

THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF SEX EDUCATION: A PSYCHOSOCIAL STUDY OF PARENT
INVOLVEMENT IN POLICY CONTROVERSIES

LAUREN R. S. JERVIS

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Abstract

In recent years, many impassioned debates regarding educational policy have pitted parents against the public education system and have thrown questions of parental and state responsibility for children's education into the media spotlight, particularly in relation to issues of sexuality. This dissertation investigates the emotional aspects of these debates by taking an approach to educational policy research that is informed by psychoanalytic theory. Working across the three fields of psychosocial, critical policy, and sexuality studies in education, I highlight the ways that the participation of parents as policy actors in two Canadian educational policy debates is influenced by their own histories of development, education, and sexuality. The first policy controversy I focus on took place in Alberta in 2012, when the government tried to pass a new *Education Act* that included a provision stating that educational programs of study needed to be in alignment with existing human rights legislation. The second policy controversy took place in Ontario between 2015 and 2019, when a new Health and Physical Education curriculum was introduced and then withdrawn from the province's schools. Employing a psychosocial methodology, I analyze print and online media coverage of both controversies alongside in-depth interviews with two parents who participated in the Alberta policy case and three parents who participated in the Ontario case. My analysis of the significance of emotional dynamics throughout the data proposes that parents use defence mechanisms such as splitting to contend with the ethical and affective complexities of discharging their responsibilities of care to their children while having to share educational authority with the government. The emotional intensity circulating through these two controversies

suggests the difficulty of confronting the failures and limitations inherent in projects of parenting, governance, and education.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Children, Parents, and the State

“How much say should the state have in how parents raise their children?” On November 16, 2014, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) published an online article that focuses on this question (Powers 2014). The article discusses debates over issues as diverse as medical treatment, sex education, and disciplinary measures. The headline reads, “3 issues that pit Canadian parents against the state,” and the lede,¹ quoted above, raises a problem that is at the heart of the conflicts provoking my dissertation research. This question is uniquely fraught when it comes to issues of education, because contemporary Canadian social structures are built on the idea that the state should play a central role in the instruction of children. This assumption is expressed through compulsory education laws and the existence of provincial and territorial public education systems. But while the law requires children to receive educational instruction that meets provincial or territorial standards, parents² are considered the primary caregivers and the main parties responsible for a child’s upbringing. The question of where parental responsibility ends and state responsibility begins, then, is not a simple one to answer, and

¹ The lede is “the opening sentence or paragraph of a news article, intended to summarize the most important aspects of the story” (*OED Online* 2019).

² Throughout the dissertation, I use the term *parent* in a broad sense, to refer to those adults who hold the primary legal, moral, and relational responsibility for the care of children. To be clear, my references to parents are meant to indicate the key *role* that certain adults play in the lives of certain children and not to denote a specific biological connection to the children in question. Consequently, my broad use of the term includes adoptive parents, legal guardians, and anyone who acts as a child’s primary caregiver.

its contours are frequently contested in public policy debates, including many debates about education. These kinds of educational debates are the focus of my dissertation research. In this chapter, I explore the issues and contexts that inform this project, and I introduce the two policy cases at the centre of the research. I also lay out the research questions and the structure of the dissertation chapters that follow.

Emotional Policy Questions

The focus of the CBC article and its linkage of various controversies under the question articulated in its lede indicate that conflicts between parents and the state over the care and education of children are salient, complex, and of great public concern. Some recent examples of such conflicts can be found in debates over childhood vaccinations (Picard 2015) and in the case of a Quebec high school student who was strip-searched without her parents' knowledge or consent when her school's staff suspected she possessed drugs (Woods 2015). The degree and intensity of public interest in these policy questions, whether over policies governing compulsory education, immunizations, or searches of students in schools, can be seen in the emotional pitch of the controversies they provoke. A notable example of this can be found in one of the policy cases on which my dissertation research focuses. In 2012, the Alberta government introduced a bill that would have updated the province's *School Act* by replacing it with a new *Education Act*. What may have seemed like a fairly straightforward modernization of an old piece of legislation turned into a heated battle as a group of homeschooling parents reacted with anger to a change that required all school instruction to "reflect the diverse nature and heritage of society in Alberta, promote understanding and respect for others and honour and respect

the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* and the *Alberta Human Rights Act*" (Legislative Assembly of Alberta 2012a, 29). These parents feared that the new legislation might prohibit them from teaching their own values to their children through homeschooling, including on such issues as sexual orientation (Wingrove 2012b). In response, they rallied at the legislature several times to demonstrate their opposition to the change (Boesveld 2012).

I was working at the Alberta legislature while this controversy was taking place.³ I saw the protests through the windows of my office, I talked with one of the parents who was angry about the proposed changes, and I witnessed the heated debates on this bill between the province's politicians. These experiences left me wondering about the significance of the emotional aspect of policy controversies. This conflict revolved around the question of whether the proposed legislation would forbid homeschooling parents from teaching their children a curriculum that was inconsistent with the spirit of human rights legislation. Interestingly, both the government and some opposition members of the legislature maintained that the bill could not have this effect (Wingrove 2012b). This disagreement may have simply resulted from differing interpretations of the legislation; however, it is possible that the homeschooling parents' objections to the bill were not primarily technical but rather emotional. One article in *The Globe and Mail* describes the bulk of the letters sent to politicians and newspapers on this issue as "vitriolic complaints"; opposition to the bill even included a death threat sent to the Minister of Education

³ At the time, I was working for the two New Democratic Party (NDP) members of the legislative assembly as a research and communications officer.

(Wingrove 2012b). This example demonstrates that the affective pitch of these types of policy controversies can become remarkably high.

A more recent example of a similarly emotionally charged educational policy controversy can be found in the conflicts that took place over the Ontario sexual health education curriculum between 2015 and 2019, which comprise the second policy case that this dissertation project investigates in depth. A new Health and Physical Education (HPE) curriculum was introduced in Ontario schools in September of 2015 and was accused by some of teaching children about topics related to sexuality and gender when they were too young, and of being developed with insufficient parental input (Brown 2015; Lopez 2015). Those who opposed the new curriculum held multiple protests, including one demonstration at Queen's Park that drew more than 3,000 participants (Ferguson and Brennan 2015). As with the controversy in Alberta, the debates over the Ontario curriculum sometimes became heated. For example, when two members of provincial parliament (MPPs) from the government caucus held an information session about the curriculum shortly after it was released, they were heckled so intensely that they had to end the session early (Warmington 2015). Clearly, the debates over the new curriculum were animated by strong emotions. For precisely this reason, my research examines the emotional stakes of struggles such as these between parents and social institutions over the education of children. I am interested in the ways that a study of the emotional facets of these debates could help researchers, institutional policy-makers, and other policy actors to better understand and respond to emotion as part and parcel of the inner work of policy development, enactment, and revision.

A Disrupted and Disruptive Policy Process

The emotional aspects of debates over how children should be raised and educated present a perplexing problem for educational policy. On a concrete level, these protests have had measurable effects on the policy process at the highest levels. For example, the advocacy of the parents who protested Alberta's proposed *Education Act* in 2012, discussed above, helped to prevent that bill from passing before an election was called (Wingrove 2012b). The version of the bill reintroduced by the government after the election no longer contained the controversial reference to the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* and the *Alberta Human Rights Act* (Gerson 2012a). The Ontario policy case also demonstrates that controversy and public outcry can lead to concrete educational consequences: the hundreds of children who were kept home from school as a protest against the new curriculum are one clear example of the controversy's effects (CBC News 2015b). Furthermore, this conflict was itself a sequel to a previous attempt in 2010 to introduce a similarly updated health curriculum, and opposition to that update led to a shelving of the new curriculum only a few days after the announcement of its intended implementation, with the explanation that more input from parents was needed (Ferguson, Benzie, and Rushowy 2010). In an instance that felt, to some extent, like history repeating itself, after the 2015 curriculum was in place for three years, a new government withdrew the 2015 curriculum for Grades 1-8 and replaced it with the previous curriculum first introduced in 1998 while they conducted a new round of consultations with parents on sex education. The revised curriculum subsequently released by the new government looked very similar to the 2015 version (Bialystok 2019a), but the many chapters of this policy saga demonstrate the ways that public mobilization can have substantial impacts on a new

policy's trajectory.

These protests, then, can shape the official policies that guide public education systems in Canada. However, most traditional and critical approaches to policy research do not explore the emotional and psychic content of policy struggles. Traditional frameworks generally hold that the policy process has a fundamentally rational basis (Diem and Young 2015) and that policy is made by governments and institutional decision-makers (Ball, Maguire, and Braun 2012). Even critical approaches to policy research, which challenge the unequal power relations reproduced in the policy process and recognize a broader range of policy actors, infrequently focus on the affective content of heated policy discussions. Given the significant impacts of opposition movements on educational policies, including those cases discussed previously, this gap in the literature must be addressed. My research project aims to do just that, by providing a model for one way that educational policy research can explore and address the emotional content of policy debates.

Dependency, Responsibility, and Control

The last half-century has seen increasing calls for the definition and provision of children's rights (Young-Bruehl 2012). Human rights discourses have been deployed to address the dangers and abuses faced by children across the globe, while rights for children have been codified in the United Nations "Convention on the Rights of the Child" (1989/2020). The idea of children's rights, however, cannot easily address the issue of children's dependency. Human beings are born into the world in a vulnerable state and in need of care by others; this dependency is ostensibly what separates children from adults. As a consequence, children cannot be given the independence and self-determination that

human rights typically grant to adult citizens. To a greater or lesser degree, someone has to care for, act for, and make decisions for children. My dissertation research examines this complex ethical dynamic, with a particular focus on the tensions between state and parental responsibility. These struggles over responsibility for children can be seen in a range of recent policy controversies: for example, an Ontario parent initiated legal action against his local public school board in 2012 because his children's school refused to notify him when they were to receive instruction on topics of sexuality, family, and marriage. He summed up his position on the issue in this way: "My children are my own. I own them. They don't belong to the school board" (Hammer 2012). The shouts of protesters opposing the Ontario government's new sexual health education curriculum implied a similar assumption of ownership but also, arguably, homophobia when they chanted at Ontario's premier at the time, who identifies as a lesbian, "Kathleen Wynne, we will not co-parent with you" (Ferguson and Brennan 2015).

These examples indicate that the protesting parents feel the state is overreaching into their domain of authority as the primary caregivers and legal guardians of their children. However, their language of control and suspicion of government intentions can also serve as a reminder of sometimes-troubling social dynamics between parents and children. Parents are generally expected to care for their children, but sometimes they neglect or harm them instead, whether intentionally or not: for instance, children are most likely to be abused by people they know, such as family members (Canadian Red Cross, n.d.). By the same token, governments that ostensibly play a role in ensuring the collective safety of children have also been known to do them harm: the federal government's residential school system for Indigenous children is but one prominent Canadian example

(TRCC 2015).⁴ Consequently, struggles over who is best positioned to make various decisions about children's supposed best interests are tainted by difficult histories and contemporary dynamics of trauma, social injustice, shifting power relations, and neglect.

A related challenge regarding the determination of who should be responsible for which aspects of children's education is linked to the social position held by children themselves. Societies need new members to perpetuate and renew them; this, in part, is what motivates governments to intervene in matters of children's welfare and education. This investment in societal and political renewal, however, contains an emotional ambivalence: according to social theorist Hannah Arendt (1993), the need for fresh leadership inspires hope, but also fear of the new. Younger generations of citizens and voters have been known to disagree with the prevailing social consensus and have led protest movements against government policies that were more broadly supported by older generations. Parents, too, may struggle with the fact that children have their own minds and do not always turn into the people their caregivers expected them to become. The ambivalent investments that both parents and societies at large have in facilitating children's development complicate the aims and beliefs of those who claim to act in the best interests of the child. Consequently, it is not a straightforward matter, emotionally or ethically, for adult figures of responsibility to carry out their duties of care to children. This project, then, inquires into how ambivalence over children affects policy debates about

⁴ The government of Canada operated a system of residential schools for Indigenous children from the time of the country's establishment until the last school was closed in the late 1990s. These schools separated children from their families with the intention of severing their ties to their Indigenous cultures, communities, and identities (TRCC 2015). The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015) describes these schools as a key component in a project of cultural genocide perpetrated by the Canadian government (5).

who has responsibility for their education. What does it really mean to determine, and act in, the child's best interests? What can policy research learn from arguments over this question?

A Psychoanalytic Perspective on Emotional Life

In order to delve into the emotional and ethical aspects of policy controversies that involve those who have responsibilities of education and care for children, I look to the field of psychoanalytic theory to inform my psychosocial theoretical framework and methodology. Psychoanalysis offers a perspective and a set of concepts that allow for a nuanced consideration of the subjective experiences of policy actors. Psychoanalytic theory is a body of theory about human life that traces its history back to the writings of Sigmund Freud and the approach to talk therapy that he developed. Adam Phillips (2002) writes, "Freud, who was himself resistant to therapy, invented a form of therapy called psychoanalysis; and it was a therapy based [...] on understanding the resistance to the therapy he had invented" (vii). Accordingly, psychoanalytic theory centres on the idea that people do not have a straightforward, consistent, or fully conscious understanding of themselves, their experiences, and their emotions; rather, the human mind is full of contradictions, conflicts, and resistances. As a consequence, "psychoanalysis was always about the odd connections and disconnections between people's words and their so-called actions" (Phillips 2002, xi).

A key reason for these "odd connections and disconnections," according to psychoanalytic theory, is the existence of the unconscious—the part of the mind that is not available to conscious thought and is formed in significant ways by early life experiences

that may precede conscious memory entirely. Of the significance of the unconscious in relation to the scene of education, Lisa Farley (2015) writes, “By the “unconscious,” I am referring to the archive of the human mind and its holdings of infantile anxieties, desires and fantasies that structure in surprising ways the conscious perceptions and interpretations we make of the world, including those we make in the creation of curriculum, pedagogy and educational research” (451). Early experiences of attachment and feelings of love, aggression, desire, and fear can reside in the unconscious and return to inform our responses to new scenes and relationships. In this way, unconscious influences can prompt experiences of anxiety—unease, worry, dread—that are difficult to tolerate. Thus, when I use the concept of anxiety in this dissertation, I do so with the idea that it has important unconscious components, as well as conscious manifestations. The return of the psychic dynamics that informed our first relationships is called the transference, and I discuss this psychoanalytic concept at greater length in Chapter 2.

I read both of the policy cases at the centre of this research project as situations that triggered these kinds of anxieties for many parents. Psychoanalytic theory also proposes that the human mind manages these disturbances and discomforts through various unconscious strategies called defence mechanisms. The origin of defence mechanisms can be traced to Freud’s change of mind regarding the relationship of repression and anxiety. Deborah Britzman (2006) discusses the fact that while Freud once thought that repression caused anxiety, he came to instead believe that anxiety, resulting from the unconscious dynamics discussed above, causes repression. Repression therefore arises as a *defence* against anxiety. His daughter, Anna Freud, later went on to enumerate several other defence mechanisms, each of which is a manifestation of “the ego's fragile attempt to

secure its own boundaries, to mediate its capacity for extremes, and quite precariously, to make a relation” (Britzman 1998, 11).

I make reference to several such defences in my data analysis. One example is the psychoanalytic concept of phantasy, which is sometimes distinguished from the common understanding of fantasy by the “ph” spelling and finds its roots in the writing of Melanie Klein. For Klein (1964), phantasies are unconscious imaginings that begin in infancy and defend against knowledge that is hard to bear. From the inevitable discomforts of infantile life emerges a psychical organization that, for example, splits off all that is perceived as bad from that which is preserved as good. A certain curriculum, law, or teacher, then, can be felt to embody all that is broken, immoral, or irresponsible about the public school system, or the government, or social values. The psychic strategy of splitting features significantly in my discussions of the policy controversies in Chapters 4 and 5. I also discuss other kinds of defence mechanisms. One of these is projection, which involves taking one’s own uncomfortable feelings or wishes and imagining them as instead residing in someone else. Another is negation, which involves expressing an uncomfortable or intolerable idea through disavowing it in its expression or expressing it in negative terms, allowing for the expression of the thought without having to accept its content (Freud 2006). Britzman (1998) describes negation as “an ambivalent form of thought, capable of subverting and resisting itself” (30). Importantly, defence mechanisms are not pathologies, but are rather common—and often useful—ways of managing the discomforts of inner life. They are also not irrational distortions that cloud what would otherwise be rational thought. Instead, as a result of the kind of “defended subject” posited by this psychoanalytic approach (Hollway

and Jefferson 2013, 21), defence mechanisms are part of the work of thinking and feeling that itself inevitably involves ambivalence, mediation, and resistance.

Defence mechanisms may be unconscious responses to internal conflicts, but they also affect the social world and the ways people participate in it. Britzman (1998) writes, “A mechanism of defense is a relation, but one that moves back and forth, from psychic reality to social reality” (11). For this reason, the tools of psychoanalysis are particularly apt for informing a psychosocial inquiry into the emotional worlds of the educational policy controversies under study in this dissertation. A psychoanalytic approach to emotions also views them as being provoked and shaped by *affective* forces of love and hate, first experienced through the bodily sensations of suffering, comfort, and helplessness in infancy and archived, to return to Farley’s phrasing, in the unconscious. In other words, emotions that are experienced on a conscious level can also have unconscious elements that interact with social and relational conditions—in the cases under study, conditions related to parenting, education, and governance. This psychoanalytic understanding of emotion thus links the psychic and the social.

The Role of Sexuality in Policy Controversies

A common thread that runs through many of the aforementioned educational policy controversies, and is especially salient in the two policy cases on which I focus in this research, is the theme of sexuality, whether via a concern for maintaining innocence, controlling bodies, (de)legitimizing identities, or policing practices. Sex education has been the subject of frequent controversy in recent years, and not only in Canada. For example, Janice Irvine (2002) writes about what she calls “sex education battles,” or “volatile sex

education conflicts,” in the United States in the latter half of the 20th century (2). While these types of debates are certainly not limited to Canada, this country’s historical, legal, political and social contexts shape the character of the Canadian controversies in distinctive ways. Education scholar Mary Lou Rasmussen (2016) examines the role of secularism in contemporary sex education, and in comparing Australia and Canada, she states, “One immediate difference I noted was that issues related to secularism, sexuality, and education appeared to be a part of ongoing public debates [in Canada] in a way that is rarely the case in Australia” (144). She suggests that this difference may be attributable, in part, to the more widespread and widely accepted role of religion in public and private schools in Australia. Local factors, then, likely shape the types of debates that erupt in Canada (and elsewhere) over sexuality and education.

That being said, this dissertation project is not limited to studying controversies that revolve strictly around formal sex education policy. By sexuality, that is, I am referring not only to the literal content of sexual health education. Following Freud, proponents of psychoanalysis posit that curiosity itself is fundamentally linked to our earliest experiences of sexuality, even as sexuality can also disrupt the educational imperatives of individual adults and social institutions (Phillips 1998; Gilbert 2014). For example, the lessons that parents and schools want to teach are often not the ones that children desire. And the notoriously awkward space of the sex education classroom and no-kissing-in-the-hallway rules testify to the difficulties schools have in dealing with the fact that their students have sexualities at all. Furthermore, policy also encounters its limitations when it confronts sexuality. Jen Gilbert (2014) argues that, while policies matter, no program, curriculum

document, or law can serve as the “magic bullet that will eradicate homophobia and transphobia in education” (95).

So, while politicians and parents may fight over the minutiae and perceived implications of educational policies, there is no perfect policy to be achieved, particularly about a topic as personal and as messy as sexuality. The field of critical policy analysis (CPA) also embodies this view; in their analysis of CPA, Sarah Diem and Michelle D. Young (2015) write that the work of the CPA scholars they talked to “sought to demonstrate the constructed nature of many policy problems and solutions as well as the ways in which policy ideas emerge from and/or are tied to broader social processes, economic conditions, and political projects” (842). This recognition that both policy problems and solutions are social constructs problematizes the notion that issues in education can be straightforwardly addressed by the “right” policy. The imperfectability of policy related to sexuality and education, then, contributes to both the emotional intensity and the impressions of hidden agendas and miscommunication in the debates under study. Nonetheless, many questions remain about why sexuality is so often at issue in moments when parents gather on the steps of their provincial legislature or write angry letters to their elected representatives regarding issues of educational policy. Consequently, another dimension of my project investigates why sexuality so often provokes conflict over children’s instruction and upbringing and, in turn, why the child so often becomes the site of conflict over the relationship between education and sexuality.

The interconnected concerns described in this chapter have driven the design and intent of my dissertation research. I aim to shed light on them through a study of two recent Canadian policy controversies in education: the 2012 controversy over Alberta’s

Education Act, and the debates in 2015-2019 over sex education curriculum in Ontario.

While the two chapters that follow lay out my theoretical framework and methodological approach in greater detail, below is a brief summary of the design of the study. The following research questions underpin the project:

1. *What are the emotional stakes of struggles between parents and social institutions over policies regarding the education of children? Specifically, this project inquires into the emotional dynamics of policy debates about who has responsibility for children's education and what it means to determine, and act in, children's best interests.*
2. *How can educational policy research explore and address the complex emotional content of policy debates? More specifically, what kind of theoretical framework is needed to do justice to the affective aspects of these debates?*
3. *What role does sexuality play in provoking and animating emotional and ethical conflicts over children's instruction and upbringing?*

To address these questions, I study the two policy cases discussed above. I investigate these cases by analyzing print and online media coverage related to each controversy. I also conducted two-part, in-depth interviews with five parents, two of whom were involved in the Alberta policy case and three of whom were involved in the Ontario case. These data sources have been analyzed in relation to one another and to the policy documents under debate in each case. Across the data sources, I have identified key themes in the narratives of education, childhood, and sexuality: themes relating to anxieties over influence, crises of authority, fears of state persecution, and hopes for a curriculum that can cure social ills.

Chapter Summaries

In Chapter 2, I describe and justify the theoretical framework of my study, in conversation with existing bodies of scholarly literature. Starting with a discussion of the complex ethical and emotional dynamics at play in the responsibilities adults have when caring for children, I argue that psychoanalytic theorizing about education can provide useful resources for developing new understandings of the significance of emotion in educational policy controversies. I propose that a psychosocial approach to policy research, informed by psychoanalytic theory, can add a valuable new strand to the interdisciplinary field of critical policy analysis and can build on that field's vital interventions in traditional approaches to policy studies. Through a review of existing scholarly literature that examines emotional aspects of education, including, in some cases, the emotional dimensions of educational policy specifically, I contend that there are unanswered questions in educational studies that my psychosocial approach to policy research can help to address. I explain how psychoanalytic theory can be particularly useful for studying controversies that relate to sexuality and education. I then go on to situate my research in relation to scholarly work on parents as policy actors, educational advocates, and even educators, in the case of the literature that focuses on parents who homeschool their children. I conclude by discussing the existing literature on the two policy cases upon which my research centres, in order to give an account of some of the academic conversations into which I am entering with this dissertation project.

The third chapter of the dissertation focuses on my methodological approach. I begin by discussing my reasons for choosing to focus on the two policy cases I did. This discussion is followed by a description of my data sources. I outline the parameters of my

data sets of newspaper coverage of the two policy debates and the methods I used for conducting my searches for the articles. I discuss the strengths and limitations of media coverage as a data source. I also specify which policy documents are of central concern in each of the cases. Next, I discuss the structure and procedures of the two-part in-depth interviews I conducted with five parents, each of whom was involved in advocacy regarding one of the two policy controversies under study. I briefly reflect on some aspects of my own personal history and identities that may bear upon the way I approached my role as an interviewer and researcher. I conclude by outlining my psychosocial approach to data analysis, as informed by the work of Wendy Hollway and Tony Jefferson (2013).

Chapter 4 focuses on my research related to the controversy over the reference to human rights legislation that the Alberta government intended to include in its new *Education Act* in 2012. I argue that the emotional aspects of this debate are key to understanding *why* the opposition by conservative homeschooling parents was so intense. In this controversy, I suggest that discourses of human rights are used to symbolize persecutory anxieties about government interference in the family sphere, using the defence mechanism of splitting. These anxieties may have been inflamed both by the experiences of homeschooling families being misunderstood by the broader public and by the shifting and contested norms in the province regarding the equality of lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) people. I begin by tracing the themes of emotion, human rights, and government overreach in the media coverage of the Alberta policy case. I also discuss portrayals of the more extreme reactions to this policy debate in the news, as well as the stereotypes and tropes that are sometimes used to depict homeschooling families. I then trace these themes through a psychosocial analysis of the interviews I conducted with

Susan and Ruth, two homeschooling mothers who participated in opposition to the government's new *Education Act* in 2012.⁵

In Chapter 5, I turn to a discussion of my findings regarding the debates over Ontario's sex education curriculum that took place between 2015 and 2019. I challenge the widely-expressed notion that many opponents of the 2015 curriculum were simply misinformed about its contents and that correcting those misconceptions would have resolved much of the controversy. Rather, I argue that the outcry over the province's 2015 sex education curriculum, including the circulation of misinformation, is itself an expression of a crisis of authority that the task of educating children about sexuality can provoke. I suggest that the challenges the topic of sexuality present to adult authority resulted, in this case, in characterizations of the 2015 curriculum as having outsized impacts: that is, as a document with the unique ability to save or ruin children. Similarly, both parents and the government were sometimes portrayed as holding *the* exclusive and rightful authority to determine the content of sex education lessons. This kind of splitting of good and bad curriculum and good and bad influence served as a defence against the more difficult reality of a shared responsibility that parents and the state have to educate children, including on topics related to sexuality. I highlight these themes of emotion, responsibility, authority, and morality through an analysis of the news coverage data, as well as my in-depth interviews with three parents: Arif, who wanted the 2015 curriculum to undergo a review; and Katherine and Shauna, who supported the 2015 curriculum and opposed the government's retraction of it.

In my concluding chapter, I draw together the main findings of my dissertation from

⁵ The names used to identify all interview participants are pseudonyms.

across the two policy cases. In particular, I discuss the implications of the study for thinking about the role of emotions in educational policy controversies for educational research. I also consider the ways my findings on emotion, policy advocacy, and authority might be useful for parents, teachers, administrators, and other policy actors in thinking through the difficulties they may encounter in relation to sex education and educational policy.

Throughout this dissertation, I hope to demonstrate the value of an approach to educational policy research that attends to the emotional charges that influence policy actors, and therefore the policy process, without resorting to implicitly splitting actors into the camps of rational and irrational. Instead, my psychosocial approach, informed by psychoanalytic theory, allows for analyses that uncover the ways that policies are framed and negotiated that both draw from and exceed rational logics. The social and ethical implications of these struggles are thus considered through a lens that acknowledges the deeply personal, complicated relationships and emotional histories that undergird adult responsibilities for the care and education of children.

Chapter 2

Theoretical Framework and Review of the Literature

A key part of my dissertation's contribution to the field of educational research is my argument for the value of a new conceptual approach to critical policy analysis (CPA) in education. In this chapter, I describe the issues and tensions underlying the project of educating and caring for children that can be unearthed and addressed by a psychosocial approach to policy research. I review the existing educational literature on emotion and education, with a special attention to the intersections between emotion and policy research. I then lay out the conceptual framework for my psychosocial orientation, and I discuss the bodies of work I draw from in this dissertation, including those on sex education, parenting, homeschooling, and the existing scholarship on the two policy cases at the centre of this project.

Acting in the Best Interests of Children

Educational policy controversies often turn on the question of children's best interests. On one level, acting in children's best interests follows from the duty of care charged to adult caregivers, yet it can be difficult to settle on what those interests mean and how to act on them. Advocating for political action based on the tenets outlined in the United Nations "Convention on the Rights of the Child" (1989/2020), Elisabeth Young-Bruehl (2012) identifies as her "touchstone" (12) a text by child psychoanalyst Anna Freud and colleagues entitled *In the Best Interests of the Child* (Goldstein et al. 1986).⁶ In this

⁶ Young-Bruehl (2012) writes that she values the text for its "insights into how to see children's issues from a child's viewpoint" (13).

classic text, Joseph Goldstein et al. write for and about people who work in institutional child protection systems, acknowledging the many “apparent contradictions” (123) that shape what it means to act in the best interests of the children in their care. For example, they write, “Good professional practice requires humanity as well as expertise—softheartedness as well as hardheadedness. The professional person should not be swayed by sympathy, but he must be sympathetic” (122-123). To address such contradictions, they advise caregivers to avoid conflicting professional roles: “A lawyer for a child cannot advocate both the child’s wishes and his own perception as a lawyer [...] of the child’s best interests” (122). The idea here is that, while children may know what they want, adults are charged to consider their welfare, and the two may not always be aligned. Thus, a representative of a child’s interests, in this case a lawyer, must be sympathetic but not swayed entirely by the child’s wishes. What the child wants is not the same as the adult’s perception of the child’s needs, as weighed against societal constraints.

At the intersection between individual autonomy and the common good, the child symbolizes the interdependent quality of human relationships, in which autonomy cannot simply be taken for granted. John Wall (2010) delves into the ethical nature of this challenge, which, in his view, stems from children’s relative dependency on others. He advocates a child-centred ethics for all people that “reimagines moral life as based, not on individual autonomy or on the authority of traditions, but on expanding interdependent creativity” (10). Wall continues, “Each human being, starting as a child, is a new center of moral creativity in what should be a growing rather than shrinking circle of mutually creative relations” (10). Wall’s relational ethics takes seriously the responsibilities people

have to each other as interdependent beings, exemplified in the responsibilities adults have to children due to their more radical state of dependency.

Wall's conception of ethics, however, does not resolve the ethical tensions inherent in the different social positions that adults and children *do* occupy, nor does it solve the problem of determining how adults can best discharge their responsibility of care to children, especially given the fact that conflict all too often enters into the roles of caregivers and guardians. As Goldstein et al. (1986) point out, children's best interests cannot be easily determined by asking children what they want or need. Anna Freud (1979) had already made this argument about education in lectures addressed to parents and teachers. There, she describes education as a form of "interference" with the activities and desires of children (13). In this sense, acting in the child's best interests not only means interrupting their own wishes at times, in the name of a common good; it also means confronting the notion of projection, and the related idea that it can be hard to distinguish children's interests from what *adults* want. In her inquiry into the social and literary uses of childhood, Jacqueline Rose (1992) makes precisely this point when she writes, "It will not be an issue here of what the child wants, but of what the adult desires—desires in the very act of construing the child as the object of its speech" (2). When adults speak of children's interests, then, they are also speaking of their own desires as they seek to decipher the child's wants and needs.

This dissertation begins with the premise that something similar is at play in policy debates, where children are represented as objects of speech by adults attempting to influence the rules and frameworks that guide education both in the home and in the school. With Anna Freud and Rose, I argue that adult desire is at play in the multiple

conflicting discourses that surround educational policy, not unlike the way that Freud locates it in the classroom and Rose identifies it in children's literature. While educational policies and children's literature occupy quite different genres and serve distinct purposes, both contain affected narratives of what is wanted for the child and what kind of child is wanted by the adults who craft the texts. This is particularly the case in policy debates regarding children's sexuality, as evidenced by the persistent media coverage of controversies over the meaning of sexual education, the appropriateness of particular health curricula, and the best interests of students in these contexts in contemporary Canadian schools. In my dissertation, I read policy debates as texts that carry traces of adult desire and anxiety. The aim is to complicate what is meant by the concept of best interests and to think through both emotional and social conflicts at play in arguments about the "right" policy or curriculum. In the space between educational controversies over sexuality and their imagined solutions in policy, I find a site rich with often-overlooked data that offer clues about the complex qualities of the adult/child relationship, data that are not only about the literal topic of sex but are also symbolic of the passions that both complicate learning and make it possible.

Psychoanalytic Theories of Education as a Resource for Psychosocial Policy Research

Throughout the last century, psychoanalytic theory and educational research have had a complicated relationship. Gail M. Boldt, Paula M. Salvio, and Peter M. Taubman (2006) write:

By the second half of the twentieth century, education [...] was turning from the painstakingly complicated intra- and inter-subjective worlds of teaching and

learning described by psychoanalysis to the promise of more efficient, cleaner—literally cleaner, turning away from the psychoanalytic emphasis on sexuality, fantasy, and the body—and empirically quantifiable outcomes. (2)

This desire for quantifiable research in education may help to explain the persistence of traditional, rational methods of policy analysis. From this perspective, policy studies aim to identify and evaluate more efficient forms of teaching and learning, as demonstrated by material evidence of outcomes (e.g., Pal 2010). Boldt, Salvio, and Taubman (2006), however, argue for the importance of psychoanalytic perspectives. They suggest that demands “for outcomes assessment, high-stakes testing, standards, accountability, and educational quality assurance” entail that “educators find it increasingly difficult, even starting in children’s earliest years, to make room for their own and their students’ subjectivities, idiosyncrasies, creativities, and emotions” (3). My dissertation notes precisely this difficulty of recognizing the impact of psychic and emotional dynamics in the context of policy research as well, where it is not just teachers’ and students’ subjectivities that are in question but also those of parents, legislators, education activists, community members, and bureaucrats.

Lisa Farley (2015) highlights strikingly similar difficulties in her research on a notable forerunner to my discussion of psychoanalysis and educational policy. Psychologist Marion Milner’s (1938) *The Human Problem in Schools: A Psychological Study Carried Out on Behalf of the Girls’ Public Day School Trust* discusses her study of a group of British independent girls’ schools in the years leading up to World War II. Farley (2015) traces the way Milner’s approach to the study changed as psychoanalytic theory came to increasingly influence her thinking. In earlier interim reports to the school trust’s leadership, Farley

argues that Milner focuses on identifying shortcomings and wasted resources, and on providing lengthy lists of policy recommendations to address the troubles her study found. While this is certainly an understandable—and typical—approach, Farley argues for the value of a different orientation that supports educators and administrators to symbolize the anxiety underlying debates over the best way forward. As Milner turns to a psychoanalytic approach, her policy analysis of the Day School Trust becomes less focused on the mastery of educational problems and their solutions and more attentive to education—and educational research—as endeavours that are shaped by unsolvable emotional, relational, and developmental conflicts of love, hate, anxiety, and helplessness. This is what Milner (1938) meant by the “human problem” in schools, and it is also the human problem in debates over the policies that ground the organization and practice of education. This swirl of emotion engulfs not just students, but teachers, administrators, parents, and the researcher herself.

Critical approaches to educational policy research have already opened the field to consider a wider range of actors and a broader set of forces that participate in the policy process (Young and Diem 2017; Viczko and Riveros 2017). CPA has been conceptualized and undertaken in ways that are influenced by many disciplinary approaches, including sociology (e.g., Ball 1990; Ball 1997; Martino and Rezai-Rashti 2012), history (e.g., Gale 2001; Winton and Brewer 2014), and anthropology (e.g., Koyama 2011; Shore, Wright, and Però 2011). Across disciplinary boundaries, these critical approaches expose unequal power relations at work in policy documents and processes. Mobilized by social justice orientations, CPA exposes the limits of efficiency models in policy studies for the way they efface the role of social difference and identity in contexts of teaching and learning (e.g.,

Ball 1997; Chase, Dowd, Pazich, and Bensimon 2012). These researchers view policy as inherently political, and they challenge the rational, positivist assumptions of traditional policy research. For instance, Stephen J. Ball (1997) argues that “epistemological development within the human sciences, like education, *functions politically* and is intimately imbricated in the practical management of social and political problems” (263; italics added). He warns against a disavowal of this imbrication:

The idea that human sciences like educational studies stand outside or above the political agenda of the management of the population or somehow have a neutral status embodied in a free-floating progressive rationalism are dangerous and debilitating conceits. (264)

To fail to attend to the political dimensions of policy is to risk ignoring the power relations and social inequalities that are reproduced by the policy process. Ball goes on to propose a more reflexive approach to policy that emphasizes context, recognizes the many parties implicated in policy processes, considers the unequal social positions of policy actors, and highlights the ethical stakes of policy-making.⁷ This widening of the definition of policy makers is important for my project, which foregrounds relationships, contexts, and, in particular, parents as significant actors in the educational policy process.

Although CPA challenges rationalist assumptions about policy-making, draws attention to the structures of power that policy serves and reproduces, and acknowledges a far wider spectrum of policy actors, it often tends to assume a rational subject while occasionally noting the affective content of heated policy debates. For example, Jenny Ozga

⁷ Ozga (2000), too, challenges the traditional categorization of government actors as the only policy actors that matter; she argues that other figures in the realm of education, such as teachers, play important roles in the policy process as well.

(2000) views policy as a “process [...] involving negotiation, contestation, or struggle between different groups who may lie outside the formal machinery of official policy making” (2). This perspective identifies the significance of conflicts over policy, but it does not emphasize the emotional content of these conflicts or interrogate their psychic dynamics. Stephen J. Ball, Meg Maguire, and Annette Braun (2012) hint at the psychic fantasies—more specifically, the idealizations—at play in educational policy narratives when they suggest that “policy texts are typically written in relation to the best of all possible schools,” adding that these “best” schools exist not in reality but in “the fevered imaginations of politicians, civil servants and advisers and in relation to fantastical contexts” (3). My use of a psychoanalytic lens in this dissertation delves into the “fevered imagination” observed here to further explore the role of emotion in policy debates that is sometimes raised, but seldom examined, by critical approaches to policy research. In developing an approach to policy research that uses psychoanalytic and psychosocial theory to foreground the study of emotion, I add yet another agent—the agent of the unconscious—to the field of CPA, with a view to consider how this focus on emotion may constitute a new strand in its multidisciplinary complement of approaches.

The Study of Emotion in Existing Educational Policy Research

While relationships between emotion and the policy process have received scant attention in educational policy research, there are a few cases in which policy scholars have investigated these relationships. In some of these cases, affect theory is used as a key

theoretical lens.⁸ For example, Marcia McKenzie (2017) argues for studying the impact of affect on policy mobilities, including its actors, networks, documents, and data.⁹ She contends that an attention to the role of affect in the movements of policy can provide a useful perspective for understanding dynamics of “uptake and resistance” of policies (187), particularly in polarized or conflictual contexts. Affective analysis is important, McKenzie writes,

in current turbulent political policy contexts where matters of fact are increasingly dismissed in favor of emotional rhetoric, when the seemingly impossible becomes the new reality, when policy mandates oppressive to human and planetary life become further regularized and violent. (200)

McKenzie is concerned with how facts become subject to fantasies that are used to make claims about a “new reality” that can impact and even destroy lives. Sam Sellar (2015) also draws on affect theory, in his case as a resource to analyze the relationships between affect and the increasingly common use of data in educational policy processes. He argues that the impact of performance data on educational policy comes not just from rational analyses but also from the “affective intensities” that the data provokes (132) and the “affective sense-making” through which data is understood and represented (142). For example,

⁸ The use of affect theory by educational policy scholars to explore the affective dimensions of policy making demonstrates that the psychoanalytically informed psychosocial framework is far from the only way to study these affective dimensions. I discuss my reasons for choosing my particular theoretical lens below, as well as throughout this chapter.

⁹ The study of policy mobilities “has developed out of urban and economic geography over the past decade and” focuses on “the globalized influences and movements of policy” (McKenzie 2017, 188-189).

performance metrics, with their attendant judgements, rewards, and punishments, function, in part, through the affective responses they elicit.

Other projects exploring the emotional aspects of educational policy approach the topic through the lens of emotional geographies. For instance, a special issue of the journal *Emotion, Space, and Society* on “Emotional Geographies of Education” brings a focus on emotion to various aspects of educational studies, including educational policy (Kenway and Youdell 2011). One article in the special issue, by Karen Nairn and Jane Higgins (2011), explores the ways that certain emotions are produced by an Alternative Education policy initiative in New Zealand. Part of a suite of neoliberal reforms of the national education system, Nairn and Higgins note that these policy changes “had particular consequences for the emotional landscape of the education sector and for the emotional experiences of students whom schools found ‘difficult’” (180). Students in one Alternative Education program perceived it as a place of “refuge” from their alienating experiences in mainstream schooling, while also experiencing continuing alienation from their peers in the mainstream system through being funneled into a separate, more marginalized educational space with fewer resources (185). Similarly, Rosalyn Black (2015) writes about the emotional geographies surrounding the enactment of citizenship education policies and programs in Australian schools, with a particular focus on those situated in socioeconomically marginalized communities. Black finds that teachers who initiate active citizenship education programs in two low-income communities experience complex rewards and risks in that work, which range from the satisfaction of feeling like an agent of positive change to the discomfort and extra labour of running programs that can be

isolated from the core school programs and at odds with the pedagogical approaches of their colleagues.¹⁰

Several scholars have written about teacher's emotional responses to educational policy change and reform. Andy Hargreaves' studies find that teacher's emotional reactions to change depend on both their career stage (2005) and whether the reforms they experience are "professionally inclusive and supportive and demonstrably beneficial for students or not" (2004, 303). In Michalinos Zembylas' (2010) analysis of contemporary research in this area, he argues that "educational change [...] is inevitably a deeply emotional sense-making experience for teachers," and their responses to education reform are impacted by their social "participation in particular forms of discursive and emotional practices at school" (231). Consequently, Zembylas concludes that educational reform efforts should anticipate and make room for a range of emotional responses from teachers as they form their own affective understandings of the reforms they are being asked to implement. On a related topic, Renée T. Clift and Carl Liaupsin's (2019) review of American self-study research on teacher educational policy suggests that many teacher educators feel the effects of policy *emotionally* and experience policy as something "done *to*" them instead of feeling like actors with the ability to influence policy (56; italics in the original). These studies of emotion shed light on how teachers feel about change, and how, in the case of Clift and Liaupsin's (2019) research, policy can leave them feeling evacuated of agency.¹¹

¹⁰ See also P. Taylor Webb and Kalervo N. Gulson's *Policy, Geophilosophy, and Education* (2015), which draws on the theoretical resources of affect theory and affective geographies.

¹¹ Some public policy and politics scholars outside the realm of education also emphasize the importance of emotion in the study of policy; see, for example, the article by Anna P. Durnová and Eva M. Hejzlarová (2018) entitled "Framing Policy Designs Through Contradictory Emotions: The Case of Czech Single Mothers," which uses an interpretive

Additionally, other educational researchers have conducted research on emotion from the vantage of mental health that has either explicit or implicit implications for policy. For example, researchers have examined the intersections between mental health and schools, including the impact of school mental health policies on educational outcomes (e.g., Clauss-Ehlers, Serpell, and Weist 2013; Morrison and Kirby 2010; Santor, Short, and Ferguson 2009). Researchers have also studied the impacts of positive psychology (e.g., Donaldson, Csikszentmihalyi, and Nakamura 2011; Gilman, Huebner, and Furlong 2009) and emotional intelligence theories (e.g., Bond and Manser 2009; Price 2009) on education, including potential impacts on educational policy. Books, too, have been written examining the wellbeing of children in schools and the impact of the idea of wellbeing on policy development (e.g., Watson, Emery, and Bayliss 2012). However, these bodies of research focus mainly on examinations of curriculum and how improving mental health can strengthen educational outcomes; they are not primarily concerned with the policy process itself, nor with the unruly, uneducable status of emotions at work in policy development and enactment in ways that cannot be reduced to their effects on educational outcomes.

Psychoanalysis, Psychosocial Studies, and Education

Some scholarly research has focused more specifically on the impacts of emotional reactions on school policy through psychosocial and/or psychoanalytic lenses. For example, in her book *Postfeminist Education: Girls and the Sexual Politics of Schooling*,

approach to policy analysis; and the special issue of *Politics and Governance* edited by Alex Prior and Yuri van Hoef (2018) entitled “Interdisciplinary Approaches to Studying Emotions within Politics and International Relations.”

Jessica Ringrose (2013) examines the effects of postfeminist panics about girls' successes in schooling and their perceived detrimental effect on boys' achievement, as well as how these postfeminist discourses impact "educational policy and practice, ultimately shaping the sexual politics of schooling" (1). She names the importance of emotional reactions in this context, stating,

Moral panics and shared group anxieties are a useful framework for thinking about the affective dimensions and dynamics of how public discourses circulate and emotive. It helps us understand the power of some *educational* discourses to grip the public imagination and individual psyches and enliven controversy and fear. (4; italics in the original)

For Ringrose, then, policy both provokes and polices social anxiety about gender and sexuality, with the effect of reinstalling antifeminist sentiments and commitments, including in the educational sphere. Ringrose draws on psychoanalytically inflected psychosocial theory in her analysis, but her focus on the affective turn in social theory at the same time critiques and moves away from psychoanalysis. Valerie Hey and Carole Leathwood (2009) also use psychosocial theory: in their case, to examine the impact of the affective turn on understanding higher education policy in the United Kingdom. They "point to ways in which the regulation of subjects in the field of higher education policy entails power relations infused with subjects' desire, affects or emotions," focusing their analysis on two specific policy areas: the policies surrounding support for "non-traditional students" and "the policy discourse of 'employability'" (102). In these policy areas, Hey and Leathwood identify underlying anxieties about those who stand as "Other" to normative participants in higher education and about the threats posed by social changes such as

increased globalization of the economy and advancing ecological damage to the planet— anxieties that higher education aims to address through its production of “employable” and “emotionally intelligent” graduates (113).

Erica Burman (2013) uses psychoanalytic theory to critique developmentalism, specifically insofar as it informs both policy and practice in education. In particular, she examines the “modes of desire” (71) that drive discourses of development—both “economic and psychological” (70)—that are commonly used to conceptualize normative childhood. Heather Price (2006) also takes a psychoanalytic approach, using the concepts of transference and counter-transference to analyze data from an ethnographic study of an infant school. Price ultimately argues for the importance of attending to the counter-transference in practitioner-research as a source of information about research participants and their relationships. This article’s implications for policy, however, are less explicit and less specific. Finally, Linda C. Powell and Margaret E. Barber (2006) start a dialogue between “educational reformers” and “psychoanalytically informed social systems theorists” about urban school reform and the stark inequalities between urban and suburban schools in the United States (34). Through an exploration of the irrational dynamics of education reform, such as the anxieties provoked in educational actors by an increasingly diverse society, Powell and Barber aim to reframe conversations about the transformative changes needed in the realm of urban schooling.

This emergent body of psychosocially informed policy research indicates that there is an interest among researchers in the emotional aspects of educational policy documents and debates. As noted, a few of these researchers are already bringing psychoanalysis to policy issues, to a greater or lesser extent (Burman 2013; Hey and Leathwood 2009; Powell

and Barber 2006; Price 2006; Ringrose 2013). Written for varied audiences in curriculum theory, educational psychology, social work, teaching, and administration, as well as policy studies, however, they do not compose a cohesive body of literature that constitutes a clear, well-defined, and well-established approach to policy research and specifically not one that explicitly engages with the questions and claims raised by a psychoanalytic study of education. Some of the aforementioned texts have ambivalent relationships to psychoanalytic theory, some draw on it only secondarily, and some do not engage with policy studies as their main object. My aim, then, is to home in on what, precisely, a psychosocial approach to policy research might look like, informed by the writing of psychoanalytic scholars of education, as well as to indicate what its unique value would be for the field of educational policy studies.

At the Intersection of Impossible Professions

Within educational theory, researchers draw from psychoanalysis to re-frame the ways they think about a range of concerns, including teacher education (e.g., Britzman 2003, 2006, 2009), literacy education (Mishra Tarc 2015; Robertson 2000, 2006), theories of learning (Bibby 2011), sexuality (Dyer 2019; Gilbert 2014; Sandlos 2010, 2011), childhood (Boldt and Salvio 2006; Farley 2018), feminist studies of teaching and learning (Pitt 2003; Salvio 2007), and the history of education (Taubman 2012). Likewise, in their chapter for the edited collection *Canadian Perspectives on the Sociology of Education*, Lisa Farley and Judith P. Robertson (2009) argue for the contribution psychoanalysis can make to the sociology of education. Given the significant influence sociology has had on critical policy analysis, I draw from their arguments to support my rationale for a psychoanalytic

approach to policy research. Farley and Robertson start by suggesting that Freud's theories of human development and learning, with their focus on inner life, can enrich the field of sociology. More specifically, they argue, "If sociology offers education insight into the construction of individual identity through the internalization of social norms, what Freud brings to the discussion is a focus on internal conflict" (81). This focus on internal conflict underscores the contradictory dimensions of the human subject, meaning that "human beings move in ways that are beyond and can oppose our conscious intentions" (81). Drawing from this assumption, I propose that policy is subject not only to the conscious intentions it lays out but to unconscious forces of conflict as well. Consequently, the aims and outcomes of policy may encode unconscious phantasies that animate and sometimes undermine conscious intention. In the aim to protect the child, as discussed in the introduction to this chapter, psychoanalysis might unearth a story of the *adult's* desire to be protected from the very knowledge at stake in educational controversies. Policy debates over children's best interests, what their future might hold, and who they can become, may dredge up phantasies that signal the adult's idealizations, regrets, fears of failure, and anxieties about their own (in)significance.

The approach to policy research I propose does more than highlight the conflicted desires and aims of policy *actors*. Psychoanalytic theory offers a fundamental challenge to the very project of education itself. Deborah Britzman (2009) highlights one version of this challenge when she discusses Freud's remarks about what he sees as the three "impossible professions": education, medicine, and governance. In his essay "Analysis Terminable and Interminable," Freud (2002) defines the impossible professions as those "in which, even before you begin, you can be sure you will fall short of complete success" (203). For

Britzman (2009), this impossibility springs from “a constitutive discontinuity, a lack the profession represses, negates, and projects into others” (129). She suggests that, as a result of its impossibility, “the very thought of education causes disturbance” (128). Farley and Robertson (2009) also take up Freud’s contention that education’s aims are impossible. They argue that Freud’s categorization of education as an impossible profession “suggests something elusive about education in terms of common perception, a quality outside the vocabulary of planning, management, and self-mastery” (81). I add to this discussion a psychoanalytic study of educational governance, with a focus on the obstacles and difficulties in policy processes that are often disavowed by an appealing phantasy that teachers, parents, and students simply comply with institutional aims. That is, I suggest that the impossibility of the profession of education is intensified in the area of policy. After all, as previously noted, Freud sees governance as another of the impossible professions. This means that educational policy is situated at the intersection of two particularly fraught social projects. Consequently, we are left with a problem for policy research: if the projects of education and governance are impossible, and the planning and management of education are subject to unconscious emotional forces, then what do educational policy debates actually signify? What are the emotional effects of policy on policy actors and, in turn, of actors on policy? What can it mean to read policy itself as affected by the troubling idea that the unconscious may be the very ground of knowledge (Britzman 1998)? And what new insights might be found in such reading practices for rethinking the work of policy research in education?

While other scholars have turned to affect theory or other theoretical orientations to examine the emotional in the educational, I value the particular tools that psychoanalytic

theory provides to inquire deeply into the “inside stories” of policy actors, to borrow Margot Waddell’s (2018) evocative phrase. In contrast to affect theory’s posthumanist affinities (Dernikos et al. 2020), the distinctly *humanist* orientation of psychoanalytic theory facilitates a focus on the inner experiences of specific human subjects—including the unconscious aspects of those experiences—even as they inform and are informed by those subjects’ participation in the social world as well. My aim, then, is to study how inside stories interact with the social and political worlds of policy-making. Writing about the value of psychoanalytic theory in the context of psychosocial studies, Stephen Frosh (2010) proposes, “It is arguable that psychoanalysis holds something significant for all the other disciplines—specifically, a capacity to theorise subjectivity in a way that is provocative and unique, through reference to the unconscious” (36). This unique capacity is what makes a psychoanalytic theoretical orientation the best fit for my exploration of the under-theorized emotions underpinning educational policy controversies. While policy debates refer to and are shaped by social conditions that affect individual and collective existence in the institution of the school, the unconscious reminds us that those debates (and those who engage in them) are never finally determined by such conditions. Psychoanalysis offers a theory of the subject that is both affected by inside stories and socially situated, while also exceeding any supposed determinism of socialization.

In the discontinuous space between teaching and learning—and, I will add, between policy texts and their negotiation, interpretation, and enactment—Britzman (2009) finds a range of symptoms that characterize the field of education. These symptoms are placeholders of anxiety, and, when we look under the surface, phantasies thrive and drive familiar tropes of the crazy teacher, the abandoned student, the good school, the bad

school, the right curriculum, and the wrong curriculum, to name only a few. Psychoanalytic concepts provide a means to investigate and interrupt some of these familiar educational narratives. While there is an actual curriculum and an actual child at stake in policy debates, there is also an untold discourse of phantasies that shape what is meant by these material realities and that this dissertation seeks to address as a question for policy research. The impossibility of education may seem familiar when we consider the conflicts it produces, its failures to meet its own standards, the exclusion of particular students from its imagined conceptions of success, and the persistence of some students in resisting the aims of their educators. It is thus not a very big leap to posit that education, freighted with its own impossibility, would elicit strong emotional reactions in those involved, including teachers, students, legislators, and parents. My dissertation investigates this nexus of volatile emotions that underlies the governance of public education, with a view to supporting policy actors, including parents, in working through the oft-unspoken phantasies and anxieties that propel policy debates.

Past in Present: The Childhood of Policy, Sexuality, and Education

Sex education is particularly ripe for a study of policy and emotion. Indeed, researchers have long drawn attention to the fact that debates over sex education policy are saturated with anxiety. Janice Irvine (2002), for example, describes late twentieth-century controversy over sex education in America as “a story about emotions, for if ways of talking help turn community debates into pitched battles, they do so through evoking passionate feelings” (3). In her work on heated sex education controversies, Irvine argues that the strong emotional reactions of policy actors, including parents, to sex education are

intentionally provoked through various rhetorical strategies used by national conservative Christian advocacy groups in order to influence local decisions on sex education curricula. Her study's attention to how these groups have "scripted the public conversation on sex education" means that it "is not a community study about how average parents negotiate a path through this highly fraught terrain" (8). My aim, in this dissertation, is to turn the focus to how ordinary parents experience these kinds of debates and how they relate to, respond to, and make meaning from broader social discourses about sexuality and education. In doing so, I take seriously Jessica Fields' (2012) contention that "the affective experiences of learning about sexuality exceed the bounds of rational and predictable knowledge" and this emotional charge permeates debates over related curriculum and policy (11). Emotional reactions to sex education may be socially constructed while also being deeply felt and personally meaningful.

Sinikka Elliott's (2012) research on the ways parents teach their teenage children about sex draws attention to the important role that parents play in their children's education about sexuality, and also to the fact that parents struggle to settle on the right way to approach this responsibility. She describes nearly all the parents she interviewed as "flummoxed when dealing with their teens' sexuality" (3), while also sharing a common view that teen sexual activity is dangerous. To deal with this uncertainty and fear, most of the parents she talked to viewed their own children as relatively disinterested in sex, even if their behaviour suggested otherwise. At the same time, they located the danger of teen sexuality in *other* teenagers. Elliott's research suggests that while many parents feel a sense of responsibility for their children's sex education, they also struggle with how best to engage with their children on issues of sexuality. Elliott also draws attention to the

significance of the inner lives and experiences of parents in influencing their feelings about their children's sexuality, even briefly deploying the psychoanalytic concept of splitting in her analysis (122). My analysis of the interviews I conducted foregrounds these kinds of psychic dynamics as central to understanding parents' involvement in controversies over sexuality and education.

In my orientation to this research, I heed the critique of sexuality education scholar Mary Lou Rasmussen (2010), who challenges a common approach to understanding opposition—in particular, religious opposition—to comprehensive sex education initiatives as moral panics or sex panics (e.g., Bialystok and Wright 2017; Irvine 2006; Irvine 2008). Rasmussen contends that the secular logics underlying such a reading can mark the emotional expressions that animate heated opposition either as uniquely irrational or as inauthentic and resulting from political manipulation. In contrast, proponents of comprehensive sex education are characterized as rational, evidence-based, and their underlying values, motivations—and, I would add, psychosocial attachments—in relation to the topic remain relatively unacknowledged and understudied.¹² Rasmussen calls for research that avoids the split between the secular-as-rational and religious-as-irrational so that there might be “a more educative dialogue about the subject of sexuality education” (129).

¹² My intention here is not to suggest that all positions on sex education curriculum are morally equivalent or have equivalent relationships to evidence and reality. Rather, I take seriously the implication of Rasmussen's caution against splitting secular and religious perspectives on sex education into categories of rational and irrational, respectively. Instead, I view the perspectives of all policy actors as informed by both psychic and social elements, both of which traverse and transcend any rational/irrational binary.

In this dissertation, I offer just such an approach to sex education-related policy. Following on the work of other psychoanalytically informed scholars of sexuality education, such as Hannah Dyer (2019), Jen Gilbert (2014, 2018), and Karyn Sandlos (2010, 2011), my distinctly psychoanalytic orientation aims to highlight and explore the varying emotional responses to the topic for their unconscious content, regardless of policy position or religious affiliation. In taking a psychoanalytically informed approach to educational policy research, I argue is that it is worthwhile for policy researchers to consider affective dynamics “such as desire, aggression, fear, neglect, or love” that “structure our attachments to knowledge before the conscious effort to know begins” (Farley and Robertson 2009, 82). Freud’s concept of transference offers a gateway to consider the force of these affective dynamics. Originally conceptualized in the clinical setting, transference refers to the migration of the patient’s phantasies and relationships onto the present situation of the analysis. Transference has also been utilized to consider the ways that early life manifests in the educational setting (Britzman 1998). As Farley and Robertson (2009) explain:

Freud [...] came to understand that teachers stand in for children’s first emotional objects (usually one or both parents) and so inherit ambivalent feelings, even before giving the child *reason* to feel any particular way. [...] The classroom, in Freud’s view, oozes this messy emotional ambivalence from the beginning. (86; italics in the original)

The transference, then, involves the influence of past psychical experiences on people’s expectations of, and concerns about, education. Moreover, this transfer is not just a one-way process: counter-transference—where the analyst’s “unconscious expression”

transfers itself onto the patient—can also take place (Farley and Robertson 2009, 87; see also Winnicott 1992).

Accounting for this two-way process of transference raises important questions for thinking about policy research and controversies, particularly as they emerge around issues of sexuality and sexual health. A consideration of the affective dynamics that structure (and sometimes defend against) policy and curricular knowledge can also offer the ground for working through the anxious pitch of policy controversies. The value of doing so, from a psychoanalytic point of view, is to represent a range of emotional extremes that, left unexamined, would otherwise repeat in idealizations and oppositions that can defend against the complexities—the grey areas—of policy, education, and sexuality. In turning to psychoanalytic concepts as a theoretical lens, the intervention of this dissertation is not to individualize or psychologize complex social and political problems, but to account for the psychological processes through which policy actors, namely parents, symbolize a range of emotions as the ground for working through real and imagined losses experienced in the context of policy changes that affect the care of their children. Admittedly, psychoanalysis is not in the business of making interpretations that can somehow get curriculum “right” or ensure its smooth implementation. Rather, psychoanalysis can help us understand how this very wish—for a perfect curriculum or a certain answer—defends against the conflicts that *do* comprise education, insofar as it is a human (and impossible) profession. While not providing certitudes, my dissertation traces the ways emotional conflicts get invoked, symbolized, and worked through in the context of policy debates over sex and sexuality.

The transference is especially lively regarding issues of sexuality because of its genesis in people's first relationship as infants and their curiosity about their own origins. Highlighted by Freud (1962), children's "sexual researches" (91-92) drive the curiosity that makes education thinkable, let alone possible (Phillips 1998). Yet, I argue that sexuality also challenges the adult project of education in ways that fuel the controversies under study in this work. Writing about Freud's theorizing on childhood sexuality, Adam Phillips (1998) states, "Children want to know about sexuality, but the grown-ups tell them they need to know about something else" (21). He continues, "Education [...] teaches the child either to lose interest in what matters most to her or to compromise that interest" (21). This formulation returns us to Anna Freud's notion of education as a form of interference. Thus, sexuality, tied as it is to prohibition, can feel like a threat in the educational context, inspiring a proliferation of policies to address the anxieties sexuality provokes and, in turn, inciting controversies as those anxieties are rekindled by the policies themselves. Moreover, the transference means that adults' libidinal histories of attachment become tangled in their views on sexuality and education.

Gilbert (2014) provides a vivid example of this convoluted relationship in her consideration of the *It Gets Better* social media campaign. The campaign consists of a collection of videos recorded by lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) adults in the attempt to reach struggling LGBTQ youth with the message contained in the campaign's name. Of the mode of address espoused by the campaign videos, Gilbert writes, "As much as this 'you' reaches out into the contemporary world of lonely LGBTQ youth, the 'you' also reaches back: the other 'you' to whom these narratives are addressed is the 'you' that is me, albeit in another, earlier age" (55). In the videos, Gilbert argues, the LGBTQ adult

is addressing the queer child they once were. The tangled relationship between adult and child can also be seen in educational policy regarding sexuality and sex education, where adult parents, educators, and legislators may address their interventions to their childhood selves as well as to children in the present. This unconscious move opens up the possibility of addressing the unthinkable notion of childhood sexuality, both of one's own and of the children in one's care. "Sexuality persists, for all of us," Rose (1992) comments, "at the level of the unconscious precisely because it is a question which is never quite settled, a story which can never be brought to a close" (4). While the topic of my dissertation (and Gilbert's discussion cited here) refers to sexual identity and knowledge about sex and sexuality, from a psychoanalytic point of view, sexuality refers to a much deeper, more disruptive force. This force hints at a history of early libidinal attachments—charged with both love and hate—that, as I argue, returns to animate, and sometimes overwhelm, debates over sex education for children.

The psychoanalytic insight, then, is not only that children's emotional histories will be transferred onto the adult, but also the reverse. The adult brings a childhood history that returns for a second performance in the context of political controversies about the child who stands before them (Gilbert 2014), even as children stand as radically other to adults in their potential to do something new in the political realm. Britzman (2006) makes a similar point in noting the transference as a key dynamic for new teachers in the classroom. She describes how their own histories of education accompany them in their return to the classroom:

Constructions of learning to teach become an exemplary problem for memory itself.

Present conflicts call back and migrate to untimely scenes of childhood, whether

these be the actual childhood or *the childhood of teaching*. And, in the events of teaching itself, beginnings are further distorted because the future that the teacher anticipates depends upon what has already happened. (107-08; italics added)

Borrowing from Britzman's theorization of "the childhood of teaching," I am calling the emotional return experienced by policy actors in debates over education *the childhood of policy*. My dissertation examines this emotional migration in the relationship of parents to the educational policy arena. These policy actors have their own psychic histories of education shaped by their earliest relationships as infants. People's educational histories affect their reactions to and involvement in policy debates in ways of which they may not even be aware. This dissertation project examines this unawareness for its untold significance and, in so doing, highlights the impacts of unconscious dynamics such as phantasy and transference on policy change in the field of education.

Parents as Policy Actors

Of the many policy actors that influenced the two policy cases under study in this dissertation, and other cases like them, parents loom large. I focus on the psychosocial investments of parents in these educational policy controversies, not because they are the only actors to have emotional investments in educational policy that inform their advocacy, but because, more often than not, there can be an assumption that policy is simply the business of teachers, administrators, and board officials who are tasked to carry it out. However, Canadian parents can have complex and intense relationships to educational policy. As discussed in Chapter 1, parents have responsibilities to their children—of care, provision, protection, and education—that are daunting in scope. At the same time, parents

also have to share the execution of those responsibilities, particularly with the state, through institutional initiatives including (but not limited to) regimes of compulsory education.

Parents sometimes fail to discharge their duties towards the children in their care, but so do governments. When government programs are seen to be lacking, failing, or even actively harming children, parents are often the ones who step in, protest, and demand better. Consequently, it is no surprise that they feature so prominently as policy actors in the two cases at the centre of this study. Yet the role of parent advocate is neither universal nor detached from other social realities. Expectations of parents are socially constructed and historically situated. For example, normative conceptions of good parenting place a particularly heavy burden on (North) American mothers through the ideology of what Sharon Hays (1996) calls “intensive mothering,” which she defines as “a gendered model that advises mothers to expend a tremendous amount of time, energy, and money in raising their children” (x). Furthermore, research by Annette Lareau (2011) suggests that the model of the highly-involved parent who advocates for their children’s access to resources, including educational resources, is a distinctly middle-class phenomenon, generally reflecting an individualist orientation to advocacy as well as an availability of time and resources to devote to such advocacy that less affluent parents may not have. Such a parent is often imagined to be white.¹³

¹³ For a recent popular example of a focus on the figure of the white parent in relation to educational policy, see the 2020 *New York Times* podcast series about parent educational advocacy in the United States entitled *Nice White Parents*, which makes a case that white parents are “arguably the most powerful force in [American] schools” (“Introducing” 2020).

However, the image of the vocal, involved parent—including the stereotype of the homeschooling parent—as white and middle-class serves to erase the labour of racialized and economically marginalized parents who oppose, act to change, or create alternatives to educational systems that neglect or harm their own children and their children’s peers. For example, there have been numerous recent examples in the Canadian news of Black parents organizing in response to racist policies and practices in their local schools and school boards (e.g., Boisvert 2019; Boothby 2020), as well as accounts of Black parents in both the United States and Canada who have responded to racism in institutional schooling by choosing to homeschool their own children (Fields-Smith 2020; Daniel 2019).¹⁴ Furthermore, in their interviews with homeschooling mothers, both Cheryl Fields-Smith (2020) and Jennifer Lois (2013) speak to mothers who are living in, or on the edge of, poverty. Ultimately, parents are a diverse group with differing relationships to their children’s schooling. Their influence in the cases under study is undeniable and psychosocially complex. My analysis of the in-depth interviews with five parents that I discuss in later chapters represents a small part of this complexity.

The Psychosocial Dynamics and Political Controversies of Homeschooling

While educational policy controversies over curriculum, resources, or practices tend to conjure the institution of the school, one of the two policy controversies I investigate in this dissertation project—the 2012 debates over a new reference to human rights

¹⁴ In an essay about sleep-training her baby during the period of widespread protests in the United States against police brutality and racism after the police killing of George Floyd, a Black man, in Minneapolis in May 2020, writer Idrissa Simmonds-Nastili (2020) states, “Being a black mother is its own form of activism.”

legislation in Alberta's proposed *Education Act*—involves parents who are engaged in homeschooling. I see the dynamics of transference, phantasy, and the impossibilities of education and governance discussed above as highly relevant to understanding the Alberta policy case, insofar as parents bring histories of attachment and learning to the endeavour of educating their own children. Research focusing specifically on homeschooling also helps to shed light on the unique aspects of this pedagogical arrangement, offering not only a context for understanding the Alberta case discussed in Chapter 4, but also a frame to think about the fuzzy boundaries between parent and educator, home and school, that play a part in both of the policy cases under study in this dissertation.

Homeschooling is most prevalent in the United States and, as a consequence, a large proportion of the academic literature on homeschooling focuses on the American context (Gaither 2017, 2). The relatively small amount of scholarly literature that does focus on homeschooling in Canada indicates that there are many similarities with the American equivalent, as well as some notable differences. In terms of similarities, the trajectory of the development of homeschooling in Canada, starting in the late 1960s, is broadly understood to be similar to its development in the United States, albeit a few years behind (Brabant and Dumond 2017, 272). The growth of homeschooling in both countries was influenced by some of the same people and publications, such as the writings of educator John Holt (273). Existing literature on homeschooling in Canada discusses the motivations parents have for homeschooling (e.g., Arai 2000; Davies and Aurini 2003; Aurini and Davies 2005) and the legal questions surrounding how much power parents have to shape and control their children's education (Blokhuis 2010). This literature informs my study of the Alberta policy case, but questions nonetheless remain for my dissertation project to investigate about

why a legislative update that had no apparent intent to change restrictions on homeschooling parents in the province, as discussed in the introduction, could ignite such heated and influential resistance.

One notable feature of the policy landscape in which Canadian homeschooling came to be established is that homeschooling was never forbidden by law in any Canadian provinces, as it was in several American states (Brabant and Dumond 2017). Consequently, the fights for legalization—or over whether homeschooling was, in fact, already legal—that are a key characteristic of the modern history of American homeschooling (Gaither 2008) do not have a clear analogue in the Canadian context. However, broader themes related to conflicts over who should control children’s education, themes that feature prominently in the Alberta policy case, can be found throughout the literature on homeschooling. In the introduction to her edited volume *International Perspectives on Home Education: Do We Still Need Schools?* Paula Rothermel (2015) summarizes the dynamic in the following way:

The concept of home education brings two fronts. There is the question of whether or not parents are capable of delivering an education and includes discussions of parental ability, self-interest issues, mental health (child and parent-separation anxiety, school refusal, etc.) and one of registration (includes debates over criminalization of non-registering parents, quality and equivalency of provision for all children, inspection, safety, etc.). One might argue that the same force governs both dilemmas, that of control. Who should be in control: parents or the state? Whose right is superior? (6)

This conflicted question of control over children’s learning opportunities echoes throughout my research project as parents and governments struggle to answer it and advocate for their position to be reflected in policy.

The conflicts that fuel questions of educational authority are also influenced by another factor that is highlighted in the homeschooling literature and shows up as an important theme in the interviews I conducted with parents: that of the distinction (or lack thereof) between the role of parent and the role of educator. Robert Kunzman (2012) explicitly links this set of themes to the matter of children’s best interests. He acknowledges that learning outside of institutional schooling happens for all children, regardless of whether they are homeschooled. He uses the term “Life as Education” (abbreviated as LaE) to refer to this kind of learning. When it comes to the question of how the practice of homeschooling influences understandings of the distinction between parent and educator—and the consequent question of the extent to which the former figure should also take on the latter role—Kunzman writes,

Much of LaE occurs well beyond the contours of formal schooling and is embedded in the domain of child rearing—long recognized as the responsibility and privilege of parents, and upon which the state cannot intrude (absent evidence of neglect or abuse). In homeschooling, however, LaE and schooling are often deeply interwoven. So if homeschooling is seen as simply part of parenting, it becomes clear why many parents who homeschool view regulations as unjustifiable intrusions into their sacred domain. (76)

As Kunzman points out, the specific educational arrangement of homeschooling highlights the tensions and ambiguities inherent in the blurry and contested boundaries between

parents and the role of the state as educator, or at least as education provider. That being said, an exploration of those tensions and ambiguities “holds implications that extend far beyond the homeschooling phenomenon” (77), as Kunzman notes, which makes the inclusion of the homeschooling policy case from Alberta especially valuable in the context of this project and its investigation of the psychosocial implications of policy controversies that put parents at odds with government.

Lois’s (2013) study of American homeschooling mothers focuses on another set of themes that is central to my discussion of the Alberta case: the emotional aspects of both the labour and the identities of homeschooling. These emotions are strongly impacted, Lois argues, by the stereotypes commonly expressed by others that homeschooling parents, and especially mothers, are defective parents who are damaging their children “by depriving them of the opportunity for ‘normal’ development in four areas: academic, social, moral, and relational” (184-185). This set of stereotypes, she concludes, is based on an impression that homeschooling mothers have specific emotional defects: “Homeschoolers’ stigma as maternal deviants was anchored in what outsiders perceived to be their *emotional* deviance, in this case, holding ‘too much’ of the ‘right’ maternal emotions—confidence, protectiveness, moral conviction, and attachment” (185). These mothers, in turn, defend against this stigma by justifying these supposedly excess emotions as instead being evidence of good mothering, “argu[ing] that mothers can never feel ‘too much’ of these important emotions” (186). In relation to my study, these findings are significant because they suggest the social *and* emotional complexity that can result from parents taking an unusually active role in their children’s education, and from homeschooling in particular. The emotional accusations contained within stereotypes of homeschooling mothers also

speak to the ways in which those mothers may feel called into question by those in their social world who are not part of the homeschooling community. Experiencing the negative judgments that result from this kind of stigma may affect these mothers' motivations to push back against perceived intrusions into their autonomy as educators of their children. This maternal dynamic of having to defend a homeschooling position will return in my analysis in Chapter 4.

Having discussed some of the academic literature on homeschooling more generally, I now turn to the existing research that specifically focuses on the two policy cases under study in this dissertation, beginning with the Alberta policy case. These bodies of scholarly work provide some helpful context for understanding the two cases, and they gesture toward some of the emotional dynamics at play in each controversy. Through my discussion, I indicate how my research enters into conversation with this existing research and, in some cases, addresses gaps or unanswered questions that remain.

Existing Academic Research on the Alberta Policy Case

While a moderately sized body of research exists on homeschooling in general, very little in the way of academic writing exists on the 2012 debate over Alberta's *Education Act* and its impact on homeschooling families. I found two academic journal articles that substantively discuss this policy controversy: one by a political scientist and one by two legal scholars.

Clark Banack (2015) conducted a qualitative study inquiring into the extent and nature of the influence of religious educational advocacy organizations on educational policy in Alberta. He highlights three contentious educational policy debates that took place

in Alberta between 2009 and 2015 as indications of the influence of faith-based advocacy, and one of them is the 2012 debates over the *Education Act*—the Alberta controversy this dissertation examines as well. Banack’s particular interest in the policy case pertains to the key role played by the Alberta Home Education Association (AHEA) in pressuring the government to remove the mention of the *Alberta Human Rights Act* in what was Section 16, although he also notes that AHEA’s efforts were “aided in turn by smaller grassroots parents organizations and a number of largely unaffiliated religious private and Catholic public school supporters” (938), as well as the advocacy of the Alberta Catholic School Trustees Association (940). Banack writes, “AHEA has demonstrated a superb mobilization capacity that clearly caught the attention of Alberta legislators in 2012” (942). He also notes that the group’s success at convincing the government to change the *Education Act* might have been made more likely by the fact that secular education advocacy groups were not mobilizing in the same way to put opposing pressure on the government, partly because some believed the new reference to human rights legislation would have little substantive effect, one way or the other (943-944). Banack ultimately concludes that certain contextual factors, such as the Progressive Conservative government’s interest in maintaining support in rural areas of the province, which tend to be more socially conservative than Alberta’s cities (947), as well as the rise of the right-wing Wildrose party in the polls (948), created favourable conditions for AHEA and its allies to win the day.

Banack’s study underscores the important role that homeschooling parents played in the 2012 debates over the wording of Alberta’s *Education Act*. His focus on the role of faith-based education *organizations* (and their relationships with the Alberta government) in shaping policy also helps to fill out some of the broader social and political context in

which the parents I interviewed were experiencing—and participating in—the controversy.

The other discussion I found in the academic literature regarding the Alberta policy case is an article in a legal journal making the case for why homeschooling should be made illegal in the United States. Martha Albertson Fineman and George Shepherd (2016) employ vulnerability theory to make their case for the prohibition of homeschooling, and their arguments are also grounded, to a significant extent, in American historical, social, and legal contexts. Overall, their main argument is not particularly relevant to this research project, but it is notable that they briefly turn, perhaps surprisingly, to the *Canadian* example of the Alberta policy case to support their arguments. After a description of the controversy—one that, unfortunately, contains some basic factual errors about the legislative changes under debate¹⁵—Fineman and Shepherd write,

Homeschoolers' outrage over the possible effects of minimal government regulation of homeschooling within the home is a strong argument as to why homeschooling should not be permitted to displace public education. If a homeschooling parent can be compelled neither to teach civic virtue and respect for law nor to submit to the most basic monitoring and regulation, then the only alternative is to prohibit homeschooling, so that the child will be exposed to those lessons in a school setting.

(99)

¹⁵ For example, Fineman and Shepherd (2016) describe the controversial provision of the *Education Act* that referenced human rights legislation as “reinforc[ing]” the *School Act* (99), but the *School Act* was instead the piece of legislation that the *Education Act* would have replaced. They also state, “The Education Ministry interpreted the *School Act* to prohibit homeschools, private schools, and Catholic schools from teaching students that being gay is a sin” (99), but the controversy in question was over the implications of the proposed *Education Act*, not the *School Act* that was already in place.

While the question of whether homeschooling should be legal or not is outside the scope of this dissertation, Fineman and Shepherd's characterization of the Alberta policy controversy provides evidence of the extent to which homeschooling itself can be provocative and controversial. This is important context for understanding the way the homeschooling parents I interviewed might have come to feel they were under attack by the government. Additionally, it is worth noting that it was Susan, one of my interview participants, who first brought this article to my attention. This suggests that at least some homeschooling parents in Alberta were aware that their advocacy in 2012 was being used to support an argument for making homeschooling illegal—an argument that they would very likely find unconvincing and possibly threatening. Although the article was published after the policy controversy in question took place, it reflects part of the broader social environment in which the parents I interviewed were interpreting and relating their 2012 policy advocacy when they spoke with me in 2018.

Existing Academic Literature on the Ontario Policy Case

Relative to the Alberta case, the Ontario policy case has received much more scholarly attention. Perhaps this reflects the scope of impact in each case. The Ontario curriculum changes affected almost all public school students in that province, especially those in Grades 1-8. In contrast, the Alberta debate focused primarily on the potential impacts on homeschooling families, and, to a lesser extent, students in faith-based schools. The Ontario debates over sex education curriculum also took place over a much longer period of time, and their protracted nature may have served to draw further attention. The body of research relating to the Ontario policy case deals with both the province's 2015

Health and Physical education curriculum, as well as a previous instance in 2010 when a similar updated HPE curriculum was introduced, only to be shelved after just a few days of outcry over the lessons on sexuality (e.g., McKenzie 2015; Rayside, Sabin, and Thomas 2017; Shipley 2015). The Ontario case has been taken up for analysis by scholars from an array of disciplines, including education (Bialystok and Wright 2017; Bialystok 2018, 2019b; Bialystok et al. 2020; Davies and Kenneally 2020; Gilbert 2018; Saarreharju, Uusiautti and Määttä 2020), child studies (Dyer 2019), environmental studies (Larkin et al. 2017), family studies (Davies and Kenneally 2020), legal studies (Gallagher-Mackay and Steinhauer 2017), medicine (Farmer, Fleming, Black, and Dumont 2019), political science (Rayside, Sabin, and Thomas 2017), religious studies (Shipley 2015), social work (McKenzie 2015), and women and gender studies (Larkin et al. 2017). Across this diverse body of research, many themes and topics emerge that resonate with my research, and I enter into conversation with them in the chapter focusing on the Ontario policy case.

Lauren Bialystok and Jessica Wright (2017) analyze media coverage, online reaction, and statements from advocates regarding the initial controversy surrounding the 2015 HPE curriculum to track the ways that racialized discourses of “Canadianness” and the fantasy of a tolerant national identity were invoked in criticizing protesters of colour who were part of religious minorities. At the same time, these same discourses and fantasies were deployed by the protesters in defending their opposition to the curriculum by citing freedom of religion as a fundamental Canadian value.¹⁶ Bialystok and Wright also

¹⁶ Recognition of the importance of media coverage and online activity in shaping the debates over the curriculum can also be found in the work of Saarreharju, Uusiautti and Määttä (2020), who perform a content analysis of the comments posted on an online article from *CBC News* on the 2015 Ontario curriculum update. These comments saw readers weigh in on the following topics: “the conflict between children’s rights and adults’ values

note the prominent role of apparent misconceptions—or possibly even misinformation—regarding the contents of the curriculum in fueling the controversies (6), a phenomenon I discuss in Chapter 5. Bialystok and Wright conclude that their analysis “confirms a growing body of research about the power of public discourse to slant social controversies and fuel unresolved anxieties about democracy, pluralism, and national identity” (12). My research focuses on these unresolved anxieties provoked by debates over sexuality and education, including those that relate to racial and ethnic diversity and belonging, which surface in my analysis of the interviews I conducted with participants in the Ontario policy case.

Bialystok et al. (2020) examine another set of political dynamics at play in the Ontario sex education debates in their article on the way the Doug Ford government’s resurrection of the controversy over the 2015 curriculum fits the mould of contemporary right-wing populism. Through a disparagement of evidence and expertise, a confusing and chaotic roll-out of an interim curriculum to replace the 2015 version, and attempts to pit parents and teachers against each other, Bialystok et al. argue that Ford’s Progressive Conservative government was deploying typical populist strategies that prepared the way for government cuts to public education.

While the two articles discussed thus far focus on macro-level political discourses and their impact on the conflicts over sex education, other research focuses on stakeholders who are affected by (and affect) policy change in the realm of sex education. June Larkin et al. (2017) revisit results from a survey conducted in 2006 and 2007 with

(19.4% of the comments),” “political questions regarding the reform (15.7% of the comments)”, and “the appropriate timing of sex education (10.6% of the comments)” (618). In comparison, only a few comments called into question whether an update to the curriculum was necessary (618).

over 1,200 youth in Toronto that asked them “about sexual services available to them, the accessibility of those services, where they got their sexual health information, and what kind of information they needed” (7). Larkin et al. use these results to analyze the 2015 HPE curriculum, and they highlight the ways that curriculum would better meet the needs identified by youth in the survey in comparison to the previous curriculum—as well as ways it might continue to fall short. More broadly, Larkin et al. point out that debates over sexuality education curriculum often focus heavily on the opinions and input of parents, while the voices of young people receive much less attention (4). My dissertation research does not redress this gap in the public conversations, but Larkin et al.’s point also gives context for why understanding parent involvement in these kinds of controversies is so important—because (some) parents’ voices get privileged in particularly significant ways.

Some of the other scholarship on Ontario’s recent sex education controversies specifically takes up the role of parents.¹⁷ Bialystok (2018) lays out a philosophical argument for why parents should not have the power to opt their children out of comprehensive sex education instruction, such as that which was offered by Ontario’s 2015

¹⁷ In their book *Pushing the Limits: How Schools Can Prepare Our Children Today for the Challenges of Tomorrow* (2017), law and education scholar Kelly Gallagher-Mackay and principal and educational leader Nancy Steinhauer devote a section of the chapter entitled “The Children We Share” to the conflict between parents and the government that characterized a large part of the Ontario sex education controversies. While the book is geared to a more general audience than the other articles and books discussed in this section, it is important to mention for one reason in particular: their account of the controversies includes an interview with a parent in Thorncliffe Park who opposed the curriculum, pulled his children out of the local public schools, and eventually re-enrolled them while choosing have them opt out of the lessons on sexual health. This interview, while discussed only briefly by Gallagher-Mackay and Steinhauer, shares some similarities with the interviews I conducted, insofar as it portrays a parent’s perspective on his involvement in the policy case in a more sustained manner than the short quotations included in news media coverage.

HPE curriculum. She argues that allowing parents to shield their children from such lessons undermines one of the curriculum's key mandates—to combat social ills such as homophobia and sexual assault—and that the provision of the curriculum constitutes a case in which the parent's wishes do not necessarily align with their children's best interests or the best interests of other children in the community. While an assessment of the merits of the curriculum is not the focus of this dissertation, nor is the question of whether it should be mandatory for students whose parents object to it, Bialystok's article once again highlights the important role of parents in influencing the provision of Ontario's sex education curriculum and mediating students' access to it, as well as the murky (and hotly contested) status of where parents' powers end and the state's powers begin when it comes to educational matters. Furthermore, she suggests that the government "should try to provide the best possible justification for the curriculum, both in order to minimize dissent and in order to meet its own legitimacy requirements," and she argues "that there are persuasive defenses available for the [2015] sex education curriculum in Ontario" (25). While the Liberal government that introduced the curriculum mounted a spirited defence of its merits, these justifications did not seem to have a significant effect on allaying the intensity of the opposition. My turn to considering parents' positions on this curriculum from a psychosocial perspective, instead of evaluating the competing arguments on a solely rational basis, provides different kinds of insights into why and how parents participate in these kinds of debates, and what the significance is of that participation.

Adam W. J. Davies and Noah Kenneally (2020) also comment on the status of parents in the conversation over sex education in Ontario. In the course of their argument

for crippling¹⁸ both sexuality education and the liberal human rights framework that often underpins conversations about it, they comment on the fact that when the controversy in Ontario is framed in terms of parents' rights vs. children's rights, the debate creates a kind of polarizing alienation that disavows the interdependence of not just disabled children, and not just all children, but *all people*. This insight recalls Wall's (2010) conception of an ethics that takes children's dependence—and, relatedly, human interdependence—as its starting point. Davies and Kenneally's (2020) argument is also notable in the context of my research because of the ways that debates over the 2015 curriculum seemed to strike such personal notes for some parents in relation to their sense of their duty of care for their children. Davies and Kenneally draw, in part, on Dyer's (2019) piece addressing the Ontario sex education curriculum and its attendant controversies. Dyer's analysis is particularly significant for my project because of her deployment of a psychosocial perspective, and her use of psychoanalytic theory in particular, to understand the affective intensity of debates over sex education. Dyer does not focus her analysis on parents specifically, but rather on the investments of adults more generally in an approach to sex education that shores up fantasies of both adult certainty and childhood innocence regarding sexuality. Dyer writes,

No matter one's opinion on the topic of the child's sexuality, it will be made from the traces of our own experience of learning and our own fantasies of love and revenge against parents, educators, friends and community. Moral responses, from all sides

¹⁸ Davies and Kenneally (2020) define crippling in the following way: "To cripp means to reclaim the term 'crip' as part of a disabled identity [and] to find value in that which is devalued while problematising taken-for-granted norms and ideologies that reproduce ableism" (368).

of the debate, demonstrate how the adult's affective responses to sex-ed curriculum are regulated by the impingement of social pressure to protect the child and prepare for the future. (744)

For Dyer, then, the realm of sex education is one that provokes a return to adults' developmental and educational histories—histories that, in turn, inform their sense of responsibility for children. My psychosocial approach to researching the policy controversies in this study resonates with, and draws from, Dyer's theorizing about the intergenerational and intra-psychic dynamics at play in negotiating the shape of sex education for children.

In a more recent article, Bialystok (2019b) turns her attention to teachers, another group of key policy actors who are sometimes overlooked. She discusses the results of a 2017 survey of 117 Ontario HPE teachers regarding the updates to sex education, after the 2015 curriculum had been introduced in schools by the Liberals and before the Progressive Conservative government was elected and withdrew that curriculum for Grades 1-8 to hold more consultations. Overall, the surveyed teachers supported the 2015 curriculum changes.¹⁹ Of note for this dissertation project, a significant proportion of the teachers had

¹⁹ Notwithstanding this suggestion that the 2015 curriculum may have had widespread support from teachers, medical researchers Elise Farmer, Nathalie Fleming, Amanda Black, and Tania Dumont (2019), who surveyed sexual health educators in one Ontario school board in the spring of 2016, found that just 85% reported that their schools had a program in place to teach sexuality education and some reported "teaching mostly about abstinence" (836). This is not necessarily an indication of teacher resistance to the new curriculum; Farmer, Fleming, Black, and Dumont note, "After study completion, numerous emails were received from teachers interested in receiving additional resources" (837), indicating that a lack of support and training might have been a significant factor in the way these teachers were approaching lessons on sex education.

personally experienced resistance from parents to the new curriculum. Bialystok writes, “43% said that they had encountered opposition to the curriculum as teachers, mostly in the form of students being withdrawn from class by their parents” (19). When asked to identify the specific concerns of the curriculum’s opponents, the teachers named “age-appropriateness, parental role, religious freedom, and sexual encouragement” (21). These teachers also identified what they believed to be explanations for the opposition that some parents and other critics had expressed; Bialystok sorts most of these explanations into the categories of “misinformation, homophobia or intolerance, [and] media distortion” (21). Twenty-nine percent of respondents thought that clarifying the contents of the curriculum was the best way to respond to parental concerns, while a few of those surveyed expressed skepticism that “parental opposition could be reconciled with the curriculum, or that it ought to be” (24).

The survey results outlined above demonstrate that parent participation in these policy debates had wide-ranging impacts, including on the educators who are tasked with enacting the curriculum. It is interesting to note, again, the highlighting of misinformation as a possible cause of parental opposition. Also of note is the belief of some of the teachers that sharing facts with those who are misinformed could be a means of resolving their concerns, which mirrors a commonly held view expressed by other supporters. As my dissertation finds, however, facts do not always easily settle parental concerns over policy documents, because those concerns, I suggest, can be driven by emotional conflicts that transcend the policy in question. On this very point, a small number of teachers expressed doubt that factual clarification would quell opposition. The emotional investments in the debates over the contents of sex education lessons suggest that simply correcting

misconceptions would not have made the controversy go away, since such corrections do not address the discomforts that the very thought of sex education can provoke. My skepticism about the powers of combatting misinformation ultimately provided one of my motivations for undertaking this study.

Finally, Gilbert (2018) examines a specific facet of the public debates regarding the Ontario HPE curriculum. Her paper focuses on two students in Grade 8 who successfully lobbied the government to include the topic of consent in the 2015 curriculum by starting a petition and campaigning on social media.²⁰ Gilbert writes about the phenomenon wherein the passionate advocacy of the two teens' activism in support of consent education, when rendered by adults into the language of curriculum, was transformed into "bland and didactic" conversation prompts (274). As a result, the lessons on consent in the 2015 curriculum demand student compliance with certain protocols instead of acknowledging and engaging with "a much more complicated scene of sexual decision-making than our curriculum and laws admit" (276). Gilbert's work is a reminder of the emotional and social currents that shape and attempt to tame sexuality in school curriculum, and I return to her discussion of the complexities of consent education in my analysis of participant interviews in Chapter 5.

Conclusion

Taken together, the scholarly bodies of research and context discussed in this

²⁰ Gallagher-Mackay and Steinhauer (2017) give a detailed account of this campaign that includes interviews with both of the students involved as well as their media studies teacher, in whose class they developed the project on rape culture that would inspire their activism (129-133).

chapter point to many reasons why making decisions to promote children's best interests can be so difficult, including in the realm of educational policy. In their article on the Ontario government's move to withdraw and review the 2015 sex education curriculum updates, Bialystok et al. (2020) state, "curriculum policy research is intended to expose and analyse processes which, in a functioning democracy, should arguably be transparent to anyone without undertaking academic work" (6). However, I read this less as a realistic description of optimal governmental functioning and more as a wish for an orderly, linear, straightforward policy process that critical policy scholars suggest is not likely to exist (Diem, Young, and Sampson 2019). Policy change is often messy, in ways that range from the mundane complexities of bureaucratic review and approval processes to the public firestorms that can be touched off when political agendas and personal concerns meet in particularly flammable combinations. As scholars of sex education and homeschooling have demonstrated, those two policy areas provide a wealth of combustible material, both psychic and social, and this combustibility is exemplified in the policy cases that are the focus of this dissertation. In the two cases, parents played leading roles as policy actors whose orientations towards the policy changes in question were informed, I argue, by both the social world and its expectations of parents, and by the psychic complexities of adults who are responsible for the care of children in the present while also being answerable internally to their own past childhoods. My psychosocial analysis of interviews with five of these parents in the chapters to come will examine these policy controversies in light of both the external and internal conflicts that they sparked.

Chapter 3

Methodology and Research Design

Working across the three fields of policy, psychosocial, and sexuality studies, my research project highlights a central tension: namely, how emotional conflict shapes public policy and, in turn, how social and political debates may represent something of the inner lives of policy actors. In Chapter 1, I discuss several policy debates occurring in various Canadian jurisdictions over the last ten years. All involve conflicts between parents and government institutions regarding the care and education of children and youth who have not yet reached the age of majority, at which time they attain the degree of autonomy conferred by the legal status of adulthood. Numerous controversies fitting this description have erupted in Canada in recent years. In the chapters that follow, I focus my analysis on two of these debates, in large part because they both refer to policies governing provincial systems of compulsory education. Furthermore, the two cases involved particularly heated responses from parents, politicians, and other concerned members of the public about the issues of sexuality education implied within them. The impassioned nature of the debates surrounding these policy issues makes them especially suitable cases for a study of the emotional aspects of educational policy development. This passion is symptomatic of the emotional and ethical conflicts that underpin notions of children's care, education, and guardianship.

Arguably, the emotional intensity provoked by these debates bears a resemblance to the fraught responses people frequently have to learning about what has been termed "difficult knowledge" (Britzman 1998; Pitt and Britzman 2003). Such knowledge, as Alice Pitt and Deborah Britzman (2003) argue, signifies "both representations of social traumas

in curriculum and the individual's encounters with them in pedagogy" (755). While my research is not about social traumas on the scale of genocide or war, the cases I study provoked debates over pedagogical responses to ongoing social injustices and patterns of violence, such as homophobia, sexual assault, and gender-based violence. Moreover, Pitt and Britzman's two-pronged definition frames a knot of difficulty that is central to my discussion of sex education debates. Not only is the content of sex education difficult, so too are encounters with such knowledge in that they dredge up desire, disagreement, and defences against knowledge, which spill into public debates. Sexuality is difficult insofar as it undoes and often exceeds the prohibitions that may be invoked to control the unruly force of desire it also unleashes (Pitt and Britzman 2003). This is particularly the case when sexuality is brought to bear on notions of childhood and education, because both concepts have been historically linked with innocence. Whether or not the text of the policies in question appear to grapple with the topic of sexuality, issues of innocence, bodies, sexual identity, desire, pleasure, and prohibition surface in each of the controversies over the two policy cases below. As such, these cases provide lively sites of inquiry into contested realms of knowledge that are made from the interplay between constructions of children's best interests and anxious phantasies of education into which my research inquires.

In this chapter, I discuss my methodological approach to my dissertation research. I explain my reasons for choosing the two policy cases I did for in-depth study. I then go on to describe my data collection parameters and procedures: first, for the data sets of media coverage, and then for the in-depth interviews. Finally, I discuss my psychosocial orientation to analyzing the key themes and issues that arose across the data.

The Policy Cases: Parental Authority, Sex Education, and Public Outcry

The two educational policy controversies on which I focus my study took place in different Canadian provinces, and both arose within the last decade. Consequently, they reflect social and educational dynamics and conditions that are relatively current, and they speak to these conditions in the contexts of two different parts of Canada. Furthermore, each of these two cases have features that made them particularly suitable for inclusion in my study. The Alberta case involved resistance initiated by homeschooling parents to the inclusion of references to human rights legislation in the province's laws governing compulsory education. The fact that one small, and arguably symbolic, provision could lead to such significant opposition, and that such opposition could lead to the provision's removal, indicates the anxieties that inhabit questions of responsibility, censorship, and sexuality when it comes to educating children. An investigation of the emotional and political features of this controversy in Alberta will add to scholarly conversations about homeschooling that were outlined in the previous chapter, as well as drawing from and responding to existing research on debates over the interplay of human rights, education, religion, and governance that have taken place in that province (e.g., Banack 2015; Banack 2016; Filax 2006; Grace 2018).

The second case, in which Ontario's sex education curriculum became the object of a protracted controversy, also saw the trajectory of the policy process impacted by the intensity of the outcry that was provoked, most notably in the Progressive Conservative government's fulfillment of their campaign promise to withdraw and review the 2015 curriculum that had been introduced by the previous government (Ogilvie 2018). This

move was met with significant opposition as well, which may have contributed to the fact that the revisions made to the 2015 curriculum by the new government were not particularly substantial (Bialystok 2019a). Overall, the Ontario case indicates the difficult nature of the issues and conflicts the new curriculum raised for both the government that introduced it and for its opponents. Drawing on the research on sex education discussed in the previous chapter, an investigation of the psychosocial dynamics of this policy case will add to the scholarship on conflicts over sex education in the Canadian context. Taken together, these two cases not only provide vivid illustrations of the affective content of educational policy debates coming to the fore of the narrative. They also illustrate the ways that this kind of emotionally charged advocacy can have real effects on the policy process. These effects demonstrate the importance of research that investigates the psychosocial dynamics of educational policy controversies. In the next section, I describe the types of data I gathered in my study of the two cases.

Data Sources

Media Coverage and Policy Documents

My study of the two policy cases discussed above draws from multiple data sources. First, I analyze media coverage related to each controversy, alongside an examination of the relevant portions of the policy documents under debate: Section 16 of the proposed *Education Act* (Legislative Assembly 2012a) that was under debate in the Alberta case and the parts of the 2015 Ontario Health and Physical Education (HPE) curriculum (Ontario Ministry of Education 2015a; 2015b) dealing specifically with sexual health education in the Ontario case. I focus my media coverage analysis on print and online articles from local

and national newspapers. These articles were identified using the newspaper databases *Canadian Major Dailies* and *Factiva* and supplemented by internet searches.

News articles produced by major media organizations are a key source of current events information—including information on government policy initiatives—for the public (Winton 2010); although print newspaper readership is on the decline, online articles (and online versions of print newspaper articles) continue to be disseminated and shared, increasingly via email and social media channels. Furthermore, Maarten A. Hajer (2009) argues for the important role that media coverage plays in policymaking, and in political controversies in particular: “Looking for ‘interesting’ news stories, the media highlight incidents and crises, not the ‘non-event’ of political stability. The media frame politics in terms of conflict, and hence this is how people perceive it” (9).²¹ Hajer’s argument for the role of news coverage in perpetuating controversy also hints at some of the limitations of media coverage as a data source for a project that aims for a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the psychosocial dynamics of educational policy debates. Media coverage can draw from rehearsed statements and prepared texts, such as media releases, from the various players involved in policy debates. It can also distill complex debates into catchy headlines or produce distorted depictions, due to its frequent reliance on sensational emotional rhetoric and storylines that may neglect the more substantive issues and implications of policy changes (Delaney and Neuman 2018).²² Nonetheless, in an

²¹ It seems important to note, in the context of my study, that Hajer (2009) is *not* arguing that media is the primary cause of political conflicts or crises, even though he notes that they play an important role in advancing narratives of political conflict.

²² While Katherine K. Delaney and Susan B. Neuman (2018) compellingly illustrate the ways that certain kinds of emotional narratives dominated the media coverage of the recent push to universalize pre-kindergarten in New York City, largely at the expense of

age where misinformation is rampant on social media platforms and some politicians base their approach to governing on whichever “alternative facts” they find most convenient, and dismiss the facts they find inconvenient as “fake news,”²³ the mainstream news media plays a vital role in providing information on politics and current events to the public. Furthermore, as key sites where parent and government positions were articulated and disseminated, news coverage provides vivid representations of the political, social and emotional dynamics of debates over education and childhood. Examining media coverage, then, provides important insights into how a policy change has been framed in its introduction to the broader public. This aspect of my method bears some resemblance to Jessica Ringrose’s (2013) approach, insofar as she also analyzes media texts and educational policies, in her case to explore “mass postfeminist panics over girlhood” (7).

Alberta Media Coverage Search Parameters

To assemble the data set of online and print newspaper media coverage of advocacy by homeschooling parents with regards to Alberta’s proposed *Education Act*, I used the newspaper databases *Canadian Major Dailies* and *Factiva* to search for coverage during the period of January 1-December 31, 2012. This time period covers the introduction of Bill 2,

discussing the content and implications of the policy initiative, I take issue with their conceptual approach to the rhetorical strategies they analyze, which treats emotional accounts of the policy (pathos) and logical, reasoned accounts (logos) as mutually exclusive and at odds with each other. My theoretical orientation to the relationship between reason and emotion in relation to the policy process is discussed in Chapter 2.

²³ An aide to former United States President Donald Trump, Kellyanne Conway, used the term “alternative facts” to describe the White House press secretary’s false assertions about the size of the crowd that attended Trump’s inauguration (Bradner 2017). “Fake news” is a terms used by Trump, among others, to attack journalism that reflects poorly on him and his actions, with a view to undermining the credibility of the mainstream news media in the eyes of the public (Sullivan 2020). While Trump is not a Canadian politician, his approach to politics illustrates the value—and vulnerability—of a free press.

Education Act; its debate in the legislature and failure to pass before the legislative session ended; the election that followed; and the re-introduction and subsequent passage of the updated *Education Act* in the next sitting. I searched all the papers in the *Canadian Major Dailies* database, which includes the Alberta newspapers the *Edmonton Journal* and *Calgary Herald*, the national newspapers the *National Post* and the *Globe and Mail*, as well as other major newspapers from across the country. Additionally, I used *Factiva* to search the *Edmonton Sun* and the *Calgary Sun*, since these two papers are significant players in the province's media landscape and are not part of the *Canadian Major Dailies* database. My searches were designed to locate coverage of the proposed *Education Act* that included mention of the concerns of homeschooling parents. After conducting my searches, I assembled a data set of 74 documents: 61 from *Canadian Major Dailies*, 12 from *Factiva*, and one article that I found in a supplementary internet search that had not been captured through the other database searches. The documents in the data set include news articles, opinion columns, and a few letters to the editor. Some articles and columns are either duplicates or substantially similar. This is often the case because similar articles had run in two different papers that were owned by the same company. Of the articles included in the data set, some make only passing mention of the controversy over Bill 2 and its impact on homeschooling families, while many are partly or entirely devoted to the topic.

Ontario Media Coverage Search Parameters

In order to assemble the data set of newspaper coverage for the Ontario policy case, I used the news databases *Canadian Major Dailies* and *Factiva* to search for coverage during two time periods. The first period, from February 1, 2015 to August 31, 2016, spans the time from the announcement by then-premier Kathleen Wynne that a new HPE curriculum

would be introduced to the end of the summer after the first year of the curriculum's enactment. The second period, January 29, 2018 to August 31, 2019, begins on the day Doug Ford announced he was running for the leadership of the Progressive Conservative Party of Ontario and ends a few days after Doug Ford's government unveiled the curriculum that would permanently replace the 2015 curriculum, after the year of reversion to the interim curriculum originally written in 1998. Because of the longer time periods involved, as well as the higher profile of this policy controversy as compared to the Alberta policy case, thousands of news articles were written about Ontario's sex education controversy during these periods. Consequently, I performed narrower searches for the Ontario case than I did for the Alberta case. In the *Canadian Major Dailies* database, I limited my search to Ontario and national papers only.²⁴ In *Factiva*, I searched the Ontario newspapers the *Ottawa Sun* and the *Toronto Sun*. Additionally, I designed my searches to retrieve articles that feature mentions of parents prominently, either in the headline or abstract/lead paragraph.²⁵ Instead of assembling a comprehensive list of every article discussing the Ontario sex education controversy during the specified time periods from the publications in question, then, my searches yielded a subset of these articles that was a manageable size for analysis but also represented a range of views and themes, with a particular focus on the roles and actions of parents.

²⁴ The papers included in this search were *The Globe and Mail* (both online and print), *Kingston Whig-Standard*, *National Post* (both online and print), *Ottawa Citizen* (both online and print), *Sudbury Star*, *Toronto Star*, and *Windsor Star* (both online and print).

²⁵ Since the search functions in the two databases operate differently, this narrowing of search parameters was achieved slightly differently in each case, but with a similar effect in each search.

The resulting data set that I assembled, based on these searches, included 121 documents: 28 from *Canadian Major Dailies* and 20 from *Factiva* from the first date range, and 60 from *Canadian Major Dailies* and 11 from *Factiva* from the second date range. I also included two additional articles, one from each date range, that I had found in other internet searches and that represented themes or content that was not otherwise represented in the aforementioned data set. The data set includes some articles that are either duplicates or near-duplicates. Again, this is usually the result of the same (or a similar) article being published by two different outlets, or because the same outlet had published the article both online and in print (in cases where the database included a newspaper's print and online articles). The documents in the data set include news articles, opinion columns, and letters to the editor. All documents focus entirely or substantially on the debates over Ontario's sex education curriculum.

The In-depth Interviews

In order to delve deeper into the complexity of these controversies, I conducted interviews with five parents, two of whom were involved in the Alberta policy case and three of whom were involved in the Ontario case. These parents participated in the controversies under study through activities such as writing letters to elected officials or meeting with them in person, attending demonstrations, and raising their concerns in parent groups and parent council meetings. Some of the parents I interviewed were in favour of the changes proposed by the government in the policy case in question and some were opposed to them.

I circulated my invitation to potential interview participants through community and professional contacts in both Alberta and Ontario, through advertising the study on

Twitter and in relevant Facebook groups, specifically a group for Alberta homeschooling parents (in this case, my poster was shared by a contact who was a member of the group) and an Ontario group for people involved in parent councils. I also put up posters around one neighbourhood in Ontario where there had been parent mobilization regarding the 2015 HPE curriculum. When it came to the Alberta policy controversy, the parents who had been involved in mobilizing in response to Bill 2 were nearly all homeschoolers, so I concentrated my efforts on finding participants in the homeschooling community. Recruiting proved to be a challenge. While I ultimately found two parents who were willing to be interviewed, my invitation did not yield a great deal of interest, and I encountered some suspicion as to my motives for conducting research on this matter.²⁶ In this respect, my experience aligned with the experiences of some other researchers who have conducted research with homeschooling families; in his book on homeschooling in the United States, Joseph Murphy (2012) notes that “resistance on the part of some of the homeschool community to engage with researchers is legendary” (14). While there could be many reasons for this reticence, the conservative homeschooling parents who mobilized against Alberta’s proposed *Education Act* in 2012 may have assumed from my status as a PhD candidate in Education at a public university in Toronto that my values and perspectives would not align with theirs. This assumption of misalignment may have deterred some prospective participants.

In Ontario, recruitment was also challenging. I made repeated recruitment efforts through various avenues before I received enough expressions of interest that I could

²⁶ One of my interview participants, Ruth, also expressed suspicion of this kind during her second interview with me, which I discuss in Chapter 4.

eventually find three participants who fit the criteria for my study. I can only speculate as to the reasons why recruitment in Ontario was difficult. One reason might have been the time commitment required for two separate 90-minute interview appointments (a factor that may have impacted my recruitment success in Alberta as well). I also noticed, however, that my first significant recruitment efforts in Ontario, in the spring and summer of 2018, coincided with the return of the controversy over sex education to widespread public attention. This chapter of the controversy emerged in response to the promises of the (at-the-time) new Progressive Conservative leader, Doug Ford, to pull the 2015 HPE curriculum from schools and conduct further consultations on the content (Beattie 2018), a promise he followed through on almost immediately after winning the provincial election in June of 2018 (The Canadian Press 2018). My attempts at recruitment during this time, through personal and professional contacts, social media, and postering, yielded no responses at all. During this period of time, supporters of the 2015 curriculum were organizing and holding protests (Ogilvie 2018), and I noticed a lot of media and social media activity relating to this issue. I have come to wonder if my invitation to parents to participate in interviews about the curriculum was getting lost among all of the other content and conversations regarding the same issues. When I made another round of attempts to recruit participants at the end of 2018 and the beginning of 2019, public conversation about the curriculum had subsided considerably, and this time I received several replies from interested parents. In this way, I was eventually able to find the three Ontario parents whom I interviewed in this study.

The sample formed by the five participants I interviewed for this research project was shaped to large extent by the self-selection of those who contacted me in response to

my recruitment efforts. Because of this, and because of the small total number of participants, they are not representative of parents in Alberta and Ontario more broadly. For example, a recent study that surveyed parents across Canada found that a large majority in every region of the country supported the provision of sex education in schools, including on the topics of sexual orientation, gender identity, consent, and the scientific names of body parts (Wood et al. 2021). This strong trend of parental support for comprehensive sex education is not something that could necessarily be gleaned from the sample of parents in my study. Furthermore, the two Alberta parents whom I interviewed have broadly similar points of view in terms of their concerns about the wording of the *Education Act* that was under debate in 2012. This lack of diversity in the participant sample in Alberta may be partially a result of the fact that the parents who got involved in that policy case largely seemed to come from a small subset of the population, namely homeschooling parents with conservative religious views. There were not, for example, large countervailing protests by parents outside the Alberta legislature advocating for the government to *retain* the references to human rights legislation in the *Education Act*. Ultimately, my decision to conduct two-part in-depth interviews with a relatively small number of parents sprang from my desire to provide thick, nuanced representations of a few parents who participated in each of the two policy debates under study, with a view to enrich and complicate the ways that parents are imagined and understood as policy actors in educational research.

The Interview Structure

The structure of the interviews draws from and modifies the phenomenological in-depth interviewing model that Irving Seidman (2013) outlines in *Interviewing as*

Qualitative Research: A Guide for Researchers in Education and the Social Sciences. Seidman emphasizes the importance of attending to context—that is, the social, cultural, and emotional forces shaping the ways in which participants make sense of their experiences. For this reason, Seidman is a proponent of in-depth interviewing. He advises against one-time interviews with participants, warning that this leaves the researcher “on thin contextual ice” (20). Exploring personal context through in-depth interviews is especially important in a study that focuses on the emotional aspects of policy making, given that experiences of emotion are embedded in particular social and cultural situations, as discussed in the previous chapter.

Through in-depth interviewing, I aimed to give participants an opportunity to move beyond the first story they might have told about the policy controversy in which they participated—which may seem straightforward, factual, unitary, and consistent—by asking them to consider the internal and external contexts that surrounded their involvement in the policy debate in question. I interviewed each participant twice, and each interview was scheduled for 90 minutes. The actual recorded interviews usually ran for approximately 60-80 minutes. Each participant was offered \$60 for agreeing to participate, in recognition of childcare costs that might be incurred as a result of their participation. In each set of interviews, the first conversation focused on context by inquiring about the participant’s history leading up to the policy debate.²⁷ Many of my questions contained the word “how,” informed by Seidman’s (2013) suggestion that the question of “how” encourages participants to “narrate a range of constitutive events in their past family, school, and work experience that place their participation in the [activity or event under study] in the

²⁷ Please see Appendix A for the list of questions I used to guide each interview.

context of their lives” (21). For instance, I asked participants to describe how they came to be interested in the policy in question. Questions of “how” invited participants to delve deeper into motives, worries, and desires that underwrite the conscious rationale or narrative of their involvement in the policy debate in question. The questions for the first interview also focused on the details of the participants’ involvement in the policy debate, to get a sense of how the participant remembered their experience of the event. Seidman refers to this part of the interview as a “reconstruct[ion]” (21) of memories of the events themselves, and of details large and small. I further facilitated this type of inquiry in the second interview by asking the question “what was it like?” My aim in so doing was to invite comparison with other events, as well as to solicit metaphors and similes that give symbolic weight to the description. My goal was to open up opportunities for participants to narrate multiple aspects of their involvement in a policy debate in both concrete and symbolic terms through drawing attention to their subjective experience of remembered events.

The second interview, conducted at least a couple of days after the first,²⁸ also returned to questions of personal history and reconstruction of memory from the initial interview. In addition to addressing Seidman’s concerns about the limitations of quick, one-time interviews,²⁹ my decision to conduct a second interview is rooted in the psychoanalytic assumption of “second thoughts” (Bion 1967). That is, I take as axiomatic

²⁸ In practice, the amount of time between the first and second interviews depended primarily on participants’ schedules, as well as my own.

²⁹ Seidman’s (2013) in-depth interviewing model involves conducting three separate interviews with participants. I decided to adapt his method to take place of over the course of two interviews, because I worried that parents would find participating in three 90-minute interviews to be too onerous.

the idea that the activity of thinking provokes previously unthought ideas that inspire continual renewal and revision. The second interview, in this study, was intended to provide a venue for second thoughts and to consider their significance in relationship to the initial thoughts of the first interview. The second interview, therefore, moved to a focus on the refinement of meaning and the making of significance. This phase of in-depth interviewing was especially suitable for my interest in unearthing the emotional impact of policy events. Seidman (2013) writes that this stage “addresses the intellectual and emotional connections between the participants’ work and life” (22). In other words, the second interview inquired after the relationship between the emotional and social realms. In this part of the interview protocol, I was also particularly interested in the question of temporality, because an analysis of transference depends upon the passage of time. I asked participants to reflect on the relationship between their feelings at the time of their participation in a given policy event and their feelings about the controversy in hindsight. In essence, the second interview provided an opportunity to look back at a past set of events and reflect on what significance the events had taken on with the passage of time. Overall, the five sets of interviews offer an in-depth look at the ways emotional and social investments interact, conflict, and converge within adult narratives about educational controversy and policy.

Interpreting the Data

After conducting the interviews, I transcribed them verbatim, with a view to capturing, as precisely as possible, their spoken content, but also pauses, stumbles, and self-corrections as important aspects of the interview data. The interview excerpts that appear in this dissertation, however, are not necessarily rendered in this style. When

elements such as repetition or correction are important to the data analysis, I retain them in the excerpt to support and illustrate the grounds for my analysis. Most of the time, however, they are not material to the analysis. In these cases, I have removed them from the excerpts as represented here, in order to increase the readability of participants' comments and to provide them with a dignified and respectful representation.

When it comes to the way I represent the interview participants, I have spent a great deal of time thinking about what it means to analyze and interpret the narratives of others. This is a question that looms over much qualitative research with human subjects, and I found it particularly challenging to think through in this context where I was inquiring about participants' strong emotions, deeply-held values, and personal experiences. Moreover, the participants held a range of beliefs about sexuality, education, and other issues, some of which were at odds with my own views. In my role as a researcher, I was keen to better understand the complexities of the experiences and values of the participants, perhaps especially those with whom I disagree on matters of conscience, and that genuine curiosity is a key driver of this project. At the same time, I felt—and continue to feel—concerned about what it might mean to make interpretations and arguments in response to the interviews that the participants may not always appreciate or agree with. My aim in this project is not to evaluate the policies and curricula under debate on their relative merits, or to evaluate whose positions on these matters were right or wrong. Nonetheless, I bring my own values and history to this work: my childhood experiences of being bullied in school; my upbringing in a Christian religious community that was mostly (but not entirely) supportive of gay and lesbian rights and inclusion; my membership in extended families in which differences in religious beliefs and traditions were and are

constantly negotiated, resisted, and/or accommodated; my experiences as a young student in a Catholic school (as a non-Catholic), then as a homeschooler, then as a student in a public, secular high school; my involvement in anti-homophobia activism, starting as an adolescent; my previous research work for the two New Democratic Party members of the legislative assembly in Alberta; my past work experience in media analysis and issues management in the Ontario Public Service; and my positionality as a white cisgender woman who is married to a cisgender man, with whom I parent a young child.

These aspects of my history inform my interest in this research, as well as my anxieties about how to “do justice to the complexity of our subjects,” to echo Wendy Hollway and Tony Jefferson (2013, 3), knowing that they might not always be satisfied with my conclusions. By the same token, I found myself worrying about giving the impression that I am excusing some the views expressed at times by some participants that I view as homophobic or giving credence to beliefs about the policies in question that are not supported by evidence. In response to these concerns, I have made every effort to represent the participants’ words accurately, to convey their narratives generously, and to own my interpretations as being mine and not theirs. While I did not engage in any post hoc feedback opportunities with my participants, during the interviews I endeavoured to ask questions of clarification and to confirm my impressions of their accounts, so as to be able to give an accurate representation of the stories they shared. I also looked into contextual information and resources they mentioned in their interviews, such as the academic journal article that Susan brought to my attention (Fineman and Shepherd 2016), in order to better understand the sources that informed their own perspectives.

Data Analysis

The multiple sources of data that inform this study—print and online media texts, and in-depth interviews—were analyzed in conversation with each other, and with the policy texts in question, as they provide a range of perspectives on the same issues. Across the data sources, I have identified key themes in the narratives of education, parenting, and sexuality, such as the anxieties about responsibilities adults have to children, fears about how parents and government go about sharing their responsibilities for children’s education, and concerns about the limits of education’s capacity for addressing and repairing social problems. My focus on and understanding of these themes were informed by my theoretical framework. Because of my conceptual focus on controversies as containers for desire, anxiety, and phantasy, I resisted the urge to treat the data as presenting straightforward facts or self-evident truths. In *Doing Qualitative Research Differently: A Psychosocial Approach*, Hollway and Jefferson (2013) articulate why the assumption of such fact-finding is a problem from a psychosocial point of view. They write, “Treating people’s own accounts as unproblematic flies in the face of what is known about people’s less clear-cut, more confused and contradictory relationship to knowing and telling about themselves” (3). Thinking psychosocially about the subjects of my study, I heeded Hollway and Jefferson’s advice. With this in mind, I took an analytic approach to interpreting the data, which means I attended not only to the conscious, spoken narrative but also to gaps, silences, word choices, metaphors, and repeated motifs as saying something about the emotional content of experiences that are difficult to represent.³⁰

³⁰ Freud sees these kinds of speech phenomena as evidence of the workings of the unconscious; of these phenomena, Britzman (2011) writes, “Freud took the side of this discarded content—obscure mental interventions such as dreams, slips of the tongue,

Analytic interpretation of these aspects of the interviews is necessarily speculative, as opposed to definitive, and aims to highlight complexity rather than catch people out in unintentional expressions. As Hollway and Jefferson argue, a psychoanalytically-informed approach to analysis is key to representing people as the complex subjects that they are. My goal was not to “psychoanalyze” research subjects but to notice how the unconscious may animate understandings of emotional flashpoints that emerge in policy debates. This aim aligns with Seidman’s (2013) warning that the interviewer should not take on the role of the “therapist” because, he writes, “the researcher is there to learn, not to treat the participant” (109).

My approach to psychosocial research also takes seriously Hollway and Jefferson’s (2013) distinction between the work of the clinical psychoanalyst and the “psychoanalytically informed” researcher, the latter of whom is both “taking account of the radical implications of a psychoanalytic epistemology” and “grounded in a research tradition with a set of practices dictated by empirical, qualitative, psychosocial field-based research, which must frame questions of ethics, interpretation and researcher reflexivity” (150). Stephen Frosh (2010), too, counsels a degree of caution when researchers take psychoanalytic concepts outside the world of the clinic when he writes, “The locus of psychoanalytic knowledge is in the clinical situation, so what is being enacted when it moves ‘outside’ is a translation across and extension of psychoanalytic ideas and practices, raising issues about the distortions and possibly creative alterations that take place along

bungled actions, fantasies, witticism, and forgotten memories—and greeted it as an objection to consciousness and as material to be narrated and interpreted” (2).

the way” (36). Ultimately, this methodological approach might prove to be most valuable in allowing for the asking of different kinds of questions that challenge some of the traditional assumptions that qualitative research tends to make—about subjectivity, the social world, and the relationship between them. I thus share in Frosh’s modest hope that psychoanalysis “can be seen as making excursions into the social sciences which disrupt their taken-for-granted positions and augment or even overturn them by insisting that knowledge of the human subject can never be as they believed. Instead, it is always partial, always potentially undercut by some other way of being” (221).

In order to interpret the themes found across the data with integrity, I relied on the range of contextual information found in the media coverage and policy documents I analyzed as well as the personal narratives captured by the interviews I conducted. This allowed me to move back and forth between the psychic and the social in my interpretation, a dual attentiveness that is characteristic of a psychosocial approach to qualitative research. In their text, Hollway and Jefferson (2013) describe precisely this dynamic approach: they articulate a need “to posit research subjects whose inner worlds cannot be understood without knowledge of their experiences in the world, and whose experiences of the world cannot be understood without knowledge of the way in which their inner worlds allow them to experience the outer world” (4). Accordingly, I attended to the ways in which participants experience the social phenomenon of an educational policy controversy and, in turn, how their representation of that controversy suggests something about their inner life. Furthermore, I followed Rose’s (1992) example and read the data in a literary manner, looking for traces of desire, anxiety, and phantasy in the texts I analyzed by attending to the participants’ words, as well as the hints from the unconscious discussed

above. The need for this approach is predicated on the assumption that the texts under study represent difficult knowledge, which resists representation. After all, as Pitt and Britzman (2003) point out, “significant psychoanalytic concepts—namely the unconscious, phantasy, affect and sexuality—all work to unseat the authorial capabilities of expression to account exhaustively for qualities of experience, to view history as a causal process, and to separate reality from phantasy” (756). Thus, a mode of interpretation that reads for hints, slips, and traces is essential for accounting for the difficulties of representing experiences and emotions that animate questions of childhood, education, and sexuality.

To organize and annotate my thematic analysis of the interview data, Hollway and Jefferson (2013) advise against using a traditional “code and retrieve method” of data analysis, because of the way it fragments interview narratives (63). Heeding their advice, I read holistically, paying attention to the context of the set of two interviews with the participant in question as well as the larger context of the policy controversy in which they participated. I made notes in the interview transcripts of themes I noticed that related to my research questions, especially those that arose again and again. I also noted my observations, thoughts, and questions while I read. While this process may have resembled coding in some ways, I took particular care to consider the totality of each participant’s response (and my questions or remarks as an interviewer), instead of attaching a thematic code to a few words. After this process of note-taking, I also used summarizing techniques, as recommended by Hollway and Jefferson, to aid with holistic analysis. For each interview participant, I created a pro forma. This document was a few pages long and “consisted of categories ranging from standard bio-data to comments on themes and ideas that emerged from the whole reading” (65). As Hollway and Jefferson explain, the pro forma is distinct

from the notes taken upon reading through the interview transcripts, because “the notes [are] a way of amassing descriptive detail, while the summary [is] used to begin to convey some kind of whole” (65). Once the pro forma was complete, I used it as a basis to write a pen portrait, defined as a descriptive account that aims to make the interview participant “come alive for a reader” (65) and provide a foundation upon which the subsequent discussion of the participant’s interview can be understood. The pen portraits summarize the stories participants tell about themselves, including information about their identities, histories, and the other aspects of their lives that they chose to discuss when introducing themselves to me in relation to their involvement in the policy debate in question. These portraits are not intended to be complete, comprehensive, unitary, or even internally consistent. Rather, they attempt to summarize the participants’ own representations of themselves throughout the course of the interviews. Each participant’s pen portrait is included in the text of this dissertation, as a way of introducing them to the reader and providing important context for the interview participants’ narratives.

Conclusion

My methodological procedures—both the in-depth interviewing, in which I spent a relatively lengthy amount of time speaking with a relatively small number of participants, and my psychosocial approach to data analysis that avoided a coding process that fragmented the data in favour of reading for themes across larger portions of the text—resist many of the positivist traditions of social science research. Instead of claiming to draw broad, generalizable conclusions about certain populations, my aim in using this research design is to document and interpret a few vivid, detailed narratives of parent

involvement in two policy debates and highlight their emotionally rich and socially significant features. These methodological choices reflect my belief that a psychosocial lens has much to contribute to the field of critical educational policy research, particularly when it comes to better understanding how the deeply personal affective and relational ties between parents and children interact with social forces in the context of educational governance.

Chapter 4

“Whose Kids are They?": Anxiety, Human Rights, and Homeschooling in Alberta

In this chapter, I turn to the first of my two policy cases—the 2012 debates over a new *Education Act* in Alberta—in order to investigate the significance of its emotional dynamics in light of the psychosocial theoretical framework I laid out in Chapter 2. I begin by providing a detailed description of the key events that comprised the policy controversy. This description is particularly important given that these events have received little attention in the academic literature up to this point. I then turn to my analysis of the news coverage of the controversy, demonstrating how the media reflected and emphasized the emotional intensity of the debates. I also draw attention to some themes in the media coverage that intersect and overlap with key aspects of the interviews I conducted with two Alberta homeschooling mothers. I then shift my discussion to focus on the two sets of interviews, with an attention to the psychosocial factors that, I suggest, underpin the emotional significance of this policy case for these two parents.

Setting the Scene

In 2008, Alberta's Progressive Conservative government undertook an initiative to “create a long-term vision for education in Alberta” (*Inspiring Education* 2010). Informed by this initiative, the government drafted the *Education Act*, a new legal framework governing compulsory education in the province. This modern legislation would replace the existing *School Act*, which dated back to 1988 (Hancock 2011b). The *Education Act* was first introduced as a bill in the provincial legislature in April of 2011 (Hancock 2011a), but the government determined that the legislation needed some revisions and it was pulled

from further consideration by the legislative assembly while the Minister of Education, Thomas Lukaszuk, undertook more consultations (*CBC News* 2011).

In February of 2012, Lukaszuk re-introduced the *Education Act* in Alberta's legislative assembly in a slightly revised form (*CBC News* 2012). Given that the Progressive Conservatives held a majority of seats in the legislature, it seemed likely that the *Education Act* would be passed into law this time. Concerns, however, began to circulate among conservative homeschooling families about Section 16 in what was then known as Bill 2. Section 16 was entitled, "Diversity and Respect," and it stated, "All courses or programs of study offered and instructional materials used in a school must reflect the diverse nature and heritage of society in Alberta, promote understanding and respect for others and honour and respect the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* and the *Alberta Human Rights Act*" (Legislative Assembly of Alberta 2012a, 29). At that time, homeschooling families in the province were required to register their children with a public or private school of their choice (French 2020). Consequently, some homeschooling parents with conservative religious views saw this provision as a threat to their ability to teach their children in accordance with their personal values and religious beliefs on matters such as sexual orientation (Boesveld 2012),³¹ which is a protected ground under the *Alberta Human Rights Act* (AHRC 2018).

Susan, one of the parents I interviewed, indicated that she was first made aware of these concerns through the reporting of Patrick Craine for LifeSiteNews. LifeSiteNews

³¹ While the two parents I interviewed mentioned concerns about how Section 16 would impact what they were allowed to teach about other topics, such as sexuality more broadly, marriage, and abortion, the example most often raised in the media coverage was the worry that a human rights complaint could be made if homeschooling parents taught their children that "homosexuality is a sin" (Boesveld 2012).

describes itself as “a non-profit Internet service dedicated to issues of culture, life, and family” and was founded by the Canadian anti-abortion group Campaign Life Coalition (LifeSiteNews, n.d.). An article written by Craine in February 2012 states that when the Ministry of Education was contacted by LifeSiteNews for comment on the implications of Section 16, spokesperson Donna McColl stated, “Whatever the nature of schooling—homeschool, private school, Catholic school—we do not tolerate disrespect for differences” (qtd. in Craine 2012). According to Susan, these comments from the Ministry of Education appeared to confirm the fears of homeschooling parents that the new legislation would prohibit them from teaching their children their personal and religious values in their own homes. In response, conservative homeschoolers began to mobilize. Interview participants described expressing their opposition to Bill 2 by writing letters to government officials, meeting with their MLAs, signing petitions, and attending protests at the Alberta legislature (see also Boesveld 2012; Wingrove 2012b).

While homeschooling families make up a small proportion of Alberta families with school-aged children, and homeschooling families with conservative religious beliefs an even smaller proportion,³² the advocacy efforts against Bill 2 were spirited and ultimately attracted significant media attention. Emotions ran high in debates over the legislation, and Lukaszuk, the Minister of Education, even received at least one death threat with regards to

³² A news article from 2012 about the controversy cited a figure from Alberta’s Ministry of Education that approximately one percent of the province’s students were homeschooled at that time (O’Donnell 2012). Research conducted by the Fraser Institute, a Canadian think tank with a politically conservative reputation, indicates that while some Canadian parents choose to homeschool for reasons related to religion and a desire for religiously-inflected curricula, others are motivated by pedagogical and logistical considerations that have nothing to do with religion (Van Pelt 2017; see also Arai 2000). Thus, the homeschooling parents discussed in this chapter who advocated for changes to Section 16 of Bill 2 are not representative of the views of all homeschooling parents in the province at the time.

this issue (Wingrove 2012b).³³ Lukaszuk explicitly assured homeschooling parents that Section 16 would not apply to parents' instruction of their children at home (Boesveld 2012), in contrast to his own spokesperson's comments as reported by LifeSiteNews, but this did not quell the opposition. One protest drew over a thousand people to the legislature (Kleiss 2012d).³⁴ The impact of this mobilization against Bill 2 is evidenced by the fact that the government passed an amendment that spelled out parents' "right to choose the religious and ethical traditions in which their children are raised" in Bill 2's preamble (qtd. in Kleiss 2012b). This, too, failed to assuage the homeschooling parents' concerns. Instead of a clause in the preamble with no legal force, a spokesperson for the Alberta Home Education Association advocated for home education to be redefined in the legislation, so that Section 16 would clearly not apply to homeschooling (Kleiss 2012b). The homeschooling advocates began to attract allies to their cause, including the opposition Wildrose Party, who expressed their concerns during legislative debate, and the

³³ As I discuss in more detail below, representatives of the homeschooling families that opposed Bill 2 denounced the violent and hateful messages received by Lukaszuk and maintained that they were not representative of the majority of homeschoolers who were advocating for changes to the proposed legislation (Simons 2012; van den Bosch 2012).

³⁴ Susan told me that she and others involved in the first protest against Bill 2 at the legislature felt that the media had under-reported the size of the crowd. At the second protest, she said that the organizers asked participants to sign in, in order to provide an accurate record of the number of people in attendance. She claimed, however, that the media under-reported attendance at the second protest as well. While I cannot verify the size of the crowd at these events, in my media scan I noticed that there were inconsistencies in representations of the attendance numbers. The article cited above, from the *Calgary Herald*, states in the headline that over 1,000 people attended the second rally, which took place on March 19, 2012 (Kleiss 2012d), while a longer version of the same article that ran in sister newspaper the *Edmonton Journal* was headlined, "Hundreds Protest New Education Act" (Kleiss 2012c). This headline gives quite a different impression of the numbers, in spite of containing the same figure ("More than 1,000...") in the body of the article. Both of these numbers, however, are lower than the number reported in the *Edmonton Sun*, which stated that nearly 2,000 people were present at the protest (Rodrigues 2012).

province's Catholic school trustees (Wood 2012a). In spite of the opposition, it seemed that the government was poised to pass Bill 2 before calling a provincial election. However, the government surprised the opposition and political watchers by choosing not to use the legislative tools at their disposal to force the passage of Bill 2 before calling the election (Kleiss 2012e). In her comments after the announcement that she had triggered an election, Premier Alison Redford indicated that the vehement opposition to Section 16 contributed to the government's decision to abandon its attempt to pass the legislation (Kleiss and Gerein 2012b). For the second time, the *Education Act* died on the order paper.

The Progressive Conservatives won the election and once again formed the government. Lukaszuk told the media of his hope to continue serving as Minister of Education (Wood 2012b), but Premier Redford instead chose Jeff Johnson, who started consulting with homeschooling organizations in the province (Wood 2012a). When the *Education Act* was introduced in the legislature for the third time in October of 2012, the reference to programs of study needing to align with the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* and the *Alberta Human Rights Act* had been removed (Gerson 2012a). Instead, the equivalent section of the new bill stated, "All courses or programs of study and instructional materials used in a school must reflect the diverse nature and heritage of society in Alberta, promote understanding and respect for others and honour and respect the common values and beliefs of Albertans," and "must not promote or foster doctrines of racial or ethnic superiority or persecution, social change through violent action or disobedience of laws" (Legislative Assembly of Alberta 2012b, 29). This language was similar to what appeared in the province's *School Act*, which the new *Education Act* would replace (Gerson 2012a). In addition, the latest version of the legislation contained new

language—in the body of the bill, not the preamble—specifying that “a parent has the prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be provided to the parent’s child” (Legislative Assembly of Alberta 2012b, 40). This statement about parental rights was a development that Susan was particularly happy to see, and it exceeded her expectations of what kinds of changes to the proposed legislation the government might have been willing to entertain in response to the advocacy of homeschooling parents like her. With the contentious reference to human rights legislation removed, the third version of the *Education Act* was finally passed into law by Alberta’s Legislative Assembly (Sands and O’Donnell 2012).³⁵

In this chapter, I explore the question of *why* the dispute over the implications of Section 16 became a heated controversy that changed the trajectory of a major piece of government legislation. Key to a deeper understanding of this conflict, I argue, is an attention to its emotional aspects. As a policy dispute, it may appear to be about conflicting human rights, or about questions regarding the definitions and limits of several rights-based concepts, such as parental rights, religious freedom, and freedom of expression. It might even seem to boil down to the applicability of the *Alberta Human Rights Act*, and how its scope is or is not affected by a sentence in another piece of legislation. However, I believe that an exclusive focus on the legal or political aspects of this case distracts from some key drivers of the controversy—namely, the psychosocial dynamics that made it feel so urgent and momentous for certain homeschooling parents who became key policy actors and contributed to shaping the legislation.

³⁵ While passed in 2012, the *Education Act* was not actually proclaimed and enacted until 2019 (*Education Act* 2019).

In both the media coverage and the interviews I conducted with two homeschooling parents who were involved in advocacy opposing Bill 2, human rights discourses are deployed in many different ways. I interpret this language of human rights as standing in for or expressing—at least in part—an anxiety about the uneasy relationship between government responsibility and parental responsibility for the care and education of children. This specific conflict over a fairly generic-seeming statement in the proposed *Education Act* was animated, I suggest, by a persecutory anxiety about government interference in the intimate sphere of the family. This phantasy of a potentially persecutory government served to split the threats of harm that adults can pose to children by attributing them to the dangers of government interference. As I discussed in Chapter 1, this relationship between state authority and parental authority is already a fraught and sometimes uneasy one. The context, however, that made this particular policy issue so incendiary for a specific subset of Alberta parents was one where homeschooling as a parenting and pedagogical practice occupies a marginal status and is subject to crass insults and stereotyping, as well as more deliberative critique. The effects of these negative social judgments of homeschooling parents may be felt especially acutely by mothers, who bear a particularly heavy societal burden, in terms of the expansive roles they are expected to perform, for their children and for society more generally.

More specifically, though, homeschooling parents with conservative religious beliefs in Alberta, and the media commentators, politicians, and other education stakeholders who supported their position, may have been influenced by both the history of the Alberta government's vocal antipathy for legislation protecting lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) persons and the ways in which those homophobic stances have, in uneven and contested

ways, started to be challenged and changed in the province. The fact that people cannot necessarily expect their government to ignore the rights and wellbeing of LGB Albertans anymore may have contributed to the fear that the Progressive Conservative government in 2012 (whose record on LGB issues was distinctly ambivalent) was planning to start interfering in the conversations homeschooling parents were having with their children about sexual orientation and sexuality at home, despite any definitive evidence that this was the government's intention—and that the new legislation would even make this possible. That this reaction to the proposed policy change constitutes *anxiety* and the defence mechanism of *splitting* is suggested both by the emotional intensity of opponents' reactions and by the extreme persecutory scenarios envisaged by commentators and the parents I interviewed. This psychosocial reading helps to shed light on some of the potential reasons that the policy controversy had the amount of traction and impact that it ultimately did.

Media Representations of Homeschooling Parents' Opposition to Bill 2

The news coverage contained in the data set of newspaper and online articles I gathered about the advocacy of homeschoolers in opposition to Bill 2 paints a vivid picture of a heated controversy. Evidence of the emotional nature of this controversy can be found in the media coverage. For example, homeschooling parents are described as being “upset” by (Gerson 2012b), or “tak[ing] offence to” (Rodrigues 2012), Section 16 of Bill 2. These parents are depicted as “worried” about being prosecuted for violating the proposed education law (De Souza 2012; O'Donnell 2012). Fear is also mentioned many times. Parents are depicted as experiencing “fear” about being “dragged before human rights

tribunals” (Gerson 2012b; see also O’Donnell 2012 for a similar example) or about the potential undermining of their ability to pass on their values to their children (Kleiss 2012c). One Postmedia columnist, whose columns discussing the Bill 2 controversy were printed in several newspapers across Canada, described the opposition by homeschooling parents to the bill in this way: “Parents cried out” (Lilley 2012a). In a different article, these parents are described as “angry” (Wood 2012a).

Comments from Alberta’s premier at the time, Alison Redford, also speak to some of the emotional dynamics of this controversy. Just after her government decided not to invoke closure on Bill 2, which would have allowed the assembly to pass the bill before the government called an election, Redford commented to the media on the importance of taking the time to get such an important piece of legislation right. Redford stated, “I think this is a pretty emotional time right now in Alberta, there’s no doubt we’re going to be going to Albertans soon,” referring to the imminent election (qtd. in Kleiss and Gerein 2012a). While she does not mention the protests by homeschooling parents specifically here, her remarks seem to be referencing the pitch of the controversy surrounding Bill 2, as well as the heightened rhetoric that often emerges in the period leading up to an election. After calling the election only days later, some of Redford’s first comments on the campaign trail also addressed the battles over her proposed education legislation. She said, “What we saw happen in the last 10 days in the legislature was a debate about fear and a debate that tried to separate Albertans with respect to education” (qtd. in Henton 2012). While the article is not specific about whose fear Redford is referencing, it seems she is criticizing the opposition Wildrose party for encouraging the fear of homeschooling parents that the government was planning to interfere with their lessons. These remarks by the premier at

the time give further credence to a widespread understanding of the policy controversy as having a deeply emotional character.

While those who support the *Education Act* are described far less often in this news coverage, a letter to the editor from an opposition MLA, Kent Hehr, suggests that they, too, have emotional investments in the debate. The letter, which decries the government's removal of references to human rights legislation in Section 16 from the revised version of the *Education Act* introduced in the legislature after the 2012 election, describes the deletion as "hurtful and regressive" (Hehr 2012a). The aforementioned letter to the editor is also notable because it raises an issue that is largely unaddressed in the media coverage of, and opinion editorials about, this policy conflict: that is, the impact of the controversy on LGB Albertans in general, and students in particular. Hehr (2012a) states that by removing the reference to human rights legislation from the proposed *Education Act*, the "government is sending a message that Alberta's Human Rights Act only applies to some residents and not others."³⁶ The wording of the *Education Act* makes no change to the legal provisions in place that protect against discrimination based on sexual orientation, because it does not change the scope or contents of the *Alberta Human Rights Act*. But the broader point, which is that LGB Albertans were likely to feel hurt and devalued by this controversy and the government's willingness to remove references to legislation that is considered suspect, in part, *because of its protections for LGB people*, is one that is seldom made by other commentators and columnists, even those who support the inclusion of Section 16 in its original form. A similar point is made in a letter to the editor written by a private citizen,

³⁶ Hehr (2012b) makes a similar argument in another letter to the editor on the topic of this controversy.

who worries both about the impacts of anti-gay education on gay children and on all children, who may be more likely to bully and show prejudice towards their gay peers (Doucette 2012), while another letter briefly echoes these concerns about bullying and discrimination (Stelfox 2012). Aside from these letters to the editor, though, the news coverage generally does not consider the perspective of the LGB—or any—student. Discussions of the ethical implications of this controversy—and of the kinds of values-based lessons that the homeschooling parents were so vocally defending—were present in the media coverage but not particularly prominent.

In addition to these explicit mentions of emotion in the media coverage of the debates over Bill 2, the affective intensity of the situation is also hinted at in the vivid language used by journalists and columnists to characterize the debates, as well as by other policy actors who are quoted in the media coverage. Concerned homeschooling parents are described in one article as having “dug in their heels” in resistance to Bill 2 (Cuthbertson 2012). In another article, Alberta Home Education Association spokesperson Paul van den Bosch declares of Bill 2, “Home educators can't swallow this, and neither should any parent in Alberta” (qtd. in Kleiss 2012b). In an opinion column, Frontier Centre for Public Policy research director Marco Navarro-Genie describes Premier Redford as “wielding rights as weapons” through instruments such as Section 16 of Bill 2 (Navarro-Genie 2012). Another article about the “saga” also refers to it as a “political minefield” (Wingrove 2012a). Another calls it “a fierce legislative battle” (Wood 2012a), while yet another describes it as “a major firestorm” (Wood 2012b); both also use the word “fight” as a descriptor (Wood 2012a, 2012b). These metaphors of force-feeding, war, violence, and natural disaster paint a colourful picture of the anxious pitch—and high emotional stakes—of the policy

controversy, reinforcing the significance of the fact that this was not just some intellectual difference of opinion over dry, technical policy matters but instead was being experienced by some policy actors as a threat or even an attack by the government. This sense of threat may have been, in turn, further heightened by the tone of the media coverage.

Another notable thread that runs through the media coverage data set is an attention to moments when the conflict over the *Education Act* provoked more extreme reactions from individuals who opposed the proposed legislation. The aforementioned death threat received by the minister of education receives only a small amount of coverage. For example, one article states that some homeschoolers “sent legislators and journalists vitriolic complaints about the law,” and, “in one case, Mr. Lukaszuk received a death threat” (Wingrove 2012b). Another instance of a more extreme reaction against Bill 2 can be found in a brief—and vague—sentence in an article covering the protest at the legislature that took place on March 19, 2012. That article states, “The protest was peaceful but police were called and took one man into custody after he refused to stop when asked” (Kleiss 2012d). (The sentence appears to be incomplete and it is not clear what the man refused to stop doing.) A different article provides more detailed coverage of another incident that led to police intervention (Massinon 2012). Well-known “anti-gay crusader” Bill Whatcott was arrested while delivering graphic flyers with homophobic content to houses in Calgary in March of 2012. The article states that the flyer’s “purported intent is to criticize changes to the provincial Education Act that some proponents of home-schooling fear could limit what they teach their children about homosexuality.” It goes on to say that the police told Whatcott that the arrest was “preventive because there was a high likelihood of him being assaulted for passing out the flyers.” He was released by the police

and no charges were laid. A Calgary police hate crimes investigator acknowledged that the flyer was offensive and that the police had received complaints about it. He also said that the Crown had reviewed its contents and determined that it did not constitute hate speech (Massinon 2012).

An opinion piece by an *Edmonton Journal* columnist explicitly takes up the topic of the tenor and, in some cases, extremity of the opposition to Bill 2. In her column, Paula Simons (2012) begins,

I've seen plenty of hate mail. But I've rarely seen anything quite like the outpouring of fury and death threats Education Minister Thomas Lukaszuk has been bombarded with of late. The vicious homophobic emails from Canadian and American home-schoolers, outraged by Alberta's new Education Act, are appalling. (I'd planned to quote some, but my editors deemed the language inappropriate for a family newspaper.)

In response to these hateful reactions to Bill 2, Simons notes that the chair of the Home School Legal Defence Association of Canada, Paul Faris, maintains that his organization disapproves of them. She quotes him as saying, "Quite frankly, you're going to get wackos on any issue. But the home-school movement shouldn't be judged by what a few people might say" (qtd. in Simons 2012). Simons argues that Bill 2 will not do what its homeschooling opponents claim it will, and she concludes that "the movement must bear some responsibility for using misinformation and misinterpretation to whip up a frenzy of fear."

Her characterization of the debates over Bill 2 evidently struck a nerve, because van den Bosch, the Alberta Home Education Association spokesperson, wrote a letter to the

editor responding to the column, which was published in the *Edmonton Journal* three days after Simons' piece. In it, he acknowledges that the minister of education had received "inappropriate" communications, but he argues that Simons "focuses on the few and ignores the many," as he claims other journalists had also done (van den Bosch 2012). He writes, "She doesn't note that the vast majority of the contact with the minister and his office has been respectful and polite, a fact I confirmed with his office." These articles about arrests, death threats, and hate mail—and the columns and letters debating not just the merits of the legislation, but also the question of whether the most extreme reactions to the policy controversy are the responsibility of the broader community of policy actors opposing that legislation—highlight the complex emotional and political dynamics of these debates and heighten the sense of threat and embattlement surrounding the controversy. At times, they also raise questions about whose and what kinds of advocacy are considered intellectually and morally legitimate. The spokespeople I quote above are quick to adamantly disavow more extreme expressions of opposition to Section 16, perhaps in an attempt to draw a clear line between those who would send death threats, distribute graphic pamphlets and disturb the peace at a demonstration and those whose objections to the legislation were being presented through more legitimate means, in order to maintain a sense of occupying the moral high ground.

Another trend I noticed in some of the news coverage I analyzed relates to these questions of intellectual and moral legitimacy among educational policy actors, and how this legitimacy is portrayed in the media. Columnists and commentators sometimes used insults and negative stereotypes to describe the homeschooling parents who opposed Section 16 of Bill 2. For example, in an article that seeks comment from various political

scientists on the government's failure to pass the *Education Act* prior to calling the election, Mount Royal University professor Keith Brownsey states that the Wildrose party, which took up the cause of the concerned homeschooling families, "was really appealing to a fringe element" and that the governing Progressive Conservatives would be able to use that position against the Wildrose in the election campaign by "paint[ing] the Wildrose as a bunch of whackadoodles" (qtd. in Kleiss 2012a). While Brownsey was suggesting the Wildrose could be portrayed as "whackadoodles," he implies that this would be possible due to their association with the conservative homeschooling community, which ultimately casts the latter in a similarly negative light.

A more direct insult towards the homeschooling parents who opposed Bill 2 can be found in a piece by *Edmonton Journal* columnist Graham Thomson, who describes Redford's removal of references to human rights legislation from the version of the *Education Act* that was introduced in the legislature after the election as "a sop to hyperventilating homeschoolers who were afraid any reference to human rights would somehow have children ratting out their parents over supposed violations of the law" (2012). Perhaps the strangest—and crassest—portrayal of homeschooling in the media during this policy debate can be found in an opinion piece by Yukon Jack, a radio personality on Edmonton's "100.3 The Bear" rock radio station, whose regular opinion segment was called "My Big Yap, with Yukon Jack," and whose opinion pieces were sometimes printed in the *Edmonton Sun*. In one of his columns, he discusses the homeschooling parents' concerns with Bill 2, and writes, "How about social concerns for those who are home-schooled? Home-schooling can produce socially stunted weirdos" (Jack 2012). While this last case is certainly not an example of high-calibre journalistic

commentary, these incidents give examples of the tone of some of the criticisms leveled at homeschooling parents who were opposing Bill 2. While many criticisms of the positions of the Bill 2 opponents were expressed without using insulting language or drawing on negative stereotypes, these examples are emblematic of the ways that homeschooling families can be called into question or disparaged due to the non-normative, and possibly countercultural, social status of home education (Lois 2013).³⁷ I suggest that these kinds of responses only served to heighten the tensions and anxieties surrounding this particular policy debate, as homeschooling parents may have worried about whether they were being taken seriously and treated as intelligent adults, while being made more suspicious of those who disagreed with their concerns in fear that those opponents may espouse negative, even paranoid, stereotypes about homeschoolers as well.

Another theme that is present in the media coverage also provides an opportunity to examine some of the more inflammatory language present in these articles and opinion columns. The main argument opponents make for why Section 16 of Bill 2 is unacceptable is that it will hamper the ability of homeschooling parents to teach their children lessons that align with the parents' values in the course of their homeschooling, on topics that are

³⁷ See also Gaither (2008) for a discussion of how families involved in countercultural movements on both the political left and right were instrumental in the growth of homeschooling in the United States. Gaither notes that with the increasing popularity of new forms of schooling, such as online and hybrid models of education, the status of homeschooling as countercultural may be changing: "Whether the movement as a whole will ultimately be seen as a countercultural protest, an embodiment of the *zeitgeist*, or perhaps both at the same time, cannot be predicted with certainty" (226). The mainstreaming of homeschooling seems to have been accelerating recently with many families who have the resources to do so opting to homeschool their children for the first time in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and concerns about disease transmission in institutional schools (Winton 2020).

protected grounds in the *Alberta Human Rights Act*, such as sexual orientation. Discourses related to human rights are thus deployed frequently, and in various ways, throughout this body of media coverage. Some commentators make reference to “parental rights” being infringed by Section 16’s reference to the *Alberta Human Rights Act*, (e.g., Lilley 2012b; Navarro-Genie 2012).³⁸ Others focus on the threat to parents’ freedom of religion. For example, Fred Henry, the Roman Catholic bishop of Calgary at the time, writes in a column criticizing Bill 2, “The right to teach religious beliefs is recognized as an important aspect of the freedom of religion” (Henry 2012). Van den Bosch also references other human rights concerns, including infringement on freedom of religion, in describing what he worries the potential impacts of Section 16 would be: “I don’t want to give bureaucrats any ideas, but it would be very easy for them to require standardized testing that is in line with human rights acts, which means freedom of thought, freedom of conscience, freedom of expression, freedom of religion is undermined” (qtd. in Boesveld 2012).

Supporters of Bill 2 also use human rights rhetoric to make their case. Simons, the *Edmonton Journal* columnist, points to the “enshrine[ment] of parental rights” in the *Alberta Human Rights Act* to argue for why the new *Education Act* would be unable to infringe on parents’ ability to teach their children their own values (Simons 2012).³⁹ The

³⁸ Critics of Section 16 seemed to be worried mainly about the section’s mention of the *Alberta Human Rights Act*, moreso than the reference to the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, due to the perception that the Alberta Human Rights Commission’s tribunals had unfairly and disproportionately determined statements by conservatives figures to be hate speech (see, for an example from the media, De Souza 2012).

³⁹ At the time, the *Alberta Human Rights Act* included a controversial provision, which has since been removed, that required that parents be notified when subjects that deal “primarily and explicitly with religion, human sexuality or sexual orientation” were to be taught to their children, and that parents be allowed to exempt their children from such lessons (Legislative Assembly of Alberta 2009). I return to discussing this controversial provision in the *Alberta Human Rights Act* later in this chapter.

minister of education himself, Thomas Lukaszuk, is described in another article as repeatedly assuring the public that “the bill won't undermine parents' religious rights” (Kleiss 2012c).

It is important to consider these arguments over human rights in the context of several other debates that have taken place in the last decade, in which attempts to recognize or enshrine rights for different marginalized groups in Canada have been criticized for potentially violating the freedom of expression of other Canadians. For example, Jordan Peterson, a psychology professor at the University of Toronto, received considerable public attention in 2016 when he claimed that the Canadian government’s legislation that added gender identity as a protected category in the *Canadian Human Rights Act* and the *Criminal Code* would contravene the freedom of speech of people who refuse to use non-binary pronouns (Dea 2019). This claim was disputed by legal experts (which Peterson is not) such as Brenda Cossman, who maintained that “there is nothing in Bill C-16 that criminalizes the misuse of pronouns” (qtd. in Chiose 2016). In a case with some discursive parallels, in the wake of a mass shooting at a mosque in Quebec City that took the lives of six Muslims, the Canadian House of Commons in 2017 passed a motion “condemning Islamophobia and religious discrimination” (*CBC News* 2017). Motions are not legally binding, but the symbolic act nonetheless was met with criticism that it would deny Canadians “the freedom to criticize Islam” (Zine 2017). Aside from the actual legal implications and reach of these government actions, these debates seem to indicate a trend where free speech and human rights discourses are employed to justify actions that undermine the safety and dignity of demonstrably marginalized populations who have

been subject to violence and hatred in 21st-century Canada, such as trans and non-binary people and Muslims.

The debates in Alberta over Section 16 of Bill 2 bear some resemblance to these other controversies, while also involving distinct legal factors, such as the rights and responsibilities of parents caring for their children and the reach of the law into the private sphere. While an analysis of the media coverage on Bill 2 could be read at the discursive level of a spirited disagreement about the definitions and scope of human rights, and the ways in which the *Education Act* would impact these rights, it is also worth paying attention to the tone, affect, and connotations of this disagreement. Far from being a technical debate about human rights law, much of the anti-Bill 2 commentary contained in these media texts provokes fears about malign government overreach and censorship in the intimate private sphere of the home and family. This theme can be found right in the title of an opinion piece by Sun Media columnist Brian Lilley, which is called, “Who are the Parents? There’s Absolutely No Place for Government at the Family Table” (Lilley 2012b). In this column, Lilley criticizes several instances from across Canada in which he believes provincial education systems have inappropriately interfered in the realm of parents. He writes, “We used to look to the government to help families. Now they want to be our families, or worse, simply control our families.” A column making a similar argument, by *National Post* columnist and Roman Catholic priest Raymond J. de Souza (2012), is called “Bringing Soft Totalitarianism into the Classroom” and concludes that “those parents who do not wish to lazily hand over the formation of their children to the state” are being made “to fight to discharge the duties that are properly theirs.” University of Calgary political scientist Barry Cooper (2012) claims in an opinion piece that Section 16 is evidence that Premier Redford

“doesn't like the notion that in Alberta, parents are the primary educators of their own children.” In an article about the rise of the Wildrose Party, Wildrose MLA Ian Donovan expresses his concerns about Bill 2, stating, “The government wants to almost become the primary caregiver to your children, and tell you what you can and can't teach them” (qtd. in Cryderman 2012). Columnist Lorne Gunter (2012) states the threat to parents particularly starkly when he writes, “It has long been the goal of radical unionists within the Alberta Teachers' Association to replace parents with education bureaucrats and ideologues,” a group to which Gunter claims that Premier Redford was beholden.⁴⁰

This spectre of a government trying to replace parents is a powerful one, and the replacement narrative in particular is a message that many parents might find deeply anxiety-provoking. As I will discuss below, the two parents I interviewed expressed similar kinds of concerns about Bill 2. An analysis of the media coverage of the debates over the *Education Act* in 2012 suggests that the parents I interviewed were not formulating their concerns in a vacuum. Susan and Ruth draw on the same kinds of human rights-based arguments, and they express similar concerns about government interference in the sphere of the family. However, the in-depth interviews I conducted also demonstrate how deeply held and emotionally significant these concerns were for both Susan and Ruth. It is a mistake to dismiss the homeschooling parents who were involved in this case, as some of the commentators I discussed above do, as “hyperventilating” or as “whackadoodles,” because it allows observers to overlook the psychosocial complexity of the threat that these parents felt that Bill 2 posed to their role as parents and to the functioning of their families,

⁴⁰ Later in the column, when discussing what he sees as another overreaching piece of government legislation, he refers to the premier at the time as “Mother Alison” (Gunter 2012).

in the midst of a changing and contested landscape of recognition of LGB rights in Alberta.⁴¹ As I argue below, this landscape—specifically, the way it demanded an attention to ethical questions related to social difference and the education of children on sexual orientation in particular—seemed to be experienced by some opponents to Section 16 of Bill 2 as a threat to a sense of moral certainty and impunity that might have previously been taken for granted by those whose religious beliefs demand an adherence to compulsory heterosexuality.

In the course of this study, I conducted two-part in-depth interviews with two homeschooling parents who were involved in advocacy opposing Bill 2. In what follows, I begin with a pen portrait of each interview participant, which I adopted as part of my methodology from Hollway and Jefferson's (2013) psychosocial approach to research, and which I discuss in detail in my methodology chapter. After the pen portrait, I describe how each participant first heard about the controversy, what they thought about it, and what actions they took to participate in policy advocacy. I then move on to discuss the themes I identified in the interviews and my interpretations of their significance.

⁴¹ To be clear, I am not suggesting here that I agree with opponents' positions on the implications of Section 16, nor am I proposing that the impacts of this debate on LGB students and family members be ignored. Instead, I am arguing for the value of viewing opponents of Section 16 as complex, "defended subject[s]," as all people are (Hollway and Jefferson 2013, 21). This is a more curious, less dismissive approach to inquiry which can lead to a more ethical stance from which to listen, research, and ultimately better understand the policy controversy under study.

Parent #1: SusanPen Portrait

The first participant, whom I'll call Susan, is a white, married mother of a large family of more than three children.⁴² She lives in a exurban area near one of Alberta's larger cities. In 2012, when the policy case took place, her oldest child was a young adult, and her youngest was primary school-aged. She had homeschooled all of her children, with the support of her husband, from the beginning of their formal education. She told me that her and her husband's decision to homeschool was informed by their Protestant Christian faith, and also by their desire to nurture strong relationships with and among their children. She contrasted this with her own experience growing up, when children of different ages would play together in the summertime, but would start segregating themselves by age once they were in school. Susan also related these practices of age segregation to her own experiences in her family of origin. She compared the close relationships her children developed through being educated together to her own relationship to her siblings growing up:

And for my siblings, we didn't hang out. We didn't go out. My one sister and I, we despised each other until university, then we kind of started to warm up. And then once we both had kids, we became best friends.

When the government introduced Bill 2 in 2012, Susan was taken aback to read about homeschoolers' concerns related to the section stating that programs of study

⁴² The homeschooling community in Alberta is relatively small, and Susan requested that some additional personal information of hers be masked, in addition to her name and location. For this reason, I do not disclose the exact number of children she has, nor their specific ages at the time of the controversy.

needed to “honour and respect” the *Alberta Human Rights Act* (Legislative Assembly of Alberta 2012a, 29). She herself became worried that these changes would constrain her ability to teach her children in accordance with her values, as informed by her faith, on matters such as sexuality, abortion, and marriage. Specifically, she worried that this section of Bill 2 could be used to either prevent her from homeschooling altogether, or to limit her autonomy in choosing what her children would be learning, and not learning, by requiring that she adhere to the Alberta curriculum.

Policy Advocacy Involvement

Susan’s involvement in the policy controversy included writing letters expressing her opposition to Bill 2 to the premier, the minister of education, the official opposition education critic, and her member of the legislative assembly (MLA). She also made phone calls to both the premier’s office and the education minister’s office to share her concerns about the legislation. Susan met with her MLA about the issue and spoke with him on the phone about it at least twice. She attended two demonstrations at the Alberta legislature in protest of Bill 2. She also shared her perspectives on the controversy with her friends and family via email and Facebook, and she raised the topic with people in her social circles when “the opportunity arose.” In addition to this advocacy, she read the transcripts of the debates on Bill 2 in the Alberta legislature, and she discussed her concerns about it with her older children. Once the provincial election was called and Bill 2 died on the order paper, she volunteered, along with other members of her family, for the election campaign of a candidate in her riding whose party shared her opposition to the most recent version of the *Education Act*.

From a methodological perspective, it is worth noting that all of the above information could be gathered from briefer interviews or even in a survey. It also largely reflects the type of information that was conveyed in media coverage of the event. Much of this information would, I suspect, comprise the so-called “first story” Susan might tell about her involvement in this policy debate (and, in fact, she relayed much of it early in the first interview). However, in-depth interviewing provides an opportunity to move beyond the first story that someone might tell about an experience, and this is what gives us a more complex view of Susan’s participation in this policy debate. In what follows, I discuss these subsequent narratives of policy advocacy, to explore the social and emotional dynamics at play.

A Multi-vocal Policy Narrative

Susan narrated her story of involvement in advocacy regarding Bill 2 as one with significant emotional aspects. This was a framing that I brought to the interviews from the start; my consent form described my study as “investigat[ing] the emotional, social, and ethical aspects” of the policy controversies on which the project focuses. Nonetheless, Susan herself introduced the emotional significance of her experiences in numerous spontaneous and voluntary ways. For instance, she described the time when Bill 2 was under consideration as “stressful,” “terrifying,” and “intense.” When it came to her concerns about the possible impacts of Bill 2, Susan “had this sense of doom,” because “this government does not care, [laughing] is kind of the impression you got.” She talked about being “frustrate[ed]” by what she felt was a “pretty intentional” mischaracterization of homeschoolers by the Minister of Education as being “against human rights.” She also hinted at the intensity of her involvement by describing her advocacy on this issue as “life-

consuming.” These emotional descriptors suggest that the experience of being involved in policy advocacy regarding Bill 2 was, for Susan, motivated by a significant amount of anxiety about the possible consequences she would face if the proposed *Education Act* was enacted with the reference to human rights laws intact. Her descriptions of emotions also linked, at times, to a characterization of an uncaring government that responds to the concerns of homeschooling parents like her in bad faith.

In light of Susan’s emotionally charged experience of policy change, it stood out to me as significant that Susan used a multi-vocal narrative style. Of course, an interview already contains two voices: the interview participant’s and the interviewer’s. But I was intrigued to see the way Susan narrated the dialogue of several different figures in telling her own story. These voices included a narration of her own thoughts, but also representations of the opinions and positions of others, as she described both real conversations and imagined commentary by others. Sometimes these were specific others, such as her children, her husband, or a friend. But they were often generalized others: her homeschooling community, for example, or people responding to the knowledge that she homeschooled her children. Sometimes they were imagined others that were not specific people at all. A notable example of this is when Susan would narrate imagined dialogue for the government of the day. The following statement is an example:

You know, for the government to come in and say, “No, sorry. Those values are not acceptable. You need to teach them *our* values.” It comes down to, whose kids are they?

At another point, Susan was talking about what she feared the implications might have been if the government in 2012 had passed Bill 2 into law:

Lauren: What were you imagining it might look like? Do you recall?

Susan: Well, I mean, [sigh] basically, if all materials must respect the *Alberta Human Rights Act* and that is being interpreted by human rights tribunals as being very pro-LGBT, you know, not just accepting them as people, which I think everybody has to do—okay, that's not true. I guess not everybody has to—everybody should do, right? But saying that this is a good thing and there's nothing wrong with this behavior, when our faith informs us differently on that, then what happens if all of our instructional materials don't do that? Right? It gives them a grounds to say, "No, you cannot home educate your children."

This multi-vocal narrative that includes imagined policy actors speaking to each other indicates the lively way that a policy controversy can be experienced and understood in the imagination. These imagined conversations and consequences read as very ordinary, in some ways, insofar as it is quite common for people to imagine or anticipate conversations with others. But I see this feature of the interview narrative as more than just an incidental rhetorical style, as policy players such as "the government" are represented as figures and given voices that potentially reveal the anxieties of the thinker. In this case, Susan seems to be imagining what figures in the government might be trying to say to her through Bill 2 and in its aftermath: specifically, "you cannot home educate your children." Here, Susan seems to be expressing an anxiety about a persecutory government that is turning against her when she imagines them saying that she is no longer permitted to have a fairly free hand in teaching her children as she wishes.

An Issue of Rights

Susan used human rights discourses to narrate her opposition to Bill 2's requirement that programs of study align with existing human rights legislation. This line of reasoning draws on conservative arguments that the *Alberta Human Rights Act* and its associated human rights tribunals were being used to contravene citizens' rights and freedoms to speak against social identities and experiences protected by this legal framework. These kinds of arguments can also be found in the media coverage I analyzed (e.g., De Souza 2012). Regarding this larger concern about the scope and use of human rights legislation, Susan said, "These days when you hear human rights legislation [...] we're talking about, usually, LGBT issues." She worried that human rights legislation was being used to protect LGBT rights at the expense of other kinds of rights, such as freedom of expression and freedom of religion. She said, of the homeschoolers like her who were objecting to Section 16:

Absolutely we're not against human rights. But the whole idea—there seems to be this—you know, parental rights aren't human rights, or religious rights aren't human rights, or only these rights are human rights, and, really, human rights are human rights. And that includes the rights of parents, and the rights of children, and the rights of people of faith, and LGBT rights, and, I mean, they're *all* human rights.

This question of how to deal with competing rights came up again in some broader remarks Susan made about the challenges of living in a diverse society. Towards the end of our second interview, she made an off-hand comment that caught my attention:

Susan: I have no idea where it's all going, I just find it fascinating to watch and wish I wasn't involved. [laughing]

Lauren: Hmm. Oh! Can I ask you to say a little more about that? Like, when you say you wish you weren't involved?

S: Oh, well, because it's fascinating to watch where society's going. I mean, speaking of identity, we have so many identities that are clashing, and it's like, how do we live together with all these identities, you know? My identity as a conservative Christian versus this person's identity as a gay atheist, right? Can we live together side by side? Or does one have to supersede the other? How do you balance those rights? Or are we not going to balance them? And so, in a sense, it's fascinating to watch.

What's going to happen? On the other hand, I'm involved. [laughing] Right? So it would be much more interesting—not interesting—much more comfortable [laughing] if I were not personally involved in having to deal with whatever the outcomes are.

Here I see Susan's concerns about having her own rights and freedoms curtailed as bumping up against larger ethical questions of how to live together in a diverse society, where the demands of others for recognition of their rights can feel like a very personal threat. I also hear Susan expressing the discomfort of proximity to, and implication in, these conflicts. I am left wondering if the discomfort of implication—in this case, of being provoked by changing societal norms and conversations to consider the possibility that one's beliefs about sexuality may cause harm to the lives and dignity of others—is part of what makes this otherwise banal-seeming sentence in Section 16 of Bill 2 seem like such a threat. It can be easier to enjoy "fascinating" intellectual debates when it feels like one is simply "watching" them, instead of being "personally involved." This sense of personal implication, I suggest, contributes to the emotional intensity of the *Education Act*

controversy for Susan. The discomfort of this personal implication may be part of what makes the discourses of defending parental rights against state intrusion so appealing in this case.

“Whose Kids Are They?”

The emotional complexity of the Bill 2 controversy also comes from the questions it raises regarding the authority of parents related to the scope of their educational responsibilities to their children. Over and over again, Susan framed the crux of this policy debate as being captured in the question: “Whose kids are they?” She raised this question four times in the first interview. I asked her about it again in the second interview, and she returned to the question two more times later in that interview as well. Susan’s question can be found echoing in the media coverage I analyzed. For example, Lilley (2012b) also asks “Whose kids are they?” while criticizing what he views as government overreach into the family sphere, while a column by John Robson (2012) states, “As Thomas Sowell wrote about ‘death education’ and other perverse social conditioning in schools: ‘The real issue is: Whose children are these?’”

On one level, the answer to that question is, of course, that both the state and parents have legal as well as moral responsibilities to children, and the state’s responsibilities partly involve acting as a check on the powers of the parent, if the parent is seen to be causing harm to their child. Susan acknowledged as much in our interviews; in spite of expressing many objections to the idea that the government was threatening to interfere in her homeschooling and in the educational and parental relationships she had with her kids, she also said the following:

There seems to be this objection to, you know, well, children aren't parents' property. And that's true. I think pretty much everyone would agree with that. But they are a part of that family unit, and so children belong to parents as much as parents belong to children. And it's when, I think, you start to get the state intruding into that that—and obviously the state has to intrude sometimes, but you certainly wouldn't want that to be the norm.

Susan acknowledges here that government interference is necessary in rare, extraordinary instances. Yet the pervasiveness of her concerns about government interference in the family throughout the interviews touches on the fact that Canadian parents do raise their children under the surveillance of the government (in terms of standards of care and education) with the possibility of intervention present at all times. At one point, Susan referred to the question of when state interference in families is warranted and when it is unwarranted as “the zillion-dollar question,” so she is well aware of the difficulty of definitively answering it. In practice, though, the likelihood of this intervention taking place, and the likelihood of it taking place in an insensitive or unjust manner, can be affected by many factors such as racialization, Indigeneity, and poverty, among others.⁴³ These factors seemed not to apply in Susan's case, but the law nonetheless can become a source of persecutory anxiety, perhaps even apart from its theoretical applications or actual reach.

Perhaps the most vivid illustration of this kind of anxiety was Susan's suggestion of similarities between the implications of Section 16 of Bill 2 and Canada's history of

⁴³ This is evidenced, for example, by the disproportionately high numbers of Indigenous and Black children who are removed from their families by Canadian child welfare systems (Government of Canada 2020; OHRC 2020).

residential schools for Indigenous children.⁴⁴ Late in our first interview, Susan told me that “there were numbers of parents that brought up the residential school thing” during the 2012 policy controversy over the *Education Act*, “because they saw shades of the same thing.” Susan seemed to recognize, on some level, the fact that this comparison could be seen as a significant exaggeration of the scope and harm implied by Section 16, when she said of the proposed parallel, “Obviously, not yet, right?” However, the comparison clearly had some resonance with her, because she then asked, “But, is this a step in that direction? Are we trying to repeat what was done in the past with a different group of people for different reasons?” It was also a topic that she brought up two additional times in our second interview. It is interesting to note in this case that the government’s assurances to homeschooling parents that the contentious provision in the proposed *Education Act* would not be applied to parents’ interactions in the home with their children was not a sufficient comfort to Susan. What seemed to be triggered in this policy controversy was not just a technical concern regarding a specific issue of law, then, but an anxiety about the possibility of government intervention in the intimacy of the parent-child relationship. This construction suggests the defence mechanism of splitting. As discussed in Chapter 1, splitting is a psychic structure that separates good from bad as a defence against anxiety—in this case, benevolent authority is split from malevolent authority. In this construction, government is the threat to the well-being of children and places parents as victims alongside their own children, defending against the more complicated way that parents are

⁴⁴ Susan also linked this policy conflict over Bill 2 to larger, global political contexts, suggesting that requiring parents to teach their children only state-sanctioned values seemed more like a policy she would expect in countries such as China, North Korea, and the former Soviet Union.

ethically implicated in this policy conflict. The splitting of government into bad actor and parent into principled victim ultimately, I suggest, invites the phantasy of a imagined future where the treatment of homeschooling families is akin to the systematic, generations-long “cultural genocide” perpetrated by the Canadian government via the residential school system (TRCC 2015, 5).

Parent #2: Ruth

Pen Portrait

The second Alberta parent I interviewed, whom I’ll call Ruth, had three young children at the time of the Bill 2 controversy, two of whom were primary school-aged. She was partway through her first year of homeschooling with the support of her husband, who was the primary income-earner for the family. At that time, Ruth and her family lived in a bedroom community near one of Alberta’s major cities.⁴⁵ Unlike Susan’s children, who were all homeschooled from the beginning, Ruth’s school-aged children had started out in the public school system. She explained, “At that time we didn’t feel like it was safe for [my child’s] physical wellbeing to be at school, and we had to change that, right? You had to put your child first.”

Ruth’s concerns about the safety of her children at school emerged as a result of several incidents. In one of these incidents, one of her children left school property during recess without adult accompaniment. Ruth’s concerns about safety were heightened after a bullying incident in which her child was seriously injured by a classmate. Ruth was upset

⁴⁵ A bedroom community is “a small community that has no major industries and that is lived in by people who go to another town or city to work” (*Merriam Webster*, n.d.).

by how the school handled the incident: she was not notified about the injury, and she felt that her child received inadequate medical attention.⁴⁶ Ruth also felt that one of her children's teachers was treating students differently depending on their religion or ethnicity. She did not give a specific example of how this was happening, but she did express concern that "cultural [and] religious influences" were affecting what her children were learning at school, including through the influence of their classmates. Ruth believed this was outside the proper purview of a school-based education, which was to teach strictly "academic" topics.

Due to these concerns, Ruth and her husband decided to start homeschooling. They had friends who homeschooled their children, so Ruth was able to get advice and support from them as she made the transition to home education. In 2012, when the Bill 2 controversy occurred, her children were registered with a Catholic school board that worked with a large number of homeschoolers. They were in a blended program where they were accessing curricular resources and receiving regular support from a teacher liaison while learning at home. Ruth saw homeschooling as an opportunity to customize education for each of her children, in order to give them the best education possible. She also liked that she did not have to send them away to a school every day, where they would have "their own life away from me," as she put it.

⁴⁶ Michael Apple (2000) writes about how concerns over children's physical safety at school are an increasingly salient part of the "emotional economy" that has been turning people away from public schools, and towards homeschooling, in the United States (70). In the American context, Apple ties this to the prevalence of school shootings and their impact on suburban schools where white, affluent families might have expected to avoid problems of violence that they previously associated with urban schools and poor and racialized students. For these families who have chosen homeschooling out of fear about violence in schools, Apple writes, "if even the schools of affluent suburbia were sites of danger, then the *only* remaining safe haven was the fortress home" (71).

Policy Advocacy Involvement

Ruth first heard about the controversy over Bill 2 from emails circulating through her homeschooling community. Like Susan, Ruth was concerned that if Bill 2 passed, the government would be able to dictate to her what she could and could not teach her children and could try to monitor the lessons she taught in her own home. She expressed concern that, should Bill 2 become law, the government might prevent her from homeschooling if she did not comply with the government's directives on curricular content, and that she could get into legal trouble as a result. She raised matters of sexuality and sexual orientation as issues where the government might require her to teach in ways that contradicted her values. And, like Susan, she ultimately linked these concerns to her religious beliefs, in Ruth's case as a Catholic, which she felt were in conflict with the values that the government wanted her to convey through her homeschooling.

Ruth had never participated in educational policy advocacy before, but she felt that Bill 2 would have a direct impact on her family and that she needed to get involved. She met with her MLA, who was part of the government caucus, to share her concerns. Ruth found that meeting disappointing, because she felt that her MLA was more interested in asking her about why she would homeschool in the first place than about understanding the concerns that she was raising. She also signed some petitions and participated in special meetings with her homeschooling moms' support groups that focused on discussing Bill 2 and ways to lobby the government regarding their concerns. Finally, she talked to her friends and family in order to share her opposition to the proposed legislation.

Parenting, Rights, and the Government

Like Susan, Ruth described the controversy over Bill 2 as an emotionally charged experience. When it happened, Ruth had only just started homeschooling. Her new endeavour had been going well; Ruth commented, “I was excited, and then it turned fearful,” because of her concerns over the proposed *Education Act*. She went on, “It was very unnerving, and I felt very uneasy, and I felt scared at the thought that this could change.” She also expressed surprise that these proposed changes were coming from a supposedly conservative government:

[Given that] it was a conservative government, this isn’t something that I would expect to see on an agenda for them. So even *more* surprised, because that doesn’t match their party ethos. How can this be happening with—why would you want to change it if you’re a conservative government? Progressive Conservative, but still— [laughing] why? That didn’t seem to match up.

The proposed changes in Bill 2 also struck Ruth as abrupt: “I was just so disheartened and disgusted for how fast things were happening, and at the whole system of how it was coming about.” She recalled that when she first read about the possible implications of Bill 2 for homeschoolers like her, she “started feeling sick.” Consequently, it seems clear that Ruth’s involvement in this policy controversy was an intense emotional experience and one that seemed to cause a great deal of anxiety about what the policy implications of Section 16 would be.

Like Susan, Ruth also used discourses of human rights to explain her objections to Bill 2. When I asked her what she feared the outcomes would have been if Bill 2 had become law, she replied:

That our home, me being the teacher, the government had the right to come in to say what I could and could not be teaching. So, if it came to matters of sexual orientation, sexual education, things of opinion rather than fact, that the government could mandate what I had to say or not say and have the authority to close my school, basically, and say that I couldn't homeschool because I am teaching in violation of the—not ethics. What would you call it? Violation of people's natural rights, you know, and that's illegal.

She went on to contend that the law would have actually had the effect of contravening *her* rights instead:

As much as they say that they're doing [this] to be inclusive, it's actually doing the opposite, because you're stating what they *cannot* do, and what they're having the right to do. So, I was like, "That doesn't seem very free to me." So, immediately that feels [like] an infringement of my parental rights, which will make me defensive of my family, as most parents would [be].

Ruth felt this would be an inappropriate intrusion by the government into her home, her family, and her role as a mother. She expressed this particularly vividly when she said she worried that, if Bill 2 passed, "Mommy could get in legal trouble if I say something that's not right." I interpret her reference to herself in the third-person here as "Mommy" as highlighting what felt like the absurdity of the possibility that she could get in trouble with the law just by doing what she saw to be her job as a mother. It also evoked the perspective

of her children, whose mother, as Ruth sees it, could be censored and possibly punished due to the imagined consequences of this legislation, and who are implied to be the innocent victims of this interference with their parent. Evident here, I suggest, is the split phantasy of the punitive, overreaching government and the principled, persecuted parent.

This kind of government interference was a far cry from the role Ruth wished the government would play in children's education. When she described the type of education she had hoped her children would experience at school, she said that she thought public education should only cover "academic" subjects, which she characterized as a "textbook education," instead of focusing on "social" and "spiritual aspects." She went on to say that when her children attended public school, she had hoped "you could separate your family life from a school life, and vice versa. But we didn't find that to be true, and we found a lot of cultural [and] religious influences, even in a program where it says that it's not supposed to be." When I asked her in the second interview if she could say more about this distinction, she elaborated:

Well, it's pretty self-explanatory. We can pretty well definitively say that two plus two is four in our mathematical system. You have something that you can interpret. You can actually see two objects with a name that we put to them: one, two. But on, you know, matters of conscience, it never has to be if something's one or two. Usually, if you're doing mathematics, then it's—you need to use your conscience, or you do something that goes against your personal morals. So, when they're asking you to make moral decisions, or they're trying to say that *they* get to determine what a moral issue is for your children, then that's not the scope of a parent—what I think

the government should have in education. Some people disagree, but my perception of education is numeracy and literacy, and the rest we'll do at home.

This wish for public education to focus on objective, quantifiable subjects and stay away from thorny moral issues that touch on “cultural and religious” differences (and a wish for this distinction to be “self-explanatory”) was at odds with Ruth’s experience of the education her children experienced in a public school, and this discrepancy partly motivated her to start homeschooling. Consequently, this context helps to shed light on why she found the language in Section 16 of Bill 2 so “unnerving,” to use her word. By my reading, Ruth’s attempt to keep the broader social world, exemplified by the public education system and the government, separate from the moral instruction she gave to her children was being threatened by the government’s proposed education legislation and its references to human rights documents that implied a conflicting set of moral principles.

“Whose Agenda Is This?”: The Discomfort of Difference

Just as Susan repeatedly asked throughout our interviews, “Whose kids are they?” Ruth also had a question to which she returned again and again. When it came to this proposed policy change, and the implications as she understood them, she wanted to know, “Whose agenda is this? Who wants this?” In terms of a possible answer to this question, she mentioned that this policy was one she would have expected from a socialist government, or even a liberal government, but not from the Progressive Conservative government that was in place in Alberta at the time. In our second interview, I asked her directly about whether she had any thoughts about where this policy change was coming from. Her answer took me by surprise. She laughingly suggested that the Freemasons were involved, and at first I thought she was joking, given that this was apparently a reference to a well-

established genre of conspiracy theories.⁴⁷ But after she brought up the Freemasons a few times, I asked her directly whether I should understand her remarks about Freemasons as jokes or as serious. Her response was ambiguous at first. She said, “I’m laughing, because 20 years ago, I would have laughed if I had heard somebody else say that.” When I posed the question again, she explained:

I’ll send you a list of books and reading, but yes. I do think so. I think you can summarize it better—a polarization of good and evil. So, yes, I believe that these things trying to go through are diabolical, because they are anti-family. Well, who’s against anti-family? Well, that would be evil. Who’s evil? Who’s the prime propagation of evil? Well, right now, what is able to affect most in the government is the Freemasons.

Ruth’s attribution of the changes to homeschooling she feared would be brought about by Bill 2 to the influence of Freemasons indicates the extent of the threat she was imagining. Her reading of the policy debate as “a polarization of good and evil” is a strikingly direct articulation of the splitting between a malign government and a persecuted group of parents that was discussed earlier. These comments reveals affective stakes that seem to go far beyond what appears to be at issue in the text of the legislation. I suggest that this

⁴⁷ The Freemasons is a secret society that “was founded as an upper-class fraternal organization in early-18th century Britain” (Bjork-James 2020). The organization has been the subject of conspiracy theories since shortly after its founding: “Its secretive nature, elaborate rituals and the wealth and power of its members made the Masons fodder for conspiracy theorists from the start” (Bjork-James 2020), in Britain, Canada, and, especially, the United States (Bjork-James 2020; Raible 2008). Bjork-James (2020) notes that “because it often challenged the power of the church, conspiracies against the Masons have tended to frame the group as anti-Christian or even satanic.”

instead points to the destabilizing experience of a social context that no longer allows people with beliefs like Ruth's about sexual orientation to take for granted their social acceptability.

Ruth's concern about hidden, malign influences in the public sphere entered into our interview more even more directly. At one point, I was asking her more about her concerns about the public education system, and she turned the conversation to the question of my own motivations, to which she had made a cryptic reference before the interview had started—a reference I had not fully understood at the time:

Ruth: This is— [laughing] this is the stuff I was thinking about before we started. I'm like, "What are they going to do—who are advancing this, and why? Why do they want to know what people like me do when they are upset about something? I thought it was interesting.

Lauren: Oh, this is back to the question of why *I* want to talk to you.

R: Yeah! [laughing]

L: Okay. No, I just wanted to—yeah. I mean, I'm not the government, but—[laughing]

Ruth: [laughing]

To me, this felt like an unusually awkward and tense moment in our conversation, and I quickly turned back to my next interview question. I had the impression, before and after this moment, that we had built a good rapport throughout the interviews. At the end of the second interview, Ruth even told me that she liked me and was grateful that I had listened to her, six years after she felt her MLA had been unwilling to do the same. But, in the moment when she expressed suspicion about my agenda, I was also cast as a possible adversary, someone who might use her words against her and for my own ends. The

tension was likely heightened, for me, because of my awareness that she and I do not agree on many of the issues we were discussing. My views were not the subject of the interviews, so I was not sure what impression she might have formed of my perspectives up to that point. But a simple disagreement on matters of sexual diversity—or on educational policy—seemed to implicitly have greater stakes at this moment in the interview, given Ruth’s previous comments on “a polarization between good and evil.”

Ruth’s sense of a threat embodied by a hidden agenda that would harm her and her children speaks, perhaps, to the overwhelming implications of having to view children’s education as a place where broader conflicts over ideology, control, and values play out, as opposed to a phantasy of a protected sphere where young people only learn straightforward, uncontroversial lessons. Ruth’s concluding comments at the end of our first interview seem to touch on the anxiety provoked by this reality:

It went from worrying about what my child was learning in the classroom to, “What’s happening with the government?” Like, it just seemed like the issue kept getting bigger and bigger and bigger. And, you know—and where do you go? How do you deal with a problem that’s that big, you know? Where is it coming from? I don’t know. I still don’t know. Let me know if you find out. [laughing]

Ruth’s connection of anxiety about governance with anxieties about her children’s education serves as a reminder that the scene of education is itself an anxious environment, as Britzman (2009) writes:

The problem is that there can be no learning or teaching without anxiety, yet anxiety, an anticipation and story of self/other relations, calls forth both phantasies of and desires for knowledge and defenses against its loss. But if anxiety signals that

first urge to think, it is also the force in which thoughts lose their curiosity. Anxiety exchanges what does not yet exist in the name of what has already happened. (66)

Encounters with newness, difference, and discomfort can provoke learning, but also defensiveness against the loss that seeing the world in a different way might entail.

Ruth's concerns about my motivations for wanting to interview her about the Bill 2 controversy seemed to relate to a discomfort about the possibility that I, at the very least, might see the world differently than she does. She also mentioned this type of tension when she discussed the differing perspectives of some other parents in her community:

Like, I really thought that other parents had the same agenda as I did. Everybody—all parents were on the same boat, where you send them to school, just to learn [from the] textbook, and everything else is done after school. But that's not the case.

Ruth also expressed surprise that when she tried to share her concerns about Bill 2 with other parents she knew, many of them seemed unconcerned:

Any parents that were friends that I tried to speak to a bit about [it], they didn't care. You know, it didn't really mean anything to them. But, for me, it did. Maybe we're⁴⁸ just more sensitive to things like that. I don't know. [It's a] possibility, I guess. But, to me, I—just surprised that everybody wasn't down there saying that "I'm the parent, I'm in charge, we pay the government, you help us educate our children in the ways that we need."

⁴⁸ While it is not clear to me to whom Ruth is referring here as "we," her remarks just prior to this excerpt lead me to wonder if she means the parents in her homeschooling community who also advocated for the removal of Section 16 from Bill 2. It is also possible that "we" refers to she and her husband, but there is no explicit indication of this in the transcript.

To some extent, this sounds like an echo of Susan's expression of concern about how to live in a society where people have very different views on the scope of human rights, the role of government in people's lives, and the kinds of education children should receive—at school or at home. For Ruth, however, this discomfort manifested in articulations of surprise that others do not see these issues in the same way she does. Perhaps the split phantasy of a malevolent government and benevolent parents was challenged by the fact that other parents in Ruth's social circle had different views on the debates over Bill 2 than she did. One way the debates over Bill 2 may have unsettled her, then, was by drawing attention to these divergent perspectives held by the people in her social world.

Persecutory Policy and Intensive Mothering

Susan and Ruth had plenty of responsibilities when it came to caring for their children, and these two mothers took on additional work by choosing to homeschool. They also seemed to live within contexts of relative privilege that allowed them to perform this extra unpaid labour. Both participants explained their decision to homeschool in relation to trying to give their children better childhood experiences, in part through an education that was aligned with the family's religion. The themes of personal responsibility, faith-based education, and the protection of children explored in the interviews of this chapter resonate with sociologist Jennifer Lois's (2013) findings from her interviews with American homeschooling mothers. She found that they were homeschooling in an effort to be what she called "ultraresponsible parents" (2), or to be "the best mother they could be" (4). In a social context where expectations of mothers are already high, as indicated by Sharon Hays's (1996) formulation of the ideology of intensive mothering, these

homeschooling mothers take on additional responsibilities, not by working outside the home, but instead by assuming the roles of both mother and teacher for their children. Susan articulated these additional pressures when she said, “[laughing] When you send your kids to school, right, other people are responsible. When you homeschool them, it’s all on us.” She went on, “If they turn out to be really messed up, there’d be a lot of parent guilt there [laughing].” Intensive mothering, it seems, carries a narrative of perfection, where the figure of the parent is freighted with idealizations of authority that can also produce anxieties and guilt about the perceived stakes of failure.

Jacqueline Rose (2018) adds an additional layer to the pressures on mothers when she argues that, in current Western discourses, mothers are often treated as scapegoats for “everything that is wrong with the world,” and they are also expected to right those wrongs (1). Susan and Ruth may both feel as though it is their job to make up for the inadequacies of schools and society, but the choice to homeschool brings its own additional risks of censure, because these mothers are taking on a role that is, in their social context at least, usually performed by the state. Lois (2013) also discusses this pressure when she writes, “Homeschoolers are constantly fighting public perception that they are irresponsible mothers for keeping their children out of conventional schools” (4).

In light of this negative construction, I was particularly intrigued by the ways both Susan and Ruth discussed the government in relation to this policy controversy. Each of these mothers had a question they asked over and over again throughout the course of their two interviews. For Susan, the question was, “Whose kids are they?” The first time she asked this question, she elaborated further by saying, “Whose kids are they? Are they the parents’ kids? Are they the states’ kids? Who gets the ultimate say over, you know, what

they learn? Or what values are passed on?" When I asked her more about this question, and how she wished the government would interact with her as a homeschooling family, she expressed the wish to just be left alone, even as she later acknowledged that there are some cases where the state needs to step in, such as when parents are abusive. I read a tension here, between an anxiety about state intervention into the parental and educational work Susan was doing within her family, which she wished the government would stay out of, and the recognition that families cannot and should not operate as opaque, closed systems with no monitoring from the outside.

From a psychosocial perspective, I propose that the weight of pressures on 21st-century parents in a North American context such as Alberta, and especially on mothers, can provoke a sense of vulnerability, particularly when these mothers are engaged in the somewhat non-normative practice that is homeschooling. Furthermore, while governments in Canada and around the world have, in various capacities, intervened in the intimate spheres of family and parenting, sometimes in violent and persecutory ways, sometimes in ways that may be seen as in the best interests of children, I wonder whether this threat of state intervention is one that had not been felt particularly acutely by parents such as Susan or Ruth before this policy change was proposed and interpreted by their homeschooling community in the way it was—that is, as a threat to homeschoolers' abilities to teach their children in accordance with, for example, their religious beliefs that prohibit same-sex sexual activity. On this point, it seems relevant to note that both Ruth and Susan described their advocacy activities in response to Bill 2 as being unprecedented in terms of their own previous political involvement. They both said they had never gotten involved to such an extent in trying to influence government policy direction before. This

was, after all, a province that had been ruled by Progressive Conservative governments for decades and that had a history of state-level antipathy towards its LGB citizens.

It was the decision of a private Christian college in Edmonton to fire one of its laboratory instructors for being gay that led to the Supreme Court of Canada decision in 1998 that determined that sexual orientation should be read into the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* and the *Alberta Human Rights Act* as grounds for protection against discrimination (“Vriend v. Alberta” 1998; Simons 2018). The case went all the way to the Supreme Court, in part, because the Alberta government had appealed a lower court ruling that Alberta’s human rights laws were unconstitutional because they did not offer protections on the basis of sexual orientation. After the Supreme Court decision, social conservatives, including members of the Alberta government caucus, urged then-premier Ralph Klein to invoke the notwithstanding clause in the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, in order to block the ruling’s impact on Alberta human rights law. In the midst of heated public debate on the issue, Klein ultimately opted to accept the ruling, but Alberta was still the last province to formally amend its human rights legislation to explicitly state that it included protections against discrimination based on sexual orientation (Filax 2006; Province of Alberta 2018).

This reluctance to accept federal expansions of lesbian and gay rights is characteristic of what Gloria Filax (2006) calls Alberta’s “particular brand of homophobic inertia” around the turn of the 21st century (xvii). That being said, broader social trends of increasing acceptance of LGB people did not pass Alberta by, and they were helped along by the advocacy of all the lawyers, organizations, community leaders, and other individuals who worked on and supported the Vriend v. Alberta Supreme Court decision (Simons

2018). Nonetheless, when the Alberta government finally did add sexual orientation to the *Alberta Human Rights Act* in 2009, it also added a provision requiring that parents be notified when subjects that deal "primarily and explicitly with religion, human sexuality or sexual orientation" were to be taught to their children in school and that parents be allowed to exempt their children from such lessons (Legislative Assembly of Alberta 2009). The government's ambivalence towards the recognition of sexual diversity amongst Albertans continued to be apparent, even as human rights protections on the basis of sexual orientation were explicitly enshrined in the province's human rights law.

Ultimately, my interviews with these two homeschooling mothers illuminate what I see as an uneasy relationship between the state and parents, a tension that may lie dormant for parents who experience the government as mostly on their side, but that can inflame anxiety when provoked through a policy case such as this one, when state-level power to interfere in the intimate realm of the family is brought to the surface and suddenly experienced as a source of persecution. Against this perceived threat of persecution, demands for parental control are made as a defence against parents' sense of vulnerability in the face of the power of the state. Furthermore, even though sexual orientation had been grounds for protection under human rights law since 1998, the belated formal recognition of this protection by the Alberta government in 2009—only three years before the Bill 2 controversy that is the subject of this chapter took place—may have drawn increasing attention to the fact that religious beliefs which some homeschooling (and other) families pass on to their children about sexuality could be seen by an increasing proportion of society as able to cause harm to LGB children. Under the guise of a legal dispute, then, over whether parents' freedom of religion could be violated

by the enactment of Section 16 of Bill 2, an uncomfortable ethical question may have been simmering.

The parents who opposed Section 16 may dispute the claim that such religious beliefs could be hurtful to LGB persons. Even if the expression and transmission of those beliefs is legal, however, the growing attention to LGB rights may nonetheless make it harder to espouse those beliefs without any sense of ethical, or at the very least, social, discomfort. Instead of, or in addition to, grappling with these ethical questions, then, a sense of persecution⁴⁹ and a phantasy of government as *the* threat to innocent children and families might have been a way to defend against the discomfort of being ethically implicated in increasingly prominent conversations about the rights, existence, and dignity of LGB people, including children. Some of these children are even a part of the families of socially conservative, religious Alberta homeschoolers. The emotional weight of this ethical implication could contribute to the intensity of the anxiety, and to the idealization of intensive mothering, that I suggest was experienced by at least two of the parents who were involved in this policy controversy. Defenses thus took shape in the split construction of government-controlled education as a persecutory institution, leading to comparisons with residential schools and the invocation of conspiracy theories about the malign influence of Freemasons in government.

Hollway and Jefferson (2013) discuss the appeal of certain stories through which people make sense of the world when they write, “The idea of a defended subject shows

⁴⁹ Claims by (especially evangelical) Christians that Christian communities, past and present, have been the especial targets of persecution are well documented (e.g., Noble 2014). Some of the historical claims upon which these narratives of persecution are based have been called into question (Moss 2013).

how subjects invest in discourses when these offer positions that provide protections against anxiety and therefore supports to identity” (21). Discourses of human rights violations and persecution may have become so prevalent in the opposition to Bill 2 because of the way they unconsciously defended against the anxieties resulting from ethical implication in the marginalization of LGB people and shored up identities related to being morally upright vis-à-vis one’s religion and a good mother via one’s choice to homeschool. The feeling of persecution may have been further enabled by the extreme rhetoric used in media reports and the crass stereotypes and smears used by commentators to demean homeschoolers—even though these insults ultimately do not reflect deep, systemic inequities of the kinds that have characterized Alberta’s treatment of LGB people (and, for that matter, Indigenous peoples). Nonetheless, the intense emotions provoked and channeled through these debates ultimately changed the contents of a foundational piece of the province’s education legislation.

Chapter 5

A Crisis of Authority: The Debates over Ontario's Sex Education Curriculum

Chapter 5 focuses on the project's second policy case—the controversies over sex education curriculum in Ontario—and it follows a similar structure to Chapter 4. I begin by providing some important context by describing the many chapters of this policy case in detail. I then turn to an analysis of the key themes and issues that I identified in the data sets of media coverage that I gathered from two key periods in the long lifespan of this controversy. After that, I turn to my analysis of the interviews with three parents who participated in the sex education curriculum debates in Ontario. I conclude by discussing the crisis of authority over sexuality and education that I suggest is being expressed and grappled with throughout much of the media coverage and interviews.

Setting the Scene

This project's second policy case, from the province of Ontario, is notable for its long time-frame and what seemed at the time to be an endless number of twists and turns. From 2015 to 2019, Ontario was repeatedly seized by a controversy over the contents of the province's Health and Physical Education (HPE) curriculum, specifically the aspects relating to sexuality. When a new HPE curriculum was introduced by Kathleen Wynne's Liberal government in 2015 (Ontario Ministry of Education 2015a, 2015b), Ontario saw large and persistent protests in response. The curriculum covered new topics that reflect 21st-century conditions and challenges, such as the risks of sexting, cyberbullying, and contemporary understandings of affirmative consent (Ontario Ministry of Education 2015a). It also included lessons in Grade 1 on the names of body parts, including genitalia, which were recommended by experts for building children's self-confidence and making

sexual abuse easier for children to report (Alphonso 2018a). Sexual orientation and gender identity, too, were part of lessons starting in Grade 3, where they were discussed among many kinds of traits that make people unique and different from each other (Ontario Ministry of Education 2015a). According to its critics, however, this curriculum taught children too much information about sexuality at too young an age (Brown 2015) and was developed without enough input from families (Lopez 2015). Thousands of parents and other opponents gathered on the lawn of the provincial legislature to express their opposition to the new curriculum (Ferguson and Brennan 2015), and hundreds of children were kept home from school by their parents as part of a boycott to protest the changes (CBC News 2015b). Campaigns of misinformation targeting parents circulated via fliers and anonymous letters, which made inaccurate claims that, for example, students would be exposing themselves to each other in lessons and learning how to masturbate in the classroom (Brown 2015).

In spite of the initial heated opposition, the 2015 curriculum was taught for three years in Ontario schools, and the matter seemed mostly settled. But then, three years later, Ontario's government changed as the Progressive Conservative party won the June 2018 provincial election on a platform that included a promise to reverse the sex education curriculum update (Beattie 2018). The new government proceeded to pull the 2015 curriculum for Grades 1-8 and temporarily replace it with an older version first written in 1998. Notably, this was a time before same-sex marriage was legal in Canada, and a time before social media, sexting, and modern cyberbullying (Ogilvie 2018). At the same time, the government launched what Premier Doug Ford promised would be the most extensive consultation on an educational issue in the province's history, purportedly to compensate

for the alleged shortcomings in the development of the 2015 documents (The Canadian Press 2018).

This conservative curriculum rewind was a big victory for opponents of the 2015 version, and it was now the turn of those who were *in favour* of the 2015 curriculum to mobilize in opposition to the government's actions (Ogilvie 2018). Supporters of the 2015 curriculum held protests and insisted that the curriculum had already been developed with significant amounts of consultation, as well as input from experts (e.g., Johnstone 2018). In September of 2018, an estimated 38,000 youth from 75 schools across Ontario walked out of their classes in a student-led protest of the new government's decision to retract the 2015 curriculum (Teotonio 2018). Meanwhile, Ford warned teachers that they were not to be teaching the retracted curriculum, and the government introduced a website portal where parents could submit complaints if they believed their children were being taught lessons that deviated from provincial curriculum expectations (Ferguson 2018). Teacher union leaders criticized the move, calling it a "snitch line" and decrying the threat of discipline contained in a surveillance tool that bypassed the normal systems already in place for parents to share feedback and concerns about their children's schooling (Alphonso and Giovannetti 2018a).

The Canadian Civil Liberties Association partnered with a queer parent to launch a human rights challenge to the government's reversion to the 1998 curriculum, arguing that the rights of LGBTQ parents and their children were being infringed by the return of a curriculum that made queer families invisible in HPE lessons (Fine 2019). The Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario, a provincial teachers' union, initiated their own court challenge against the curriculum change and the government portal for parent complaints

about teachers, arguing that these actions by the government “violate[d] teachers' charter rights, as well as their professional and ethical obligations” (Rushowy and Teotonio 2018). In a bizarre turn of events, one of the government’s lawyers then argued before the court that teachers *could* draw from the 2015 curriculum as a resource while teaching the older curriculum, an assertion that was seemingly at odds with Ford’s previous threats of discipline for teachers who drew from the 2015 curriculum in their teaching (Alphonso and Gray 2019). While both legal challenges were dismissed, they contributed to an overall picture of the protracted debates over the curriculum as contentious, chaotic, and, at times, confusing.

After all of this conflict, the government released an updated HPE curriculum in August of 2019. Ironically, the sex education lessons in this document varied only slightly from the 2015 version (Bialystok et al. 2020; Lapierre 2019).⁵⁰ Both proponents and opponents of the 2015 curriculum were divided on their positions on the new 2019 curriculum. Some proponents were happy to see much of the content from 2015 curriculum preserved in the 2019 version (Artuso 2019), while others criticized the decision to move lessons on gender identity and expression to older grades (Lapierre 2019). Likewise, some opponents of the 2015 curriculum felt betrayed because of the 2019 curriculum’s many similarities to the 2015 document, while others were satisfied with the standardization and increased prominence of parental opt-out procedures (Artuso 2019). It was a strange end to a long controversy, one that left many questions unanswered as to the significance of what had taken place. On a political level, it seems that Ford had used the

⁵⁰ I conducted all of my interviews before the new 2019 curriculum documents were released, so none of the participants would have been able to comment on the full contents of the new curriculum in the course of our conversations.

issue as a way to mobilize social conservative voters in order to win the leadership of his party, and his subsequent move to review the curriculum was a means of demonstrating that he was keeping that promise to them, even though the 2019 update ultimately changed far less than many social conservatives might have expected. These political machinations, however, do not explain the broader uproar and affective intensity—that is, expressions of love and hate related to this curriculum—among segments of the broader public that accompanied each twist and turn of the policy saga described above.

While this policy saga was playing out, newspapers published articles with titles such as “Fact or Fiction: What’s Actually in Ontario’s Contentious Sex-Ed Curriculum” that attempted to address misconceptions about what the new lessons would entail (Alphonso 2018b). In the aforementioned article, Chris Markham, the executive director of the Ontario Physical Health Education Association, a non-profit organization that advocated in favour of the 2015 curriculum update, is quoted as saying, “If parents could just take the time to sit down and look through the curriculum, I think they would be calmed” (qtd. in Alphonso 2018b). These efforts to highlight facts and combat misinformation reflected a belief I was hearing expressed in the halls of my university and at academic conferences, as well as in broader public conversation: the belief that sharing “the truth” about the curriculum—both about its contents, and about the process of its development—could resolve much of the ongoing controversy. However, explanatory articles in newspapers and the attempts by school boards, principals, and teachers to share the facts about the 2015 curriculum failed to quell many people’s concerns. Facts do not easily settle conflicts such as this one, which is why I argue in this dissertation that some educational policy controversies are driven by deeply held emotional investments and histories that are not straightforwardly affected by

the outside world. For policy researchers who wish to better understand these types of explosive debates, then, the question might be as much about what the policy documents *signify* for the actors in these debates as it is about their manifest content.

More specifically, the scope, intensity, and tenacity of the controversy over sex education curriculum in Ontario, I suggest, is reflective of a crisis of authority when it comes to sexuality, education, and children. This can be seen in the extreme, all-or-nothing, split positions taken by some parents, advocates, and politicians, the most prominent among them being that parents are *the* ultimate authority when it comes to their own children's education on matters of sexuality and schools should always stand subordinate to that authority. At the same time, some parents seemed anxious—almost panicked, at times—by the prospect that they might have to engage with topics related to sexuality in relation to their own children. Another less extreme but no less complicated position is one where a parent may express confidence in their own ability to teach their children about sexuality in a way they find appropriate, but they do not necessarily trust other parents to do the same with their children. This makes the authority and responsibility vested in the education system to provide a certain standard of sex education both more important (in order to compensate for the perceived shortcomings of individual parents) and more precarious, because it is unclear who should be tasked with deciding what the standard sex education should look like. Recourse to evidence and experts may not be satisfying if a prominent public narrative of parental authority is circulating. Furthermore, it is clear that many parents wanted a say regarding the curriculum's contents—even if their input was to advocate for following expert advice. This swirl of overlapping areas of responsibility and conflicting claims of authority reflects the difficulties inherent in the collective projects of

education and governance, which Sigmund Freud (2002) identified as two of the “impossible professions,” as I discussed in Chapter 2. Shared responsibilities, limited authority, and the curiosity and independent minds of children all make for an anxious scene of curriculum development, policy change, and enactment at the school level. This anxiety is intensified by the unruly topic of sexuality, which is fraught with taboos around discussion between adults and children, even as the urgency of tackling the issue is made apparent by children’s interests, and by adult worries about attendant risks posed by online pornography, sexual experimentation, sexting, and sexual assault. Protecting children and youth from the risks of sexuality is a seemingly impossible task. Perhaps, then, this is why the curricular contents take on such a particular importance. The curriculum provides an object onto which policy actors can project all these worries—about danger, responsibility, and control.

The interviews I conducted reflect some of these dynamics as parents grapple with the impossible professions of education and governance, as does the news coverage I analyze. The stories of these parents who became involved in the sex education controversy illustrate the complex, conflicting, and deeply felt ways that curriculum content can matter to parents and affect their involvement in the political sphere as policy actors.

Media Representations of Parents’ Reactions to Ontario’s Sex Education Curriculum

In framing this research project, I have proposed that the emotional aspects of contentious changes to educational policy are worthy of the attention of researchers and others who want to gain a deeper understanding of the dynamics of the controversies. In

light of this stance, I looked closely at the data set of news coverage on the Ontario sex education debates for mentions of emotion. I found many such references, which indicates that these debates were being framed as emotionally charged by certain stakeholders as well as by media outlets. They were also being experienced as emotionally significant events by some of the policy actors involved who are quoted directly in the coverage or whose opinions are represented in columns and letters to the editor. For example, a parent who opposed the 2015 curriculum's lessons about sexual orientation in Grade 3 as inappropriate for children of that age writes in a letter to the editor, "I'm furious at being bullied about this, with the implicit suggestion that to oppose this timeline is to be homophobic" (*The Globe and Mail* 2015). Another parent who kept her child home from school to protest the 2015 curriculum states, "The parents are angry," and "[Premier Kathleen Wynne] has no idea how infuriated and hurt the parents are" (qtd. in Smith 2015). Besides references to anger and its synonyms, there were also mentions of fear. One parent tells the *Windsor Star* that "parents fear the school system is forcing their children to grow up too fast" (Waddell 2015). I was interested to note that fear was often an emotion that was attributed to others by stakeholders or other commentators. For example, one article states, "an estimated 2,000 kids [have been] permanently withdrawn from public school over their parents' fears of sex ed" (Ross 2016), while a column defending comprehensive sex education in schools argues, "fear of information is unfounded" (Baranyai 2018).

Shame is another emotion that appears in the data set, particularly in reference to the effects of an HPE curriculum that does not include representations of, and lessons about, LGBTQ people. In a column arguing for the importance of both the anti-bullying Day

of Pink that many schools hold and the 2015 HPE curriculum, one queer parent writes that while she wishes she could protect her young children from learning about the existence of homophobia and transphobia, she can't "ignore reality" and it is the responsibility of "adults to give [students] the tools they need to understand their experiences in school and not cloak them in silence and shame" (Robertson 2018). The author of another opinion piece similarly pairs shame with silence when she writes that opponents of the 2015 curriculum "cite cultural concerns and family values but, as far as I'm concerned, a culture of shame and silence is more dangerous" (Bhandari 2015). These references to shame draw attention to the fact that removing conversations about sexuality from schools does not erase people's feelings about these topics—on the contrary, silences about sexuality and discrimination produce their own emotional responses. A cryptic use of the word "shame" that evokes the controversy's overall chaos and affective intensity can be found in graffiti that was spray-painted on the wall of Thorncliffe Park school, in a Toronto community where many parents had opposed the 2015 curriculum. The graffiti read "shame on you," and it is unclear whether the vandal wished shame on the supporters and implementers of the 2015 curriculum or on its opponents in the school community (Ross 2015). In this way, it is an apt representation of the affective charge that exceeds the rational aspects of the debate over curriculum content.

The emotional character of the controversy is also conveyed—and reinforced—by the particularly vivid language that is sometimes used to describe it. While this is a common tactic employed by the media to make the news more exciting and attract readers (Delaney and Neuman 2018), it also feeds into the conflictual dynamics of the policy debate. Furthermore, this kind of language does not always originate from reporters or

columnists, but is also used by policy actors such as parents, politicians, and other stakeholders. Tanya Granic Allen, a candidate in the 2018 Progressive Conservative leadership race and president of the advocacy group Parents as First Educators, decried curricula that include what she called “gender identity theory,” arguing that it was being “forced down the throats” of Ontario students (Artuso 2019). Premier Doug Ford even stated, without any apparent irony, that teachers who insisted on giving lessons from the 2015 curriculum that were absent from the previous curriculum which he temporarily reinstated were “using our children as pawns for grandstanding and political games” (Ferguson 2018). The pitch of these comments may have both reflected and influenced the emotional responses parents had to the curriculum controversies and to their sense of responsibility on the topic of sex education for their children.

Another common set of themes in the data also relates to concerns about adult responsibility and authority, and this is the frequent discussions of risk, danger, safety, and protection in relation to children learning about sexuality. These themes appear in many different ways. One opinion column by Farzana Hassan (2015) dwells on these issues at length while arguing that the 2015 curriculum was in need of an independent review, due to the fact that Benjamin Levin was the deputy minister of education during its initial development. Levin, who was also a professor in the school of education at the University of Toronto, was convicted of possession of child pornography, making child pornography, and counselling to commit sexual assault in 2015. These charges were a result of his involvement in online communities where adults were discussing sexual activity with children (*CBC News* 2015a). Wynne stated publicly that Levin was not involved in writing the curriculum (Benzie 2013). However, some opponents of the 2015 documents

expressed concern about his possible influence on it, including one of the parents I interviewed, as I discuss below. Alongside her specific concerns about Levin, Hassan (2015) also paints a broader picture of a world made dangerous for children due to sexual influences and factors. Of her opposition to a more comprehensive sex education curriculum, she writes:

This is not to downplay the claim children in today's sexually open atmosphere must be equipped to deal with many dangers. Most would agree children need candid and practical advice about how to keep themselves as safe as possible from sexual predators. Responsible parents know dangers can be lurking for their children even behind their own bedroom doors, and children themselves need to be made aware of these risks. Children must be equipped to recognize sexual abuse and to be assertive in countering it and reporting it.

Nevertheless, Hassan also maintains that “the new curriculum offers educational overload on matters that likely will provide no such safeguards, and this overload itself presents dangers.” In her view, sex education itself is one of the conduits through which sexuality poses threats to children. Jessica Fields (2012) describes a similar approach to sex education policy in the United States, which is often driven by a concern “that sexuality education’s lessons are themselves damaging, exacerbating the sexual risks youth and children already face” (2). The implication of this logic, then, is that “protecting youth comes to mean protecting them from sexuality education” (Fields 2012, 7). These beliefs point to a crisis of authority situated in the very project of sex education, where the curriculum itself is the danger, regardless of whether it is feared to contain subliminal messages from a convicted child pornographer or not.

Other articles and columns also give the impression that the terrain of sex education is fraught with danger, predators, and perils, and that the key question is how best to protect children and keep them safe. Leader of the Official Opposition Andrea Horwath criticized the government's move in 2018 to retract the 2015 curriculum for Grades 1-8, saying, "Going backwards in terms of keeping our kids safe and giving them the information they need to stay safe is not the right direction for the kids of this province" (qtd. in Alphonso 2018a). These kinds of narratives sometimes point to concrete concerns about specific dangers that ignorance can cause, but they also crowd out other reasons sex education might exist, or other metrics by which to assess a specific curriculum, such as children's right to know about their own bodies and identities (UNESCO 2018). Furthermore, they imply that the content of curriculum can have singularly significant impacts on the lives of children. For example, one parent at a protest against the 2015 curriculum told the *Toronto Star* that she feared the lessons on sex education would "sexually stimulate" male students. She also said she was worried about her daughter getting raped in the bathroom at school as a result (Ferguson and Brennan 2015). Another example of a media portrayal of parent advocacy that engages some of the same issues—that is, fears of sexual violence and a sense that curriculum documents have a uniquely strong influence on the safety or lack thereof of students in relation to this violence—can be seen in the comments of Glen Canning. He is the father of Retaeh Parsons, a Canadian teenager who died by suicide in 2011 after she was allegedly sexually assaulted by peers and then bullied in response to a picture of the assault that was shared online. In interviews with the media, he has stated his belief that if the 2015 Ontario curriculum had been taught to his daughter and her peers, then Retaeh would still be alive (Yang 2018).

These conceptions of a curriculum that directly incites violence, moral degradation, and sexual chaos in schools, that contains subliminal messages from a pedophile—or, alternatively, that saves youth from sexual assault, bullying, and suicide—put a great deal of stock in the powers of curricula to influence and form the minds, experiences, and actions of young people. While the contents of curricula are no doubt important, I suggest that outsized phantasies of the impact of curricula point to anxieties surrounding the limits of any parent, or school, to inoculate children against the complexities, discomforts, violence, and injustice that can accompany the experience of negotiating sexuality in the social world.

The parameters of my database searches specifically sought out articles with prominent references to parents, and there were many such articles to find. Parents' opinions are sought and quoted, their advocacy actions are documented, and their putative wishes are invoked to support various policy positions and actions. The commonly-used rhetorical tactic of speaking of "parents" as a homogeneous group with a single opinion struck me as particularly odd in the midst of a controversy where many parents were loudly broadcasting their multiple, varied positions on the question of what Ontario's sex education curriculum should look like. During her campaign for the leadership of the Progressive Conservative party, Tanya Granic Allen advocated for the removal of the 2015 HPE curriculum, arguing, "Parents need some relief. They need to have their rights respected" (Kotsis 2018). Similarly, the *Sudbury Star* describes Khalid Mahmood, a parent and member of the Thorncliffe Parents Association, as characterizing the province's reversion to the 1998 HPE curriculum as "a victory for parents" (Thompson and Jeffords 2018). Another instance in which parents are invoked as a powerful rhetorical tool is when

they are asserted to be the rightful, ultimate authority on what their children should learn about sexuality. When the Progressive Conservative government pulled the 2015 curriculum from schools, Minister of Education Lisa Thompson said it was “because we're respecting parents. Through the campaign we heard loud and clear parents were not happy with the direction the former Liberal government took, so we're listening to parents” (Rushowy 2018). Another article describes opponents of the 2015 curriculum as believing that, when it comes to information about topics such as “gender identity and same-sex marriage,” “parents should be the ones to provide such information” (Alphonso and Giovannetti 2018b). This type of rhetoric resonates with Bialystok et al.'s (2020) argument that in the premier's framing of his withdrawal of the 2015 curriculum as respecting the authority of parents, “Ford used ‘the parents’ as the symbolic locus of true citizenship” (8). In addition to consolidating the legitimacy of parents as the rightful decision-makers on sex education, I would add that this move by Ford also allowed him to implicitly abdicate his own responsibility for ensuring that the public education system was offering a well-researched, up-to-date, and ethically sound program of study on sexuality for its students.

Some of the arguments for parental input or control as paramount in the realm of sex education invoke the concept of parental rights and bear a resemblance to similar arguments made in the Alberta policy case. Granic Allen described herself as “stand[ing] up for parental rights” in her advocacy against the 2015 curriculum, and Education Minister Thompson promised that a new “Parental Bill of Rights” would be drafted by her government as part of their response to the controversies over the 2015 HPE curriculum

(Artuso 2018).⁵¹ Scott Masson, a professor at the evangelical Christian Tyndale University College and member of the Upper Mohawk First Nation band, raises the idea of parental rights in an opinion piece that criticizes the 2015 curriculum by comparing it to Canada's history of operating residential schools for Indigenous children. Masson (2018) writes:

The residential schools episode, which afflicted my First Nations people, was atrocious precisely because the government and judiciary first contravened parental rights. I have a sense of déjà vu here because despite government assurances there is no opting out.

This argument, too, recalls the comments of Susan, one of the parents I interviewed about the Alberta policy case, who told me that people she knew were comparing the Alberta government's inclusion of Section 16 in the proposed *Education Act*, which required that all educational programs of study align with human rights laws, with the separation of Indigenous children from their families via the residential schools. Splitting parental authority and government authority in the realm of sex education into good and bad and characterizing them as forces that are in opposition reads to me as a defence against the more nuanced and difficult negotiations required to carry out a shared responsibility to children.

Assertions of near-absolute parental authority also conflict with other moments in the data that emphasize perceived limitations or shortcomings of parents' capacities to broach topics of sex education and to answer their children's questions. These kinds of

⁵¹ In my subsequent searches of the Ontario Ministry of Education's website, I could find no indication that any further action had been taken on creating a Parental Bill of Rights.

arguments are sometimes made by proponents of a more comprehensive curriculum. One letter to the editor written in support of the 2015 HPE curriculum states:

There is too much misinformation, ignorance and intolerance around to put the responsibility for teaching this material solely in parents' hands. The fact we are still dealing with intolerance about sexual orientation shows that too many parents still aren't doing a proper job and that government and educators need to step up to fill the void. (*The Globe and Mail* 2015)

I found it more surprising, however, when those with concerns about the 2015 curriculum also make reference to the limits of parents' capacities to be sex educators. One parent who was interviewed by *The Globe and Mail* expressed concern that the 2015 curriculum would send students home with questions that their parents would be ill-prepared to handle:

Students don't leave their questions in the school. Those kids might come home and try to find information on the Internet or ask their parents and those parents won't want to listen to those questions. Where does that student go? (qtd. in Cuneo Keenan 2015)

Another parent's comments suggested that some parents were not so much unable as unwilling to contend with their children learning the more comprehensive 2015 curriculum; at a protest against the 2015 curriculum, this parent told the *Toronto Star* that she "worries it will make her life, and the lives of other parents, 'difficult' because she fears it will teach her children lessons that contradict important cultural values" (Hall 2015). The parent went on to say, "These things really bother us. Maybe they'll learn something bad from school and they'll just start arguing with us" (qtd. in Hall 2015). While I don't wish to trivialize concerns about how curriculum might conflict with deeply held cultural values, I

find these expressions of parental limitations striking when considered alongside assertions that parents are the best arbiters of sex education. I read these as expressions of anxiety around the sometimes-daunting responsibility of parents to figure out how to talk (or not talk) to their children about sexuality. Parents may claim absolute authority for themselves as the rightful sex educators of their children, but they may also express a sense of their own inadequacy in the face of unexpected or unwanted questions about sexuality from their children. In light of this ambivalent relationship to authority on matters of sexuality, the curriculum is imagined to be either a panacea that will replace the inadequate (or non-existent) instructions of parents, or as a provocation that will only lead children to ask *more* questions of their parents.

The themes discussed above, relating sex education controversies to strong emotions, concerns about sexual risk and danger for children, assertions about the powers of curriculum, and complicated relationships to parental and governmental authority in the sphere of sex education, are reflected and given additional nuance in the interviews I conducted with three parents who became involved in the debates over Ontario's HPE curriculum between 2015 and 2019. I turn my discussion to these interviews next.

Parent #1: Katherine

Pen Portrait

The first Ontario parent I interviewed, whom I'll call Katherine, lives in one of Ontario's large cities. She has one daughter who was in middle school at the time of the interviews in early 2019. Katherine described her socio-economic class background when she was growing up as "working-class" and "disadvantaged," and she contrasted this with

her high level of educational privilege as an adult. Katherine had recently completed a PhD and described herself as an “academic,” “social activist,” and “educator” at the postsecondary level. She is a white, cisgender, bisexual woman, an atheist, and a survivor of sexual assault. She gave birth to her daughter when she was in her early twenties and was in an abusive relationship with her daughter’s father, a relationship that she subsequently left after several months. Since then, she has raised her daughter as a single parent, although her daughter’s father has had some limited contact with their child. Katherine’s involvement with the controversies over sex education in Ontario began in 2018, when Doug Ford’s Progressive Conservative party formed government and withdrew the 2015 HPE curriculum for Grades 1-8 from the province’s schools while launching new consultations. Katherine was upset by this, because she valued the clear lessons about consent in the 2015 curriculum. She also appreciated the 2015 curriculum’s expanded content on embracing sexual and gender diversity, including in the younger grades, as well as what she saw as more opportunities for “honest discussion around sex.”

Policy Advocacy Involvement

Katherine acted on her opposition to the changes the new government had made by discussing the issues surrounding the HPE curriculum with her daughter, who was also concerned about the reversion to the older curriculum, and they listened to media reports and debates on the topic together. She also held a meeting with friends to discuss the possibility of coordinating what she called “rogue sex ed” to compensate for the shortcomings of the older curriculum to which the province was temporarily reverting. Due to the fact that other groups were already offering these kinds of educational opportunities in the community, she and her friends did not proceed with their plan, but Katherine’s

daughter was present for that initial meeting. Katherine also thought she might have filled out the government's "For the Parents" survey about sex education and other educational matters, although she couldn't remember for sure. Ultimately, Katherine described her main involvement in the sex education curriculum debates as taking place through her encouragement of her daughter's engagement and interest in the issue. Katherine talked about teaching her daughter the importance of activism, and she articulated her belief that it is important for youth to get involved in social and political issues that affect their lives.

The Political is Personal: Sexual Violence and Activism

Katherine referred to emotions many times when she recounted her experiences and opinions relating to the sex education controversies in Ontario. For example, she described herself as "stoked," "excited," and "happy" about the 2015 curriculum, particularly the lessons on consent. She also expressed her concern with the Ford government's subsequent move to remove the curriculum from schools for a review, describing the move as "upsetting" in both of our interviews and saying it left her feeling "frustrated" and "angry." Katherine noted that she experienced these emotions in spite of the fact that she was "not all that shocked" by the policy reversal, given broader political trends she was observing in the world towards increased support for right-wing populism. Nonetheless, the curriculum change sparked an emotional response in her.

Another aspect of the debates over sex education that had emotional resonance for Katherine was her daughter's decision to take a leadership role in a student walkout at her school that protested the removal of the 2015 HPE curriculum from schools. The walkout took place in conjunction with other student walkouts happening at an estimated total of 75 schools across the province, as previously mentioned in the introduction to this chapter,

and was covered by the news media (Teotonio 2018). While Katherine was aware that the walkout was taking place, her daughter did not inform Katherine that she was one of the leaders of the action at her own school. It was only afterwards, when a teacher whom Katherine ran into on the street described Katherine's daughter as "doing so much amazing work around this" and leading other students in chants through a megaphone that Katherine understood the extent of daughter's involvement. She described feeling "happy" about her daughter's activism, but also "surprised" and "a little bit sad" that her daughter hadn't discussed her role in the activism with Katherine. This story about her daughter's activism suggests the ways that Katherine's emotional investments in the curriculum debates are informed by the transference of her own history and beliefs, her desire to pass along her values to her daughter, and the all-too-familiar experience for parents of having to accept the growing independence of their children. As Katherine's daughter acted in ways that seemed to demonstrate the influence of her mother, she also exerted her natality—her ability to do something new in the world (Arendt 1993)—in a way that left her mother in the dark.

When I asked Katherine explicitly about the emotional side of her experiences of these controversies, she suggested, while laughing, that as an academic, she tended to discuss these kinds of issues "in very technical language." She then went on to say,

It's also that I'm raising a young girl and I can do everything that I can do. You know, [my daughter] is hopefully privileged to be exposed to people in her life that will provide a lot of that information for her. But not everyone else is getting that information, and so, as a young girl growing up in the world where young boys and other young women aren't necessarily learning this, that scares me. The potential

for violence to be enacted on her, the potential for her to find herself in situations where that kind of violence is normalized, legitimized, downplayed. The potential for her to find herself in institutions and social relations where her experiences and her feelings are delegitimized, where her capacity to navigate safe sex is undermined, because she's not the only one involved in that. Practicing safe sex goes two ways. You can only be so safe when you're the only person navigating that. So, those are—I'm quite fearful, on some level, about that.

This statement encapsulated several of the key themes that Katherine had raised throughout the interviews, while specifically pointing to the emotional and relational stakes, for her, attached to what kind of sex education curriculum is taught in Ontario schools. It also speaks to her awareness of the limits of the power of the sex education she can provide for her daughter, given that sexuality plays itself out in the social world as well. Furthermore, Katherine's statement locates sexual danger in her daughter's peers, who may not be receiving the kind of sex education that Katherine endeavours to give her own daughter. To some extent, this mirrors Sinikka Elliott's (2012) finding from her interviews with American parents about their sex talks with their teenage children that many parents locate the dangers of sexuality in other teenagers, as opposed to their own children. At the same time, though, Katherine's statement that "practicing safe sex goes two ways" suggests that she expects her daughter to take some responsibility for ethical sexual conduct. I also read her remarks as an implicit critique of both the approaches of some other parents to educating their own children about sexuality and the broader social discourses that perpetuate gender-based violence and inequality. Elsewhere in our conversations, when we discussed how much say parents should have in sex education curricular content,

Katherine told me she wanted to have some input but wished certain other parents with views that conflicted with hers did not have an influence over the curriculum. She openly acknowledged the tension inherent in this position and suggested that those right-wing parents probably would not want her to have influence over the curriculum either. This concern about other parents and their capacities for providing sex education for their children reflects some of the commentary in the media coverage that expresses doubt about parents' competence as sex educators, further complicating the question of who should hold the authority to design and deliver sex education lessons.

Throughout the interviews, Katherine drew a connection between the content of sex education and the possibilities of sexual and gender-based violence that existed within the social sphere within which her child was coming of age. For Katherine, whose daughter was in elementary school when the 2015 curriculum was first taught in Ontario schools, the new lessons about consent were a source of excitement and hope. In addition to telling me that she had become a parent at a young age and was a single parent to her daughter, she also shared that her daughter's father had been physically, emotionally, and financially abusive to her before she was able to leave him. At the time of the interview, she said that he had no custody rights but was still in touch with their daughter. Katherine also revealed that he held many views that were informed by Men's Rights Activism and that he discussed these views with their daughter.⁵² While she told me she did not wish to "frame"

⁵² Men's Rights Activism (MRA) is a movement that originally focused on countering what was perceived to be an attack on the rights of fathers by feminists in the realm of family law, especially related to policies regarding child custody and support (Gotell and Dutton 2016). More recently, Men's Rights Activism has increasingly shifted online, as proponents participate in "virtual communities founded on malice against feminists and mobilizing men on the basis of a claimed identity as victims" (72). In particular, MRA has recently

her views on the HPE curriculum “explicitly in terms of [her daughter’s] father,” Katherine did discuss him and his affinity for Men’s Rights Activism several times throughout the first interview to illustrate the importance of the lessons on consent contained in the 2015 curriculum. The political implications of a curriculum that explicitly taught children about affirmative consent were, for Katherine, deeply personal as well.

Katherine was hopeful that the lessons on consent and healthy relationships could help to counteract the messages that her daughter was hearing from her father and help to prevent the types of violence she had herself experienced. In fact, Katherine wished there was even *more* emphasis on teaching consent in the earlier grades:

I was more interested and concerned with moving it forward [and] expanding the scope of what would be included. So, my view to it was that this is a great fucking change, but it’s not enough. And so we need to keep moving that conversation. [...] I think maybe that’s why the background of [my daughter]’s father makes sense is, I see this as an important step to educating youth, and perhaps shifting tendencies towards rape culture, toxic masculinity, all those kinds of things. And preventing, perhaps, violence in the long run.

The theme of violence came up several times in our conversations. For example, Katherine worried that the removal of lessons on LGBTQ identities would constitute a missed opportunity to “head off violence, or potentially violent conflicts, in the future” due to intolerance. She also expressed concerns about the perpetuation of rape culture more generally in the absence of widespread education about consent. This was not simply an

focused on claims that feminist discourses surrounding rape culture encourage false allegations of rape by women while making sexual violence towards men invisible.

abstract concern for her. Katherine told me a story about an incident that took place when her daughter was in elementary school, during one of the years when the 2015 HPE curriculum was in place. Her daughter was teased by some classmates who said she enjoyed getting raped. When Katherine told the principal she thought that the students were in need of a conversation about what a taunt like that really means, the principal responded that that kind of discussion was not yet permitted, because lessons on consent were not included in the HPE curriculum for that grade.⁵³

At our second interview, Katherine told me about another incident that had taken place since our first conversation, in which a classmate of her daughter's had taken a photo of her daughter and modified it in a sexually suggestive manner. While the photo had not been shared on the internet, Katherine linked this story back to the importance of understanding issues of consent, this time in relation to modern technology and social media. Both of these stories seemed to illustrate that the arguments over contents of the HPE curriculum had a kind of urgency and immediacy for Katherine, because the curriculum content had the potential to intervene on the ways her daughter, and presumably others as well, were being treated in school at that time. Furthermore, she drew a connection between these incidents and the kinds of ignorance and power imbalances that uphold rape culture and lead to more overt forms of violence and harm—

⁵³ This explanation from the principal struck me as odd, because the contents of the HPE (or any) curriculum do not strictly define or circumscribe the abilities of teachers and administrators to respond to inappropriate behaviour on the playground. While I can imagine that the recent controversy surrounding the contents of the 2015 HPE curriculum may have contributed to this principal's cautious stance on tackling a topic related to sexual violence, I also see their response as symptomatic of a move to treat the curriculum as having the coercive and prohibitive effects of law, a phenomenon I discuss later on in this chapter.

harms of the type that she herself had presumably experienced as a self-identified survivor of sexual assault. I read this as a transference of Katherine's history onto the scene of her own parenting and her daughter's education.

Ultimately, I see Katherine expressing the hope that "a curriculum of consent is education's cure for sexual violence" (Gilbert 2018, 277n), a sentiment that Jen Gilbert analyzes in her article on the addition of lessons on consent to the 2015 HPE curriculum. The crisis of authority contained in Katherine's story of involvement in sex education curriculum advocacy, in my view, is the crisis of a government and broader social context that seems unwilling to take responsibility for the misogyny and gender-based violence that are endemic to the world in which Katherine is raising her daughter. There are also hints, though, in Katherine's narrative of the limits of any curriculum to mend a violent social world. Katherine finds the 2015 curriculum is still inadequate, and it does not create the conditions in which her daughter's principal confidently addresses the rape jokes made by young students. Perhaps these shortcomings could be addressed by further improvements to the curricular content or by better staff training. It is also possible that "we may ask too much of sex education" (276), as Gilbert writes. But who can blame parents for doing so, especially when they are attuned to the fact that their own individual ability to protect their children from violence has its own limits? Anxieties about the limits of authority may extend, too, to the limits of the impossible profession of education.

Parent #2: ArifPen Portrait

The second Ontario parent I interviewed, whom I'll refer to as Arif, is a married parent of three children who lives in a large city in Ontario. He is an accountant with a Master of Business Administration (MBA) degree, and his wife is a high school teacher. As a child, he arrived in Canada from East Africa as a refugee and experienced standing out as someone who was "brown" and "foreign," in his words. He is also a Muslim. Given the focus in the media on Muslim parents who opposed Ontario's 2015 HPE curriculum for religious reasons, it is important to note that Arif did not describe his objection to the curriculum as stemming from his religion. When it comes to political views, he stated, "I would say I'm politically fiscally conservative and socially liberal to left of liberal."⁵⁴

When the 2015 HPE curriculum was introduced, Arif's three children were in middle school and high school and were attending public schools. Arif was already involved in his children's education as a member of parent council and of the school board's parent advisory body. He had not attempted to influence curriculum content through advocacy before. Generally speaking, he believed that if parents had children with exceptional needs or if they felt something was lacking from their children's education, they should find a way to provide for those needs themselves. His own children had previously attended private Montessori programs for preschool and school-aged children.

⁵⁴ Arif described himself in this way at the end of our second interview. I found his characterization of his social views to be somewhat at odds with our conversations about sexual and gender diversity, which are discussed below.

Media coverage brought the controversy over the 2015 HPE curriculum to the attention of Arif and his wife. Initially, their primary concern was over the possible involvement of former Deputy Minister of Education Benjamin Levin in the development of the curriculum. Arif was troubled that there seemed to be so much resistance to reviewing the curriculum, in light of Levin's child pornography convictions. He and his wife then took a look at the curriculum itself: Arif said, "We glanced through it. I think my wife read through the document more than I did." At that point, the lessons about consent became an object of his concern as well. He also had reservations about the way the parent consultation that informed the 2015 curriculum was conducted. For all these reasons, he believed the curriculum needed to be reviewed.

Policy Advocacy Involvement

Arif's involvement in advocacy regarding Ontario's sex education curriculum was multifaceted. He spoke with his member of provincial parliament (MPP), in person, about his concerns with the curriculum during its first year of implementation. He attended a fundraiser for one of the candidates in the Progressive Conservative leadership race that took place in 2015. He told the candidate's team he had heard that Patrick Brown—the eventual winner of the leadership race—was using the issue to recruit "minority" supporters, and that he thought their candidate also needed to call for a review of the curriculum, as Brown had done.

Arif and his wife attended a conference hosted by a nearby university on sex education, and they went to a session that specifically focused on the 2015 HPE curriculum. They did this, he said, in order to "get the other point of view." During that session, he shared his own concerns about the curriculum with those present. He also shared his views

at parent council, although he did not regard this as a particularly effective venue for making an impact, because “you get drowned out.” In addition, he posted his opinions about the curriculum on a Facebook group for those involved in school parent councils in his area.

At one point, Arif reached out to the leader of a prominent neighbourhood-based parent group that was vocally opposing the curriculum. He did not specify what he was hoping to achieve, and it sounded like more of an exploratory call, with the hope of perhaps “build[ing] a coalition to get some stuff done.” He found, however, that this group’s leader did not seem to be interested in a partnership.

Additionally, two parents in his community decided to pull their children out of public school and homeschool them instead, in response to the introduction of the 2015 HPE curriculum. Arif told me that he helped these parents design a homeschool program for their children, and he sought out resources and homeschooling community contacts for these parents. This is perhaps not a typical advocacy activity, but it is another way he was involved in parent responses to the introduction of the new sex education curriculum.

Once the government pulled the 2015 HPE curriculum from schools and initiated a new consultation with parents, Arif filled out the “For the Parents” survey, and he submitted a separate document with his comments on the curriculum. He also told me that he listened in on two telephone town halls that were intended for regions of the province other than the one he lives in, in order to hear what people in those regions had to say about the curriculum. Overall, I was struck by Arif’s high degree of involvement in advocacy, through many avenues, regarding Ontario’s HPE curriculum. The issue seemed to have hit a nerve with him in a significant way.

The Anxiety of Influence: Adult Agendas and Childhood Innocence

Something that stood out to me over the course of my two interviews with Arif was that he did not mention emotions very much in relation to the sex education controversy. This contrasts with the narratives of other interview participants I talked with for this project and many of the comments from parents and other stakeholders in the media coverage, in both the Ontario and Alberta cases. In the second interview, when I asked him directly about “how it felt to be involved in this controversy”—a question I asked all interview participants—he did not discuss his own feelings or personal experience. He began by shifting quickly to the second person: “I would describe it as being—you’re in a very polarizing conversation. Extremely so.” He then went on to discuss the positions and motivations of other parents, as he understood them. The topic of other parents, especially those who opposed the curriculum, was a frequent one in his answers throughout the two interviews. The purpose of our interviews was for me to hear about his opinions, actions, and experiences, but he was more interested in representing the opinions, actions, and experiences of others. In this way, Arif’s representation of emotional life appeared to me as a projection onto the lives of others. One of the defence mechanisms I first discussed in Chapter 1, projection, involves displacing one’s own uncomfortable feelings or wishes, so that they are seen instead to reside in someone else. As a result, my conversation with Arif often felt depersonalized, and I struggled at times to separate out what he himself was thinking and feeling about the topics under discussion.

While frequently discussing other parents, Arif also seemed intent on differentiating himself from them, including many of the concerned parents portrayed in media coverage. Unlike others, he maintained that he “wasn’t concerned” about the impact of the content of

the 2015 HPE curriculum on his own children because, in his words, “we had enough influence at home.” In fact, when the 2015 HPE curriculum was enacted in schools, he and his wife insisted that their children go to health class, even though two of his children were reluctant to attend. Arif said that he and his wife told them, “Well, you might as well listen to it. Like, you’re going to have to learn about it, right?” This relative lack of concern about the particulars of the curriculum affecting the education of his own children may be related to his belief, mentioned above, that the public education system is already inadequate in many respects, and that parents have to mediate and supplement their own children’s education in order to ensure that they get the kind of schooling they need to be successful.

Instead of being motivated by fears about the education and wellbeing of his own children, Arif articulated a generalized concern about school curriculum as a conduit for malign influences on society more broadly. Perhaps the most specific example of this was his belief that Benjamin Levin’s purported involvement in the development of the curriculum made its content suspect. To Arif, what he saw as Levin’s oversight of the curriculum’s development was “like having a thief running your accounting finance department” and was therefore grounds for a review of the curriculum in and of itself. He also found the lessons on consent in younger grades⁵⁵ concerning in light of Levin’s connection to the curriculum, and he likened teaching children about consent to “grooming” them to be susceptible to pedophiles:

⁵⁵ Lessons that explicitly mention consent are included in the 2015 HPE curriculum starting in Grade 5, in the context of building “healthier relationships” and developing “living skills” (Ontario Ministry of Education 2015a, 175). In Grade 3, the 2015 curriculum has students learning that “healthy relationships” involve “communicating openly, listening, [and] showing mutual respect and caring” (121).

If you took the most negative point of view and say, “Okay, how would a pedophile create the perfect document?” He would teach kids consent and say that you have the permission to do X, Y, Z. Fundamentally, that’s what you would do.

The alarming nature of Levin’s activities seemed to provoke for Arif an anxiety of influence, which he expresses through a thought experiment in which he takes “the most negative point of view.” Arif’s experiment also implies a collapse of the space between the signifier and the thing to which it refers: in this case, sex. Indeed, Arif’s concerns bring to mind Janice Irvine’s (2002) book *Talk about Sex*, where she documents and describes both the narrative that sex education will encourage children to have sex *and* the related but distinct idea that talking about sex with children and youth is somehow equivalent to engaging in sex. Arif’s comments seem to float in the space between these two types of concerns.

Arif’s seeming anxiety about influence also appears to undergird his view that the curriculum is part of a larger social agenda advanced by the premier at the time, Kathleen Wynne. Early in the first interview, Arif stated that the 2015 curriculum “is a social engineering experiment from Kathleen Wynne-slash-the Ministry of Education to achieve some social purpose that they’ve said is important.” Arif used the language of “social engineering” several times throughout the two interviews, often in ways that did not specify exactly what the goal of that social engineering would be. However, he did draw a connection between Kathleen Wynne, the administration of the human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccine to children,⁵⁶ and some kind of social engineering agenda. Similar to his

⁵⁶ While Arif was not specific about the link between the HPV vaccine and Kathleen Wynne, Ontario’s program of providing the HPV vaccine to Grade 7 children, which had previously only included girls, was expanded to include boys in 2016, during Wynne’s tenure as premier (Ferguson 2016). Sinikka Elliott (2012) discusses the fears of parents she interviewed that their children would contract HPV, as well as debates in various American

concern that lessons on consent were “grooming” children for pedophiles, Arif suggested that by giving them the HPV vaccine, “it’s almost like you’re priming kids to be sexually active.” When he considered the vaccine program in the context of the 2015 sex education curriculum, Arif concluded, “I’m just seeing what she’s doing and I’m saying, ‘She’s socially engineering her cultural beliefs upon everybody,’ which I had an issue with.”

Arif’s comments seem to attribute a sinister motive to Wynne, an attribution that appears to draw on a tradition of vilifying gay and lesbian people by associating them with pedophilia (Fetner 2008).⁵⁷ At other times in the interviews, though, Arif describes Wynne’s motives as well-intentioned, if misguided. For example, towards the end of the second interview, I inquired about the link between Wynne’s sexual orientation and the “social engineering” agenda that Arif had identified in the 2015 HPE curriculum:

Lauren: When you talked about ideology informing this 2015 sex ed curriculum, do you link that to the ideology of the LGBT community in Ontario?

Arif: Oh yeah. 100 percent. 100 percent. And I think that was Wynne’s personal mission, because of her personal history.

L: Hmm. As a lesbian?

A: Yeah. 100 percent. I think it 100 percent had to do with her history, and with the people she knows, her history.

states over whether government HPV vaccination programs would encourage sexual activity among teens.

⁵⁷ Homophobic attacks on then-premier Wynne and concerns related to the influence of pedophiles in the curriculum are also documented in the media coverage of this policy debate. For example, an editorial in *The Globe and Mail* (2018) notes, “Opponents shamelessly claimed the curriculum was designed to ‘groom’ children for pedophiles, and that it was the work of a ‘lesbian-activist.’”

Here, I understood Arif to be specifying that a literal gay agenda was underlying the sex education content of the 2015 HPE curriculum. Unlike his previous concerns that the curriculum was designed to make children sexually active and more vulnerable to sexual predators, however, Arif immediately goes on to say that he believes Wynne's intentions with the curriculum were, in fact, positive. The following excerpt picks up where the last interview excerpt leaves off:

Arif: Yeah. 100 percent. I think it 100 percent had to do with her history, and with the people she knows, her history. Nothing wrong with that, but I think she went about it the wrong way. I think she went about it the wrong way. The intentions: good. The approach: I don't think it benefitted [anyone].

When I asked him to clarify in what respect Wynne's intention were positive, he replied that "the fact that one should not discriminate against the LGBT community" did need to be addressed in curriculum. While I did my best to ask questions that would help me understand Arif's point of view on this matter, I found his comments confusing. In particular, Arif's seeming use of the defence mechanism of negation to describe Wynne's good intentions suggests an ambivalence—as previously stated in Chapter 1, Britzman (1998) describes negation as "an ambivalent form of thought" (30). In this case, Arif seemed to want to view Kathleen Wynne as a person with good intentions, but he worried about her having a nefarious social engineering agenda as well. It also seemed that he both supported a curriculum that discouraged discrimination against LGBT people, even while he opposed lessons that openly discussed sexual and gender diversity, homophobia, and transphobia.

This tension between good intentions and negative outcomes was also reflected in Arif's comments on what he thought would make a better anti-discrimination curriculum. He worried that the 2015 curriculum singled out the LGBT community too much, and he said that, with this kind of targeted attention, "what you're doing is you're putting a mark on somebody."⁵⁸ He related this concern about unwanted attention and being singled out to his experience of being new to Canada as a child:

Being a minority who came to Canada when I was only a young kid in school, the last thing you want to be is marked as an outlier. And that's what this does. It effectively marks you as—at least from my perspective, it marks you as an outlier, versus marking you as somebody who's part of the group.

I read Arif's concern about what he perceives to be the singling out of the LGBT community and the possible negative consequences of that as, at least in part, a projection of his own history. As Britzman (1998) notes, projection provides a basis for empathy: she writes, "the project of empathy is actually a projection of the self into the conditions of the other" (83). Drawing on this history, Arif advocated for an indirect anti-discriminatory approach,⁵⁹ such that lessons in history and civics classes could examine and compare instances of discrimination against various communities around the world. He mentioned discrimination against Rohingya Muslims and against Mormons as two examples. The idea

⁵⁸ While the curriculum does focus specifically on sexual orientation and/or gender identity and expression at certain moments (e.g., Ontario Ministry of Education 2015a, 216), these topics are often mentioned alongside others, such as in a list of invisible differences between people (124) or as examples on which stereotypes may be based, along with others including "race, [and] ethnicity or culture" (177).

⁵⁹ A call for a less direct approach to teaching about sexual and gender diversity can also be seen in the opinion column by Hassan discussed above (2015), in which she contends that "children [...] can be taught to respect diversity in less explicit ways."

was that students would then draw their own conclusions about the fact that, if discrimination was bad in these cases, it would be bad if directed at LGBT people as well. Arif did acknowledge, however, that the comparison between racial, ethnic, or religious groups and the LGBT community might not be perfect, even as he continued to lean on this perceived equivalency. In the following interview excerpt, I preserve the verbatim transcription in order to convey the struggle Arif had articulating the extent to which the equivalency does or does not hold up:

The LGBT [sic] is, for lack—is—isn't a tribe, but it's just—it's a cultural—it's a cultural, um—it's more—n—it—cultural's not the right word, but I—I t—I—I—I don't know what the right word for it, but it's a s—i—I—I don't think it belongs in the sex ed.

He went on to state, “Now, when you're talking about how people should be treated, that's [...] history, that's [...] civics.” By (tentatively) characterizing the LGBT community as just another of many cultural groups, Arif was able to make the argument that they did not merit a particular focus in the sex education curriculum.

After we had talked about what he characterized as Kathleen Wynne's good intentions and misguided approach as embodied in the 2015 curriculum, Arif started using the language of human rights when he expressed the concern that the LGBT community was being given “preferential rights.” He suggested that integrating into a dominant culture requires minority groups to “shed 10 percent” of their group identity, and he argued that the 2015 sex education curriculum was working against this kind of integration for LGBT people. He expressed a desire for the LGBT community to “assimilate” and “blend in” more, arguing that “every other community's done that.” Arif's desire for assimilation, and for a

curriculum that encourages it, was supported by a concern that minorities were being allowed to overrule the majority. Arif brought up the example of changing the legal definition of marriage to include same-sex couples, and he claimed that the concept of marriage was “being taken hostage by a minority group.” This shift in the conversation shed new light, for me, on why the open discussion of LGBT people in the 2015 curriculum might have made Arif anxious: because, I suggest, it highlighted their existence and the challenges that LGBT identities pose to hegemonic understandings of sex, gender, and relationships. This highlighting was at odds with the aim of assimilation, one that Arif had embraced himself as a person of colour who arrived as a child refugee in Canada and tried to avoid standing out. In this case, the transference of affective dynamics relating to a desire for belonging and experiences of xenophobia from early life experiences may have informed Arif’s approach to the 2015 HPE curriculum.

If Arif was wary of singling out LGBT issues in curriculum, and of adults’ interventions in this context, he seemed to find hope in the figure of the child. He gave me an example of what his ideal LGBT education would look like by telling me an anecdote about his daughter who entered a gifted program in middle school, where she developed a close group of friends, one of whom was openly gay. Through getting to know him, Arif suggested, his daughter had learned about what it meant to be gay in a way that was “so organic” and involved “a very natural progression” of learning. Arif described this education as “optimal,” and he returned to this anecdote over and over again throughout our two interviews. When I asked him at the beginning of our second meeting whether anything had come to mind after our first conversation regarding the issues we had discussed, he returned to the topic of his daughter and her gay friend again. He told me that

he had met his daughter's friend because he had come to Arif's house. Arif had gone to the friend's house as well and met his family. He described the visit to me:

Dad and his two brothers were on the couch watching TV. A very traditional, I would say male-centric household. So it sort of gave me a perspective, and I said, "Yeah. It's just sort of like—it's not environment, it's not this." That sort of reaffirmed for me, personally, that this kid is in a very male-oriented household. There's no bias to that.

In getting to know his daughter's friend and his family, Arif drew on common tropes of a heteronormative childhood that seemed to allay his concerns about queerness. Still, Arif's anxieties about adult influence are nonetheless at work in the above excerpt in the form of his seeming approval that a gay child could be raised in a "very traditional" and "male-centric" household, with "no bias." Learning about LGBT people from a gifted child with an apparently wholesome, "traditional" family seemed preferable to Arif than placing such lessons in the hands of adults—especially adults in Wynne's government with what he saw as nefarious agendas.

Overall, my conversations with Arif made it clear that he acknowledges a societal collective responsibility to discourage discrimination among young people, and he sees a role for education in discharging this responsibility. At the same time, Arif had to contend with the challenge of articulating his views as a person of colour, a first-generation Canadian, and a Muslim in a context where opposition to the curriculum by religious and ethnic minorities—especially Muslims—was being met, in some public discourse, by scornful, reductionist, and racist responses. In her discussion of the Ontario sex education controversies, Hannah Dyer (2019) notes:

An insistence on conflating “anti sex-ed activism” with communities of immigrants allows race to become regenerated as a determining factor of one’s moral positioning on the child’s sexual development, and demonstrates how a provincial debate is inscribed with discourses of race and racism in a global frame. (751)

At risk of being viewed through a stereotype that delegitimizes his authority to comment on curriculum as a parent, Arif holds up an assimilative ideal as a model through which discrimination could be indirectly addressed and discouraged, with the hope of avoiding backlash or scrutiny on any particular group.

When it comes to the 2015 curriculum’s content that directly confronts the existence of sexual and gender diversity, though, the crisis of authority that sexuality can provoke seems to become manifest in Arif’s fears of hidden agendas on the part of state actors, such as bureaucrats and politicians. This crisis indicates a lack of trust in government to educate on sexuality responsibly and transparently, where the very attempt to openly discuss sexual and gender diversity may feel like a breach of norms that claim to protect children from sexuality. Fields (2012) writes that similar “depravity narratives that pervade US debates about sex and sexuality education [...] rest on a historically available discourse about the corruptible child” (7). She continues:

They also help to imagine and constitute a world in which the threat of sexual molestation looms everywhere, every teacher is potentially a pedophile, and learning happens when “the omnipotent, all-controlling adult” meets “the powerless, passive child.” (7)

This view of the child as passive and non-threatening may also help to explain why Arif’s daughter’s friend seemed to be a much less threatening conduit to learning about sexual

diversity, especially when considered in the context of his normative family. In this case, the gay child can be split off from the threatening gay content of the 2015 curriculum; the former can be seen as wholesome and innocent, while the latter as a Trojan horse for malign agendas.

Parent #3: Shauna

Pen Portrait

Each of the parents I interviewed about their advocacy related to Ontario's sex education curriculum has a distinct relationship to educational advocacy, and the third parent I interviewed, whom I'll call Shauna, is no exception. Shauna is a married, cisgender woman and the mother of two children, who were in kindergarten and early elementary school at the time of the interviews. She described her race as "mixed Black and white," and she told me she was university-educated and part of the middle class. Shauna told me she had had a "very demanding professional career" before she had children and had more recently been a stay-at-home parent. During her time at home, she had taken on several official roles as an educational advocate in her community within one of Ontario's major cities. She had held various positions on her children's school's parent council, ever since her oldest child had started school, and at the time of our conversation she was the parent council chair. She was also serving as a member of her school board's advisory committee that focused on supporting the academic success of Black students. Finally, she had been appointed to serve as an interim school board trustee for four months during the previous year to fill a vacancy until the next school board elections took place.

Policy Advocacy Involvement

Shauna's involvement in policy advocacy was not limited to, or even primarily focused on, the issue of sex education. Rather, it was one of many important educational issues that she had engaged with in her various official advocacy roles and as a concerned parent. She described how she had originally gotten involved in education advocacy more generally through her participation in parent council and learning about "all of the different challenges that people face and, you know, some of the policies that don't meet their needs." The HPE curriculum announced by the previous Liberal government had not caught Shauna's notice in any significant way when it was introduced in 2015, which was around the time that her oldest child was beginning school. Instead, the sex education controversies came to her attention at the start of the 2018-19 school year as she was starting her tenure as an interim school board trustee. The new Progressive Conservative provincial government had just announced it was withdrawing the 2015 HPE curriculum for Grades 1-8 and starting consultations. Shauna said, "I became more attuned to it because of all the media coverage, and then also because of parents' inquiries as a trustee, and then also all of the social media conversations that were happening and the sharing of that 'For the Parents' consultation." She also stated, "I would get a lot of inquiries from people about it. And not even just as a trustee, but as a leader in my community and at my school. Obviously, parents are going to be asking questions, and hopefully you can provide answers."

Shauna supported the teaching of the 2015 HPE curriculum because she wanted her children to be taught proactively about queer and trans identities and families in school, to reinforce the positive messages about sexual and gender diversity that her children were

getting at home. She also worried about the negative impact of removing these lessons on the LGBTQ community. Another reason she was in favour of the 2015 curriculum was its inclusion of lessons on consent, starting from an early age. She could, and did, teach her own children about consent at home, but she wanted all children to have access to these lessons as well. Between our two interviews, the government announced its intention to move the first lessons on gender identity later in the curriculum, to Grade 8 (Powers 2019). When we discussed this, Shauna expressed concern that lessons on sex and gender were happening too late.

Shauna engaged in advocacy regarding the sex education curriculum in several ways. She participated in a telephone town hall and completed a survey as part of the government's educational consultation that took place in late 2018, although she told me she felt "angered" and "duped" by the consultation process, due to her sense that it didn't have any impact on policy decisions. In her role as an interim trustee, she responded to her constituents' concerns and inquiries about the curriculum changes, and she voted in favour of a school board motion that called on the government to reinstate the 2015 curriculum. In her community, she engaged in conversations with other parents on the topic, she participated in discussions on social media about the curriculum, and she had some conversations with her MPP about the matter as well. Finally, after her time as an interim trustee was over, she was interviewed on the television news as an engaged parent to discuss various changes the government was making to the education system. She thought she remembered discussing the sex education changes in that conversation, along with other issues.

The Politics of Parenting: Social Responsibility and the Work of Integration

While my intent was to speak to my interview participants about the policy advocacy they had undertaken as parents, in my conversations with Shauna, I noticed how deeply interwoven her roles were as an active parent, a community leader, and an official educational advocate (as an interim trustee and a parent council chair, for example). She said as much herself, when I asked her which role she saw herself inhabiting when she participated in the 2018 telephone town hall as part of the Progressive Conservative government's consultation on education, during her tenure as an interim school trustee. She replied, "I don't think it's possible for me to not wear both. I mean, I am most concerned as a parent. That's what brought me into the role of a trustee." Shauna said that her work as an educational advocate and community leader was motivated by her belief that her socio-economic and educational privilege obligated her to contribute to the well-being of her community, and that she wanted her children to experience this sense of responsibility as well. At the same time, she had noticed that her children appreciated seeing her around their school as she carried out her work as the chair of the school parent council. She also said it had been helpful for her to spend a lot of time at the school to support her oldest child, who has an exceptionality that had affected their early learning experiences at school. Unlike other interview participants, then, who seemed to have given the policy controversy under discussion their particular attention, Shauna talked about the changes to the HPE curriculum as one in a constellation of important issues and changes in the province's education system that demanded her attention and advocacy. This context is important for considering Shauna's involvement as a parent in the sex education

controversies specifically, as it is not neatly separable from her work in her formal community advocacy roles.

Shauna's integration of her roles as parent and educational advocate was also complexly interwoven with her family history. Shauna's mother had served on her school's parent council when Shauna was a child, which Shauna had "really, really appreciated" at the time. In general, she said that her family took seriously their "civic duty" to help others through acts such as volunteering and charitable activities. When it came to sex education, Shauna's mother had been open with her about sex when she started asking questions about it as a young child. In fact, Shauna still had the book that her mother had given her as a child that was meant to help children learn about reproduction, and she was planning to read it to her own oldest child, who was starting to ask questions about the topic.

Shauna's integrative approach was intergenerational. To this end, she described the ways that she had been influenced by her grandmother, who had run a school for many years in the Caribbean country where she lived. The school, which Shauna said had an excellent reputation, offered a sliding-scale tuition in order to include students from less affluent families, and her grandmother was committed to integrating students with disabilities and exceptionalities into the classes with the other children. The school also hired graduates with exceptionalities as teaching assistants. As a child, Shauna spent most of her school years in Ontario, but she also spent many summers living with her grandmother and attending the school's summer programming, so she had a chance to experience the integrated environment first-hand. She also witnessed the experiences of her younger cousins in both their grandmother's school and in Ontario schools. Her cousins are Black, and one of them has multiple exceptionalities. At their grandmother's school her

cousins had positive experiences, but in Ontario schools, they “faced discrimination,” in Shauna’s words. One of them had spent some time in jail, which Shauna attributed to the school-to-prison pipeline:

It became very clear to me the inequities in our system when my cousins moved back here and they didn’t have all of that support at their disposal. And their parents were, for a variety of reasons, needing to work very long hours. [...] Being kind of anti-establishment themselves, [they] didn’t really trust the kind of help and support that they might receive from the system.

Shauna related this context to her work on the school board committee that supports the achievement of Black students, where she noticed that many of the Black parents who were advocating for their children had, themselves, experienced discrimination in the school system and therefore did not trust that the system would treat their children equitably.⁶⁰ As Shauna made clear to me, her educational leadership and activism was informed by her own history and the actions and experiences of her family members in relation to schooling. Her commitment to educational advocacy sprang from childhood experiences of family and schooling, and her commitment to social justice in education extended to many aspects of schooling, not just sex education.

In light of her many overlapping roles related to educational advocacy, it is perhaps not surprising that Shauna had a lot to say about *how* advocacy and input can and should happen. The work of integration seemed, in this case, to lead to embodied actions, or

⁶⁰ The experiences of Shauna’s Black family members and the Black parents she had met in the course of her committee work are also reflected in research conducted in Ontario schools that documents the many ways systemic anti-Black racism, in both the past and present, impedes the educational success of Black students (James and Turner 2017).

praxis. For example, in commenting on her participation in the recent provincial education consultation and what she viewed as its shortcomings, she spoke concretely about how parents can make their voices heard and what kinds of features make a consultation effective. In the latter case, she drew on her own experience helping to facilitate a consultation process in her own school community through her involvement in parent council. Shauna also expressed her belief that parents have significant political power. She stated, “The power is with the people. The strongest voices are the parents, truly. And, you know, it doesn’t really seem like it’s making an impact right now, but certainly at the next election, it likely will.” She also told me she believes that social media is providing new opportunities for parents to get involved in educational advocacy. For Shauna, the failures of the public education system were many, but this crisis of public education within and beyond the HPE curriculum could be challenged and changed by parents through advocacy. Parents’ authority could be exercised through grassroots activism to critique the government’s various abdications of responsibility in the realm of education.

When it comes to sex education specifically, she talked about her own role in educating her children. She noted that both she and her husband have taught their children about important aspects of sex education, such as the dictionary names for their body parts and what consent means in their interactions with others. Because of this proactive approach, Shauna said, when it comes to deliberations over the content of the curriculum, “I somewhat feel that those decisions don’t apply to me directly.” She also pointed out that some of the things her children have learned at school, from their peers and therefore not directly determined by what is in the curriculum, are at odds with what a comprehensive sex education program would aim to provide. For example, her children learned nicknames

for their body parts (here, I understood her to mean genitals) only *after* they started school, from their friends. She also said that her older child acquired what she called “misconceptions” about what sex is from conversations on the playground.

While schools are not always perfect conduits of factual information when it comes to human development and sexuality, Shauna acknowledged that parents, too, can have their limitations or shortcomings as educators. When speaking about the value of comprehensive sex education in schools, she stated:

It’s much easier to get a message across [laughing] by a teacher, in some respects, than it is from a parent, because kids are always seeking consensus from one another, and when they see that certain schools of thought are acceptable and normalized, then, you know, that’s more effective, I feel, than whatever I can do. Or at least it’s complementary to it.

Shauna seemed to be acknowledging the limits of parental authority, as well as the unique value of collective educational experiences. However, she also mentioned that she worries about other children who, unlike hers, are not learning about consent or receiving positive messages about sexual and gender diversity at home. In her comments on this, explicit references to emotion emerge:

I do fear for the children who aren’t having those conversations at home. So, I feel passionately that that information needs to be in there. I think it needs to be in there for children’s safety and protection and inclusivity, [and the] safety and protection of children who identify as a different gender or who have non-heterosexual sexual orientation. Those kids are already facing mental health challenges for not feeling like they fit in, and that their family structure may not be normal. And then the kids

who aren't well-informed, or for those things that are not normalized to other kids, then comes bullying and picking on—you know, so I just think it doesn't foster a healthy dynamic for kids at school, if that information is not being taught.

When it comes to learning about sex, like Katherine, Shauna expressed concern that other parents might not be providing adequate instruction to their children. She was particularly worried about “children who fear talking with their parents” about sex because “it will be like blasphemy that they've even brought it up.” This acknowledgement of the strength of the taboo that can exist around conversations pertaining to sex, particularly involving minors, is vividly rendered here as causing “fear” in children who may be curious or have questions they feel they cannot ask their parents. Shauna also pointed to the fact that parents are sometimes unable or unwilling to have conversations about sexuality or gender that they may find too uncomfortable or that challenge their own prejudices. Once again, a parent is expressing ambivalent feelings about (other) parents' capacities as sex educators.

In a similar vein, Shauna once again raised the topic of other people's children—and once again used the language of emotion—when she talked about why she thinks lessons about consent are so important:

I'm concerned about [...] my own children, but I'm also concerned about other children. I really feel strongly that it is necessary to teach consent at the earliest age possible, not just for your own child and what might happen to them, but what your child might do to someone else. They need to know that no means no, [...] from their point of view as well as someone else's.

Shauna went on to tell me about an incident she experienced as a child, when an older child sexually assaulted her. At the time, she felt “so ashamed” and “didn't really understand

what happened.” She did not tell her mother about the assault, and she suggested that while her mother had taught her about sex more generally, Shauna felt that she hadn’t learned enough about consent as a child. This experience, she said, influenced her choice to talk directly to her own children about consent. Besides talking about her concern for how children might treat each other in the absence of learning about consent, and her recollection of feeling ashamed after she was assaulted, she concluded this disclosure with another reference to emotion, saying, “I don’t know if that answers the question about why I feel so personally about it.” In this way, Shauna made explicit what I read as the transference of her own life history and her feelings about her experiences onto her wishes for the curriculum she wants for the children of today—both her own and others. She also pointed, once again, to the possible failings of parents to teach their children about consent. This discussion of parental limitations even extended to her own mother, who Shauna described in affectionate and positive terms throughout the interviews. One of the challenges sexuality brings into the sphere of parenting and education is that even good parents are not perfect. No parent can control how others will treat their own child, nor can any parent control how their child will act towards others. A parent’s responsibility might feel infinite, but their influence is finite. A comprehensive sex education curriculum that includes lessons on consent and sexual and gender diversity, then, is simply another imperfect attempt, within an imperfect education system, to help children feel safe and show respect to others.

Between the Wish for a Perfect Curriculum and the Impossibility of Education

The saga that was the controversies over the Ontario sex education curriculum gave voice to the way that sexuality can expose “the limits of education” (Gilbert 2014, x). Gilbert unpacks this unstable relationship between sexuality and education:

There can be no education without the charge of sexuality; love, curiosity, and aggression fuel our engagements with knowledge. And yet education—its practices, procedures, rules, structures, and relations—can be undone by the wildness of sexuality. Sexuality will push education to its limit, and education, despite this debt, will try to limit sexuality. (x)

Gilbert’s formulation of this fraught relationship sheds some light on why the governance of sex education can be so difficult and so affectively loaded. Furthermore, these limits of education exposed by sexuality are mirrored by the limits of parenting uncovered by controversies such as the one in Ontario, where parents’ attempts to regulate, intervene on, and even understand their children’s needs to engage with the topic of sexuality also seem, at times, to be pushed to their limits. When these limits are exposed, a crisis of authority may be provoked, as a sense of responsibility for children’s welfare and learning bumps up against the messy inadequacy of any educational intervention into the curious world of sexuality. As Dyer (2019) argues,

Sexuality exceeds the adult’s understanding as much as the child’s, and our entrance into debates about the child’s relationship to sex-ed is as much about them as it is about us and the adult’s securement of knowledge. (748)

Sexuality reminds parents and educators that any illusion of the adult's mastery of knowledge is a phantasy that defends against the uncertainty and curiosity that topics of sexuality so often provoke.

I want to be clear here that I am *not* suggesting that the contents of sex education curriculum are unimportant. Going back to the question of misinformation considered at the beginning of the chapter, I'm also not suggesting that efforts to correct misinformation about the curriculum are unnecessary or pointless. What I am suggesting is that there is an emotional excess that remains beyond the facts of what a curriculum does or does not include. This excess is not unmoored to social realities, either. For example, I found it striking that both of the mothers I interviewed in Ontario disclosed histories of sexual assault in the course of discussing their views and advocacy related the 2015 HPE curriculum. These curricular debates, too, were taking place in the context of a society in which being female and young both increase one's risk of sexual assault (Conroy and Cotter 2017). A 2019 survey of Canadian students found that almost one in 25 girls in Grade 4 said they had "experienced unwanted sexual touching" at school, and that number rose to nearly 1 in 8 among girls in Grade 7 (Common, Singh, and Taylor 2019). In light of these social realities, it is not surprising that both Katherine and Shauna felt that teaching lessons about consent to all students was an urgent priority.

At the same time, there are moments in the data where I see a wish for a perfect curriculum that would save children, or a fear of a curriculum that would irreparably harm them. I suggest that this investment of outsized powers in a policy document is a defence against the status of education and governance as impossible professions—impossibilities in which parents are also implicated. The split phantasies of the powers of curriculum

seemed to take on a particularly strange and rigid shape in the almost viral use of the word “repeal” to describe the Ford government’s move to withdraw the 2015 curriculum for review (e.g., Alphonso 2018a, 2019; Artuso 2018; Ferguson 2018; Lapierre 2019; Rushowy and Teotonio 2018; Thompson and Jeffords 2018). In my experience as a legislative researcher, this word is most commonly used to describe the revocation of legislation.⁶¹ Curriculum, in contrast, is not law and does not have to be voted on by the Ontario legislature before being introduced into the province’s schools. Using the word “repeal,” I suggest, connotes that the HPE curriculum has the force of law. This characterization recalls Ford’s threats to teachers that they could be punished for drawing their lessons from the 2015 curriculum after it had been withdrawn—in spite of the fact that the government’s own lawyers later argued that the 2015 documents could be used as resources by teachers. These defensive phantasies of the power and punitive potential of curriculum suggest an alternative that may be harder to bear—that it is impossible to educate, or legislate, our way out of the messy terrain of learning about sexuality. “At this intersection of law and education,” Gilbert (2018) writes of discourses of consent that run through both sex education curricula and age of consent laws, “sexuality troubles any confidence we might have in those institutions” (276). This dilemma, then, may shed some light on the emotional investments that drove and complicated the protracted debates over Ontario’s HPE curriculum. It also invites us to reframe the impossibility of education, not necessarily as a failure of curriculum change to deliver on its promises, but as the ground

⁶¹ This usage is captured in one of the Oxford English Dictionary’s definitions for the verb “repeal,” which reads “To revoke or rescind (something previously determined or set, esp. a law or sentence)” (*OED Online* 2020).

from which to work through the uncertainties and losses that both sexuality and learning produce.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

What do Susan, Ruth, Katherine, Arif, and Shauna have in common? They differ from each other in many respects. However, they all seem to be living middle-class lives in Canada, in provinces with what are widely considered to be functional infrastructures for ensuring their children receive a certain standard of education. They all, in different ways, want a say in what their children's education should look like, and they see influencing policy as one way of providing that input. All of them connect policy changes in education to broader social and political forces that are affecting Canada and the world. And they all, in some fashion, seem to be grappling with the boundaries of their own authority, and the authority of the government, over the formation of their children. In other words, they are grappling with education, governance, and *parenting* as impossible professions—endeavours with built-in limitations and losses. In this concluding chapter, I consider the implications of my research for researchers, educators, and parents, as well as some possible avenues for further inquiry based on the findings of my project.

These are five parents with five distinct stories of policy advocacy involvement. None of their stories is representative of an entire group of parents. Rather, each narrative offers a look at what it was like for a particular parent to participate in a particular educational controversy. These narratives, as they are represented in this dissertation, portray the lived experiences of five parents at a level of specificity and depth that is generally not available via mainstream or social media accounts. One of my aims in this research project has been to provide multifaceted representations of parents and their advocacy, with a view to better understanding the key roles they played in both cases. In

this dissertation, I have argued for attending to the complicated histories, experiences, and perspectives of parents as policy actors. In particular, I have highlighted the importance of considering the emotional aspects of these histories, experiences, and perspectives. In doing so, I do not mean to suggest that parents are the only ones whose emotional investments affect their involvement in policy processes. Instead, I assume that all policy actors are influenced by many factors, including rational, social, and emotional ones, and that these factors cannot be easily isolated from each other. When focusing on the affective features of parent narratives of policy involvement, I have noted that these internal features exist in a particular context and have a unique intensity that comes both from parents' own histories—of being a child, and of being educated—as well as from the psychic and social weight of the responsibilities they shoulder in parenting their own children. These responsibilities are shaped, limited, and challenged by government duties of provision, protection, and education.

My investigation into the emotional dynamics of policy processes underscores the value of a psychosocial approach to policy research that can constitute an additional strand in the already-multidisciplinary field of critical educational policy analysis. My formulation of this psychosocial approach has drawn on psychoanalytic theory in general and psychoanalytic theorizing in education in particular. This theoretical orientation has provided me with concepts to consider where the pressures and attendant anxieties that may arise when parenting and educating children in the contemporary Canadian context come from and how they operate in cases where educational policy change provokes strong emotional reactions among members of the public, especially parents. While the existing literature on sex education, homeschooling, and the two policy cases under study

in this dissertation point to some of the emotional themes and conflicts at play in these cases, my psychosocial analysis has delved into these in a sustained way, bringing psychoanalytic insights about the impossible professions of education and governance, the difficulties the topic of sexuality poses for adults who are responsible for the education of children, and the way these controversies can return policy actors to their own childhood histories via the transference, through what I have called *the childhood of policy*.

These thematic threads have provided clues as to why some educational policies become particularly emotionally charged sites of contestation. In particular, I have followed these threads through a study of two policy cases, as I analyzed media coverage of each one and put this analysis in conversation with the interviews I conducted with five parents who each participated in one of the two policy debates under study. Throughout my investigation of these cases, I considered the significance that controversial policies have for parents as policy actors, on levels both literal and metaphorical, practical and symbolic.

In both policy cases, questions of responsibility and authority came to the fore. These policy controversies revolved around difficult questions about who should have the authority to educate children on related topics of morality and sexuality. While a clear answer to this question would make the projects of education and parenting easier, the debates in each case suggest the truth is more complicated, even for those with strong views on the matter. In the Alberta case, I have proposed that policy actors' invocations of human rights discourses, and the framing of the controversy as centring on conflicting human rights claims, was partly a way of expressing anxieties about government intrusion into the parental sphere of authority in the home—anxieties animated by fears of loss,

including the loss of childhood innocence and the loss of parental power. For the Alberta parents, social factors, such as the sometimes ignorant and disparaging ways that homeschooling is described in public discourse—portrayals that call their legitimacy and authority into question—may have contributed to homeschooling parents' split narratives of government persecution and parental victimization. These negative discourses may have expressed a particularly acute threat for conservative homeschooling mothers, given that they bear a disproportionately large amount of the social expectations and scrutiny when it comes to their caregiving activities (Hays 1996; Rose 2018). Furthermore, parents with conservative religious beliefs may have assumed in the past that the Progressive Conservative government's underlying values on topics such as sexual diversity aligned with their own. However, an unevenly changing policy landscape in Alberta and in Canada more broadly has resulted in broader protections under the law for lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) people. Within this social context, I argue, the very possibility of a state project to ensure homeschooling lessons adhered to the values of equality and protection for LGB people contained in contemporary human rights laws may have felt deeply threatening to a conservative homeschooling parent's authority.

In the Ontario case, I have suggested that the controversy was driven, in part, by a crisis of authority that surfaced doubts in the abilities of both parents and the public education system to provide adequate sex education for the province's children. Psychoanalytic theorizing on sexuality and education has provided some hints as to why a curriculum on sexuality, in particular, might provoke such a crisis, given that sexuality can both drive curiosity and undermine claims of certainty (Gilbert 2014). In the case of the debates over the Ontario curriculum, I have identified this crisis of authority as manifesting

in positions on sex education that split parents and government into camps of legitimate and illegitimate authorities on sex education. From both corners, curricula became infused with fantasies of omnipotence in which it was invested with the power to save or ruin children. That is, curriculum was constructed as an overly powerful force, whether protective or harmful, which was then used to justify strong claims for or against its implementation. In granting such power to curriculum, there was no discussion of how teachers and students interpret curricular knowledge claims in ways that do not perfectly meet, and can contradict, curricular aims. Furthermore, the difficulties policy actors may have in dealing with their overlapping responsibilities and ambivalent senses of authority may reflect “the limits of education” (Gilbert 2014, x), and, in this case, the limits of governance and parenting as well, to settle once and for all the unruly dynamics of sex education. These limitations return us to Freud’s (2002) view that education and governance are impossible professions, guaranteed to fall short of their aims. That is, in the realms of parenting and education, where the scope and stakes of adult responsibilities for children loom large, facing failure, uncertainty, and limitation can be troubling for adults who feel they must occupy roles that require competence, mastery, and untroubled authority. Encountering the limits of parenting, and the limits of education, to protect and equip children for navigating sexuality in the social world is an encounter with difficult knowledge (Britzman 1998; Pitt and Britzman 2003). My dissertation opens a question about what conditions might support parents, as well as teachers and administrators, to work through the impossibility of education in order to find the opportunity to risk imagining what teaching and learning about sex and sexuality can mean, beyond the certitudes promised by explanations and prohibitions.

This study has multiple implications for the worlds of educational theory and practice. My project lends support to the idea that educational policies can be a fruitful object of study for psychoanalytic and psychosocial scholars of education. Far from being inert, lifeless texts, they can instead become complex affective symbols for those who are in their sphere of influence and who, in turn, seek to influence them. More broadly, this study provides another experiment with what happens when psychoanalytic concepts and interpretive frames are moved “outside the clinic,” to return to the words of Stephen Frosh (2010). My research extends Britzman’s (2006) theorizing on the emotional situation of education and what she calls “the childhood of teaching” (107) into the world of educational policy, through my related theorization of how the affective dynamics made in our earliest relationships with others return to shape responses—including resistances—to policy interpretations and implementation. In so doing, this dissertation applies Britzman’s insights to a different realm in the world of education: that is, I consider the private corners of the mind that may affect how public policy is made, read, debated, and changed. This application may inspire additional translations of this psychoanalytic approach into the study of other emotional situations, whether related to education or not.

For the field of critical policy analysis (CPA) in education, I have laid out a justification for, and an example of, a psychosocial approach to policy research that focuses on the emotional content and context of controversies over policy change. My psychosocial approach aligns with multiple key priorities of CPA scholars. For one, critical policy researchers tend to emphasize the importance of the relationship between theoretical framework and methodological approach, because “our different ways of seeing and thinking about phenomena determine what we see” (Young and Diem 2017, 5). This

project's theoretical framework and methodology demonstrate this type of consistency due to their psychosocial orientation informed, in particular, by psychoanalytic theory and its applications in educational studies. CPA also pays particular attention to the ways that policy processes work towards, or against, goals of social justice (Blackmore 2017). My dissertation's contribution to this goal of CPA is its attention to the ethical dynamics and implications that run throughout these controversies and help to fuel their emotional complexity. While my use of psychoanalytic theory does not situate the project as starting from an explicitly political theoretical orientation, and while my dissertation does not take sides on which policy option is best (as many CPA studies do), this research project nonetheless has political and ethical implications. For both state actors and parents, this research draws attention to the ambivalent experiences that holding authority may provoke and it invites adults in positions of authority to understand their role as one of containing many sides of emotional conflict—stemming from both their own emotions and those of others. An attention to the emotional worlds of policy actors can, I hope, help all those who have responsibilities of care and education for children to work through their investments in these policy controversies and notice the ways those investments might impact the types of educational opportunities provided for young people—especially young people who, because of sexual orientation or gender identity, may face the prospect of lessons that either ignore or condemn their lived experiences. When it comes to dynamics of shared authority, this research gestures to the importance of cultivating relationships, when possible, between the adult figures in families and in the educational system that hold space for open communication, listening, respect, and even a capacity for tolerating the anxieties of others. These kinds of relationships between home and school,

family and state, are likely to provide a better basis for working through conflicts and concerns about children's education and the impacts of policy—including addressing misinformation—than the kind of depersonalized, sensationalized, and defensive communication that can predominate through traditional media and social media channels.

My dissertation research is also a reminder for those working towards social justice in education, including critical policy scholars and sex education researchers, of the inevitable limitations of trying to achieve social change through better policy. While policies do matter, broader social inequalities cannot be solved through educational improvements alone, just as the threat of sexual assault, for example, cannot be cancelled out by a perfect sex education curriculum. Like the project of education more broadly, educational policy has to contend with its own limits.

My hope is that further research will take up this psychosocial approach to policy research and test its applicability with other sorts of policy cases and topics. One possible avenue for further research would be to apply this psychosocial approach to policy research to the study of parent involvement in educational policy controversies that do not have issues of sexuality at their heart, such as heated debates over special education services, school choice, or mathematics curriculum. A consideration of how psychic dynamics such as the transference and the use of defence mechanisms interact with social factors in these debates may provide useful insights on their volatility and persistence. Similarly, I am intrigued by the prospect of using this psychosocial framework to research the policy activities of other actors besides parents. It would be particularly interesting to consider how a psychosocial lens might shed new light on the policy activities of elected

officials. This also might be challenging research to conduct, given how proficient politicians are at providing a practiced, coherent narrative about their policy work.

On a more concrete level, this project has contributed to scholarly conversations about two notable debates over the governance and scope of compulsory education in two Canadian provinces. In particular, given that the 2012 controversy in Alberta over the *Education Act* has received little scholarly attention, one of the contributions of this research has been to provide an in-depth account of the policy case, drawing on both the contemporaneous media coverage and the interviews with two parents who were involved. This policy controversy was neither the first one in Alberta to involve LGB issues and education, nor was it the last. Consequently, my chapter on this particular case may hold some value for other scholars who are analyzing the historical trends of the intersections between sexuality and education in Alberta. My particular contribution has been to highlight the role of parents in shaping processes of policy negotiation, and to demonstrate how a psychosocial study of their stated concerns can give expression to the psychological stakes of policy change as experienced by parents in relationship to notions of authority and care that are so connected to their identities *as* parents.

My analysis of both the Alberta and Ontario cases has ultimately suggested the importance of recognizing the sometimes-difficult psychic position of holding authority for the care and education of children. Inhabiting a position of authority in the midst of uncertainty and discomfort, and the uneasy sharing of this authority that parents and the state have to negotiate, make for a potentially anxious environment—an anxiety that may only be further intensified when sexuality is front and centre. Recognizing the psychosocial landscape of policy debates may be useful for anyone who is involved in educational policy

development and enactment, including parents, teachers, administrators, and legislators. While not all opinions about sexuality, children, and education have the same ethical implications or even the same relationship to reality, those who are negotiating a shared responsibility for children's care and education may find it helpful to keep in mind that these opinions can reflect many layers of meaning for those who hold them. They can reflect the histories, anxieties, hopes, and fears of policy actors, as well as their social location and political investments. When a parent approaches a principal with concerns about the sex education curriculum that seem incongruous with the actual content of the curriculum document itself, for example, the principal might find it useful to consider what psychosocial factors are animated inside this gap. This type of consideration, in turn, could help the principal to respond in ways that are both principled and generous. The idea is not that the two parties will always be able to find a way to see eye to eye on questions of if, how, and where sex education should take place. But a psychosocial perspective on the topic may provide some fresh ways of facing the difficulties—even impossibilities—of discharging shared responsibilities for facilitating the learning and growth of the children in our care. Above all, my psychosocial study of policy debates over sexuality and education can help theorists, administrators, teachers, and parents recognize the unspoken stakes of their arguments as holding emotional significance. For parents in particular, who are the focus of this study, my research can be read as an invitation to think about the emotional situation of parenting, not as something to keep out of the classroom or debates over curriculum, but quite the contrary: as a resource to work through the conflicts that childhood, sexuality, and education present.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

Interview #1 (90 minutes)

Framing question for the interview: How did you come to be involved in [policy controversy X]?

Can you give me a bit of an introduction to yourself? What can you tell me about yourself and your life previous to [controversy X] that would set the stage for how you came to be involved in this policy debate?

Tell me the story of how you decided to get involved in the debate over [X].

What was it about [X] that made you want to get involved, or what circumstances led to your involvement?

Prior to participating in [X], how did you understand your role and educational responsibilities to your child(ren) as a parent?

How did your prior experiences (as a parent, and in general) inform your involvement in [X]?

Describe in detail the activities that pertained to your involvement in [X]. Can you walk me through each activity?

Interview #2 (90 minutes)

Framing question for the interview: How do you understand the significance of your participation in [policy controversy X]?

Since our first interview, have you had any further thoughts about the events and topics we talked about?

Do you remember how you felt when participating in these activities? What was it like to participate?

Looking back, why do you think [X] made you feel the way it did at the time?

Looking back from your vantage point today, what does your participation in [X] mean to you now?

How do you feel about your involvement in [X] now?

In light of your experience participating in [X], how do you understand your role and educational responsibilities to your child(ren) as a parent?

Would you like to share any other demographic, social group, or identity information with me (e.g., race, gender, age, sexual orientation, marital status, class, religion, etc.)? Do you have any thoughts about how or if any of these matter to your experience of participation in [X]?