

'Difficult citizenship': The precarious relationships between childhood, sexuality and access to knowledge

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Sexualities

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Abstract

In this discussion children's *difficult citizenship* is examined within the contentious context of children being considered sexual citizens. The relationship of childhood to sexuality is fraught with difficulties, controversies, and complexities; it is one openly and officially based on exclusion, with children constituted as requiring *protection* from sexuality, considered an 'adults' only' domain, dangerous to children. Hegemonic discourses of *childhood* and *innocence* are examined in the ways in which they have been utilized to strictly regulate children's access to knowledge of sexuality and to deny their relevance and access to sexual citizenship. Utilizing a Foucaultian theoretical framework, it is argued that the regulation of children's access to knowledge of sexuality is primarily linked to the ways in which childhood and innocence are utilized as a means through which the 'good' heteronormative adult citizenship subject is constituted and governed. Children's education is foundational in the development of the heteronormative good future citizen and sexual citizen subject. Through institutions such as schooling, adults have heavily regulated children's education and access to information, strictly defining what knowledge children should and should not be privy to. A focus is given to Australian primary schooling and pre-school education. Moral panic is regularly mobilized to reinforce this regulation when the boundaries of what is perceived to be 'appropriate' knowledge for children are transgressed. It is argued that this regulation has critical implications for children's early education, their increased vulnerabilities, and for their health and well-being, not just in their childhood but throughout their lives.

Keywords

Childhood, citizenship, education, knowledge, sexuality

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Introduction

Childhood has a difficult relationship to citizenship discourse. As the vast range of research on children and citizenship highlights, it is a relationship in which children are predominantly considered citizens *in potentia*, rather than current citizens in their own right (Dahlberg and Moss, 2005; Harris, 1987; Howe and Covell, 2005; Hultqvist and Dahlberg, 2001; John, 1995; Kulynych, 2001; Landsdown, 1994; Marc, 2004; Mayo, 2006; Roche, 1999). Consequently, children are generally excluded from participating broadly in the social, political, and economic arenas of public (and private) life. Even within the context of the most significant official recognition of children's rights to date, the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child*, ratified in 1989, which outlines a broad range of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights considered should be granted to children, there is a failure to fully articulate these values and practices into children's everyday lives or into institutionalized laws. The realization of children's citizenship is always in tension with adult-child relations of power and adult sovereignty or governance over childhood is considered fundamental by some adults to the maintenance of the status quo in society (Howe and Covell, 2005). The articulation of rights given to children is only ever partial and/or conditional on adult regulations. Nicholas Rose points out, 'childhood is the most intensively governed sector of personal existence' (1999: 123). The relationship between childhood and citizenship is indicative of this process of governance.

Children's *difficult citizenship* is even more problematic when considered in the context of being sexual citizens. The relationship of childhood to sexuality is fraught with difficulties, controversies, and complexities; it is one openly and officially based on exclusion, with children constituted as requiring *protection* from sexuality, considered an 'adults' only' domain, dangerous to children. In this discussion children's *difficult citizenship* is explored in two main ways: firstly through the ways in which the concepts of *childhood* and *innocence* have been utilized to regulate children's access to knowledge of sexuality and to deny their relevance and access to sexual citizenship; and secondly, through the ways in which these two concepts are intimately connected as a means of constituting and governing the 'good' normative adult citizenship subject – one that is white, middle-class, heterosexual and upholding Christian family morals and values (Bell and Binnie, 2000; Berlant, 1997; Richardson, 1998). As Lauren Berlant so aptly argues, 'It is in her name [the girl child] as future citizen that state and federal governments have long policed morality around sex and other transgressive representation' (2004: 61).

Incorporating a critique informed by Foucault's concepts of governmentality and technologies of power, this policing acknowledged by Berlant, is examined in terms of how hegemonic discourses of childhood and childhood *innocence*, have been mobilized to strictly police citizenship norms through children's access/inaccessibility to knowledge of sexuality. This regulation is discussed

in terms of its operation within official sex-education curricula in Australian schooling and in early childhood education prior to school. However, it is also important to point out that this regulation is often reinforced through the unofficial early educational practices of parents within the family (Geasler et al., 1995). Parental fears of being judged as bad parents for providing children with 'too much' information 'too early' and on controversial topics such as sexuality, especially same-sex relationships, often results in self-surveillance around what information they allow children to access, despite their often own more liberal personal opinions (Davies and Robinson, 2010).

Children's education is considered foundational in the development of the good future citizen and sexual citizen subject. Through institutions such as schooling, adults have heavily regulated children's education and access to information, strictly defining what knowledge children should and should not be privy to. It is through this process of regulation that children learn what it means to be a 'good' future citizen and sexual citizen subject. Moral panic is regularly mobilized to reinforce this regulation when the boundaries of what is perceived to be 'appropriate' knowledge for children are transgressed. This is particularly so in the context of children's access to knowledge of queer identities (Robinson, 2008; Wallis and van Every, 2000).

Children and youth resist being confined to passive representations of childhood, citizenship and sexual citizenship participating in a range of activities and community demonstrations, as well as taking responsibility for initiating and organizing local, national, and global projects and research, aiming to make a positive difference in social, environmental, political, economic, and educational public arenas (Hart, 1992; Kellet, 2009). Gay/Straight Alliances in high schools are a good example of young people engaging in sexual citizenship and working together to counteract homophobia and heterosexism, to improve the social and educational experiences of queer youth (Walls et al., 2010). Children and youth also constantly challenge regulations around access to sexual knowledge, most often in secrecy. They access sexual knowledge through various means, such as technology and media sources, popular culture magazines, library resources, conversations with peers, and through personal experience, all of which impact on their perceptions, practices and experiences, not just in their younger years, but throughout their lives (Davies and Robinson, 2010; Geasler et al., 1995; Goldman and Goldman, 1982; Jackson, 1982; Robinson and Davies, 2007b, 2008a). The *United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child* acknowledges that access to knowledge is an important component of citizenship rights, and is critical to an individual's competency and power. Children's and youth's access to sexual knowledge and to open honest discussions around sexuality are critical to their health and well-being throughout their lives. It is equally essential for the foundations of a sustainable culture of sexual ethics and respectful relationships in society more broadly (Carmody, 2009) – which must be considered a major foundational component of citizenship education for all.

Governing the child's innocence

Modern childhood is a period of extreme surveillance in which the child (and the child's parents) has become the target of social, political, educational and legal regulations that constitute children as the dependent other on the adult and State (Rose, 1999). This surveillance has been primarily constituted in the name of *protection* – largely of the *innocence* of childhood, but also of constituting, regulating and maintaining the established order of adult–child relations of power. Protection, often framed in *the best interests* of the child, is a powerful means of individual and social control. The regulation of childhood through discourses of *innocence* and *protection* is perpetuated not just through social practices, but also through government and legal policies and legislation that impact on the way that children are viewed and treated in the family, in schools, and more broadly in society. This institutional process of regulation operates to establish powerful 'regimes of truth' that act to classify, discipline, normalize and produce what it means to be a child – as well as, what it means to be an adult and good citizen subject – (Foucault, 1978, 1995). Although it is critical to have social and legal regulations to protect children from harm, this process of governing the child, frequently loses sight of children's best interests as they are often in conflict with the best interest of adults and of the State more generally and what is considered the 'natural order of things' (Howe and Covell, 2005). The political philosopher and theorist Hannah Arendt (1961) vehemently opposed children's politicization, believing that they should remain *protected* in the private realm of human existence – that is, *protected* in the family from the politics of the public world that plagued and corrupted the lives of adults (Kulynych, 2001). This sentiment echoes the humanist philosophical beliefs of Rousseau, who considered the child to be naturally saintly, virtuous and unspoilt through being distinctly different from adults in their limited experiences of life (Rousseau, 1992 [1762]). An important aspect of this natural state of the child was sexual innocence, which seemed threatened by an increased participation in the social, economic and political worlds of adults. Nowhere more obvious is the process of governing the child than in the regulation of childhood in terms of sexuality (Foucault, 1978). Levine (2002: xxviii) points out:

The child's innocence was threatened by the very act of growing up in the world, which entailed partaking in adult rationality and politics... the child was clean not just of adult political or social corruption, but ignorant specifically of sexual knowledge and desire. Ironically, as children's plight as workers worsened, adults sought to save them from sex. (Levine, 2002: xxviii)

Saving children from sex became increasingly articulated through age of consent laws and through formal and informal censorship and regulation of children's behaviours and access to sexual knowledge (Jackson, 2006). In the early 20th century infants were considered to have 'strong and dangerous impulses', including

autoeroticism, masturbation and thumb sucking, viewed as easily growing out of control, resulting in the child being 'wrecked for life' (Wolfenstein, 1998: 200).

The constitution of childhood in western industrialized societies within discourses of developmental psychology (Piaget, 1973 [1929]) and romantic notions of childhood innocence underpin children's continued precarious and difficult relationship to sexuality. Children have been successfully employed as regulators of normative life markers across human development (Halberstam, 2005; e.g. schooling, sexual maturity, starting work, voting, marriage, reproduction and retirement), of normative family structures, behaviours, morals and values, and of the normative citizen subject (Berlant, 1997; Buckingham, 2000; Jackson, 2006; Kincaid, 2004; Richardson, 1998; Silin, 1995; Tobin, 1997). Sexuality has become representative of adulthood and it is perceived to be a critical boundary differentiating adulthood from childhood. Normative life markers of human development not only operate to constitute and reinforce the culturally defined boundaries between childhood, adolescence, and adulthood, they are the socio-cultural, political, and economic organizing principles of relations in society. Children have ultimately become markers of the heteronormative status quo (Berlant, 1997; Berlant and Warner, 1998; Halberstam, 2005; Jackson, 2006; Warner, 1999). Steven Bruhm and Natasha Hurley (2004: xiii) argue that adult utopianism and nostalgia plague the constitution of the child and are in turn the preferred form of the future:

Caught between these two worlds, one dead, the other powerless to be born, the child becomes the bearer of heteronormativity, appearing to render ideology invisible by cloaking it in simple stories, euphemisms, and platitudes. The child is the product of physical reproduction, but functions just as surely as a figure of cultural reproduction.

Corteen and Scraton point out that 'the infantilizing of children, sustaining childhood as a prolonged denial of personhood or citizenship, is particularly marked with regards to their developing sexualities' (1997: 99).

As Foucault points out, sexuality is the 'precise point where the disciplinary and the regulatory, the body and the population, are articulated' (1997: 252). Sexuality not only operates as a regulatory and disciplinary technology of the self, but is also a critical point through which the 'massifying' of power, that is, the extension of technologies of power to the multiple body, to the regulation and governing of populations – what Foucault terms as biopower, or the 'biopolitics of the human race' – is articulated (Foucault, 1997: 243). Biopolitics deals with the population as a political problem and as 'power's problem' (Foucault, 1997: 245). It incorporates the use of regulatory State mechanisms (e.g. forecasts, statistical estimates, overall measures) that counteract and control the randomness of populations in order to 'optimise a state of life' (Foucault, 1997: 246). Foucault argues that sexuality became a field of vital strategic importance particularly for two main reasons: the need to regulate and discipline individuals' sexual behaviours through constant

surveillance – the undisciplined sexual body is open to disease and degeneracy; and to regulate and discipline the biological processes of procreation in populations – hygiene and the medicalization of reproduction. The mass perpetuation and regulation of the heteronormative sexual subject and the good citizen subject is dependent on the perpetuation of hegemonic discourses of childhood and of childhood innocence.

Sexuality, sexual citizenship and the child

What is sexual citizenship? Within the resurgence of interest in citizenship in the 1980s, and its inclusion of a broad range of dimensions covering political, economic, social, legal and ethical aspects, it was viewed as a useful concept for articulating and agitating for sexual politics (Bell and Binnie, 2000). There are many different forms of sexual citizenship, but as David Bell and Jon Binnie (2000) aptly point out ‘all citizenship is sexual citizenship, in that the foundational tenets of being a citizen are all inflected by sexualities’ (2000: 10). However, within the mainstream politics and legal foundations of citizenship there is an inherent representation of the *normal* and *natural* citizen as heterosexual (Bell and Binnie, 2000; Berlant, 1997; Cooper, 1993; Duggan, 1994; Richardson, 1998). The rights of sexual ‘Others’, such as gays, lesbians and the transgendered have different citizenship status (Bell and Binnie, 2000). Critical discussions of sexual citizenship include among others, a focus on the material construction of the sexual citizen in a consumer market (Evans, 1993); the place of love, family and the social in relation to citizenship (Bell and Binnie, 2000; Berlant, 1997; Cooper, 1993; Plummer, 1995; Richardson, 1998; Weeks, 1998); the globalization of sexual identities and politics (Bell and Binnie, 2000; Weeks, 1998); and the impact of AIDS and the New Right on the reinvestment in (hetero)normative family life (Berlant, 1997; Evans, 1993).

One critical debate has centred around the usefulness of the concept of citizenship for sexual ‘Others’, and the State’s role in constituting and regulating, not just citizenship, but sexual citizenship. Bell and Binnie (2000: 2) consider sexual citizenship as an ambivalent concept, with tensions between opportunity and limitation, arguing, ‘Many of the current nodes of the political articulation of sexual citizenship are marked by compromise’ – that is, taking up an ‘acceptable’ sexual citizen subject position – one that is ‘privatized, deradicalized, deeroticized and confined in all senses of the word: kept in place, policed, limited’. Citing and critiquing Jeffrey Weeks (1998: 37) who upholds that the ‘moment of citizenship’ represents the only way that ‘difference can [ever] find a proper home’, Bell and Binnie point out that there must be some questioning of who defines what a ‘proper home’ is for the sexual citizen (2000: 3). They believe that rights claims for the sexual citizen operate to reinforce ‘phobic arguments that grant sexual rights only on the understanding that they will be kept private: that is invisible’ (2000: 5). Davina Cooper (1993) echoes this point, raising concerns around the tensions in public-versus-private narratives of sexuality. She argues that sex is either considered inappropriate to ‘the public’ or its privacy is seen as in need of protection

from encroaching public scrutiny. Diana Richardson (1998: 90) also argues, 'lesbians and gay men are granted the right to be tolerated as long as they stay within the boundaries of that tolerance, whose borders are maintained through a heterosexist public-private divide' – gay men and lesbians can be citizens only if they can be 'good' citizens – upholding heteronormative values.

Sexual 'Others' are legitimized as good citizens when they are secured and rendered invisible in the private, especially within the confines of heteronormative *family* structures. However, there is even a limit to this legitimization, which is evident in the recent moral panic associated with the potential legal recognition of same-sex marriage in Australia and the reviewing of same-sex marriage laws in some states in the USA and Canada. Despite the introduction of new civil rights for same-sex couples in Australia with the election of the Rudd Labor Government in 2007, their inclusion in the legal definition of marriage continues to be officially unsupported. The border patrolling of what Katherine Franke (2004) terms the 'domestinformative sexual citizen' (cited in Cossman, 2007: 29), aggressively continues alongside piecemeal rights granted to non-heterosexual couples.

How is sexual citizenship relevant to children? The hegemonic constitution of sexual citizenship within the politics of private/public spheres in which the heteronormative family is constituted as the *normalizing* space of the 'good' sexual citizen, has interesting parallels with the constitution of childhood, children's rights, and the regulation of children's perceived developing citizenship/sexual citizenship. The potential articulation of children's rights have been primarily considered within the context of the private sphere of the family home, than in relation to broader economic, social and political arenas. This perspective reinforces the privatization of childhood, parent-child relationships, and children's enforced dependency on parental decision-making around their life choices. Children's agency at best is negotiated within these limits, and at worst is non-existent. Debates about children's access to sexual knowledge (or education for sexual citizenship) are also framed within the politics of private/public spheres. Concerns around what is considered *appropriate* knowledge for children in regards to sex education is followed by the equal concern of who are the *appropriate* teachers to impart this information to children – families or schools (Jackson, 1982; Robinson and Davies, 2008b; Walker and Milton, 2006). Children's education of sexual knowledge, especially around non-heterosexual relationships, is generally perceived to be a private matter and the primary responsibility of the family. Sex education in schooling reflects a scientific heteronormative narrative constituted within monogamous Christian marriage. Within this context, sexual 'Others' are viewed as deviant and abnormal and are problematized, marginalized, and silenced (Robinson and Davies, 2008b). This has significant parallels and links with discourses of citizenship for the queer subject.

Further, many of the issues directly addressed in the context of sexual citizenship are relevant to children and their lives. Firstly, its relevance is applicable through the material construction of 'childhood innocence' as a sexual commodity, impacting significantly on the exploitation and abuse of children within familial and extra-familial contexts (Elliott, 1992; Kitzinger, 1990). This has immediate and long-term

consequences for children's sexual citizenship. Secondly, the targeting of children in advertising as consumers of popular culture in which sexuality, including young people's sexuality, is a major component of the selling process also makes sexual citizenship relevant to children. There has been a call for increased censorship in advertising and popular culture, such as the music industry (including the production of music videos) that targets young consumers in this way (Levin and Kilbourne, 2008; Rush and La Nauze, 2006). As censorship does little to deal with the perceived problem, but rather increases it through the manifestation of the intensification of interest, as well as denying children's agency in this process, it is more strategic to build children's critical skills and knowledge around the issues as a means of successfully moving forward. Thirdly, issues of love, family, and the social in relation to sexual citizenship are of particular relevance to children's lives. Some children grow up gay, lesbian, or queer (GLQ), or live in GLQ families. The lack of public, legal and institutional support for GLQ youth and for GLQ families can impact on children's and young people's daily lives, concepts of self, and perceived future choices (Mayo, 2006). The level of addiction and youth suicide, associated with issues of sexual identity, are a critical reminder of how relevant sexual citizenship is to children and young people (Donaghy, 1997).

The inclusion of sexual 'Others' in the constitution of national identity and their equal access to political, economic, social, educational, and legal rights is critical to the lives of *all* children, not just queer children, or children from GLQ families. It is relevant to their life choices, especially in terms of sexual identity, and how these choices are supported by families, friends and peers; it impacts upon their safety, well-being, and sense of inclusion in society; and it influences how they perceive and interact with sexual diversity and difference as children, youth and adults. The perpetuation of the belief that living a Christian heteronormative life is the only means to a successful, fulfilling, and happy life, leaves many queer children perceiving few options for their positive involvement in society.

Challenging the discourses of the 'knowing child' and of age-appropriateness

Hegemonic discourses of child development (Piaget, 1973 [1929]) have primarily underpinned perceptions of the irrelevance and inappropriateness of sexuality to children's lives and have been mobilized to defend and regulate the social practices that have operated in terms of children's access to knowledge of sexuality (Alderson, 1999, 2000; Hultqvist and Dahlberg, 2001; Jackson, 1982; James and Prout, 1990;). The 'knowing child', the child who is perceived to 'know too much' about sexuality (i.e. has the knowledge and language to speak about sexuality) for its age, is constituted as the non-innocent or the corrupted child. The 'pure' and 'innocent' child is critical to the formation of the good moral heteronormative

adult citizen. Children's access to sexual knowledge before it is considered to be developmentally appropriate – discursively defined within a moral, Christian, heteronormative framework – is perceived as corrupting the child's innocence and potentially leading to children's promiscuity and immature sexual activity (Patton, 1995). The ultimate consequence is perceived to be the formation of the promiscuous adult or the deviant adult citizen/sexual citizen. The knowing child is often viewed with suspicion as such knowledge is considered an indicator of a child's possible subjection to sexual abuse. The discourse of the 'knowing child' is both ironic and highly problematic in that a critical way of increasing children's competency and resilience is to provide them with language and knowledge about sexuality and an understanding of what constitutes ethical and unethical sexual relationships. It is the perceived 'innocence' constituted in the dominant discourse of childhood that is tenaciously protected by adults that can lead to their vulnerability (Gittins, 1998; Kitzinger, 1990).

Children learn early that talking about sex and sexuality, especially with adults, is taboo. From an early age children are actively trying to critically make sense of and sort through the 'bits and pieces' of information that they receive about sexuality (Boldt, 1997; Davies and Robinson, 2010; Goldman and Goldman, 1982; Jackson, 1982; Plummer, 1995; Tobin, 1997). Children actively engage in meaning-making around sexuality in their early lives, based on the limited (mis)information (stereotypes and myths) that they receive from families, peers, television, the internet, and through their daily experiences, especially observing others – older children, youth or adults. Young children often frame their understandings within other knowledge contexts, such as observing the sexual practices of family pets and other animals, which is often used as a source for building knowledge about human experiences (Davies and Robinson, 2010). A five-year-old child participating in Robinson and Davies' research on children's sexual knowledge articulated how she perceived becoming pregnant and having a baby in the following manner: 'When the sperm meets the egg that turns it to an egg; the egg hatches and then the baby comes out'. In this child's experience, chicken eggs and the hatching process of chicks frame their understanding of childbirth (Davies and Robinson, 2010). Cultural and personal values affect adults' responses to children's understandings of sexual knowledge, with some choosing not to intervene in correcting children's information (Robinson and Jones Diaz, 2006). In fact, children's misinformation – often considered to be developmentally age appropriate understandings – is frequently viewed as 'cute' and 'amusing' and is a reassurance for some adults that they have successfully protected children's perceived innocence. It is interesting, and fortunate, that the acceptance of children's misinformation in other areas of knowledge would not be tolerated and would be actively corrected by adults (2 + 2 = 5 for example would not be accepted!).

Robinson and Davies (2007a, 2008a, 2008b, 2010) also highlight that children's sexual knowledge is primarily founded in their understandings of hetero-gendered relations (see also Jackson, 1982). Young children, often obsessively, view marriage as the natural and normal context in which heterosexual relationships are

conducted, as well as being the context in which they conceptualize having babies (Davies and Robinson, 2010). Some children perceive that it is possible to marry their same-sex best friends, but the policing by young peers and adults, including educators, aggressively reinforces the discourse of heteronormativity (Davies and Robinson, 2010; Renold, 2005; Robinson and Jones Diaz, 2006; Wallis and van Every, 2000) – a point returned to later in this discussion.

In recent years researchers have challenged the hegemonic position of developmental theory in determining children's capabilities for understanding and building competencies around complex concepts (Alderson, 1999; 2000; Hultqvist and Dahlberg, 2001; Jackson, 1982; James and Prout, 1990). Alderson (2000: 57) argues that Piaget's theories of children's cognitive and moral immaturity, for instance, have perpetuated the belief that children have a false sense of reality and identity and that they cannot distinguish that their view is one among others. Consequently, their reports are considered unreliable. Alderson's (1999) research with children aged seven to seventeen refutes this claim, indicating that they have higher abilities to deal with spatial, moral and real issues than the works of Piaget suggest. Children operate in discursive frameworks that incorporate understandings of values and they have the ability to make moral choices. Therefore, they need to access a broad range of knowledge relevant to their lives in order to effectively and productively engage in decision-making (Dunn, 1995). Goldman and Goldman (1982), based on research conducted with children aged five to fifteen, which investigates their sexual thinking, also critique the unquestioned acceptance of Piaget's theory of knowledge in determining children's abilities to comprehend and critically think about their bodies and sexuality. Despite the dominant construction of sexual knowledge as irrelevant and developmentally inappropriate for children, research demonstrates that they are engaging with sexuality in their daily lives, and are aware and critically thinking about their bodies and relationships with others (Davies and Robinson, 2010; Goldman and Goldman, 1982; Jackson, 1982; Robinson and Davies, 2010; Tobin, 1997).

Regulating childhood and citizenship: Schooling for the good heteronormative citizen subject

There has been an on-going public debate focusing on whose responsibility it is to provide children with sexual knowledge and what information should or should not be a component of this education. Conservative and religious discourses in particular have underpinned the strict regulation of children's access to knowledge of sexuality, constituting this education as primarily a private matter between children and their families. However, many parents struggle to fulfil their role of raising 'sexually literate' children (Dyson, in press). Schooling – in a role of *loco parentis* – is increasingly considered to have a place in educating children around knowledge of sexuality. Still, this role has been strictly regulated and schooling has been a site of struggle and tension around what is considered 'appropriate' content,

policies and practices in this area (Corteen and Scratton, 1997; Haydon, 2002; Mayo, 2006; Robinson and Davies, 2008b). The 'appropriate' sex education curricula that prevails in schools perpetuates heteronormative understandings of sexuality and operates to constitute and perpetuate the normative future adult citizen as the moral, heterosexual, monogamous and family oriented subject. The socially sanctioned 'othering' of non-heterosexual relationships and families is not just part of the formal sex education curriculum but operates across both the formal and hidden curriculum as a whole in schools. Homophobia and heterosexism are everyday experiences encountered by many young people in schools, especially those perceived to be queer, primarily through the different ways they embody their gender (Britzman, 1997; McClean, 1996). Contrary to the right of students to feel safe in schools, homophobic slurs often go unchallenged by school authorities (Robinson and Ferfolja, 2001).

In Australia, sex education curricula in both primary and secondary schools are highly regulated, with individual states determining the content, policies and procedures associated with the teaching of sexuality and sexual knowledge. The *Controversial Issues in Schools Policy* (Department of Education and Training, Office of Schools, New South Wales, 2007) introduced in 1977 and revised in 2005, determines practices and processes associated with the incorporation of sexuality into the curriculum in New South Wales (NSW) schools. Sex education in NSW Primary Schooling (Board of Studies, NSW, 1999a, 1999b; schooling of children aged five to eleven) is located in the personal development, health and physical education syllabus and is generally founded on scientific discourses of sexuality encompassing human biology and reproduction – what can be called the mechanics of reproduction. There is a secondary focus on health-related risks associated with being sexually active or having unprotected sex, such as STDs and AIDS, with abstinence upheld as an important choice for consideration (Robinson and Davies, 2008b). With older age groups, the curriculum does include some discussion of non-heterosexuality, with a focus more on the problems associated with this 'lifestyle choice', including experiences of homophobia and its consequences (Robinson and Davies, 2008b).

In early childhood educational contexts prior to school, the perception of the irrelevancy of sexuality and sexual knowledge to young children prevails (Robinson, 2002, 2005a, 2005b; Robinson and Jones Diaz, 2006; Surtees, 2005). However, similar to the schooling of older children and youth, heteronormativity operates in these early educational contexts through the curriculum, teachers' pedagogies, institutional policies, and through children's everyday interactions with each other and with their teachers (Surtees, 2005). Not only do many adults in these early educational contexts strictly regulate the construction of children's sexual knowledge and police the construction of children's gender, so do children themselves. Children are active and knowing agents in the process of gender construction, engaging in the policing of gender performances of other children (and adults), within rigid boundaries of what is widely considered appropriate masculine and feminine behaviours (Alloway, 1995; B Davies, 1989; Davies, 2008a;

MacNaughton, 2000). This process of gender construction in children's lives is inextricably constituted within and normalized through the process of 'heterosexualization' (Butler, 1990; Epstein, 1995). Paradoxically, despite the prevalence of the perception that children are innocent, asexual and too young to understand sexuality, the construction of heterosexual identities and desire in early childhood is a socially sanctioned integral part of children's everyday educational experiences – for example, mock weddings, kiss and chase, mummies and daddies (Cahill and Theilheimer, 1999; Casper et al., 1998; Robinson, 2005b; Surtees, 2005). This process of heterosexualization is rendered invisible through the heteronormativity that discursively operates and is especially naturalized within constructions of gender. These everyday play practices are rendered invisible when they are normalized as markers of children's healthy *human* development. Moral panic and calls for strict regulation of children's early education result when children's access to sexual knowledge or play practices are perceived to transgress the strict boundaries of heteronormativity – for example, when the young boy chooses to dress in women's clothing in 'dress-ups'; when two little boys or girls want to marry each other during play; or when gay and lesbian families are normalized in family diversity (Cahill and Theilheimer, 1999; Davies, 2008a; Robinson, 2008; Robinson and Davies, 2007a; Surtees, 2005; Wallis and van Every, 2000).

Moral panic is used as a political strategy by conservative governments and right-wing Christian groups for maintaining the heteronormative nature of the curriculum in schools, as well as the hegemony of the nuclear family, the sanctity of heterosexual relationships, and the heteronormative social order more broadly in society (Davies 2008b). In Australia, this process has been most obvious around the regulation of children's learning associated with queer subjectivities (Robinson, 2008). This is epitomized through the moral panics perpetuated through media frenzies during the period 2004–2006, associated with several incidents related to children's early education. The first incident was the airing of an episode of *Play School*, a long-time popular Australian Broadcasting Commission children's television programme, which momentarily (approximately 20 seconds) featured two mothers taking their child and her friend to an amusement park. This was in fact the second time that this particular episode went to air; the first airing received minimal public comment. The second and third incidents were associated with conservative politicians and the media questioning the use of the educational resources, *Learn to Include* (Harding, 2006) and *We're Here: A Resource For Child Care Workers* (Lesbian Parents' Play Group, 2001), designed to educate children around gay and lesbian families and to provide strategies for counteracting homophobia and heteronormativity in early childhood education. Conservative and religious 'moral entrepreneurs' (Critcher, 2003) mobilized media and political support to create a major public controversy around the use of public funds for such projects, perceived to be relevant only to a minority of people – queer citizens and their families. The moral panic was fuelled by the perpetuation of the myth that traditional heterosexual family morals and practices were being undermined and that these resources were teaching young children how to be gay.

These moral panics played a dual role in Australian society at the time: firstly, to reassert adult–child relations of power and the regulation of children’s access to ‘appropriate’ sexual knowledge through hegemonic discourses of childhood and childhood innocence; and secondly, to reassert conservative heteronormative morals and values as the foundations for citizenship at a time when they were perceived under threat. Discourses of childhood innocence and the homosexual as ‘folk devil’ were mobilized by conservative, right-wing politicians and ‘moral entrepreneurs’ to strategically instigate a moral panic at the time when the conservative Howard Liberal government, in office at the time, was lobbying to exclude legal recognition of same-sex marriages or civil unions. The government perceived it was in need of a moral coup in order to counteract the growing impetus of gay and lesbian groups calling for legislative reforms and equal citizenship rights, especially through the legal recognition of same-sex marriage (Robinson, 2008).

The extremities of the regulation of children’s access to knowledge of sexuality are also particularly obvious in the USA and the UK. In the USA, sex education curricula has been strictly monitored through the Adolescent Family Life Act (1981) – the first federal law specifically written to fund sex education (Levine, 2002). According to Levine (2002) the aim of this Act, framed within discourses of the conservative Right, is to eradicate teen sex, teen pregnancy and abortion. The discourse of abstinence has featured most prominently in this curricula since the late 1990s, perpetuated by the powerful lobbying of the Christian Right, who have a strong influence on education curricula (Apple, 2006; Levine, 2002). This influence is further reflected in regulations, such as the prohibition of instructions about contraception or condoms unless discussed in regards to their failure, as well as the requirement that educators point out that non-marital sex ‘is likely to have harmful psychological and physical effects’ (Levine, 2002: 92). The recent success of *Proposition 8* in the state of California in the USA further reflects the powerful influence of the Christian Right in regulating the good citizen as a heterosexual subject, maintaining the heteronormative status quo, as well as defining what is considered appropriate education for young children. The passing of this proposition in 2008 changed the Californian constitution to define and restrict marriage to couples of the opposite sex, eliminating same-sex marriage as a legally recognized union. One of the main arguments upheld by many proponents of the proposition was that the change was necessary in order to prevent public schools teaching children that non-heterosexual marriages were acceptable. This proposition is similar to other legal and constitutional regulations that have prevailed in other countries. For example, Section 28 in the UK was a Local Government Act introduced in 1988 and repealed in 2003, which prohibited any local authority from intentionally promoting homosexuality or publishing any materials that promoted homosexuality, as well as prohibiting the teaching of homosexuality as an acceptable family relationship in local authority schools (Moran, 2001).

There is an unfounded fear held by some adults and schooling officials that if you provide children with information they will actively engage in that behaviour.

For example, openly providing children with knowledge about sexual harassment is often perceived to lead to children engaging in that behaviour (Robinson, 1996); a similar discourse operates around sexuality (Patton, 1996). As stated by Levine (2002: 19):

... censorship is not protection. Rather, to give children a fighting chance in navigating the sexual world, adults need to saturate it with accurate, realistic information and abundant, varied images and narratives of love and sex.

Comparative research between the USA and Europe undertaken by Levine (2002) highlights that providing sexual knowledge to children and youth in cultures that have a more liberal and open approach to sexuality do not lead to social problems as often predicted by social and political conservatives. For example, in the Netherlands, where abstinence is not taught, contraception is free through the national health service and condom vending machines are widely available, teenage pregnancy is virtually eliminated as a health or social problem.

Deborah Britzman's work around 'difficult knowledge' is of particular importance to the reconceptualization of education around sexuality. Her examination of affect in pedagogy focuses on learning from what she terms, 'difficult knowledge', which challenges one's subjective reality in the world, provoking a crisis within the self. Difficult knowledge 'is felt as interference or as critique of the self's coherence or view of itself in the world' (Britzman, 1998: 118). Britzman argues that to learn from difficult knowledge 'educators must begin by acknowledging learning as a psychic event, charged with resistance to knowledge' (1998: 118). This resistance, she goes on to state, 'is a precondition for learning from knowledge and the grounds of knowledge itself' (1998: 118). Education around sexuality, especially of young children, is a critical example of 'difficult knowledge' as demonstrated throughout this discussion. As argued, sexuality is not just knowledge that adults often find problematic and uncomfortable, but it has a critical material and psychic foundation on which relations of power between adults and children are maintained, as well as social relations of power constituting society more broadly. The strict regulation of children's knowledge of sexuality not only operates to constitute and maintain definitions of the child, youth and adult, but also relations of power within and across these categories. Sex education in schooling curricula needs to take up the principles of effective education in that 'the purpose of knowledge is not to affirm the order of things but to work against itself' (Britzman, 1998: 73). Queer theorists, such as Britzman and others (Sedgwick, 1990; Silin, 1995) remind us that it is critical to question the normalization of cultural relations and how they are constructed to maintain hegemonic relations of power – as in the case of childhood, age-appropriateness and access to sexual knowledge. It is important that the 'docility of education' is unsettled and that it takes up projects that are founded in contention, a refusal to tidy categories, that allow debate, and encompass practices of possibility and impossibility (Britzman, 1998: 77).

Conclusion

Viewing citizenship and sexual citizenship, as encompassing a broad range of issues, such as, relationships, identity, understandings of bodies and behaviours, sexual health and well-being, social responsibility for building a sustainable culture of ethical and respectful relationships, values, family diversity, and political knowledge – how power and resources are dispersed – it has been argued throughout this discussion that these concepts are of relevance to young children's lives and to their early education. However, children's relationship to citizenship, especially sexual citizenship, has been one fraught with difficulties and is almost impossible to articulate into children's lives as a result of the prevailing relations of power that constitute who they are as subjects. Children's difficult citizenship is intensified through the volatile relationship between sexuality and childhood; a relationship that is socio-culturally constructed and constantly mobilized not just to regulate children's lives, but also to maintain dominant relations of power broadly in society, especially around the constitution of the normative citizen subject. Childhood innocence, another socially constructed concept, is often utilized to fuel moral panic when heteronormative boundaries are transgressed in both children's and adults' lives. It has also been argued throughout this discussion that the strict regulation of children's access/inaccessibility to sexual knowledge is a critical component in the process of heteronormalizing their early educational experiences in order to actively produce the heteronormative adult citizen subject. However, this regulation of knowledge has serious implications for both the immediate and long-term health and well-being of children and throughout their lives. It is critical that children have access to open, well-informed honest discussions around sexual knowledge that take account of children's agency in order to build their resilience and competencies in this area. A review and reconceptualization of current sex education curricula and pedagogies in schooling is especially important in this process (Robinson and Davies, 2008b), but there are critical issues that need to be addressed, as pointed out in this discussion, including those highlighted by Britzman and other queer theorists, if this is to be at all possible.

In a society where children are increasingly required to negotiate and make decisions about a broad range of options in their lives perpetuated through media, popular culture, consumer advertising, and the internet, it is essential to provide them with the critical skills to do this in a competent and confident manner. Currently, censorship around children's access to sexual knowledge, in the name of protection, is ironically contributing to children's vulnerabilities on many different levels. It is critical to find a balance between children's 'protection rights' and their rights to exercise autonomy and to access knowledge (Alderson, 2000). Poststructuralist critiques of enlightenment thought have radically challenged the perceived inherent coherence and rationality of human subjects, as well as the linear progression of this process from childhood to adulthood. These critiques call for a reconceptualization of the way that current adult-child relations

of power privilege the needs, freedoms, rights, and social status of the adult, over those of the child.

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