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# Parents' perspectives on gender and sexuality diversity inclusion in the K-12 curriculum: appropriate or not?

Tania Ferfolja , Kate Manlik and Jacqueline Ullman 

School of Education, Western Sydney University, Sydney, Australia

## ABSTRACT

Recent years have witnessed growing acceptance of gender and sexuality diversity in Australia; yet, its inclusion in the school curriculum remains contentious. Despite evidence to the contrary, there is a commonly held belief that parents consider the inclusion of such topics inappropriate. In the light of this, this paper focuses on an analysis of three qualitative items from an Australian national survey of parents of children attending government-funded schools. Informed by the responses to these questions, we sought to better understand the concept of age-appropriateness present in the discourses deployed by a (minority) number of Australian parents who did not support gender and sexuality diversity-inclusivity in the curriculum. Thematic data analysis identified three key themes used by parents to warrant gender and sexuality diversity curriculum exclusion based on age inappropriateness: namely, inclusion is 'confusing'; children are too 'immature'; and children are too 'easily influenced'.

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## Introduction

Despite greater acceptance of gender and sexuality diversity in Australia, its inclusion in school curriculum remains politically contentious. This contention has been visible, historically, at the highest levels of government (Butson 2018, para. 1). Political interference alongside an orchestrated conservative media campaign to derail attempts at inclusion have triggered several public moral panics over the last two decades (Ferfolja and Ullman 2020; Thompson 2020), culminating in an institutional silence around gender and sexuality diversity in schools. Recently, there has been a shift in concern from political opposition and supposed parental apprehension about *sexuality* diversity in these moral panics to a hyper-fixation on *transgender* and *gender diverse* identities in schools, and the impact of associated knowledges on youth.

Moral panics about gender and sexuality diversity inclusion in schools rely on a questionable discourse that positions gender and sexuality diversity-related curriculum content as antithetical to parents' wishes for their child's education. Circulating dominant

**CONTACT** Tania Ferfolja  [t.ferfolja@westernsydney.edu.au](mailto:t.ferfolja@westernsydney.edu.au)

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discourses reinforce a commonly believed parent positionality that gender and sexuality diversity constitutes an ‘adult’ knowledge, and its inclusion in public school curriculum is inappropriate and capable of corrupting the innocence of children (Robinson 2013). Although the Australian national Health and Physical Education curriculum provides a broad directive for teachers to ‘affirm diversity in relation to sexuality and gender’ (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority 2022), educators often fear broaching topics related to gender and sexuality diversity – even in relationships and sexual health education – due to worry about potential backlash (Ezer et al. 2020).

This belief in parents’ resistances to inclusion, however, is not founded in, or supported by, evidence-based research. No large-scale Australian study has comprehensively examined what parents want in relation to the inclusion of gender and sexuality diversity in relationships and sexual health education. The mixed method research referred to in this paper is the first to address this gap in Australia (Ullman, Ferfolja, and Hobby 2022). The study’s survey, which drew on a nationally representative dataset and included both closed and open-ended response items, examined parents’ perceptions about the inclusion of gender and sexuality diversity-related content in public school<sup>1</sup> education from Kindergarten through to Year 12 – the final year of schooling in Australia. Top-level findings are outlined in the literature review below and illustrate that most parents *do* want inclusion.

This paper, however, focuses on qualitative responses to three open-ended survey items. These items provide data insight into how parents’ conceptualisation of age-in /appropriateness frames their positionality with respect to the in/exclusion of gender and sexuality diversity-related content in the school curriculum. Specifically, participants’ responses provide insight into the paper’s focus question: ‘how is the concept of age-appropriateness constituted in the discourses deployed by a (minority) number of Australian parents who do not support gender and sexuality diversity-inclusivity in the curriculum?’ Thematic data analysis identified three key themes: ‘inclusion as confusing’; ‘children as immature’; and ‘children as easily influenced’.

## Theoretical framework

Dominant western discourses of childhood have implications for children’s social positioning (Garlen 2019). Our use of ‘discourse’ here, draws on the work of Foucault (1978) and refers to ‘practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak’ (Foucault 1974 as cited in Ball 1990, 2). Discourses constitute who and what can be spoken about, and with what power. Dominant discourses have their base in social institutions and are neither fixed nor stable. They construct knowledges about individuals and communities and, as Paechter (2001, 43) articulates, ‘result in the prioritising of different forms of knowledge; change the power relations between discourses and the knowledge relations associated with them will change as well’. Subjectivities are constituted in and through discourse and people are encouraged to become ‘specific kinds of subjects’ depending on the discourses available to them; although subjects are able to resist power-knowledge regimes and re-articulate dominant discursive formations (Bacchi and Goodwin 2016, 70).

Western discourse constitutes childhood in binary opposition to adulthood (Faulkner 2010) and constructs this period as one of ‘innocence’ (Robinson 2013), ‘ignorance’, ‘powerlessness’, and non/a-sexuality (Bennett, Harden, and Anstey 2017). This

construction of childhood bestows adults with substantial power in the adult/child binary, retained through the censorship of certain knowledges. Knowledge is selectively released to children when they are considered 'mature enough'. This release is reflected in in/formal education, where Piagetian discursive approaches have encouraged the implementation of 'developmentally appropriate' practices for a supposedly universal child. These are based on children's apparent competencies as evidenced by 'their ability to pass through stages of cognitive, linguistic, social, emotional, moral and physical development' (Robinson and Jones Diaz 2006, 73). An additional overarching consideration is that discourses of childhood innocence are raced and classed (Garlen 2019), and 'innocence' (or the assumption of innocence) is not equally afforded to all children.

The intersection of childhood and developmentalist discourses renders particular knowledges age-inappropriate, including those related to issues of sex, sexuality, war, death, and other 'grown up' concepts (Robinson 2013). Adults actively seek to control children's exposure to information depending on the age/stage of the child, irrespective of the child's agency and potential ability to locate information through a variety of means. Content related to sex, sexuality, and sexual orientation, or which disrupts the normative binary gender status quo, is seen as inconsequential and potentially dangerous to the minds of young people (Cherrington, Cooper, and Shuker 2020). Of particular 'danger' in this respect is knowledge of gender and sexuality diverse subjects. Sexuality diverse subjects have been historically defined by their sexual practices, which do not align with those promoted by normalised (hetero)sexuality, and which are discursively constructed through medical, religious, and other institutional discourses as deviant, sick, predatory, and hypersexual. Gender diverse subjects, similarly, have been positioned as unnatural and perverse, and subjected to extensive medical and legal regulation. Thus, knowledge of these subjectivities is perceived as inappropriate for children.

Dominant discourses, perpetuated through social institutions, construct parents as the protectors of childhood; their parenting styles are policed and regulated under a social, moral and legal ethic to be so (Robinson 2013). Failure to adequately meet this obligation is punished (Foucault 1978). Thus, discourses of the 'good parent' construct the parent subject as one who shields the child from the real and imagined corruptions of the adult world. The 'good parent' does not discuss gender and sexuality diversity with young people other 'than what dominant socio-cultural discourses legitimate as appropriate' (Robinson 2013, 120; Martin 2009). The 'good parent' also sets boundaries around their child's gender expression and protects their body/mind not only from others but also from themselves as they are positioned as suggestible and non-agentic. As Faulkner (2010, 107) points out, '[t]he fear is that this "drawing of attention" to the (non-existent) sexuality of the child performatively constitutes the child as sexual'. Within this discursive framework, the 'good parent' is responsible for raising heterosexual and cisgender citizens who will provide a 'positive' contribution to society's fabric (Thompson 2020).

Discourses of childhood, developmentalism and the good parent have been mobilised by the 'culture of limitation' that is strongly present in Australia (Ferfolja and Ullman 2020), and were in dense circulation during this study's data collection period (Nov-Dec 2019). The culture of limitation is a messy politic that brings together neoconservative, neoliberal, colonial, patriarchal, fundamentally religious, and heteronormative discourses into the creation of a powerful dynamic. This dynamic incites moral panic around the inclusion of gender and sexuality diversity-related content in the curriculum, feeding on

adult fears about potential corruptions to, and loss of innocence in, childhood. In the public milieu, the culture of limitation draws on a performative (and supposedly representative), highly traditional parent subject. The seeming ubiquitous presence of this subject is created through repeated discursive reinforcement by conservative media, lobby groups, and political figures, and is thus perceived to represent the normative parent. Simultaneously, it reinforces the belief that good parents ‘who care about their kids’ are similarly resistant to the inclusion of gender and sexuality diversity-related content in school curriculum. These concepts inform this paper.

## Literature review

Little Australian research to date has focused directly on the notion of age-appropriate curriculum, particularly when used by parents to question or reject knowledges connected to gender and sexuality diversity. The following section, thus, draws on a combination of inter/national literature related to parents’ perspectives regarding relationships, sex and sexuality education and its intersections with the inclusion of gender and sexuality diversity-related content in school education.

### *Parents and gender and sexuality diversity inclusion in in/formal education*

Research on parents’ perspectives on relationships, sex and sexuality education demonstrates that many parents in Western contexts feel disposed towards the inclusion of comprehensive relationships and sexual health education in their child’s schooling (Peter et al. 2015; Eisenberg et al. 2008; Wood et al. 2021) and feel confident in schools’ ability to offer this education (Ollis, Harrison, and Richardson 2012). Many parents also support the inclusion of gender and sexuality diversity in this curriculum. For instance, a US-based research survey of 1,715 parents found 52% approved inclusion for elementary school students and 72% did so for secondary students (Barr et al. 2014). Similarly, Eisenberg et al. (2008), in another US-based study, found approximately two-thirds of respondents ( $n = 1605$ ) were supportive of sexual orientation inclusion in the curriculum. More recently, a Canadian national study, which used a random sample of 2,000 parents, found approximately 90% of parents surveyed supported the inclusion of sexual orientation and gender identity school-based sexual health education topics, with most suggesting introduction prior to the end of Year 8 (13–14 years-olds) (Wood et al. 2021).

In Australia, minimal research has been undertaken in relation to parents’ perspectives regarding curricular inclusion of gender and sexuality diversity-related topics; that which has been done demonstrates parental positivity towards such inclusions. For example, Macbeth, Weerakoon, and Sitharthan’s (2009) research on 177 Sydney-based parents found general support for the curriculum inclusion of ‘homosexuality’. Similarly, Moran and Van Leent’s research (2022) indicated that some Queensland parents considered sex, gender, and sexuality diversity an important element of their child’s primary school education.

Robinson, Smith, and Davies (2017) research involving 342 parents of primary school-aged children, found that parents wanted to protect their children’s innocence and shield them from adult knowledge that might be included in relationships and sexual health education. Although sexuality diversity was considered contentious, it was likewise

perceived as important subject matter. The authors identified an intersection between participant conservatism and religious beliefs, with some participants expressing the view that controversial subjects should be the educational remit of parents and families rather than educators (Robinson, Smith, and Davies 2017).

As Robinson, Smith, and Davies (2017) found, parents often use notions of age-appropriateness when discussing sex education and expressed concerns that their child was 'too young', positioning sexual knowledges as exclusively the domain of adults. This infantilisation of young people limits their access to good quality relationships and sexuality education, potentially leaving them unprepared, uninformed, and vulnerable to harm (Bennett, Harden, and Anstey 2017), even though they may be physically maturing and engaging in/with sexual experiences in different ways.

More recently, an Australian nationally representative study (Ullman, Ferfolja, and Hobby 2022) of 2093 parents of children attending public school education from kindergarten to Year 12 found that over 90% of parents wanted their children to receive general relationships and sexuality education, with nearly 82% of parents wanting gender and sexuality diversity included in relationships and sexuality education. The majority of parents suggested that this content inclusion should begin in Stage 3 (years 5 and 6 [10–12-year-olds]) or Stage 4 (years 7 and 8 [12–14-year-olds]) of schooling. One of the main reasons for inclusion was to decrease discrimination towards gender and sexuality diverse students.

Parents' limited opposition to a gender and sexuality diversity-inclusive curriculum, was due to their sense that it was not age-appropriate and that children were suggestible about these topics. These opposing parents were also likely to believe that faith leaders and parents were the most appropriate providers of relationships and sexual health education and that parents should have the right to remove their children from school-based relationships and sexual health education (Ullman, Hobby, and Ferfolja 2023). A closer analysis of the qualitative responses of the opposing parents, on which this current paper is built, is provided later in this paper.

### ***Age appropriateness***

Research in England within this space is illuminating. Bennett, Harden, and Anstey (2017) found contradictions between adults' desired and actual approach to sex education. They examined eight fathers' perceptions about, and experiences of, talking to their 10-year-old children about reproduction, puberty, and relationships. They found that although parents felt a responsibility to discuss such issues with their child, expressed confidence in doing so, and were even aware of their child's romantic relationships, seven of the eight fathers had not had conversations about relationships and sexuality with their offspring, positioning them as too young to be exposed to this information – in other words, such knowledge was deemed age-inappropriate.

Bennett, Harden, and Anstey (2017) study highlights the discrepancy between parents' assumptions about their child's knowledge and the child's reality, drawing attention to the power of discourses of childhood innocence. Importantly, some parents have 'difficulty acknowledging the[ir] child's sexuality' (Noone and Young 2010, 30), undoubtedly in part because of the challenge it presents to the discursive construction of childhood. Indeed, Martin (2009) found in the USA, that while mothers often discussed heterosexual

norms (e.g. marriage) with their young children, 'non-normative' sexualities were absent from conversations. When parents do discuss sex, they often speak about the negative (e.g. risk) more than the positive or pleasurable (Evans et al. 2020).

Furthermore, parents are often reactive in discussing sex/sexuality/gender with their children, deeming their child's 'readiness' for information only when they start asking questions. However, many young people do not feel comfortable speaking to their parents about these issues and, thus, this approach to information delivery is problematic (Hyde et al. 2010).

## Methods

This mixed-methods study sought to understand parents' attitudes towards, and desires for, gender and sexuality diversity-inclusive content in relationships and sexual health education. A survey provided a nationally-representative sample of Australian parents of children in public school in years K-12 ( $N = 2093$ ) (see Ullman, Ferfolja, and Hobby 2022). The research was approved by Western Sydney University's Human Research Ethics Committee (H12788) and written consent was obtained according to university's ethical protocols prior to survey commencement. Of relevance here are three open-ended items which were investigated to respond to this paper's central enquiry. These were as follows.

**Q1:** I would like the opportunity to make sure certain topics are discussed in the curriculum (please specify which topics)

**Q2:** I would like the opportunity to make sure certain topics are not discussed in the curriculum (please specify which topics)

**Q3:** I would like the opportunity to withdraw my child from all or certain areas of the Relationships and Sexual Health Education curriculum (please specify which areas)

The responses to these items were coded using the qualitative software package, NVivo (v.20). Before initiating coding, the three researchers discussed the kinds of responses that could be coded in relation to the key question for the purposes of this analysis. The coding phase involved an initial round of open coding (Saldaña 2013), conducted by KM, with particular attention to responses evoking discourses of age and in/appropriate information. Open codes included (for example): 'gender diversity as confusing', 'gender diversity as a choice', and 'gender diversity as an ideology (not science)'. These codes reflect explicit mentions of age/inappropriate information and implicit discussions around children being 'too young' to learn about certain topics. Once this initial round of open coding was complete, a meeting was held between the three authors, during which a refined coding frame was co-developed and cross-checked for trustworthiness (Nowell et al. 2017). Using this, one additional round of coding was completed by KM, which included a closer reading and re-coding of several descriptive themes (Saldaña 2013). Each question was coded in isolation to get a better sense of the relative number of parents who did or did not want their children learning about specific topics. The alignment of relative proportions of qualitative responses reflecting parental opposition with percentages of quantitative responses reflecting the same in previously published data from this study (Ullman,



Ferfolja, and Hobby 2022) provided further evidence of trustworthiness through data triangulation.

Across these three open-ended items, a range of between 56% and 38% of survey participants responded (Q1,  $n = 1163$  [55.6%]; Q2,  $n = 822$  [39.3%]; Q3,  $n = 794$  [37.9%]). Many of these participants expressed their support for a gender and sexuality diversity-inclusive curriculum, reflecting trends in the quantitative data (Ullman, Ferfolja, and Hobby 2022). Typical responses provided by these positively oriented parents included the view that inclusive education is vital to cultivating students' acceptance of gender and sexuality diverse individuals, as well as some students' self-acceptance of their own potential gender and sexuality diverse identities. Respondents acknowledged that curriculum inclusion could have broader social benefits. As one participant wrote, 'Knowledge is power and helps promote inclusion when we understand each other' (Age 38, oldest child in Stage 5, WA).

This paper, however, specifically focuses on the *minority* of parent participants whose responses demonstrated a rejection of, or resistance to, gender and sexuality diversity-related content inclusion in the curriculum. For Q2, this included the  $n = 252$  responses (12% of the survey cohort) where parents specifically indicated they did *not* want their child taught about gender diversity as well as the  $n = 110$  responses (5.3% of the survey cohort) where parents did *not* want their child taught about sexuality diversity. For Q3, this included the  $n = 168$  responses (8% of the survey cohort) where parents indicated they would like to withdraw their child from classroom discussions which included gender diversity as well as the  $n = 103$  (4.9% of the survey cohort) where parents wanted to withdraw their child from sexuality diversity education.<sup>2</sup> This cohort of parents positioned such exclusions within a range of discourses, including (but not limited to) derision, religiosity, suggestibility, or age in/appropriateness. This paper interrogates the latter category of age in/appropriateness in terms of its discursive deployment by these parents.

## Findings and discussion

Within the cohort of parents who wanted the option to advise on what should or should not be discussed in the relationships and sexual health education curriculum and wished to withdraw their child from particular relationships and sexual health education lessons, appropriateness in relation to gender and sexuality diversity featured heavily. Themes related to age-inappropriateness included the idea that gender diversity inclusions were 'confusing', and that children were 'too immature' or 'influenceable'. These thematic categories intersected and reinforced one another.

Around 10% ( $n = 83$ ) of the participants who responded to Q2 articulated that they did not want age-inappropriate information to be discussed in their children's sex education classes. Of this specific sub-cohort of parents, around 40% identified topics related to gender diversity as inappropriate; about 20% identified sexuality diversity as inappropriate; and around 19% identified sex (generally speaking) as inappropriate. Of the participants who responded to Q3, roughly 6% ( $n = 44$ ) explicitly stated that they would remove their child from lessons deemed inappropriate.



### *Inclusion as confusing*

Some participants articulated how education about diverse genders and sexualities, particularly the former, is confusing for children and therefore inappropriate for curriculum inclusion, especially for younger students. The concept of confusion resulted in a belief, by some, that these topics were more appropriately introduced (if at all) in the upper levels of schooling.

I do believe that gender variants should be limited to the higher year levels to not further confuse children in an already confusing time of puberty. The mention of these variants could be touched on, normalised, but as it is a very personalised event, that is also a minority, I think information should be provided on how to access help if they need more guidance on discovering themselves. (Age 26, oldest child in kindergarten, QLD)

I would like to ensure my young children do not have to question if they are male or female or whethet [sic] that may change. They shouldnt [sic] need to feel like their identity, gender or sexuality is a choice or is confusing. I believe presenting options for primary aged children is confusing. However, i believe that if teachers and parents identify students who are unsure, they need safe places to be able to find information and support. I believe by high school largely students have a greater sense of who they are and with teaching on respect, tolerance [sic] and inclusion they can understand and appreciate those in their peer group who identify differently. (Age 38, oldest child in Stage 1, NSW)

There should be no discussion about gender fluidity because it's damaging nonsense. People are either male or female and to teach kids otherwise is causing mass confusion, and (Age 55, oldest child in Stage 4, NSW)

Although the first two quotes present what might be read as somewhat supportive responses through recognition of gender and sexuality diverse young people's potential marginalisation, the quotes highlight numerous concerns. First, there is an implication that young people of a certain age are heterogeneous in their comprehension and abilities. St/ages of schooling are socially constructed, and students' understandings do not necessarily correlate with a particular st/age. Young people do not suddenly 'mature' or become more prepared for complexities because they have started high school, particularly without education. Furthermore, there is a failure to recognise that discrimination starts young (Perszyk et al. 2019), and not engaging with gender and sexuality diversity-related education until high school is too late; students who identify outside hetero/cisnormative constructions (and others who identify as 'different') have likely encountered discrimination for half of their schooling life by the time they reach high school. Such discrimination has significant implications for students' emotional well-being, school engagement, academic achievement and, by extension, life outcomes (Hill et al. 2021; Ullman 2021; Ullman, Ferfolja, and Hobby 2022).

There is some irony in thinking that one should not be exposed to complexity for fear of 'confusion'; young people encounter diversity every day and education is critical to fostering understanding. It is also offensive to assume that all young people are incapable of thinking through complexity. This assumption reflects dominant discourses of childhood that position young people as naïve, incapable, and unknowing (Robinson, Díaz, and Townley 2019). Furthermore, the above quotes position knowledge of gender and sexuality diversity as inappropriate, because of a belief that young people who are exposed to such knowledge will

be compelled to 'try it' - a position explored in more detail below. Information censorship illustrates adult endeavours to control young people's knowledge and demonstrates an 'adult-imposed' requirement that children settle on a single and coherent understanding of their gender and sexuality, eradicating their opportunities to experience/understand their identities as fluid and/or potentially changing over the lifetime.

Furthermore, these same participants' responses presume that their child is not gender or sexuality diverse, and unlikely to identify as such in the future (unless persuaded otherwise through information exposure). This rhetoric erases children's autonomy to articulate their own gender and sexuality identities. It also reflects the neoliberal desire of schooling as productive of normative (heterosexual/cisgender) subjects who are legible for an employment market (Woolley 2017). In these instances, parental protection extends beyond their child's physical and emotional well-being and, as Jones (2011) argues, functions to reproduce a heteronormative and cishnormative status quo in which gender and sexuality diversity is positioned as a threat to the individual's development.

Respect, acceptance, and inclusion of diversity can be acquired through education (Gegenfurtner and Gebhardt 2017) and assisting young people to make sense of the world is one of its hallmarks. Exclusion from the curriculum for fear of confusion is highly problematic when one considers the difficulties experienced by students in gaining 'a greater sense of who they are' if dialogue about diversity is not incorporated. Alongside this, relegating gender and sexuality diversity to the position of 'minority' or as 'damaging nonsense' is highly discriminatory. This discourse reflects the socially fracturing approaches utilised historically by a culture of limitation in the perpetuation of moral panics over the inclusion of, and engagement with, gender and sexuality diversity in education (Ferfolja and Ullman 2020).

Additionally, contradictory suggestions are offered above by the first two respondents. Although there is recognition that gender (and sexuality) diverse young people may be present in schools, and acknowledgement that gender diverse adolescents may require guidance, the school is not seen as an appropriate site for the acquisition of information except to 'touch' on the topic. It is well-documented that marginalising gender and sexuality diverse young people in education can have serious consequences for their social and emotional well-being both at school and with respect to their aspirations for tertiary education (Ullman 2021).

### ***Children as immature***

Normative notions of childhood development are central to gender and sexuality education. In previous Australian literature, Robinson (2008, 115) details how Piaget's understanding of childhood cognitive development 'perpetuate[s] a view of the "universal child" - a state of nature - in which understandings of what it means to be a child are viewed to be a shared "human" experience'. For Robinson (2008), Piaget's theories reinforce the adult/child binary, and portray children as developing in a linear fashion, through identifiable stages. Developmental theories further suggest that (until a certain age) children are best understood to be non-sexual and innocent. Within this framing, children lose their right to access knowledge deemed to be 'inappropriate' (Robinson 2012).

Several participants drew on age and maturity to frame children as ‘not ready’ to learn about aspects of sex/uality education, namely those to do with gender and sexuality diversity, and designated these topics as more appropriate for older children.

I am not anti-same sex relationships but not sure I want my younger children exposed to the discussion too soon. (Age 41, oldest child in Kindergarten, QLD)

Topics relating actually to different sexual acts beyond the child’s understanding and experience. (older teens) (Age 35, oldest child in Stage 1, QLD)

I think Stage 4 children should have an aware [sic] of GSD in the early years 7/8 but the hardcore topics [such as] reproduction for GSD people etc should be discussed as the children’s maturity levels grow. (Age 44, oldest child in Stage 3, NSW)

...it all depends on the age of my child at the time! The gender neutral topic is not something children need to learn about at 6 years of age. (Age 35, oldest child in Stage 1, QLD)

The above quotations suggest several problematic understandings about young people and relationships and sexual health education. First, as stated above, they draw on a developmentalist discourse that prohibits ‘adult concepts’ from being addressed by schools until children are ‘old enough’. Additionally, the same statements reinforce a discursive subtext concerning the appropriateness of heteronormative relationships, in which non-normative relationships are only speakable to older children. This fails to recognise how from an early age children and young people are exposed to non-normative relationships and genders in social media, through popular culture, and via social connections.

Second, withholding information about ‘sexual acts beyond the child’s understanding’ presumes that certain behaviours align with specific sexualities, rather than acknowledge the fact that particular sexual practices can be undertaken by people of all sexualities. It also implies that including gender and sexuality diversity-related content in the school curriculum involves teaching about sexual acts, rather than exploring family, relationships, and emotional connection. Critically, it misrecognises the conservative approaches observed by schools in relation to the provision of information about sexual knowledge in general. These comments ignore how an increasing number of Australian youth do not identify as exclusively heterosexual or as binary (man/woman) (Bragg et al. 2018); that identification as gender and sexuality diverse can begin early (Telfer et al. 2020); and that GSD students fair better, emotionally and academically, when education engages with and reflects their identities (Ullman 2021). As aforementioned, gender and sexuality diversity-related education can foster inclusive attitudes in cisgender heterosexual students (Ryan, Patraw, and Bednar 2013).

Akin to relying on developmentalist discourse, some parents considered the inclusion of discussion pertaining to gender transitioning inappropriate for young people and justified their beliefs using medicalised discourses concerning physical brain maturity and children’s tendency to be readily persuaded.

I would prefer that children and teens did not learn about medical pathways for ‘gender transition’, as they are easily influenced in those formative years before the frontal cortex is fully mature. (Age 40, oldest child in Stage 2, VIC)

This quote suggests that once a child has a ‘fully developed’ brain they will have a different ability to understand gender, enabling them to not be so ‘easily influenced’. This response is simplistic. First, comprehension at brain maturity is assumed to

automatically occur without educational input. Second, the quote promotes censorship to regulate young people's agency, based on the mythology that speaking about gender diversity will result in the child becoming gender diverse; this is akin to the mythology that educating children about sex will lead them to engage in sex (Robinson 2012; Noone and Young 2010). More accurately, withholding information is problematic and may breach a young person's human rights (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization 2018) as all young people have a right to safe, accurate education that relates to their lives.

### ***Children as easily influenced***

Given the perception that children are easily influenced, some participants in our study expressed the view that they did not want knowledge 'forced' on their children through gender and sexuality diversity-related education. Participants who resisted gender and sexuality diversity-related inclusion were particularly concerned that such education would lead to their children becoming gender or sexuality diverse.

I don't want my child educated to think they are anything other than [*sic*] who they were born as. If they choose to be the opposite gender to what they were born I want to know it's their own choice and not pushed on them through education. (Age 41, oldest child in Stage 1, VIC)

Such responses tended to refer to trans and gender diversities as a 'fad' - akin to historical discourses that once understood sexuality diversity as a 'phase' that individuals would eventually 'grow out of' (Toft, Franklin, and Langley 2019). According to this kind of perspective, the growing number of children identifying as trans and gender diverse is seen as the result of its 'popularity' among children, rather than as a response to wider and more supportive discourses that recognise and celebrate gender diversity.

At best, respondents were concerned that transgender discussion might result in 'pathologising normal teen self discovery' (Age 29, oldest child in Stage 3, QLD). At worst, as one participant argued, just '[d]iscussing [trans identities] is leading to high numbers of children being medicated with life altering medications and many dangerous, and even unknown ramifications' (Age 41, oldest child in Stage 4, TAS). These hyperbolic statements echo those voiced during recent moral panics, which have used misinformation to silence discussion of these topics in the curriculum because they might disturb the normative gender subjectivities that young people would assumedly ascribe to if they did not encounter knowledges questioning dominant discourses of gender (and sexuality). As one person stated, 'If they [a person] wish[es] to engage in medical transition, it should be well into adulthood so that they can fully appreciate the risks to fertility and so on' (Age 40, oldest child in Stage 2, VIC).

Furthermore, in response to a question asking participants to identify the topics they thought should not be discussed in the curriculum, one participant stated:

That your gender changes. You can do a lot to look the part sure. But there is [*sic*] only two sexes. And confusing children about this at school age is not good. (I have a child who is trans who got the idea from school. My child is now wanting to remove healthy body parts from their body) . . . also gender confusion is higher in children with autism . . . Maybe there is something in that. I think more reasurch [*sic*] into this area is needed. Children are getting too [*sic*] in to this. I know of about 20 kids who are in and out with this. (Age 39, oldest child in Stage 5, ACT)

In the above account, the speaker identifies their child as trans but does not comprehend this identity as legitimate. Rather, the child is presented as having ‘got the idea from school’. This participant’s understanding of children as ‘in and out with’ trans and gender diverse identities further references de-transition discourse (and panic), wherein children who have transitioned (either to a binary or non-binary gender) likely transition ‘back’ to their gender assigned at birth.

Importantly, moral panics surrounding gender transition and de-transition often reference children, although as Slothouber (2020) argues, the child concerned is usually a ‘figurative’ (rather than real) person. For Slothouber (2020, 94), debates about de-transition are typically focused on an imagined, ‘white, middle- and upper-class cisgender’ child and the possibilities of mis-diagnosis. Such debates do not concern themselves with the risks associated with transphobic violence or the (in)accessibility of gender affirming care for all transgender children – concerns that overwhelmingly impact children of colour and poor children (Slothouber 2020). Nor do these debates acknowledge the low rates of de-transition among transgender individuals, particularly in the absence of external driving influences (Turban et al. 2021).

## Conclusion

This discussion has illustrated how children’s (assumed) confusion, immaturity, and ability to be influenced are mobilised by some parents to position education about gender and sexuality diversity as ‘age-inappropriate’. This perspective is buoyed by dominant discourses of ‘childhood’ and the ‘good parent’, as well as social constructions of the adult/child binary; discourses which are employed in moral panics when gender and sexuality diversity-related topics are mentioned for possible curriculum inclusion. Such narrow and often misinformed perspectives are made highly visible by a vocal minority who are ensconced in, and supported by, a culture of limitation, and it is most often these (minority) voices that seek to influence curriculum and educators’ work. This is evidenced by the fact that, although four out of five Australian parents of children attending public schools desire the age-appropriate inclusion of gender and sexuality diversity in their child’s education (Ullman 2021), it is the dissenting minority voices that are so often heard.

The findings described in this paper highlight the need for educators to engage resistant parents in dialogue about what is and is not considered age-appropriate for curriculum inclusion and why. Including parents means they are informed about the resources and approaches that may be used with their children in the classroom and potentially quell myths that could result in a moral panic. Additionally, this dialogue can provide an important educational moment for parents in which the benefits of an inclusive curriculum can be highlighted. Clearly, not all individuals are open to change, and some are immovable, despite the negative impact of curriculum silences and exclusions on gender and sexuality diverse young people. Engaging in dialogue may, however, result in some gender and sexuality diversity resistant parents coming to understand that a gender and sexuality diversity-related curriculum *can* be implemented in an age-appropriate way and that this would be of benefit to not only gender and sexuality diverse students, but all young people.

## Notes

1. Public schools in Australia are funded by state governments.
2. Across both items, there is significant overlap amongst these individuals; thus, these numbers/percentages cannot responsibly be added to create a total figure.

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## ORCID

Tania Ferfolja  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0892-5326>

Jacqueline Ullman  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6999-423X>

## Data availability statement

The participants in this study did not give written consent for their data to be shared publicly, so due to the sensitive nature of the enquiry, supporting data is not available.

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