

PROMPTING ELEMENTARY ONTARIO HEALTH AND PHYSICAL EDUCATION TEACHERS

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Received: February 10, 2024

Accepted: June 26, 2024

Published: July 31, 2024

Suggested Citation:

Ryan, T. G., & Ryan, D. (2024). Prompting elementary Ontario health and physical education teachers. *International Journal of New Trends in Arts, Sports & Science Education (IJTASE)*, 13(3), 185-191.



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Abstract

Scripted prompts offer educators an exemplar of what can be stated when addressing specific aspects of curricula. Written prompts are textual and introduce a means to influence, guide, and rouse the educator to conceive of the possibilities when teaching certain content. Prompts can be used when students are learning in classrooms while talking, writing, or showing their understanding in health and physical education. Ontario teachers can prompt students via questioning and in a Socratic manner move minds forward. Written prompts in the curriculum inform educators and impact pedagogy as the educator constructs plans and implements preplanned lessons and units. The author of these written prompts, the Ontario government, maintains that all prompts are not required hence the notion of option is implied.

Keywords: instruction, scripted curriculum, health, physical education.

INTRODUCTION

The Ontario Ministry of Education believes the Ontario Elementary Health and Physical Education (2019) curriculum contains a “wide assortment of examples and prompts that illustrate different ways of meeting the expectations” (Ministry of Education, 2020, p. 1). The written expectations for students are indeed education targets for educators who work to engage and move forward all students in the learning process. The Ontario provincial government expects that most students will be able to reach a target/goal at a certain grade in each discipline. The discipline of Ontario Health and Physical Education details the “knowledge and skills that students are expected to acquire, demonstrate, and apply in their class work and activities, on tests, in demonstrations, and in various other activities on which their achievement is assessed and evaluated” (Ministry of Education, 2019, p. 21). Education in Ontario is modern, controversial, and thought provoking (Ryan & Ryan, 2023).

In the discipline of Health and Physical Education there are many specific expectations in broad areas such as, Social-Emotional Learning, Active Living, Movement Competence, and Healthy Living. The 2019 curriculum guide includes prompts that aim to deepen and guide the educational process in these four areas, yet these prompts are not requirements (Ministry of Education, 2019). The prompt acts as a “supplemental antecedent stimulus that increases the likelihood of the target response occurring” (Cooper et al., 2019). Prompts are a means to influence, guide, and provoke the educator to imagine the possibilities when covering certain curriculum content. Prompts can be used when students are “talking, writing, or showing their understanding in health and physical education, teachers can prompt them, through questioning, to explain the reasoning that they have applied to a particular solution or strategy, or to reflect on what they have done” (Ministry of Education, 2020, p. 1). In addition, there are response prompts, such as “gestures, models, and physical guidance, involving the behavior of an instructor (e.g., touching the correct item in an array) and likely are among the most used prompts in clinic and educational settings” (Cowan, 2022, p. 1). While written prompts in the curriculum guide educators

they also impact pedagogy as the educator plans and implements preplanned lessons, units, and a year plan.

Within the classroom and during planning stages Ontario educators work to understand when and where specific requirements are introduced, educators must “consult the expectations, examples, and teacher prompts in the body of the curriculum document. There, they will find indications of the specific, age-appropriate content, scope, and depth of coverage of the expectations in particular grades” (Ministry of Education, 2019, p. 291). Still the Ontario government maintains these prompts are not required hence the notion of optional surfaces.

Reviewing the curriculum recursively the reader learns of the many “examples and prompts that illustrate different ways of meeting the expectations” (p. 59). To be precise in the 2019 curriculum there are 149 instances of the use of the word ‘prompt’ in a 317-page curriculum document. One such use of the word prompt reveals:

Teacher prompt: “Mental health is often misunderstood, and when people hear someone mention ‘mental health’, they may automatically think ‘mental illness’. Negative feelings or judgements about mental illness can be the result of not understanding or of being afraid. We all have ‘mental health’. How might societal views on mental health and mental illness perpetuate stigma and even cause harm?”

Student: “They can stop people from getting the help they need. If people who have a mental illness do not feel safe to talk about it or to get help, they can end up feeling hopeless, lonely, and hurt.” (p. 290)

Having prompts indicates the possibilities and informs the educator of the meaning and direction of the expectation removing some of the interpretive guesswork in planning, instruction, and evaluation (Flicker et al., 2020). Clark and Mayer (2003) found that prompting has beneficial effects upon pedagogy. However, other researchers have found prompting may not have the same impact on all students as prompts may not engage nor help students with certain learning styles or skills (Ede, 2006; Lin & Lehman, 1999).

The Ontario Ministry of Education (2019) suggests,

specific expectations reflect this progression in knowledge and skill development, as well as the growing maturity and changing needs of students, through (1) changes in the wordings of expectations, where appropriate; (2) the examples that are given in parentheses in the expectation; and/or (3) the teacher prompts and student responses that follow most expectations. The progression is captured by the increasing complexity of requirements reflected in the examples and prompts and by the increasing specificity of relationships, the diversity of contexts in which the learning is applied, and the variety of opportunities described for applying it. (p.22)

The 2019 Health and Physical Education curriculum is more complex than past curricula in Health and Physical Education and having specific expectations (learning goals) with related prompts provides useful information around sensitive topics that educators “may have feared broaching in the past” (Flicker et al., 2020). Nonetheless it is the same prompts that may produce different learning outcomes when they are applied in distinctive settings and with diverse people (Lin & Lehman, 1999), it is believed.

METHOD

Content Analysis (CA) is a research mode that allows for the “subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns” (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1284). CA requires the repetitive reading of content, in this case, curricula (Schreier, 2012; Weber, 1990). Rereading text augments and clarifies text meaning, revealing distinctions and layers of connotation (Ryan, 2020; Weber, 1990).

Summative content analysis “identifies and quantifies the frequency of keywords in textual data” and “through a deductive approach, pre-existing codes or categories are applied to the data” (Delve & Limpaecher, 2023, p. 1). The qualitative “data reduction and sense-making effort . . . takes a volume of qualitative material and attempts to identify core consistencies and meanings” (Patton, 2002, p.11). Stemler (2001) believes CA is a “systematic, replicable technique for compressing many words of text into fewer content categories (headings) based on explicit rules . . .” (Stemler, 2001, p. 1). Herein, the

Ontario Health and Physical education (2019) curricula document has been reread repeatedly to uncover meaning and emphasis within the written text concerning prompts.

Teacher Prompts

The Ontario Ministry of Education (2019) has developed specific expectations which are “accompanied by examples, “teacher prompts” (as requested by educators), and student responses. These elements are intended to promote understanding of the intent of the specific expectations and are offered as illustrations for teachers” (p.22). Close reading of the curriculum document brings the reader to the realization that “the examples and prompts do not set out requirements for student learning; they are discretionary, not mandatory” (p.23). Still, having these prompts listed 149 times in a 317-page document is something that influences and guides educators both in training and in-service, for example,

Teacher prompt: Gender-based violence includes any form of behaviour – psycho- logical, physical, or sexual – that is based on an individual’s gender and is intended to control, humiliate, or harm the individual. Sexually explicit media, such as pornography, that depicts women as sex objects and unequal to men can contribute to gender-based violence. Gender-based violence can affect all people, but it disproportionately affects women, girls, people who are transgender or gender non-conforming, and marginalized communities. One example of gender-based violence is the systemic violence that Indigenous women and girls have experienced in Canada for decades. Can you give me some other examples?(p. 288)

Reading this prompt and knowing it is not a requirement for instruction, according to the official Ontario Ministry of Education, is puzzling and builds a level of cognitive dissonance within the teacher reading this prompt. The excerpt is in a highly sensitive area of content that is quite controversial in Ontario and has led stakeholders on both sides to protest at government offices and School Board Headquarters. In 2023 the government has moved three provincial education priorities forward, including: “achievement of learnings outcomes in core academic skills, preparation of students for future success and student engagement and well-being” (Omstead, 2023, p. 1).

Researchers such as Flicker et al. (2020) interviewed a small sample of 34 teachers out of 86,000 elementary educators in Ontario from 17 different school boards out of 76, across the province and concluded:

Many teachers felt some trepidation about delivering this curriculum. They described teaching—with a pervasive sense of being surveilled by students, parents, and administrators. They expressed concerns about delivering the curriculum in an effective manner while balancing the educational needs of diverse students (e.g., cultural, developmental, and experiential), recognizing some students might be uncomfortable discussing these issues in a mixed or group setting, and feared offending students. (p.10)

Change and the newness of the curricula unsettles educators who are accustomed to foundational daily routines (Ryan & Ryan, 2023). New curricula move pedagogical signposts and introduce new ones. Knowing this the Ontario Ministry of Education states:

The examples, given in parentheses, are meant to clarify the requirement specified in the expectation, illustrating the kind of knowledge or skill, the specific area of learning, the depth of learning, and/or the level of complexity that the expectation entails. The teacher prompts are meant to illustrate the kinds of questions teachers might pose in relation to the requirement specified in the expectation. Both the examples and the teacher prompts have been developed to model appropriate practice for the grade. Teachers can choose to draw on the examples and teacher prompts that are appropriate for their classrooms, or they may develop their own approaches that reflect a similar level of complexity. (p.22)

The busy educator may not have enough time to change praxis and fully comprehend the new notions of appropriateness. Ontario teachers are told that “. . . principles are indicated in the expectations through examples and teacher prompts that illustrate how skills can be applied at different ages and stages” (p.31). Flicker et al. (2020) found “teachers really appreciated detailed prompts. . . teachers were provided with sample prompts that could be used to answer student questions or initiate conversations about sexual health topics. These prompts were deemed very helpful by Ontario educators” (p.10).

But the educators also read how these prompts were not an obligation hence the perception that these could be ignored surfaces in the mind of an educator. Ultimately, the instructor fades a prompt for some more capable students whereas other more needy students would require repeated prompting, cueing and help to contribute and grow as a student. Several prompt-fading procedures exist including, “including least-to-most (LTM) prompting, most-to-least (MTL) prompting, prompt delay, most-to-least prompting with a prompt delay (MTLD), and graduated guidance” (Cowan, 2022, p. 1). The following figure one provides more information on prompting as a hierarchy.

Prompting Hierarchy

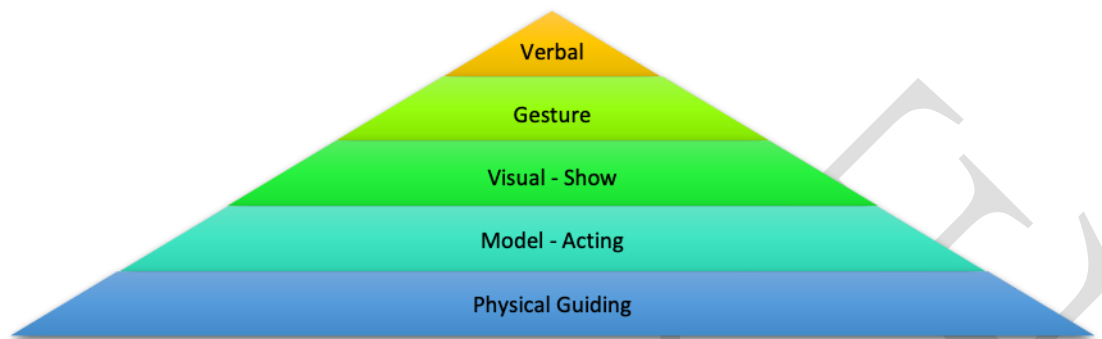


Figure 1. Prompting hierarchy

While this prompting has in the past been entrenched in the guidelines for meeting special needs in Health and Physical Education; many would argue that this mode of prompting is useful for all students (Flicker et al., 2020; Francois, 2016; Ryan, 2020). A Health and Physical Education teacher naturally uses verbal cues and/or prompts while teaching. Written prompting of educators assures educators of the depth, direction, and intention of the content (Francois, 2016). However, there are limitations within prompting as prompts are restrictive and fixed (Kostons & Van Der Werf, 2015). An educator will need to move away from prompts in unique contexts for example in special education and diverse classrooms. Researching teacher reactions to new curriculum Flicker et al. (2020) found, “this specificity felt supportive and gave them greater latitude to be direct in their classroom. The prompts provide detail around “sensitive” topics that they may have feared broaching in the past” (Flicker et al., 2020, p. 8).

Prompting Excerpts

The Ontario Ministry of Education (2019) has developed specific prompts in many areas of the Ontario Health and Physical Education curriculum, for instance the provincial government explains: “Whether students are talking, writing, or showing their understanding in health and physical education, teachers can prompt them, through questioning, to explain the reasoning that they have applied to a particular solution or strategy” (p.80). An illustration of prompting:

Teacher prompt: “We show respect in many ways. In our classroom, we show respect for people of all cultures and abilities by including everyone in our activities. In our school, we show that we respect the environment by recycling and cleaning up. Showing respect for others is an important part of participating in physical activities. How do you show respect for others when you are being active?”

Student: “I show respect by tagging other people gently when we are playing tag and speaking politely to others.” (p. 97)

What is apparent within this prompt are certain values (enduring beliefs) and expectations such as respecting others. Collins and Tierney (2006) believe education and its educators work to, advance “values and ideals: the teacher as a professional, a life-long learner and a social activist; the power of teaching and learning; the values of respect, inclusion, globalization, and diversity . . . (p. 75). Educators model values and using prompts teachers are reminded of this social responsibility of teaching as students develop within inclusive environments carefully developed by educators (Ryan & Ryan, 2023). Beliefs are addressed in all classes via discussions, feedback, and instruction as the value of collaboration with others is experienced in classes and within educational and public communities.

Within Ontario Health and Physical Education there is a focus upon healthy self-management and its components of body, mind and thought. Incidentally, health was ranked third highest by a large survey of Ontario teachers in training (Ryan et al., 2013). This valuing of health is not unique to Ontario teachers since Veisson (2009) found that Estonians considered the most important values to be health. The high ranking of health is expected since being unhealthy negatively impacts our quality of life. A teacher prompt getting at these concerns reads:

Teacher prompt: There are many things that contribute to a healthy body and mind, and healthy eating is one. When we talk about ‘a healthy body and mind’, we’re talking about your whole body, including your brain and your feelings and thoughts. Just as some toys need batteries to run, we need healthy foods to be active, to grow and be well, and to learn. How does eating breakfast every day and eating healthy meals and snacks throughout the day help you learn?

Student: ‘It gives me energy to help me stay alert and concentrate through the day. (p.105)

As well as prompting the content cues the student to reflect upon diet and how this impacts both thoughts and wellness. This prompt may lead to thoughts and discussion of harm that can be done via a diet that is unbalanced or extreme. For example, the next prompt guides educators to ask:

Teacher prompt: What are some behaviours that can be harmful to your health? What are some things you can do that are healthier or that protect your health and the health of other people?”

Student: “Spending too much time watching television or playing computer games keeps us from getting all the physical activity we need. We can play outside after school instead. Smoking cigarettes is unhealthy, and so is breathing smoke that is in the air when other people are smoking cigarettes. We can ask people not to smoke or vape around us. It is against the law for people to smoke or vape in cars when there are children in the car. (p.110)

As people make decisions on what to eat and choose behaviours each day it is prudent to guide students to think in terms of limits, boundaries and excessive behaviours that may do the body harm while impacting thought and wellness. This next step requires further resources, and this can be an obstacle as “it takes time to locate and vet online materials, which is why having them provided would not only be helpful and time saving, but also standardize resources” (Flicker et al., 2020, p. 9). Prompts are a good start however taking next steps requires curriculum approved resources that need to be easy to source and use. The modernization of the curriculum builds tension as many sensitive topics are included for instance one prompt suggests:

How would thinking about your personal limits and life goals influence decisions you may choose to make about sexual activity?

Student: Thinking in advance about what I value and what my personal limits are would help me to respond and make decisions that I felt comfortable with in different situations. I would be able to approach a situation with more confidence and stick to what I had planned. I would be less likely to be caught off guard and have to react without having thought through the options and possible consequences. (p.282)

Recent research has found teachers “walking the line” and “treading carefully” when addressing “sensitive topics out of fear of being characterized as “inappropriate,” and potential backlash from parents and administrators. Teachers were concerned about how teaching sex education could affect their employment prospects and future careers” (Flicker et al., 2020, p. 11). Covering material in this apprehensive atmosphere merely causes teachers to cover the content and not focus upon student learning (Valencia et al., 2006). Viewing the prompts as scripts is arguably not the intention of their inclusion and so the notion put forward by the Ministry of Education suggests prompt usage is not required.

Summary

Educators work to create an inclusive, positive, and engaging environment within classrooms, schools, and the larger community (Ryan & Ryan, 2023). These educational goals are seeded in the Ontario teacher training where educators work for two years learning pedagogy, curricula, and theory in Ontario schools and within Faculties of Education at the tertiary level. During training the curricula is examined, discussed, and utilized to create lesson, unit, and year plans in all disciplines. Having prompts (scripts)

guide and inform new educators appears to be a prudent enterprise in training Ontario teachers as the prompt reveals intention and meaning. An in-service educator also benefits from written prompts as much of the new curricula is fresh and deals with sensitive modern content that reflects a contemporary world challenging educators to move forward, change a stance, orientation and/or mindset (Ryan & Ryan, 2023).

Admittedly some scripting may cause educators to feel like technicians (actors) simply reading lines, however the Ontario Ministry of Education emphasizes that the prompts are not required. Nonetheless, some teachers may still believe that their professionalism has been diminished. An educator needs to believe they are valued, and this prompting does impact pedagogy, students, and the learning community indirectly. Once the prompt is read it can stay in the head of the reader and influence behavior.

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