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Parental attitudes to the Australian anti-bullying *Safe Schools* program: a critical discourse analysis

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Abstract

LGBTIQ children and adolescents experience disproportionate levels of bullying. *Safe Schools,* an Australian anti-bullying program, has recently been a site of public debate, with parents and their imagined concerns being central to the debate. This study investigated how parents construct gender, sexuality, and bullying, in relation to *Safe Schools*. Utilising Critical Discourse Analysis, we analysed 11 parent interviews and identified four broad discursive themes: heterosexual anxiety, transhysteria, the contested ecology of bullying, and resistance. Many parents feared that children will be harmed mentally and sexually by exposure to the program, and that bullying is an isolated phenomenon. These attitudes serve a social function of maintaining heterosexual and cisgender hegemony, and a psychic function of disavowing the fluid nature of subjectivity. There was also evidence of resistance to these attitudes, with many contending that *Safe Schools* is necessary, due to bullying being viewed as a social phenomenon informed by homophobia and transphobia. Hostility towards transgender people was notable amongst parents. The discourses identified in this research highlight the strength of current anxieties around children and sexual subjectivity and how they function to undermine the lives of LGBTIQ people, including children who would benefit most from a meaningful implementation of *Safe Schools*.

Keywords Bullying · Sexuality · Gender · Children · Discourse analysis · Safe schools

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1 Introduction

Across Western countries, homophobic and transphobic attitudes are an issue in schools. In Europe, a survey of 93,079 LGBTI people found that 38% of all participants and 44% of the gay participants reported experiencing regular harassment when they were at school (European Union Agency For Fundamental Rights 2014). Similarly, a study of 305 pre-kindergarten through 12th grade teachers in the US reported that just under half of the respondents held at least one negative attitude toward the LGBTI community (Hall and Rodgers 2019). In Australia, a survey of more than 3000 LGBTIQ youth found that over 80 percent had experienced some form of abuse at school (Hillier et al. 2019). *Safe Schools* is an Australian government funded program designed to address high levels of distress in LGBTIQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer) youth, by making schools more inclusive. *Safe Schools* provides training materials, resources, and other support to help principals, teachers, and school communities support students to reach their full potential. In response to this program, there has been controversy in the media, and both opposition and support at a community level. Advocates for *Safe Schools* argue that the program is necessary because general anti-bullying measures do not improve psychosocial outcomes for LGBTIQ youth. Conservative detractors of the program argue that *Safe Schools* is designed to corrupt children with sexual perversion, whilst also socially engineering their identity to be gay or transgender. The imagined threat posed to parental authority by the program is frequently harnessed in such arguments. As yet, parents themselves have not been the subject of in-depth inquiry around this issue. This research contends that it is important to explore parental attitudes to *Safe Schools*, as they occupy an important site of influence where children, schools, media, and exposure to advocacy converge. Parents are also representatives of broader society and their testimonies will help us understand broader attitudes towards LGBTIQ communities.

1.1 Homophobia and transphobia in Australia

Attitudes to homosexuality have improved in Australia since the 1990s (Kelley 2001). LGBTIQ people can recognise their identity and come out sooner than in previous generations (Drasin et al. 2008). Caution in overstating change, however, seems warranted when considering modern discrimination. Overt discrimination is now less socially acceptable, causing covert discrimination to flourish (Marchiondoet al. 2018). Covert discrimination includes exclusion, harassment, jokes, slights, insults, incivility, and muted forms of disrespect, and is just as damaging to its targets (Jones et al. 2016). For the LGBTIQ community, examples include using incorrect pronouns for a transgender person, comments such as “that’s so gay”, intrusive questions about genitals, requesting that a gay person does not “act gay” or forcing a child, against their wishes, to dress in a gender normative way (Nadal et al. 2011). As such, covert discrimination can seriously demean LGBTIQ people.

Beyond covert discrimination, overt discrimination is still common. The largest survey of LGBTIQ respondents in Australia, the *Speaking Out* report, detailed LGBTIQ abuse in Queensland. Fifty-three percent of participants reported abuse based upon sexuality or gender within the previous two years (Robinson and Berman 2010). Verbal abuse, spitting, offensive gestures, threats of physical violence, and physical assault were most common. Sexual assault was found to be more common amongst queer people, with 3% of participants reporting sexual assault (Robinson and Berman 2010), compared with 0.3% of the broader population (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2018). Similarly, a 2008 survey of Victorian LGBTIQ respondents found that nearly 85% had been subjected to homophobic or transphobic abuse while alone, and nearly 90% when in a group or couple (Leonard et al. 2008). Many did not report these incidents due to fear of experiencing discrimination from the authorities (Leonard et al. 2008). Given that there is underreporting of hate crimes experienced by queer people (Dick 2009; Hill and Willoughby 2005), it is concerning to consider the full scope of the problem. It also raises the question of what kind of harm is caused by such abuse, especially for more marginalised members of the queer community.

1.2 Queer Youth

Queer youth are one such group experiencing magnified harm, with bullying a common site of abuse. Bullying involves intent to harm, behaviours causing physical or psychological damage, repetition, and a power imbalance (Monks and Smith 2010). In Australia, bullying is a problem amongst all children, leading to poor outcomes for mental health, socio-emotional wellbeing, and behaviour (Fitzpatrick and Bussey 2016). An ecological systems framework argues that bullying is associated with events in a child's microsystem (family, peers, teachers), mesosystem (interaction between microsystem elements), exosystem (media or neighbourhood), macroystem (cultural norms), and chronosystem (socio-historical experiences) (Álvarez-García et al. 2015). From this perspective, bullying of LGBTIQ youth occurs due to multidimensional and structural factors, such as prejudice in the family and amongst peers, isolation at school, teachers' attitudes, bystander behaviour, along with broader heterosexist norms (Hong and Garbarino 2012). For LGBTIQ young people, bullying is a socially complex issue.

The impact of bullying on queer children is significant. Minority stress theory explains this harm, positing that frequent exposure to prejudice causes physical and mental health deterioration (Meyer 2003). One study surveyed 1032 school students from grades 9–12 and found that perceived discrimination amongst LGBTIQ youth accounted for an increase in depression, self-harm risk, and suicidal ideation (Almeida, Johnson, Corliss, Molnar, and Azrael 2009). In Australia, analyses of data from 572 LGBTIQ people aged 18–25 found that perceived stigma and homophobic physical abuse were associated with higher levels of distress, drug dependence, suicidality and a lifetime suicide attempt (Lea et al. 2014). Furthermore, Australian transgender youth experience more abuse and suicide attempts than cisgender queer youth (Jones and Hillier 2013). This suggests that minority stress is greater

for transgender people. The deleterious impact of prejudice on the lives of LGBTIQ youth is striking. It poses a challenge for those wanting to address the ecological nature of this issue.

1.3 The *Safe Schools* anti-bullying program

Anti-bullying measures have the potential to address the structural nature of bullying. When considering that queer youth still experience disproportionate levels of mental illness, suicidality, substance abuse and poorer educational outcomes (Lea et al. 2014), it seems that general measures are inadequate. This may be because these measures conceptualise bullying as an individual problem, not a social problem (Walton 2004). Furthermore, within an ecological understanding of bullying, family constitutes a unique factor for LGBTIQ people. Unlike other minorities, family is much less likely to share or affirm queer identity at home (Law 2017). This can very seriously limit supportive spaces in a young queer person's life. Aside from being necessary for this reason, specific LGBTIQ inclusiveness programs are effective. Research has suggested that schools with rules and expectations around LGBTIQ inclusion offset the risk of mental health issues amongst queer youth. Queer students at schools without such rules show more evidence of depression, anxiety and obsessive–compulsive features (Sandfort, Bos, Collier, and Metselaar 2010). Beyond policy and rules, student engagement is also effective. During a pre-test/post-test control group design, it was found that after attending a discussion panel of LGBTIQ speakers, participants reported lower anti-gay bias scores (Span 2011). Furthermore, students involved in gay straight alliances reported greater confidence in their identity, and increased academic performance (Lee 2001). These studies support interventions at levels including policy, engagement between schools and students, as well as at a peer support level. These are all fundamental aspects of *Safe Schools*.

Safe Schools Coalition is the only specific LGBTIQ anti-bullying program in Australia. It started in 2010 in Victoria, before a federally funded national rollout in 2014 (Safe Schools Coalition Australia 2016b). Rather than narrowly focusing on anti-bullying, *Safe Schools* takes a "whole of school" approach. It addresses the school level, classroom level, and individual level. This addresses bullying in a non-stigmatising fashion that is consistent with an ecological framework (Pearce et al. 2011). As such, *Safe Schools* is designed to create a positive and inclusive culture, which in turn reduces bullying (Alcorn 2016). It involves teacher training, resource provision,and supports gay-straight alliance formation (Nicholas 2016). *Safe Schools* training explores the impact of homophobia on students and educates about gender being on a continuum, rather than in a binary (Law 2017). A resource called *All of Us* was developed to compliment the program. It features the personal stories of LGBTIQ young people, promotes positive language, discusses how to establish safety, heterosexism, and how to be an ally. It also includes empathic exercises which ask students to imagine scenarios that commonly impact upon queer students. *All of Us* was developed by experts and was independently reviewed as being age-appropriate (Law 2017).

1.4 Attitudes to safe schools

Despite appearing to engage best-practice, *Safe Schools* advocates have been criticised for expressing benevolent prejudice. Anti-bullying discourse tends to focus on poor psychosocial outcomes of bullying for LGBTIQ youth (Formby 2015). As a consequence, it is argued that these young people become discursively positioned as vulnerable, fragile and "at-risk", which renders their strengths invisible (Ellis 2007). LGBTIQ young people and mental illness are also conflated, positioning them as patients and sufferers (Ellis 2008), yet queer adolescents defy this logic. In a study looking at abuse and suicidality of Australian transgender youth, many participants responded to discrimination with activism, self-affirming strategies, and high hopes for transforming the world (Jones and Hillier 2013).

In contrast to this benevolent prejudice, hostile attitudes to *Safe Schools* are striking. This hostility has been characterised as a moral panic (Law 2017; Rodwell 2016). Moral panic involves widespread moral alarm and anxiety about perceived deviance, particularly about youth (Ungar 2001). Editorial cartoonist Bill Leak (2016a, b) was a salient figure in this moral panic. He presented *Safe Schools* as a program designed to corrupt children with sexual perversity whilst undermining parental authority. He illustrated classroom scenes where fetish gimps were portrayed as teachers, subjecting children and even parents to penis tucking classes, bondage, and sadomasochistic practices. The intent to inspire parental disgust with *Safe Schools* is clear in such illustrations. Leak has been identified by Law (2017) as part of an overwhelming conservative media backlash against *Safe Schools* published in the *Australian* newspaper in particular. The impact of this moral panic was so widely felt within the Australian queer community that News Corp, which publishes the *Australian*, was banned from sponsoring Victoria's premier queer festival, Midsumma (Hawthorne 2016).

Social engineering was another concern within this moral panic. Australian Senators critical of *Safe Schools* believe the program "[indoctrinates children] with a radical political and social agenda", and that it does so when "[young kids are] being told their gender is not defined by their genitalia and only they will know if they are a boy or a girl" (Kelly 2016). These attitudes are imbued with fear about children becoming gay, transgender and politicised, which is assumed to be worrisome for parents. It also conflates ideology with queer identity, which constructs LGBTIQ existence as debatable. Parental concern is the intended target of these arguments.

1.5 Parents and safe schools

By harnessing the imagined concerns of parents, *Safe Schools*' detractors have hindered the program's efforts. Since its inception, more than 500 public, private, and Catholic schools have voluntarily signed on (Alcorn 2016). Despite this apparent success, a review of *Safe Schools* was ordered, with the program being restricted to high schools, and parental consent mandated (Rhodes, Nicholas, Jones, and Rawlings 2016). Seeking parental consent may defeat the purpose of *Safe Schools* as families can be a site of heterosexism, homophobia, and transphobia (Boulay, Yeung,

Leung, and Burns 2014). In more hostile homes, there are higher rates of queer children being disowned and becoming homeless (Boulay et al. 2014). It is hard to imagine that prejudiced parents would consent to their children participating. Furthermore, *Safe Schools* could be undermined by the moderating effect of obtaining parental consent, and the bias inherent in actively consented students (Shaw et al. 2015).

2 Rationale and aims

Parents occupy a significant nexus of influence where children accessing this program, schools, the media, and advocates for and against the program coalesce. Exploring this nexus of influence by examining parental attitudes could be helpful in advocating for LGBTIQ youth. Parents will therefore be interviewed in this study in order to better understand their attitudes. This will highlight which parental anxieties actually exist, and allow for a strategic response to these anxieties. Furthermore, understanding parental attitudes to *Safe Schools* creates an opportunity for anti-bullying programs to respond to harmful discourses while also avoiding the reproduction of benevolent forms of prejudice. Ultimately, it is hoped that a more nuanced understanding of this issue will contribute to knowledge about the way gender, sexuality, and young people are understood in Australian society.

3 Methodology

3.1 Epistemology

This research is informed by a social constructionist epistemology (Willig 2013). The primary focus is how parents discuss LGBTIQ issues and bullying, with *Safe Schools* providing a focal point for discussion. A qualitative, discourse analysis methodology was chosen as it allowed us to understand the ways parents speak about these matters. When parents spoke about *Safe Schools*, they were engaging in social negotiation, providing information about current available ways of speaking about bullying, gender and sexuality. Foucault's (1972) notion of discourse was central, where broad social discourses, which are imbued with power, permeate our conversations. Discourse describes how language is used to achieve interactional objectives within specific socio-historical contexts. Our task was to locate and discuss the broad social discourses around *Safe Schools,* LGBTIQ issues, and bullying that were evident in interviews with Australian parents of school aged children.

3.2 Researcher position statement

It is important for researchers to acknowledge their socio-cultural contexts, and to reflect on how their positioning influences research design and methods (Willig 2013). My (First Author) interest in *Safe Schools* stems from my own history.

I am a queer woman who grew up in a homophobic family while attending Catholic schools. I believe that *Safe Schools* would have benefited me as an adolescent. Being born in 1986, I was subjected to homophobia at the peak of the AIDS crisis and beyond. In other words, homohysteria informed my environment throughout my development. I have been acutely aware of my bias throughout this research. I (second author), am a heterosexual middle-class white male. Being from a majority social group I have rarely needed to reflect on my sexuality, and as such it was necessary to reflect on my bias throughout the research.

3.3 Theoretical perspective

Queer theory informs this study's analysis. Foucault's *A History of Sexuality* (1978) influenced queer theory. Foucault (1978) charts the creation of the homosexual by postulating a "repressive hypothesis." The homosexual was positioned as a naturally occurring category, inferior and in opposition to the naturalised, non-deviant, heterosexual subject. Identification occurred, such that homosexual subjects who named themselves as such emerged. Expanding upon this, Butler (1990) asserts that social constructionists tend to separate sex, gender, desire and sexuality, when they are mutually constitutive. Genders that are intelligible maintain a sense of coherence between these categories. Furthermore, Butler (1990) argues that gender is performative and requires repetition of acts and gestures. This creates the sense of an essential identity, despite being constructed and sustained through discourses and bodily signification. Sexuality and gender, for Foucault and Butler, are not stable. They are socially constructed concepts embedded in discourse and power.

Based upon these concepts, queer theory unpacks ideas about identity and normalcy. The word "queer" is adopted to continually invoke its history in shaming and controlling subjects (Butler 1993). For queer theorists, heterosexuality and homosexuality are not innate identities. They exist in a socially constructed binary that is intelligible at specific points of history (Seidman 1994). Queer theory's strength is therefore exploring identity as fluid, indeterminate, and relational (Jagose 1996). It investigates seemingly indisputable concepts around sex, gender, and sexuality by analysing the power structures and discourses that perpetuate them (Turner 2000). It questions the political implications of calling upon sexual identity categories. Instead, queer theory takes an anti-assimilationist approach, rejecting the liberal notion that queer people are similar to others, instead embracing the power of difference (Duggan 2001).

This research is also influenced by Butler's (1997a) contention that it is impossible to split the psyche and social relations. As such, psychoanalysis also informs this research. Psychoanalysis is a theory of personality organisation and development originating with Freud. A detailed account is beyond the scope of this paper, but in essence, Freud (1915) asserts that the unconscious includes desires, memories, and mental processes that are inaccessible to the conscious mind, influencing thoughts, feelings and behaviours. Anxiety occurs when conflicting demands are placed upon the ego, which mediates the superego (sense of social mores), and id (instinctual

urges) (Freud 1927). Defence mechanisms such as repression and projection are employed to manage this anxiety.

Homophobia is illuminated by a queer psychoanalysis. Butler (1997a) proposes that heterosexual development is premised upon foreclosure of homosexual desire. As a consequence, "unlived possibilities" cannot be acknowledged nor mourned. This creates melancholia, a perpetual unresolved grief which is denied. For Butler (1997a), melancholia is integral to heterosexuality, overlapping with gender. For example, Butler (1997a) describes a heterosexual boy's subject formation in the rejection of femininity. The more he defends masculinity, the more intense his melancholy. From this perspective, prohibition of homosexuality and what it means for a person's internal experience (and how they project this) is essential in understanding homophobia.

3.4 Methods

Semi-structured interviews organised discussions of participants' attitudes. This ensured that research aims were addressed consistently, whilst providing participants space to raise unexpected ideas (Galletta 2013). Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) was employed to identify discourses in the data. CDA addresses how discourses (re) produce and challenge dominance (van Dijk 1993).

3.5 Materials and procedure

3.5.1 Participant recruitment

This research project was subject to approval from Victoria University's Ethics Committee. It has been assessed by the Committee as meeting the requirements of the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) 'National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007)'. Participants in this research project participated with their informed consent (signed consent form). Eleven parents of school-aged children, two who insisted upon being interviewed together, were recruited with a purposive sampling methodology, with their demographics noted in Table 1.

In order to sample a diverse range of opinions on *Safe Schools*, an advertising flyer was posted in Facebook groups about *Safe Schools*, general parenting, LGBTIQ parenting, and Christian parenting. This ensured we sampled a broad range of parental attitudes. Participants were recruited until it was found that theoretical saturation was approached due to relative absence of new discourses.

3.5.2 Data analysis

Interviews were conducted in public locations convenient for participants. For example, participant 1 suggested her local cafe. Limits to confidentiality in public settings were explained to participants. Skype was utilised for participants who could not meet face-to-face. The interview schedule consisted of 8 open-ended

Table 1 Demographic information by participant

Participant	Age	Gender	LGBTIQ	SES	Location	Interview Medium	Attitude to *Safe Schools*
1	30s	Cisgender woman	Yes	Medium	Suburban Melbourne	Face-to-face	For
2	40s	Cisgender woman	No	Low	Outer suburban Melbourne	Face-to-face	Against
3	50s	Cisgender man	No	Low	Regional Victoria	Face-to-face with participant 4	Against
4	50s	Cisgender woman	No	Low	Regional Victoria	Face-to-face with participant 3	Against
5	60s	Cisgender man	No	Low	Regional Victoria	Skype	For
6	40s	Cisgender woman	No	Medium	Regional Victoria	Face-to-face	For
7	30s	Cisgender woman	No	Low	Suburban Melbourne	Face-to-face	Against
8	40s	Cisgender man	Yes	Medium	Inner city Melbourne	Face-to-face	For
9	30s	Cisgender woman	Yes	Medium	Suburban Melbourne	Skype	For
10	40s	Cisgender woman	No	Medium	Suburban Sydney	Skype	Against
11	50s	Cisgender woman	Yes	Low	Suburban Melbourne	Face-to-face	For

questions relating to *Safe Schools*, and demographics. The first author transcribed the interviews to aid analysis. Pseudonyms were used to protect participants' confidentiality. A CDA of the transcripts was conducted. CDA concerns itself with how power and inequality are (re)produced through language (Blommaert and Bulcaen 2000). Many approaches are possible (van Dijk 1993). McGregor's (2003) CDA framework was utilised in this study. Initially this framework calls for reading the data uncritically, before rereading the data in a more critical fashion, and finally engaging in "topicalisation." Topicalisation involved identifying overall discursive themes, and for the data within these themes, noting who was positioned as powerful (or disempowered), omissions, presuppositions, insinuations, connotations, as well as tone.

Member checks were utilised throughout. Unclear information was clarified with participants during interviews and on 3 occasions during analysis, while emerging codes and discourses were discussed by the authors, and explored in the first author's research journal. Negative case analysis was engaged to account for seemingly contradictory data, for example, supporters of *Safe Schools* who expressed prejudice. Referential adequacy was ensured by revising raw data after codes were developed, in order to ensure that codes were strongly grounded in the data.

4 Findings and discussion

Analysis of interview data revealed 4 broad discourses about *Safe Schools*; heterosexual anxiety, transhysteria, the contested ecology of bullying, and resistance (see Fig. 1). These broad discursive themes are constituted by more specific discourses as follows.

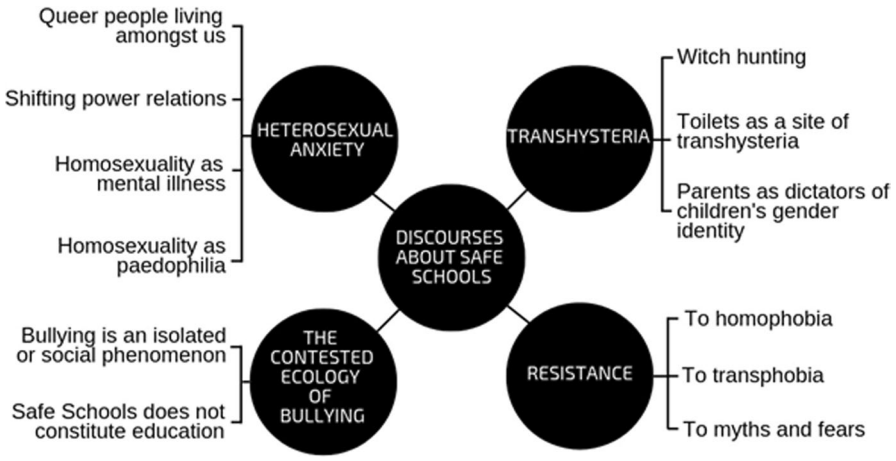

Fig. 1 Breakdown of discourses identified in interviews with participants

4.1 Heterosexual anxiety

In interviews with parents about *Safe Schools*, heterosexual anxiety, which included some aspects of homohysteria (Anderson 2010), was notable.

4.1.1 Queer people living amongst us

At the crux of homophobia was an anxiety about homosexuals. In particular, heterosexual anxiety related to queer people living amongst them. Participant 9's daughter Beth was discriminated against at a school Mother's Day stall due to her parents being queer. Much like Participant 1, Beth also absorbed a projection of heterosexual anxiety around family structure, despite being 6 years old.

> 'Cause Beth's already said stuff about like, she wants to be the same and not have two mums. … I mean we had Beth at school not even allowed to get a Mother's Day present last year. Two Mother's Day presents.

Even when lesbian parents are not physically present, simply being reminded of non-heteronormative families by a child buying two gifts was enough to elicit anxiety. The anxiety caused by a challenge to discourses around what constitutes a family, however seemingly innocuous, seemed to cause conflict for the heterosexual person. They managed this conflict by punishing the child with exclusion so she was "not even allowed to get a Mother's Day present". This demonstrates the lengths people may go to in order to avoid consciously understanding that heteronormative ideology is fallible. For the melancholic heterosexual, their unconscious experience of foreclosed sexual possibilities is consciously expressed as aggression toward those representing fluidity (Butler 1997b). By aggressively displacing anxiety onto Beth, this had the unfortunate consequence of causing internalisation of the heterosexual's ego conflict. Beth assimilated hegemonic discourses around what constitutes a family, or "sameness," within her superego.

4.1.2 Shifting power relations

Perceived shifts in power relations constituted another key aspect of heterosexual anxiety. This seemed to replace the witch hunting characteristic of homohysteria (Anderson 2010). Participants described encounters with out-homosexuals, which made witch hunting unnecessary. Some participants were affronted by their lack of shame. They commonly identified social change as a problem. Participant 4 explained this in relation to a friend's friend who now identifies as gay.

> Okay, she's gay, that's fine, but you don't have to tell me. Its almost like it's an honour thing. Well this is exciting. This is what society is saying now, is that it's okay. I think that's the problem with the *Safe Schools* thing is. It's little things like that.

Participant 3 agreed that homosexuality "is almost too… acceptable." He disliked that homosexual identity is a "badge of honour." Participant 10 was also scornful

of expressive homosexuality and said, "I'm heterosexual but I don't go around yelling out that I'm heterosexual." The existence of open homosexuals was viewed as defiant. The implication was that there is an unwarranted challenge to heterosexual power by homosexuals. Furthermore, implicit in their scorn of open homosexuality was a desire for homosexuals to become closeted, ashamed, and subordinated. This would allow for heterosexuals to avoid the threat that open homosexuality poses to their ego. That is, a reminder of foreclosed sexual possibilities (Butler 1997b). Expressing desire for homosexual oppression defended against this disavowed sexuality.

Despite implicit acknowledgement of homosexual oppression, these parents expressed the feeling of oppression as heterosexuals. Participant 10 felt oppressed, censored, and discriminated against. The existence of *Safe Schools* was central to this feeling.

> Well, if they're gonna introduce this *Safe Schools* program, I want a heterosexual program. I want another *Safe Schools* program too, on human development and procreation and how babies are made and that can be introduced as well. Why are they discriminating?

Participant 4 expressed a similar idea after discussing businesses who were successfully sued for refusing service to homosexual couples.

> Um, you know, so we just. Christians, white, you know, Christians are more of a minority now than ever. And we're discriminated against. We're not allowed to say, you know, I need to be careful of what I say at work.

Participant 3 agreed, saying that as a "physically able-bodied, heterosexual, white Anglo-Saxon male, I am probably the most discriminated against person now… And why is it the straight ones, straightness seems to be a minority?" Participant 3 positioned himself as an oppressed minority in response to open homosexuality. There is a denial of his continued power in a heterosexist society and in turn, a denial of the continued existence of homophobia (Case, Hensley, and Anderson 2014). Similarly, Participant 10 demanded "a heterosexual program" despite living in a heteronormative world, where procreation is discursively positioned as natural and non-deviant (Peterson 2013). This emphatic expression of being oppressed as heterosexuals, whilst implying knowledge of their own power by positioning homosexuals as defiant, is also a reaction formation. By attempting to convince themselves that they are oppressed, the impact of their homophobia on homosexuals can be denied. Their own fear of what homosexuality means in relation to their own sexuality can also be denied.

4.1.3 Homosexuality as mental illness

This fantasy of homosexuality as oppressive extended to a fantasy that imagined homosexuality as a contagious mental illness. Children were positioned as being at risk from infection. Participant 4, for example, was concerned about the children of an acquaintance being exposed to their mother's homosexuality. She said,

"These poor kids are gonna grow up so mixed up. And screwed up, If that's the right word to use." *Safe Schools* was also positioned as a medium for mental illness to spread amongst children. Participant 4 was worried about "the psychological impact on our kids. What is that doing to them? It's a big worry." Similarly, Participant 10 says that long term consequences of *Safe Schools* include children growing up and experiencing "loss of identity, depression, ah, mental illness, um, all of these things that could happen because of you know, confusion and not fitting in." Participant 2 compared students on the receiving end of *Safe Schools* to patients, as though sexual orientation is a medical matter. When asked who should deliver *Safe Schools*, she suggested.

> A sexologist, a psychologist. Someone who has the skills and the background to actually guide them to deliver stuff. Rather than a maths teacher or their humanities teacher or whoever it is giving it. And it also gives it a bit more, I don't know, weight to what's being delivered as well.

By positioning queerness as something in need of containment by medical personnel, heterosexuality is naturalised while homosexuality is positioned as pathological. Homosexuality cannot be contained by boundaries of the human body or mind and is therefore infectious. This lack of stability and containment is imagined as posing danger to innocent, contained, sterile and stable heterosexual victims. Pathologising homosexuality in this way can be understood as an aggressive projection (Sussal 1998). It is one that defends against the heterosexual considering that their sexual subjectivity is neither sterile nor stable. It is interesting that unlike during the AIDS crisis, it is mental illness rather than disease that is the symbol for this construction. Perhaps this speaks to current stigma around mental illness (Link, Phelan, and Sullivan 2018). Furthermore, perhaps it is fair to say that heteronormativity is more comparable to a "disease" than homosexuality. Much like a pandemic, heteronormativity is widespread, virulent, and spreads powerfully (Jackson 2006). Instead of proliferating at a cellular level, transmission occurs at a discursive level (Jackson 2006).

4.1.4 Homosexuality as paedophilia

Homosexuality was not only conflated with mental illness, but also with paedophilia. Both homosexuals and *Safe Schools* were imagined as predators out to corrupt children with adult sexuality, sexually violate children, and to take their "innocence". Participant 2, for example, heard a myth that sex toys were brought into classrooms as part of *Safe Schools*.

> And that's what got me, um, fired up about it. 'Cause I went, oh my goodness, why would you? If they're bringing marital aids into the classroom, there's a reason why you're not allowed in those shops until you're 18. They're not for kids. So why are we bringing adult concepts into a minor's space? Yeah.

When asked about her overall opinion of *Safe Schools*, Participant 10, who is a teacher, immediately makes the association between *Safe Schools* and paedophilia.

> My opinion is that, um, as paedophiles, you know get caught and jailed and whatever. Right. We are teaching. We're taking the innocence of. We're being forced to teach things against our morals, against our beliefs, against our values, our faith.

She believes that later on, people will witness repercussions of *Safe Schools,* saying things about the program such as "Oh you know we've got this child. This guy's grown into, You know, he has become, um, you know, a criminal. And this one's raped. And this one's that."

Participant 3 concurs, saying, "Yeah. Be careful what handle you're grabbing." as if children cannot possibly avoid molestation amongst gay men. He describes the introduction of *Safe Schools* "like getting the fox to look after the chickens." Participant 3 explains that on the internet he has seen a "P" for paedophile added to the end of LGBTIQ. Queer people are imagined as embracing paedophilia.

By conflating homosexuality and paedophilia, homosexuals are subordinated as deviants in a way that is considered particularly abhorrent. Children are also framed as pure, innocent, and untainted by the complexities of adulthood. This allows for disregard of children's integrity instead of addressing actual child abuse. This is because an innocence and purity discourse ignores the full complexity of children's experiences. In effect, it conceals the pervasive everyday threat posed to children's integrity by the heterosexual institution of the nuclear family. This institution is positioned as protecting children from threats that might undermine their subjectivity. Yet, according to Okin (1997), the nuclear family is critiqued for shaping subjectivity with unquestioned patriarchal authority, compulsory heterosexuality, normative ideals of gender, domestic violence, as well as assimilating children into the economic sphere. This then becomes invisible in the face of concern around imaginary paedophile homosexuals. This discourse also shows a repressed, anxious and titillated fascination with "monstrous" or uninhibited sexuality, the kind where one might not have to "be careful what handle you're grabbing." Expressing concern for children provides a socially acceptable discursive vehicle to explore such sexual imagery for the melancholic heterosexual.

4.2 Transhysteria

Whilst heterosexual anxiety is significant, the prejudice faced by transgender people was particularly strong amongst participants. Transhysteria describes these interrelated discourses. Hysteria is an apt description, as it was when Anderson (2010) described homohysteria, due to the prominence of witch hunting.

4.2.1 Witch hunting

Panic around the presence of transgender people appeared to cause significant angst. Parents were anxious about their children being read as transgender and anticipated witch hunting. Participant 1's daughter's school was an early adopter of an inclusive uniform policy. Pants were to be avoided, lest a child be interpreted as trans.

> When my daughter was getting [pants] and her friends wanted them, The friends parents were saying things like, "That's only for trans students" or "I don't think you should get that until you find out how many normal students start wearing those pants"

Cisgender children are explicitly positioned as "normal" and transgender children as deviant. Notions of gender in this situation are so rigid that even pants are a symbol of risk. The fear of a child being read as transgender belies the stigma and even danger in being identified as trans. The example of pants demonstrates that clothing can elicit psychic anxiety about a child's gender identity. Clothing is not only a site to discipline or express gender, it is also a site where it can be repressed. Ego conflict is not just intangible, it is also corporeal (Grosz 1994).

4.2.2 Toilets as a site of transhysteria

Although transhysteria clearly has potential to occur in any everyday setting, toilets emerged as a key site of hysteria. Participant 7 holds concerns about the potential for predation if all-gender toilets are provided at schools, saying that, "Well, I'm actually concerned about the toilet issue… I'm really worried." When asked who would be harmed as a consequence of toilets being inclusive, she says, "Girls more than boys, definitely… I can see that they would be easily picked on in the toilets, 'cause there's no teacher in there." When asked who would be harming girls in this situation, she responds

> Oh, boys… I'm not saying that boys might not get picked on either…. I can only relate it to what I know. That I was picked on a lot by boys and the girls toilet was my safe place to go. And so if I didn't have that, and I know other girls who didn't have that school, I don't know where they'd go.

Toilets are imagined as a site of safety and protection for innocent young women, with the accessibility of all-gender toilets imagined as a way for boys to bully young cisgender girls. Rather than the actual safety of transgender people being considered, the imagined threat to cisgender girls' innocence is emphasised. By consciously expressing a concern about safety, these participants are able to rationalise their discomfort in sharing public spaces with transgender people. It also displaces the real threat posed to children within their own homes (Okin 1997), as opposed to an imagined transgender sexual predator. This discourse of transgender sexual predators reproduces the idea of the sexual child and the hypersexual transgender woman that it disavows. Concern is a socially acceptable way to displace the pleasure of this reproduction, a dynamic which is described by Adler (2011). The pleasure may be expressed as being disturbed, but nonetheless it is a way to enact desire and fascination with childhood vulnerability and queer sex within the constraints of one's own cisgender and heterosexual existence. Perversion is not in the gender neutral toilet, but it may be in the psyche of the transhysteric.

4.2.3 Parents as dictators of children's gender identity

Control of children as an aspect of transhysteria was prominent when considering transgender children in particular. Transgender children, from a transhysteric viewpoint, could not be trusted to know their own identity. Parents were also positioned as omniscient dictators of identity. Participant 2, at first, expressed support of gender inclusive practices, even in an early learning setting.

> I also work in a child care centre as well. And they talk about, you know, should we teach, um, ah, gender neutral in child care? So from you know 2 onwards, should we say, um, should we take away all gender specific toys and just give them neutral toys?

Despite expressing some support for transgender children, there were limits to this.

> And I completely agree with Australian government rules is we don't start giving kids hormonal treatment for gender identity until they're 16. I think that's great. Let them be a kid all the way through there.

Transgender identity was compared to privileges that only adults are responsible to make decisions around. Risk and danger were therefore conflated with being trans. Participant 2 and Participant 10 justified paternalistic power over a child's sense of self as "sensible" by expressing concern around the imagined regrets that they associated with transitioning. Arguments about social engineering conflate danger, deception and transgender identity. In a way, transgender people are positioned as diseased and infectious in relation to children. Yet the assumption of cisgender identity may be best described as social engineering. It is a widespread and unquestioned form of mental manipulation coerced upon children's subjectivity (Jackson 2006). In this sense, blaming transgender people and their allies with this logic is a form of projection. It detracts from where the power, confusion and harm really lies.

4.3 The contested ecology of bullying

The way in which participants situate bullying is far from universal. It tends to reflect their beliefs around control and prejudice in relation to the LGBTIQ community.

4.3.1 Bullying is an isolated phenomenon

Some parents thought of bullying as a discrete phenomenon, not a social problem. For these participants, *Safe Schools* was positioned as niche, rather than something that addresses a systemic problem of homophobic and transphobic discrimination. They believe that it excludes others beyond the LGBTIQ community. Participant 7 is firm in her position about this.

> Okay. So, because it's only targeting a small amount of students, I believe. It's only. Because it's gonna be a special program for them, I think that

> the other students, or maybe teachers, I don't know, will be like, "Oh, why are they having something special and we're not?" That's how I see it… Because there's a lot of other diverse issues and cultures and communities in a school… Well, there'd be like multicultural groups that would miss out. Religious groups that would miss out.

There is also a belief that *Safe Schools* can only ever serve the LGBTIQ community. Participant 7 goes on to say,

> Ok, so if there are like, a small community of whatever it is about, if they push it onto other people, they gonna go, "We don't want this. You're gonna have to take it out." Because it's not for the whole school, it's only for a small community.

By saying that *Safe Schools* is "only for a small community" the widespread nature of homophobia and transphobia, as well as the people from which it stems, is denied and rendered invisible. Homophobia and transphobia would not exist if it were not for a heteronormative and cisnormative society perpetuating these beliefs. The idea that addressing bigotry does not serve bigots, only those being victimised by bigotry, suggests an unconscious understanding that power is held by those who are heterosexual and cisgender. Unconsciously, the homophobe or the transphobe does not want to relinquish this power and control. Denying the nature of that power allows one to justify holding onto it.

In contrast with Participant 7, supporters of LGBTIQ rights may be assumed to express a more systemic understanding of bullying. This is not necessarily the case. Participant 2 is one heterosexual parent who was eager to express her support for the LGBTIQ community, making comments such as, "the best thing we've done in Australia in years is voting yes on marriage equality." Regardless, Participant 2 asserted that *Safe Schools* is "failing" by excluding others. This demonstrates how unconscious and deeply held prejudice can be. She said.

> So, it's like, ok, well, let's teach anti-bullying just for one thing but you can bully on everyone else. 'Cause we're not spending the resources to target anything else. So just don't target these people but everybody else is fine.

Exclusion is all too familiar for those who benefit from it. It is an unpalatable to admit this and is best projected onto those who are ostracised themselves. In this instance there is a transference from the heterosexual and cisgender subject to the queer object of *Safe Schools*. It is comfortable to support the "victim class" of queer people when they are prepared to assimilate into heteronormative institutions like marriage, but a program wanting to denaturalise heterosexual and cisgender identity in young people is a discomfort best addressed with projection. Furthermore, by positioning *Safe Schools* as "targeted" rather than addressing a systemic issue, LGBTIQ discrimination is constructed as an isolated phenomenon that only concerns queer people. By viewing bullying as an isolated phenomenon, one does not have to address complicity in systemic forms of oppression.

4.3.2 Bullying is a social phenomenon

In contrast with this position, some parents embraced an understanding of the social order and its power relations as intertwined with education. Bullying, for these parents, reflects broader power relations. For Participant 9, bullying occurs when children assimilate harmful ideology in their environments. When her daughter is bullied for having gay parents, she does not blame the child who perpetrates the bullying. Instead, she considers what has informed that child's behaviour. When asked about what it is like for her daughter to be subjected to homophobia, she says, "I get sad about it. When I think like, what's that little boy hearing at home that's made him be a little bigot already? And like he's in whatever, grade 4." *Safe Schools* is understood as an intervention that will potentially interrupt this social transmission of inequality.

4.3.3 Safe Schools does not constitute education

In contrast with this ecological understanding of bullying, the construction of bullying as an isolated phenomenon seems to come hand-in-hand with a narrow positioning of education as distinct from the social realm. *Safe Schools* is framed as an unnecessary distraction from "real" education, rather than being seen as a set of values that can enhance the curriculum. Participant 10 is almost irate when expressing her view on this.

> It's concerning. I think the world's gone mad. I think the Department of Education needs. Oh my God. No wonder our education system is you know. We're concentrating on things that we shouldn't be. Like, we should be concentrating educating the children. Keeping things like that. Neutral.

Participant 7 naturalises the role gender plays in education. She says, "It's called an education institution. It should be an education institution. Not a gender identity institution. That's something I believe." For these parents, there is a fantasy of education as a rigid, pure set of tasks a child must learn in a linear fashion. To maintain this fantasy, parents must deny that education exists within a social order that demands rigid gender roles and heterosexuality from children. In this speech, the social order is rendered an invisible part of the educational system. What these parents fantasise about is arguably more of a "gender identity institution" than any *Safe Schools* signatory. There is a paradoxical subject position here, which is reminiscent of the way Žižek (1993) describes the psychodynamics of nationalism. Parents fear the theft of their enjoyment of power, while *Safe Schools* is imagined as an object experiencing unacceptable pleasure from the exact same power. The pure form of education and parenting about which they fantasise, is not something these parents ever possessed, as existing outside of the social order and its power relations is impossible.

4.4 Resistance

Unlike those parents who hold fantasies about "pure" education, parents with an awareness of the social order allow this to inform the ways in which they resist prejudice in their everyday lives.

4.4.1 To homophobia

Homophobia, for queer parents, calls for ongoing resistance in the fabric of their day to day lives. It is psychically managed in some instances with the adaptive defence mechanism of humour. When Participant 9's daughter, for example, was not allowed to buy two Mother's Day presents at the school Mother's Day stall, she responds to the integrity of her family being attacked with humour.

> I mean we had Beth at school not even allowed to get a Mother's Day present last year. Two Mother's Day presents… But we've fixed that. We've joined the school committee [laughing]. It's not what I want to be doing with my life. But I'm working on the Mother's Day stall this year [laughing] But I've got to… It was just some stupid old biddy from the school! Hopefully I work with them this year. I'll be extra lesbian that day!

Her wit highlights the absurdity of having to deign to respond to heterosexual anxiety as a queer parent. Her defiance in being "extra lesbian" in the face of homophobia demonstrates not only rebellion, it belies a uniquely queer way that humour is employed as an adaptive defence mechanism. It asserts superiority, self-worth, and defiance that casually deflects heterosexual attempts at denigration and projective identification.

Participant 8 also shows glimpses of this uniquely queer form of humour amidst an open discussion about sexuality with one of his children.

> If they ask me a question [about homosexuality], I certainly didn't, I didn't promote it one way or the other, because as you know, my view is that shouldn't be a thing. If they had questions about it. You know, like my eldest son had questions about, "I've got feelings for guys". And I was like, "Okay." Thinking, "YASS!" No, not really. Maybe some part of me! And he said, "I love looking at men's bodies, dadadadadadada" And I said "okay. Could you imagine ever doing anything with a guy?" And he said, "No not really". And it turns out that he just admired muscly men. That's okay, you know.

His humour, which celebrates the potential of having a gay son, inverts the assumption of compulsory heterosexuality in children (Rich 1980). Participant 8's open discussion with his son around a continuum of desire and appreciation does not foreclose the possibility of homosexual desire, which raises the question of how heterosexual subjectivity manifests when it is not predicated upon meloncholia (Butler 1997b). There is an acceptance of fluid object relations and

subjectivity. This acceptance indicates an interruption in intergenerational psychic reproduction of heterosexual anxiety.

4.4.2 To transphobia

Participant 6, a parent of a gender-questioning non-binary child, is acutely aware of the gender roles that exclude her daughter from everyday life. She identifies this system and challenges it amongst those who position her daughter as anomalous.

> A few weeks ago from a teacher who said, "Your daughter, There's a problem with your daughter. She won't line up in the girls or boys line" And I said to the teacher, I said, "Actually it's not her issue, it's yours. Why do you have to line?"… She doesn't care who she is, everyone else does.

The school is keen to position Sam as the "problem." In the face of this, Participant 6 clearly identifies systemic transphobia as the symptom. Remaining steadfast in this support however, is not easy in the face of overwhelming prejudice. When supporting her transgender daughter, Participant 6 demonstrates vigilance in avoiding the seductiveness of this fantasy. Resistance to prejudice is not always easily embraced, humorous or inspiring, it can be difficult and conflicting.

4.4.3 To myths and fear

Parents supportive of *Safe Schools* believed that few people actually know what the program entails. As such, they said it requires adamant defence in the face of myths and prejudice. Participant 8 feels very strongly about this in particular.

> I think parents have no idea what it's about. I think it's the media are, Christian groups and other groups have put out misinformation. And put out advertising campaigns that are total bullshit…And schools should be pushing what they're doing a lot harder.

Participant 6 agrees

> there's been so much bad press, but actually what is it and how does it um. And I think it became, I think it got caught up in the whole marriage equality, all that sort of debate.

For these parents, myths have prevented *Safe Schools* from being understood. The frustration these parents feel with this is palpable. The marriage plebiscite of 2017 is positioned as damaging to the cause of *Safe Schools*, whilst promotion is viewed as a potential solution. The extent of myths around *Safe Schools* appeared to reawaken their own experiences with prejudice. For Participant 8 as a gay man, who feels that it is "a pretty horrendous kind of concept" for gay children "thinking that they're the only ones." For Participant 6, it reawakens pain about her daughter "having [to] cry herself to sleep at night".

Parents believe that fear is preventing *Safe Schools* and its signatories from meaningfully committing to the program and promoting it. Participant 6 feels strongly

about fear being key. Participant 5 believes the next step is to "Pull the fear out of it, pull the ignorance out of it, pull the hate out of it, pull the politics out of it"

These parents recognised that without meaningfully engaging with *Safe Schools*, schools are lacking in courage and ceding power to detractors. The prejudiced other overwhelms schools with their imagined reactions, in this view. Schools are reified as institutions which do not challenge in such situations. They "like to think they're a Safe School" but whether "that actually means that they've done any of the work" is debatable. These parents want schools to move beyond this resistant and submissive position, as this is how they believe social change for LGBTIQ children will actually occur. In a way, this perspective leaves these supporters of *Safe Schools* experiencing transference with impotent *Safe Schools* signatories. It mirrors the experience of many queer children growing up in families which render them invisible or invalidated. Yet their willingness to confront fear, myths and prejudice, as well as the complexities intertwining the social and psychic experience of these phenomena, is undoubtedly meaningful for themselves, their children, and their broader social networks.

5 Limitations and further research

Although this research committed to a complex engagement with the discourses informing debate around *Safe Schools*, there are important limitations to acknowledge. Firstly, during recruitment it became apparent that people who volunteer to participate in such a study feel either strongly for or against *Safe Schools*. While there was a spectrum of more and less passionate participants in this sample, those who are unsure or neutral about *Safe Schools* have not been represented. Furthermore, due to the time constraints of this study, there was not enough opportunity to recruit transgender parents despite efforts made to do so. Given the importance exploring transhysteria, this is a perspective that would have strengthened the integrity of this study's findings.

In terms of more focused research on *Safe Schools*, measuring the impact upon both cisgender heterosexual, and LGBTIQ young people attending signatory schools would allow for consideration of its effectiveness. This seems important in a climate where parents have identified that tokenistic rather than meaningful engagement is a potential problem with *Safe Schools*. Ultimately, it is hoped that research in these areas will challenge the harmful discourses that lead to LGBTIQ young people experiencing bullying and poorer psychosocial health outcomes than their heterosexual and cisgender peers.

6 Conclusions

After considering the interrelated discursive constructions that emerged in discussions with parents, it is apparent that *Safe Schools* is a site where contemporary Australian expressions of homophobia, transphobia, and bullying are striking. These discourses are utilised to fervently reify structures of power and prejudice

that ultimately benefit those who are heterosexual and cisgender, whilst undermining the lives of LGBTIQ people, including children who would benefit most from a meaningful implementation of *Safe Schools*. The social realities constructed by these discourses ensure that homosexuality continues to be pathologised in the face of perceived shifts of power, with resulting heterosexual anxiety functioning to disavow the fluid nature of subjectivity. Transhysteria also emerged in this research as an especially salient site of prejudice. Bullying is also frequently positioned by those holding these views as an isolated phenomenon that is not embedded within broader structures of power, which allows measures such as *Safe Schools* to be positioned as exclusionary and unnecessary.

This research has also found, however, that parents, although often imagined within constructions of the nuclear family as heterosexual and heteronormative, do not all position *Safe Schools* as a threat to the social order. Nor do they all experience it as a threat to their psychic integrity. Despite being LGBTIQ or vocally supporting LGBTIQ causes, some parents reproduce the discourse that parents are dictators of children's gender identity while others admit experiencing homophobic and transphobic attitudes under the pervasive weight of social prejudice. The reproduction of transhysteric discourse is not limited to a conservative, heterosexual, cisgender people, which demonstrates its notable and unfortunate power at this point in Australian history.

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