

# Discursive Decoys: The Legitimation of Homophobia and Transphobia, Educational Neutrality, and Teacher Deprofessionalization in Mainstream Media’s Coverage of the “Parental Rights” Movement in Manitoba

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## **Abstract**

In the 2023 provincial election in Manitoba, the Progressive Conservative Party (PC) committed to enhancing “parental rights” in education if elected for a second term. This article examines the way the PCs’ campaign materials, surrounding media coverage, and responses from provincial public education partners legitimized the underlying discourses of the “parental rights” movement. This movement endorses the erasure and harm of 2SLGBTQIA+ students and community members, disregards and undermines children’s rights, and privileges the perspectives of particular parents. Using critical discourse analysis, we outline the way that homophobic and transphobic discourses are legitimized

through the coverage of this campaign. We also outline the ways that neutrality is weaponized in order to secure heteronormativity in schools. Moreover, we reveal the ways that teachers are villainized (criminalized) in order to advance “parental rights” claims. By putting discursive tactics on display, this article reveals the way that power is operationalized and secured.

*Keywords:* “parental rights”, critical discourse analysis, transphobia, homophobia, deprofessionalization

### Résumé

Lors des élections provinciales de 2023 au Manitoba, le Parti progressiste-conservateur (PC) s’est engagé à renforcer les « droits parentaux » en matière d’éducation s’il était élu pour un second mandat. Cet article examine la façon dont le matériel de campagne du PC, la couverture médiatique qui l’entoure et les réponses des partenaires provinciaux de l’éducation publique ont légitimé les discours sous-jacents du mouvement des « droits parentaux ». Ce mouvement soutient l’effacement et le mal fait aux étudiants et aux membres de la communauté 2ELGBTQI+, ne tient pas compte des droits des enfants, et privilégie le point de vue de certains parents. En utilisant l’analyse critique du discours, nous soulignons la façon dont les discours homophobes et transphobes sont légitimés par la couverture de cette campagne. Nous décrivons également la manière dont la neutralité est instrumentalisée afin de garantir l’hétéronormativité dans les écoles. De plus, nous révélons la façon dont les enseignants sont diabolisés (criminalisés) afin de faire valoir les “droits parentaux.” En exposant les tactiques discursives, cet article révèle la manière dont le pouvoir est opérationnalisé et assuré.

*Mots-clés:* “droits parentaux,” analyse critique du discours, transphobie, homophobie, déprofessionnalisation

## Introduction

Across Canada, groups claiming concern about the “sexualization and indoctrination” of children have organized demonstrations against Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity (SOGI) curriculum and against policies aimed at creating safe and inclusive schools. These groups (such as Action 4 Canada, Hands Off Our Kids, and Family Freedom) use “parental rights” as an alibi for their conservative anti-transgender activism (Mayo, 2021). They spread dangerous disinformation about curriculum, mobilize harmful stereotypes about 2SLGBTQIA+ people, and call teachers “groomers” and “pedophiles.” Rather than challenging the claims and tactics of these groups, in advance of the provincial election in 2023, the Manitoba Progressive Conservative (PC) party campaigned on a promise to “expand parental rights over what their children learn in school” (MacLean, 2023). Specifically, the PCs committed to ensuring parents had the right to: “be informed about curriculum; be involved in addressing bullying and other behavioural changes; advance notice about any presentations by people outside the school system; consent before any image of a child is made, shared or stored” (MacLean, 2023, para. 7). Like their provincial counterparts in Saskatchewan and New Brunswick, the PCs’ use of the term “parental rights” advanced disinformation about public school curriculum, policies, and educators, undermined human rights legislation, and privileged private values that do not align with established public values—namely those outlined in human rights legislation, the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (which Canada ratified in 1991). Moreover, in using a term that is implicated in a broader conservative anti-transgender movement (Mayo, 2021), the PCs’ election pledge endorsed the erasure and harm of 2SLGBTQIA+ students and community members (Goldberg et al., 2024), disregarded and undermined children’s rights (Ganshorn, 2024), and privileged the perspectives of particular parents (Mayo, 2021).

## Manitoba Mainstreaming

As educators in the province of Manitoba, we were very concerned about the public discourse and educational consequences that would result from the PCs’ turn to “parental rights” language. We were not just worried about the governing party’s use of the term; we worried about the way the mainstream media’s coverage of the PCs’ campaign nor-

malized and legitimized discourses within the “parental rights” movement. Through this article, we consider the way the PCs’ announcements and advertisements regarding “parental rights” in Manitoba, the subsequent media coverage of these announcements, and the responses made by opposition parties, federations, organizations, and associations in the province mobilized harmful narratives about 2SLGBTQIA+ students, teachers, and community members; promoted the fallacy that the existing heteronormative curriculum is “neutral”; and contributed to the villainization and deprofessionalization of teachers.

Our analysis moves beyond the PCs’ campaign materials to focus on the mainstream media’s coverage of this campaign and surrounding responses, as we want to reveal the ways that surrounding media legitimizes and endorses the underlying discourses of the “parental rights” movement. We focus on Manitoba for three reasons: (a) as educators in the province, we have witnessed the rise and impact of the “parental rights” movement over a very short period of time; (b) we feel that an in-depth study of one province will offer more insight into how the “parental rights” discourse is used to advance private values at the expense of established human rights; and (c) we feel that the case of Manitoba can reveal how culture wars are used to undermine and destabilize public education and advance/justify the privatization of a public good.

Our analysis of the “parental rights” movement in Manitoba exists within a broader context. In order to frame and contextualize our analysis, this article begins with a brief historical overview of the “parental rights” movement, including our understanding of the underlying motivations and consequences of this current iteration. Subsequently, we outline our rationale for employing critical discourse analysis to explore the coverage of the PCs’ use of “parental rights” language in the Manitoba provincial election. In addition, we outline the specific process and analytical terms that we used for our analysis. Finally, we articulate the findings of our analysis and the implications of these findings.

### **“Parental Rights” Are Wrong**

The PCs’ use of the term “parental rights” rests on the rhetorical tactic of *ofcourseness* (Rogers, 2004). That is, it invokes the ring of common sense—*of course parents should have rights in relation to their children*—in order to legitimize and validate a concept that does not exist. It is a “thought terminating cliché” that does not demand further questions

and clarifications about these rights (Woodrow, 2023). The term has historically been employed to promote private parental values in education and to challenge democratic humanist principles in public schools (Gutmann, 1987).

## **A Familiar Tactic**

Moves to secure “parental rights” in education are not new. Religion has motivated high-profile “parental rights” cases surrounding the teaching of evolution (*The State of Tennessee v. John Thomas Scopes*, commonly referred to as the Scopes Monkey Trial), mandatory schooling (*Wisconsin v. Yoder*), and reading materials that countered religious teachings (*Mozert v. Hawkins County Board of Education*) (Hornbeck, 2023). “Parental rights” language was also used by white parents to challenge the desegregation of schools in the United States (McRae, 2018). Although a more prevalent tactic in recent years, censorship of research-informed curriculum and book bans were used throughout the 20th century to remove materials from schools and libraries (Goncalves et al., 2024; Zimmerman, 2022). These book bans have often been motivated by individual parents and organized groups who are opposed to books, curriculum, and reading materials that challenge patriotic national narratives, recognize and celebrate 2SLGBTQIA+ people and themes, and include research-informed understandings of sex education.

While American examples may be more widely known, Canada has also witnessed highly publicized battles over the teaching of comprehensive sex education in K–12 schools (Bialystok, 2017). Undeniably, claims to parental authority in schooling have existed since the inception of mandatory schooling; however, several factors make this moment distinct. For instance, social media has amplified and mobilized “parental rights” claims alongside rampant disinformation about school curriculum and teaching practices. Moreover, current moves to secure “parental rights” in education are occurring in the shadow of a global pandemic that catalyzed anti-government rhetoric and assertions of individual rights and freedoms.

## **Parents Do Not, Children Do**

While “parental rights” may be a powerful idea, it is not one that is recognized in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms or other human rights legislation (Ganshorn, 2024). Parents do not hold unlimited rights over children; “the state regularly intervenes in the

lives of children in a wide range of cases—from child abuse (an admittedly extreme example) to compulsory school attendance policies, to the regulation of advertisements shown during children’s television programming” (Herriot et al., 2018, p. 708). If parents were to receive additional or special rights it would “diminish recognition of children as full rights-bearing members of our society” (Carter, 2008, p. 480). Children are not property of their parents, nor are they citizens in waiting; they are already rights holders (Vissing, 2023). Children’s rights are legally recognized in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. As a result, children have a right to an education that is truly public, an education that introduces them to values beyond those held by their parents (Shulman, 2014). Despite the lack of legal validity for “parental rights,” groups across Canada continue to use the term “as an important unifying strategy and to leverage the political and social capital that a universal claim for ‘parental rights’ might garner” (Nash & Browne, 2021, p. 81).

### **Privileging Particular Parents**

“Parental rights” rhetoric not only disregards legitimate children’s rights and human rights, but it also privileges the views of particular parents—that is, parental rights are not rights for all parents. “Parental rights” proponents use of the term “parents” is intended to distract “from their lack of respect for parents who want to raise their own children to be respectful of diversity” (Mayo, 2021, p. 373). Instead, they mean that some parents should control what everyone’s children should be learning:

The current debate about “parental rights” in schools is largely framed by political and religious conservatives who believe they have the right to near total control over what their children can and should learn in schools, which in turn gives them control over other children and parents in schools that don’t believe like them. (Hornbeck, 2023, p. 5)

It is a perceived authority that is used to shape public schooling practices, “where individual parental interests supersede those of students, state, or community” (Hornbeck, 2023, p. 2). Conservative strategists are using the veil of religious rights to limit the scope of conversations and censor curriculum in schools. However, religious rights have limits. When people have positioned private religious values above established public values,

the law has sided with 2SLGBTQIA+ rights. That is, the results of legal challenges based on religious rights claims have increasingly resulted in wins for 2SLGBTQIA+ rights (Short & MacDougall, 2021, p. 7). In the case of competing rights, protecting freedom of religion should not be grounded in the denial of 2SLGBTQIA+ rights (Short & MacDougall, 2021). People can expect respect of their private values up to the point that they infringe on the rights of others (Journell, 2018), and the marginalization, omission, and governing of gender and sexual identity is indeed an infringement on established rights.

## Theoretical Framework

In the current moment, “parental rights” are used to veil and validate homophobia and transphobia. It is “a trend of conservative antitransgender activism that, rather than being overt about its transphobia instead uses the distraction of enhanced respect for parents’ rights” to prevent transgender, nonbinary, and gender diverse students from obtaining rights (Mayo, 2021, p. 370). Nash and Browne (2021) describe this as a new form of heteroactivism that positions “monogamous, binary cis-gendered, coupled marriages as best for children and for society” (p. 74). In order to evade being labelled transphobic and homophobic, heteroactivists have learned not to overtly disparage 2SLGBTQIA+ people and instead to frame their concerns as issues of “parental rights,” state indoctrination, freedom of speech, freedom of religion, and childhood innocence (Nash & Browne, 2021). This movement weaponizes terms like “gender ideology” in order to stoke moral panic about comprehensive sex education and curriculum committed to recognizing 2SLGBTQIA+ lives (Butler, 2024). In using the label “gender ideology,” “parental rights” advocates are purposely veiling the way that normative discourses of gender and sexuality are both pervasive and political.

The parental consent policies that have emerged in response to these claims negate the rights of transgender and non-binary students, and consequently contravene our public values. These policies are intentionally repressive “not only of trans identity but of youth capacities to assess and reflect on gender normativity” (Mayo, 2021, p. 378). “Parental rights” legislation “endorses the invisibility and harm that LGBTQ+ families have historically experienced within the school system” (Goldberg et al. 2024, p. 227). Schools assume and enforce heteronormativity through school policies and practices, curriculum,

homophobic bullying, and social policing of gender and sexuality (Wilkison & Pearson, 2009). The result is that

queer, gay, lesbian, trans kids who are deprived of an education on sex, gender, and sexuality that would recognize and affirm their lives are, in a homophobic and transphobic world, left only with a heteronormative education, and compulsory one at that. (Butler, 2024, p. 105)

Anti-gender ideologues have used the phantasm of gender to create alarm about national security, the traditional family, indoctrination, childhood innocence, nature, and civilization itself (Butler, 2024). They collect fears under the label of gender in order to distract the populace from very real economic and ecological threats and to restore “a patriarchal dream order where a father is a father; a sex identity never changes; women, conceived as ‘born female at birth,’ resume their natural and moral positions within the household; and white people hold uncontested racial supremacy” (Butler, 2024, p. 14–15).

## Methodology

With this theoretical grounding and context in mind, we used critical discourse analysis (CDA) to examine provincial party announcements and advertisements regarding “parental rights” in Manitoba, the subsequent coverage of these announcements by mainstream media, and the responses made by opposition parties, federations, organizations, and associations in the province.

Critical discourse analysis operates from the premise that power is maintained through language (Fowler & Mountz, 2024). The purpose of CDA is to disrupt normalized understandings in order to reveal the operations of power at play (Rogers, 2004). The field of critical discourse analysis exists to elucidate social issues, unsettle hegemony, and expose the reproduction of dominance that is won through discourse—namely to reveal the way that language is manipulated to advance certain epistemological or ontological stances (Parker, 2019). While we do not follow his method precisely, our analysis is informed by Fairclough’s (2010, 2013) assertion that a systematic investigation of written texts can make veiled power dynamics visible. This analysis extends to both the content of communication and its form, examining what is said, how it is said, and what is omitted.

For this study, we chose three analytical themes that we felt were pertinent to our broader goal of exploring the ways that provincial political parties, mainstream media, and the five groups commonly referred to as the Manitoba public education partners<sup>1</sup> advanced and legitimized the underlying discourses of the “parental rights” movement. The three analytical themes included (1) language that promoted homophobic and transphobic discourses, (2) veiled heteronormativity through calls for neutrality, and (3) deprofessionalization of teachers in order to undermine faith in public education. We chose these themes as we wanted to place the operationalization of heteronormativity through discourse on display.

Our analysis included the official party platforms<sup>2</sup> and surrounding election materials of the three political parties that hold seats in the Manitoba Legislature (namely, the Liberals, New Democratic Party [NDP], and Progressive Conservatives). In addition, we looked at 33 articles and opinion/editorials from media outlets, specifically: CBC (11 articles), CTV (five), Global (three), the *Winnipeg Free Press* (eight), the *Winnipeg Sun* (four), and the *Brandon Sun* (two). Any article from these outlets that addressed the PCs’ election promises and/or the parental rights movement more broadly was included. We began our analysis of mainstream media in May 2023, when two school boards in Manitoba encountered calls to remove books that addressed sexuality and gender identity from their school libraries; however, the bulk of the mainstream media analysis we conducted included articles and editorials from August (seven articles) and September (12 articles), right before the provincial election. We included articles following the election if they involved discussions of “parental rights” in Manitoba; these included articles from January 2024 (one) and March 2024 (six). Beyond mainstream media, we also considered the responses made by the Manitoba public education partners. However, these responses were not directed toward the PCs’ election promises; rather, they were about book banning, “parental rights,” and safe schools.

The analysis occurred in three rounds. In round one, we used the three analytical themes to guide our analysis. That is, we looked for language in the campaign, news stories, editorials, and responses that mobilized and legitimized homophobia and trans-

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1 These five groups are: the Manitoba Association of Parent Councils, the Manitoba Association of School Business Officials, the Manitoba Association of School Superintendents, the Manitoba School Boards Association, and the Manitoba Teachers’ Society.

2 The PCs’ platform is no longer available online.

phobia, the myth of educational neutrality, and the deprofessionalization of educators. In round two, we created a separate list of terms, content, and inclusion of perspectives/voices we had noted in round one. For example, we started to note which articles put quotation marks around “parental rights,” how the protestors were described, and whether connections were made to the broader movement. We also started to note which articles mentioned children’s rights, specifically the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Finally, in this round, we also noted whose voices were included and excluded. In this way, round two included some critical content analysis rather than exclusively highlighting the use of language to uphold hegemonic discourses. With that said, we did use this examination of content to speak to the mobilization and legitimization of particular discourses. We felt that noting the particularities about who was granted space to speak, how people were described, and how articles were scaffolded was important, as it revealed the way that some articles that initially appeared critical of the “parental rights” movement also mobilized and legitimized the underlying discourses of the movement.<sup>3</sup> This highlights the importance of CDA and its potential to help elucidate the subtle and often invisible operation of power through the legitimization of particular discourses.

### **Campaigning on Fallacy and Hate**

In using the term “parental rights,” the PCs were tying themselves to the messaging of a broader movement. The term is loaded with historical context and meaning. It cannot be untethered from the connotations of its previous iterations, nor can it be severed from its use by protestors across North America who have used “parental rights” to advance homophobic and transphobic views, to secure heteronormativity, and to ensure the further erasure and dehumanization of 2SLGBTQIA+ people.

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3 There were several articles and opinion editorials that thoughtfully and critically challenged “parental rights,” but this article highlights the way mainstream media legitimized and endorsed particular discourses in its coverage. As such, we do not focus on the way articles challenged these discourses. Our objective is to reveal the way mainstream media, even in pieces that superficially appear critical, props up particular discourses.

As part of their campaign, the PCs promised that parents would be informed about curriculum.<sup>4</sup> Yet, the curriculum documents are all already freely available on the Manitoba Education Early Childhood Learning website, a department and website that the PCs oversaw as the official government at the time. Moreover, the Senior 1 and Senior 2 Physical Education/Health Education curriculum implementation documents include language about informing parents about potentially sensitive content: “For student learning outcomes related to the sub-strands [of GLO 5] Substance Use and Abuse Prevention and Human Sexuality, schools must seek parental involvement and provide a parental option prior to implementation” (Manitoba Education Citizenship and Youth, 2004, p. 15). In making this promise to inform parents about something they already have access to, the PCs were contributing to the narrative that something is being hidden from parents and that something nefarious is going on in K–12 classrooms. Fostering suspicion about public education and public school teachers is a longstanding tactic of neo-liberal and neoconservative reformers who seek to privatize public education (Ganshorn, 2024; Kumashiro, 2012; Schneider & Berkshire, 2021). Promises like this help fuel disinformation about curriculum, teachers, and schools. In 2023, more than 1,000 students were absent from one school division in Winnipeg as a result of a disinformation campaign that warned parents about the dissemination of sexually graphic materials in classrooms (Macintosh, 2023). These campaigns rely on the distrust of teachers and false information about the enactment of diversity and inclusion in schools. As a result, people lose faith in public schools and the broader project of privatization is advanced (Ganshorn, 2024).

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4 As stated on page 1, the PCs listed four parental rights they were seeking to add if elected: (1) the right to be informed about curriculum, (2) the right to be involved in addressing bullying and other behavioural changes, (3) the right to receive advance notice about any presentations by people outside the school system, and (4) the right to consent before any image of a child is made, shared, or stored (Gowriluk, 2023; MacLean, 2023). We are relying on CBC’s reporting of these promises from two separate articles, as the party platform is no longer available and this content is no longer listed on the Manitoba PCs’ website.

## Imprinting Transphobia and Homophobia

*Men decide, women nurture, and queers get back in the closet. That's the gender ideology these people want children to learn.*

- Shaker & Milton, 2023, para. 13

While we expected the mobilization of particular discourses in a campaign grounded in “parental rights,” we were less prepared for the ways in which the media coverage of this campaign would normalize, legitimize, and advance homophobia and transphobia. For example, some reporters referred to “parental rights” groups as “anti-LGBTQ protestors.” In using this term, without any critique, these news stories legitimize protesting someone’s right to exist. This mainstreams the dehumanization of 2SLGBTQIA+ people and validates views that undermine human rights. We open this section with this example in order to demonstrate how word choice, such as the seemingly simple description of a group of people in a news story (in this case, as “anti-LGBTQ”), carries broader messaging. Critical discourse analysis places these terms on display in order to reveal the hidden operationalization of power. This example also exposes the way that protestors try to use “parental rights” as an alibi for their homophobia and transphobia (Mayo, 2021); that is, they use their personal values, often tied to faith, as a justification for undermining 2SLGBTQIA+ rights. These protestors are not fighting for advanced rights for parents; they are fighting against 2SLGBTQIA+ rights. They are prioritizing personal values over established human rights.

## Perpetuating Panic About Pornography and Pedophilia

In many of the mainstream news accounts, journalists repeated (without critique, fact checking, or legal challenge) the claim that 2SLGBTQIA+ stories and resources were explicit or pornographic: “We must protect our children from sexual grooming and pedophilia. The sexualization agenda is robbing children of their innocence” (Kemp, 2023, para. 4). These claims rest on dangerous and harmful stereotypes of 2SLGBTQIA+ people as groomers and pedophiles. Moreover, they confuse/conflate discussions about sexuality with sexualization. When these claims are featured in a news story, they are mobilized.

The claims regarding pedophilia and pornographic materials were also left uncorrected in many news stories. A former school board trustee speaking about access to books in southern Manitoba public libraries stated that:

This is not a censorship issue. This is about having books that align with the Criminal Code of Canada..... This is about showing pornography to children, so I'm not taking the right away from anybody to read books, but I am upholding the laws. (Gowriluk, 2023, para. 18)

The claims that these books do not align with the criminal code, and that they are pornography, are patently false. Yet, this was not corrected anywhere in the article.

## Both Sides

The articles featured in this analysis not only platformed these outlandish claims, but they also did not challenge them. When there were challenges offered, they occurred in the latter half of the stories. That is, the heading and first half of the stories outlined the thoughts and feelings of those advocating for increased “parental rights” and censorship of resources and materials, but to see any evidence of those problematic claims being refuted, readers must make it all the way to the end of the piece—a less likely outcome. In this way, the scaffolding of the articles anchored the stories to the voices and claims of those advancing “parental rights.” In many articles, the voices of educational theorists, librarians, and politicians were only included in the latter half, which is notable because (a) people do not often read to the end of an article, and (b) it privileges the perspective shared first, and in doing so clouds the way people read the content that follows. In some cases, the voices of experts were captured by the generic term “critics.” For example, an editorial in the *Winnipeg Free Press* stated, “Critics of parent’s rights activism say forcing teachers to out LGBTTQ+ students to their parents may expose them to harm at home” (Samyn, 2023, para. 6). The “critics” in this case included the New Brunswick Association of School Psychologists and the Canadian Civil Liberties Association, among others. The use of the generic term “critics” positions their expertise as an opinion equal to that of those in the “parental rights” movement. Positioning “parental rights” as a both-sides issue devalues legal and professional responses to this movement and grants legitimacy to those exploiting this rhetoric. Yet, homophobia and transphobia are not legitimate positions, even when they are dressed up in parental or religious rights.

Beyond using a they said/they said structure, the articles also used language that granted both sides legitimacy, for example, “Groups supporting and opposing policies surrounding LGBTQ2 children in schools ended up at the legislature Wednesday afternoon” (Prentice, 2023, para. 1). It is unclear what policies would exist that oppose LGBTQ2 children in schools. The wording of this headline legitimizes opposition to existing human rights legislation and school division policies that protects the rights of 2SLGBTQIA+ students and families. CTV Winnipeg used the same both-sides language in their headline: “‘We can’t have that here in Manitoba’: Rallies speak out both for and against 2SLGBTQIA+ inclusion” (Holyk, 2023). Once again, the headline legitimized those “against 2SLGBTQIA+ inclusion,” ignoring that this stance defies human rights.

### **The Innocent Child**

Beyond platforming views that undermine human rights, mainstream news stories promoted the view that “parental rights” were not an issue of discrimination or hate by including quotes from advocates that positioned this as an issue of protecting children—yet another attempted alibi for transphobia and homophobia: “We actually do support the LGBTQ what we don’t support is our children being indoctrinated at school, being taught and shown things they shouldn’t be taught and shown until they are more mature” (Prentice, 2023, para. 11). This quote re-entrenches the idea that any discussion of 2SLGBTQIA+ lives is an affront to childhood innocence and that these discussions are innately perverse. Moreover, it positions sexuality as an intruder, something external to school and children (Gilbert, 2014). This quote exemplifies a heteroactivist trope that rests on the image of a vulnerable heteronormative child who requires protection (Nash & Brown, 2021). Under the guise of protecting children, heteronormativity itself is secured.

In yet another attempt to exonerate oneself from the label of hate and transphobia, a protester quoted in a CTV article exploited this heteroactivist trope: “We don’t hate any kids, we don’t hate any trans kids, nothing. But you can’t do that to little kids with those books” (Holyk, 2023, para. 7). This quote is tangled up in so many fraught discourses about children. First, it rests on long-ago challenged developmental discourses of children that disregard the ways that growth is contingent and recursive (Lesko, 2012; Vagle, 2012). Further, it exploits the image of an idealized innocent child that negates the varied ways in which children have been constructed throughout history and the lived reality

of many children (Tucker, 2023). Moreover, in suggesting children are robbed of their innocence, this statement ignores the very real harm 2SLGBTQIA+ children encounter in spaces that are hostile to them, that do not represent their stories and lived realities, and that do nothing to counter the discrimination they face within and beyond schools.

However, readers of this article would not hear about the experiences of 2SLGBTQIA+ children and youth in schools, as their voices were not included. Of the 33 articles, only 12 included 2SLGBTQIA+ voices at all. This included resource and support groups (Rainbow Resource, for example), lawyers for Pride groups, and 2SLGBTQIA+ family members. Only two of the articles included voices of 2SLGBTQIA+ youth. In this way, the voices of those claiming protection of children were left to “speak for” children. Moreover, 2SLGBTQIA+ youth’s perspectives surrounding harm and erasure in schools were disregarded.

## Hate in Hiding

Unsurprisingly, the opinion pieces/editorials included more blatant challenges of the motives, claims, and consequences of the “parental rights” movement. Lett (2023), writing in the *Winnipeg Free Press*, stated, “The term ‘parental rights’ is a green light for aggrieved activists to demean and devalue the lives of other people with different views of sexuality and gender. It is hate masquerading as a motherhood issue” (para. 22). This recognition of hate was refreshing after countless articles that failed to identify the rhetoric of the movement as such. Certainly, some may claim that journalists are expected to maintain “objectivity,” despite the impossibility of this. Regardless, claims of “objectivity” do not absolve journalists of their responsibility to recognize and address hate speech, nor to challenge demonstrably false claims that contribute to the spread of hate. If a journalist would hesitate to quote blatantly racist claims, the same should apply to homophobic and transphobic claims.

We noted that, beyond journalists, Wab Kinew, then-leader of the opposition and now the current premier of Manitoba, called “parental rights” rhetoric “divisive,” a “wedge issue,” and a “dog whistle,” rather than calling it “hate.” By choosing these benign terms, homophobia and transphobia are legitimized, human rights legislation is undermined and weakened, and the humanity of 2SLGBTQIA+ people is made debatable. Rather than playing politics, Kinew could have named and challenged statements made

by “parental rights” advocates that promote hate and/or that privilege private (heteroactivist) values over established human rights and children’s rights.

Only 10 of the 33 articles connected the PCs’ promise to enhance “parental rights” to the broader movement in the United States. By not revealing this connection, the articles ignore the way the term “parental rights” is already laden with meaning and connotations. They give the term an innocence. Yet, Moms for Liberty, a group championing “parental rights” in the United States, has been labelled an extremist group by the Southern Poverty Law Center (Hornbeck, 2023). The “parental rights” movement has motivated legislation that has censored curriculum and promoted further erasure of 2SLGBTQIA+ students in schools (Goldberg et al., 2024). This movement has relied on harmful tactics that claim transgender women are predators or that surgeries are being performed on non-consenting minors (Mayo, 2021). By ignoring these connections, these news articles endorsed the alibi of “parental rights” as an issue of religion and family values and ignored the way it advances hate and undermines human rights.

Rather than challenging the underlying discourses and connections in the “parental rights” movement, news sources often repeated the claim that schools should remain neutral. In this case, neutrality equates to heteronormativity and further erasure of 2SLGBTQIA+ lives.

### **Imprinting Neutrality**

*Parents expect public schools to provide students with a solid education in the academic basics. When schools depart from their primary mission, they risk destroying trust with the communities they serve.*

- Zwaagstra, 2023, para. 9

“Parental rights” advocates use two tactics to undermine human rights and to advance their values as neutral. First, they label human rights as “ideological” in order to position them as sinister and coercive (Butler, 2024). Heteroactivists rely on terms like “indoctrination” and “ideology,” rather than using claims of deviance, grooming, and pedophilia, so that they are not labelled as homophobic and transphobic (Nash & Browne, 2021). Second, they advance the view that the status quo—in this case, heteronormativity—is

neutral or apolitical (Butler, 2024; Nash & Browne, 2021). The Zwaagstra (2023) quote above is emblematic of this tactic of neutrality, using the terms “academic basics” and “primary mission.” Yet, academic basics are already political:

Values are embedded in every aspect of the curriculum: content, teaching/ learning methods and assessment/evaluation strategies are selected using criteria that reflect and embody particular value positions, whether teachers recognize it or not. Moreover, values are promoted just as much by what is omitted from the curriculum as by what is included. (Hodson, 2009, p. 4)

This is also evident in the use of terms like “back to basics” or “fundamentals,” or the suggestion that “schools need to ‘return to’ their focus on reading, writing and arithmetic” (Macintosh, 2024, para. 17). The suggestion of neutrality, basics, or primary mission ignores all the ways that these terms are all political; they all support and promote particular truths and values. As Ross and Vinson (2013) remind us:

There is a misguided and unfortunate tendency in our society to believe that activities that strengthen or maintain the status quo are neutral or at least non-political, while activities that critique or challenge the status quo are “political” and inappropriate. (p. 23)

Using terms like “gender ideology,” the anti-gender ideology movement positions itself as neutral while actively trying to entrench patriarchal order (Butler, 2024). In this way, the political force of the status quo is veiled: “Framing the school and classroom as ‘neutral’ is an approach that refuses to acknowledge the well-established sexual/gendered power relations in play in embedding heteronormativity into the classroom” (Nash & Browne, 2021, p. 83). By labelling the status quo “neutral,” heteroactivists seek to veil the way heteronormativity is operationalized and secured through schooling. Despite superficial changes to curriculum and policy, “schooling in Canada continues to be inordinately influenced by heterosexism, gender policing, and the erasure or pathologization of both queerness and queer bodies” (Herriot et al., 2018, p. 699). “Back to basics” and “neutrality” rhetoric is exploited to hide the politics of current schooling practices and ensure that schooling persists within the current ideological framing.

Despite the impossibility of neutrality, “parental rights” advocates charge teachers with “ideological teaching” and “brainwashing” in order to villainize teachers who pro-

mote inclusion and who interrogate societal norms, like gender. The practice of blaming teachers rests on a long history of deprofessionalization.

### **Imprinting Deprofessionalization**

*You raised them and nurtured them. So who better than you—as parents—to know what's best for your child as you send them off to school?*

- Stefanson, 2023

The PCs' announcements about "parental rights," and the subsequent news coverage of these announcements, were all dripping with deprofessionalization. Teaching has historically been deprofessionalized, constructed as "natural," conflated with femininity, and understood as an extension of the unpaid work of motherhood (D'Amico, 2019; Grumet, 1988; Pawlewicz, 2020; Pitzer, 2008; Santoro, 2021). The "naturalization" of teaching as women's work has contributed to the devaluing of the profession and has resulted in disrespect for teachers as professionals (Pitzer, 2008). This devaluing and distrust of teacher professionalism has resulted in increased auditing, surveillance, and standardization of teachers' work (Ball, 2003, 2016; Giroux, 2013; Smyth, 2012). Resting on this history of distrust and deprofessionalization, teachers are being accused of ideological teaching, brainwashing, and worse. A toxic mix of patriarchy, misogyny, and a long history of teacher bashing makes these claims publicly palatable. This deprofessionalization was evident in the PCs' claim that "parents know best," in their insinuation that teachers are concealing classroom practices, in the libelous claims about grooming and pedophilia used by people within the "parental rights" movement, and in the utter lack of teacher voices included in news stories about "parental rights."

### **Parents Know Best**

Throughout the campaign, the PCs constantly repeated the term "parents know best." While parents certainly may know their children, they do not know: (a) the curriculum, (b) current pedagogical practices, (c) school policies, and (d) public school values (among many other things about education). Teachers, as professionals, do. In repeating

this phrase, the PCs undermined the professionalism of teachers who have research-informed understandings of curriculum and pedagogy. It is hard to imagine “parents know best” being applied against the advice of medical or legal professionals. The historical deprofessionalization of teachers has licensed “parents know best” attitudes.

Moreover, parents are not a universal group. While a parent may know their own child best, they do not know what is best for other people’s children or for public education more broadly. “Parents know best” rhetoric undermines the role of public schools in advancing public values. There is no way for schools to represent the values of all parents, particularly as some private parental values simply do not align with public values. This phrase permits the values of some parents to overwhelm what all students learn (Hornbeck, 2023; Mayo, 2021). Moreover, this phrase undermines children’s rights to learn and grow beyond the image/inings of their parents.

## Covering Curriculum

As discussed earlier, one of the PCs’ promises was to inform parents about curriculum. This promise rests on the tactic of naming a problem in order to create a problem. The curriculum is already easily accessible, and due to increased use of email, school apps, and classroom platforms, parents have unprecedented access to teachers and classroom practices. The PCs’ promise to inform parents about the curriculum purposely ignored these factors and fueled the idea that teachers are hiding their classroom practices from parents. It fed the rhetoric used within the “parental rights” movement about ideological teachers who are brainwashing students. Following the election, the interim leader of the PCs, Wayne Ewasko, added more fuel to this idea, stating, “Why would we want to hide various topics away from parents and guardians when we’re trying...to get more and more parents and guardians involved in their kids’ education?” (Canadian Press, 2024, para. 3). This statement exploited two rhetorical tools: first, the suggestion that curriculum and school practices are hidden from parents and, second, the suggestion that any resistance to pronoun policies, which undermine student privacy, translates to an effort to discourage parental involvement.

The insinuation that teachers are concealing classroom practices is intentional. Teacher blame is a longstanding tactic of the privatization playbook; privatization rests on the vilification of teachers (Kumashiro, 2012). Those interested in undermining faith

in public education have generated a moral panic about teachers and “gender ideology” in order to advance privatization through “parental choice” (Ganshorn, 2024). Increased parental choice appeases those who want an increased marketplace for education and those who seek educational choices that align with their private values. “Parental rights” and other exploits of the culture wars have been used to encourage doubt in the public system and to rationalize more privatization. This relies on demonizing teachers.

### **Libelous Claims**

Beyond claims of ideological brainwashing, educators have also been called groomers and pedophiles by people within the “parental rights” movement. These claims were repeated throughout mainstream media. CBC included the accusation that librarians are pedophiles (Gowriluk, 2023); Global News included the stated mission of the 1 Million March for Children as being “to safeguard children from gender ideology teachings, sexual indoctrination, and exposure to explicit sexual content” (Prentice, 2023, para. 4); and the *Winnipeg Sun* repeated the claim that schools were promoting “LGBTQ ideology” and that books in the library could lead to “sexual grooming and pedophilia” (Baxter, 2023, para. 2). Even when mainstream news placed these claims in quotes, or included countering perspectives, they did not challenge the legal legitimacy of these claims or make clear that they are false.

More surprising was our examination of the materials released by the Manitoba Public Education Partners, inclusive of the Manitoba Teachers’ Society (MTS), which did not directly challenge these claims. While the MTS stated that the rhetoric used by “parental rights” advocates can be “physically and emotionally dangerous for members of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community and their allies” (Martindale, 2024, para. 2), and that the MTS has a “responsibility to stand in opposition to individuals or organizations whose beliefs or ideologies put anyone at risk of harassment, bullying and outright violence” (Martindale, 2024, para. 4), it did not once address the fact that its members were being libelously called “groomers” or “pedophiles.” This is slander, and it needs to be named as such in order to challenge the flippancy with which these harmful labels are being used.

## **Lack of Teacher Voices**

Throughout all of these materials, teachers were constantly talked about without being spoken to. False claims were being made about what was happening in school classrooms, but the teachers who could clearly articulate the expectations of professional practices and counter some of the disinformation were not included. Overall, these news articles talked about teaching and education, but only a few of the articles in all of those examined included the voices of currently practicing teachers. In this way, teachers were unable to defend themselves from harmful claims, to clarify classroom practice, and to demonstrate how their practices align with curriculum, school policy, and human rights legislation.

## **Discussion**

Throughout this study, we have used critical discourse analysis to put the discourses underlying the “parental rights” movement on display. We have revealed how the coverage of the “parental rights” movement has secured heteronormative understandings of gender and sexuality and of the patriarchal idea of the traditional family. This article raises questions about the way the mainstream media’s coverage of the PCs’ election promises to enhance “parental rights” lent the concept legal legitimacy, veiled the existing enforcement of heteronormativity of schools, subverted established human rights, and advanced libelous claims about public school teachers. By mainstreaming the ideas of the “parental rights” movement, this coverage risks undermining faith in public education and advancing privatization through demands for increased “choice” in education, as parents push for schools that align with their values. Additionally, as these ideas are publicly promoted in mainstream news sources, it can also result in public schools deferring to and accommodating private values that undermine established human rights, children’s rights, and the broader purpose of public education. Although public school curriculum in Manitoba is written in alignment with Manitoba Human Rights Code and the Charter of Rights (Manitoba Education and Early Childhood Learning, 2018), the culture wars surrounding classrooms can have a chilling impact on educators (Anderson, 2023). That is, as teachers feel increasingly under attack, they avoid including divisive concepts in their teaching. As a result, marginalized groups are further erased in public schools. In this way, public school curriculum is being censored by the demands of some parents.

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By placing elements of this movement and the subsequent media coverage on display, we seek to make readers more attuned to the subtleties of how societal discourses are secured. We also intend to challenge mainstream media to be more considerate in their coverage so as not to legitimize harmful discourses about 2SLGBTQIA+ people, reify heteronormativity, and sow doubt in public education. Moreover, we offer this analysis as a challenge to public education partners to challenge the intentions of “parental rights” advocates, to remind Manitobans of the role of public schools, and to stand up for enshrined human rights.

### Conclusion

*Schools have a responsibility to promote inclusivity and diversity...some parental values and beliefs may be harmful to children and society.*

- Mayo, as cited in Hornbeck, 2023, p. 8

Public schools have a responsibility to uphold established public values (Journell, 2018). This requires that public schools reject private values that do not align with human rights, children’s rights, or educational research. Rather than placating “parental rights” advocates, it’s imperative that politicians, public education partners, and mainstream media assert the rights of 2SLGBTQIA+ people. When they fail to do this, the broader pedagogy of their failure is that 2SLGBTQIA+ rights are not human rights.

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