Interrogating Mainstream News Media's Re-Presentation of the 'Parental Rights' Movement: Neoliberal Influences and the Imposed Moral Panic of Gender

by

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Abstract

In recent years, there has been an upward trend in Canadian mainstream news media's coverage of what is colloquially coined the 'Parental Rights Movement'. As the movement advances false narratives about children's rights, gender and sexuality, and teachers, it is important to consider how the mainstream media's coverage may legitimize some of these views. Using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Fairclough, 2010; Roger, 2004) this research considers the following overarching question: In what ways has the 'parental rights' movement been framed in Canadian mainstream media outlets? Specifically:

1. How have the roles and relationships between students/parents/teachers been framed by the mainstream media's coverage of 'parental rights'?
2. How has the purpose of public education been framed through this coverage?
3. How is gender and sexuality positioned within this coverage?

The 'parental rights' movement uses tactics of moral panic that leverages social anxieties, effectively mobilizing policy to increase surveillance and governance (Fowler & Mountz, 2024). CDA places language use on display in order to reveal how particular views are normalized and condoned. This study is crucial as media re-presentations cannot be disentangled from public perceptions (Buckingham, 2019; Hoechsmann & Poyntz, 2012; Kellner & Share, 2019). In line with Giroux's (2019) concept of public pedagogy, popular media—including Hollywood films, video games, social media, and mainstream news—play a significant role in shaping societal understandings. These media re-presentations

not only normalize and legitimize certain views but also impact the livability and grievability of people's lives (Butler, 2010).

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Contents

Chapter One: Introduction

Recently mainstream media has had an intensified focus of attention on a select group of parents who are claiming that public schools are imposing gender ideology on students (Benchetrit, 2023). These news stories suggest students need protection from ideological curriculum, sexually explicit content, and a newly identified 'other': transgender individuals. This ‘other’ is extended to anyone who does not align with a binarized understanding of gender and sexuality. In Florida there was the legislated ‘Don’t Say Gay’ bill instated (Panetta, 2022); in Saskatchewan Premier Scott Moe promised to use the Notwithstanding clause to ensure that parents are informed about students use of pronouns at school (Zimonjic, 2023); the Smith led provincial government in Alberta reinforced notions of restricted sex and gender education by introducing increased gender surveillance and teacher oversight (French, 2024). Manitoban Conservative politicians also used ‘parental rights’ rhetoric during their provincial campaign in 2023 (MacLean, 2023). All these policies were centered around gender and sexuality generally and transgender rights specifically. These policies actively impose regulation on what constitutes acceptable gender identity and sexual orientation; ultimately reifying gender within a male/female binary and subsequently policing sexuality within this binary

The fabricated moral panic about gender ideology has manifested in discussions of book bans in Manitoba (Abas, 2023) and is connected to international debate over the incorporation of Critical Race Theory in schools (Alfonseca, 2023). Though focused on different identities, both movements draw from similar ideological foundations: a rejection of structural analyses of power and identity, and a fear that schools are indoctrinating

children into progressive values. As such, anti-CRT and anti-gender ideology campaigns often share supporters, messaging strategies, and political backers, reinforcing each other through common tropes. This curated moral panic is wide-reaching, often contradictory, and encompasses not only issues of gender and sex education but also race, ethnicity, religion, and other neoconservative insistencies of fear (Butler, 2024). A recurring tactic employed within people trying to censor curriculum and erase human rights in K-12 classrooms is the fiction of 'parental rights'.

Due to the widespread media coverage of the 'parental rights' movement and 'parental rights' legislation, the ideas of the movement have spread beyond the movement itself, going far beyond its alt right websites to become a mainstay in mainstream media sites nationwide (Benchetrit, 2023; Mason & Hamilton, 2023). Resultantly, the media coverage becomes a form of public pedagogy (Giroux, 2019) in which the public is introduced to ideas about/from the movement. The extensive media coverage can give the public the impression that these ideas are widely held and that they are legitimate, namely that 'parental rights' are a legitimate legal concept. Moreover, the way the movement is covered, or re-presented, can result in the normalization and legitimation of particular views (Kellner & Share, 2019).

Using CDA, Bialystok & Wright (2019) demonstrate the ways that media re-presentations of the 'parental rights' movement can prioritize certain narratives and values in ways that negate the fact that the majority of parents support comprehensive sex-ed in schools. Put simply, 'parental rights' discourse has been shown to uphold and privilege a certain type of parent (Kingston, 2021). Such media re-presentations risk legitimizing

traditional and conservative views on education, family, and societal norms (Gilbert, 2018), while marginalizing and vilifying inclusive perspectives and varied identities (Fowler and Mountz, 2024).

This research utilizes Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to investigate mainstream media's re-presentation of the 'parental rights' movement. CDA exposes patterns, tactics, and strategies employed by mainstream media to frame the issue and subsequent public conversation. Moreover, CDA highlights the ideological underpinnings of these representations and elucidates the ways in which language and imagery are used to construct and convey specific meanings and agendas. Through this analysis, the research aims to reveal how these media narratives result in a powerful form of public pedagogy that advances particular views of parents/teachers/students, the purpose of education, and gender and sexuality.

Positionality

Consistent with the insights of Peshkin (1988), my approach to this research acknowledges and actively engages with my subjectivity. Peshkin emphasizes that subjectivity is an invariable component of research, not to be retrospectively acknowledged but to be systematically explored throughout the research process. In my research, I align with Guba and Lincoln's (1994) epistemological perspective that knowledge is socially constructed and fluid. My ontological standpoint, as per Guba and Lincoln's definition, is that reality is multifaceted and socially constructed through interactions and interpretations. Due to my understanding and relationship with knowledge

and perspective I believe it vital to interrogate my own positionality and how I came to ask the research question I have.

Milner (2007) emphasizes the importance of researchers acknowledging their own racial and cultural background to develop “deeper levels of awareness and consciousness in conducting education research” (p.3), and so it is here that I will begin. I am a White, cisgender, heterosexual, middle-upper middle class, male. Not only does this mean that my biases are situated in power and privilege, but it also means that my work will go into the vast ocean of other work written from this position, having the potential to further perpetuate the dominant narratives that shape our understanding of education and knowledge. Due to this positionality of power, it will be integral to actively engage in reflexive practices that interrogate how my social location colours the research process.

As my research is situated in the 'parental rights' movement, I must also consider my positionality in the education system. I want to begin by acknowledging my experience as a student in the public-school setting. My mom and dad gave every minute they had to ensure that I experienced love, opportunity, and happiness. My mom worked with children for Manitoba Keewatinowi Okimakanak (MKO) and later in public school’s up until my older brother was born, at which time my mom decided that she would make raising my older brother, and later me, her full-time job. Growing up I watched my parents make sacrifices and take risks; saw my dad laid off, and find new work; and throughout it all, I knew that my well-being was their priority. My mom sat with my brother and I every evening, giving time and patience to ensure that we understood our schoolwork. She was on every school

counsel, and I believe made the school experience better, for not just me, but every one of my classmates.

Throughout my schooling my family went from poor/lower middleclass to upper middle class. My dad got promotions and eventually started his own business, while my mom dedicated every moment to our upbringing and schooling. My brother and I were given every opportunity, not only because of our gender, sexuality, and race, but also because of the home in which we were brought up in.

I go into detail of my upbringing because I believe that this contributes to my own biases as I consider the parents role in the education system. If every school had families with the Bordieuan forms of capital and resources, for example, then there would not be an inherent inequality to school fundraising. I believe that due to my mom's experience of working in the public school system every student at the schools that my brother and I attended benefitted, but not every school benefitted; and even more poignantly my brother and I benefited the most.

I am also a teacher. I am a teacher who vehemently believes in the power of education to be a liberative practice. Within my pedagogy I refract my experiences as a past addict, who through their addictions faced significant challenges and obstacles, but ultimately found purpose through education. It was through addictions that I first began understanding hegemonic systems and neoliberal policies that perpetuate cycles of poverty, marginalization, and systemic inequalities. This understanding has informed my teaching philosophy, pushing me to question and challenge power within my pedagogy. My witnessing has profoundly shaped my understanding of the transformative potential, and

responsibility of education as a vital means for social change. My experiences have instilled in me an empathy for individuals who face barriers, whether those barriers are related to socioeconomic positioning, mental health, addiction, race, or other forms of identity oppression.

This background influences my view on the 'parental rights' movement. I recognize the importance of parental involvement in education, but I am also acutely critical of the disparities in how this involvement manifests, often reflecting and reinforcing existing inequalities. I recognize the ways in which parents are weaponized as consumers, to shift the responsibility of education from the public to the individual. My position as a White, middle-upper class, male teacher cannot be parsed away from my interpretations. It is with this understanding of my inherently personal positionality that I take a stance as a public intellectual, who hopes to advocate for policies and practices that ensure all students, regardless of their family's resources or background, or their own identities, have access to a quality education that empowers them, and most importantly to speak out against policies, rhetoric, and ideas that actively oppress.

In engaging with Critical Discourse Analysis, I place my biases, experiences, and perspectives at the forefront. My aim is to expose the translucent spheres of hegemony that lie at the core of the 'parental rights' movement, a domain where power dynamics are constantly shifting and elusive. By drawing from scholars of diverse backgrounds and experiences, and by being acutely aware of my own privileges and life experiences, I hope to expose and challenge these spheres of power.

Rationale and Purpose

This research acknowledges the media's role in shaping public perceptions, and thus is concerned with exposing the way media stories are constructed and framed in ways that encourage and legitimize particular narratives. Through Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 2010; Mullet, 2018; Rogers, 2004; van Dijk, 1993 Wodak & Myers, 2001), this research aims to dissect the media narratives surrounding 'parental rights', revealing the underlying and prevailing discourses. Discourse, in the Foucauldian sense, is translucent, ambiguous, ubiquitous, and power-laden. Thus, the discourse within/around a movement that marginalizes, delegitimizes, and regulates identity and existence while simultaneously individualizing, mechanizing, and weaponizing public education demands to be investigated. As Butler (2024) articulates, the war on gender is transnational and growing, and the 'parental rights' movement is a social occurrence on the war on gender (Fowler and Mountz, 2024).

Gender and sexuality are a troubling center of this movement, that works symbiotically with neoliberal views of education that encourage individualism, personalized learning, and private values over public values. Public education in Canada has systematically been infested with neoliberal ideals (Winton, 2022). The 'parental rights' movement is a neoliberal symptom that attacks the professionalism of the teacher (Mayo, 2021; Rojo and Percio, 2020). That is, in order to advance private values in public schools- and to place doubt in public education more broadly- teacher professionalism is undermined through claims of brainwashing, "ideological teaching," and "grooming". In this way, the 'parental rights' movement undermines faith in public education system in

order to rationalize and mobilize more private options and in order to validate and impose of private values in public schools (Moore, McCorquodale-Bauer & Lopuck, 2025). This study is grounded in the premise that mainstream media serves as a powerful agent of public pedagogy (Giroux, 2019), shaping societal norms and influencing public opinion on pivotal issues. Thus, the coverage of the 'parental rights' movement must be analyzed to expose how student/parent/teachers, public education, and gender is re-presented. Giroux (2013) calls for educators and academics to advocate for a "qualitatively better world for all people" (p.464). And Butler (2024) asks how we can resist the insistence of oppression and vouch for a more livable world for all? This is the purpose of this research, to make a small contribution to the literature that challenges hegemonic discourses; to expose how gender has been constructed through purposeful verbiage or language complacency; and to defend the sanctity of public education as a public good.

Research Questions

In what ways has the 'parental rights' movement been positioned in mainstream media outlets?

1. How have the roles and relationships of students/parents/teachers been framed?
2. How has the purpose of public education been framed?
3. How are gender and sexuality positioned in mainstream media covering the 'parental rights' movement?

Objective

The primary objective of this research is to critically analyze and understand the re-presentation of the 'parental rights' movement in mainstream media in the Canadian

context. For the purposes of this study, I will examine CBC News, The Globe and Mail, and National Post. Utilizing CDA I will examine the narratives and discourses used to portray the relationships between students, parents, and teachers, the depicted purpose of public education, and the framing of gender and sexuality. As is the crux of Critical Discourse Analysis, the aim is to expose existing power relations, to the dominant discourse in order to offer a critique of what is often accepted as inevitable (Fairclough, 2010). Thus, I seek to dissect these media portrayals to uncover the underlying ideologies, biases, and power dynamics at play, providing a comprehensive view of how the 'parental rights' movement is framed and its potential impacts on public perception and policy.

Significance

If we accept that critical education is a precursor to a democratic society, as posited by Giroux (2017), Chomsky (2013), Freire (2017), Butler (2018), Dewey (2009), hooks (2010), and others, we must acknowledge that a concerted effort to undermine the integrity of education is of high concern. The current attack on education through 'parental rights' discourse seeks to individualize education (Fowler and Mountz, 2024) and curates a world that limits the livability for non-hegemonized identities (Butler, 2024) through discourses of power, suppression, and intolerance (Bratich, 2022; Butler, 2024; Fowler and Mountz, 2024; Giroux, 2019; Rojo and Percio, 2020). Moreover, by legitimizing the 'parental rights' movement as a legal concept, mainstream news media coverage is actively undermining children's rights, ignoring human rights legislation, and contributing to the privatization of public education. This examination is significant to this field of study as the current iteration of the gender fright driven 'parental rights' movement is relatively new, and there

has been no CDA conducted on the mainstream media's coverage of the movement of the national level in Canada.

Addressing the impact of 'parental rights' discourse on education is crucial for the common good. Education is a public good that should serve the interests of all members of society, promoting inclusivity and diversity rather than reinforcing exclusionary practices (Labaree, 2011). The parental rights rhetoric used on the international scale, and I argue present nationwide in Canada, uses a myriad of fantasy-like rhetoric that positions progressive education as a demonic force (Butler, 2024). Through a relationship of convenience between neoliberal and neoconservative actors (Porter, 2012), we see a conjoined effort to reshape education into a tool for maintaining existing power. Neoliberals aim to continue marketizing and commodifying public education (Girroux, 2019), while neoconservatives want to ensure public education advances their private values (Butler, 2024). Understanding this interplay is essential for safeguarding the democratic potential of education and ensuring it remains a transformative force for social good. The significance of this work can be further contextualized through the delineation of the history of the 'parental rights' movement.

History of 'Parental Rights' as Context

The history of the 'parental rights' movement goes to the start of public education and is inseparable from aims to maintain dominant belief systems and practices. While I will later delineate the ways in which the current 'parental rights' movement is actively pushing marginalized groups to further margins of the public school system, we can trace the 'parental rights' movement to the concept of school choice. Logan (2018) explains that

since the onslaught of westernized education in the United States, “locally controlled and funded schools were made available to children of European ancestry or White children”, and that “Catholic leaders were able to create the earliest alternative to public education with a privately funded system of Catholic schools” (p.2). In other words, from the conception, there has been a faction of parents whose incentive for education was solely based on the benefit of an individualized experience. An individualized experience based on the notion of ‘school choice’.

Logan (2018) continues the exploration of the development of the 'parental rights’ movement by considering the ways in which ‘school choice developed in the mid to late 20th century. The development followed the free market ideals of individualization, minimized government interference, and increased choice. Steeped in the concept of choice, Logan argues that to maintain accountability the movement relied on “market pressures, where failing schools would be forced to close and mediocre schools would be forced to perform better” (p.3). Logan also depicts, from the U.S. context, the ways in which parental choice is steeped in segregated schools as magnet schools that were created in order to ward off ‘White Flight’ as financially affluent White families began to move out of urban areas into the suburbs, taking their resources and support away from urban public schools; “In similar fashion to magnet schools, controlled school choice emerged in the United States as a means to provide parental choice while maintaining racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic balance in schools” (p.5). Thusly, highlighting the contradictions within the ‘parental rights’ movement's emphasis on school choice, revealing how market-based

approaches to education often perpetuate existing inequalities rather than fostering genuine accountability or equity.

Jacobs (2018) delineates the way in which the school choice iteration of the ‘parental rights’ movement witnessed significant legislative support and evolution, reflecting a continuous push for innovation and differentiation within the educational system. Initiatives such as President George W. Bush's No Child Left Behind Act and President Obama's Race to the Top aimed to bolster school performance through increased accountability and choice, introducing mechanisms for restructuring underperforming schools, including conversion to charter schools or management by private entities. The trend of extended choice, as per the demands from the 'parental rights’ movement, continues according to Jacobs, as we see the introduction of school vouchers, and most recently online education.

Introduction to the Canadian Connection

While Jacobs (2018) writes in the context of the United States, if we accept the interwoven relationship between the 'parental rights’ movement and school choice, we can then track the rise in 'parental rights’ movement within the Canadian context through Asadolahi et al’s (2022) delineation of the rise of school choice across Canada. Asadolahi et al. defined school choice in various ways including private schools, baccalaureate programs, charter schools, and other categories, they then tracked the increase of these categories from province to province. Through their analysis they found that while “private alternatives to public education have also become more common over the past several decades, the expansion of choice inside the public education system has arguably grown

at a faster rate and has thus played a larger role in the expansion of choice in education" (p. 201). Through this understanding, I conjecture that we can understand the current 'parental rights' movement in direct relation to the increase in school choice.

The implications of school choice extend beyond mere options in education to influence the very content that is taught, making the debate around sex education in Canada an illustrative example of this phenomenon. Bialystok and Wright (2019), posit that "debates about sexuality education often reveal more about the identities of particular groups and individuals and the cultural narratives they represent than about any pedagogical issues related to youth sexuality" (p. 343). They argue that the approach to sex education is influenced by hegemonic discourses and is inseparable from dominant societal constructs. By applying Critical Discourse Analysis and Critical Race Theory, Bialystok and Wright dissect how news media frame issues of sex education curricular reform in Ontario, suggesting that a confluence of factors including religion, social conservatism, Islamophobia, and the influence of publicly funded private schools contribute to a moral panic that is both racially and religiously motivated. This case illustrates how choices in education are profoundly shaped by personal beliefs, reflecting broader societal debates within the prism of 'parental rights' movement; thus, the case will be used as recurring instance of comparison throughout the chapter. Such debates around educational content, as exemplified by sex education, segue into a broader discussion of the dynamics of 'parental rights' movement, where Rubin et al. (2019) identify a dual trend: parents navigating the educational landscape as consumers influenced by market

dynamics, and groups of parents collectively challenging the encroachment of neoliberal ideologies within the educational system.

Rubin et al. (2019) observes two prevailing trends: parents as consumers in a market driven education ecosystem; and conversely collective parental action in opposition of the invasive neoliberal discourse. Rubin et al. establish that ‘choice’ is a term that is heavily marketed towards parents, presenting the illusion of empowerment and autonomy within the educational system. This notion of 'choice' serves to commodify education, framing it as a product for consumption in a competitive market. This market-driven approach encourages parents to act as consumers, evaluating schools and educational services based on perceived quality and outcomes, often measured through standardized test scores and other quantitative metrics. This trend, Rubin et al. (2019) argue, inherently benefits those with the resources and knowledge to navigate the market effectively, thereby exacerbating existing inequities within the education system.

Theoretical Framework

Using the history of ‘parental rights, we can now revisit our three guiding questions:

1. How have the roles and relationships between students/parents/teachers been framed by the mainstream media’s coverage of 'parental rights'?
2. How has the purpose of public education been framed through this coverage?
3. How is gender and sexuality positioned within this coverage?

The ways in which the answer to these questions are explored, and subsequent findings are derived, are not only influenced by my positionality/biases but also derived from my theoretical framework. A theory is a system of related concepts, predictions, and

meanings; and thus, a theoretical framework is the theories that guide perspective, understanding and approach (Imenda, 2014). Imenda also conjectures that while theoretical frameworks provide a clear way of thinking, a researcher can also synthesize multiple frameworks to allow their understanding to exist in a conceptual framework. Working within Imenda's notion of synthesis, below I outline my understandings of gender and sexuality, media, and the broader purpose of education. These understandings inform all elements of the research process, from study rationale to analysis and representation of my data.

Gender

As this research considers how mainstream media positions gender and sexuality, it is important to recognize my own analytical framing of gender. Gender is a performative construct that actively imposes socially constructed roles, behaviours, and expectations on subjects defined through a binary definition of sex (Butler, 2006). Indeed, in accordance with Butler's notion of performativity, gender imprints on to the discursive understanding of sex itself; reshaping sex from a biological to a socio-cultural phenomenon. We can further contextualize gender's imprint on sex with Fausto-Sterling's (2000) biological exploration of sex, delineating the five sexes which ultimately disrupts the biological truth of binaried sex. Fausto –Sterling argues that the simplistic binary model of sex fails to account for the biological complexities and variations that exist, including intersex people. Put simply, even science does not support the binary of male and female. As a result of the gender binary, heteronormativity emerges, reinforcing the idea that heterosexuality is the default, or exclusive sexual orientation (Butler, 2006).

Butler (2024) positions the moral panic surrounding gender as a neoconservative "way for existing powers—states, churches, political movements—to frighten people to come back into their ranks, to accept censorship, and to externalize their fear and hatred onto vulnerable communities" (p.6). In this sense, gender is demonized to distract from existing social and political tensions—tensions that have nothing to do with gender—and restore hegemonic control. Butler (2024) exposes that gender has been purposefully deployed as a "boogeyman" to symbolize all that is perceived as socially corrosive or morally decaying; this fear mongering purports a false moral panic that calcifies dominant norms and distracts from legitimate harm such as regulation of gun use (Giroux, 2018) and historic and contemporary sexual harm to youth by the Catholic church (Butler, 2024). Here we can once again see that gender is not just a construct but a performative tool. This performative use of gender highlights how identities and norms are not merely observed, but actively deployed to achieve specific ideological and political objectives. With this understanding of gender, it is understood that the call for the depoliticization of gender ideology is itself deeply political.

In the Canadian context, gender identity and sexual orientation are protected under the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and the Canadian Human Rights Act, which explicitly prohibit discrimination on the basis of sex, gender identity, and sexual orientation. These legal protections enshrine 2SLGBTQIA+ rights as fundamental human rights, not optional values subject to debate or parental discretion. Public schools, as state institutions, are expected to uphold these rights and reflect them through inclusive pedagogy, equitable policy, and affirming curriculum. This expectation is embedded in

provincial education frameworks, which articulate a responsibility to foster respect for diversity, promote student well-being, and prepare youth for participation in a pluralistic society. As delineated by Moore et al. (2025), the 'parental rights' movement illegitimately questions these rights, in an attempt to assert their own private familial values onto the public. The undermining of these rights through the strategic deployment of heteroactivism (Nash & Browne, 2021), a reactionary movement that frames heteronormativity as under threat and demands a return to exclusionary norms. Within this framework, 'parental rights' are often invoked as an alibi to legitimize this backlash (Mayo, 2013), masking discriminatory aims beneath the language of care, choice, and familial authority. Such rhetoric seeks not merely to question the place of gender and sexual diversity in schools but to restructure public education in the service of private, moralized interests that contradict Canada's own human rights commitments.

Media As Form of Public Pedagogy

Within this study, the attention to media re-presentations of the 'parental rights' movement is rooted in the understanding that media's delineation and dissemination of information directly affects public understanding. Media functions as a form of public pedagogy, shaping societal norms, values, and knowledge. According to Giroux (2000), and many other critical media literacy scholars, media not only entertains but also educates, conveying messages and ideologies that influence public perception and understanding. Kellner and Share (2019) conjecture that media does not reflect societal understanding but teaches societal understandings through reality re-presentation: the dash between the 're' and the 'presentation' indicates the construction of a curated presentation of depiction of

reality. As Kellner and Share delineate, this critical media literacy is rooted in critical theories and cultural studies and are "are most relevant to progressive education when taught through a democratic approach within critical pedagogy" (p.9). Media's language, presentation, and content can thus be seen as actively constructing and reconstructing reality, and thus it is vital to expose the reiterative cycle of discourse production (Fairclough, 2010). In this way, this study recognizes the potential influence of media on audiences and the potential for media analysis to expose and unsettle hegemonic ideals.

The Purpose of Education

The purpose of education, in my view, extends beyond the acquisition of knowledge and skills to include the development of critical consciousness and the promotion of social justice. Freire (2018) argues for an education that empowers individuals to challenge oppression and transform society. However, neoliberal reforms increasingly view education through the lens of market principles, prioritizing economic outcomes over holistic human development (Rojo and Percio, 2020). This shift emphasizes efficiency, standardization, and workforce preparation, often at the expense of critical thinking and social equity. It also promotes individualized understandings of education that ignore the role of public education in upholding a common/public good (Labaree, 2011). Instead, education is seen as something that can and should advance private values and private goods, such as traditional values about gender. In my study, I recognize this tension and explore how neoliberal ideologies influence educational policies and practices, particularly in relation to gender and sexuality. I aim to understand how these neoliberal tendencies intersect with

the goals of transformative education and how they impact the 'parental rights' movement Discourse.

Chapter Two: Methodology and Methods

This chapter outlines the methodological framework that guides this research, grounding it in the principles of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). It begins by detailing the ontological and epistemological foundations that shape the study's understanding of knowledge, language, and power. It then explores the rationale for choosing CDA, clarifying its distinct capacity to interrogate how discourse reflects and reproduces ideology. Following this, the methods section outlines the processes of data collection, corpus construction, and article selection, including the criteria used to include or exclude texts. The chapter then moves into the procedures of thematic coding and recursive analysis, articulating how micro-level linguistic features are analyzed in tandem with macro-level ideological patterns. It also includes a discussion of rhetorical fallacies and what is absent in the discourse, highlighting how silence and omission function as powerful meaning-making tools. The chapter concludes with a reflection on the limitations of the study, particularly its under-engagement with Critical Race Theory, and a brief introduction to the structure of the three analytical chapters that follow.

Methodology

Due to education's inherent relationship with politics, social issues, and ideology, (Apple, 1999; Freire, 2018; Giroux, 2002; Rogers, 2004), the discourse surrounding in the 'parental rights' movement demands analysis that extends beyond simple linguistic aspects. Instead, it requires attention to the iterative process of micro-to-macro-level actions of power and discourse (Rogers et al., 2012). That is, the terms, phrases and tactics used within the movement need to be placed in relation to broader societal discourses.

For this reason, this study is rooted in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Fairclough, 2010; Mullet, 2018; Rogers, 2004; van Dijk, 1993). The application of CDA aims to provide a comprehensive description, interpretation, and explanation of discourses, utilizing the critical analysis of language to uncover underlying power dynamics (Fairclough, 2010) and to expose systemic power structures that perpetuate oppression and inequality (Van Dijk, 1993). In other words, this study seeks to not only dissect the textual and communicative elements within the discourse of the 'parental rights' movement but also to contextualize these elements within the larger social, political, and economic frameworks that shape them.

Ontological and Epistemological Foundations

CDA, ontologically, posits that there is a reiterative relation between language and representation and society (Regmi, 2017), due to the political orientation of knowledge and power, “critical discourse analysts (should) take an explicit sociopolitical stance” (van Dijk, 1993, p.252). By approaching knowledge as political, research can expose discourse without a vein of neutrality (Giroux, 2019). Epistemologically, CDA asserts that knowledge is both socially constructed and inherently political, emphasizing the roles that language and discourse play in shaping our understanding of the world (Regmi, 2017). This perspective aligns with the view that discursive practices are not only reflective but also constitutive of social structures, actively participating in the creation and perpetuation of power dynamics. This approach, regarding ontology and epistemology, is seated in the poststructural paradigm (Dillet, 2017; Hodgson & Standish, 2009), acknowledging that

reality is constructed through power relations, and that knowledge is contingent and shaped by sociohistorical contexts (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

Discourse

Following Gramsci (1971) power is the repetitive enforcement of hegemonic norms that subtly permeates society's cultural and intellectual realms. This reiteration can be contextualized by what Fairclough (2010) defines as the capital D vs lowercase d of Discourse. Within Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), the distinction between (D)iscourse (with a capital 'D') and (d)iscourse (with a lowercase 'd') is significant for understanding the broader implications of language in constructing social realities; discourse refers to specific language use in texts or speech, encompassing words, phrases, and sentences that communicate meaning in particular contexts (Rogers, 2004). (D)iscourse with a capital 'D' extends beyond mere language use to include larger, socially and culturally constructed narratives, practices, and ideologies that shape and are shaped by power dynamics within society (Rogers, 2004).

Why CDA

The choice of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as the primary methodological approach for this study is grounded in its attention to “the concept of power, the concept of history, and the concept of ideology” (Wodak & Myers, 2001, p.4), rather than the other linguistic analytic methodologies that frame language as merely a system of signs or structural elements, devoid of socio-political context and the dynamics of power and ideology. CDA's dual focus on micro-level language use and macro-level societal narratives allows for a comprehensive examination of how specific language choices and framing in

media reflect and influence public and political perceptions (Fairclough, 2010; Wodak & Meyer, 2001). CDA's emphasis on the social construction of knowledge and the inherent politicization of discourse aligns with this research's objectives to uncover underlying power dynamics and examine the sociopolitical implications of media representations (van Dijk, 1993; Fairclough, 2010). This approach not only facilitates a critical analysis of how media discourse both shapes and is shaped by societal ideologies but also enhances the study's relevance to broader societal discussions, responding to the call for academic research to engage in impactful public pedagogy (Giroux, 2019).

Methods

The methods for this CDA were guided through an inductive process, as the theories informed the data collection, and the data collection informed the theories in a cyclical fashion. In what follows, I will delineate the process of data collection, highlighting the fluidity and recourse based on process. I will then explicate the process of thematic coding. This process is demonstrated in Figure 1 below.

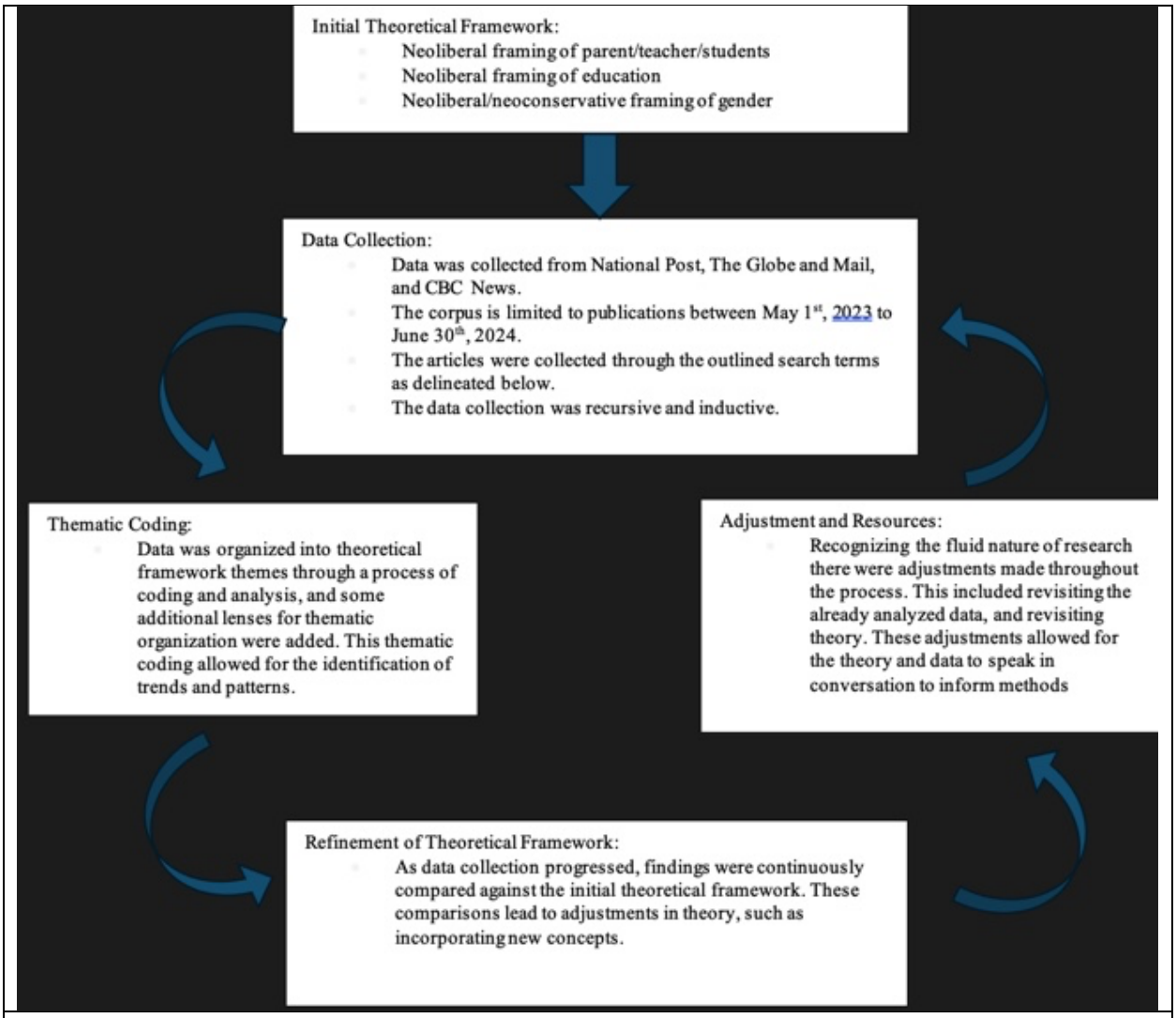


Figure 1: Cyclical Data to Theory Process

To prepare the roadmap for the methods, I consulted previous studies that applied CDA to mainstream media, particularly in the Canadian context (Deacon et al., 2015; Hiebert and Power, 2015; McLeod et al., 2024; Piazza, 2014; Walker et al., 2019). Due to the trans-Canadian nature of the privatization and neoliberal individualization of education (Ganshorn & Moussa, 2022; Moore and Winton, 2023; Winton, 2022), that the 'parental rights' movement is so closely linked to (Fowler and Mountz, 2024), the media sites being analyzed are national media sites. That is, while I recognize that education is a provincial issue, the 'parental rights' movement does not follow these borders.

National Media

As delineated by Fowler and Mountz (2024), Mayo (2021), and Rubin et al. (2020), the 'parental rights' Movement is closely linked to neoliberal education reform. The neoliberal reform rhetoric is not isolated to a singular province but is rather a national movement (Ganshorn & Moussa, 2022; Moore and Winton, 2023; Winton, 2022) that has global connections (Sahlberg, 2016). Thus, the media coverage is not isolated to a singular province. For this reason, despite education being a provincial responsibility, this study will focus on the representations of this movement in the national news. The media framing of political issues encourages particular understandings (Kellner and Share, 2005). Local media is often polluted by the same corporate/neoliberal biases (Dorlan, 2016). As such, the coverage of issues across Canada can be used to advance neoliberalism. Moore and Winton (2023) posit that "provincial fragmentation veils the well-organized rhetoric and tactics of neoliberal education reforms. As a result, community and political responses are often confined within provincial borders. The reformers are centrally organized while resistors are not" (para.4). This study situates itself in the national public pedagogy to act as a resistor to the national neoliberal reform.

Mainstream Media Outlets

In reviewing the methods of studies that utilized CDA to critique mainstream media, there were varying approaches to their data set parameters. While Piazza (2014), did a general Google News search with varying key terms, other studies such as Walker et al.'s (2019) narrowed their media outlets repertoire to a select group namely: Globe and Mail, National Post, Toronto Star, Vancouver Sun, APTN, and CBC. Hiebert and Power (2015)

similarly narrowed their media outlets to just Globe and Mail, and National Post. With widely varying sets of mainstream media outlets, there seemed to be no consensus of outlet selection. For the purposes of this study, I focused on the three most accessed and viewed mainstream media outlets. In what follows, I will explain how the existing literature identifies the top three mainstream Canadian based media sources (CBC, National Post, The Globe and Mail). I will then consider site biases, cross-referencing current literature with online bias checker tools.

An aspect that Piazza (2014) focused on for their mainstream media outlets to have some form of nationwide coverage. Walker et al. (2019) study was based in Nunavut, and thus were focused on coverage of their specific territory. Similar to Piazza's work, my focus will be on the broader nature of national coverage, from which I will inductively organize based on presenting thematic patterns. One distinction made by Walker et al., was that in comparison to other nationally available news outlets, such as *National Post* and *The Globe and Mail, CBC* is publicly funded.

In Deacon et al.'s (2015) study, in which they performed CDA of news coverage surrounding environmental justice, they identified The Globe and Mail, and the National Post as the most widely read and circulated privately owned news sources. Walker et al. (2019) similarly identified Globe and Mail and National Post as the most read/viewed privately owned news outlets with 2,018,923 and 1,116,647 views per week respectively as of 2015. While, CBC had 4,000,000 views per week as of 2017. Based on this understanding, I used CBC, The Globe and Mail, and National Post as the mainstream news sites for this study.

Media Outlet Biases

Walker et al. (2019) also considered the media biases of the news outlets. Walker et al. triangulated various sources and found that on the political scale, CBC is left of center, Globe and Mail is considered center, and National Post is right of center. I cross referenced these political positioning with readily available bias checkers online. I did this to take the rhetoric outside of the academy and into a more public discourse framework, allowing for a broader understanding of how these media outlets are perceived by the general public. The websites used to cross reference these political leanings were: https://mediabiasfactcheck.com/ (March, 21, 2024) and https://www.allsides.com/media-bias (March 21, 2024), and their results can be found in figures A and B respectively.

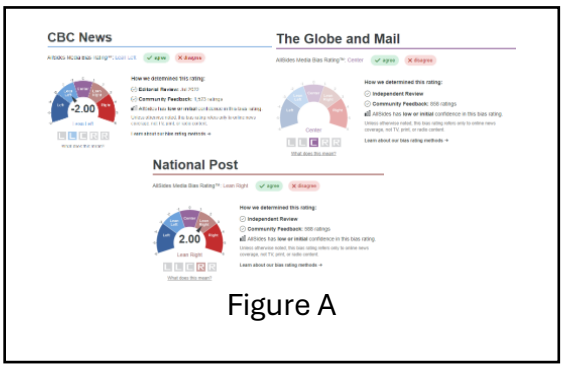


Figure A

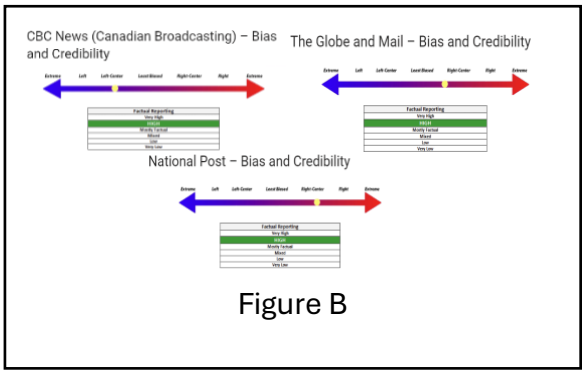


Figure B

As seen in the figures above, these bias checkers found similar political spectrum alignments as Walker et al (2019) had. This will enable the study to account for potential influences of media bias on the representation and discourse surrounding the movement. By analyzing articles from these different sources, the research aims to capture a broad spectrum of perspectives, thus facilitating a nuanced critique of the narratives and ideologies shaping public discourse on 'parental rights', education, gender, and sexuality in Canada. The inclusion of three sources of supposed differentiation of political leanings,

also invites the contemplation of how discourses of neoliberalism may run across these supposedly politically distinct sources.

Corpus

The corpus was collected deductively, focusing on articles from CBC, The Globe and Mail, and National Post published between May 1st, 2023, and June 30th, 2024. The timeframe used ensures a current and relevant examination of recent discourse trends. While excluding past articles may limit historical context, focusing on this specific timeframe allows for a concentrated examination of recent discourse trends and developments within the 'parental rights' movement. By dating back to May 1st, 2023, the study includes New Brunswick's Policy 713 and the student protests against the legislation of 2SLGBTQ+ surveillance (Rudderham, 2023). Within this date range, Canda also saw Saskatchewan's introduction of Bill 137 that increased surveillance on gender identity, being pushed through with the Notwithstanding Clause (Hunter, 2023), Manitoban PC 'parental rights' campaign promises (MacLean, 2023), and Alberta's attack on youth's gender rights and teacher autonomy (Dryden & Lee, 2024). These interprovincial trends reveal that the international movement of 'parental rights' is prevalent and growing across Canada.

Corpus Collection

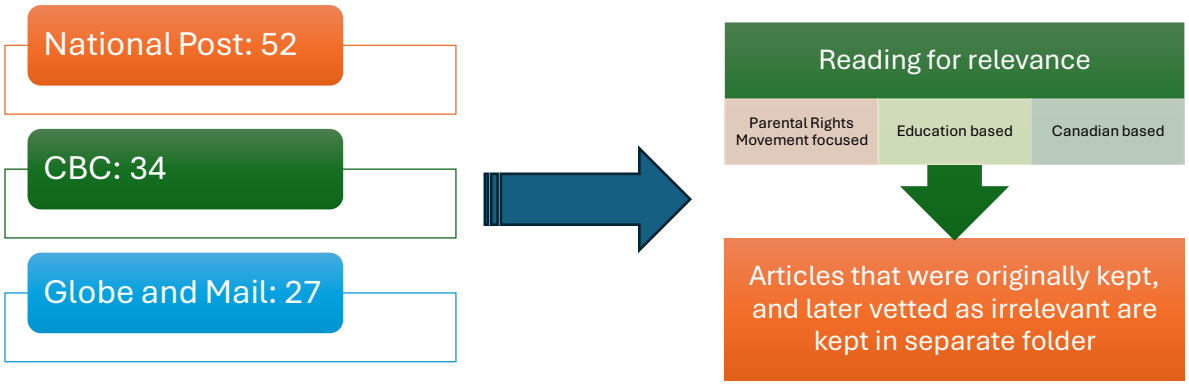
For this study's data collection the search term "parental rights movement" and 'parental rights' was used. Each site had built in search functions that allowed for internal site searches to be conducted. National Post and Globe and Mail used a linear timeline-based algorithm which presented articles that had "parental rights movement" or '"parental

rights" in the either the body of writing or in the title. Meaning that all articles containing this phrase, whether in the headline or throughout the text, were returned in chronological order. CBC's algorithm was different, however. Using the search function on the CBC website proved to only bring forward select articles, likely due to differences in how the platform's algorithm indexes or prioritizes and promotes certain articles. To work within the CBC algorithm, and effectively capture all possible data, two additional steps were implemented.

To ensure the inclusion of all relevant articles from each media site, I clicked on hyperlinks within each article; if a hyperlink led to another article published by one of the three news sites, I included it in the corpus. To avoid duplication, I used a Ctrl+F search for the article title in a master folder containing all collected titles.

For the National Post and the Globe and Mail, there were no hyperlinked articles that did not already appear in the initial search results. However, for CBC, more than 20 articles discovered through hyperlinks did not show up in the site's search function. This discrepancy suggests the possibility that additional CBC articles relevant to the 'parental rights' movement discourse may still be missing from the dataset.

After the initial article collection, a total of 113 total articles were flagged (52 National Post, 34 CBC, 27 Globe and Mail). These articles were then vetted for relevance. The relevance of an article was determined by three categories, as shown below:



The three vetting categories included:

1. Was the article focused on the 'parental rights' movement?
2. Was the article's discourse based in a conversation about education?
3. Was the article Canadian focused?

To expand on defining these categories, I will begin with detailing the first category. Some articles were flagged even though they were not rooted in the 'parental rights' movement; instead, they focused on 'parental rights' in the context of divorce proceedings or custody disputes. The second category vetted articles that were purely focused on the 'parental rights' movement's presence outside of the discussion of education, often only focused on the medical side of the conversation. The final category eliminated articles that did not connect the movement to Canada and instead confined the discussion exclusively to the United States.

A final category of article exclusion inductively emerged through the vetting process. This category eliminated articles that did not follow the popular discourse, thus being found as anomalies, and did not fit the criteria for articles purporting neoconservative and neoliberal 'parental rights' narratives. These articles opposed the 'parental rights' discourse by centering conversation on students, resisting the framing of infantilization, or by

highlighting the voice of transgender individuals, and parents who opposed the movement. These articles refused to put forward neutral voice that inherently allows for the movement's rhetoric to be normalized. While these articles did engage with the 'parental rights' movement in education, they were excluded because they did not legitimize and mobilize discourses about students, education, and gender that ground 'parental rights' movement. In this case, 13 of articles were found to challenge 'parental rights'; these 13 articles should be further investigated in another study analyzing the discourse of resistance to the 'parental rights' movement.

After the vetting process, a total of 83 relevant articles were kept, 13 articles were dismissed as anomalies/articles of resistance, and 17 articles were found as irrelevant (not related to parental rights in education in Canada). Within this breakdown the CBC, National Post, and Globe and Mails article relevancy were as follows:

	Relevant	Irrelevant	Anomalies
CBC	28	2	4
National Post	39	9	4
Globe and Mail	16	6	5

In the sections to follow, I will detail how I analyzed the 83 articles. To begin the explanation, I will delineate the general recursive process of moving between '(d)iscourse and (D)iscourse analysis, then I will introduce the three guiding themes that influenced my analysis. Lastly, I will explicate the four rounds of analysis that informed my findings.

(D)iscourse and (d)iscourse

In my research on the representation of the 'parental rights' movement in Canadian media, I explored both the micro-level language use ((d)iscourse) and the macro-level societal narratives ((D)iscourse) to comprehend how media discourses construct and reflect the movement's ideologies and practices. The (D)iscourse to (d)iscourse is, naturally, recursive and tandem. Meaning, I began by recognizing macro trends, in societal narratives ((D)iscourse) about the 'parental rights' movement, such as overarching themes or ideologies mobilized through the broader media landscape. Then I considered the specific instances of language use discourse within individual media texts to see how these larger narratives are manifested at the micro level and subsequently internalized, normalized and then repeated, allowing the (d)iscourse to inform the (D)iscourse, and the (D)iscourse to inform the discourse. This approach allowed for an examination of the reciprocal relationship between (D)iscourse and discourse: how broader societal narratives both shape and are shaped by the language and representations used. As Roger (2004) states, "This recursive movement between linguistic and social analysis is what makes CDA a systematic method, rather than a haphazard analysis of discourse and power" (p. 7).

In the recursive process, the (d)iscourse analysis focused on the linguistic features, styles, and rhetoric within media texts, examining how language is employed to frame the movement, influence public opinion, and convey underlying messages. This includes analyzing word choice, metaphors, argumentative structures, and other rhetorical strategies to understand the immediate, textual representation of the 'parental rights'

movement. Conversely, the (D)iscourse analysis considered the broader socio-political and cultural narratives that the media texts both draw from and contribute to. This involves exploring how the 'parental rights' movement is situated within larger (D)iscourses around education, gender, sexuality, and human rights, identifying how these media representations reflect, reinforce, or challenge existing power structures and societal norms.

The tandem back and forth process in CDA, as outlined by scholars like Fairclough (2010) and Rogers (2004), involves a continuous, iterative movement between analyzing specific instances of language use (d)iscourse and the broader socio-cultural contexts (D)iscourse that they inhabit. This recursive analytical process allows me to not only deconstruct the text itself but also reconstruct the larger social and cultural meanings, uncovering the dynamic interplay between text and context. The (D)iscourse analysis can be best explained in the pre-determined themes that informed my perspective.

Thematic Coding

This study used three analytical thematic codes to organize inform analysis but was open to emerging themes as well. The three predetermined thematic codes were based upon the three sub questions of this study:

1. How have the roles and relationships of students/parents/teachers been framed?
2. How has the purpose of public education been framed?
3. How is gender and sexuality positioned?

These codes identified how the media constructs these concepts, revealing the underlying assumptions, values, and power dynamics that shape public discourse and influence societal perceptions and norms.

To better understand the themes that were explored I will define how the following were framed in/by the media: parents, children and teachers; public education; and gender and sexuality. While I have articulated my general understandings through my theoretical framework and literature review, below I offer a specific understanding of the three analytical terms that I used. In doing so, I am trying to demonstrate how the re-presentation of the 'parental rights' movement in mainstream media normalizes neoliberal and neoconservative views of parents/children, education, and gender. Critical discourse analysis seeks to put power (normative and naturalized) discourses on display in order to unsettle the power (naturalization) they maintain through invisibility.

Neoliberal Framing of Parents, Children, and Teachers

Within a neoliberal framework, parents are seen as consumers (Rubin et al., 202; Rojo and Percio, 2020; Winton, 2022), and children are seen as future neoliberal citizens who can produce economically (Kingston, 2021). Within this paradigm, teachers are reduced to technicians who deposit rote learning into students, following a "banking" model of education that prioritizes measurable outputs and economic efficiency over critical thinking and holistic development (Freire, 2018). Giroux (2019) posits that this view of education undermines democratic values and civic engagement, transforming schools from spaces of critical inquiry and social empowerment into factories that produce compliant workers attuned to the demands of the market.

Neoliberal Framing of Education

Neoliberal reform of education seeks to individualize the education process, placing responsibility for success or failure on the shoulders of individual students and parents, thereby deflecting attention from systemic inequalities in the society (Giroux, 2002). This individualization of education is accompanied by an increased governmentality of heightened surveillance and control (Rojo and Percio, 2020). The neoliberal ideology demands market driven choices that uphold hegemonic systems, and consequentially any organized form of resistance must be privatized and controlled (Apple, 1999). This results in a scenario where public dissent and collective action are systematically undermined, as they are framed not as democratic rights, but as disruptions to the market's efficiency and order. In this way, neoliberal policies not only shape educational outcomes but also reconfigure the very fabric of societal engagement, aligning citizenship and civic participation more closely with consumer behavior and individual competition.

Neoconservative Construction of Gender and Sexuality

Gender and sexuality, in the traditional enshrinement of neoconservative construction is binary (Morán Faúndes, 2019). The contemplation of expansion to this binarization of gender, and sexuality, in the neoconservative fundamentalism is subsequently framed as a threat to the traditional family must be resisted through heteroactivism: a strategy employed to undermine and restrict gay/trans equalities (Clarke, 2024). Within the hetero resistance to gender, children are weaponized as vulnerable to the ‘indoctrination’ of gender, while gender/sex is simultaneously framed as natural and unwavering (Butler, 2024). The attempt to attack gender and preserve traditional

hegemonic power has contradictions and creates a web of fears casted wide enough to entrap a breadth of individuals and communities (Butler, 2024). Within this expansive web of gender fear mongering, we see the convenient alliance of neoconservatism, and neoliberalism (Porter, 2012).

Neoliberalism demands the restoration of a traditional 20th century workforce and consumer base (Woolley, 2017), and promotes the reproduction of traditional family frameworks (Bezanson, 2006). This restoration of a mythic past causes for an active attack on individuals who do not conform to traditional binarized gender norms, or heteronormative notions of sexuality (Bratich, 2022; Giroux, 2019). This resistance has formed in the production of toxic masculinity, that promotes violence, and suppression in order to uphold masculine dominance (Giroux, 2013). In this form, neoliberal seeks to reform education to produce a binary construction gender and sexuality that reinforces patriarchal and heteronormative values, ultimately limiting the spectrum, of acceptable identities and expressions (Woolley, 2017).

Initial Corpus Analysis

The initial stage of analysis involved organizing excerpts from the selected corpus of 88 news articles into an Excel spreadsheet, categorized under the three overarching thematic frames reflective of my initial research questions: gender, the parent/child/teacher triad, and public education. Within this spreadsheet, each row represented a discrete instance of discourse, often a sentence or short paragraph, lifted from the corpus and placed in a column that aligned with its dominant thematic resonance. This process allowed for an

early mapping of patterns, clustering of rhetorical strategies, and identification of recurring lexical choices across the media landscape.

However, this form of analysis soon revealed its limits. The fragmentation of discourse into spreadsheet cells risked flattening the complexity of each article's internal logic and obscured the broader ideological terrain, what Gee (2011) would differentiate as "d"iscourse versus "D"iscourse. As I moved deeper into the corpus, I noticed my own interpretive orientation shifting: the data points began to blur, articles bled together, and the relational dynamics between language, ideology, and power grew murky. I found myself alienated from the context I was attempting to understand.

In response to this methodological impasse, I returned to the raw corpus, not as a detached observer, but as a participant in dialogue. Drawing on Biesta's (2006) notion of subjectification and Freire's (1970) insistence that education and inquiry must be dialogical, I reformatted each article into a more accessible document and began annotating them directly, treating each piece not as an object of dissection, but as a partner in conversation. In these margins, I responded with questions, counter-claims, emotional reactions, and theoretical associations, effectively writing myself into the analysis. This shift marked a turning point in the project: rather than approaching the corpus as a collection of stable meanings to be uncovered, I came to understand it as a living site of struggle in which I, too, was entangled.

This recursive process allowed me to re-encounter the articles not only as texts but as enactments of power. With this renewed closeness, I returned to my earlier spreadsheet but this time, I cross-referenced my annotations and began clustering excerpts based on

shared rhetorical features, not just topical alignment. These emergent groupings formed the basis of my thematic subcategories, such as “Gender as Boogeyman,” “The Helpless ‘c’hild,” “Privatization of Education,” and cross-cutting rhetorical devices such as “Common Sense Rhetoric,” “Argumentum ad Temperantiam,” and “Of-Courseness.”[1]While some themes (e.g., “Villainization of the Teacher”) mapped cleanly onto a single analytical frame, others—particularly rhetorical strategies like “Of-Courseness”—resisted such compartmentalization. These cross-cutting devices operated across all three domains, reinforcing ideological dominance not through overt argumentation, but through the normalization of particular beliefs. Rogers (2011) identifies this process as lexical legitimation: a method by which the repetition of certain terms and phrases produces an aura of inevitability, making alternative perspectives appear radical or absurd.

By tracing how these rhetorical patterns coalesce within and across the thematic domains, I was able to move beyond surface-level content analysis toward a critical discourse analysis that foregrounds both micro-level language choices and the macro-level ideological formations they sustain. These rhetorical categories—“Common Sense Rhetoric,” “Argumentum ad Temperantiam,” and “Of-Courseness”—differ from the other thematic subcategories in that they are not grounded in a specific sociological subject (like gender or education), but rather in the linguistic mechanisms that scaffold and sustain all dominant narratives. They function not only as standalone discursive phenomena but as throughlines that weave across the entire dataset. For example, the theme of ‘parental rights’ frequently relies on of-courseness to present its claims as self-evident, while

[1] Each of the themes listed will be further explained in the coming chapters of analysis.

simultaneously drawing on the infantilization of children ("the helpless 'c'hild") to legitimize its authority. In this way, these rhetorical strategies serve as connective tissue, reinforcing the ideological underpinnings of multiple themes while obscuring their constructed nature.

Importantly, this recursive movement between text and context, between "d"iscourse and "Discourse," is what allowed the final set of thematic categories to emerge, not as static labels, but as analytical entry points into the workings of power, normativity, and educational meaning-making in the Canadian public sphere.

The final stage of analysis involved pairing the emergent findings with theoretical frameworks, both those established in the literature review and those introduced more explicitly in the analysis chapters themselves. This recursive pairing was not a linear application of theory to data, but a dialogical process in which theory and discourse mutually informed one another. As I engaged with instances of language pulled from the corpus, I continually returned to thinkers such as Freire, Foucault, Giroux, and Butler—not as fixed authorities, but as interlocutors in an ongoing inquiry. In doing so, the boundaries between data and theory, method and interpretation, began to blur in productive ways. For this reason, the literature review and analysis chapters are intentionally co-constructed: they do not function as separate stages, but as overlapping terrains that reflect the recursive nature of discourse itself. This structure, where theory emerges alongside, and in conversation with, the data, honors the complexity of the subject matter and resists the artificial separation of analysis from meaning-making.

Lexical Cohesion and Fallacies

Before leaving the methods chapter, we must revisit the themes that landed in the realm of lexical cohesion. Rogers (2011) puts forward that a form of lexical cohesion lies within the act of purporting a sense “of courseness” (p.163). This fallacious rhetorical tool asserts a tone of authority that is paired with language that is deliberately unrefined, suggesting an air of uncompromising honesty and strength while, in reality, it serves to obscure focus from the holes in the argument itself; for example, the term ‘parental rights’.. We can aptly pair this lexical cohesion with other fallacious rhetorical tools. Walton (1987) writes that “One group of fallacies has to do with "hot" appeals to emotion in argument” (p.4). One example of a hot appeal is the ad hominem attack; rather than addressing the argument put forth by a person, the person is attacked. In this fallacious rhetorical tact, the argument is framed through villainization and attack. In the case of the 'parental rights' movement, we can link the cohesion through of courseness and ad hominem appeal, as if an argument posits that the ‘parent’ must be protected or be the protector from a villainized entity, be it gender, public education, teachers, or the government In doing so, it shifts the discourse away from fact, relying instead on an emotionally charged narrative that reinforces in-group solidarity while demonizing perceived outsiders.

Social Identification fallacy is described by Boylan (2020) as: “if the persuader can convince you that everyone is doing something, then the reader is drawn to conforming” (p.44). This mechanism dovetails with of courseness and ad hominem by further solidifying the “us-versus-them” framework. Once individuals believe that their in-group must be defended from an out-group villain, and that “everyone” in the in-group already agrees—

critical thinking is overshadowed by emotional appeals and conformity pressure. The us vs. them rhetoric can be observed as well in the tokenistic 'olive branch' of a golden mean, or false middle ground fallacy, also known as an *argumentum ad temperantiam*. Grigore et al. (2020) writes that the "rhetorical construction of an *argumentum ad temperantiam* (a false balance), therefore ensures that the premise of the paradox is not examined closely" (p.201). This fallacy can be exemplified by a rhetoric of, "being gay is ok, but being transgender should be hidden." By presenting a shallow compromise as the sensible midpoint, this tactic often evades deeper scrutiny. It can appear moderate and fair yet simultaneously silence legitimate concerns by funneling all discussion into an artificially constrained "middle" position.

Walton (1987) also identifies the post hoc hoc fallacy, which assumes that because one event follows another in time, the first must have caused the second. Within the Parental Right Movement's rhetoric, a post hoc claim might assert that "once certain policies supporting LGBTQ+ students were introduced, parents began feeling marginalized; therefore, those policies must be the cause." This simplistic correlation-as-causation error further intertwines with 'of courseness', ad hominem, and social identification strategies by fueling an emotionally charged narrative: if event B follows event A, it becomes easy, though logically unfounded, to blame A for any perceived harm to the in-group.

What Is Missing

Just as important as what is in the text, is also what is not in the text. As Billig (1988 wrote, "the possibility of a dialogic, or rhetorically accomplished, unconscious implies that discourse analysts must observe both what is talked about in conversation and what is not

talked about" (p.206). In other words, what perspective is missing from the discourse? Just as Billig (1988) suggests, these omissions can be as rhetorically potent as the overt fallacies themselves, for they shape the narrative terrain on which arguments are waged. By failing to acknowledge perspectives that do not fit neatly into the constructed "us-versus-them" framework, such as the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ youth, educators, or parents supportive of inclusive policies, the discourse creates a self-reinforcing echo chamber.

I choose to delineate the importance of what is missing, as well as rhetorical devices (as seen in the previous section), in the methods because these discursive tools are not merely stylistic—they are methodological indicators of how ideology operates beneath the surface of language. In Critical Discourse Analysis, the ways arguments are framed, repeated, and supported, through lexical cohesion, fallacies, and omission are central to understanding how power is maintained and legitimized. These devices serve as scaffolding for dominant ideologies, subtly guiding readers toward particular conclusions while rendering alternative perspectives invisible or illegitimate. By making these mechanisms explicit in my methodological approach, I not only situate the analysis within a rigorous framework, but also foreground the recursive relationship between language and power. Recognizing what is absent is just as critical as analyzing what is present, because absence is itself a form of discourse, one that shapes perception, narrows public debate, and constructs the boundaries of what is sayable, believable, and ultimately, governable.

Critical Race Theory

While this study is primarily focused on the Canadian iteration of the 'parental rights' movement, which I will show is seated in neoliberal, neoconservative, and anti-gender constructs, it is also important to consider how "the same attitude circulates widely in the public opposition to 'critical race theory' "(Butler, 2024, p.22). Zelnick et al. (2023) state that we are in the midst of a modern red scare, fraught with political repression in education, stipulated by the increasing efforts to censor and limit the teaching of certain historical events, critical race theory, and discussions surrounding gender and sexuality in schools. They draw parallels between the current political climate and the McCarthy era, highlighting how this resurgence of censorship and ideological control mirrors past efforts to suppress dissenting views and maintain hegemonic power structures. Zelnick et al. (2023) argue that this 'modern red scare' is characterized by legislative bans, educational policies, and public discourse that aim to narrow the scope of what can be taught and discussed within educational settings. This trend not only threatens academic freedom but also undermines the ability of educators to provide a comprehensive and inclusive education that reflects the diversity of experiences and histories.

Zelnick et al. (2023) explain how the attack on progressive ideology is not new, nor is the mandated increased surveillance of people of Colour, non-binary individuals and other marginalized groups within educational and public spheres. They illustrate that these actions are part of a broader historical pattern where dominant power structures seek to control and limit the visibility and rights of these communities. In solemn homage to Martin Niemöller, they posit that "First they came for critical race theory… we are already

threatened to silence the mere mention of race or gender" (Zelnick et al., p.172). Zelinick's et al.'s allusion to Niemöller's poem, emphasizes that the current wave of censorship is not an isolated phenomenon, but part of a cascading erosion of rights that begins with targeted ideologies and quickly expands to threaten broader forms of speech, identity, and dissent.

In my opinion, as the author of this study, the lack of reliance, magnification, and discussion on Critical Race Theory is the most damaging limitation of the work. The focus was on gender and sexuality, but just as gender is mobilized to invoke fear, race is often mobilized to justify control. The two are not separate discursive threads but interwoven logics of domination that reinforce each other through selective visibility, surveillance, and exclusion. Critical Race Theory is not merely a subject of recent backlash—it is a framework that offers essential tools for understanding how power functions systemically through legal, educational, and cultural apparatuses. By not foregrounding CRT more centrally in my own analysis, I risk reproducing the very siloed thinking that critical pedagogy seeks to dismantle. Future research must address this gap directly, not only by tracing how anti-CRT discourse functions in Canadian media and policy, but by asking how whiteness, settler colonialism, and racial capitalism shape the very terms of the so-called 'parental rights' debate. As Butler (2024) reminds us, the fear of CRT is a fear of reckoning—with history, with accountability, and with the possibility of transformation. To omit race from the center of educational critique is to leave power partially uninterrogated

Connecting Theory

In the chapters that follow, I will detail the findings within/through a review of the literature. Rather than treating the literature review and findings as distinct sections, I

adopt a recursive structure that mirrors the iterative nature of CDA itself, where (d)iscourse and (D)iscourse mutually shape one another, and where literature is not a backdrop to data, but an active participant in its interpretation. In doing so, the upcoming chapter weaves together theory, media excerpts, and critical analysis to demonstrate how the ideological terrain of the 'parental rights' movement is constructed and normalized within Canadian mainstream media. Framing this inquiry through a Foucauldian lens, the analysis highlights how systems of power operate through mechanisms of visibility, discipline, and moral panic, particularly in relation to gender, sexuality, and public education. The recursive movement between empirical media discourse and the theoretical frameworks of power, pedagogy, and performativity allows for a deeper understanding of how hegemonic narratives are produced and reproduced.

The next three chapters present the major thematic findings of this study. Chapter Three, "Gender as the Boogeyman," explores how gender and sexuality are framed as threats to social cohesion, children's innocence, and family values. Chapter Four, "Who? The Parent. Whom? The Child. Beware, the Teacher" analyzes how the roles of students, parents, and teachers are discursively constructed to legitimize parental control while undermining teacher autonomy and student agency. Chapter Five, "Trojan Horse of Privatization" reveals how public education is reframed through neoliberal and neoconservative logics that shift its purpose from collective well-being to private authority and moral regulation. What follows, then, is not just a review of the literature, but an analytic entry point into the discursive operations of the movement itself, laying the groundwork for the chapters ahead.

Chapter Three: Gender as the Boogeyman

The contemporary ‘parental rights’ movement in Canada cannot be understood as a sudden or isolated reaction to emerging conversations about gender identity, it is a discursive continuation of a long-standing struggle over who controls the purpose, content, and values of public education.

Current anxieties around gender and sexuality are less about pedagogy and more about reasserting hegemonic authority over knowledge, identity, and belonging. What follows is not simply an exploration of how gender is discussed in Canadian media, but an exposure of the ways gender is discursively constructed as a threat through rhetorical strategies that frame trans and queer existence as dangerous, contagious, or ideologically extreme.

This chapter uses a recursive analytical approach, drawing from Critical Discourse Analysis and a Foucauldian understanding of power to trace how gender is regulated, pathologized, and rendered monstrous across Canadian mainstream media. By unpacking how public discourse constructs gender as a cultural contagion, ideological threat, and institutional corruption, the analysis reveals not just what the 'parental right’ movement opposes, but what it aims to restore. In doing so, this chapter lays the discursive groundwork for understanding how fear, affect, and tradition are mobilized to reconstitute the purposes of education and deny students the right to live and learn as they are.

Chapter Introduction

The coming sections of this chapter seeks to expose that Parental Right movement is not a moment of the past, but a continuation. Moreover, it aims to show how discursive

framings of gender and sexuality in Canadian mainstream media (CBC, The Globe and Mail, National Post) reproduce power structures aligned with neoliberal and neoconservative logics. Using a Foucauldian approach to power structures, I explicate both systems of influence and existing power structures. These discussions will then be connected to the current news media in comparison to literature on the 'parental rights' movement, illustrating how these systemic and structural dimensions intersect and influence the discourse and policies surrounding 'parental rights' in the context of education. This analysis will provide a nuanced understanding of how power operates with a particular focus on the discourse on gender, sexuality and its impact on the shaping of 'parental rights' narratives. While this discussion centers on gender and sexuality, with more focus on gender, the conversation can be extended to other marginalized groups.

To fully grasp how gender becomes a discursive scapegoat in the 'parental rights' movement, it is necessary to interrogate the broader terrain in which meaning is constructed and contested: media. Media does not merely report on controversies—it actively shapes them, offering selective representations that legitimize certain narratives while excluding or pathologizing others. The question, then, is not only what is said about gender, but how power circulates through these representations, determining which identities are rendered intelligible and which are framed as threats. This is why a discourse analysis rooted in Foucauldian power is essential: it allows us to examine how representations of gender and sexuality function not as isolated commentary, but as technologies of regulation, containment, and ideological reproduction.

Within this mediated landscape, gender is made to carry far more than its ontological weight—it is positioned as the vessel through which broader cultural anxieties are managed (Butler, 2024). By turning gender into a flashpoint, media discourses divert attention away from structural inequality, economic precarity, and political disillusionment, offering instead a villain that is intimate, affective, and ever-present in the lives of children. This is not incidental; it is a deliberate effect of power working through discourse. What follows is an exploration not only of what is said about gender in the media, but of how these statements work to secure authority, reassert normative values, and discipline difference under the guise of parental concern and pedagogical neutrality.

Introduction to Power, Media: A Precursor to Evaluating Gender Representation

Power, in the Foucauldian sense is not contextualized by theory, nor is it a mere position that is held, rather is "it is the operation of the political technologies throughout the social body" (Dreyfus et al., 1982, p.185). Due to its allusive and abstract existence, it is inherently invisible, just as the painter's full gaze is invisible to the viewer, and so is the viewers gaze to the painter (Foucault, 1970). Thus, the dynamics of power goes unnoticed, and ever imposing. In examining the 'parental rights' movement, this conceptualization of power aids in understanding how narratives around gender, sexuality, and race are shaped and propagated.

The dynamics of visibility and invisibility in media representations play a critical role in how societal norms and values are constructed and contested, influencing the frameworks within which 'parental rights' and educational policies are debated and formulated. Bialystok and Wright's (2019) comparative analysis of the media coverage

surrounding changes to the sex ed curriculum in Ontario in 2010 and 2015 exemplifies the media's role in reifying power. Specifically, their analysis exposes how white evangelical Christians opposed to the curricular revisions in 2010 were constructed very differently than the non-white protestors in 2015. Although the curriculum was opposed for the same reasons in 2010 and 2015, the protestors in 2015 were positioned as 'others' That is, in 2015, the people protesting were challenged for not adapting to "Canadian culture "; yet the media did not employ this critique against white Christian protestors in 2010 who were demanding schools respect traditional, conservative values. This example puts on display how power, policy, and discourse are intertwined, with constitutional protections and participatory rights seemingly afforded selectively. Moreover, it also reveals the media's role in framing these debates and highlights the intricate ways power structures influence public discourse and policy outcomes, particularly in the realm of education reform.

Media is not an unbiased reflection of the lived realities of people's diverse experiences, but rather a tool that is both reproductive and productive of certain ideologies. Following Kellner & Share (2019) societal understanding of sexuality and gender are molded by dominant representations in the media: gender is binary, heterosexuality is the norm, and any expressions of gender that are not aligned with societal norms are viewed with skepticism, condescension, or outright opposition.

While traditional media has always been complicit in the construction of gender, digital platforms have amplified the focus and force of gender. Digital platforms have given rise to alternative masculinities, masculinities that wish to restore a past of phantasm (Butler, 2024), or a mythic past (Bratich, 2022, Giroux, 2019) That is as Mercer and

McGlashan (2023) discuss, the rise of toxic masculinity online, a response to perceived threats from progressive movements, including 2SLGBTQ+ rights. Such sentiments often manifest in transphobia, with trans individuals facing heightened violence online and offline. To fully understand how discourses of gender are regulated and weaponized in media, it is essential to examine the political formations that underpin them. In particular, the convergence of neoliberal and neoconservative logics provides the ideological scaffolding through which gender becomes both a target of control and a symbol of societal anxiety. The following section takes up this task by tracing how these two frameworks—often assumed to be in tension—work in tandem to discipline gender expression and preserve hegemonic norms.

Governing Gender

To begin delineating how gender is framed in discourse, it is instructive to reconsider two constructs that, while seemingly in opposition, function in iniquitous harmony: neoliberalism and neoconservatism. Neoliberalism, a contemporary iteration of capitalism, maintains capitalism's fundamental need for perpetual growth. As Marx and Engels (1848) observed, capitalism survives through the "constant revolutionising of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation" (p. 16). In other words, progress is the lifeblood of capitalism, and insecurity is the nourishment that enables its continuation. Neoliberalism follows this same logic of progress, yet departs from Adam Smith's (1776) conception of the free market as a mechanism to reduce poverty. Instead, as Harvey (2005) argues, "neoliberalization was from the very beginning a project to achieve the restoration of class power" (p. 16),

harnessing fear and insecurity to generate financial gain for the few at the expense of the many (Taylor, 2023). It is here that we see the natural intersectionality of neoliberalism and neoconservatism, the halting of social progress to preserve hegemony.

As Kristol (1984) and later Thompson (2015) conjectured, neoconservatism cannot be given a conclusive definition due to its illusory and contingent character, functioning less as a fixed ideology and more as a reactive political formation shaped by prevailing socio-cultural conditions. Alberta (2023) does not explicitly use the term *neoconservatism*; however, his exploration of the evangelical fixation on women's bodily autonomy, gender norms, and moral authority effectively illustrates the core mechanisms through which neoconservative discourse operates: namely, through the invocation of fear, righteousness, and tradition to regulate bodies and sustain hegemonic power structures.

While neoconservatism resists progress, and neoliberalism demands it, they both agree on hegemonic preservation, and thus the alliance of commonality is made. This alliance is particularly visible in the governance of gender. Judith Butler (1990) theorizes gender not as an innate characteristic, but as a performative construct, repeated acts that create the illusion of a stable identity. As Butler (2024) argues, "gender" has become a discursive flashpoint, vilified and politicized, while simultaneously being tightly policed through neoconservative appeals to biological essentialism. Here gender is used to perform not just the/an assumption of binary, but rather a moral panic of prescribed perversion because of what individual security of identity threatens: the erosion of normative certainties and hierarchies. Fausto-Sterling (2000) challenges these essentialist claims by revealing the social construction of sex itself, demonstrating that binary

categories fail to capture the complexity of human embodiment. Yet despite biology's refutation of the binary, dominant discourse continues to discipline gender through appeals to nature, tradition, and efficiency: logics that serve both neoliberal markets and neoconservative cultural agendas.

It is the intent of the coming sections to illustrate how mainstream news media in Canada, namely *CBC*, *National Post*, and *The Globe and Mail*, propagate neoliberal and neoconservative discourses on gender. Having written this chapter's introduction after completing all three analysis chapters, I can attest that gender is seldom framed as constructed, nor is there strong advocacy for individual ownership over one's identity. Instead, we witness the medicalization of gender, the villainization of gender, and the repetition of fallacious narratives designed to construct a common enemy stoking fear, entrenching binaries, and reinforcing hegemonic ideologies.

Gender: A Posthumous Report

> *Here, the action of representation consists in bringing one of these two forms of invisibility into the place of the other, in an unstable superimposition – and in rendering them both, at the same moment, at the other extremity of the picture – at that pole which is the very height of its representation: that of a reflected depth in the far recess of the painting's depth. The mirror provides a metathesis of visibility that affects both the space represented in the picture and its nature as representation; it allows us to see, in the centre of the canvas, what in the painting is of necessity doubly invisible.*
>
> *Foucault, 1970*

This section begins with the aim of rendering visible the layered operations of power—those forms of bias, regulation, and exclusion that are so embedded within dominant discourse that they remain largely unseen. Following Foucault's conception of "double invisibility," gender emerges not merely as a visible identity or political category, but as a mediated object of representation: reflected, distorted, and displaced through competing ideological frames. What is presented as neutral or natural in mainstream media is often the effect of deliberate framing: a mirror that both reveals and conceals. Through this lens, we examine how media discourses project a posthumous report on gender: narrating its limits, regulating its visibility, and attempting to fix its meaning within a narrow, binary framework.

In the logic of contemporary discourse, gender is caught in a paradox: it is framed both as an immutable, natural state and as something dangerously contagious something that can be taught, caught, or seduced into existence (Butler, 2024). This contradiction is evident in statements in the media columnist discourse, such as Zivo (2023, National Post),[2] who claims that online communities "make transition seductive by portraying it as a cure-all to distress" (para. 5). This framing exemplifies the central paradox: if gender is truly natural and fixed, as 'parental rights' discourse suggests, then the idea of gender being seduced or indoctrinated would be irrelevant. As Butler (2024) argues, such contradictions reveals that what is claimed to be natural is in fact performative—sustained by repetition,

[2] While APA guidelines typically require that only the author and date appear in in-text citations, I chose to include the name of the news source directly within the citation for the first time a news source is referenced in a section. This decision was intentional: I believe the source outlet plays a meaningful role in how readers interpret the quote, particularly in the context of media framing. Rather than listing this information solely in the references, I've included it in-text to support clarity and transparency for the reader.

policing and governmentality. Zivo uses inflammatory terms like “seduction” to create alarm about the rise of transgender and non-binary identification among youth.

Parental rights advocates create suspicion about any teaching related to gender and sexuality. Parents are “concerned about lessons kids are learning on the topics of gender identity and sexual orientation.” (Taylor, 2023, para. 5, The Globe and Mail). In doing so, they frame gender as the central site of cultural decline, resting broad social anxieties onto the identities of youth. This moral panic repositions systemic constructs as individual moral failings, allowing gender to be villainized as function as a scapegoat for all societal issues. Similarly, rhetoric such as that from National Post’s Sarkonak (2023) warns that gender teachings in schools are “harmful to children,” while insisting that “what people do in their own grown-up life” is outside the bounds of public concern:

> These teachings, when they are delivered to children, are harmful to children. What people do in their own grown-up life, that’s none of my business. But as it pertains to children and our public institutions — out, out it goes. (Sarkonak, 2023, para. 20)

This is a rhetorical move that privatizes identity while hyper-policing youth self-expression. Moreover, it ignores the ways that schools are always already teaching gender through official curriculum, hidden curriculum, and school policies. There is no school space that is not already teaching gender; instead, those teaching normative understandings are invisibilized and constructed as apolitical. Cinderella sells gender and heteronormativity, but would not be identified as a gendered text, or as indoctrinaire. Public figures such as Alberta Premier Danielle Smith propose policies that require parental permission for any instruction related to gender or sexuality: “Teachers will have to alert parents ahead of

every lesson that involves ‘gender identity, sexual orientation and human sexuality’ and they will have to sign off on their children’s participation, the Premier said.” (Smith and Tait, February 2024, para. 26, The Globe and Mail). In this way, the provincial government is constructing such knowledge as dangerous and exceptional—and again ignoring the impossibility of instruction that is void of gender

Beyond labelling any non-normative discussion of gender as private, harmful or doctrinaire, people within the parental rights movement cast suspicion on inclusion, likening inclusive education to a “grooming process,” and equating the existence of queer identities with the threat of pedophilia:

> Another said, “It is my opinion that the overt sexualization of children, under the guise of 'love and inclusion,' is in effect part of a grooming process, with the intention of normalizing pedophilia in our society” (Ibrahim, 2024, para. 32, CBC News)

The inclusion of such a notion purports the possibility that the mere inclusion of sex education and gender in the classroom can be linked to pedophilia. The invocation of “grooming” and concerns about “taking time away from learning” (Benchetrit, 2023, CBC News) further reinforces this logic by framing queerness as distraction, danger, or even criminality.

Even moderate concerns, such as those voiced in CBC’s article by Benchetrit (2023), frame discussions of Pride as distractions from “real” education, suggesting that the acknowledgment of queer existence is excessive and unproductive:

> (The parent said) “It's great that they're talking about Pride month, but at the same time, if you spend that much time on it, yes, it is taking away time from children to other learning activities” (Benchetrit, 2023, para. 34)

Crucially, this positioning operates through a false middle ground fallacy: the suggestion that a “balanced” approach must limit discussions of gender and sexuality in order to preserve academic focus. But what is being framed as compromise is in fact exclusion, where the visibility of marginalized identities is treated as negotiable. In reality, such comments deny that affirming students’ identities is not a detour from learning but fundamental to the conditions under which learning becomes possible.

What all of these excerpts reveal is not merely an opposition to gender-inclusive education, but a discursive project that constructs gender diversity as both invisible and illegitimate. Phrases like “astonishing rates” (Zivo, 2023, National Post) and “harmful to children” (Sarkonak, 2023, National Post) deploy rhetorical surprise and moral panic to suggest that gender nonconformity is an aberration, an unnatural phenomenon that must be controlled or eliminated. These statements operate through what is left unsaid as much as what is stated outright: that gender diversity is not only socially unacceptable but pedagogically inappropriate, something to be shielded from the neutral, rational space of the classroom.

This is the essence of the posthumous report on gender. Gender is not engaged with as a living, contested, or evolving identity: it is spoken about, not to, and always in the past tense of correction, control, or suspicion. The public discourse mirrors Foucault’s “double invisibility”: gender is made hyper-visible through media panic, but the humanity and

agency of trans and queer people are systematically erased in the process. Gender becomes a floating signifier, a referent for danger, while the people it refers to are denied subjectivity. In this way, the representation of gender becomes a distorted memorial, an obituary written by those invested in its containment.

What emerges across these discourses is a deeply contradictory framing: gender is at once too natural to require teaching and too dangerous to be discussed. In this way, gender identity is not treated as a personal truth but rather as a public threat, an object to be managed, regulated, and denied. As Foucault suggests, this reflects not merely the representation of identity, but the representational machinery of power itself: the rendering visible of one form of invisibility by overwriting another, a doubling of erasure that constructs gender as a site of both panic and discipline. Not only does this framing offer contradictory, inflammatory and fear mongering language, it also reduces gender as binary or taught, disregarding the public pedagogy of learnt masculinity.

Through appeals to child protection, “parental rights,” and educational neutrality, media and political discourse mobilize fear to justify the containment of gender variance. In doing so, they transform gender into a cultural battlefield, one where identity is denied autonomy, and difference is cast as deviance. As Butler (2024) observes, this process sustains a broader backlash against gender theory itself, where even naming the social construction of gender becomes suspect.

This posthumous reporting on gender, where its meaning is fixed, feared, and policed, lays the discursive groundwork for the simultaneous invisibility and hyper-visibility of gender nonconformity. In the sections that follow, this contradiction is interrogated

further through an analysis of masculinity as a learned and weaponized identity. If gender nonconformity is rendered illegible through fear and control, then masculinity remains the unmarked and unquestioned norm, produced, circulated, and reinforced through both online subcultures and institutional discourse. The next section, *Performed Masculinity: Academy Critique*, takes up this task by exploring how hegemonic masculinity operates as both a discursive product and a regulatory force within public pedagogy by interacting with well supported academic research.

Performed Masculinity: Academy Critique

If gender diversity is rendered threatening, excessive, or indoctrinary, then masculinity often escapes scrutiny precisely because it is constructed as natural, neutral, and unremarkable. Yet, this supposed neutrality is itself a product of discursive power. The same media and political narratives that frame gender nonconformity as dangerous simultaneously uphold hegemonic masculinity as the normative standard—rarely questioned, let alone problematized. This asymmetry is not accidental but central to the politics of gender representation: it is the unmarked that wields the greatest force. Thus, to fully understand the operation of gender within the ‘parental rights’ discourse, we must also interrogate the silent center—masculinity itself. The section that follows takes up this task by exposing masculinity as a performative construct that, despite its invisibility, is aggressively produced, defended, and weaponized through public pedagogy and digital culture alike. In contrast to the media's posthumous narration of queer and trans lives, masculinity is given perpetual life—rehearsed, valorized, and rarely held accountable.

This section approaches gender through Butler's (2006) theorization of performativity, treating gender as an iterative, socially constructed act reinforced through discourse in order to highlight the flaw of gender framing as delineated above. It is important to understand how masculinity is constructed, policed, and weaponized within digital and ideological spaces. Kellner and Share (2019) describe how concepts of masculinity are curated and disseminated through digital platforms: "social media have also contributed to the dissemination of toxic masculinity through its speed, anonymity, social disembodiment, and the spread of new men's rights activists (MRAs) online communities known as manospheres" (p. 42). Bratich (2022) defines the manosphere as a "part of digital culture devoted to developing 'toxic' masculine subjectivity… to restore patriarchal power in the social, juridical, and cultural realms" (p. 75). This form of "learnt" masculinity is not benign—it has been linked to harassment, domestic abuse, rape, and mass shootings.

Through media re-presentations and other normalized discourses, masculine power is promoted, a discourse that promotes violence, intolerance and marginalization (Bratich, 2022; Giroux, 2019). Butler (2006) posits that the masculine is challenged through anormative instances, but these instances of resistance are reshaped and categorized through a masculine lens, ultimately serving to reinforce the very norms they aim to subvert. This cyclical performativity highlights the hegemonic public pedagogy. If gender ideology is monitored and restricted, this hegemonic reproduction is protected, and it is only through education, academia, and free public discourse that the constructed masculine monogender can be disrupted; perhaps this is why the discourse of neoliberal

and neoconservative rhetoric attacks the education system itself; as will be illuminated later.

This contradiction becomes even more stark when considering the asymmetrical scrutiny applied to different forms of gender expression. While the ‘parental rights’ movement seeks to remove any reference to gender diversity from formal education, treating its mere discussion as indoctrination or harm (as shown in the previous section) , there is a resounding and resulting silence around the pervasive presence of violent masculinity in everyday cultural discourse. That is, 'parental rights' advocates who employ childhood innocence and protection as a rhetorical strategy and rationale ignore the very real harm that is resulting from violent forms of masculinity. From the unregulated messaging of popular music to the algorithmic amplification of hyper-masculine influencers online, students are consistently exposed to performative masculinities that glorify dominance, aggression, and emotional repression (Bratich, 2022). These messages are not only unmonitored but often framed as apolitical or culturally normative. Thus, while the existence of queer and trans identities is rendered controversial, the public pedagogy of gendered violence is naturalized through repetition. This asymmetry reveals the selective moral panic of the ‘parental rights’ movement: it does not seek to protect children from gender, but rather to preserve a very specific, hegemonic version of it, one rooted in power, tradition, and control.

Giroux (2019) explicates how this iteration of masculinity promotes the hyper-masculine, promotes the violent occurrence of gender constructs, and is painted as a mundane normalcy: this mundane normalcy demands the profane illumination, whereby

the everyday acceptance and reinforcement of hyper-masculinity requires a critical examination to expose its underlying violence and implications. The neoconservative resistance to this hegemonic disruption has labelled gender as a cult of indoctrination that seeks to harm the family and disrupt natural order (Butler, 2024). To acknowledge non binarized gender identities and non-heterosexual sexuality, is labelled as indoctrination thus demonizing the very existence of these identities. Simultaneously, the resistance to inclusive education within the online manosphere, as Bratich (2022) elucidates, is not merely a collection of isolated individuals expressing discontent, but a structured network that systematically produces and circulates ideologies supporting male supremacy and resistance to gender equality. Bratich (2022), further extends the link of the manosphere to mass.

In this juxtaposed reality, gender is framed as a contagion, something that can be "caught" by mere mention, and simultaneously as natural, something that cannot be taught. This contradiction fuels a rhetoric of eugenics and fascism (Butler, 2024), positioning nonbinary and queer identities as threats to a mythologized past of masculine dominance. The result is the active repression and erasure of gender/ (gender diversity).

Pathologizing Gender

I begin this section with the listed quotes below to clearly show the (D)iscourse behind the pathologization of gender. While the language across these examples varies — from clinical to casual, from statistical to moral—the discursive trend becomes unmistakably clear when viewed in succession. Each quote participates in a broader rhetorical project that frames gender diversity not as a legitimate identity, but as a site of

confusion, instability, or harm. Together, these statements construct gender nonconformity as something to be diagnosed, managed, or corrected—often through appeals to biology, risk, or social protection. After presenting these examples, the instances will be further analyzed to unpack the specific rhetorical strategies and ideological work they perform.

> I greatly respect people who work in the school system — teachers, social workers, guidance counsellors — (but) they do not have the qualifications to make a diagnosis of a mental health condition and therefore are going beyond their pay grade in agreeing or not agreeing with a kid's request. (Blaff, 2024, para. 54, National Post)
>
> In people assigned male at birth, puberty blockers limit the growth of male genitalia and prevent the voice from deepening. In people assigned female at birth, the blockers limit breast development and stop menstruation. (Bailey and Smith, 2024, para. 4, The Globe and Mail)
>
> After Alberta Premier Danielle Smith announced a raft of proposals this week designed to restrict young people's access to gender-affirming health care – including puberty blockers, hormone therapy and surgery – medical providers in the field sharply criticized the measures, voicing concern they would harm vulnerable teens and adolescents. (Bielski, 2024, para. 1, The Globe and Mail)
>
> "For these issues that focus specifically on female identity, motherhood, and birth, there is little appetite for gender-neutral language," concluded pollsters. (Hopper, 2023, para. 8, National Post)

> "However, there are obvious biological realities that give transgender female athletes a massive competitive advantage over women and girls." (Dawson, 2024, para. 26, National Post)
>
> Dozens of former gender clinicians, many of whom are homosexual, have claimed that pediatric gender-affirming care is homophobic and “transes away” vulnerable lesbian, gay and bisexual children. (Zivo, 2024, para 17, National Post)

The media excerpts cited above exemplify a recurring pattern in which gender is pathologized through discourses that render it medically suspect, psychologically unstable, and socially dangerous. At the core of this pathologization lies a contradiction that Judith Butler (2006; 2024) has repeatedly foregrounded: gender is simultaneously framed as innate and immutable, and yet also as something that can be dangerously taught, caught, or chosen. Statements like Blaff’s (2024) assertion that school staff are unqualified to “diagnose” mental health conditions reflect a framing in which a young person’s gender identity is implicitly treated as symptomatic—an object of clinical evaluation rather than affirmation. This framing reinforces the idea that to identify as transgender or non-binary is not to assert an identity, but to suffer from one.

Fausto-Sterling’s (2000) work challenges the very foundations of such medicalization, showing that sex itself, not just gender, is socially constructed through scientific, institutional, and cultural lenses. The description of puberty blockers by Bailey and Smith (2024), when stripped of context and care, reduces trans existence to a set of physiological interventions. In doing so, the body is framed as a battleground, and trans embodiment is constructed as deviant, something to be debated rather than lived. This

biomedical framing also echoes the concerns raised by Zivo (2024), who warns that gender-affirming care may "trans away" Queer identities—an argument that re-inscribes essentialist ideas of sexuality and gender while casting queerness as fragile, substitutable, and inherently unstable.

These narratives closely parallel what Bialystok and Wright (2019) identify in their analysis of media coverage surrounding Ontario's sex education reforms. Rather than engaging with pedagogical questions, they argue, such debates often reflect deeper anxieties about identity, belonging, and cultural authority. In both the 2010 and 2015 sex education controversies, public and media responses were shaped not by curriculum content, but by who was seen as legitimate in voicing opposition—white evangelical groups in 2010 versus racialized immigrant communities in 2015. In both instances, as with current debates around gender, the issue is less about educational practice and more about which identities are granted cultural legitimacy and which are framed as threats to normative order. In this context, gender variance is not simply misrepresented, it is actively constructed as a site of danger, confusion, and contagion, both to children and to the cultural fabric of the nation.

As Butler (2006) has argued, gender performativity is not a free act of self-definition, but one that is constantly regulated through discourse, institutional norms, and repetition. The pathologizing rhetoric surrounding trans youth, gender-inclusive education, and queer embodiment works precisely by denying this performativity, by collapsing the lived, repeated, and socially situated nature of gender into a fixed biological or medical condition. The result is a regime of visibility in which gender diversity becomes hyper-

visible as a threat, and yet invisible as a valid mode of being. Fausto-Sterling (2000) and Bialystok & Wright (2019) help us see that what is at stake is not only the content of education, but the cultural and ideological infrastructure that determines which bodies and identities are deemed intelligible—and which must be corrected, silenced, or erased. The rhetoric surrounding gender identity in the analyzed discourse also reveals a deeply embedded network of linguistic fallacies that serve to pathologize trans existence while masking this pathologization as common sense or moral concern. Recall Rogers' (2011) description of a particular form of lexical cohesion, what she terms *of courseness*, often employed to convey authority through deliberately unrefined or declarative language. Phrases like Dawson's (2024) assertion of "obvious biological realities" exemplify this move, foreclosing debate by presenting contested claims as incontrovertible facts. Such language obscures the performative and socially constructed nature of gender. In Blaff's (2024) news article, educators are dismissed as unqualified to address gender identity because doing so is equated with diagnosing mental illness—a rhetorical manipulation that aligns trans identity with pathology while reinforcing rigid boundaries around professional authority. These appeals function not through reasoned argument, but through hot emotional triggers (Walton, 1987), such as the claim repeated in Ibrahim (2024) that gender-inclusive education is part of a "grooming process" to normalize pedophilia, an overt *ad hominem* attack that delegitimizes queer existence by conflating it with predation.

These rhetorical devices are not merely persuasive tactics; they operate discursively to reinforce the dogmatic and ideological project of the 'parental rights' movement. As Bialystok and Wright (2019) argue, debates around education, especially sex and gender

education, often reflect not pedagogical concerns, but deeper cultural narratives about identity, belonging, and moral panic. The appeal to collective concern, as seen in Smith and Tait's (2024) news article of parental consent policies, draws upon the *social identification* fallacy (Boylan, 2020), constructing a unified "we" that must protect children from trans visibility. Similarly, Zivo's (2024) suggestion that pediatric gender-affirming care "transes away" Queer youth presents a *false balance* (Grigore et al., 2020), purporting a superficial middle ground that sacrifices trans legitimacy under the guise of defending queerness. Even the sequencing of these narratives often employs a *post hoc* logic, as if the presence of gender-inclusive policies necessarily caused a decline in social values or parental control. Together, these rhetorical patterns form a discursive regime that both polices and obscures the performative nature of gender, portraying it as simultaneously dangerous, unstable, and manipulable. In doing so, media discourse functions not only to misrepresent trans identities, but to actively discipline the boundaries of acceptable identity, reinforcing the binary logics that sustain hegemonic norms and ultimately creating a villain: "Gender as the Boogeyman"

Gender as the Boogeyman

> *At this point, it is either sheer ignorance or gaslighting to deny the damage that automatic trans affirmation does to children who are simply confused by their gay and lesbian attraction, their autism or their social alienation. (Stratton, 2024, para 6, National Post)*

As delineated in the previous section, the discourse around the 'parental rights' movement is riddled with fallacious language to allow for lexical cohesion. But for what

purposes? This is the crux of the findings, and hopefully be made clear to you in the many pages to come. The intent is to clearly explain that while the pathologization, or binarying of gender may seem mundane, it leads to a much larger issues.

Recall, the neoliberal and neoconservative alliance of commonality: to preserve power. Now, consider the ad hominem fallacious tool of attacking an individual, ultimately detreating trust. In this case, the ad hominem does not merely attack an individual, it constructs the trans person as a symbolic threat, casting their identity as deceptive, unstable, and dangerous. This rhetorical move not only delegitimizes trans existence but cultivates a broader mistrust in the trans individual's capacity for self-knowledge, framing their very existence as dangerous, ultimately creating gender as the boogeyman. With this boogeyman, as will be shown in the following sections, the "child" can be framed as the innocent who needs protection, ultimately subverting the public good of education, and implementing privatized values to maintain hegemonic dominance. But first, the exposure of the attack on transgender existence and gender more broadly must be unpacked.

> (Duncan said) "I think parents, are getting a sense that they were maybe not involved to the same extent that they would like to be in some of these sensitive issues involving their children." (Hunter, 2023, para. 19, CBC)

Disregarding the framing of parent as subject and child as object to be protected, which will be discussed in a subsequent chapter, this rather domesticated quote is an example how juxtaposition can be used to create a fear. By presenting a vague "sense" of parental exclusion alongside the phrase "sensitive issues involving their children," the statement implies danger or impropriety without stating it outright, subtly reinforcing the

notion that gender is sensitive and therefore holds a danger. While language like this may be seemingly harmless, when repeated and expanded the discourse projects a moral panic, an alarming issue that must be addressed, as exhibited in the following instance:

> "I just asked that you would remove any books that caused our kids to question whether they are in the wrong body," Hackenshmidt said. "They are certainly not in the wrong body. They are fearfully and wonderfully made." (Kemp, 2023, para. 13, CBC)

This statement builds upon the soft framing of Hunter's quote, intensifying the stakes through theological certainty. The use of "fearfully and wonderfully made," a direct biblical reference (Psalm 139:14), mobilizes religious moralism as a rhetorical tool to both sanctify the body as fixed and to reject the very premise of gender variance. What appears as a statement of love becomes a vehicle of ontological closure: to question one's identity is not only dangerous, but spiritually blasphemous.

This is where neoconservative discourse reveals its power: it does not rely on overt hostility, but on the sanctification of norms through naturalized and moralized language. By embedding fear within phrases like "sensitive issues" and "wrong body," the discourse cloaks its disciplinary function beneath concern for children's well-being. Gender, in this context, is not only pathologized but tabooed, a source of corruption that must be removed to preserve innocence. This soft, affective mode of language is central to the neoconservative appeal: it reinforces hegemonic binaries not by explicitly using language of hate, but by cloaking them through the language of care, protection, and, in this case, divine design.

If gender outside the binarized dichotomy is merely unnatural to the 'fearful,' then avoidance would suffice, as one might ignore an annoying colleague. However, the quiet microfascism of avoidance does not fulfill the neoconservative or neoliberal aim of hegemonic preservation. To quote Butler (2003), "The derealization of the other means that it is neither alive nor dead, but interminably spectral" (p. 33–34). In other words, it is precisely the unseen that becomes the most potent enemy: elusive, invisible, and imagined to be lurking in classrooms, lesson plans, closets, and even sewers. It becomes the boogeyman.

The quote below exhibits this lurking fear mongering framing:

> Faye's biological daughter used to be joyful, healthy and energetic. "She was into all those extracurricular activities and then COVID hit. She just completely shut down. She was in her room a lot," Faye told the Post. The 15-year-old "became very depressed and anxious."
>
> The family consulted with a family doctor who recommended a psychiatrist. Within four months, her child "came out to us as trans."
>
> The self-identification "didn't make any sense," said Faye. "If it were an issue, we would have seen it all the way along. You can't expect a kid that's five, six, seven, eight, nine, even ten, to be able to hide things. It's not possible." (Blaff, Apr 2024, para 45-47, National Post)

The narrative presented in Blaff's (2024) news article constructs gender identity not as a lived truth, but as a symptom of deeper pathology, emerging not from the self but from trauma, depression, and social isolation or perhaps gender causing those symptoms itself.

Here, the trans identity is framed as both invisible and invasive, something that emerges "out of nowhere," linked causally to COVID, mental illness, and emotional shutdown. The child, the boy, is described not as someone coming into understanding, but as someone who has been seized by something unseen, reinforcing the idea that transness is a kind of possession or external influence rather than an internal, agentive realization. The mother's disbelief, "If it were an issue, we would have seen it all the way along" presumes that gender identity must be externally visible, easily legible, and consistent over time to be valid. This framing delegitimizes trans self-knowledge, implying that unless identity can be tracked, predicted, or verified through parental observation, it is not real.

This rhetorical construction echoes Butler's (2006) theorization of the derealized subject—a figure rendered interminably spectral, neither fully real nor fully absent. The trans child in this account is not granted ontological legitimacy but is instead portrayed as a site of confusion, fragility, and mental decline. Depression and trans identity are fused together into a causal narrative that transforms gender into a discursive symptom of illness, rather than a mode of becoming. In this way, the neoconservative rhetoric sustains its moral panic by making the trans child both unknowable and threatening, a figure who must be recovered, treated, or redirected. What appears to be a story of parental concern is, in fact, a powerful mechanism of control, where love becomes surveillance, and care becomes refusal. It is not enough to reject trans identity; the child's own narrative must be overwritten by one that restores the parent's perception of reality. Stepping momentarily out of the analytical and theoretical: to the human rendered invisible in this feeble attempt

of journalism, and to those whose identities are constantly questioned or denied—I see you, I support you, and you are not alone.

We can further break down the discourse of presenting gender as a danger into three groups, as shown below:

Quote	Group
It's therefore possible that social transitions 'lock in' a trans identity for youth who, in the past, would have outgrown their dysphoria. (Stratton, 2023, para 14, National Post)	Group 1: Gender as Contagion / Irreversible Harm
As the benefits of affirming trans-identifying youth are now understood to be uncertain, and potential harms are more known. (Zivo, 2023, para 12, National Post)	Group 1: Gender as Contagion / Irreversible Harm
These teachings, when they are delivered to children, are harmful to children. What people do in their own grown-up life, that's none of my business. (Sarkonak, 2023, para 20, National Post)	Group 1: Gender as Contagion / Irreversible Harm
Their objective, instead, is to convince others that they must accept a range of beliefs that reject reality and accept that any failure to do so is an act of unforgivable bigotry. (Jerema, 2024, para. 8, National Post)	Group 2: Gender as Ideological Threat / Social Pressure
Only in 2023 could this be considered draconian or dangerous. (Selley, 2023, para. 7, National Post)	Group 2: Gender as Ideological Threat / Social Pressure
"And I simply said you can identify as you please, but the fact of the matter is God created male and female." (said the subject of the article) (Higgins, 2023, para. 7, National Post)	Group 2: Gender as Ideological Threat / Social Pressure

Posters created by a group called '1MillionMarch4Children' say rally participants are 'standing together against gender ideology in schools.' (Dyck, 2023, para. 2, The Globe and Mail)	Group 3: Gender as Cultural Corruption in Schools
Many people who use the term say they are concerned about lessons kids are learning on the topics of gender identity and sexual orientation. (Taylor, 2023, para. 5, The Globe and Mail)	Group 3: Gender as Cultural Corruption in Schools

The lexical choices in Group 1 work subtly but powerfully to construct gender nonconformity as a dangerous contagion, something that invades, alters, and destabilizes youth. In Stratton's (2023) claim that social transitions may "lock in" a trans identity, the verb "lock" evokes a sense of entrapment and permanence, suggesting that transness is not a legitimate identity but a trap from which youth must be rescued. Similarly, Zivo (2023) speaks of "uncertain benefits" and "known harms," framing gender affirmation as risky and experimental, while subtly positioning the trans child as the subject of a failed medical or social intervention. These lexical choices cultivate a rhetoric of doubt and caution, even when cloaked in measured or scientific tone, reinforcing the idea that trans identity is unstable and potentially dangerous.

Sarkonak's (2023) invocation of "harmful" teachings draws on emotionally charged yet vague language, enabling the association of trans-inclusive content with generalized damage. The use of the term "children" repeatedly in these excerpts operates as a rhetorical anchor, evoking innocence, vulnerability, and the need for protection—classic elements of moral panic discourse. By juxtaposing "grown-up life" with our public institutions, Sarkonak draws an implicit boundary between private deviance and public danger, locating gender variance not in the realm of personal development but in a

perceived institutional failure. The cumulative effect of these lexical choices is to cast trans identity as a spectral antagonist: invisible, irreversible, and corrupting. Gender is thus not merely misrecognized, it is feared, and the fear is produced through carefully chosen language that pathologizes transition while masking bigotry as concern. This is the rhetorical construction of gender as the boogeyman: haunting, contaminating, and in need of containment.

The lexical patterning in Group 2 reframes gender identity as an ideological invasion, something imposed on society rather than emerging from lived experience. In Jerema's (2024) claim that "they must accept a range of beliefs that reject reality," the phrase "reject reality" functions as an epistemological weapon: it posits trans-affirming discourse as not only incorrect, but irrational and fundamentally untruthful. The modal verb "must" implies coercion and social pressure, aligning with a larger neoconservative narrative of ideological tyranny, wherein dissent is no longer tolerated. The framing of noncompliance as unforgivable delusion further casts inclusion as an authoritarian overreach, one that punishes those who do not conform to what is framed as a delusional orthodoxy.

This same structure of resistance is present in Higgins' (2023) assertion that "God created male and female"—a phrase that leverages theological absolutism to dismiss identity as self-constructed. The use of "simply" ("I simply said…") is a lexical softener that paradoxically amplifies moral certainty, cloaking a rigid gender binary in the language of calm, reasoned dialogue. In Selley's (2023) line, "Only in 2023 could this be considered draconian," sarcasm is employed as a rhetorical scalpel, suggesting that trans inclusion is not only excessive but laughable, a symptom of cultural decline. Collectively, the language

of this group relies on semantic binaries, truth vs. delusion, freedom vs. coercion, natural vs. ideological, to construct gender as a threat to social cohesion. In this formulation, the trans subject is not feared for who they are, but for what they allegedly represent: the collapse of shared norms, the erosion of reason, and the imposition of a new and dangerous morality. Gender, once again, is rendered spectral, not through pathology, but through perceived epistemological and moral destabilization.

In Group 3, the rhetoric frames gender not only as dangerous, but as culturally invasive, with schools cast as battlegrounds for ideological corruption. Lexically, this group relies heavily on the language of infiltration and safeguarding, where the term "gender ideology" (Dyck, 2023) functions as a loaded signifier, vague, yet ominous. The word "ideology" suggests something external, radical, and imposed, contrasting with the presumed neutrality of traditional education. "Standing together" (Dyck, 2023) evokes a defensive collective, activating a militant in-group solidarity that casts schools as under siege. Taylor's (2023) softer language, "concerned about lessons kids are learning"—reinforces this fear in more palatable terms. It uses affective vagueness ("concerned," "lessons") to generate anxiety while avoiding direct accusation, making the sentiment harder to challenge without seeming dismissive of parental worry.

The focus on "kids," "children," and "schools" across discourse strategically centers the figure of the vulnerable child, which is often mobilized to deflect attention from the ideological underpinnings of such discourse. The affective pairing of vague danger with the innocence of youth implies that children are being secretly indoctrinated, with the school positioned as complicit in this moral transgression. The absence of explicit references to

trans or queer identities serves a dual purpose: it sanitizes the discourse while allowing it to operate under a cloak of plausible deniability. In doing so, the rhetoric fosters a perception of trans inclusion as a corrupting force hidden in the curriculum, requiring immediate parental intervention. This strategy renders gender not only deviant, but institutionally embedded, turning the classroom into a site of perceived contagion and control. Through these lexical moves, gender becomes a “boogeyman” not just of the body or the mind, but of the public sphere, something that must be expelled to preserve the moral order of the school and, by extension, the state.

It is this framing of the helpless child that allows for the villain of gender to be a fear induced tool of mobilization. In the next chapter, I will clearly delineate how the child is framed, how the parent is the purported owner of child, and how the teacher is subservient to the will neoliberal and neoconservative force or they, just as gender, is a villain.

Chapter Four: Who? The Parent. Whom? The Child. Beware, the Teacher

While the concept of a child may seem like a straightforward question of age or phase of life—it is far more complicated. And thus, this chapter demands a clear review of literature to ground the question of, "what is a child?" An important foundation within an analysis of 'parental rights', involves the construction of the child, and how this particular construction has been normalized and has consequently promoted the paternalistic ownership of the child (Lesko, 2001; Janzen, 2008; Krepski, 2022). Yet, this discursive construction of the child employed within the 'parental rights' movement lacks congruence with law (Carter, 2008; Short et al., 2021). Moreover, it instrumentalizes the figure of the child to perpetuate hegemonic norms, reinforcing cis-heteronormativity and whiteness through neoliberal consumer reproduction where children are imagined not as citizens or subjects, but as vessels for parental ideology, economic productivity, and normative continuity.

Through this chapter, I offer a critical interrogation of how the child is constructed, positioned, and deployed within the discourse of the so-called 'parental rights' movement, with particular attention to how these constructions authorize adult governance while marginalizing the child's autonomy. I begin by frontloading literature that examines what constitutes a child—legally, developmentally, philosophically, and socially. This grounding is necessary to reveal how dominant framings of the child are not neutral but historically and culturally situated, often in service of paternalistic and neoliberal logics. Following this, I turn to my discourse analysis, identifying five interlocking themes in Canadian mainstream media coverage: The Un-Neutral Child, The Helpless Child, Parent as Subject;

Child as Object, Language of Possession, and The Child as Extension of the Adult. These themes draw on and extend the theoretical foundations established earlier, showing how the figure of the child is continually evoked to justify control and suppress complexity.

Though the chapter focuses on the child, I move deliberately into an analysis of how the parent is constructed—because the child, as will be shown, is not constructed in isolation but in relation to the parent, whose authority is made legible through the presumed dependency and malleability of the child. This relational dynamic necessitates examining the language of ownership, which underpins much of the 'parental rights' discourse. From there, I transition into the role of the teacher—not as a separate analytic figure, but as one triangulated between parent and child, often framed as threat, obstruction, or tool. The teacher becomes both a site of projection and a figure through which disciplinary ideologies are enacted.

In doing so, this chapter interrogates not only the representations of the child in media, but the broader discursive apparatus that positions the parent as sovereign (if they comply), the teacher as suspect, and the child as voiceless. By unpacking these rhetorical patterns, I show how the 'parental rights' movement is not a spontaneous response to moral concern but a calculated reinforcement of hegemonic norms under the guise of care, safety, and common sense. What follows is a thematic analysis that maps how these constructions operate rhetorically and ideologically, shaping the public imaginary of childhood, education, and identity in Canada.

What Constitutes a Child?

While scholars such as Krepski (2016) contend that a child's autonomy should have limited interference, and scholars such as Moschella (2016) argue for more parental oversight, they both agree that the oversight is temporary and contingent on well-being. In this sense, parental oversight can be understood as a temporary conservancy that may only be acted upon if it is in the child's 'best' interest, as outlined in Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989). There are three major questions that arise from this understanding:

1. What constitutes a 'child'?
2. How does law define a 'child'?
3. What is 'good' for a 'child'?

To consider the question of 'what constitutes a child?' let us begin by considering the parent, child relationship. Hannan and Vernon (2008) propose two approaches in which we can temper the relationship between parental choice and the child's interest: dual interest and child centered. Robinson (2017) expands on these definitions as they explain, "'dual interest' approaches suggest that parental authority is justified by a combination of parents' and children's interests, while those who adopt 'child-centered' approaches suggest that only children's interests should count" (p.4). In both of these constructs, we see childhood framed in relation to being an adult, where the developmental trajectory of the child is primarily defined through the lens of eventual adulthood, either by balancing the interests of the present (child) and future (adult) selves in the case of dual interest approaches, or by prioritizing the immediate interests of the child with the assumption that

these are inherently distinct and separate from those of adults in child-centered approaches.

Falkenberg and Krepski (2020) argue that such perspectives may inadvertently uphold traditional views of childhood as merely a preparatory phase for adulthood, rather than recognizing children as active participants with distinct needs, rights, and agency. The framing of the child as a co-constructor of knowledge is also present in recent iterations of postmodern research, as the child is not seen merely as an extension of the adult, nor a blank canvas to be filled, but rather an autonomous individual who engages with and contributes to their environment in meaningful ways (Janzen 2008). This reconceptualization of the child challenges the traditional, passive role assigned to children and asserts their capability as co-creators of knowledge and culture.

Despite this framing of youth being autonomous, Moschella (2016) advocates for strong parental oversight, viewing it as a necessary balance between state responsibility and "parental rights," but ultimately frames the child as a non-autonomous extension of adult. Krepski (2020), advocates for the reduction of paternalistic oversight, through the understanding that what is seen as good by the parent, may not in actuality benefit the child. Afterall, in the paternalistic framing of the child, there is an assumption imposed that creates a subject of creation to the child; in other words, by framing the child as in need of paternalistic action, the child is consequentially stripped of autonomous agency and constructed as a passive recipient of adult governance. This view reinforces the notion that children are merely subjects to be shaped according to adult standards and expectations,

rather than being acknowledged as individuals with their own rights and capacities to make decisions.

In this argument, I have framed the child as a commonly understood entity of clear delineation. However, Lesko (2001) outlines the way in which there are 'confident characterizations' of adolescents within law, education, medicine, etc., but these characterizations act as a reiterative practice that perpetuates limited and often stereotypical views of youth. Thus, it is worthwhile to deconstruct the construction of the child.

The Construction of the Child

Lesko (2001) outlines the way in which the subjectification of youth has been historically linked with political positioning for increased surveillance control through the framing of the 'endangered' youth. Lesko conjectures that the "modern project to develop adolescence was and is simultaneously a construction of whiteness and masculinity" (p.9). This framing of the construction of the child pushes against the notions put forward that youth need protection and reaffirms the understanding that youth are autonomous agents of their own identity (Carter, 2008; Falkenberg and Krepski, 2020; Janzen, 2008; Lesko, 2001; Short et al., 2021).

As delineated above, notions of childhood are constructed; the marker for paternalistic action is contentious and contested; and even in the agreed upon notion of oversight for the good of the child, good is subjective. As Tucker (2023) argues, childhood is socially and historically created, and thus, "each culture constructs and enforces narratives about what's natural and normal for children" (p.138). It is through this

understanding of the constructed child, and thus the constructed norm, that we will begin looking at the "parental rights' movement'. I want to clarify, while 'parental rights' and the 'parental rights' movement are tightly linked they are not synonymous; the distinction lies in the broader implications and objectives behind the movement itself. Within the Convention of the Rights of the Child (1989) parent's rights are positioned as a responsibility to uphold the rights of the child, whereas the 'parental rights' movement applies surveillance and governance to a child. As Tucker (2023) explains, parents and politicians banning books want schools and libraries to be safe from risk, trauma, danger, bad language, unpleasantness – from anything that could imperil their idea of the Child – whereas the teachers, parents, and librarians fighting to keep books available see classrooms and libraries as safe places to encounter, explore, and react to unpleasant or "unchildlike" realities, particularly when children are invited to discuss their reading with peers, parents, and teachers. Ultimately, the adult leveraging their position to surveille and govern the very essence of the child.

Through the tension of external application of 'what is good' for a child, we see the wellbeing and best interest as a vague and subjective concept. Thus, while the 'parental rights' movement is positioned prominently in public discourse, including mainstream media, it reflects broader tensions in hegemonic preservation and societal control. Just as explained by Lesko (2001), the construction of the child has and is political, and the safety of the child is weaponized to demand restoration of neoconservative ideals. While there is robust research on the ways in which children are understood (as a responsibility, a 'half adult', an autonomous being, etc.) there is a gap in literature that looks at how the current

mainstream media coverage of the 'parental rights' movement positions the child vs 'parental rights'.

What About Law?

Carter (2008) delineates that when discussing freedom and rights under the *Canadian Charter of Human Rights* there is no distinction or subsection absolving children from these constitutional protections. Instead, children are accorded the same rights and freedoms as adults, and parents are not extended additional rights as adults. Carter further explains that the *Canadian Bills of Rights* is situated in a liberal perspective, that frames an individual as a natural stake holder to their own rights and freedoms no matter "their personal domestic, cultural, and economic context" (p.484). In fact, as Carter later points out, legislation attributing one's rights as consortium to another is infamously displayed in history through slavery and a husband's conservatorship of *their* wife. As seen in *the Convention on the Rights of the Child,* anyone under 18 is considered a child, however this designation does not exclude the child from any rights, but rather ensures their existing rights be upheld. Through this understanding, I contend that the colloquially used term of 'parental rights' is in fact a misnomer and instead should be termed as parental responsibility.

The Implication of the Legal Definition in the Classroom

Short et al. (2021) situates the conversation of representation in the classroom in a legal framework, using constitution and case law to delineate the right to exist; and to exist without discrimination. Short et al. explains the way in which religious freedom is often positioned against gender identity and sexual orientation. This positioning of 'freedom'

exists within section 15 of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms,* and as Short et al. explicate, these conversations are often a case-by-case situation, but ultimately a student has a right to exist no matter, their race, religion, sexuality, or gender. Thus, we see that the exclusion of transgender conversation in the classroom is in fact in contradiction to the *Canadian Charter*.

Short et al. (2021) also make the distinction that the conversation which situates religion and 2SLGBTQ+ rights as contradictory entities does not consider the multitude of religions and religious organizations that support the rights of all, including members of the 2SLGBTQ+ community. Herriot and Callaghan (2018) expand on this concept as they conjecture that the divisive rhetoric that dichotomizes freedom of religion against freedom of gender and sexuality, is media driven and ignores the complex and often supportive relationships that exist between various religious communities and 2SLGBTQ+ individuals. Once again, we see a tension in what is represented, what voices are heard, and who's rights are dismissed.

The argument for parental control, and the corresponding marginalization of conversations around gender and sexuality in schools, further reveals the selective framing of rights and the omission key theoretical insights into how identity is shaped. While Short et al. (2021) effectively challenge the notion that religious freedom and 2SLGBTQI+ rights are inherently oppositional, this tension can be deepened through Butler's (2006) theory of gender performativity, which frames gender not as innate, but as something socially produced, enacted, and reinforced. In this sense, the exclusion of gender-diverse perspectives in the classroom is not merely a neutral omission; it is an active

reinforcement of dominant, often masculine, norms. Short et al. begin to disrupt the ideological assumption that all rights are granted equal weight, yet this disruption is further sharpened by interrogating how gender itself is already being taught—implicitly and structurally—through the privileging of certain identities as "normal."

What is 'Good' (for the child)

Despite the theoretical and philosophical circling of the construction of children and youth, it can be commonly agreed that in certain instances, say a youth unknowingly stepping into immediate peril, a paternalistic intervention can be justified. But what defines danger? Who decides the intervention?

To build upon the thought activity of when is paternalistic oversight palatable, Jacobs (2022) posits that intervention could be rooted in public health, and public health is: "(1)a collective good (2) that focuses on disease prevention, (3) is consequentialist in its outlook, and (4) frequently involves use of state power" (p.96). The essence of the distinction is that autonomous intervention is justified if it benefits the 'good'. But as delineated by Falkenberg and Krepski, the concept of 'good' is multifaceted and context-dependent, particularly in the realm of child autonomy and 'parental rights'. Indeed, if child autonomy intervention is acceptable on the aforementioned premise, then this leads us to the pivotal question: *What constitutes 'good'?*

On the discussion of child autonomy, Guttmann (1980) considers what constitutes an agreed upon 'good' for children, and conjectures that some 'goods' that can be commonly agreed upon are things such as housing, modern medicine, safety:

> Yet, from the point of view of some citizens within our society, even this short list is controversial. Many Jehovah's Witnesses and Christian Scientists do not think that their children should be forced to take certain medicines or undergo certain medical treatments that are necessary to good health and normal physiological development, and sometimes to life itself. The Old Order Amish do not believe that formal secondary education is a primary good in our society. (p.3)

These perspectives challenge the notion of a uniform standard of 'good' and illustrate the deep-seated tensions between communal norms and individual beliefs, further complicating the navigation of ‘parental rights’ within a pluralistic society.

It is the essence of moral disagreement that proposes such a division in considering a child’s education. The concept of ‘good’ is not universal. Sachdeva et al. (2023) posit that "those who possess symbolic capital also possess symbolic power, or the power to shape a vision of the way that others should perceive the world” (p.6). And thus, those who influence and control power dictate the concept of ‘good’ and consequentially promote their own ideologies onto others. This approach to influence is rooted in Bourdieu's (1986) concepts of capital: symbolic, cultural, social, and economic. Each form of capital plays a significant role in shaping perceptions and ideologies within a society.

We can, in some ways, make a connection to Falkenberg and Krepski’s (2020) framing of childhood as social construct. As delineated earlier, the intervention of autonomy is defended through someone’s conception of ‘good’. ‘Good’ being a construct that is both context specific and deeply rooted by societal values. To understand the imposed value of ‘good’ that is promoted onto students, we must consider the broader

neoliberal construct of which we are situated in relation to the construction of child identity. Giroux (2015) further expands on this discourse by considering the concept of a "pedagogy of ignorance," where educational policy promotes political and intellectual conformity. This pedagogical approach not only reinforces the dominant societal norms but also systematically undermines the autonomy of students by dictating what is considered ‘right’ or ‘good’.' In this context, the notion of 'good' as promoted is not merely an abstract value but a tool for socialization that aligns with the broader neoliberal agenda, which prioritizes individual competition and market logic over collective well-being and critical thinking. The ways in which neoliberalism influences the ‘parental rights’ movement and education will be discussed in depth below. Moving from the theoretical to the practical implications of neoliberalism's impact on education and “parental rights,” we encounter a complex interplay of power, policy, and personal conviction. This shift allows us to scrutinize how neoliberal values infiltrate family dynamics, influencing parents to unknowingly propagate these ideologies through their parenting practices. By examining the role of parents within this neoliberal framework, we can better understand the contested terrain of education policy and its impact on the notion of 'good' in child-rearing and education.

If we considered school synonymous with state, which I will argue in chapter four is not so, there could be some well-founded concern of ‘governmental overstep’ from the competing stakeholder of child well-being: the parents. However, this concern can be found wanting as we reflect on Bourdieu's (1986) concepts of capital. Within the framework of neoliberal ideology, parents play a critical role in reinforcing hegemonic norms through

their parenting practices, often without conscious intent (Gillies, 2005). These practices, deeply embedded in the values of competition, individualism, and market logic, are not simply personal choices but are significantly shaped by the broader socio-economic environment. The dominant political will cannot be separated from parental influence. The construction of what is and is not to be taught, to uphold, and maintain 'good' has been well documented and ongoing.

To ground this contemplation in a tangible example we can consider the historical examination of sex education. Bialystok and Wright (2019) detail the deliberate omission of sexual education, as seen in the practices of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. By prioritizing the preservation of a culturally constructed woman's virtue over her right to knowledge, society made a clear statement on its values, equating ignorance with purity and, thus, with 'goodness.' Gilbert (2011) elaborates on this concept as they delineate how "Homosexuality, abortion, sex education, human immunodeficiency virus, teen pregnancy, and sex outside of marriage are only a few examples of sexualized topics" (Gilbert, 2011, p.1) that have been at the center of contentious debates. Here we see the concept of 'good' is continually contested and redefined within the media and legislative debates, providing a rich field for examining the interplay between language, power, and ideology as mediated by parental influence and educational policies.

We can further consider the nuances of the concept of 'good' by considering not only the benefit, but also the how's of teaching consent. Gilbert (2018) explicates the contentious and nuanced topic of consent in sex education. The article is rooted in feminist history and critically approaches how sex education is constricted by conservative

ideals throughout history. Gilbert (2018) grounds the history and development of the current Ontario sex education curriculum in the story of two young female activists who demanded for a better sex education. Gilbert posits that sex education, as many provinces in Canada have today, is framed in legal verbiage and implicitly establishes potential victims and potential perpetrators: “And we know that the division between those young people whose sexuality needs to be protected and those young people whose sexuality is a threat will, in policy and practice, line up with other racialized, gendered and classed divisions” (p.276). Here we see how the construction of curriculum actively reiterates the construction of gender as well as the construction of the child, exhibiting the performative nature of hegemonic norms.

From this we can draw insights into how the educational system's portrayal and handling of topics like consent not only reflect but also reinforce societal norms and biases. This reinforcement acts as a pedagogical tool that shapes young people's understanding of their bodies, their rights, and their responsibilities within their interpersonal relationships.

In this context, the child is not merely a subject of care but a rhetorical figure—constructed, regulated, and mobilized to legitimize broader political aims. It is precisely this constructed notion of the child that becomes foundational to the ‘parental rights’ movement, which leverages idealized visions of childhood to justify surveillance, censorship, and educational control.

Now that I have offered the theoretical and legal framing that informs this project—particularly regarding the constructed nature of childhood, the conflation of parental rights

with ownership, and the ideological function of ‘the good’—I turn now to the media discourse analysis itself. This next section presents five interrelated themes I identified through a critical discourse analysis of Canadian mainstream media coverage of the ‘parental rights’ movement. These themes are: The Un-Neutral Child, The Helpless Child, Parent as Subject; Child as Object, Language of Possession, The Child as Extension of the Adult

Each of these themes reveals a distinct yet overlapping way in which the child is discursively constructed—not as a rights-bearing subject, but as a rhetorical figure onto whom adult fears, ideologies, and power struggles are projected. These themes do not exist in isolation but emerge through the interplay of language, media framing, and political discourse. Drawing from the theoretical foundations explored above, I examine how these constructions of the child are mobilized, justified, and reinforced across news articles, and how they contribute to the normalization of adult-centric governance in education. What follows is a detailed analysis of these five themes, beginning with the first: The Un-Neutral Child.

The Un-Neutral Child

> Paragraph 1: Flyers accusing schools of "pushing transgenderism" plans to distribute more material to support Premier Blaine Higgs when he campaigns for re-election this fall.
>
> ....
>
> Paragraph 32: "Teachers are highly certified professionals who are focused on students' education and well-being," he said in an email. "To suggest otherwise is

simply untrue and an attempt at eroding the public's trust in their professionalism. (Awde, 2024, CBC)

While this chapter focuses on the child, I have chosen to begin with this quote to illustrate two vital noticings evident throughout my analysis. Firstly, the child is employed as a political tool;[3] in this particular instance, the child is not even mentioned, but there is an inference to that child is. Secondly, as in the quote included above the structure and organization of many CBC and Globe and Mail articles often presents two opposing views as equally valid. These articles are often scaffolded to begin with a sympathetic tone towards the 'parental rights' movement followed by criticism. This oscillation of perspective offers a dangerous mode of false neutrality. That is, the journalistic convention of "giving both sides" equal weight—even when one side relies on misinformation, fearmongering, or discriminatory rhetoric—produces the illusion of objectivity while embedding dangerous assumptions. Such balance is not neutral; it imposes a false equivalence that can mislead readers, legitimize harmful views, and obscure ethical accountability.

This sequencing privileges the moral panic, positions the 'parental rights' movement as a legitimate starting point, and frames critiques as reactive or secondary. In doing so, such articles risk reinforcing the legitimacy of the 'parental rights' movement's claims, subtly reproducing the very power structures they purport to critique. A prime example of the levying of both perspectives renders discourse to purport echo chambers of understanding, as shown in the quotes below:

[3] I will outline more on this concept later but wanted to note it here as it is a consistent tool.

> Paragraph 4: "'We must protect our children from sexual grooming and pedophilia. The sexualization agenda is robbing children of their innocence.'"
>
> ...
>
> Paragraph 8: "It is completely inaccurate and false and actually really disgusting that people associate gender identity to pedophilia," Judd said. "It's a false narrative ... and so it has nothing to do with one's gender identity." (Kemp, 2023, CBC)

This juxtaposition, placing sensationalist, fear-inducing rhetoric adjacent to a reasoned rebuttal, creates the illusion of balance while subtly legitimizing the 'parental rights' movement's framing. By granting the moral panic the first word, articles like this risk reaffirming the very power structures they later attempt to critique. As Lesko (2001) argues, the construction of the child has long been a political project used to justify adult surveillance and control, particularly through narratives of endangered innocence. Similarly, Tucker (2023) highlights how competing definitions of what constitutes safety for the child are often rooted in adult projections of risk, rather than the child's actual experiences. In this way, media coverage that oscillates between alarm and reassurance does not simply present two sides, it reinscribes the child as an object of adult anxiety, and thus a tool for advancing ideological agendas. Keeping these initiated quotes in mind, we will now dissect the language that purports the child as helpless and thus enables the leveraging of child as political.

The Helpless Child

> Health Minister Mark Holland said he's "deeply disturbed" by the province's plan, which he said will put children at risk. (Tasker, 202,4, para 5, CBC)
>
> Schools must protect students from being outed to abusive families that might hurt them for experimenting with gender. (Zivo, 2023, para. 17, National Post)
>
> Supporters of Policy 713 said changing the consent provisions might endanger students who come from less supportive families. (Moreau, 2023, para. 9, CBC)

A competing narrative against the 'parental rights' movement is often present in articles, as outlined above in the quotes that suggest moves to secure parental rights will endanger students and put children at risks. In doing so, those rejecting the movement repeatedly frame the child as helpless, incidentally building toward the same paternalistic logic they seek to critique. While the intention is perhaps well meaning, this framing reinforces the image of the child as passive, vulnerable, and in need of adult intervention: whether from parents, the state, or educators. This reproduces what Lesko (2001) would call the confident characterization of youth, wherein young people are denied agency and instead cast as either in danger or dangerous.

In positioning the child as at risk, mainstream media discourses (even when challenging the 'parental right's movement) rely on tropes that erase youth autonomy. The subjectivity of the child is not centered; rather, the child becomes a justification for adult action. This framing, while oppositional in its political alignment, mirrors the 'parental rights' movement's own use of the child as a symbolic placeholder for ideological struggle.

The child is not positioned as a rights-bearing subject, as outlined in the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* (1989), but as a site of contestation—acted upon rather than acting.

In this way, both sides of the media discourse may unintentionally converge in their construction of the child as a rhetorical device, rather than recognizing children as social agents capable of participating in decisions about their own lives. As Falkenberg and Krepski (2020) argue, to affirm children's rights is not only to protect them, but to acknowledge their evolving capacities and legitimate claims to voice, identity, and autonomy.

Across mainstream media articles covering the 'parental rights' movement, the lexical proximity between terms such as protect, safe, endanger, and child functions discursively to produce a moral imperative. For instance, phrases like "we must protect our children" (Kemp, 2023) and "changing the consent provisions might endanger students" (Moreau, 2023) align the child with immediate threat, thus demanding urgent safeguarding. The repeated pairing of child with terms of vulnerability positions childhood as inherently perilous, requiring external intervention. This lexical pattern not only activates emotional responses but also reinforces the binary of protector/protected, obscuring the possibility of the child as an autonomous agent. In doing so, the discourse iniquitously purports paternalistic logics under the painted mask of benevolence.

Child as Extension of Adult

> "I know that the motive behind it might not be bad, but the problem is … children are not fully developed to really process that information. So I feel like books should be scrutinized a whole lot more," she said. (MacLean, 2023, para 11, CBC)
>
> So, yeah, 100 per cent behind trans rights, and if my daughter got to 25 and continued in this identification and she felt it was right for her — I would still discourage her from medicalization — but I would absolutely support that choice. We're talking about children here. (Blaff, 2024, para 18, National Post)
>
> That her government's proposal would protect children from making mistakes they may regret as adults. (Smith and Tait, 2024 para. 1, The Globe and Mail)

The quotes above offer an understanding into how children are discursively positioned not as present-tense beings with current claims to agency, but as deferred adults extensions of their future selves. The rhetorical move is subtle but persistent: while support is offered in principle, it is suspended in time. Autonomy is granted, but only later—if at all. Belief is permitted, but only once verified by maturity. And identity? Identity is tolerated only if it survives long enough to be rationalized through an adult lens.

This is a perfect example of, what Lesko (2001) might call a confident characterization, not only of childhood, but of temporality itself. In each of these statements, the child is framed through the logic of eventuality. Consider Blaff's (2024) quote: the speaker's daughter might be affirmed in her identity, but only at 25, and even then, medicalization would still be discouraged. In the meantime, her sense of self is treated with aggressive governmentality. Smith and Tait's (2024) statement follows a similar

logic: that protection is needed because children might otherwise make mistakes that their future selves will not survive. It is not that children cannot feel, decide, or know, it's that their present realities are overwritten by speculative fear and harm.

This is the logic of governmentality, wherein adult oversight is framed not as domination, but as management, an act of guidance that appears neutral, even benevolent. Rather than exerting overt control, governmentality works through the internalization of norms: the adult imagines they are simply helping the child make the 'right' decision, when in fact they are shaping the very conditions of possibility for decision-making. The "dual interest" approach, as outlined by Hannan and Vernon (2008) and expanded by Robinson (2017), appears to negotiate between the needs of parent and child, but it does so within a regime that already privileges adult rationality, foresight, and legitimacy. The child's autonomy is not overtly denied but is deferred, conditioned by the adult's projection of who the child should become. This form of power is not exercised through force, but through 'care' (with heavy quotations) as a mode of governance. In doing so, governmentality obscures its own authority beneath the language of support, responsibility, and safeguarding, subtly preserving adult control while performing neutrality.

What this discourse ultimately reinforces is what Falkenberg and Krepski (2020) challenge: the idea that children must be spoken for, rather than spoken with. Even in liberal or "supportive" framings, the child is not trusted to inhabit their own identity. Instead, the child becomes a temporal placeholder: a being-in-waiting, whose claims must

survive a gauntlet of adult doubt before they can be honored. Autonomy, here, is postponed and in its place, surveillance is rationalized as care.

The deferred child, like the helpless child and the endangered child, is constructed not in opposition to the 'parental rights' movement, but within its grammar. The language may appear softer, more measured, but it ultimately circulates the same assumption: the child is not yet. And in that "not yet," adult ideology finds space to intervene.

But in order for this deferral of autonomy, freedom, and liberty to be justified, we must return to the root of this paternalistic logic: the fear of gender, weaponized to preserve neoliberal and neoconservative power. What follows is an examination of how the public good is not simply misused, but grotesquely inverted, to pathologize difference and position gender itself as a threat.

The Profane Misuse of the 'Public' 'Good'

To justify the deferral of autonomy, the erosion of rights, and the epistemic policing of identity, people within the 'parental rights' movement employ discourse that invokes a singular, urgent claim: the protection of the child. But this "protection," when scrutinized, reveals itself not as a universally agreed-upon good, but as a culturally loaded and politically weaponized construct. Recall Jacobs' (2022) explication that public health interventions are justified when they serve a collective good[4], yet in this instance the

[4] Jacobs (2022) posits that intervention could be rooted in public health, and public health is: "(1)a collective good (2) that focuses on disease prevention, (3) is consequentialist in its outlook, and (4) frequently involves use of state power" (p.96).

“collective good” is consequentialist, manipulated, and bastardized; the supposed “harm” is not disease or violence, but exposure to gender.

This inversion of the public good is on full display in statements such as:

> small children in particular — are too young to fully understand concepts like gender and sexuality. A little girl with a tomboyish personality has little capacity to understand the difference between being a boy and being like a boy (Sarkonk, 2023, para. 23, National Post)

Here, gender is not only framed as incomprehensible to children, it is actively stripped of meaning through infantilization. That is gender is governed through the infantilization of knowledge itself—constructed as an adult-controlled boundary wherein the child’s supposed innocence delegitimizes their knowledge of self and is instead an item of ownership possessed by the adult. The child is positioned not as a developing subject with emerging understandings, but as a fragile blank slate, requiring adult interpretation at every turn. This rhetorical strategy enacts what Guttmann (1980) and Falkenberg and Krepski (2020) caution against: the collapse of a child’s agency into adult projections of developmental legitimacy. “Good” is redefined not by what serves the child’s well-being, but by what upholds traditional gender scripts. In this sense, the public good becomes a euphemism for conformity, where deviation from gender norms is cast as premature, pathological, or simply impossible to comprehend.

The logic deepens in its paternalistic absurdity with the question posed by Stratton (2023): “This raises another question: Are minors’ Charter rights their own, or are they held in trust by their parents or legal guardians?” (Stratton, 2023, para 16, National Post). Above

demonstrates Bourdieu's (1986) argument that those who possess symbolic power also possess the ability to define the question itself. To ask whether a child's rights are theirs is to entertain a profoundly anti-democratic logic: that freedom, for children, may be provisional, delegated, or suspended. Within this logic, autonomy is not a birthright, it is a gift, to be bestowed at the discretion of those in power. And that power, as Giroux (2015) explains, operates through a pedagogy of ignorance: a calculated refusal to educate, to inform, to acknowledge the complexity of lived identities. In the name of safeguarding, gender becomes the boogeyman, and the child becomes the entity through which panic can be manufactured, discipline enforced, and the neoliberal-neoconservative alliance thrives. In this construction, care is not ethical, it is ideological, dogmatic, and inhumane.

What these quotes show is not a disagreement over pedagogy or parental involvement, but a deeper epistemological rupture: the child is not seen as a rights-bearing subject, but as property held in trust, a being in need of purification and protection. The child becomes not someone to hear, but something to protect, especially against themselves. This is the perversion of the public good: a regime in which the language of 'care' justifies the machinery of control.

It is through this logic that the next section unfolds. If the child is rendered an object—stripped of voice, deferred in autonomy, then the adult must necessarily become its subject: the sole knower, the guardian of knowledge, the gatekeeper of truth. It is here that we must turn next: to interrogate how the parent is constructed as rightful sovereign in the neoliberal education order, and how this construction positions teachers, schools, and the public itself in a state of suspicion and submission.

Before we further interrogate the parent as subject, I wish to clarify that, as Massumi (2015) states, “power doesn’t just force us down certain paths, it puts paths in us, so by the time we learn to follow its constraints we’re following ourselves. The effects of power on us are our identity” (p. 19). This framing is crucial, as it reminds us that identity and agency are often shaped by invisible forces long before they are consciously enacted. The use of the term 'parent as subject' is not intended to attack or ostracize parents, but rather to illuminate the ways in which contemporary discourse positions them within broader structures of power. It draws attention to how certain parental identities are valorized while others are marginalized, and how appeals to ‘parental rights’ are often mediated through ideological lenses. By examining the construction of the parent as a subject, we seek not to diminish the lived realities of parenting, but to unpack how specific rhetorical strategies elevate some voices while silencing others. In doing so, we can better understand how the figure of the parent is mobilized in service of ideological agendas—frequently under the guise of neutrality, concern, or common sense.

Parent as Subject, Child as Object

> *It’s therefore disturbing that some commentators have so quickly dismissed the longstanding tradition of parental stewardship. (Malott, 2023, para 4, National Post)*

Mayo (2021) contemplates how the framing of ‘parental rights’ fundamentally positions the rights of parents above the rights of the student. More importantly Mayo delineates how the verbiage of ‘parental rights’ creates a sense of panic; this discourse effectively mobilizes fear and resistance against curricula and “are both a distraction from

attacks on transgender youth *and* not fully inclusive of all parents" (p.369). Yet, "education is the purview of the child, not the right of the parent" (Mayo, 2021, p.379). But as will be detailed below, this is not the discourse being put forward within the language of the news media in question.

Language of Possession

In order to properly detail the pervasive structuring of the parent as owner, a brief revisiting to grade school grammar must be done. In an active voice there is a subject and there is an object: "you read this sentence as you roll you eyes with boredom". The you, or the reader is the subject, this text is the object, of course simultaneously I have written the text, and thus the text is once again the object, but now I am the subject: the subject is the owner of action and the object to be acted upon. In the examples to come, the parent is consistently constructed as the subject, the one with agency, authority, and rightful control, while the child is rendered the object, the passive recipient of that control. This is evident in Dryden's (2023) article, when quoting the Alberta Premier:

> "Regardless of how often the extreme left undermines the role of parents, I want you to know that parental rights and choice in your child's education is and will continue to be a fundamental core principle of this party and this government," Smith said. (Dryden, 2023, para. 2, CBC)

Smith's use of the phrase "your child's education" presupposes ownership, locating the child not as an autonomous learner but as an extension of the parent's domain.

This is also evident in Kives' (2023) statement, "Right now it's about having that conversation, an extensive consultation with parents and teachers as we move forward

with the ultimate goal of having everyone protecting our children," (para 13, CBC). In this case, the word “our” is used to create a false sense of communal guardianship, positioning the child as shared possession of the adult collective, while implicitly excluding the child from the collective. “Our” performs a unifying rhetorical function that binds adults together in a shared project of possessive protection that purports control; it subtly masks the power imbalance between adult and child by cloaking authority in the language of care and solidarity.

We see this possessiveness again in Dubé (2024), “We must respect parents and the role they play in their child’s life and education” (para, 5, The Globe and Mail). The child is the object to be “protected” or “guided,” but never spoken with, only about or for. Malott (202), writing in the *National Post*, again uses the possessive their “Many Canadians feel the school system is becoming hostile to their agency and autonomy. In recent weeks, concern has grown so strong among parents that some have protested for parental rights in their children’s education” (para 1); however, the article also discloses the idea that children are Canadians who also have agency and autonomy. Selley’s (2023) curt declaration that “Parents should know what’s going on with their kids” (para 2, National Post) the “their” again condones possession. Across these discourses, the child is grammatically and ideologically subordinated, their subjectivity collapsed into the parent’s authority. This linguistic construction reinforces the neoliberal and neoconservative logic of possession and control, where relationships are rendered transactional and hierarchical, and where the very grammar of the sentence becomes complicit in the erasure of the child’s voice.

The language does not end with objectifying the 'child', it develops and often militarizes the parent population: calling to action the subject. This militarization is exemplified in three examples below shown below:

> ...and that we as parents will hold no reservations against a government, or a school, or a school board, or a political entity or a teacher's union, that would undermine parental authority.... We know that now. It's an incredible gift." (Sarkonak, 2023, para 10, National Post)

> Many Canadians feel the school system is becoming hostile to their agency and autonomy. In recent weeks, concern has grown so strong among parents that some have protested for parental rights in their children's education. (Malott, 2023, para 1, National Post)

> Ness said parents have been making their voices heard. (Simes, 2023, para 35, CBC)

Recall the hot appeal (Walton, 1987) and social identification (Boylan, 2020) fallacies, which function discursively to inflame emotional response and align the speaker with a presumed majority. The use of phrases like "we as parents" (Sarkonak, 2023) or "parents have been making their voices heard" (Simes, 2023) evokes a collective identity under threat, one that must act to reclaim its supposed rightful place. These constructions weaponize parenthood, transforming concern into mobilization and positioning the parent as both moral agent and political actor. Through this discursive move, the parent-subject is not only authorized but conscripted called upon to defend, resist, and restore a normative order presumed to be under siege. In contrast, the child remains passive, voiceless, and

grammatically inert the reason for action, but never the agent of it. What emerges, then, is a discursive battlefield in which the child is both symbol and stake, and the parent becomes the sovereign actor through whom ideologies of control, purity, and tradition are enacted and enforced.

Despite this research centering on the ‘parental rights’ movement, it is not, at its core, an analysis of parents themselves. Accordingly, this exploration of the parent figure is deliberately brief. First, because I am demonstrating how the construction of the parent simultaneously constructs the child. Second, because my intent here is not to pathologize the parent but to interrogate how media discourse constructs the parent as subject and, increasingly, as militant within a broader ideological framework. These constructions are not neutral; they are mobilized strategically through the invocation of fear, particularly fear surrounding gender. It is this fear, fear of transformation, of ambiguity, of non-normativity, that becomes the rhetorical engine of the movement.

However, it is not all parents who are granted this discursive authority. As will be discussed next, the figure of "the parent" in mainstream media is not a pluralistic or inclusive one it is a selectively amplified voice that privileges whiteness, heteronormativity, and conformity to dominant cultural norms. The following section reviews the literature that exposes how only a certain type of parent is legitimized in the ‘parental rights’ movement, and how this selective representation functions to marginalize not only students, but parents who resist or fall outside the ideological frame.

Certain Type of Parent

The assertion of 'parental rights' only recognizes a certain type of parent, a parent who upholds neoliberal or neoconservative powers. Kingston (2021) considers their child's schooling experience as they perform a critical discourse analysis on school newsletters and the framing of parental involvement for student success. Kingston (2021) applies a Foucauldian approach to measuring power systems and the existence of governmentality, as they posit that the aim of parental involvement is "to produce the neoliberal parent who is committed to partnering with schools to cultivate 'ideal future neoliberal citizens'" (p.3). In this view, we can ascertain how only some forms of involvement is encouraged, and unduly privileges certain kind of parents, ultimately reproducing already existent power structures. As Kingston recognizes, the ownership shift unto parents, is a neoliberal construct that shifts responsibility to the individual and thus accredits failure to the individual. This neoliberal framing of parent as detailed above, can be compared to other instances, such as the 2010 Ontario modelling of 'Parents in Partnership' (Kingston 2021).

Kingston's (2021) observation of the demand for a certain kind of parent, highlights the narrowed view of what a parent is. Kingston proposed that the parent was only encouraged to participate if they promoted neoliberal ideals and were participants who raised the next generation of neoliberal consumers. Kingston's findings, while different, corroborate how Rubin et al. (2019) explicated that school 'choice' only benefits a certain type of family. We can also see how the 'moral panic' around the sexual education curriculum change, as outlined by Bialystock and Wright (2019), had varying affects depending on the 'type' of parents who were most vocal. Likewise, Mayo (2021) shares the

stories of parents who wish to support their child's transition were routinely ignored and disrespected. These stories exhibit the way in which the 'rights' of only certain parents are at the focus of the so called 'parental rights' movement. Through these patterns, we can begin to understand that the 'parental rights' movement focuses on a certain kind of parent, and not *all* parents.

These movements are mono focused on the type of parents and families they seek to 'benefit'; consequentially narrowing the purposes of education to a market-driven model that individualizes the public good. In order to have market drive, values that support archaic hierarchies, the discourse does not only benefit a certain type of parent, but also a certain type of teacher.

Role of Teachers

Before making the argument that the 'parental rights' movement deprofessionalizes teachers, I will establish that: teachers are professionals (Biesta, 2015), the profession demands artistry (Biesta, 2023; Fenstermacher & Richardson, 2005), and teachers are public intellectuals (Apple, 1999; Giroux, 2002). By establishing these understandings of the teacher, we will then be able to understand the ways in which the rhetoric of the "parental rights' movement undermines the professionalism of the teacher.

Fenstermacher and Richardson (2005) created a thought experiment. In this thought experiment, a teacher taught in front of a class of presumed human students. The catch was, that the students were not human, but rather they were robots being controlled by an operator from another room. In the posing of this thought experiment, the lesson went exactly as the teacher planned, because the operator made the robotic students

participate, engage, and regurgitate the posited knowledge from the lesson. This perfect lesson, as conjectured by Fenstermacher and Richardson, was only successful because of the controlled environment. They further put forward that in any given lesson, the teacher must adjust, and implement what Biesta (2015) calls judgments.

It is in this concept of judgement (Biesta, 2015), that the professionality of the teacher is rooted. Students are not robots, they do not enter the classroom in equal states of 'readiness', and have a wide array of needs. This includes social support, emotional willingness, physical ability, etc. (Fenstermacher & Richardson, 2005). Based on this inequity and variability, it is up to teacher judgement to adjust, adapt, and judge the best course of action in the particular moment (Biesta, 2015). These decisions cannot be top down, autocratic, cookie-cut-to-form policies, but must be rested in the *professional* judgment of the teacher.

The concept of judgement can be reiterated in a similarly, but distinct verbiage called 'artistry' (Biesta, 2023). This 'artistry' of the teacher is embedded within the recursivety of teaching; the open system that demands continuous adaptation, a dynamic interplay of knowledge, skills, and creativity that evolves not just around 'learning' but the social domain of 'well-being' (Biesta, 2023). By applying the reiteration of judgement as artistry, we can further delineate the teacher as much more than a technician of rote production, but rather as an actor of a humanistic endeavour.

Expanding on the role of the teacher, we can draw upon Giroux's (2002) statement that a teacher is a public intellectual. As such, the teacher should be trusted for theory making, or else the decisions will be made by external forces far removed from the

classroom. Giroux (2015) also calls for the teacher as the public intellectual to participate in “thoughtful dialogue, [that makes] the case for a qualitatively better world for all people” (p.464). However, for the teacher to be a public intellectual, an ‘artist’, a professional: the profession must be treated as an autonomous and trusted entity capable of making informed and nuanced decisions. In the following section, we will consider how the teaching profession has been historically attacked and deprofessionalized. By comparing the tension of what teaching should be with the historical attack, we can begin to contextualize the current ‘parental rights’ movement as a function of neoliberalism.

History of the Attack on Teachers

The ‘attack’ on teachers has historically been rooted in moral panics and a call for a societal reform. As Pawlewicz (2022) explains, the teacher in these instances is simultaneously framed as the panacea and the problem. Through this dichotomic positioning, teachers are depicted as selfish, incompetent, and inadequate, and are scapegoated for broader societal failures. This framing serves to justify increased governmentality of the teaching profession (Rojo, and Percio, 2020). With this increased governmentality, “Teachers feel alienated from education policy making, with only a third reporting that their opinions are valued at the district level, 5 percent reporting they are valued at state level, and just 2 percent reporting they are valued at the national level” (Pawlewicz, 2022, p.231).

The increased governmentality is promoted by using pre-existing social inequities of power. Apple (1986) outlines the way in which the teaching profession has historically been considered ‘women’s work’. With this classification, there has been imposed oversight, and

rules, often enforced by a position occupied by men. Pawlewicz (2022) extends the constructs leveraged for governmentality beyond gender and outlines how increased teacher supervision and monitoring has also been linked to race as well. This marginalization is exacerbated by government interventions such as the *No Child Left Behind* legislation, which Orelus and Chomsky (2014) argue propagate undemocratic structures within the schooling system. Moore et al. (2021) also highlight how during the COVID-19 pandemic, provincial governments in Canada advanced neoliberal policies without consulting teachers, further limiting their professional autonomy and creativity in pedagogy. These neoliberal rooted initiatives, while ostensibly aimed at improving educational outcomes, often resulted in a heightened scrutiny and standardization of teaching practices, disproportionately affecting schools in marginalized communities (Goldstein, 2014; Pawlewicz, 2022).

As outlined in the previous section, teachers are much more than technicians who implement routinized lesson plans, rather they are professionals who act recursively with artistry to an ever-changing open system (Biesta, 2023). Despite this definition of teachers, there has been a historical attack on teachers (Apple, 1986; Goldstein, 2014; Pawlewicz, 2015). As will be delineated in upcoming sections, we can begin to better situate the 'parental rights' movement, not as a singular event, but rather as a new recurrence of a repeating pattern. With this understanding of teacher, we can now track the pattern of how the teacher is framed through it contextulaiztion in the news media (CBC, National Post, The Globe and Mail).

Good Teacher, Bad Teacher

> It's that responsibility of instilling values that separates parents from the role of, say, a **babysitter**. (Malott, 2023, para. 5, National Post)

Important to note in this section is that there are no examples from *The Globe and Mail*. This absence in media discourse was not a mere oversight on my end, but rather a reflection of the texts themselves. Beyond quoting policy statements that mention teachers, the figure of the teacher was largely absent. This absence speaks as loudly as defamatory language; it implies the obedient and compliant teacher, effectively removing the teacher as a stakeholder in the educational process. This omission was not unique to *The Globe and Mail* articles, but was also evident in other media sources.

Beyond omission the teacher is represented in two contradictory ways, framing a dichotomy of good teacher vs bad teacher, or as I more critically dub: the tamed teacher or the shrew teacher. Let us begin with considering the tamed depiction, the depiction of what the Shakespearian character Petruchio dreamed he could make Katherine become:

> Under the minister's directive, teachers are now obligated to inform the student's family of these changes, regardless of whether they have permission from the student. (Anton, 2023, para. 3, CBC)
>
> "We're not talking about penalizing teachers, but the direction will be that the teachers will not essentially acquiesce to the wishes of the child unless the parents consent if they're under the age of 16," he told reporters. (Simes, 2023, para. 24, CBC)

> He said if teachers grant a child's request for a specific name and pronoun, and the parents complain, then the teacher could face disciplinary action. (Ibrahim, 2023, para. 4, CBC)

These examples illustrate the construction of what I term the *tamed teacher,* a figure who does not act, interpret, or support, but obeys. This discursive construction casts the teacher not as a professional, but as a passive mechanism through which parental authority and state demands are enforced. Within this logic, teaching becomes a feminized act of caretaking divorced from agency, reflecting a long history of gendered devaluation of the profession (Apple, 1986; Goldstein, 2014; Pawlewicz, 2022).

The repeated use of terms like “obligated,” “direction,” and “disciplinary action” signals a structure of power that eliminates teacher judgment. Teachers are no longer entrusted with making decisions based on their professional understanding of students; rather, they are instructed to comply. Anton’s (2023) reporting of “obligated” strips away any sense of discretion, framing the teacher as a bureaucratic functionary. In Simes (2023), the phrase “acquiesce to the wishes of the child” both demeans teacher and child, as though a child’s expression of identity is a whim, and a teacher's affirmation is reprehensible. The implication is clear: teachers must be corrected if they step out of line.

This governmentality is blatant in Ibrahim’s (2023) framing, where disciplinary action is the consequence for affirming a student’s request. Here, the teacher is not just passive, they are policed. Even minor acts of support are surveilled, reinforcing what Giroux (2002) calls out as the technician model of teaching: the teacher as rule-follower, not thinker or moral agent.

This portrayal directly undermines the literature on teaching as a profession requiring complex judgment and artistry. As delineated previously, Biesta (2015) argues that professional judgment is fundamental to education precisely because classrooms are unpredictable, open systems. Biesta (2023) also reframes this judgment as artistry, the capacity to respond dynamically, creatively, and ethically to human difference. None of that artistry is permitted in the tamed teacher framework.

Instead, what we see is a return to what Apple (1986) describes as the feminization of teaching: a profession historically coded as women's work, subject to external control, and defined by obedience rather than innovation. The teacher, in this framing, is someone who cares but only within boundaries prescribed by the state or by "the parent." This kind of care is not relational or justice-oriented; it is hierarchical and compliant.

Thus, the tamed teacher is not simply a discursive figure, it is a disciplinary mechanism. It is how governmentality operates in the classroom: not through direct intervention, but through the transformation of the teacher into an agent of regulation. In this way, the teacher becomes a means of reasserting dominant norms under the guise of professionalism: a professionalism that excludes autonomy, judgment, dissent, or... true professionalism.

If the teacher oversteps their monitored lanes of obedience, then they are subsequently dubbed a bad teacher or the shrew:

> "They shouldn't say 'safe space.' They should say 'danger zone,'" he said at the meeting. "Preaching confusion in the guise of inclusivity and acceptance is truly disgusting."

> The parents say the stickers, and any LGBTQ-inclusive messaging, are at odds with their Catholic faith. (Cheese, 2023, para. 4, CBC)

This neoconservative attack on teachers details how just the mere existence on nonbinary gender or sexuality If the *tamed teacher* is lauded for obedience, the *shrew teacher* is condemned for resistance. In this construction, the teacher who affirms non-normative identities, offers inclusive curriculum, or merely allows the visibility of 2SLGBTQ+ identities in the classroom becomes a threat. Their classroom is no longer a "safe space", it is a "danger zone." This discursive shift marks a stark moral inversion: safety becomes synonymous with silence, and inclusion becomes equated with "confusion" or "preaching." Even when the article attempts to soften the blow, such as when Cheese (2023) later includes the counterpoint, "'The ultimate goal here is to protect the rights of our students who are in our schools and to make our students aware that our schools are safe for them to be in'" (para. 33) the damage has already been done. The framing has privileged the panic.

By granting the inflammatory rhetoric the first word, and offering measured rebuttals only later, the article performs a familiar dance of feigned neutrality. This structure, as previously explored, reinforces the legitimacy of the panic while rendering the affirming response as defensive, secondary, or even ideological. The shrew teacher, then, is not merely a character in this discourse, they are the consequence of it: a figure whose refusal to comply with dominant norms becomes the proof of their politicization.

> The core issue at hand is preserving their agency and autonomy over the ideological content of their children's education (Mallott, 2023, para 6, National Post)

> School boards, schools, and particularly individual teachers should make a choice: are they involved in education or social justice and woke activism? (Murphy, 2023, para 1, National Post)
>
> This policy has opened up a clear division between those who are militant advocates of and those who are fatigued with the interposition of schoolteachers and education officials between parents and their children on LGBTQ matters. (Black, 2023, para 6, National Post)

This framing becomes increasingly visible in the linguistic choices made across articles. Consider the phrase: “The core issue at hand is preserving their agency and autonomy over the ideological content of their children's education” (Malott, 2023). Here, the teacher is not named, but their work is implicitly defined as ideological. The possessive structure, “their children's education”, once again grammatically positions parents as rightful owners, and teachers as interlopers. The invocation of “agency and autonomy” is discursively reserved for the parent, not the teacher or child. Autonomy is thus not a universal right, but a selectively distributed privilege — one that is predicated on ideological alignment.

Murphy’s (2023) framing intensifies this dichotomy: “teachers should make a choice: are they involved in education or social justice and woke activism?” This rhetorical bifurcation relies on a lexical opposition, where education and activism are cast as mutually exclusive categories. The teacher is trapped in a false binary: to teach critically is to betray professionalism. To include queer identity or gender diversity is to become an ideological activist. The term *woke*, by now a culturally loaded epithet, functions

metonymically — collapsing progressive pedagogy into a caricature of extremism. This reduction obscures the complexity of curriculum, pedagogy, and identity, and instead posits the teacher as a vector of danger, rather than a facilitator of inquiry.

Black (2023) goes further, invoking explicitly militant language: *"militant advocates," "fatigued," "interposition,"* and *"on LGBTQ matters."* The phrase *"militant advocates"* performs dual discursive work: first, it positions the teacher (or ally) as aggressor, invoking imagery of conflict and extremism; second, it renders parents as exhausted victims, overwhelmed by the unwanted "interposition" of school staff. The use of *interposition*, a term often associated with intrusion or obstruction, paints the teacher not only as oppositional, but as an obstruction to familial coherence. This metaphor aligns with what Walton (1987) might identify as an "emotive fallacy", the deliberate use of emotionally charged terms to construct an "enemy" without substantiating the claim.

This is the logic of the *shrew teacher*: framed as enemy, ideologue, and danger. Their pedagogical care is rebranded as indoctrination. Their refusal to erase queer or trans identities is reinterpreted as aggression. In effect, the teacher becomes the vessel through which the boogeyman of gender can "catch" the helpless child. The teacher is not depicted as a public intellectual (Giroux, 2002), nor as a reflective practitioner engaged in the recursive artistry of pedagogy (Biesta, 2023); they are cast as a threat, a moral hazard cloaked in authority.

What emerges is not only a pattern of delegitimization, but a deeper epistemological rupture. As Rojo and Percio (2020) argue, neoliberal educational discourse positions teachers as technicians, expected to deliver content efficiently, obediently, and without

interference from so-called personal or political "bias." The *shrew teacher* breaks that mold, and in doing so, exposes the fragility of the myth that teaching is neutral, and that neutrality is ever possible. As such, the shrew teacher is punished not for what they teach, but for the audacity of seeing teaching as an ethical act— one rooted in justice, plurality, and critical consciousness.

Education Not Upbringing

> Which teacher watched with amazement and ecstasy as our babies were born? Which of them was excited when they saw our children take their first steps, or speak their first words? Who lay beside our children's beds when they were feverish in the middle of the night, or was there to comfort them when they broke their arm, or when they bought their pet rabbit, or when their grandparent died? Who drove them to their first day of school to help to calm their nerves — and then waited all day to find out how that day went? Which teacher attended all of their sports events, or helped them with their paper route?" (Mack, 2023, para 1, National Post)

As we move onto the final chapter of analysis, this quote is fundamental to understanding how the fear of the boogeyman, gender, infantilizes gender, villainizes teacher, all as means to degrading liberated, meaningful, and critical education. There is, in this quote, and many to come, a merger of the concept of personal, family care, private concepts, and public, professional, and purposeful education. This merger enacts what can only be described as a profane fallacy: the conflation of upbringing with education, of parent with teacher, of love with curriculum.

The rhetorical question barrage, "Which teacher watched with amazement…?" functions not only as emotional appeal but as a discursive trick. It positions the teacher as an outsider to the child's emotional life and, by extension, illegitimate in shaping their intellectual or ethical development. This fallacy draws on deeply gendered and heteronormative logics that place care within the private sphere of the nuclear family and cast education as a threat when it crosses the thresholds of identity, sexuality, or belief. As hooks (1994) reminds us, education is the practice of freedom, it is not meant to reproduce familial comfort but to foster critical thinking, autonomy, and social responsibility.

By invoking moments of private, embodied care, sick beds, scraped knees, funeral grief, and contrasting them with the imagined coldness of the public school, this narrative constructs the teacher not only as secondary, but as suspect. It rests on a false equivalence: that proximity to a child's early life moments equals moral authority over what they learn, how they identify, and who they become. This logic, like the movement that deploys it, seeks to restrict education to a process of cultural inheritance, not intellectual exploration.

Ultimately, this comparison is flawed not only because it contrasts unlike entities, but because it weaponizes care itself, turning it into a tool for denying the necessity of diverse, inclusive, and student-centered pedagogy. It collapses the roles of caregiver and educator into a single, narrow mold, closing the space where learning, transformation, and resistance might otherwise emerge. This is the insidious nature of the 'parental rights' discourse: it manufactures moral panic, degrades livability by casting certain identities as 'other,' militarizes fearful parents, and undermines the democratic, critical, and liberatory

aims of public education. In its place, it seeks a return to a mythic past—one that calcifies hegemonic neoliberal and neoconservative power under the guise of protection.

Chapter Five: Trojan Horse of Privatization

If the child, as explored in the previous chapter, is constructed as object—helpless, deferred, and symbolically weaponized—then (public) education, too, is subject to similar discursive transformation. This chapter contends that the 'parental rights' movement does not merely argue over curriculum—it seeks to rewrite the public purpose of education itself, cloaking a politics of privatization in the language of care, fear, and neutrality.

Much research on the privatization of public education is based in the United States as 'casino capitalists' actively implement a "mode of governing fuelled by fantasies of exclusion accompanied by a full-scale attack on morality, thoughtful reasoning and collective resistance rooted in democratic forms of struggles" (Giroux, 2019, p.32). While American privatization may be more brazen, Canada is experiencing endogenous privatization: privatization by stealth, where market driven decisions and practices replace public interest within the public education system (Winton, 2022). Winton argues that while parents may not intentionally seek to privatize education, their decisions—driven by a desire to ensure *their* children's success within a capitalist system—nonetheless contributes to a system that disadvantages others. That is, a parent may choose to send their child to a boutique program within the public system in order to support their child, not recognizing how these programs exclude students and undermine the public school ideal as they are not available to everyone.

Winton (2022) further discusses the roles parents are encouraged to assume within the neoliberal framework, such as funders/fundraisers and consumers, which aligns with a broader agenda to dismantle societal and social state structures in favor of individualism.

This transformation, Winton contends, exacerbates inequalities within the education system, privileging certain demographic groups over others. Moreover, it introduces a market-driven dynamic where schools compete for enrolment in order to increase their per pupil funding.

Winton's (2022) analysis extends to the mechanisms of school choice, highlighting the assumption that parents act as rational actors conducting cost-benefit analyses to secure educational advantages for their children. This process, however, is fraught with inequalities, as not all parents have equal access to the resources required to navigate this competitive landscape. Moore et al. (2025) argue that there is another pathway to privatization, an iniquitous and subtle conduit that they call the fourth pathway: “When provincial governments advance, defer to, and accommodate private values that undermine and ignore children’s rights and human rights, they are contributing to public education privatization.” (p. 24). The current ‘parental rights’ movement is yet another example of endogenous privatization and fourth pathway to privatization. The verbiage of ‘*parental rights’ movement’* is a trojan horse for privatization armored in ‘of courseness” that coincidentally provokes moral panic in order to undermine faith in public education.

International Trojan Horse

This trend of ‘parental rights’ cloaking the broader aim of privatization is not restricted to North America, rather it is a worldwide phenomenon. Writing about Roma student experiences in Spain, Paniagua-Rodríguez and Bereményi (2019) highlight how parental engagement, rather than equalizing access to education, often reinforces Foucauldian governmentality. Under the guise of participation, parents are positioned as

individual agents responsible for outcomes, shifting focus away from systemic inequality and reframing education as a private rather than public good. This shift adopts an "input/output rationale" (p. 120), aligning education with market logics and individual performance metrics.

According to Paniagua-Rodríguez and Bereményi (2019), the language of parental participation masks neoliberal ideals of individualism, competition, and consumer choice. Framed this way, education becomes a transactional process: students are products, and their achievements are outputs evaluated like corporate performance. The discourse appears inclusive but ultimately naturalizes marketization, embedding inequality under the guise of empowerment. By doing so, it shifts the narrative of education from being a collective societal investment in the future to a privatized venture where the return on investment is paramount. While Paniagua-Rodríguez and Bereményi conjecture that the language is unintentional, other scholars, such as Mayo (2021) posit that it is manufactured verbiage for moral panic.

That is, panic is created about supposed parental exclusion from public education, when parents at this time have far greater access to teachers and curriculum through various platforms. This panic about exclusion and rights is exploited in order to implement policies that favour particular parental views (e.g. legislated policies requiring teachers to share student gender identification with parents). These policies harm children, undermine children's rights, deprofessionalize teachers, and promote particular narratives about public education and public school educators (Moore & Lopuck, 2025). Mayo (2021) also highlights that the blanket term of 'parents rights' ostentatiously only pertains to a certain

kind of parent and ignores the parents “who want to raise their own children to be respectful of diversity” (p.373).

The neutral language of ‘parental rights’ and the benign word choice presents as a well-intentioned movement towards parental positioning in their child’s upbringing (Fowler & Mountz, 2024). However, illuminated in the context in which the Act has come to be understood and applied, Fowler and Mountz (2024) argue that the term 'parental rights' camouflages a broader agenda to control educational content and limit discussions on topics such as gender identity and sexual orientation within schools. This neoliberal construct of governance actively upholds hegemonic standards and “reifies dominant racial, gendered, and heteronormative discourse while concealing the very prescriptive functions they impose” (p.28). When rights-based knowledge is ‘centerstage’, the intent is to preserve the status quo and limit the transformative potential of education by creating an environment where critical discussions and diverse perspectives are not only devalued but actively suppressed (Fowler & Mountz, 2024).

Fowler and Mountz (2024) describe how positioning parents as a group of people who are ‘under attack’ camouflages the nefarious nature of the ‘parental rights’ movement and ultimately justifies “state-sanctioned surveillance of gender, sex and sexuality content in the classroom” (p.32). This paternalistic overreach oppresses students’ freedom to identity, narrows parent engagement to conformist properties, and actively deprofessionalizes the teacher.

Intentional or Not

The literature discussed above reveals a significant tension between the perceived intentions and the actual impacts of the parental right movement. Giroux (2019) and Winton (2022) discuss the overt and covert privatization efforts in the U.S. and Canada respectively; they highlight a common issue: the replacement of public interests with market driven decision. While Paniagua-Rodríguez and Bereményi (2019) disagree about the intentionality of the iniquitous nature of the neoliberal reform, they critique the notion of parental engagement as a mechanism that, instead of democratizing, perpetuates social inequalities within educational systems. This critique resonates with Mayo (2021), however Mayo argues that the framing of 'parental rights' often intentionally masks a deeper agenda that can undermine inclusivity and professional autonomy in education. This study does not attempt to determine whether individuals within the parental rights movement are acting with harmful intent; rather, it interrogates the consequences of the movement's discourse consequences that remain damaging regardless of motivation. One of the primary actors in facilitating these consequences is the mainstream media, whose re-presentation of the movement helps normalize and mobilize the privatization of public education.

The conversation of intentionality is not the aim of this study, however, grounding the theory in specific instances, such as the 'Don't Say Gay' Bill, as delineated by Fowler and Mountz (2024) we can see that intentional or not, language matters, and thus there are consequence rhetoric that directly results in identity surveillance and governmentality. Gereluk et al. (2015) investigate the ramifications of *Section 11.1* of the Albertan Human

Rights Act (requiring parents to opt-in to sex education) and find similar results to Fowler and Mountz's review of the Floridan Bill. Gereluk et al. (2015) explicate that the implementation of *Section 11.1* directly affected teacher practice, limiting autonomy, and essentially deprofessionalizing the teaching profession. Similar to the tension between Paniagua-Rodríguez and Beremény i (2019) and Mayo (2021), Gereluk et al. (2015) and Fowler and Mountz's (2024) findings were similar in results but differed on intentionality and 'best intentioned' purpose of the legislation. To add to this conversation, using CDA this section will now show how the discourse of the mainstream news media in Canada (CBC, National Post, and The Globe and Mail) intentionally or not, privatize the public values of public education derailing the public good for private gain.

The following analysis traces how the discourse of 'parental rights' in Canadian mainstream media facilitates the privatization of public education—not always through explicit calls for defunding or deregulation, but through rhetorical strategies that redefine education's purpose, reassign its authority, and reframe its responsibilities. This chapter does not isolate individual articles or headlines as outliers, but reads them as nodes in a larger discursive network, one that gradually reorients education away from democratic values toward private moral governance. Through six interconnected sections, I demonstrate how this discursive shift unfolds: how public opinion is elevated as expertise, how outrage is mistaken for dialogue, how neutrality conceals bias, and how the civic mandate of education is quietly eroded. What emerges is a patterned logic of dispossession, in which the language of care, choice, and concern is used to hollow out the public in public education. The goal of this analysis is not only to reveal these rhetorical

moves, but to make visible the ideological architecture they support, an architecture in which certain truths are made dominant, certain voices erased, and public schooling rendered increasingly expendable.

Too Many Cooks in the Kitchen

> At least 46 per cent of the respondents surveyed said they would support their province using the notwithstanding clause to ensure schools have to inform parents if their child wants to be called a new name or pronoun. (Taylor, 2023, para. 18, The Globe and Mail)
>
> Meanwhile, a recent survey released by the Angus Reid Institute found 50 per cent of Saskatchewan people answered they wanted to be informed and provide consent for students to change their name or pronouns. The poll was conducted before Saskatchewan's policies were announced. (Simes, 2023, para. 16, CBC)
>
> If it shocks you that 78 per cent of Canadians feel schools should at the very least inform them if their child intends to do something life-altering, you need to get out of whatever bubble you're trapped in. (Selley, 2023, para. 8, National Post)

The statistics above (with no context given from the news sources of survey phrasing or methodology) rest on majoritarian sentiment that is not a sufficient justification for decisions that override children's rights, professional judgment, and pedagogical integrity. By foregrounding polling data and public opinion quotes, media outlets legitimize the idea that widespread beliefs equate to moral or legal correctness, ignoring the complexities of constitutional law, the rights of children, and meaningful pedagogy. Framing public opinion as the rightful arbiter of educational policy is deeply problematic. Educational

policymaking grounded in populist response, particularly around issues of gender and sexuality, often disregards constitutional protections, students' rights, and professional expertise (Gereluk et al., 2015). What is popular is not always what is just, equitable, or educationally sound. Giroux (2015) similarly critiques how neoliberalism collapses expertise into consumer choice, whereby “everyone’s opinion” is given equal weight, regardless of its foundation in pedagogy, child psychology, or law. This is the consequence of education’s ongoing marketization: if schools are imagined as services dictated by public, then the public is imagined as customer, and the teacher as technician. In this logic, knowledge becomes a product, not a process.

Moreover, the uncritical deployment of polling data in news media functions as a lexical legitimation device. Citing "78% of Canadians" (Selley, 2023) offers rhetorical closure; it forecloses dissent by presenting opinion as fact and public will as moral authority. But this “public” is not monolithic. As Mayo (2021) and Kingston (2021) argue, not all parents are given equal weight in discourse. Media often amplifies the voices of white, middle-class, conservative parents while marginalizing those who support inclusive education or who come from racialized, queer, or working-class communities. In this way, the appeal to public opinion reproduces what Bourdieu (1986) calls symbolic power, those with greater social capital have their beliefs circulated as norm. It becomes a feedback loop: dominant views are amplified, dissenting ones erased, and policy is reshaped to reflect the loudest, not the most just.

While the proliferation of polling data and anecdotal testimony appears to present a neutral snapshot of public opinion, these discursive strategies do more than just reflect

sentiment, they actively diffuse the purpose of education by manufacturing the illusion of consensus. The invocation of ‘parental rights’ as a populist common-sense belief is not benign; it functions as an ideological sleight of hand that reorients the purpose of public education. No longer understood as a collective investment in democratic society, education is increasingly framed as a private commodity, one that parents are entitled to curate, control, and shield from competing worldviews. In this shift, we see the public good recast through the lens of ownership, preference, and individualized moral governance. It is here that the neoliberal and neoconservative logics converge: by disguising ideology as neutrality and personal choice as public virtue, the ‘parental rights’ movement becomes a powerful conduit for the quiet dismantling of public education.

From Public Good to Private Interest

> The emails congratulating and thanking Higgs and Hogan came from people in New Brunswick and elsewhere. Some parents and residents thanked them for upholding their religious rights, parental rights, or for fighting against the "LGBTQ agenda," or "gender ideology." Many emails ask them to go further and change curriculum to prevent discussions about gender identity. (Ibrahim, 2024, para 52, CBC)
>
> "I think it's important that we respect parental rights [and] respect parental choices," said Nathan McMillan, a protester in Toronto. "If parents feel that sex education in a particular manner is not appropriate for their child, they should absolutely have that right to have those conversations privately offline." (Benchetrit, 2023, para. 8, CBC)

> Protests and counterprotests for and against Canada's trans and LGBTQ community are being planned across Canada on Wednesday. (Dyck, 2023, para. 1, The Globe and Mail)

Across mainstream coverage, 'parental rights' are framed as a moral baseline: as common sense. The problem isn't that critique is entirely absent (some articles do include opposing voices or legal commentary), but that this critique is often secondary, diluted, or structurally subordinated. The quotes above, placed early in their respective articles, frame the conversation through the language of outrage, concern, and righteousness—evoking family, faith, and protection. The rest of the article often "balances" the outrage with a quote from an expert or trans youth parent (not the youth themselves), but by then, the stage has been set. The fear has been named. The parent has been sanctified. The teacher vilified.

This sequencing and framing are not incidental, it's how dominant discourse becomes pervasive. As Paniagua-Rodríguez and Bereményi (2019) note in their work on parental engagement in Spain, the language of participation and concern is often cloaked in the language of equality, but functions to reinforce power. When terms like "gender ideology" or "LGBTQ" agenda are used, as in Ibrahim (2024) above, marginalized groups and understandings are falsely positioned as dominant and oppressive. In repeating the claims of parents, by asserting religious rights without limits, and by positioning human rights as a both sides issue, 'parental rights' aren't just reported, they're elevated and reified. They appear not as an opinion, but as a given. The child becomes a site of adult anxiety, and public education becomes a battlefield of consumer preference.

McMillan's phrasing in Benchetrit (2024) to, "have those conversations privately offline," reveals just how deeply this market logic runs. Education, in this view, is no longer a shared public resource, but a customizable service to be opted in or out of like a streaming platform. Moreover, consent, healthy relationships, boundaries, and sex education are positioned as a private matter even though we exist in a public that requires we understand these concepts. This kind of verbiage epitomizes Winton's (2022) concern that parents are increasingly positioned as consumers and funders, not as co-stewards of a public good. "Respect parental choices" sounds inclusive, until you ask who's making choices for whom, and which identities are being erased in the process.

Even the language used in seemingly neutral descriptions, "protests and counterprotests for and against Canada's trans and LGBTQ community," performs a dangerous equivalency. It positions trans existence as debatable, "controversial," something to weigh evenly against the fear it allegedly provokes. This is not balance. It is the laundering of prejudice through feigned objectivity.

Recall Moore et al.'s (2025) fourth pathway to privatization, when state actors defer to private moral values that undermine human rights. That is, rather than upholding constitutional or Charter-based protections—such as the right to gender identity and expression enshrined in the *Canadian Human Rights Act*—policymakers instead legitimize selective, often religiously framed, moral beliefs as the basis for public education policy. These private values, which may include rejecting the existence or dignity of trans and queer identities, are treated as valid grounds for overriding the rights of marginalized students. In doing so, some identities are protected, while others are silenced or erased.

But, media plays its part too. By amplifying voices of oppression, while only softly countering them, discourse is not just reproduced, it is made palatable. Symbolic violence becomes civic concern. A movement designed to surveil and silence becomes “dialogue.”

The dialogue is a dialogue of privatization, not only because consumer logic and traditional values are amplified, but because the very purpose of education is never questioned. This omission is not neutral. As Billig (1988) reminds us, what is left unsaid carries just as much ideological weight as what is said. Across the 88 articles analyzed, not a single one asked the fundamental question: What is the purpose of education?

The dominant discourse ignores the purpose of education and instead will often conjecture ideological overreach, and the need to “stick to facts.” This latter refrain, particularly common in the *National Post*, evokes a painfully familiar caricature of schooling: one where education is reduced to rote information delivery, stripped of imagination, ethics, and complexity. It’s the logic of Dickens’ Mr. Gradgrind: facts over feelings, data over dialogue, memorization over meaning, and thus Sissy Jupe becomes Cecilia (or worse, girl #20) and horses nothing more than quadrupeds.

But this so-called factual neutrality is anything but neutral. It is an epistemological weapon wielded to delegitimize any curriculum that dares to explore gender, race, power, or identity. Under the guise of objectivity, schools are instructed to evacuate values, flatten context, and prioritize palatable knowledge over transformative learning. The concept of “facts,” or the notion of an “unbiased” teacher, or unbiased curriculum, or even an “unbiased” reporter, has a fundamental linguistic flaw when evaluated through an etymological and ontological lens. Bias, as I understand it, and as confirmed by the Oxford

English Dictionary, originates from a textile term referring to a diagonal line sewn across the grain, from corner to corner; used to strengthen the fabric's durability. This original meaning evolved into a broader definition of perspective or slant. And here lies the ontological assumption baked into the slur of bias: that there is a single, stable truth from which one can deviate. This is a constructed fiction: one that pretends neutrality exists while masking whose truths are allowed to dominate the discourse.

This rhetorical posture of neutrality is not benign; it rests upon and reinforces a deeper linguistic and ideological architecture wherein power speaks as if it were not speaking at all. As outlined in Chapter Four, the child is persistently constructed as the grammatical object, acted upon, referred to, or corrected, while the parent is framed as the knowing subject, the one who decides what is good, what is harmful, and what is permissible. Gender, too, is positioned not as a lived and embodied identity but as a threat, an abstract, politicized force that must be kept at bay. Together, these constructions allow for the reassertion of dominant norms beneath the guise of fact and fairness. The child becomes a vessel to be protected from ideological 'contamination,' and education becomes the stage on which adult fears of transformation and ambiguity are disciplined into silence. This is not neutrality; it is a grammar of domination masquerading as care.

The criticizers of bias only wish to rip the stitches that etch the concept of change. Their bias, their beliefs, their ideology is denoted as the center itself. And thus, we see the use 'parental rights' language as a distorted mirror, indoctrination of public curriculum to conform to neoconservative and neoliberal restoration of the mythic past.

Language of Panic

> …board policies undermined their children's well-being, destabilized the family and alienated them from their children. They said it represented a massive overreach by teachers and school administrators into their family lives (Blaff, 2024, para. 9, National Post)

The rhetoric surrounding the 'parental rights' movement does not merely express concern, it performs the conversion of civic institutions into sources of existential danger. Terms like "undermined," "destabilized," and "overreach" (Blaff, 2024) are not neutral descriptors, they animate fear. As Butler (2024) argues, panic becomes the organizing affect of contemporary politics, where gender is framed not as identity but as contagion. Together, these discourses cast schools as ideological battlegrounds, children as vulnerable property, and teachers as agents of moral transgression. As a result, public schools become suspect and resultantly parents leave public schooling, push for choices within the public system that reflect their individual values, or advocate for public dollars to follow their children into private options (Winton, 2022). The quotes to come, drawn from *The National Post, The Globe and Mail, and CBC,* function not as isolated expressions of concern, but as part of a broader linguistic pattern in which moral panic is not just reported it is manufactured. The examples are placeholders to show the larger Discourse trends. The language constructs enemies, erases complexity, and flattens nuance to position public education as a site of ideological corruption that must be "cleansed" through parental reassertion and state intervention.

> (Scott Moe said,) “Not only am I in support of (the pronoun disclosure) policy, I think … there is no room for gender ideology in public schools,” Merle said. (Sarkonk, Sep 2023, para. 20, National Post)

This quote deploys exclusion through the phrase “no room,” a complete negation that denies the possibility of dialogue, plurality, or critical engagement. The term “gender ideology” is a floating signifier, a vague, highly politicized phrase with no fixed definition, used to conflate inclusive education with political extremism. It operates as a discursive strawman, enabling the speaker to reject an entire body of knowledge without naming its actual contents. This use of ideological labeling simplifies complex social realities and positions public education as already compromised. The implication is clear: something dangerous has infiltrated, and it must be removed. And as already situated in Chapter three, this danger is gender.

> “Parents are being pushed aside by the dangerous indoctrination of the left, which caters to the loud minority in this province and country,” she told the crowd when the party opened the floor to discussion. “Children and teens should be educated in school, not brainwashed by woke activists who do not have their best interest in mind.” (Smith and Tait, 2023, para. 10, The Globe and Mail)

This excerpt is a discursive crescendo of panic. The verbiage: “dangerous,” “indoctrination,” “loud minority,” “brainwashed,” “woke activists” constructs an emotional atmosphere of siege. This is the language of war, not education. The rhetorical opposition between “parents” and “woke activists” invokes an antagonistic duality: protector vs. corrupter, common sense vs. ideological threat. As Foucault (1977) contends, discourse

does not merely reflect—it produces, organizing the field of what can be thought, said, and acted upon. In this case, the parental subject is framed as simultaneously marginalized and morally superior, while teachers are recast as ideological agents of a deviant agenda. The phrase “do not have their best interest in mind” functions as a discursive mechanism of manipulated power, where the teacher, once imagined as a moral guide, is now surveilled, distrusted, and displaced by the presumed purity of parental authority. What results is a regime of truth in which “caring” for children legitimizes repression, and where the language of safeguarding becomes a technique of governance.

> "This is very much a government that is being responsive to parents from across this province, of which we're fortunate to have a large caucus that represents many areas from corner to corner to corner in the province, putting forward a piece of legislation that largely parents that have reached out to us are supportive of."
>
> (Hunter, Oct 2023, para. 25, CBC)

Though less overt in tone, this statement uses performative consensus to manufacture legitimacy. The repetition of “corner to corner to corner” creates a lexical painting of omnipresence, implying a widespread, province-wide consensus without offering evidence or specificity. The phrase “parents that have reached out to us” is an unspecified agent, enabling selective amplification. Whose voices are reaching out? Whose are being ignored? This vagueness is ideologically strategic, it positions the government’s actions as merely reactive, while ignoring the power it holds to shape, direct, and filter the discourse.

If ‘parental rights’ are cast as commonsense, then any resistance to them can be cast as irrational, unsafe, or extremist. And once the terrain is defined by panic, the only solutions permitted are those that reinforce conformity and surveillance. As Winton (2022) argues, this is the precise condition in which privatization thrives, not through transparent legislation, but through cultural atmosphere. When discourse positions education as compromised, consumer “choice” is framed as rescue. The project of choice falls within Winton’s explicated second and third pathways to privatisation, through endogenous mechanisms: endogenously, by restructuring the internal culture and priorities of public education to align with market logic and parental control; and exogenously, by expanding external options like private or charter schools, redirecting public funds and reshaping education as a customizable commodity. In both cases, the language of panic serves as the affective groundwork upon which privatization proceeds, not as policy imposed from above, but as the 'reasonable' response to a crisis discourse that the media helps to fabricate.

Discursive Slope of Privatization

This section examines how the discursive terrain of ‘parental rights’ gradually shifts from implicit consumer logic to explicit ideological restructuring of public education. Through a close reading of select media quotes, I trace how the affective language of care and protection becomes a discursive entry point for neoliberal and neoconservative values. Drawing on Winton’s (2022) conception of endogenous privatization, Moore et al.’s (2025) identification of the fourth pathway to privatization, and Giroux’s (2019) critique of neoliberalism’s erosion of moral and democratic life, I demonstrate how these discourses

displace the public purpose of education with private interest. Recalling earlier observations from Paniagua-Rodríguez and Bereményi (2019) on participation as a cloaked mechanism of control, and Rogers' (2011) notion of lexical legitimation, the analysis that follows reveals how even seemingly moderate or neutral statements are ideologically charged. Through recursive engagement with these scholars, and using examples from the media that act as representers of broader (D)iscourse this section shows how the slope of privatization is constructed linguistically—one rhetorical move at a time.

> "I am involved in their life financially, emotionally and I'm going to be there for them through their early years. Why should I not be the one holding their hand, guiding them, rather than [teachers] doing it for me?" (Asserted the parent) (Anton, 2023, para. 23, CBC)

The above instance distills the affective logic underlying much of the 'parental rights' discourse: the conflation of care with control. The parent is rendered the singular locus of moral guidance and epistemic authority, with the teacher reframed not as a partner in education, but as an intruder. Recalling Winton's (2022) observation that neoliberal education reform positions parents as funders and consumers rather than public stewards. Anton's (2023) reporting draws a boundary between private parenting and public pedagogy, framing education not as a shared, dialogical process but as a site of control. Within this framing, love is not a gesture of mutuality, but a claim to ownership (recall Chapter four and its contemplation of ownership of child) used to justify exclusion rather than cultivate relational responsibility. In contrast to Freire's (1970) vision of education as a practice of freedom, rooted in co-intentionality and dialogue, this model of

care is vertical, unilateral, and proprietary. It positions the child as a passive recipient of parental authority, rather than an agent in their own becoming.

> "We believe that parents know what's in the best interest of their children, and that they have a right to be informed at school with what is happening so that they can make the decisions for their children," Manitoba Premier Stefanson said when asked at a live leaders debate on Winnipeg radio station CJOB whether her party would introduce similar rules to ones in provinces like Saskatchewan. (Gowriluk, 2023, para. 2, CBC)

The phrase “we believe that parents know…” signals a moral imperative masked as political consensus. This is not an educational principle grounded in equity or shared responsibility; it is, as Giroux (2019) argues, the substitution of critical pedagogy with cultural dogma. It appeals not to dialogue or democratic deliberation, but to unexamined conviction, foreclosing debate before it begins. Most striking, however, is the construction of the child in this sentence. The phrase “make the decisions for their children” casts the child not as a thinking subject, but as an object of parental will, a passive extension of adult authority. The child is spoken of, not with.

This discursive move aligns directly with Moore et al.’s (2025) articulation of the fourth pathway to privatization, wherein public institutions defer to private moral values under the guise of inclusivity and choice. But in practice, this deference often erodes foundational democratic commitments, pluralism, protection of minority rights, and the child’s right to self-determination. The school is no longer imagined as a site of collective meaning-making, where students are co-creators of knowledge. Instead, it becomes a site

of surveillance, where teachers are tasked with enforcing the ideological preferences of parents-as-clients.

The implications of this are ontological as much as political. As explored in earlier chapters, when the child is positioned grammatically and socially as object, acted upon, protected, corrected, rather than as subject, thinking, becoming, relational: the logic of ownership takes root. This is a model of education antithetical to Freire's (1970) pedagogy of liberation. Rather than a dialogical encounter between student and teacher, learner and world, it becomes what Freire would call a "banking model" of education, in which knowledge (and increasingly, morality) is deposited by those in power into the blank accounts of the young. But education in this framing is not neutral, it is possessed, curated, and controlled by the few for the few. And so the language of 'parental rights', disguised in care, becomes the language through which the child is dispossessed of voice, and public education is dispossessed of its civic and transformative purpose.

Feigned Neutrality

Each side has a point (Moreau, 2023, para. 13, CBC)

This is where the discourse attempts to smooth offer feigned neutrality. "Each side has a point" appears as a claim to fairness. But as Billig (1988) reminds us, what goes unsaid is as meaningful as what is voiced. In a context where one "side" is seeking protection and affirmation of existence, and the other is seeking restriction, silence, or erasure, the gesture toward balance functions as a moral flattening. It performs a kind of ideological laundering, where oppression becomes merely one perspective among many. Recall Rogers' (2011) concept of lexical legitimation: this phrasing bestows credibility to all

claims, regardless of harm. It reinscribes the neoliberal logic described by Giroux (2015), where all positions are treated as market options, and where justice becomes subordinate to preference. But justice, especially in public education, is not a customer satisfaction metric.

And if this is what counts as critique within mainstream discourse, the conversation is far from neutral and even further from transformative. What this reveals is not balance, but the flaccid center of a debate in which power has won. Objectivity, in this context, functions as a mask, one that conceals the ideological investments shaping what counts as a legitimate claim, whose voices are amplified, and whose experiences are erased.

This is precisely where the myth of bias becomes so ideologically potent. As discussed earlier, the etymological root of "bias" refers not to distortion, but to perspective, a diagonal slant across the fabric, not a tear. Yet in media representations of the 'parental rights' movement, neutrality is framed as the absence of bias, as if truth were a fixed center and all deviation from it is blasphemous. But this conception of truth is itself a fiction, one that cloaks neoconservative and neoliberal worldviews in the language of fairness. "Each side has a point" becomes not a bridge between perspectives, but a rhetorical trick that positions oppression as one opinion among many, and justice as merely optional. Each side can indeed have a point, up until one side infringes on human rights (Journell, 2018). In this structure, the child is rendered object once more, not a being with rights and subjectivity, but a site upon which adult anxieties, preferences, and ideologies are inscribed. The conversation is not balanced—it is power laden.

> The objective of gender activists is not, it seems, to persuade people to accept and accommodate transgendered individuals. Their objective, instead, is to convince others that they must accept a range of beliefs that reject reality and accept that any failure to do so is an act of unforgivable bigotry. (Jerema, 2024, para. 8, National Post)

This example does not simply reject gender expansiveness, it reframes it as an existential threat to order. “Reject reality” is a phrase weighted with ontological violence, insinuating that trans identity itself is a delusion, a manufactured belief system that threatens the coherence of truth. This rhetorical move mirrors what was previously identified in Chapter Three, where Butler’s (1990) theory of performativity is inverted and weaponized. Gender is no longer a socially constructed performance, it is now falsely framed as a political imposition, something to fear and repel. The use of “must accept” positions inclusion as coercion, and disagreement as martyrdom. In doing so, the article constructs a moral binary between common-sense reality and ideological intrusion, reasserting hegemonic norms under the guise of resistance.

What’s essential to notice here, recalling Foucault’s (1977) concept of power as regenerating, is how discourse doesn’t just reflect bias, it generates the conditions through which certain truths become legible, and others become threats. Trans identity, framed through this logic, is no longer a subject identity, but a pathogen, an ideological contaminant to be resisted. The frame is not “what is best for the child?” but “how do we protect the system from contamination?”

> Battle line re-draws are indeed possible. Just two years ago, the federal conservatives (well, the ones who were physically in Ottawa at the time) unanimously caved to legislation that banned "conversion therapy" for transgender-identifying children, but was silent on "conversion therapy" for regular, non-trans children. Back then, there wasn't room for debate. Today, in Alberta, there is. The momentum is on the side of conservatives. (Sarkonak, 202, para. 9, National Post)

The phrase "conversion therapy for regular, non-trans children" is not just ideologically loaded, it is linguistically absurd and profoundly revealing. It positions trans identity as such a threat that even acknowledging its legitimacy or existence is framed as dangerous indoctrination. The implication is that gender education itself—its discussion, inclusion, or representation, is a form of coercion. In this framing, exposure becomes corruption, understanding becomes seduction, and affirmation becomes violation. The term "regular" does enormous discursive work here, conjuring an imagined normativity that casts trans children as aberrations and their existence as inherently contagious. It reverses the very meaning of "conversion therapy," deploying it not as a descriptor of institutional violence used historically to erase queer and trans identity, but as a protective measure for those supposedly at risk of becoming trans. It is a complete inversion of harm and care, danger and support.

What is being mobilized here is not simply disagreement, it is a campaign to redefine public education's purpose, rendering its commitment to inclusion not as ethical responsibility but as ideological overreach. Teaching about gender, in this discourse, is not education but manipulation. Here we see, the mere act of naming gender diversity

becomes constructed as a risk that must be legislated against. This discursive construction transforms critical pedagogy into political warfare. It revives the specter of "recruitment" that has long haunted anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric, painting schools as sites where normative children are allegedly converted through exposure, and further invisibilizes and neutralizes all of the ways in which children are always already gendered into societal norms of gender within schools In using this particular discursive inversion, the classroom becomes a battleground, and the teacher a propagandist.

This discursive inversion is not accidental. It reflects what Bratich (2022) warns is the restoration of a mythic past, one in which gender roles were fixed, schools were ideologically silent, and difference was rendered invisible. But this past is not neutral—it is the cornerstone of neoconservative preservation, which seeks to reinforce dominant hierarchies under the guise of stability, tradition, and moral clarity. The rebranding of inclusive education as a form of indoctrination, while redefining surveillance and discipline as acts of parental care, reveals the neoconservative impulse to reclaim control over meaning itself. It is not simply a resistance to change, but an attempt to roll back social and epistemic gains by reviving an imagined era in which whiteness, heterosexuality, and patriarchy reigned uncontested. This moral panic is not an aberration but a strategy, one that uses fear to reassert control, and nostalgia to mask power (Butler, 2024; Seymour, 2024).

> In schools, gender rights can conflict with Charter rights based on sex, religion, sexual orientation and security of the person, which includes "the health and privacy of the body." Some schools permit children to use the washroom of their

> self-identified gender, rather than their sex. What are the sex-based Charter rights of girls, and the religious rights of religious girls, when it comes to same-sex washrooms and change rooms? Male puberty gives boys greater muscle mass and bone density than girls. What are girls' sex-based rights in secondary school sports competitions? (Stratton, 2023, para. 10, National Post)

This invocation of the Charter is not merely flawed, it is a grotesque misuse of legal discourse that weaponizes constitutional language to perform exclusion. As Short et al. (2021) argue, the Charter has increasingly become a discursive battleground in which claims to "religious freedom" or 'parental rights' are leveraged to erode protections for 2SLGBTQ+ youth. Rather than safeguarding pluralism and equity, these rhetorical appropriations hollow out the Charter's emancipatory intent, converting it into a shield for moral panic. Stratton's appeal to "sex-based rights" masks this strategic inversion: inclusion is reframed as imposition, and protection as overreach. This distortion obscures the fact that the Charter was designed to protect minority rights against majoritarian tyranny—not to justify the suppression of vulnerable identities under the banner of fairness. In effect, we see here a constitutional logic turned inside out: rights are not invoked to liberate, but to surveil and suppress. The very document designed to secure dignity is twisted into a tool that denies it.

This quote is perhaps the most textbook demonstration of the fourth pathway to privatization (Moore et al., 2025): public discourse defers to private moral values, this time reframed as legal "concerns", to justify exclusion, surveillance, and the rollback of inclusive policies. The language of safety and fairness is not used to protect all children, it

is used to deny some children the right to exist safely in the first place. And when fear is framed as reason, and exclusion as equity, the purpose of public education is no longer to uplift, but to calcify power.

The ideological arc becomes increasingly transparent. And with Stratton's legal framing of gender as threat, the groundwork is laid for one final rhetorical maneuver—the sweeping condemnation of public education itself.

> Or is it to impart a set of subjective values, which may or may not reflect a student's or their family's belief system? Those values aren't limited to gender identity, but include dogmas new and old, such as environmentalism, religion and ethnic nationalism. It doesn't matter what "ism" is being taught, the goal is the same: changing social norms by molding the minds of children. (Kheiriddin, 2023, para. 6, National Post)

If Jerema (2023) evokes fear, Sarkonak (2024) invokes mobilization, and Stratton (2023) appeals to legality, then Kheiriddin (2023) phrasing represents the completion of the discursive circuit by casting public education itself as the threat. Here language transforms pedagogy into dogma, learning into indoctrination. The phrase "molding the minds of children" is rhetorically calibrated to suggest authoritarianism, not education—a direct callback to the parental anxieties laid bare in Chapter Four, where the role of teacher is reconstructed as both ideological agent and threat to parental primacy.

The use of "subjective values" is particularly revealing. It does not differentiate between democratic principles and extremist ideologies, instead flattening them into interchangeable "isms," thus collapsing pluralism and authoritarianism into one

homogenized fear. The implication is that public education has no right to guide ethical reflection, environmental stewardship, or historical understanding if it might challenge the "belief system" of the family, once again privatizing or more aptly put, averting the very aim of the public education for the public good.

Kheiriddin's (2023) statement, by positioning education as a conduit for "subjective values" and "dogmas," functions as a discursive culmination of a broader ideological project. Her framing collapses pluralistic civic education into ideological imposition, thereby casting public schooling as inherently suspect. This rhetorical move aligns with Giroux's (2019) critique of neoliberalism's moral deregulation—where collective reasoning and democratic pedagogy are replaced by market logics and private morality. Here, gender functions not as the central issue, but as a strategic entry point: a cultural wedge through which distrust in public institutions is normalized, and the civic role of education is systematically diminished.

Such discourse enacts Winton's (2022) characterization of endogenous privatization, a gradual and alarming shift in which public education is reconstituted not through overt dismantling, but through linguistic delegitimation. The institution is not attacked directly; rather, it is reframed as ideologically coercive, incompatible with familial authority, and ultimately expendable. The teacher is cast as propagandist, the curriculum as indoctrination, and the student as a vessel of parental sovereignty. This narrative structure recalls Moore et al.'s (2025) fourth pathway to privatization, wherein the state accommodates private moral values that erode human rights protections under the guise of democratic responsiveness.

In this discursive configuration, education is no longer a site of ethical inquiry or democratic preparation, but a marketplace of beliefs subject to consumer preference. The logic is not simply one of surveillance or censorship—it is a deeper ontological reordering of education itself. Public schooling, once imagined as a space of justice and collective uplift, is recast as a threat to traditional authority and a battleground of competing ownership claims. What begins as an appeal to parental concern culminates in the symbolic and structural reconfiguration of education as a privatized, depoliticized, and ultimately hollowed institution.

Education as Dispossessed Public

If the 'parental rights' movement functions as a Trojan Horse, its payload is not merely policy change— it is epistemic restructuring. Through the affective language of protection and the rhetorical appeal to neutrality, mainstream media discourse has not simply reported on education; it has participated in its redefinition. Public education is no longer portrayed as a site of critical inquiry, democratic development, or ethical encounter. Instead, it is rendered suspect**,** a battleground to reclaim, a system to sanitize, and, ultimately, a public good to dismantle.

What begins as the call to "respect parental choice" quickly morphs into the demand to evacuate public schooling of anything deemed uncomfortable, contested, or non-normative. This displacement is not accidental. It is the discursive condition in which privatization becomes possible without naming itself as such. Through populist appeals, strategic ambiguity, and moral panic, we witness what Winton (2022) terms endogenous privatization**:** not through direct dismantling, but through the reconfiguration of values,

roles, and responsibilities that govern the education system. The classroom is no longer the domain of educators, or even of students, it is reframed as an extension of the home, subject to private belief and market logics.

This transformation is not only linguistic, but also legislative. Whether through policy shifts that defer to parental veto, or curricular revisions that exclude marginalized identities, we are witnessing the quiet institutionalization of the fourth pathway to privatization: when public institutions surrender to private moral authority, human rights are not merely ignored, they are rewritten.

Importantly, this chapter has shown that privatization is not simply economic, it is ontological and moral. It alters who counts as a knower, who counts as a subject, and what counts as truth. Public education, once imagined as a place where young people might encounter the world and remake it, is increasingly imagined as a site of risk, a system to be policed, tamed, or escaped altogether. And when public systems are no longer trusted to hold the complexity of identity, justice, and transformation, they are not merely under attack, they are being emptied from within.

This is the final function of the Trojan Horse: not to burn the city, but to rearrange its foundations while the gates remain open. If public education is to survive, not just in infrastructure, but in purpose, we must recognize that its defense cannot be apolitical. As the following conclusion explores, the time for neutral observation has passed. Discourses of surveillance, exclusion, and privatization are no longer emerging, they are already active, encoded in policy, and shaping the lives of students, teachers, and families across

Canada. The question is no longer *if* public education is at risk. The question is what we are willing to do to reclaim it.

Chapter Six: Conclusion

Summary of Findings

Using Critical Discourse Analysis this thesis examined how Canadian mainstream media constructs, authorizes, and circulates the rhetoric of the 'parental rights' movement, with a particular focus on the intersections of gender, educational purpose, and construction of the child. Drawing from 83 articles published between May 2023 and June 2024 across CBC, The Globe and Mail, and The National Post, the study traced how linguistic patterns, omissions, and rhetorical framing devices contribute to a broader ideological project that undermines public education and pluralism. The three analysis chapters explored how media discourse shapes perceptions of gender identity, the roles of students, teachers, and parents, and the very function of education itself.

Chapter Three exposed how gender and sexuality are constructed as existential threats within mainstream media reporting: what I term the "boogeyman effect." Drawing from theorists such as Butler (2024), Giroux (2019), and Bratich (2022), the chapter revealed how trans and queer existence is reframed as dangerous, contagious, and ideologically extreme. The mere teaching or acknowledgment of gender diversity is often portrayed as indoctrination, grooming, or even a form of "conversion therapy" for "regular" (cisgender) children. The chapter traced how this moral panic is not an outlier but a recurring discursive strategy that fuels policy decisions, encourages surveillance, and renders trans existence controversial by default. The figure of the trans child becomes both hypervisible and voiceless, an object of fear, pity, or erasure rather than agency. In doing so,

gender becomes the gateway issue through which the logics of neoliberal privatization, governmentality, and neoconservative restoration are activated.

Chapter Four explored how media discourse constructs the relational triad of parent, child, and teacher, emphasizing a rhetorical hierarchy in which the child is framed as passive, the teacher as dangerous or disposable, and the parent as the sole legitimate moral actor. The chapter showed how media articles regularly erase student agency, villainize educators, and feminize the compliant teacher ultimately justifying a reordering of educational power. Parental authority is elevated as both consumer right and moral imperative, while teachers are stripped of professional autonomy and reframed as ideological agents. Drawing from scholars such as Freire (1970), Winton (2019), and Kingston (2022), the chapter revealed how this relational framing legitimizes the shift from public stewardship to private governance, where "care" becomes discourse for control and where surveillance is moralized as protection.

Chapter Five built on these dynamics by arguing that the 'parental rights' movement operates as a Trojan Horse for the privatization of public education. Through feigned neutrality, emotional appeals, populist polling, and selective Charter-based legalism, the media reinforces a consumer logic in which education is framed as a customizable service rather than a democratic good. Drawing on Moore et al.'s (2025) concept of the "fourth pathway to privatization," this chapter showed how private moral values are increasingly treated as legitimate grounds for public policy, displacing the civic function of education and supplanting it with individualized parental authority. The repeated tropes of "parental choice," "balanced perspectives," and "both sides" discourse do not foster fairness they

mask ideological capture under the guise of neutrality. Through rhetorical strategies like "of-courseness," argumentum ad temperantiam, and lexical legitimation, the chapter traced how privatization is made to feel inevitable and even righteous.

Together, the three findings' chapters map a recursive discursive terrain in which gender is cast as threat, parental authority is sanctified, and public education is delegitimized. The study demonstrates that Canadian media discourse does not merely reflect the 'parental rights' movement, it participates in its reproduction and normalization. By encoding fear, moralism, and privatization into the language of care, balance, and objectivity, the media becomes an instrument of ideological reinforcement. What this analysis reveals is that public education is not only under policy attack it is under discursive siege.

Answering the Research Question

This study set out to critically investigate the discursive construction of the 'parental rights' movement in Canadian mainstream media through three interrelated research questions:

1. How are the roles and relationships of students, parents, and teachers represented?

The media discourse constructs a hierarchical and deeply asymmetrical relationship between parents, children, and teachers. Parents are consistently portrayed as rational, morally upright agents, responsible not only for their children's well-being but for protecting them from an allegedly corrupt educational system. This framing repositions the parent as both guardian and consumer, entitled to veto knowledge they deem

controversial. In contrast, teachers are often vilified or diminished, cast as overreaching ideologues or passive bureaucrats. Their professional judgment is undermined through surveillance-oriented policy discourse. Students, especially queer and trans youth, are rendered grammatically and ideologically passive and are thus acted upon rather than heard. As shown in Chapter Four, this configuration erases student agency and recasts public education as a site of conflict where teacher-student relationships are mediated by parental authority rather than professional ethics or pedagogical care.

2. How is the purpose of public education framed?

Rather than being represented as a space for democratic development, critical inquiry, or civic engagement, public education is increasingly framed as a site of moral overreach or ideological intrusion. Education is stripped of its transformative purpose and repurposed as a neutral service for individual families to customize according to their beliefs. As demonstrated in Chapter Five, this shift is enabled by rhetorical devices that present public schooling as dangerous, biased, or failing, thereby opening the discursive terrain for alternatives grounded in parental control and market choice. The purpose of public education becomes narrowed: not to prepare citizens, but to preserve norms. Media discourse supports this redefinition by emphasizing parental dissatisfaction, amplifying populist polling, and legitimizing restrictive policy through selective appeals to the Charter. In this framework, the school becomes an extension of the private home, and the public good is subordinated to personal preference.

3. How are gender and sexuality positioned within this discourse?

Gender and sexuality are positioned not as lived experiences or sites of identity, but as ideological threats. As Chapter Three reveals, gender diversity is consistently framed as something to fear, suppress, or regulate, constructed through tropes of indoctrination, confusion, and harm. Trans and queer youth are hyper-visible in media narratives but rarely granted voice; instead, their identities are instrumentalized in broader moral panics that frame public schools as dangerous spaces. The teaching of gender is portrayed as synonymous with coercion or recruitment, often described using terminology traditionally associated with abuse or manipulation. This rhetorical inversion weaponizes the language of safety and care to justify exclusion, and it mobilizes fear as both a political strategy and a pedagogical tool. Gender becomes the battleground through which larger ideological projects, such as the restoration of patriarchal norms and the rollback of inclusive policy, are fought and legitimated.

Connect to Existing Research

This thesis contributes to and extends a growing body of critical scholarship examining the intersections of media, education, gender, and neoliberal ideology. While much of the existing research on the privatization of education and the 'parental rights' movement is based in the U.S. (Apple, 1999; Giroux, 2019; Rubin et al., 2020), this study confirms that similar ideological patterns, particularly the erosion of public education through moral panic, consumer logic, and populist discourse, are increasingly prevalent in Canadian contexts.

Building on Winton's (2022) concept of endogenous privatization and Moore et al.'s (2025) "fourth pathway to privatization," this research shows how Canadian media, even

when politically diverse, converges in its reproduction of discursive strategies that privilege private values over public rights. The study affirms Fowler and Mountz's (2024) assertion that terms like 'parental rights' function as camouflaged mechanisms of ideological control, and extends their work by applying a Foucauldian analysis to show how media discourse disciplines educators, silences students, and moralizes surveillance as care.

The study also intersects with critical feminist and queer theory, echoing the concerns of Butler (2024) and Bratich (2022), who describe the contemporary anti-gender backlash as a transnational strategy to restore traditional hierarchies through affective language and fabricated threats. Chapter Three's exploration of gender panic builds on this foundation by demonstrating how Canadian mainstream media positions trans identity as both contagious and fundamentally illegible—something to fear, regulate, and/or exclude. Through CDA, this study reveals that trans and queer youth are not only discursively marginalized, but strategically instrumentalized to justify broader campaigns of educational control and cultural retrenchment.

While this research confirms and extends existing work on the privatization and politicization of public education, its most significant contribution may lie in its Canadian specificity. By using Critical Discourse Analysis to examine how mainstream media shapes and legitimizes the 'parental rights' movement in Canada, this study exposes the illusion of Canadian exceptionalism and underscores the urgency of defending public education as a democratic, pluralistic, and emancipatory institution.

Discussion of Limitations

While this study offers a critical and timely contribution to the discourse on the 'parental rights' movement in Canada, several limitations must be acknowledged. First and foremost is the limited temporal scope of the corpus. The dataset includes articles published between May 1, 2023, and June 30, 2024—a period of heightened political mobilization around gender and education. While this timeframe captures key flashpoints such as New Brunswick's Policy 713, Saskatchewan's Bill 137, and Alberta's policy shifts under Premier Smith, it necessarily excludes earlier iterations of the movement and longer-term discursive trends that may have shaped the public imaginary. A broader historical lens might have offered deeper insight into how these rhetorical strategies developed over time.

Second, although this study focused on three major national media outlets (CBC, The Globe and Mail, and National Post), the exclusion of regional, alternative, and community-based media means that voices outside the mainstream, particularly those from Indigenous, racialized, or queer-led publications, remain underexamined. Including such sources could have introduced more counter-discourses or grassroots narratives that challenge the hegemonic logics described herein. This absence is not accidental; it reflects both the structure of media power and the discursive marginalization that this study seeks to critique.

Third, the focus on language in news media limits the study's ability to speak to the material impacts of discourse on schools, teachers, and students. While CDA is a powerful tool for tracing ideology through language, it does not measure the real-world

consequences of discursive shifts, such as teacher attrition, student well-being, or changes in curriculum content. Further research would be needed to connect these representational dynamics to concrete educational outcomes.

Fourth, and perhaps most importantly, this study underrepresents the role of race and coloniality in shaping the discourse of 'parental rights'. As noted at the close of the methodology chapter, Critical Race Theory (CRT) was not sufficiently foregrounded in the analytical framework. While the focus on gender and sexuality exposed important dynamics of control and privatization, the absence of CRT may inadvertently reproduce the very epistemic silencing this thesis critiques. The interlocking nature of race, gender, sexuality, and class cannot be overstated, particularly in a settler colonial state like Canada where whiteness and heteronormativity remain central to the construction of "normal" families, "objective" teachers, and "neutral" knowledge.

Future Directions and Recommendations:

This study opens several important avenues for continued inquiry. Most urgently, future research should center Critical Race Theory (CRT) in the analysis of the 'parental rights' movement in Canada. As Butler (2024) and Zelnick et al. (2023) note, the backlash against CRT is not a separate phenomenon from the anti-gender panic—it is part of the same ideological apparatus. Future research should interrogate how race, whiteness, and settler colonialism are mobilized in both explicit and subtle ways through media discourse. This includes analyzing how notions of 'parental rights' intersect with the cultural narratives of nationalism, religious liberty, and moral superiority, particularly when they are used to erase racialized perspectives on education.

There is also room for research that includes policy impact analysis, connecting the discursive trends mapped in this study with measurable outcomes in schools, such as shifts in policy, curriculum content, or student mental health. Mixed-method approaches that combine CDA with interviews, ethnographic observation, or surveys with educators, students, and parents could produce a richer account of how discourse materializes in practice.

Further research should explore how resistance discourses are articulated across media, social movements, and classrooms. While this study focused on dominant discourses in mainstream media, future work could examine the counter-hegemonic narratives offered by grassroots groups, student protests, educator unions, and alternative media outlets that support inclusive and democratic education.

Finally, a trend that was noticed while working through the corpus was that CBC and The Globe and Mail exhibited spikes in publication frequency tied to catalytic events—such as New Brunswick's Policy 713, Alberta's government-led restrictions on gender-inclusive education, and Saskatchewan Premier Scott Moe's invocation of the Notwithstanding Clause. In contrast, The National Post, the outlet most aligned with neoliberal and neoconservative ideology, maintained a steady cadence of coverage. Rather than responding reactively to news events, The National Post appeared to engage in an ongoing ideological project, positioning gender and education not as momentary 'controversies' but as a continuous cultural battleground. This shows a need for future research into media temporality and agenda-setting: how the pacing and frequency of discourse production shape public perception and sustain moral panic over time. Tracking these rhythms across

media publications can help us better understand the strategic architecture of culture war narratives, and the persistent framing of gender, race, and public education as ideological threats in need of containment.

Significance and Contribution

This study is not just an analysis: it is an intervention. At a moment when public education is being redefined through the language of care, neutrality, and parental control, this work reveals the deeper logics embedded within those discourses. It shows how mainstream media, regardless of political leaning, often reproduces neoliberal and neoconservative narratives that privilege parental authority, sideline student voice, and recast teachers as ideological threats rather than ethical professionals. These discourses are not benign, they are active instruments in the erosion of the public good.

To leave such patterns unchallenged is to concede the very purpose of public education. This research insists that we must pay attention not only to policy but to the words that shape it, the stories that frame teachers as overreachers, gender as contagion, and education as a marketplace of values rather than a collective endeavor for justice. This thesis has shown how language does more than reflect reality; it builds it. And if language can build walls of exclusion, it can also be used to tear them down.

I want to iterate that the Critical Discourse Analysis of this study is not done out of a disdain toward the mainstream media in question, nor toward the journalists, many of whom have answered the call to confront injustice and shed light on emergent threats to equity. To paraphrase Butler (2024): to be critical is not to be hateful, but rather is an act of love, because you dare to dream there can be better. Dominant discourse is often not

intentionally perpetuated, but functions as a hegemonic force of invisibility, normalized, repeated, and rendered natural through language and structure. In my biased view, this is a much more apt conceptualization of the boogeyman: not a monster that hides in closets or lesson plans, but a spectral force that shapes who can be seen, who can speak, and who is rendered illegible. Except the imposing force of hegemony is not 'out to get you,' no it is existent to preserve what already exists. By naming it, we refuse its power. By analyzing it, we reclaim the possibility of public education rooted in justice, plurality, and care. This study is, above all, a call to imagine differently.

The recursive methodology used here, moving between Discourse and discourse, between theory and lived example, models a way of doing research that is dialogical, reflexive, and grounded in the political urgency of the moment. Drawing from thinkers such as Freire, Foucault, Butler, and Giroux, this work resists the siloing of identity from power. Instead, it offers a framework for understanding how the privatization of public schooling is not simply an economic shift, but an ontological one, reshaping who counts, whose voices matter, and what truths are allowed to circulate.

But this work cannot end here. The findings call for renewed commitment to critical pedagogy, to public dialogue, and to the defense of education as a site of democratic possibility. We must challenge the false neutrality of "each side has a point." We must call out the misuse of the Charter as a weapon of exclusion. We must refuse the sanitization of public discourse that casts bigotry as opinion and surveillance as safety.

While this study focused on the discourse of CBC, National Post, and The Globe and Mail, the language is currently being used in education policy itself. This language as seen

within active policy in Saskatchewan, New Brunswick, and Alberta, and being used by politicians in Manitoba, Ontario, and Federally, is language that actively oppresses and dehumanizes our own citizens. As Freire (1970) puts forward: to be oppressed is to be dehumanized, but to oppress is to be un-human, and thus it is all our civil duty duty to name this violence for what it is and to resist it in all its forms. If public education is to remain a space of democratic formation and ethical becoming, then we must fight for it, not only in policy, but in language, in media, in classrooms, and in ourselves. This study aims to be as both critique and invitation: to imagine otherwise, to speak boldly, and to teach as if freedom is still possible.

To educators, scholars, journalists, and all those who care about the future of public education: the time for passive observation has passed. If the ‘parental rights’ movement is a Trojan Horse, then we must name it as such and decide what we will do now that it’s inside the gates. Public education can still be reclaimed, but only if we recognize that language is not peripheral to resistance—it is the resistance.

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