



## ETHICS WITHIN ONTARIO (CANADA) ELEMENTARY HEALTH AND PHYSICAL EDUCATION

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### Abstract

Following the qualitative research mode commonly known as content analysis unfolded while exploring the current Ontario provincial government positions arising from the recent 2019 Ontario Health and Physical Education curricular document which includes directives supporting the teaching of ethics. Several questions provoked and framed this content analysis which asked: How should ethics be taught in Health and Physical Education? What level of ethical awareness should Ontario Physical Educators and students have? What are the existing ethical guidelines and orientations impacting Ontario teachers? To what extent are Ontario teachers urged via the curricula to focus and emphasize ethics in the classroom and gymnasium? Eventually, the curricular emphasis on ethics emerges via references to Ontario teacher unions, the Ontario Teachers College, the Ontario Ministry of Education and implications for various other stakeholders complete the picture within a contemporary ethical infused landscape.

**Keywords:** Health and physical education, ethics, values, curriculum, pedagogy

### INTRODUCTION

An Ontario teacher begins each day knowing what the rules are in the school, classroom, gymnasium, hallways and in all other areas of the school. This is a necessary type of knowledge to help students learn in a respectful environment that is fair and free from harm. Teaching as a profession is guided by rules, and it is each educator's legal obligation to know, apply, and follow rules (Darling-Hammond, Flook, Cook-Harvey, Barron & Osher, 2019). Rules in a classroom can be flexible if necessary; however, "ethical rules of a profession are analogous in many ways to the rules of the game in sports. One might conclude that there would be no game of baseball without rules and thus no sense of professionalism without the constraint of ethical rules" (Elkins, 1985, p. 41). In the classroom an educator is supporting the development of student maturity and an ability to care, whereas baseball rules only ensure the game is played reliably and fairly.

Each Ontario teacher endeavors to be an ethical leader and works to provide an ethically sound teaching environment which requires demonstrative values commonly known as honesty, love, responsibility, trust and credibility. Teachers try to be caring, inclusive and fair while valuing honesty as they guide students (Ryan, Schruder, & Robinson, 2013), in the classroom, all the while demonstrating and modelling respect for others (Frank et al., 2011). Teachers care and trust students to be fair, and it is only the ethically challenged student that puzzles teachers. Bellini (2018) believes that "telling teachers to think and behave ethically is simply not enough. Teaching them a step-by-step cognitive process that is straightforward . . . would help the teaching profession enormously" (p.149). This awareness of ethical conduct is first delineated in teacher training and hopefully becomes habitual (Ryan et al., 2018) however, a persons' inner compass needs to be calibrated, refined and maintained throughout life to stay within ethical professional margins.

### Theoretical Background

Ethics is forever linked to our enduring beliefs (philosophy) and theoretically this positioning suggests ethics has logical foundations that can be entangled with educational conceptualizations such as curricula and curriculum (Bishop, 1992). Ethics is infused in written curricula and is "not simply a matter of following rules or calculating consequences. It is a matter of discerning, "(Lebacqz, 1985, p. 29). Each of us possesses a philosophical orientation that is guided and informed by both morals and values (enduring beliefs) (Ryan et al., 2013). Ethical behaviour surfaces via the interplay of morals,



values and philosophy that each person perceives and applies daily. Therefore, in theory it is possible to examine and influence human ethics via behaviour in schools and within the guiding curriculum documents.

### **Purpose of the Study**

To illuminate and determine the prevalence of ethics within the recent 2019 Ontario Health and Physical Education curricular document via content analysis.

### **Research Questions**

To what extent is ethics emphasized within the recent 2019 Ontario Health and Physical Education curricular? How should ethics be taught in Health and Physical Education? What level of ethical awareness should Ontario Physical Educators and students have? What are the existing ethical guidelines and orientations impacting Ontario teachers? To what extent are Ontario teachers urged via the curricula to focus and emphasize ethics in the classroom and gymnasium?

### **Limitations of Study**

Herein this research effort is limited since sampling included only curricula used at the Ontario elementary level (kindergarten to grade eight) and only one author directed the study. As an outcome this study does not detail past curricula nor speculate on future directions, instead it is a snap-shot of a document produced in 2019 by the Ontario Ministry of Education. Moreover, search terms and selection of content, and eventual results are linked to researcher bias. The researcher is a senior and experienced elementary educator now training teachers at the post-secondary level. Using this background, the term ethics was demarcated, which informed and guided the research in such a way that possible inaccuracy resulted while examining text and selecting content. As is the case in most research, further work may be required to ascertain trustworthiness and reliability of the content associated with ethics in Ontario elementary curricula.

## **METHOD**

Herein this investigation employed a qualitative content analysis (Elo et al., 2014) which involved “a systematic, replicable technique for compressing many words of text into fewer content categories (headings) based on explicit rules . . .” (Stemler, 2001, p. 1). The close reading of a small quantity of text (Schreier, 2012) is the core element of iterative content analysis “. . . in order to understand what they meant to people, what they enable or prevent, and what the information conveyed by them does” (Krippendorff, 2004, p. xviii). The text is revisited to reduce, reinterpret and reshape textual interpretations (Schreier, 2012) to develop qualitative insights, and link these to other elements in much the same way as a mind-map (Schreier, 2012; Weber, 1990). A number of researchers have emphasized that content analysis is “a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data” (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Content analysis is highly descriptive, describing and summarizing text to uncover new perspectives (Schreier, 2012) while grounding evidence in content data.

### **Ontario (Canada) Stakeholder Orientations: Ethics**

In the province of Ontario, it is the education act developed and maintained by the provincial government which directs each teacher employer to acknowledge and follow certain rules as detailed in the Ontario Education Act. The Education Act continues to evolve as rules (laws) are refined, erased and new ones are introduced within maturing and changing school systems. Currently, the Ontario Ministry of Education (2020) provides a code of conduct which sets clear, standards of behaviour for individual school boards to follow, so that they can develop their own codes of conduct. The standards of behaviour in school board codes of conduct must be consistent with the requirements outlined in the provincial code of conduct. (p.1)

The provincial code of conduct includes fundamental beliefs that suggest:

- Everyone has a responsibility to promote a safe environment.



- Everyone should be aware of their rights, as active and engaged citizens. More importantly, everyone should also accept responsibility for protecting their rights and the rights of others. Responsible citizenship involves taking part in the civic life of the school.
- All members of the school community are to be treated with respect and dignity, especially those in positions of authority.
- Everyone has a responsibility to resolve conflicts in a way that is civil and respectful. Insults, hurtful acts and a lack of respect for others disrupt learning and teaching in a school community.
- Everyone is expected to resolve conflicts without using violence. Physical aggression is not a responsible way to deal with other people. No one should use an object to injure another person, or even threaten to use an object to injure another person. This is unacceptable and puts everyone's safety at risk. (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2020, p. 1)

This provincial code of conduct details roles and responsibilities for many stakeholders including parents, students, administration, School Boards and teachers and staff. However, one organization has been empowered by the Ministry of Education to put in place rules solely for Ontario teachers. Indeed, the most recent ethical guidelines for Ontario teachers surfaced via the Ontario College of Teachers (OCT) who are an arm of the provincial Ministry of Education. OCT laid the foundation for specific rules teachers must follow via their ethical framework (Figure one) which builds on the Ontario Education Act. OCT also established vital legal guidelines in the Ethical Standards for the Teaching Profession and the Standards of Practice for the Teaching Profession (Ontario College of Teachers, 2009). The current guidelines, policies and ethics were an outcome of the Ontario College of Teachers who began working on these standards in 1997 (Ontario College of Teachers, 2013b), and has worked since to oversee and enforce rules teachers must follow. The OCT implemented their Ethical Standards for the Teaching Profession in the year 2000, when it also became a College bylaw (Ontario College of Teachers, 2013a).

The Ethical Standards for the Teaching Profession



**Figure 1.** Ethical standards of the teaching profession (Ontario College of Teachers, 2013a).

In a recent study of teachers, one participant reflected upon being a beginning teacher: “It was pretty much an unspoken rule to do what we do and do not speak when you are a beginning teacher” (Trendowski, 2013, p. 52). This quote portrays teachers as rule followers when in fact many new teachers simply follow what other teachers do in their classrooms and schools. This imitation can perpetuate a way of life in schools where new teachers simply do what has previously been done. It



could be that teachers follow others with more experience to avoid or decrease stress since teaching is quite a stressful occupation (Leroux & Theoret, 2014; Ryan & Lielkalns, 2011). What new and experienced teachers actually prefer is a, “warm mentoring environment in the school to provide reassurance about their expectations and self-efficacy, good collaboration with colleagues, family support, and professional development opportunities to help them improve their emotional competence and better cope with challenges” (Leroux, Beaudoin, Grenier, Turcotte, & Rivard, 2016, p. 1).

In the absence of this warm mentoring environment teachers new and experienced may have difficulty following rules and making appropriate decisions. Indeed, job intensity and unremitting role demands increase teacher stress which in turn can result in wanting teacher performance and attrition (Klassen & Chiu, 2010; Montgomery & Rupp, 2005). Many educators feeling the stress of classroom management, professional development obligations and a plethora of role responsibilities do leave teaching to the extent that up to half of those hired today may leave within the first five years of teaching (Clandinin et al., 2015; Leroux & Theoret, 2014; Roness, 2011). Stress can impair brain functionality and thereby affect decision-taking, yet exercise can provide relief (Medina, 2008), as long as the educator can find time to exercise.

In spite of significant adversity in the first few years of teaching and beyond, many teachers find refuge in teaching. For instance, the province of Ontario is identified as a curriculum leader in critical areas including mental health, cyber safety, and consent, underscoring our commitment to building an education system that prioritizes inclusion, safety, and respect (Stockton, 2020, p.1). The problem is that teachers who are themselves at-risk of dropping out of the profession due to perceived stressors or the realization of wanting teacher skills or conflict with peers (Leroux, 2013; Yong & Yue, 2007), must now teach students about the very things that may be causing them distress. It could be that in some situations, it is therapeutic for teachers to address stress in everyday life in order to ease pressure for themselves. It is a case wherein the teacher is both instructor and student, learning and leading in one reflexive action.

### **Ethics: The Health and Physical Educator and Curricula**

The recent 2019 Ontario Health and Physical Education curriculum includes important updates concerning mental health, online safety, bullying, cannabis, concussions, and healthy body image (Ottawa-Carleton School Board, 2020). It is mental health that resonates with many educators as they search for answers and coping mechanisms within their teaching role (Jepson & Forrest, 2006). The Mental Health Commission of Canada (2013) determined that over 20% of workers in Canada experience mental illness or mental health problems hence the need to learn about these issues early within the elementary grades. As physical educators prepare to teach by planning lessons and units, they become aware of the inherent qualities and emphasis in the new 2019 curriculum which suggests, as students learn and apply the principles of fair play – through concepts such as inclusion and respect for all – in a variety of settings and activities, they are developing an understanding of ethics. This understanding deepens as they develop social-emotional learning skills – as they learn about themselves and their interactions with others, and as they practise thinking critically and creatively (Ontario Health & Physical Education, 2019, p.86)

Health and Physical education classes present an opportunity to learn about oneself in a way that is quite different from the typical classroom subjects since a student can increase his or her own physical literacy. Herein, “physical literacy is the motivation, confidence, physical competence, knowledge and understanding to value and take responsibility for engagement in physical activities for life” (International Physical Literacy Association, 2014, p.1). Building knowledge in health and physical education can be augmented via the challenge to think critically and creatively which requires an ability to sort, sift and process experience and debate while rendering decisions that can affect both health and physical well-being of students and teachers.



The OCT recently released: *Inquiring into Ethical Dimensions of Profession Practice* (2015) which suggests the, “ethical efficacy of educators is strengthened through participation in critical reflection and ethical inquiry based on the ethics of Care, Respect, Trust and Integrity” (p.5). The need to be reflective and revisit experiences allows educators to deeply explore all actions and being able to reflect with others instigates a community of learners. Ethics has been linked to the “norms that a community defines and institutionalizes to prevent individuals from pursuing self-interest at the expense of others” (Costa, 1998, p. 71). OCT has become both a community and an institution revered globally by setting high standards and working to uphold the same.

OCT (2015) further adds that “ethical confidence of educators is reinforced when they collectively reflect upon, explore and critique ethical experiences” (p.5). Communal reflection is much more accessible since Teachers in Ontario are part of one union or another which creates linkages and a sense of community; an identity, as a member and in response to this grouping, collective ethical principles are constructed. For instance, one union suggests all members “will strive to achieve and maintain the highest degree of professional competence and will always uphold the honour, dignity, and ethical standards of my profession” (Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation, 2020, p. 1). Another Ontario union, the Elementary Teacher's Federation of Ontario (ETFO) is the largest teachers' organization in Canada, outside of Quebec. ETFO represents 83,000 people, both teachers and educational workers in the public elementary schools of Ontario. ETFO aims to “promote a high standard of professional ethics and a high standard of professional competence” and to “promote and protect the health and safety of members, both physically and psychologically” (ETFO, 2020, p.1). By having unions, the college, the Ministry of Education echoing these complementary ethical guidelines there really is no excuse for an Ontario teacher to be unaware of ethical conduct requirements.

### **Learning about Ethics in the Health and Physical Education Program**

The health and physical education curriculum provide varied opportunities for students to learn about ethical issues, explore ethical standards, and demonstrate ethical responsibility (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2019). For instance, fair play can be understood as “. . . respect for the interests of the game (or sport) as a practice. . .” (Butcher & Schneider 2007, p.127); students abide by the rules in order to play properly. Fair play can be sampled in efforts to be inclusive, demonstrating respect for the activity and others within “a variety of settings and activities, they are developing an understanding of ethics” (Ontario Health & Physical Education, 2019, p.86). Students who participate “. . . have understood and agreed to the rules of the game and the principles upon which any fair victory in that game must rest” (Leaman 2007, p.206). Fritzsche (2005) claims that as a “child matures, correct behavioural guidance gradually evolves to internal control” (p.68). Therefore, being informed of the need to be honest can become both a value and a part of an ethical being (Festini, 2011; Ryan & Robinson, 2013), when participating in health and physical education games and activities that have both written and unwritten rules.

The health and physical education program of Ontario (2019) offers “opportunities to explore ethical issues related to topics such as violence in sport, the use of performance-enhancing substances, and the notion of winning at all costs” (p. 86). The opportunities unfold in classrooms and gymnasiums with groups of students who are peers, participants, community members and stakeholders who will take-part and monitor the activity providing both feedback and a source of camaraderie. The community aspect is especially interesting since “individuals must consider the consequences of their behaviors and actions, both for themselves and their communities, and for both the short and long term” (Teehan, 1995, p. 845). Dewey (1989) reminds us that “the admiration and resentment of others is the mirror in which one beholds the moral quality of his act reflected back to him” (p. 246).

Within the 2019 Ontario Health and Physical Education curriculum students “explore how sports and physical activity can be used to build community, and they can consider ethical questions. . .” (p.86). A teacher can augment the curricula by turning to the Canadian Centre for Ethics in Sport who provide insight and “direction for teachers and students for many related issues such as health promotion and the use of human subjects in research” (Ontario Health & Physical Education, 2019, p.86). Similarly,



students can study and “apply citizenship education skills through health and physical education. Educators can consult the Citizenship Education Framework that appears on page 10 of *The Ontario Curriculum: Social Studies, Grades 1 to 6; History and Geography, Grades 7 and 8, 2018* to make relevant connections” (Ontario Health & Physical Education, 2019, p.86).

While illuminating and examining issues associated with “health and physical education as part of an inquiry process, students may need to make ethical judgements. Such judgements may be necessary in evaluating evidence and positions on various issues or in drawing conclusions about issues, claims, or events” (Ontario Health & Physical Education, 2019, p.86). Teachers need not avoid ethical content or related judgements when reflecting upon the past as these positions are important and inescapable (Vann, 2004). Reflection when combined with an open mind may encourage further understanding and learning. Teachers can support “students in determining the factors to consider when making these judgements. In addition, teachers provide support and supervision throughout the inquiry process, helping students become aware of potential ethical concerns and of appropriate ways to address those concerns” (Ontario Health & Physical Education, 2019, p.86). At some point students may realize that “social inequality is embedded in our individual values and beliefs, and the systems and institutions we create reflect these inequalities. Therefore, change must begin with individuals transforming” (Springtide Resources, 2008, p. 2). In order to initiate self-change, there can be a need to investigate issues and research topics to discover via inquiry-based learning (IBL).

### **Instructional Modes**

To help students develop their sense of self and an awareness of their own abilities, likes, and dislikes, programs in the junior grades should encourage them to think in terms of self-improvement rather than peer comparison. This change is possible if we accept the notion that “we construct our own and each other’s identities through our everyday encounters with each other in social interaction” (Burr, 1995, p.9). Student interaction is unavoidable at school, and for some this interaction is a problem that needs to be addressed possibly through dialogue and inquiry that is both creative and structured by the teacher in an authentic way.

Perhaps the teacher opts to use Inquiry-based learning (IBL) which is an attractive teaching mode and “. . . a system of learning that supports the development of students' problem solving and critical thinking skills, which is crucial for them in everyday activities” (Maxwell, Lambeth, & Cox, 2015, p.3). Students and teachers who practice thinking critically and creatively may realize that the development of their own rules and value systems is vital to their development. Moreover, “authentic, engaging tasks with real-world connections motivate student effort and engagement, which is supported through teacher scaffolding and a wide range of tools that allow for personalized learning and student agency” (Darling-Hamond, et al. 2019, p. 1). And yet, “they also need to be exposed to models of fair decision making and be given many opportunities to think about and solve their own problems” (Ontario Health & Physical Education, 2019, p.154). IBL is “a cluster of teaching and learning strategies where students inquire into the nature of a problem(s) or question(s) [which] . . . serves as a mechanism and catalyst to engage actively and deeply in the learning process” (Blessinger & Carfora, 2015, p. 5). Students and teachers who are inquiring may be conducting surveys or interviews and,

may need guidance to ensure that they respect the dignity, privacy, and confidentiality of their participants. Teachers also supervise the choice of research topics to ensure that student researchers are not inadvertently exposed to information and/or perspectives for which they are not emotionally or intellectually prepared (e.g., personal interviews that lead to disclosure of abuse. (Ontario Health & Physical Education, 2019, p.86)

All program activities should “emphasize participation and teamwork and help students understand the concepts of fair play, ethics, and healthy competition. Students at this level [grade 4-6] should be encouraged to ask questions and take responsibility for their learning” (Ontario Health & Physical Education, 2019, p.154). A “primary reason for discussing ethical issues in the . . . classroom is for the



students to develop a process which considers the ethical implications” (Oddo, 1997, p. 296), of their decisions. In doing so, some research has shown a positive change in moral and ethical reasoning (Ritter, 2006; Webber, 1990)

The Ontario Physical Health Education Association (OPHEA) (2016) is an association funded by the Ontario provincial government to augment and develop curriculum materials for Ontario teachers, and in doing so publishes useful reports, guides and activities for teachers that link directly to the Ontario curriculum. For example, in a resource entitled: *Approaches to teaching healthy living: A guide for secondary educators*, the document suggests that students should demonstrate “positive responsible social behaviour [while] adhering to ethical and fair play standards to create an enjoyable environment for everyone to participate in physical activity, working effectively and collaboratively as a group while participating in physical activities, and encouraging others” (p.47). Role-play, case studies, and simulations help students realize implications of their actions. What is noteworthy is the specific nature of the OPHEA directive which allows teachers to work towards this goal while exploring ethical behavior with students. Within a bigger global picture, the guide also suggests, students consider their own ethical and environmental values (p.13), while pursuing a healthy lifestyle. This emphasis on ethical living is littered throughout OPHEA resources in order to revisit ethics in various health and physical education areas and provoke both cognitive and emotional responses.

### **Affective Domain**

Within the 2019 Ontario Health & Physical Education curriculum document it is suggested that students in the intermediate grades [7-10] “are in the process of forming their adult identities and consolidating their moral beliefs and values. They are very much influenced by the world around them, and especially by their peers, who are a major source of motivation” (p. 234). Therefore, involving peers in a discussion concerning current issues and tensions that entangle student views and positions can be a positive teaching mode within the school. In fact, Jagger (2013) found that “debating the ethics of familiar topics trigger affective characteristics and are beneficial in developing levels of student engagement, critical analysis, flexibility of thinking and motivation to learn” (p.38). Many believe that the closest two people can get without physicality would be to enter into a verbal argument (debate/conflict) which may have a lasting emotional memory via the meeting of the minds. Emotions instigate lasting memories and intensify learning making the learning a felt experience (Simonton & Garn, 2018). When experience is rooted in emotional responses the intensity seems to be greater than experience that is quite impassive hence an educator who can trigger emotions of students may witness enhanced learning and achievement.

How emotions are addressed in the classroom and gymnasium is important since student anger, for example, must be decoded to understand its purpose and function within a classroom context. Each teacher needs to consider the context to respond to the student anger appropriately. Similarly, shame, pity and/or fear needs to be processed by the teacher and students to decide on the next step(s) in a gymnasium or classroom. “Stimulation of the affective domain plays an integral part in developing ethical sensitivity – an important component for moral development” (Jagger, 2013, p.38). Understanding student emotions helps teachers navigate and take next steps, for example not following the rules within a game may cause other students to become angry with the rule-breaker. By arguing and verbally jostling students are “continuing to develop their interpersonal skills and generally enjoy participating in activities with their peers. Their responses to winning and losing vary individually but can be very emotional” (Ontario Health & Physical Education, 2019, p.234). Debates and other deliberations “provide opportunities for students to interact positively with their peers, to continue developing and improving their relationship skills, and to learn and apply concepts of equity, fair play, ethics, and social justice” (Ontario Health & Physical Education, 2019, p.234). Students need time to adjust to this verbal exercise since “adolescence is a key time for using the opportunities provided within health and physical education to reach and connect with youth and provide them with positive social, emotional, and physical experiences” (p.234).



Sport and physical activity can be powerful socializing agents for adolescents. In some cases, they can also create environments of exclusion. Some adolescents move away from “physical activity because of physical, social, and emotional changes or stresses at puberty” (Ontario Health & Physical Education, 2019, p.234). People who may feel uncomfortable in one environment tend to try to avoid this recurrence even if it means being inactive and avoiding health and physical education classes. “Teachers need to develop empathetic strategies if they are to respond to their students in appropriate ways” (Barker et al., 2019, p. 2). By accepting and handling student emotions the teacher is actually helping students to form their identities and modelling responses an adult may have towards such emotions. Students learn about themselves and others while fine-tuning their own moral and ethical positions based on experiences and contexts.

## CONCLUSIONS and RECOMMENDATIONS

Reviewing the content of resources noted herein guides Ontario teachers in a professional and ethical manner. Others who read these documents will be struck by the efforts to be inclusive and protect students, for instance one OPHEA facilitators guide (2015) states how,

it’s important to be proactive in examining these reflective and guiding questions to have optimal understanding of themselves and their students before examining any of the topics in a learning environment. Once this is achieved, it’s the responsibility of the teacher to promote open discussion with students by providing a safe, positive and confidential (if necessary) environment for students to discuss matters of their own experience. (p.3)

Each Ontario teacher strives to be ethical, while providing an ethically sound teaching environment. Teachers both in training and in-service are guided to model values such as honesty, love, responsibility, trust and humor while teaching and leading students (Ontario College of Teachers, 2013b). The key is to communicate, to inquire, and to trust each other in the classroom and gymnasium. As we learn from one-another it is possible to establish an ethic of care in the school. This goal can only be achieved in a warm mentoring environment that provides support to all. Teachers demonstrate care and model cooperation with colleagues, offer support to families, and seek-out professional development opportunities to continue to learn and improve the educational conditions.

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