

Sex and education?: Intersecting sex, education, and student activism

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Abstract

With a focus on the Eurocentric sex education curriculum, this paper reviews three sub-disciplinary geographic literatures – geographies of education, geographies of sexualities, and geographies of children and youth – with a focus on student activism. I propose that although these dissimilar areas of work are relatively sequestered, they share a common connection, children and youth agency. Through a detailed exploration of these three literatures, this study found three things. First, an inclusive sex education curriculum is important as it has the ability to dismantle harmful heteronormative discourses while providing a safe and inclusive environment for marginalized students. Secondly, school's and education's purposes are contradictory as they have been used as a way to protect children, but also to prepare them for the responsibilities of adulthood. Lastly, although children and youth are often viewed as incapable of making rational and informed decisions by adults, they are active agents in their everyday lives. They, therefore, are capable of creating social and political change. These findings add to the continuing conversations of these three sub-disciplinaries of geography. They also repeat the call for more research into the combination of these three sub-disciplinary fields to dismantle the hegemonic heterosexual norms.

Keywords: Education, Sex Education, Activism, Sexuality, Children

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Introduction

Since they began, schools have represented institutional power structures. They have been and still are, used as a resource to structure future opportunities for society through the production and installation of knowledge in young children. Schools are constructed through social, cultural, and moral beliefs which are generally governed by legally binding curricula developed by governments, school boards, administrators, and teachers (Bain & Podmore, 2020; Barker, Alldred, Watts & Dodman, 2010; Taines, 2014; Valentine, 2001). These multi-faceted social and cultural beliefs also reflect informal teacher practices known collectively as the hidden curriculum (Bain & Podmore, 2020; Holloway, et al., 2000, as cited in Holloway, Hubbard, Jöns, & Pimlott-Wilson, 2010). Through the use of the hidden curriculum, schools become institutions in which states reinforce dominant social orders while conveying moral beliefs and practices of identity and behaviour that ultimately shape children into becoming law-abiding citizens (Bain & Podmore, 2020; Barker, et al., 2010; Basu, 2011; Collins & Coleman, 2008; Thiem, 2009).

How schools and the curricula are designed and used are shaped by adult interpretations of an ideal childhood (Holloway, et al., 2010). Public schools and the curricula, particularly in Eurocentric education systems, often reflect the socio-economic, linguistic, religious, and cultural differences present within the community (Collins & Coleman, 2008). In particular, adults are influenced by the discourses of children as being innocent, vulnerable, and asexual beings who need to be nurtured and protected from the supposed corruptive threats of the adult world.

According to Jenks (1996) the Westernized discourses of childhood stem from two competing ideas that emerged during the classical era; the Dionysian and Apollonian (as cited in Moran, 2001). The first notion was initially supported by the dogma of original sin (Jenks, 1996, as cited in Moran, 2001). From the mid-19th century onwards, and through evolutionary theory, children were imagined to be “primitive, bestial and already fallen” (Moran, 2001, p. 75). In the late-19th century, a contesting notion was conceived by the Romantic poets (Moran, 2001). Through the sentimentalization of childhood, children began to be viewed as “fundamentally pure and innocent” (Moran, 2001, p. 75). These two disputing concepts have merged to produce the prevailing modern discourses of “the child as innocent but always potentially corruptible” (Moran, 2001, p. 75). Subsequently, discourses surrounding children led to the emergence of contained and desexualized school spaces (Aitken, 2001; Barker, et al., 2010; Hall, 2020b; Valentine, 2001). These discourses have prompted teachers to steer children away from the corruptions of the adult world.

When it comes to discussions surrounding policy in the Eurocentric education system, debates on what is, and should be, taught in schools arise from policy makers, parents, and students. This is particularly true when it comes to the sex education curriculum. For decades all of the aforementioned groups have argued that the contents within the sex education curriculum, although universally recognized as important, are controversial because they challenge the societal norms and disrupt the adult discourses schools are meant to represent. However, I argue that schools are not universal or fixed spaces but are constantly shifting as their and social context evolves. More specifically, and with respect to sexuality, there is significant evidence to argue that schools are highly

sexualized environments (see Hubbard, 2000; Hyams, 2000; Newman, Woodcock, & Dunham, 2006; Waters, 2017).

While historical notions of childhood remain in place, there is growing research highlighting the fluidity of childhood (see Bosco, 2010; Hung, 2011; Hyams, 2000; Newman, et al., 2006; Skelton, 2010; Wood, 2016). This research allows for perspectives that focus on children's agency (Krishnan, 2020). This is particularly important as it offers a starting point for the discussions of children and youth lives rather than the adults who constrain, control, and regulate them. Schroeder (2012) argues that oftentimes children and youth are categorized as oppressed by default, which not only obfuscates their agency but also dismisses intersecting forms of oppression such as ethnicity, race, nationality, class, disability, gender, and sexuality. Shifting focus towards children and youth agency and addressing matters of youth activism and resistance provides the opportunity to gain insight into children's experiences and their contributions to both political and educational processes.

My research focuses on discourses on childhood sexual health education curriculums. It involves looking at the conversations being had about health and sex education curriculums within geographies of education, geographies of children and youth activism, and geographies of sexuality. In doing so, I will map out how these three subdisciplines of geography intersect, with respect to sex education. I argue that a large portion of the literature in geographies of education has focused on the classroom as a disciplinary site in which children are exposed to adult discourses (Bain & Podmore, 2020; Waters, 2017). I intend to shift the focus towards the curriculum and educational spaces beyond the classroom with student activism and how future studies in geographies

of education can benefit from it. The purpose of my research is not only to establish how geographies of education, geographies of children and youth activism, and geographies of sexuality intersect but also to determine the gaps between these literatures.

In the first chapter of this paper, I discuss the importance of the sex education curriculum. I explore current literature on sex education and both its importance to young individuals and its controversial nature. In doing so, I analyze the abstinence-based sex education curriculum. I contend that this particular curriculum is used to provide the foundation to (re)produce dominant heteronormative behaviours and values that can be particularly harmful to those who cannot conform to dominant discourses. I argue that a more inclusive and progressive sex education curriculum is necessary to create inclusive classrooms.

The second chapter explores the discourse of the inherent need to protect the innocent child. I begin by focusing on geographies of education to provide the foundation towards the spatial purposes of schools and education. I analyze the scale at which disciplinary powers are employed in schools by observing the forms of surveillance and security that are needed to govern individuals. I then shift towards the social, cultural, and political nature of schools and education by addressing the (re)production of inequalities through educational policy and, in particular, the sex education curriculum. I outline a potential explanation for the fear possessed by the adults opposing a more contemporary sex education curriculum while debunking the notion that schools are desexualized spaces. I argue that a more updated sex education curriculum can destabilize harmful categorical norms, which, creates a safer space for children.

In the third chapter, I explore the literature on geographies of children and young people. I investigate the complexities of defining the boundaries between childhood and adulthood. In doing so I affirm that there is no distinct timeline according to which a child fully transitions into adulthood. I also argue that this suggests that the line between protecting the innocence of a child and preparing them for the responsibilities of adulthood is non-existent. With no defining timeline, I question when, where, and for what reason does one transition from protecting the innocent child and transition to preparing them for adulthood? I argue that to determine when a child is ready to begin transitioning towards adulthood, incorporating children and youth participation within the public and political sphere is imperative towards meeting the needs of children and adolescents.

Lastly, the fourth chapter explores political geographies and the geographies of youth activism. I begin by dissecting youth as political actors, arguing that young people occupy a unique space that both children and adults are unable to comprehend. I then explore current literature on youth activism and examine how young people utilize their agency to resist, negotiate, and make social and political changes. To sum up, I provide an example of a student-led protest by analyzing the March for Our Education protest which occurred in Ontario, Canada in July 2018.

Bosco (2010) argues that outside the sub-discipline of children's geographies, engagement with children in other fields of geographic research has been minimal. I argue that an investigation into young people's experiences creates an opportunity to explore new constitutions of political subjectivities. It allows us to view political geographies through a different lens that enables us to view young people as active

political subjects. Through the use of a critical systematic literature review, I establish how three sub-disciplinaries of geography intersect and highlight any gaps within current literature in order to further understand the connections between education, sexuality, and children. I then use this data to identify gaps within the literature and make recommendations for further research.

Because the literature on geographies of education, geographies of sexuality, and geographies of youth activism and children are wide-ranging, a systematic literature review is a beneficial method as it helps narrow down my search. Jamal, Ibrahim & Surif (2019) define a systematic literature review as an “analysis study [that] is aimed to identify the similarities and differences...[in] the findings of the study” (p. 52).

Ultimately, a systematic literature review is a method that makes sense of large bodies of information by applying protocols to answer specific research questions (Phuong, Cole & Zarestky, 2018). To further investigate, I follow a four-step framework as described by Basu (2017): framing a question, conducting a search, identify the right type of research, and extract information from the articles.

The purpose of using a critical systematic literature review is to investigate the three strands of geography for my chosen research. My first step is to determine the major contemporary discussions of each field. The next step is to locate key categories and reoccurring and important themes. Identifying these key themes and categories will help organize the data systematically. In addition, I also needed to consider what is absent within the literature.

Since geographies of education have evolved in academia over multiple decades, I narrowed my search down by only focusing on articles written post-2000s to ensure I

obtain the most contemporary research. Using Brock University's database, I specifically looked for peer-reviewed articles from geographic journals. In some cases, specifically, when looking for academic literature on sex education, I noted the lacuna in geography. In doing so, I was able to find academic literature from multiple sex education journals that connected to my research through schools and/or children.

To further narrow down my selection, I skimmed through the abstract of each article to determine whether it would be beneficial to my research. I then organized each article into one of these three sections: sex education, education, and student activism. As I read through each article, I took detailed notes while observing of reoccurring themes. Once discovering reoccurring themes, I carefully read through my notes while colour coding them into more concise categories: the importance of sex education, education and the moral panic, protecting the innocent child versus preparing them for adulthood, and youth activism. After further analyzing these articles, I attempted to answer the following questions: 1. How do these fields intersect with one another; and 2. What are the gaps in the literature?

As an individual who completed 14 years of public education and as a recent graduate of teacher's college, I have observed several changes within the education system. The multiple stakeholders involved in the education system, for instance, have held numerous debates on what should be taught within schools. Thus, I contend that looking beyond the classroom as a disciplinary site is important as it coincides with the changes continually occurring within education. My goal in analyzing these different subdisciplines of geographic literature is to ultimately break down the literature in hopes

to further the studies on how geographies of education, geographies of sexualities, and geographies of student activism and children can intersect.

I am by no means a seasoned teacher. Still, as a recent graduate of teacher's college from a university in Ontario, with teachables in both geography and physical education, I recognize the important role that the human development and sexual health curriculum played on students' lives, with respects to inclusion, acceptance, safety, and lifelong learning. I contend that breaking down the spaces of education and providing a platform for students – arguably one of the most significant stakeholders involved in the sex education curriculum – is imperative. I argue that dismissing the voices of children is detrimental as it not only creates a substantial disconnect between the fragile lives of students and the authoritative adult figures but also ignores the potential of creating a safe and inclusive school environment that allows students to focus on their education. Involving students in the decision-making process is a tool to get students to care about their education (Beaudoin, 2005 as cited in Taines, 2014).

CHAPTER 1

The Importance of Sex Education

“Human development and sexual health education is more than simply teaching young people about the anatomy and physiology of reproduction. Sexual health, understood in its broadest sense, can include a wide range of topics and concepts, from sexual development, reproductive health, choice and readiness, consent, abstinence, and protection, to interpersonal relationships, sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression, affection and pleasure, body image, and gender roles and expectations. ... As students grow and develop, they build an understanding of the physical, emotional, social, and cognitive changes that they will experience at puberty. Their learning about human development – and their understanding of its many, interrelated aspects – deepens as students get older and as the nature of their relationships change. They learn more about self, others, and identity; peer, family, and romantic relationships; personal safety; and decision making. Acquiring information and skills and developing attitudes, beliefs, and values related to identity and relationships are lifelong processes.” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2015, p. 38)

Sex and education discourses contradict one another as they represent several different physical, emotional, social, cultural, and cognitive experiences. On the one hand, education has been used as a tool, by adults, to teach discipline and to instill morals in children. Given North American attitudes towards sex and sexuality, this has made spaces of education, in particular formal education, sites that are often imagined to be desexualized institutions (Aitken, 2001; Barker, et al., 2010; Hall, 2020b; Valentine, 2001). This is because schools have been used as an instrument to contain and protect children from the moral and physical threats of the adult world (Collins & Coleman, 2008; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990 as cited in Schroeder, 2012).

In contrast, we often associate sex with the private sphere and morality (Lapointe, 2014; Moran, 2001; Thomas, 2004; Valentine, 2008) alongside adulthood (Bay-Cheng, 2003; Schroeder, 2012; Thomas, 2004). Consequently, sex in association with children

and youth is often viewed as deviant, corruptive, and immoral (Hall, 2020a; Lapointe, 2014; Schroeder, 2012; Thomas, 2004; Valentine, 2001). Therefore, in order to protect children from the coercive ideas of sex, children are in need of severe, “absolutist measures that are essential in reducing and suppressing the sexuality of children and youth” (Gagnon & Simon, 1973, as cited in Bay-Cheng, 2003, p. 63).

Based on the discourses attached to sex and education, it is hard to imagine how these two ideas coincide. Moreover, it can be difficult to comprehend the importance of teaching sex education curriculums to children and youth, especially when one’s moral beliefs and values do not align with what is being taught. This is evident in that sex education curriculums have been a controversial topic for decades and across multiple countries (see Collins & Coleman, 2008; Bodnar & Tornello, 2019; Gilbert, 2007; McKay, Byers, Voyer, Humpherys, & Markham, 2014; Moran, 2001; Schroeder, 2012; Selley, 2018). Although sex education curriculums have been around for almost a century (Moran, 2000, as cited in Bay-Cheng, 2003) and only make up a small portion of the educational document, they remain contentious as many of its topics disrupt the discourses surrounding children, youth, and education (Bay-Cheng, 2003; Bodnar & Tornello, 2019; Formby, 2011; Gilbert, 2018; Hoefler & Hoefler, 2017). Sex education curriculums, especially ones that are more progressive and present controversial topics such as: gender identity and sexual orientation; the proper names for genitalia and the reproductive system; the proper names and symptoms for STIs that go beyond just HIV and AIDS; factors that affect and contribute to decisions about sexual activity; consent; the risk of sexting and online sexual harassment; and self-pleasure and desire (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2015). All of these things arguably defy the moral discourses

schools are supposed to represent. Conversely, in 2010, the World Health Organization alongside the United Nations and the International Conference on Population and Development highlighted the importance of sex education by stating that children and youth have the right to sex education as it is essential in determining sexual health and accessing reproductive rights and sexual health (Formby, 2011; Thomas & Aggleton, 2016; Zimmerman, 2015). This has led to extensive debates over what Schroeder (2012) refers to as the perplexity between “concerns over professional ethics and moral behavior” (p. 640-641).

In this chapter, I focus on the sex education curricula and their impact on reproducing hegemonic heterosexual space. I start by examining how hegemonic heterosexual identities are subtly reinforced and reproduced within society. In doing so, I argue that these heterosexual identities are heavily influenced by school spaces and their curricula, which leads to the ‘othering’ of those who do not fit the heterosexual norm. Secondly, I discuss abstinence-based sex education curriculums. I provide insight into how these curriculums have perpetuated heterosexual norms and have harmful impacts on children and youth as it prevents them from developing any form of sexual agency. Lastly, I explore the benefits of providing a more progressive sex education curriculum. I argue that the use of outdated sex education curriculums such as the abstinent-based curricula have allowed for the reproduction of hegemonic heterosexual norms to dominate within the public sphere. Consequently, this has made females, members of the LGBTQ+ community, as well as racialized students more vulnerable to bullying, harassment, and sexual assault. I contend that it is necessary to provide a more inclusive

and progressive sex education curriculum that not only deconstructs the hegemonic heterosexual norms but also protects marginalized populations.

1.1 Normalizing Heterosexual Space

Prior to recent progressive changes in modern-day sex education curriculums, the values of the curricula were traditionally conservative (Bay-Cheng, 2003; Collins & Coleman, 2008; Schroeder, 2012; Zimmerman, 2015) as they encompassed “patriotism, punctuality, order, obedience, industry, courtesy, and respect” (Collins & Coleman, p. 284). Basu (2013), Bay-Cheng (2003), McGlashan & Fitzpatrick (2017), Schroeder (2012), and Valentine (2000; 2001; 2008) argue that these principles were primarily built on the ideas of heterosexuality, misogyny, and homophobia and were used to legitimize hegemonic heterosexual identities. This served to formally control and reproduce heterosexual hegemony within the public realm as it not only contained homosexuality by demonizing it, “but also... pathologize[d] almost any nonconformity” (Raymond, 1994, p. 125, as cited in Bay-Cheng, 2003).

These practices reveal how hegemonic heterosexuality extends beyond the confined and private spaces of sex (Thomas, 2004). It is important to recognize, that for norms to operate through everyday practice, something must remain excluded from everyday practice (Butler, 1993), as cited in Thomas, 2004). Subsequently, LGBTQ+ identities become the target of intolerant heterosexual practices. The notion of tolerance is what separates heterosexism from homophobia, in which “heterosexism becomes an invisible universal that is socially and spatially reproduced” (Schroeder, 2012, p. 647).

For centuries, we have seen the social reproduction of heterosexism through a collection of socially constructed relations and institutions, which include marriage,

family, and parenthood (Bain & Podmore, 2021; Hall, 2020b; Hubbard, 2000). Most of these, until recently, has worked to the detriment as well as the exclusion of the LGBTQ+ community. Redman (1994), Haywood, (1996), and Elia (2000) support Hall (2020b) and Hubbard (2000) stating that the delineation between normal and deviant sexualities is that “normality is located within a *monogamous, coitus-centered* relationship between a man and a woman, both who generally conform to *conventional gender roles*” (as cited in Bay-Cheng, 2003, p. 67). However, as we continue to shift from an industrial society to a new contemporaneity, traditional ideas and expectations about social relations are being reworked (Valentine, 2008), and society is beginning to perceive homosexuality as more tolerable.

While tolerance is often viewed as positive, it also highlights the power relationships and produces one group’s dominance over the other(s) (Brown, 2008, as cited in Andersson, Vanderbeck, Valentine, Ward, & Sadgrove, 2011). These power structures are not maintained and controlled by a singular event or agent, but rather through multiple socio-political systems including the exclusion of certain knowledge, ideas, or experiences in somewhat subtle ways (Lapointe, 2014; Foucault, 1972, as cited in Schroeder, 2012). For instance, although same-sex marriage has now been legalized in North America, the power structures between heterosexism and homophobia proceed in a more subtle way – through the gaze of others. For example, Hubbard (2000) states that “[w]hile displays of heterosexual affection, friendship, and desire are often regarded as acceptable or ‘normal’ in most spaces, it has been noted that homosexuals are often forced to deny or disguise their sexual orientation ... because of fears of homophobic abuse and intolerance” (p. 191-192). Thus, it is important to recognize “how particular

forms of public civility and tolerance can, nevertheless, be consistent with, and contribute to, the reproduction of other and marginalization” (Andersson, et al., 2011, pg. 631) and that even a small form intolerance towards homophobia confirms the insidiousness instilled within the normalized heterosexist society (Schroeder, 2012).

Schools cannot be analyzed in isolation from these social processes (Cook & Hemming, 2011) as they are not only a part of the heteronormative socio-political structures, but also play a significant role in reinforcing these heteronormative behaviours (Bain & Podmore, 2020). The hierarchy and the duality between homophobia and heterosexism seep into schools. Schools reinforce dominant heterosexual gender roles through policy, curricula, activities, buildings, and social life, which is apparent in everyday student culture (Chesir-Teran, 2003, DePalma, 2013, Hall, 2020c; Linville, 2009, & Pascoe, 2007, as cited in Elliott, 2016). For example, through the use of the sex education curriculum, school dress codes (see Hyams, 2000), athletics (see Elliott, 2016; Evans, 2006), and spaces including the playground (see Newman, et al., 2006), and gendered bathrooms (see Elliott, 2016; Hall, 2020c), schools can implement heteronormative behaviours that intertwine with sexuality and gender.

1.2 Consequences of Abstinence-Based Sex Education

Although some school districts have produced more modern and progressive sex education curriculums, many schools still use conservative principles as the foundation for their sex education curriculums (see Hoefler & Hoefler, 2017; Schroeder, 2012). This is most apparent in abstinence-based programs which are often influenced by religious ideals (Bay-Cheng, 2003; Hoefler & Hoefler, 2017; Holloway, Hubbard, Jöns, & Pimlott-Wilson, 2010; Hyams, 2000; Schroeder, 2012) and tend to be centered around a

“conservative and moralistic package of ‘family values’” (Bay-Cheng, 2003, p. 63; Hall, 2020b; 2020c; Moran, 2001). Aligning it with the standards of heterosexual hegemony, conservatives often use ‘family’ as a tool in defining desirable relationships. The use of abstinence-based sex education not only places a heavy emphasis on refraining from premarital sex but in doing so, also stresses the importance of the creation of the heterosexual nuclear family and marriage for child-rearing purposes (Formby, 2011; Hall, 2020b; Hubbard, 2000; Moran, 2001; Schroder, 2012). This idea of ‘family’ ends up discriminating and alienating LGBTQ+ identities, subjectivities, and practices.

It can be also argued that the sole purpose of abstinence-based sex education is to endorse and validate heteronormativity. Research shows that abstinence-based curricula are flawed (Morris, 1994 and Whatley, 1994, as cited in Bay-Cheng, 2003), in that they not only fail to prevent pregnancy and STIs due to their students’ lack of knowledge on contraception and STIs (Hoefler & Hoefler, 2017), but have also been known to provide inaccurate information (Leclair, 2006 and Wiley & Wilson 2009, as cited in Hoefler & Hoefler, 2017; Lapointe, 2014). According to Fields (2008), this includes the use of incorrect medical information as well as exploiting obsolete stereotypes and assumptions about gender and sexual orientation (as cited in Hoefler & Hoefler, 2017).

Subsequently, this misinformation frequently contributes to larger societal issues including homophobia, racism, and classism (Bay-Cheng, 2003; Hoefler & Hoefler, 2017; Hubbard, 2000; Lapointe, 2014). For instance, the propagation of stereotypes and fetishized notions of sexuality of the “lustful and loose lower class women; sexually aggressive and animalistic black men and women; emasculated and impotent Asian men” (Bay-Cheng, 2003, p. 68) continues to push the narratives of heterosexual hegemony.

This can be detrimental to females, LGBTQ+, and racialized students, as they are more vulnerable to messages surrounding the legitimacy of their own identities (Bain & Podmore, 2020; Hoefler & Hoefler, 2017). Rather than learning about themselves and others, students are often led to “othering” students with identities that do not fit hegemonic heterosexual identities.

In addition, the abstinence-based curriculums can lead to the risk of potential sexual harassment and abuse. The inadequate information provides children and youth no foundation towards understanding sexual agency and also fails to help them develop the skills needed to negotiate sexual development and sexual desires (Bay-Cheng, 2003; Hubbard, 2000; Hyams, 2000). Instead, fear-based tactics infused with the perceptions of moral decay are used. For example, Dailard (2002) asserts that educators of a U.S. federally funded abstinence-based curriculum are required to teach “that sexual activity outside of the context of marriage is likely to have harmful psychological and physical effects [and] ... that bearing children out-of-wedlock is likely to have harmful consequences for the child, the child’s parents, and society” (as cited in Bay-Cheng, 2003). In other words, this meant shaming sexual activity by only having discussions about STIs and pregnancy, while refusing to answer questions about sexual pleasure, sexual trauma, and anything outside of abstinence (Formby, 2011; Hoefler & Hoefler, 2017). Instead of learning to negotiate gender and sexual identities (Evans, 2006; Hyams, 2000) as well as sexual consent and desire (McKay, et al., 2014; Moran, 2001), children and youth are discouraged to discuss or act upon sexual desire due to fear of negative consequences. In this way, “saying no to sex [is] no longer a protest ... [but] a sign of compliance” (Gilbert, 2018, p. 271).

1.3 The Shift towards a Progressive Sex Education Curriculum

More recently, in contemporary Western societies, progressive sex education curriculums that draw attention to the possibility of same-sex marriage and self-pleasuring and question stable gender and sexual identities have created moral panics among certain conservative and religious groups (Andersson, et al., 2011; Bain & Podmore, 2020; Gilbert, 2018; Hall, 2020b; Hofer & Hofer, 2017; Moran, 2001; Schroeder, 2012). For example, Andersson, et al. (2011) states that Evangelical Christians are typically known to “harbor moral reservations about homosexuality based on a more literalist approach to the Bible” (p. 624). They further argue that even the individuals who lean towards a more left-winged stance on a variety of other political and social issues tend to remain conservative when it comes to sexual morality. Fetner (2008) agrees, affirming that the relationship between the LGBTQ+ community and religion has long been complicated regardless of liberal or conservative leanings (as cited in Schroeder, 2012).

Studies show that queer youth are more prone to alienation, depression, suicide, and poor self-esteem in comparison to their heterosexual counterparts (Bain & Podmore, 2020; 2021; Formby, 2011; Moran, 2001; Schroeder, 2012). This can be linked to education as one of the primary functions of education and its curriculum is to (re)produce dominant heteronormative behaviours and values which include a strict gender binary (Elliott, 2016; Hall, 2020b; Lapointe, 2014; Gagen, 2000, as cited in Schroeder, 2012). This strict pedagogical approach habitually fails males and females, and gays and straights (Hall, 2020c; Butler, 1991, as cited in Schroeder, 2012) as it tends to neglect the needs of those who do not self-identify with or cannot fit into these

categories (Bay-Cheng, 2003; Elliott, 2016; Hyams, 2000). Studies show that these pedagogical practices dismiss gender and sexuality which aid in silencing identities, making those who do not conform to hegemonic heterosexual norms more vulnerable to harassment, abuse, and sexual violence (Andersson, et al., 2011; Bain & Podmore, 2020; 2021; Bay-Cheng, 2003; Elliott, 2016; Gilbert, 2018; Hoefler & Hoefler, 2017; Hubbard, 2000; Hyams, 2000; Lapointe, 2014; McGlashan & Fitzpatrick, 2017; Moran, 2001; Schroder, 2012; Thomas & Aggleton, 2016).

According to Thomas & Aggleton (2016), the objective of sexual health education is to teach students lifelong skills and to “develop their attitudes, beliefs and values as they relate to gender and sexuality, sexual and gender identity, [and] relationships and intimacy” with the hopes of reducing risk and vulnerability to sexually transmitted infections, sexual violence, and abuse (p. 14). A comprehensive sex education curriculum that includes discussions about LGBTQ+ issues (Bain & Podmore, 2020; 2021; Elliott, 2016; Hoefler & Hoefler, 2017) along with promoting consent and sexual agency (Formby, 2011; McKay, et al., 2014) can contribute to healthy relationships and feelings of safety and acceptance amongst the vulnerable students at school. The introduction of the progressive sex education curriculum goes beyond the limited constraints of the male/female and straight/gay binaries as it attempts to dismantle heteronormativity. This shift provides an opportunity to not only reimagine the discourses surrounding gender and sexual identities, but also serves a purpose in protecting those who have been marginalized. The next chapter highlights the discourses of schooling by exploring the disciplinary powers instilled within schools and policies of education that have contributed to the reproduction of hegemonic social, cultural, and political norms.

CHAPTER 2

Education and the Moral Panic: Protecting the innocent child

Work on geographies of education has mainly focused on its institutional practices. Scholars consider the significance of spatiality in the production and use of formal and informal learning environments. By doing so, geographies of education analyze how political, economic, social, and cultural processes shape these spaces (Cook & Hemming, 2011; Henry, 2020; Holloway & Jöns, 2012; Lewis, 2020). Literature on geographies of education also provides the opportunity to identify the subject positions of actors linked to the state and its economic developments, while simultaneously investigating “the processes through which they are transmitted, reworked, and resisted” (Thiem, 2009, p. 163). In addition, geographies of education consider both the disputed and welcomed experiences of all the stakeholders involved, including, but not limited to, the educators, students, and parents (Basu, 2011; Holloway & Jöns, 2012).

In this chapter, I focus on the geographies of education and the purposes of schools and education. First, I outline the history of schooling and education and their purpose in containing children to protect them from the threats of the outside world. I then move on to discuss the shift towards contemporary schooling and education. More specifically, I highlight how schools have become important spaces in producing national identity through the reproduction of social, cultural, and political norms. Through the production of national identity, schools are characterized by institutional discrimination and spatial segregation along racial, class, gender, sexuality, and disability divides (Basu, 2013). Moreover, it can be argued that education generates knowledge, culture, and social change unevenly across space and society (Lewis, 2020). This uneven distribution of

social privilege sparks contestation on what should and should not be taught in schools. One curriculum, in particular, the sex education curriculum, has been a central topic of this educational debate.

It has frequently been argued that sex education curriculums contradict what schools represent, a desexualized space that is supposed to instill moral codes that shape children's identities. This idea of schools being a desexualized institution is a key component of an abstinence-based sex education curriculum, as they uphold a heteronormative narrative. In the following section, I explore this notion of the desexualized school by considering the moral panic created by adults who oppose a progressive sex education curriculum. More specifically, discussions encompassing both children and sex often incite moral panics as some people assume that this leads to the corruption of the innocent, naïve, and vulnerable child. This seemingly outweighs the beneficial considerations of children's sexual agency, autonomy, and competence (Hall, 2020a). However, feminist, queer, and trans scholars have argued these spaces are distinctly sexualized as spaces of embedded heteronormativity. In the final section of this chapter, I debunk the notion that schools are desexualized institutions. I use literature on geographies of sexuality to emphasize how schools are indeed highly sexualized spaces in which children and youth are constantly performing and negotiating their sexuality and gender.

2.1 History of Schooling and Education in Western Society

Eurocentric school systems were created shortly after the industrial revolution began and were used as an instrument to contain and protect children from the moral and physical threats of the rapid growth of urbanization and industrialization in society

(Aitken, 2001; Collins & Coleman, 2008; Hall, 2020a; Henry, 2020; Moran, 2001; Valentine, 2000; 2001). Thus, adolescence and childhood became a time for society to enforce its “rules and mores, to teach discipline, patriotism and proper codes of behaviour” (Aitken, 2019, p. 11). In turn, schools became a compulsory, government-run institution used as a way to ensure that “all children experienced a childhood” that not only protected their innocence, but also prepared them for the responsibilities they would face as adults.

Through the implementation of strategies and lessons, compulsory schooling instilled discourses that promoted respect for order and authority (Aitken, 2001; Basu, 2004; Collins & Coleman, 2008, p. 288; Collins, 2006; 2007; Henry, 2020; Schroder, 2012; Valentine, 2000; 2001). More specifically, features like “timetables, rules, teacher-experts, testing and scripted-curriculum, grading, the social construction of educated persons, state-legitimate knowledge, a physical schooling space, [and] age-specific segregation” have not only contributed to the political-economic role of schooling, but have also produced more tractable and obedient children (Bain & Podmore, 2020; Henry, 2020, p. 185). Ultimately, schools were, and are still, used as a tool to train and prepare children to become self-governing individuals who will contribute to society. This demonstrates that schools become important spaces to govern students.

The typical structure of a school is filtered from a top-down approach. Students inhabit a subordinate position (Metz, 1978, as cited in Taines, 2014), thus allowing for an environment where disciplinary power can thrive. According to Hannah (1997), disciplinary power involves “minute regulation of bodily and other visible activities, and which rely for their operation on the production of knowledge about those subjected” (p.

171). Schools are an institution that subjects individuals to disciplinary powers as students are constantly monitored, surveilled, and categorized by power authorities and ‘experts’. In these settings, students learn self-surveillance and self-regulation making the regulation of others always present (Foucault, 1977; 1980, as cited in Collins & Coleman, 2008; Newman, et al., 2006).

Moreover, Barker, et al. (2010) argues that Foucault’s (1977) theory on the “Panoptic gaze has been identified in classrooms” (p. 378). The panoptic gaze organizes “spatial unities that make it possible to see constantly and to recognize immediately” (Foucault, 1977, p. 200). The implementation of the Panoptic gaze works well in places like the contained space of a classroom. As students spend the majority of their youth within the boundaries of the school, they are subject to school rules and the judgment of their teachers and peers (Cook & Hemming, 2011; Evans, 2006; Taines, 2014). Through continuous surveillance by teachers, they are able to carry out the Panoptic gaze to help aid social and behavioural control of children (Bain & Podmore, 2020; Basu, 2004; Collins & Coleman, 2008; Henry, 2020; Waters, 2017). Although the eye of the teacher may not always be present, visibility is trapped within this confined space. The potential of being visible is always present, which in turn creates order. Essentially, the Panoptic gaze is used to instill “a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power” (Foucault, 1977, p. 201). The constant use of surveillance even when not in full use, creates a power situation in which individuals themselves are the bearers of power where they are constantly observing themselves and others (Foucault, 1977).

As students transition from school to the “real” world, the geographical scale shifts, which expands the boundaries of containment making it more difficult for the central authority to manage and discipline (Hannah, 1997). Therefore, to control a population of people within a large geographic space, Foucault (2001) used his theory on governmentality to argue that the power needed to shift from the central authority and be distributed amongst the public through several institutions, procedures, calculations, and tactics. Since schools are the only formal institution to have significant interaction with nearly every child and adolescent (McKay, et al., 2014), schools provide dominant power authorities with the perfect opportunity to implement the exercises of governmentality on children. Within the contained spaces of a classroom, cafeteria, and/or playground, students are taught the skills that allow them to become self-governing individuals in preparation to enter realities of the adult world. This begins to eliminate the boundaries of education as social practices are being reinforced and exercised (Waters, 2017) to produce professional individuals that contribute to the knowledge economy all while reinforcing gendered norms (Cook & Hemming, 2011; Henry, 2020). Failure or any threats of failure towards attaining this normative adult status is characterized as deviant, aberrant, or inadequate and a cause of societal problems (Griffen, 1993 & Luker, 1996 as cited in Hyams, 2000).

The skills and discourses to becoming self-governing individuals are generally taught through the use of the hidden curricula. The hidden curricula are informal lessons that do not focus on the content of the lesson, but on sociospatial relations – including the identities and experiences of both the teachers and students – within each learning space (Cook & Hemming, 2011; Hall, 2020c; Holloway, Hubbard, Jöns, & Pimlott-Wilson,

2010). Lupton and Tulloch (1998) argue that the purpose of the hidden curriculum is to normalize, regulate, and discipline children's bodies (as cited in Evans, 2006). Furthermore, the hidden curriculum is used as a way to convey the moral beliefs and practices of the identity of the state, which ultimately shape children into becoming law-abiding citizens (Barker, et al., 2010; Basu, 2011; Collins & Coleman, 2008; Hall, 2020c; Holloway, et al., 2010; Thiem, 2009). This can be problematic as hidden curricula are "highly dependent upon individual educators and community norms" (Hoefler & Hoefler, 2017, p. 259). In other words, the hidden curriculum is entrenched with heteronormative social relations that are inscribed and reproduced through children's everyday actions (Hall, 2020c). More specifically, the hidden curricula demonstrate the complex power dynamics within schools as naturalized social identities including gender, age, and ethnicity, play a significant and underlying role in informal lessons (Cook & Hemming, 2011). The hidden curriculum has the potential to exclude students who are marginalized within the school community through the social reproduction of dominant hegemonic norms.

2.2 Contemporary Schooling and Education

Many scholars contend that schools today remain as institutions embedded in hegemonic powers (Barker, et al., 2010; Basu, 2004; 2013; Collins & Coleman, 2008; Henry, 2020; Lewis, 2009; 2020; Thiem, 2009; Valentine, 2001). Schools and education represent institutional power structures, in which education is not universal or stable (Lewis, 2009; 2020). Rather, schools are a product of governmental interventions that reproduce national identity (Basu, 2011; Hunter, 1991, as cited in Collins, 2006; Collins, 2007; Cook & Hemming, 2011; Henry, 2020; Lewis, 2020).

Although all schools operate under disciplinary powers and instill discourses of governmentality amongst the children on a global scale, the content taught in schools is not universally determined (Lewis, 2020), but is locally and geographically specific. To elaborate, education is a crucial component of the social reproduction that organizes cities and neighbourhoods by defining and negotiating social opportunity and status (Bain & Podmore, 2020; Basu, 2011; Dunlop, Atkinson, Stubbs, & Turkenburg-van Diepen, 2020; Lewis, 2020). Thereby, if cities and neighbourhoods are composed of different social, environmental, ethical, and cultural backgrounds and discourses then so too will the educational experience of each individual (Lewis, 2009; 2020). Whether it is through the curriculum, physical space, and/or the hidden curriculum, the learning experience of each student will be a reflection of their surrounding social, economic, and cultural environment (Lewis, 2020).

Schools are also essential to social, economic, and political life (Basu, 2011; Collins & Coleman, 2008; Lewis, 2009; 2020; Nguyen, Cohen, & Huff, 2017) as education plays a key role in shaping the identities of individuals and configuring societies around the world (Dunlop, et al., 2020; Henry, 2020; Lewis, 2020; Waters, 2017). Universally, education is seen as an investment in an increasingly globalized society as it is a crucial site in the production of competitive knowledge economies but also profit-making (Basu, 2004; Henry, 2020; Holloway, et al., 2010; Lewis, 2020). As a result, the goal of education is to construct individuals who would be able to contribute to the future society and economy (Barker, et al., 2010; Basu, 2004; 2011; Collins & Coleman, 2008; Henry, 2020; Hofer & Hofer, 2017; Holloway & Jöns, 2012; Mills &

Kraftl, 2015; Valentine, 2001), while leaving little room for “political economic imaginations and ... participation in quasi-capitalist economies” (Henry, 2020, p. 184).

The purpose of formal education goes beyond building knowledge economies. Formal education is also strongly embedded within social and cultural processes (Butler & Hamnett, 2007; Cook & Hemming, 2011; Lewis, 2009; 2020). More specifically, schools are deeply political and function to (re)produce social and cultural norms (Basu, 2011; Collins & Coleman, 2008; Henry, 2020; Holloway, et al., 2010; Kirshner, 2015; Lewis, 2009; Mills & Kraftl, 2015; Schroeder, 2012). This (re)production of social and cultural norms is done through cultural politics that are embedded within each specific social geographical space (Butler & Hamnett, 2007; Cook & Hemming, 2011; Mills & Kraftl, 2015; Waters, 2017). For example, Hall’s (2020c) research on primary school children demonstrates attempts to break down heteronormative discourses surrounding gender and sexual orientation through new teaching strategies. Although students demonstrated “prevailing acceptance of liberal discourses of gender and sexual equalities in ‘formal’ micro-institutional spaces” like the classroom, heteronormative relations still proceeded and were “regularly reinstated in children’s everyday spatial practices”, (Hall, 2020c, p. 197). This is a result of repeated heteronormative performances which compel children to subscribe to heteronormative behaviours, especially when confronted by subversion (Youdell, 2006, as cited in Hall, 2020c). As a result, schools actively shape how people experience and define their communities and social environment (Basu, 2011; Lewis, 2009; Nguyen, et al., 2017).

Basu (2010) claims that spatial segregation and institutional discrimination “particularly along racial, class, gender, sexuality and disability divides” (p. 874, as cited

in Basu, 2013) have emerged in recent years. According to Apple (2004), the ideology behind schools has never served to educate adequately but rather, schools have been used to appropriate and allocate opportunities that are consistently unequal (as cited in Henry, 2020). More specifically, different social groups have vastly different capabilities to access and mobilize educational opportunities for both individual and group benefit (Henry, 2020; Lewis, 2020; Waters, 2017). Thus, it is no surprise that the field of geographies of education has shifted its focus onto inequalities within the educational system (Basu, 2010; Henry, 2020; Lewis, 2009; Nguyen, et al., 2017).

Aspects of the social environment that include socio-economic, linguistic, religious, and cultural differences are commonly reflected in the politics and policies in schools (Henry, 2020; Lewis, 2020). These include, but are not limited to, dress codes, traditional familial representations in books (see Collins, 2006; Hall, 2020c), stereotypical male and female figures in textbooks (see Hall, 2020c), and curricula content. Given this, Ladson-Billings (1998) suggests that official school curricula are not only politically influenced but are a “culturally specific artifact designed to maintain a White supremacist script” (p. 18, as cited in Henry, 2020). These policies in education are not only vital in the heteronormative social reproduction that regulates cities and communities, but in the reinforcement of social inequalities through the production, regulation, and contestation of particular versions of citizenship (Basu, 2011; Henry, 2020; Lewis, 2020; Nguyen, et al., 2017).

Institutional discrimination and spatial segregation are particularly evident in curricula (Basu, 2004; Basu, 2013; Henry, 2020). More specifically, the construction of curricula and their content provides “subliminal messages of social acceptability and

control” (Haigh, Cotton, & Hall, 2020, p. 305, as cited in Hall, 2020a). Although there are frequent attempts to find a common ground as to what should be incorporated within curriculum documents, educational performance is dependent on prior social patterning (Hall, 2020b; Hall, 2020c; Lewis, 2020). Consequently, as there is always some form of resistance stemming from both civil society and bureaucracy, content within the curricula often represents a political compromise (Thiem, 2009). Policy makers, teachers, parents, and students often debate what content should and should not be taught in schools (Butler & Hamnett, 2007; Formby, 2011; Lewis, 2009; Moran, 2001).

Political debates regarding education are nothing new. They started to expand in the 20th century when schools in the West were becoming more religiously and ethnically diverse (Collins, 2006; 2007). This wave of diversity meant that individuals within school communities would inevitably encounter others from different family, religious, sexual, gender, and ethnic, backgrounds (Collins, 2006; Lewis, 2009). The rise in diversity meant schools and their curricula needed to change to reflect their populations. Collins (2006; 2007) contended that in order to do so, more secular views were required in order to appease a largely diverse student population. Nevertheless, this was not without contestation (see Basu, 2011; Bay-Cheng, 2003; Collins, 2006; 2007; Moran, 2001).

Secular education in Western nations has constantly been challenged by conservative stakeholders (see Basu, 2011; Bay-Cheng, 2003; Collins, 2006; 2007; Moran, 2001). Conflicts between progressive and conservative activists usually revolve around the private and public distinction. These disagreements are centered around how, what, and where children and youth should learn, and at whose expense. More specifically, disputes typically occur over what should be taught in a tax-funded public-

school classroom and what should be left for parents to deal with in the privacy of their own home (Collins, 2006; Holloway, et al., 2010; Moran, 2001). The fear, especially among parents, is that schools may instill values in children that differ from those they were taught at home (Collins, 2006; Hall, 2020a; Schroeder, 2012).

Education demonstrates how ‘choice’ is significantly constrained by the nature of dominant power systems (Butler & Hamnett, 2007) as moral sentiments fall between unmarked normativity and human emotions (Sayer, 2005 as cited in Cheng, 2016). Education is deeply embedded in a wide array of ongoing social struggles which include “social organizations, belief systems, and visions for the future” (Lewis, 2020, p. 70). Parental anxiety has become more apparent within recent decades as parents recognize education as both a social relation and a positional good (Basu, 2011; Hall, 2020b; Lewis, 2009; 2020; Valentine, 2008).

Positional goods refer to those things, “ that gives its holder advantages relative to others in a social hierarchy” (Lewis, 2020, p. 69). Although curricula are intended to be distributed equally across schools, education is a place-based social relation. Because social spaces are differently constituted, schooling can never be uniform. Given this, middle-class parents recognizing that education is a positional good and their responsibility for their children’s success, compels them actively choose reputable neighbourhoods and schools for their children (Lewis, 2020). These choices have resulted in new forms of segregation as particular places accrue concentrations of educational advantage or disadvantage (Lewis, 2020). Parental concerns involving their children’s welfare and their own abilities to be a ‘good parent’ in terms of providing material and social opportunities that maximize their children’s opportunities towards success

(Valentine, 2008) have been central to public debates over policy. This is evident when discussing the sex education curriculum wherein arguments frequently transpire as the sex education curriculum disrupts the morals some believe that schools are meant to represent.

2.3 Sex Education: The Moral Panic

Problems with the sex education curriculum began to surface in the 1980s and 1990s when millions of immigrants entered Europe and the Americas (Zimmerman, 2015). The large immigrant population caused sex educators to question how they would be able to teach a diverse society about sex all while respecting the different ethnicities, cultures, and religions (Zimmerman, 2015). With the new emerging immigrant population, disputes began to arise between teachers and parents on a local scale, and polarizing views began to further divide political parties on a national scale. The debates about the sex education curriculum concerned parents as it not only threatened the moral and ethical discourses that have been embedded and embodied by the adults in society, but also threatened the innocence and morality of their children (Bain & Podmore, 2020; Collins & Coleman, 2008; Hall, 2020a; 2020b; McKay, et al., 2014; Moran, 2001; Valentine, 2001; Zimmerman, 2015).

Moral codes set a standard and define what is acceptable by whom within various spaces (Valentine, 2001). The moral codes imprinted on children construct them as asexual beings, but are also connected to the broader ideas about the regulation and control of sexual discourse within western societies (Hall, 2020a; Moran, 2001). In particular, classrooms are constructive institutional spaces where children are trained in the norms and moral codes of citizenship. If these codes are undermined, parents may

become fearful and angry (Bain & Podmore, 2020). In other words, disruption of these moral codes can trigger adults' own anxieties when they are forced to consider a sex education curriculum with input from students. The parents' fears stem from their own training about sex and sex education. This prevents them from envisioning the positive effects a more progressive sex education might provide their children.

The categories of 'normal' and 'deviant' are constructed and reinforced by sex education (Hubbard, 2000; Moran, 2001). The content is typically dictated by the morals, discourses, and theoretical trends of the present day and seeks to produce a specific kind of sexual individual and experience (Bay-Cheng, 2003; Hall, 2020b). It can be argued that the goal of the sex education curriculum is to naturalize the idea of sex by connecting it to heteronormative discourses such as marriage, family, and monogamy, and disconnecting it from acts of homosexual and hypersexual activity (Hall, 2020b; Hubbard, 2000). These strict social regulations promoting heterosexual notions of desirability determine whether someone is 'good' or 'bad' through appearance, sexuality, and gender (Valentine, 2000). Schools reinforce gender and sexual hierarchies, limiting the ability to diverge beyond the heterosexual norm (Elliott, 2016; Schmidt, 2020).

In attempts to dismantle the narrow concepts of sexuality and provide more avenues towards inclusivity, the progressive sex education curricula emphasize discussions about same-sex marriage, gender identity, sexual identity, and masturbation (Bay-Cheng, 2003; Bodnar & Tornello, 2019; Formby, 2011; Zimmerman, 2015). These attempts towards more inclusive discussions about sex have drawn aggressively negative responses (Collins, 2006; 2007; Gilbert, 2018; Hall, 2020b). In many cases, the introduction of these topics has driven some conservatives and religious groups into a

moral panic. They base their opposition on the claim that these topics are corruptive to children and also actively undermine their values and beliefs (Bain & Podmore, 2020; Collins, 2006; 2007; Gilbert, 2018; Hall, 2020b; 2020c). Given that schools are typically seen as desexualized spaces whose purpose is to instill moral codes that shape the social identities of children, it is unsurprising that moral panics arise as unspoken heteronormative discourses are challenged (Bain & Podmore, 2020; Moran, 2001; Valentine, 2001; Zimmerman, 2015).

2.4 Debunking the Desexualized School

Although it is now less common to view children as completely asexual, the idea of children as fundamentally sexual beings remains outrageous to many (Hall, 2020a; Jackson, 1982, as cited in Moran, 2001; Valentine, 2000). Children have traditionally been perceived as innocent and vulnerable beings in need of protection from the threats of the outside world. Although schools were designed to contain and protect children and youth from the adult world, Hall (2020b), Hubbard (2000), Hyams (2000), Newman, et al. (2006), and Waters (2017) argue that schools are in fact, highly sexualized environments. More specifically, schools produce sex and gender subjectivities that not only shape the climate of the school but the bodies within them (Bain & Podmore, 2020; Elliot, 2016; Evans, 2006). This can be seen through a variety of disciplinary strategies such as the sex education curriculum, policies like dress codes, learning materials such as books, gendered bathrooms, athletics, and the playground.

Sex and sexuality are important in a whole repertoire of child-to-child and pupil-to-teacher interactions (Valentine, 2001). This can be seen through flirting, harassment, homophobic abuse, and what Butler (1990) refers to as gendered performativity (as cited

in Newman, et al., 2006; as cited in Schmidt, 2020). Butler's (1993, 1997a, 1997b) theory of performativity "conceives of power, subjectivity, and subject positions as foundational effects of repeated, everyday practices" (as cited in Thomas, 2004, p. 774). These repeated everyday practices produce the appearance of substance, making performative actions seem natural over time (Schmidt, 2020). Performativity reconsiders the processes of how identity is produced by taking into account who received and regulates the performance (Evans, 2006) and how these practices are carried out and performed in certain spaces to reinforce dominant social meanings (Schmidt, 2020; Thomas, 2004). In the case of gender identity, gendered performativity analyzes how the dominant constructions of heterosexual femininity and masculinity are reproduced in everyday life (Evans, 2006; Schmidt, 2020).

Heterosexuality plays a pivotal role in shaping masculine and feminine ideals. Heterosexual men are often associated as reasoned and rational, whereas women are often viewed as passive, emotional, and objects of male desire (Evans, 2006; Hofer & Hofer, 2017; Rose, 1993, Seidler, 1995 as cited in Hubbard, 2000; Schmidt, 2020; Newman, et al., 2006). This understanding plays a role in how schools function. Schools are sites of multiple practices and performances of masculinities and femininities. For girls, it is typically their physical bodily appearance that leads towards a successful heterosexual feminine identity (Valentine, 2000). This can be demonstrated by dress codes. School dress codes are normalized through their emphasis on protecting young students on and off school grounds (Hyams, 2000). Although not explicitly geared towards women, Hyams (2000) argues that school dress codes typically target females, in that females

must cover certain body parts in order to avoid unwanted sexual advances which could lead to teen pregnancy, and ultimately academic failure.

A recent example of school dress codes targeting females occurred in February 2021 in Kamloops, British Columbia. A seventeen-year-old high school student, Karis Wilson, was sent home from school after her teacher pulled her out of class due to her outfit. According to Karis' father, she was told that her outfit "could possibly make the student teacher feel awkward and it could make [her female classroom teacher] feel awkward since it [Karis' knee-length black dress with lace trim over a full-sleeved white turtle neck] reminded her of a lingerie outfit" (CBC News, 2021). This example demonstrates the ingrained discourses of gender as the school blames the unwanted attention on the female, which reinforces the idea that females are passive objects of male affection (Hyams, 2000).

According to Tseelon (1995), fashion is critical in the negotiation of heterosexual feminine gender identity as it is a signifier of moral virtue (as cited in Hyams, 2000). The way young women are told to dress reinforces the idea that women are both the enforcer and the temptress, and thus are responsible for their own victimization (Hofer & Hofer, 2017; Hyams, 2000). Often young women find themselves needing to negotiate their gender and sexuality, of being acceptably attractive to appease the male gaze, but without being overly sexualized to prevent unwanted attention (Evans, 2006; Hyams, 2000; Valentine, 2000). These discourses exude harmful messages to young females as it not only disempowers and objectifies women, but also "contributes to a dangerous culture of male entitlement and female culpability" (Hofer & Hofer, 2017, p. 260).

It is through bodily performance that boys aspire to achieve hegemonic masculine identity (Valentine, 2000). This can be achieved through athletics and sport. In schools, popularity typically comes from the ability to demonstrate masculinity through “athleticism, physical strength, and heterosexual prowess” (Elliott, 2016, p. 52; Newman, et al., 2006; Schmidt, 2020; Valentine, 2000). This is because boys are expected to be rough, tough, and dangerous, giving them the ability to stand up for themselves both physically and verbally (Newman, et al., 2006; Valentine, 2000). Those who do not meet this expectation of hegemonic masculinity, are typically outcasted and labeled as feminine as heterosexuality is presumed the norm in schools (Elliott, 2016; Epstein, 1997 as cited in Newman et al., 2006; Schmidt, 2020). These outcasted students are more prone to bullying and harassment. Due to this expectation of hegemonic male behaviour, boys who have adopted this masculine persona are often excused from punishment, and the blame is frequently put on the other individual for not being a ‘proper boy’ (Newman, et al., 2006).

Although these hegemonic heterosexual identities are embedded in all schools, the regulatory role of gender is particularly evident in single-sex classrooms. A study conducted by Sandra J. Schmidt (2020) demonstrates the dominance of heterosexual gender binaries in schools by examining single-sex education programs. Program coordinators encouraged competition as a key behavioural tool in boys’ classrooms (Schmidt, 2020). In contrast, the “[g]irls were given sticky notes and boxes of markers so they could use color in their assignments. They sat in pairs and were encouraged to collaborate” (Schmidt, 2020, p. 1100). These practices created and reinforced gender

binaries within each gender-specific classrooms which ultimately leaves little room for alternative identities and erase gender fluid and non-conforming youth.

Although schools are expected to ensure the safety of children (Lewis, 2009), schools can create feelings of isolation in children and youth through a variety of policies and pedagogical practices (Newman, et al., 2006). Individuals who do not conform to these heterosexual norms are not only more vulnerable to face ridicule, harassment, and abuse (Bain & Podmore, 2021; Bay-Cheng, 2003; Elliott, 2016; Hoefler & Hoefler, 2017; Hubbard, 2000; Hyams, 2000; Moran, 2001; Newman, et al., 2006; Schroeder, 2012) but also end up repressing their sexuality. This can lead to depression, suicide, and poor-self-esteem (Bain & Podmore, 2020; 2021; Formby, 2011; Hyams, 2000; Moran, 2001; Schroeder, 2012; Valentine, 2000). Both boys and girls suffer from the burden to conform to a restrictive and constraining concept of sexuality (Valentine, 2001).

Schools can no longer be viewed as universal or stable spaces strictly composed of disciplinary power and adult discourses, as education and knowledge are constantly “shifting, context contingent, contested, and embodied” (Lewis, 2020, p. 70). Schools are highly sexualized spaces riddled with children and youth who are constantly negotiating their gender and sexuality. Therefore, I argue that the parental need to protect the innocence of their children from a sexualized world negates the needs of the students. Education is needed to encourage children and youth to resist the pressures of conforming to societal norms (Evans, 2006). Schools have the potential to intervene in the construction of these hierarchies surrounding heterosexual masculine and feminine identities, thus creating a more open and inclusive school environment. Through

examining literature on children's geographies, the next chapter shines a light on children and youth agency to encourage us to view identities as becoming and not being.

CHAPTER 3

The contradiction between ‘protecting the innocence of a child’ and ‘preparing them for the responsibilities of adulthood’

Studies on geographies of children and youth highlight the need to “consider the geographical experiences of those considered not-yet adults” (Bosco, 2010, p. 384). Furthermore, children’s geographies challenge the singular conceptualization of youth experiences that is often constrained by adults (Schmidt, 2020). Compared to adults, children and youth inhabit distinctive and generally more restrictive spaces in society (Hil & Bessant, 1999, Matthew, Limbs & Percy-Smith, 1998, Skelton & Valentine, 1998, as cited in Wood, 2016). More specifically, Wood (2016) states that children and young people occupy more ‘micro-geographies’, which are spatially constrained compared to those of adults (Bain & Podmore, 2021).

Research has shown that the mobility of children and young people are confined to spatially specific arenas in which children and youth are under more surveillance and exposed to greater social marginality (Hil & Bessant, 1999, Matthews, et al., 1998, White, 1996, as cited in Wood, 2016). This limited spatial mobility is due to adults’ anxieties and suspicions towards young people and children (Börner, Kraftl, & Giatti, 2020). Through laws and regulations such as curfews, age restrictions, and mandatory education, children and young people are limited to what they can do and where they can go making them spatially restricted. Geographies of children and youth focus on children and youth's everyday experiences and how their bodies are entangled in the structures of everyday social and cultural spaces (Krishnan, 2020; Schmidt, 2020; Schroeder, 2012). Through studying the everyday experiences of children and youth, “children’s

geographies attempt to free youth from the singular conceptualization of their experience as one constrained by adults” (Schmidt, 2020, p. 1097).

A key concept in geographies of children and youth is social and spatial exclusion (Wood, 2016). Understanding the exclusion of children and youth goes beyond viewing children and youth as subjects but also takes into account the social, environmental, and political construction of ‘childhood’ (Börner, et al., 2020; Hung, 2011; Kraftl, 2013; Krishnan, 2020). Childhood is not a fixed category solely based on chronological age (Valentine, 2003), but instead is frequently debated and contested along the lines of development, agency, and citizenship (Bosco, 2010; Kallio, 2007; Krishnan, 2020; Skelton, 2010; Valentine, 2003). Due to the complexities of childhood, geographic research has shown that children and youth cannot be studied as a homogenized group (Börner, et al., 2020; Hall, 2020b; Krishnan, 2020; Newman, et al., 2006; Valentine, 2000) as studying children and youth as a monolithic group oversimplifies the complexity of young people’s identity. Studying children and youth as a homogenized group has the potential to create a false boundary between adults and children (Valentine, 2000).

This chapter focuses on the geographies of children and youth and the complexity of defining the boundaries of childhood and adulthood. I illustrate the contradictory nature in which adults want to protect the innocence of a child while simultaneously preparing them for the responsibilities of adulthood. I start by using the current literature to define childhood and adulthood. Arguably, there is no definitive line as to where childhood ends and adulthood begins as scholars have argued that these boundaries are blurred by the unclear period of ‘youth’ (Holt, 2009; Valentine, 2003; Wood, 2016).

Thus, I question when, where, and for what reasons one stops protecting the innocence of a child and transition into preparing them for adulthood's responsibilities of adulthood?

In the second section of this chapter, I examine education as a source of empowerment and political change. In this section, I focus on the agency of children and young people, particularly in school settings, and youth participation towards political change. Although it is habitually assumed that children and youth are incapable of making rational and informed decisions (Bosco, 2010; Hall, 2020a) scholars have highlighted children and youth's ability to discover and perform their agency (Bain & Podmore, 2020; Börner, et al., 2020; Dunlop, et al., 2020; Jeffrey, 2012). Through the discovery and performance of agency, "young people's ideas about place, power, and identity can be used to illuminate injustices in different places and imagine alternative solutions and strategies for pressing community issues" (Hung, 2011, p. 582). In other words, children and youth are social and political actors that can disrupt adult discourses through everyday life politics (Bain & Podmore, 2020; Börner, et al., 2020; Kallio, 2007), thus providing room for change.

In the third section, I examine adult discourses within the curriculum and contend that it neglects the needs and wants of children. In doing so, I reference the sex education curriculum as a prime example to highlight the differences between adults' content as opposed to children. I argue that there is a disconnect between meeting the students' needs and wants, but that children and young people have the agency to determine what they want to learn. Therefore, to bridge this gap between adults, children, and youth, I assert that it is essential to not only provide students with a voice to participate in

political change, but have adults acknowledge that children and youth are capable of creating successful change.

3.1 The Transition between Childhood and Adulthood

In many parts of the world, it is legally determined through chronological age when an individual transitions into becoming an adult (Hall, 2020a; Valentine, 2003). For decades legal minimum age classifications have been used to define the responsibilities of adulthood. Examples of these legal age classifications include the age at which a young person can drink, get a job, join the army, vote, drive a car, leave compulsory education, and consent to sexual relationships (Bain & Podmore, 2021; Hall, 2020a; Skelton, 2010; James, 1986, as cited in Valentine, 2003). These age definitions compartmentalize childhood while reinforcing the discourses of children and young people as being “asexual, irresponsible, incompetent, vulnerable, human ‘becomings’ in need of protection” (Newman, et al., 2006; Valentine, 2000, p. 257-258).

The idea of legally determining when someone becomes an adult often assumes that people will collectively act in similar ways based on their chronological age (Valentine, 2000; 2003). However, researchers contend that this homogenized categorization of childhood and adulthood fails to acknowledge the complexity of children and youth (Hall, 2020b; Krishnan, 2020; Newman, et al., 2006; Schroeder, 2012; Valentine, 2003). Where the transition from childhood to adulthood once seemed to be a straight-forward linear shift (Holt, 2009; Valentine, 2003), more recent studies have shown “childhood as having geopolitical dimensions, shaped by global economic restructuring and inhabiting a social and political sphere” (Henry, 2020; Hung, 2011, p. 578). With multiple factors contributing to childhood, it can no longer be defined by

chronological age, but rather as a performative and processual identity (Valentine, 2003; 2008).

The understanding of childhood and youth is multifaceted and has fluctuated across time and space (Jeffrey, 2012; Valentine, 2003; Aitkens & Plows, 2010, as cited in Wood, 2016). The boundaries between childhood, youth, and adulthood are becoming increasingly more difficult to define (Holt, 2009; Valentine, 2003; Wood, 2016). More recent studies of childhood have strayed away from the 'biological' concerns of child development and have moved towards understanding the social construction and processes through which childhoods are constituted (Kraftl, 2013). By focusing on the social constructions of childhood and youth, we can uncover two things. First, it illustrates the contradictory discourses in which children and youth are placed. More specifically, it highlights the overwhelming desire to protect children from the physical threats of the outside world while concurrently needing to prepare them for the responsibilities of adulthood. Therefore I question at what point does the transition from childhood to adulthood begin, and under what circumstances are young people viewed as adults as oppose to children?

Secondly, focusing on the social constructions of childhood and youth helps break down the power relations which define children and youth. Skelton (2010) states that power is both directly and relationally present in the lives of children and young people. Adults use a variety of power structures to define young people's worlds and spatial practices (Hall, 2020b; Jeffrey, 2012; Skelton, 2010; Valentine, 2003; Wood, 2016). These power structures are built into the physical environment and are used to regulate bodies and performance (Schmidt, 2020). For example, age restrictions on when someone

can get their driver's license have the power to restrict the mobility of young people.

Although mobility is not necessarily a requirement in the transition towards adulthood, it does encourage separation, self-reliance, and self-responsibility that lead to further freedom and independence (Waters, 2017).

More often than not adults structure situations in which children are not empowered to participate in political action in any meaningful way (Börner, et al., 2020; Sapiro, 2004, as cited in Hung, 2011; Kallio, 2007). This marginalizes children and youth from contributing to the public and political sphere. Not only does this create a distinctive divide between adults and children, but it also further reinforces the hierarchy between children and adults which compel children to remain dependent on adults.

The following two sections break down the discourses of children and youth. In doing so, each section demonstrates the power structures occurring between adults and children. In many cases, children are viewed as incompetent social and political actors who are unable to govern themselves and make thoughtful decisions and thereby need adult regulation. What the period of youth reveals is an unstable time in which young people are transitioning into adulthood. Youth disrupts the smooth transition of childhood to adulthood making it unclear when protecting the innocence of a child stops and preparing children for adulthood begins.

3.1.1 Children

The discourses on or about childhood have categorized children as being innocent and free from the responsibilities of adulthood (Hall, 2020a; 2020b; Moran, 2001; Skelton, 2010; Valentine, 2000; 2001; 2003). Childhood is often defined by the category of 0-18 years old (Valentine, 2003). This chronological age distinguishes children from

adults and “prescribes both discursive and activity spaces for them” (Krishnan, 2020; Valentine, 2003, p. 37) such as playgrounds and schools. More specifically, discourses of childhood have often been used to justify practices of imperial rule arguing that children are too undeveloped to govern themselves (Bosco, 2010; Krishnan, 2020). These discourses place children in spaces of dependency, in which children require protection and moral guidance.

One of the most obvious spaces which construct and reinforce the discourses of childhood are schools. Schools are socio-politically constructed and governed by adults, who include, the government, teachers, and principals through the use of legally binding curricula (Bain & Podmore, 2020; Barker, et al., 2010; Taines, 2014; Valentine, 2001). Since children are frequently seen as incompetent, irresponsible, impressionable, and unreliable (Collins, 2007; Hall, 2020a; Kallio, 2007; Krishnan, 2020; Moran, 2001; Newman, et al., 2006; Skelton, 2010), schools have been used as a place to not only contain and protect children from the adult world, but to also instill moral codes that would ultimately construct and shape the identities of children (Dunlop, et al., 2020; Hall, 2020b). Thus, demonstrating that adults have and remain to define and construct the discourses of childhood.

The idea of viewing children as incompetent social actors has repressed children from participating in the socio-political sphere. In many ways it can be argued that the role of children can be viewed as interchangeable with the role of women, in that as members of families and society women and children have often been regarded as ‘other’ (Kallio, 2007; Krishnan, 2020). In other words, both women and children are traditionally perceived as being disempowered and oppressed within most societies, in comparison to

men and adults. Rather than looked at as social agents, women and children are often viewed as victims. More specifically, women and children are often associated with being passive and emotional, and therefore incapable of fully participating in society (Evans, 2006; Hoefler & Hoefler, 2017; Rose, 1993, Seidler, 1995 as cited in Hubbard, 2000; Schmidt, 2020; Newman, et al., 2006). Yet, unlike women, the position of children within society cannot be improved by granting them the same political rights that adults have. Using tactics such as reconsidering and adjusting legal minimum age limits or creating organizations such as Youth Parliaments (see Skelton, 2010) allows children to believe they are participating in the political sphere. However, Dunlop, et al (2020), Hall (2020a), and Kallio (2007) argue that these tactics do not provide children with any sort of empowerment as these rights are still regulated and assigned by adults. This dismisses children from being viewed as political actors as they are seen as docile bodies incapable of participating in formal policy-making.

Although neglected in political engagement (Sapiro, 2004, as cited in Hung, 2011; Kallio, 2007; Schroeder, 2012; Skelton, 2010), children and youth are often used by adults as political tools to reproduce and reinforce the hierarchal relationship between children and adults (Börner, et al., 2020; Valentine, 2000). Some of the most transparent examples are illustrated through the use of legal minimum age requirements. For instance, the age at which a person can legally obtain a full-time job creates a financial divide making children and young people fully dependent on adults. A consequence of this dependency is that children and youth are seen as inept and unfit to hold full citizenship (Bosco, 2010; Kallio, 2007; Valentine, 2003; Wood, 2016), thus reinforcing the power structures between children and adults.

While legal minimum age demonstrates a clear hierarchical divide between children and adults, childhood politics are much more multifaceted. Rather than merely being the subject of laws and regulation, children and youth are, and have always been, at risk in political and territorial conflicts (Skelton, 2010). In particular, adults have used children and young people as justifications to push forward various social and political agendas. Despite being the centre of political and territorial conflicts, children and young people remain silenced and uninvolved within the political sphere.

The case of *Chamberlain v. Surrey School District No. 36* (see Collins, 2006) is a prime example of how political and territorial conflict can be seen as child- and youth-centred. This case was brought to the Supreme Court of Canada and focused on the controversy surrounding the religiously motivated refusal of approving three books that portray families with same-sex parents. On the one side, conservative religious groups claimed that the issue of homosexuality was inappropriate for youth and children. They argued that incorporating these books in public education was an infringement on the rights of religious parents in guiding their child's upbringing (Collins, 2006). Alternatively, progressive stakeholders maintained that different family models should not be excluded from the public based on religious beliefs. They argued that eliminating discussions surrounding homosexuality breached the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (1982) and denied the rights of all citizens to partake democratically in the education of their children (as cited in Collins, 2006). While the conservative religious groups and the progressive stakeholders had polarizing opinions, the commonality between the two groups was centering their arguments around children and parental

rights. Although being the centre of this debate, input from children and youth were not considered (Collins & Coleman, 2008).

Despite legal and social regulations and practices, the transition between childhood and adulthood has become more unclear, as what was once seen as a linear pathway from childhood to adulthood has become more complex. Traditionally, an indicator of adulthood was paid employment where children not only could renegotiate their identity and gain independence, but also had the capacity to adequately support a family (Krishnan, 2020; Valentine, 2000). More recently, scholars have argued that the transition out of childhood towards adulthood has become more complicated due to structural transformations (Jeffrey, 2012; Krishnan, 2020; Moran, 2001). In particular, the increase in children and youth pursuing higher education (see Butler & Hamnett, 2007; Holloway, et al., 2011; Holt, 2009; Valentine, 2003) has consequently extended the period of parental dependency (Valentine, 2003) while simultaneously delaying the start of families (Krishnan, 2020).

The transitions from school to work, marriage and leaving home, and economic independence are no longer “chronologically predictable rights of passage from youth to adulthood” (Holt, 2009, p. 318; Valentine, 2000; 2003). For example, it is now more common to see children and young people having sex much earlier with the possibility of teenage pregnancy (see Thomas, 2004) while concurrently being dependent on their parents to provide emotional security, money, food, and clothing (Valentine, 2000). As a result, the distinction between childhood and adulthood is further complicated as the responsibilities attached to sexual relationships and parenthood are now extended to those categorized as children. Although it has been argued that transitioning from school to the

workforce often marks the entry to adulthood, the complexity of the transition has been unclear and is linked to sites of stress and tension in the lives of young people (Krishan, 2020).

3.1.2 Youth

From a legal standpoint, children and youth are often categorized as a homogenized group, as they both typically fall under the regulations, processes, and practices of adult discourses (Schmidt, 2020; Wood, 2016). Despite these rules and regulations, the category of youth can greatly differ from the discourses surrounding children. Where children are seen as pure and innocent (Hall, 2020a; 2020b; 2020c; Moran, 2001; Schroeder, 2012), youth are often perceived as troubling, rebellious, and problematic (Börner, et al., 2020; Evans, 2006; Holt, 2009; Hyams, 2000; Valentine, 2003). Rather than solely being viewed as individuals at risk and in need of protection, youth are simultaneously and paradoxically seen as a risk to society (Holt, 2009).

Unlike the categories of children and adults, the classification of youth has no definitive timeframe, creating a period that “bears no relation to diverse legal classifications of adulthood” (Valentine, 2003, p. 38). It is the stage in life where individuals are viewed as no longer a child but not yet fully an adult (Holt, 2009; Moran, 2001; Valentine, 2003; Wood, 2016). This socially constructed in-between stage of childhood and adulthood is typically attributed to when a person begins to gain independence and the ability to (re)negotiate their identity (Hung, 2011; Hyams, 2000; Valentine, 2000; 2003; 2008; Wood, 2016). As children enter the stages of youth, they begin to synthesize and experiment with various social roles which expands their fields of meaning (Schmidt, 2020).

What makes the period of youth so complex is that youth is sociospatially specific and can generate different meanings in varying times and spaces (Holt, 2009). This complexity makes the pathways to adulthood more difficult to pinpoint. Although still subject to high levels of adult regulation (Bay-Cheng, 2003; Wood, 2016) such as curfews and access to certain public spaces like bars and clubs, multiple scholars argue that young people can negotiate adult rules and develop their own (Aitken, 2001; 2019; Bain & Podmore, 2021; Barker, et al., 2010; Kirshner, 2015; Taines, 2014; Wood, 2016).

Young people are a distinct social group with a unique culture and experience. They occupy a liminal space of uncertainty where they are capable of making everyday life decisions (Börner, et al. 2020; Hung, 2011; Kallio, 2007; Skelton, 2010), but are seen by adults as too ‘young’ and ‘immature’ to hold full citizenship and participate in the political sphere (Bosco, 2010; Kallio, 2007; Valentine, 2003; Wood, 2016). As young people straddle the line between childhood and adulthood, discourses surrounding youth become more complex. More specifically, during a time of self-discovery and individualization, young people have become both “innocent and guilty – the problem and the panacea” (Alexander, 2009, as cited in Jeffrey, 2012, p. 247).

Youth is considered a time of substantial emotional and behavioural turmoil in which young people struggle with hormonal and pubertal changes and identity concerns (Bay-Cheng, 2003; Hyams, 2000; Rattansi & Phoenix, as cited in Valentine, 2003). This has created contrasting discourses of youth. On the one hand, as children get older and transition into the stages of youth, they are given more opportunities to increase their independence and exercise their agency. In doing so, they become confronted and exposed to many of the same risks and choices as adults. In particular, youth become

subjected to consumerism, fashion, leisure activities, and the media, where young people are faced with choosing between different lifestyles, subcultures, and identities (Valentine, 2000; 2003). In this regard, young people are forced to learn how to guide themselves and make rational and informed decisions as well as judge and negotiate risks and relations (Hall, 2020c; Kallio, 2007; Valentine, 2003). Young people have to manage the tensions between conformity and individuality as they are put at an increased risk of “guilt or blame if they end up on the margins of society as a result of their own choices” (Valentine, 2000, p. 265; 2003).

On the other hand, this transitional stage involving ‘raging hormones’ and ‘identity crises’ has generated discourses of youth as being chaotic, problematic, and undisciplined individuals who have the potential to disrupt social order, particularly in public spaces (Aitken, 2019; Börner, et al., 2020; Holt, 2009; Hyams, 2000; Valentine, 2003). For instance, Panelli’s, et al. (2002) research revealed that young people were stigmatized as being disorderly, drunk, and in need of adult supervision while ‘hanging out’ in public spaces (as cited in Wood, 2016). This study reinforces the hierarchal relationship between young people and adults, suggesting that young people require adult supervision. This justifies the need for continued control, regulation, and surveillance that restrict and manipulate young people’s experiences of space (Gagen, 2015; Wood, 2016).

While youth are still considered to be less competent, less responsible and less mature than adults (Valentine, 2003), Skelton (2010) argues that in some respects, young people are seen as “competent, responsible and liable” (p. 145). These contradictory discourses are prominent in young people’s political rights versus their assumed legal responsibilities (Skelton, 2010). Often in cases regarding criminal responsibility, youth

are frequently argued to be competent agents aware of their actions, and therefore liable for them (Skelton, 2010). At the same time, in many cases, youth seen as needing to be held accountable during criminal proceedings are also subject to legal age restrictions such as the ability to consent to sex, drive a car, vote, join the army, and leave compulsory education. Besides simply pursuing a set of behaviours that encompass what it means to be a good citizen, Staeheli & Hammett (2010) argue that states “seek to shape and maintain a political community capable of being governed” (p. 669, as cited in Gagen, 2015). As a result, this demonstrates the contradictory position of protecting the innocence of a child and preparing them for the responsibilities of adulthood as it reveals the complexities of defining children and youth and the underlying power relations that contribute to the construction of hegemonic discourses of children and youth.

What was once seen as a linear pathway from childhood to adulthood has become distorted by the youth's uncertain nature. This transitional period has increased fears about the end of innocence (Moran, 2001) and created structural changes and spatial exclusions that ultimately extended the child and youth dependency. This uncertain period shows that there are no obvious answers as to when one stops protecting a child's innocence to allow them to transition into adulthood. Given that there is no clear pathway from childhood to adulthood, I stress the importance of incorporating the voices of children and young people, alongside adults, within the public and political sphere. I argue that a way towards understanding children and youth is through their lived experiences as “...the becomings of children are not fully knowable by adults” (Jones, 2008, p. 195, as cited in Bosco, 2010).

3.2 Children and Youth Agency: Everyday Life Politics

Societal rules and regulations are often founded upon adult constructions of normality and difference, which structure young people's relationships (Gagen, 2015; Henry, 2020; Holloway, et al., 2010; Valentine, 2000). Most notably, these rules are commonly based upon the nonconformity to adult imposed rules (Bain & Podmore, 2020; James, 1993, as cited in Valentine, 2000). These rules and regulations maintain societal relations that are continually inscribed and reproduced through children's everyday actions (Hall, 2020c). Although these rules are used to instill and reinforce conformity and proper forms of behaviour, scholars have argued individualization as being a challenging factor (Newman, et al., 2006; Valentine, 2000). Studies have revealed the complexity of the manifold relations in the lives of young people (Krishnan, 2020). Factors including, but not limited to, poverty, disability, sexuality, and gender can alter what is considered to be a 'normal' childhood (Valentine, 2000; 2003) further demonstrating the individuality and differences each child and young person can possess. Thus, many scholars contend that children and youth cannot be theorized as a mass, but instead should be viewed as individuals with varying and unique experiences of childhood (Börner, et al., 2020; Holt, 2009; Newman, et al., 2006; Schroeder, 2012; Valentine, 2003).

Children are far more independent and capable than adults typically admit (Kraftl, 2013). Multiple studies within geographies of children and youth have revealed that children and young people have agency (see Aitken, 2001; 2019; Bain & Podmore, 2020; Barker, et al., 2010; Börner, et al., 2020; Bosco, 2010; Hall, 2020a; Holt, 2009; Hung, 2011; Jeffrey, 2012; Kallio, 2007; Kirshner, 2015; Kraftl, 2013; Krishnan, 2020; Skelton, 2010; Taines, 2014; Valentine, 2008; Wood, 2016). Börner et al. (2020), Bosco (2010),

Holt (2009), Kallio (2007) and Skelton (2010) argue that children and youth are capable of being social and cultural agents “who often take on adult responsibilities while mixing them with more ‘child-like’ activities such as playing” (Bosco, 2010, p. 385). Rather than engaging in macro-politics that include formal political participation, children and youth make decisions and participate in everyday life (Böner et al., 2020; Hall, 2020c; Hung, 2011; Kallio, 2007; Skelton, 2010). More specifically, Kallio (2007) states that children and youth's political engagement is grounded on their autonomy over their bodies. This bodily autonomy allows children and youth to use various tactics to further their objectives, and in doing so can sometimes even disrupt the dominant order (de Certeau, 1984, as cited in Kallio, 2007). For example, children and youth can determine whether they use the toilet or wet their pants, stand still or run away, eat or refuse to eat, therefore demonstrating their ability to negotiate and resist everyday activities using their bodies.

Negotiation and resistance practices are part of what Bosco (2010), Hall (2020c), and Kallio (2007) refer to as everyday life politics. Everyday life politics allows us to view children as political agents that can rework “power relations in many of the same ways (traditional-adult) activists do” (Bosco, 2010, p. 382). The ways children and youth perform their identities can serve as a political act and demonstrate their political awareness (Nogué & Vicente, 2004, as cited in Kallio, 2007).

Political awareness increases as children and young people engage in new ways of viewing their socio-political environments. Instead of strictly conforming to dominant discourses that are frequently instilled in children and youth, everyday life politics have provided children and youth the opportunity to see beyond dominant discourses (Hung, 2011). The everyday life politics of children and youth greatly shape the lives of children

through their interactions and shared experiences (Hung, 2011; Newman, et al., 2006; Valentine, 2003). Given that children and youth spend the majority of their time in school, everyday life politics predominantly occur in schools. Although schools have mainly been understood in passive ways; “as the container, the backdrop, an almost immutable externality” (Kenway & Youdell, 2011, p. 133), school spaces are much more complicated. Instead of being seen as solely a site of public service, school spaces are also viewed as a passageway for processes of social relations, actions, and negotiations (Bain & Podmore, 2020; Basu, 2011; Collins & Coleman, 2008; Hall, 2020b; 2020c; Schmidt, 2020).

Spaces such as school playgrounds (see Newman, et al., 2006), classrooms, and toilets (see Elliott, 2016; Hall, 2020c) which are typically regulated by adults, are also spaces in which children and youth negotiate their agency (Hall, 2020c; Wood, 2016). Through children’s activities, including play, children and youth are continually experimenting with cultural, political, and social relations (Bosco, 2010; Hall, 2020c; Krishnan, 2020). For example, Newman’s et al. (2006) study on primary children during playtime reveals the construction and reinforcement of gender on the playground. Newman et al., (2006) discovered a greater level of tolerance for boys who adopted traditional masculine roles. One male participant in particular, was the subject of homophobic bullying and victim-blaming by both classmates and teachers because he did not fit the normative role of hegemonic masculinity (Newman, et al., 2006). He was isolated by his male peers on the playground because he hated football and other similar games the boys played. Consequently, in his final year at the school, this participant rebelled and resisted the school and local authorities by writing explicit language on

bathroom walls directed towards the teacher who failed to protect him (Newman, et al., 2006). This demonstrates this participant's agency to not only perform an alternate identity to that of hegemonic masculinity but also reveals his ability to resist and challenge authority while claiming space for himself.

According to Börner, et al. (2020) and Valentine (2003), providing children and youth choices and allowing them to exercise their ability to judge and negotiate risk are seen as a necessity in shaping their identity. Exercising agency is valuable, especially in young individuals, as it not only teaches them how to mark themselves (Valentine, 2001), but implies that a person or a group of people are not simply engulfed by the social world, but can act upon and change it (Börner, et al., 2020; Kirshner, 2015). Since children and youth spend the majority of their time in schools, these acts of agency are typically learned and developed through both formal and informal education in schools. To a certain degree, education provides the foundation for self-discovery and reflection (Börner, et al., 2020; Beck, 1992, as cited in Valentine, 2003; Dunlop, et al., 2020). This can illuminate young people's ideas about place, power, and identity, allowing children and youth to imagine alternative solutions and strategies to overcome injustices.

3.3 Adult vs. Children: The Sex Education Curriculum

Ever since schools were created, decisions about formal education have been decided and implemented by adults (Baker, et al., 2010; Collins, 2006; Henry, 2020; Hyams, 2000; Schroeder, 2012; Schmidt, 2020; Taines, 2014; Valentine, 2001). While debating the sex education curriculum based on morals and expectations surrounding the discourses of children and education, what adults have failed to consider were the socio-spatial experiences of children and youth. This is problematic because ignoring the

experiences of children and young people neglects one of the largest contributors in the production of the social landscape of schools (Schmidt, 2020). Therefore, Holloway et al. (2010), Holloway, et al., (2011), and Newman et al. (2006) state that focusing on children's experiences and allowing them to represent themselves not only provides insights into how meanings are constructed, understood, and shared within school spaces, but also exposes the structural constraints under which children live.

The conflict that resides over the curriculum content is “almost exclusively [created] by adults,” and more than often the curriculum disregards the voices of the students and young individuals who are the recipients of these discourses (Collins & Coleman, 2008, p. 289; Schmidt, 2020). This is most prevalent when it comes to the sex education curriculum. One side of the argument calls for a more progressive sex education curriculum allowing for more inclusive material that is not encased in religious doctrine and does not solely reflect parental thinking or local biases (Collins, 2006). Progressive advocates argue that it is both socially and legally necessary to protect children from “collective and governmental coercion” (Collins, 2007, p. 195) as a progressive sex education curriculum provides individuals more freedom to make independent choices about their lifestyles and identities (Thomas & Aggleton, 2016).

The other side of the argument is typically influenced by conservative religious groups who argue that children and youth needed to be sheltered and protected from the deviant and corruptive nature of sexuality. The need to protect children and youth's innocence became more prevalent when research conducted by Hall (1905) conceived adolescence as hypersexual beings (as cited in Bay-Cheng, 2003; as cited in Hyams, 2000). Rather than providing information that teaches and promotes sexual agency, sex

education curriculums convey sexual information and facts that produce a specific kind of sexual individual and experience, which in all likelihood is the innocent asexual child (Bay-Cheng, 2003). Instead of liberating individuals to explore on their own, conservative religious groups argue for schools to enforce 'proper' age-appropriate sexual behaviour (Hall, 2020c; Zimmerman, 2015).

Despite both sides having opposing viewpoints, some commonalities reside in both arguments. First, both arguments are largely centred around protecting children and youth. Secondly, the conflict over the sex education curricula is both adult controlled and underpinned by notions of parental rights. Whilst I do not dispute that the parents have their children's best interests in mind, I argue that there is a disconnect between what adults want their children to learn versus actually meeting the needs and wants of their kids. Without listening to the socio-spatial experiences of children it becomes near impossible to fully know and understand what children desire to learn. Therefore, to bridge the gap between adults, children, and youth, I contend that it is essential to provide students, alongside adults, with a voice to participate in the political and pedagogical process of creating curricula.

Discourses of 'childhood innocence' overlap with discourses of 'adolescent sexuality' (Hall, 2020b; Moran, 2001), thus making it difficult to pinpoint when protecting the innocence of a child should stop and the shift towards preparing them for adulthood should begin. While parents struggle with the kinds of sexuality-related information is deemed developmentally appropriate for their children (McKay, et al., 2014), children and youth have voiced their opinion and used their agency to argue in favour of a more progressive curriculum (see Formby, 2011; Hoefler & Hoefler, 2017;

Lapointe, 2014). The arguments for a more progressive sex education curriculum arise from the personal experiences of children and youth. Córdova, Coleman-Minahan, Bull, & Borrayo (2019) found that “adolescence between 13 and 14 years of age disproportionately engage in sexual risk behaviors, including condomless sex, multiple sex partners, and using alcohol or drugs prior to sexual intercourse” (p. 571). Thus, it is unsurprising that youth is one of the groups most at risk of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and unintended pregnancy (Córdova, et al., 2019; Formby, 2011). To strictly view children and youth as innocent, asexual beings is irresponsible as it subjects young people to potential sexual harassment, assault, and preventable diseases and pregnancy.

What is most notable about children and youth participating in risky sexual behaviours is that this behaviour is due to a lack of sexual agency and the inability to communicate and negotiate sexual development and desires (Bay-Cheng, 2003; Formby, 2011; Thomas, 2004). Formby’s (2011) study discovered that participants lacked confidence and were unable to communicate about safer sex without feeling embarrassed. One participant expressed that this embarrassment came from a lack of knowledge of not knowing how to properly use a condom, while others suggested that the embarrassment stemmed from “not wanting to appear to be ‘planning’ for sex (which might damage their reputation)” (Formby, 2011, p. 260-261).

Another study conducted by Hoefler & Hoefler (2017) found that a large portion of their participants possessed a strong curiosity concerning sex. More than half of the participants often went searching for answers on often less reliable sources like the Internet or their friends (Hoefler & Hoefler, 2017). Due to the lack of information taught in schools and the unreliability of other sources, almost all of their participants felt

unprepared to both engage in sexual behaviour and protect themselves in sexual situations (Hoefler & Hoefler, 2017).

The desire for inclusive sex education curricula demonstrates the potential for resistance against adult-controlled regulations. Barker's, et al. (2010) argue that adult discourses and regulations are not passively accepted by children because children are social actors that can employ various tactics and strategies that dispute and challenge these adult spatial hegemonies. Although children and youth have little to no power when it comes to designing and building the curriculum, students have demonstrated their ability to act upon their agency within schools in other ways. A prime example is through the work of Gay Straight Alliances (GSAs) across multiple schools (see Bain & Podmore, 2020; Elliott, 2016; Lapointe, 2014; Schroeder, 2012).

It is no secret that queer experiences are often excluded and suppressed within school curricula (Formby, 2011; Schroeder, 2012). A solution to this was through the creation of GSAs. GSAs provide a potentially effective way of offering education on LGBTQ+ matters while tackling homophobia among straight students (Lee, 2002, as cited in Lapointe, 2014). Not only does this provide the opportunity to educate their peers through personal experiences, but GSAs also provide support and a safe space for the school's LGBTQ+ community and their straight allies to freely express themselves and engage in advocacy work (Bain & Podmore, 2020; Elliott, 2016; Lapointe, 2014; Schroeder, 2012). Students who formed and are a part of the GSA have found ways to incorporate queer perspectives and teachings despite it being excluded or suppressed in formal curricula.

The power adults have within school institutions is evident when it comes to GSAs. On the one hand, the presence of a GSA is seen as an indicator of the level of tolerance and/or acceptance amongst faculty and students (Bain & Podmore, 2020; Elliott, 2016). On the other hand, it demonstrates the power that adults hold whereby students need the support of adults to effectively meet the challenges and constraints faced in doing activist work within the GSA (Bain & Podmore, 2020; Elliott, 2016; Schroeder, 2012). Although GSAs provide a good opportunity to dismantle homophobia and learn about queer experiences, Woolley (2012) argues that it is also problematic that schools use peer education to combat homophobic behaviours and attitudes (as cited in Elliott, 2016). I argue that rather than using students through the GSA as ‘teaching experts’, it would be more beneficial for students to share their experiences with policy-makers and together implement the queer experience within formal curricula.

Societies express, contest, and transform through the processes of education (Collins & Coleman, 2008). These processes provide room for individuals to protest against what is being taught. Therefore, to minimize the potential protests Thomas & Aggleton (2016) suggest that when developing a curriculum, the developers should understand “the kinds of behaviours young people actually engage in at different ages, the environmental and cognitive factors that affect these behaviours and the best ways of addressing these factors within the local context” (p. 19). They argue that involving young people in the development of curricula will increase its effectiveness of student interest and societal development (Thomas & Aggleton, 2016). By including students in the decision-making process not only empowers students, but also acts as a tool to get students to care about their education (Hall, 2020a; Taines, 2014).

Through adult-controlled societal rules and regulations, children and youth experience sociospatial restrictions particularly within the political and public sphere. These restrictions neglect the experiences of children and youth which creates a disconnect between the wants and needs of children and adults. Thus, I argue that a shift towards the inclusion of child and youth participation, alongside adults, within the public and political sphere is imperative. Although fear stemming from adults due to loss of control, corruption, and chaos are present, providing children the opportunity to exercise their agency and be social and political actors is a step towards preparing children for adulthood. As the boundaries of childhood and adulthood become more complex and unclear, I contend that the only way to truly meet the needs of children and youth is by allowing their voices and experiences to be present within public and political spaces.

CHAPTER 4

Youth activism: Blurring the political lines between public and private

Political geographies often neglect children and youth because childhood is not considered unambiguously political (Dunlop, et al., 2020; Bosco, 2010; Hall, 2020a; Kallio, 2008; Skelton, 2010). In many cases, a child's maturity level has been used to dismiss their contributions to the public sphere. More specifically, because children are not fully mentally and physically developed, they are not viewed as full citizens and therefore are dismissed and excluded from full participation in public discourse, the public sphere, and public places (Aitkens, 2001). Although multiple scholars contend that youth can be effective agents of change (Aitken, 2001; 2019; Bain & Podmore, 2020; Barker, et al., 2010; Börner, et al., 2020; Kirshner, 2015; Skelton, 2010; Taines, 2014), powerful stakeholders tend to either romanticize and ignore students' political involvement or fear it (Aitkens, 2019; Skelton, 2010). This fear stems from the threat of youth activism, as they threaten the political status quo whose power resides in the hands of affluent constituencies (Aitken, 2019; Collins, 2007). This fear is rooted in the underlying social assumption that "children out on the street can be "dangerous" ...[as] the idea that... public spaces are adult spaces – devoid of the innocence and protection associated with childhood" (Börner, et al., 2020; Krishnan, 2020, p. 169; Wood, 2016).

Spaces are encoded with preconceived notions which can affect not only the spatial practices that reproduce and transform these spaces, but also determines who is allowed within these spaces (Reh, Rabenstein & Fritzsche, 2011). In the case of children and youth, their spatial mobility is shaped and restrained by national and societal discourses (Waters, 2017) implemented by adults. With little to no space in the political

arenas, it makes it harder for young people to see themselves as part of the solution for change and intergenerational social justice (Börner, et al., 2020).

Despite these adult-controlled discourses, the materiality of the space makes it possible to be used as a medium for change and disruption (Holt, 2009). People's actions cannot be condensed to products of dominant power and discourses (Börner, et al., 2020; Barren, 2012, 2013, as cited in Cheng, 2016). As children and youth transition towards adulthood, they become more aware of their spatial relations and can perceive the role of the environment in the shaping of their identity (Hung, 2011). With this understanding, youth encompass the ability to conceptualize inequalities within space and work together to create change (Börner, et al., 2020).

In recent years we are seeing more frequently, stories of children and youth protesting against injustices. Some examples of these protests include the March for Our Lives protest in the United States (see March For Our Lives, 2021), March for Our Education in Ontario, Canada (see March for Our Education, 2018; Teotonio, 2018; Thompson, 2018), the Youth Strike 4 Climate protest which began in Sweden and became a global climate strike movement called #FridaysforFuture (see Fridays For Future, 2021) and most recently the Black Lives Matter Protests (see Black Lives Matter, 2021) occurring on an international scale. What is most notable within all these protests is that children and youth are no longer strictly abiding by adult implemented rhetoric but instead are entering public spaces like the streets, and expressing agency through their own resourcefulness (Cheng, 2016; Jeffrey, 2012). Children and youth are blurring the political lines between public and private spheres.

As children and young people become introduced to a world beyond the private spaces of school and home, their analytical lens expands and informs their strategies for change. Young people learn how to situate themselves as actors in the world. More specifically, youth and children develop a critical awareness in which “the process of coming into consciousness involves conflicting emotions and a recognition of the social and spatial forces acting on their personal biographies and their larger community” (Hung, 2011, p. 589). Even though it was once easy to dismiss children and youth from participating in the political sphere due to their perceived incompetence, young people have found a way in which they can infiltrate themselves into the public sphere to advocate for change.

According to Bain & Podmore (2020), Cheng (2016), Skelton (2010), and Wood (2016) “there is significant evidence that young people are politically active, show competence in understanding political processes and take political action” (Skelton, 2010, p. 146). Thus, I argue that an investigation into young people’s experiences and diverse engagement with morality and ethics has the potential to create new meanings of politics and demonstrates other ways of conceptualizing political geographies by allowing us to view young people as activists. This chapter will focus on activism and young people as political actors. First, I start by examining youth as political actors. In doing so, I examine Hung’s (2011) concept on ‘geographical imagination’. I maintain that exploring young people as political actors provides a unique perspective into political geographies as they occupy a space in which adults and children cannot fully comprehend. Secondly, I will explore current literature on youth activism. In doing so, I examine how young people are able to use their agency to resist, negotiate, and make social and political changes. Lastly,

I focus on student-led protests. I start by discussing the eruption of student-led protests in the 1960s which provided the foundation for current protests. I then use the 2018 Ontario student-led protest of the repeal of the 1998 sex education curriculum as an example to demonstrate the power of youth agency and political involvement.

4.1 Young People as Political Actors: Geographical Imagination

Multiple scholars have argued that young people are actively engaged political actors and subjects (see Aitken, 2001; 2019; Bain & Podmore, 2020; Barker, et al., 2010; Börner, et al., 2020; Bosco, 2010; Cheng, 2016; Kirshner, 2015; Skelton, 2010; Taines, 2014; Wood, 2016). A large proponent of youth agency and youth political engagement is what Hung (2011) refers to as ‘geographical imagination’. Hung (2011) defines geographical imagination as “how one perceives the role of the environment in shaping one’s biography and one’s awareness of the forces that produce different places” (p. 580). In other words, geographical imagination is the knowledge, experience, and meaning an individual accredits to a place, alongside the awareness of the social, political, and economic powers that help produce and maintain these spaces (Hung, 2011).

Geographical imagination “emerges through participation and shared struggle, through the acceptance of uncomfortable realities, and with the understanding that, in order to create change, they must understand and extend the geographical imagination of others” (Hung, 2011, p. 589). To do so, one must consider the everyday agency of others and their everyday lived experiences with their local environments (Börner, et al., 2020). As young people engage with their community and enter spaces beyond the private spaces of the home and school, they are faced with a proliferation of choices making youth increasingly reflexive (Valentine, 2003). Even though youth culture and activity

typically reflect the local, regional, and national political, social, and cultural situations (Bosco, 2010), Jeffrey (2012) contends that due to the processes of expanding one's geographical imagination youth are also often reimagining these places. Within both planned and unplanned spaces, social and cultural differences are explored, negotiated, and compromised in numerous ways which fosters acts of tolerance, mutual respect, and dignity (Basu, 2011; Valentine, 2003).

Geographical imagination and its link between biography and geography enable youth to visualize how events and decisions occurring beyond their immediate scope can have meaningful impacts on their daily life (Hung, 2011). More specifically, youth can see beyond what was made to appear natural and permanent (Katz, 2004, as cited in Hung, 2011), and expose and change the injustices within their communities (Börner, et al., 2020; Cheng, 2016; Hung, 2011; Jeffrey, 2012). Although young people can often be dismissed under their association with children, young people occupy a unique space in the timeline from childhood to adulthood in which they experience the hybridity of both child/youth and adult worlds (Hung, 2011; Kallio, 2007; Skelton, 2010; Tupuloa, 2004, as cited in Wood, 2016). Young people are able to weave through these two spaces where they juggle multiple identities and socio-political contexts. In this regard, young people are able to “recognise the powerlessness of others [children and minorities] and also develop effective tactics that match the context in ways that adults cannot” (Wood, 2016, p. 495). While this may make it seem as though the lives of young people are overwhelming and complicated, it also highlights the agency that youth possess, as teenagers and young adults inhabit a space in which adults and children are unable to

comprehend fully. The next section further explores the political potential of young people through an analysis of youth activism.

4.2 Youth Activism

Alongside health care systems, housing, environmental infrastructure, and social justice initiatives, education systems contribute to the social reproduction of dominant discourses (Bain & Podmore, 2020; Dunlop, et al., 2020; Hall, 2020a; Henry, 2020; Katz, 2008, as cited in Nguyen, et al., 2017; Schmidt, 2020). Although schools are often used to marketize dominant discourses and disempower marginalized groups (Nguyen, et al., 2017) they are also sites of resistance and negotiation. Bain & Podmore (2020), Basu (2013), and Hall (2020c) agree arguing that spaces of education are not neutral, but rather can be seen as sites of contestation, resistance, and possibility.

Resistance and the possibility for change within educational spaces have been evident in the last decade, as there has been a reduction in the number of youth political groups and emergence in youth protest movement groups (Aitken, 2019). Youth activism emerges from the idea that “urban school systems are socially unequal and change occurs through political force” (Basu, 2013; Kirshner, 2015; Taines, 2014, p. 155). These social movements are influenced by student experiences. Their “stories, frustrations, and their dreams” (Kirshner, 2015, p. 77) guide students’ reform agendas and place demands of change on school officials (Taines, 2014). To achieve such a goal, those protesting have to “dig out a whole mass of discourse that has accumulated under one’s feet... [and] determin[e] the system of discourse on which we are still living ... we question the words that are still echoing in our ears, which become confused with those we are trying to formulate” (Sheridan, 1980, p. 196, as cited in Thiele, 1990). Thus, young people are

involved at every level throughout the campaign, from identifying and understanding the problem; formulating strategies and tactics to achieve their goal; recruiting peers to support their cause; collecting data, to achieving their aim by speaking at public events, and communicating with media (Kirshner, 2015; Taines, 2014).

Youth activism is typically promoted outside of the institution and is frequently run by community-based organizations (Taines, 2014). The growth in technology and social media has transformed the core practices of social movements as organizations can reach a larger population to link geographically dispersed groups (Bain & Podmore, 2021; Jeffrey, 2012; Kirshner, 2015). Digital space has been used to build and maintain networks of friends and allow youth to participate in political activity on a global scale (Bain & Podmore, 2021; Krishnan, 2020; Valentine, 2008). As well, with the recent covid-19 pandemic, large amounts of social interaction have shifted towards an online community (Börner, et al., 2020). With the continuous emergence of technology, youth are now able to better build social capital by accessing various student movements on a global scale who have everyday struggles and common goals (Bain & Podmore, 2021; Kirshner, 2015).

Exercising agency is valuable especially in young individuals, as it not only teaches the youth how to mark oneself (Börner, et al., 2020; Valentine, 2001), but implies that a person, or a group of people, are not simply engulfed by the social world. Agency provides young people the ability to act upon and change their social, political, and cultural spheres (Kirshner, 2015). Though this may seem to cause division amongst individuals that encompass different identities, the students who organize and participate in the protests find common identity and shared beliefs to build social capital.

Bourdieu (1986) defines social capital as a network of people who share the same beliefs, values, and behaviours. It can be understood as how individuals are ingrained in social organizations that facilitate cooperation for mutual benefit (Krisotakis & Gamarnikow, 2004, Putnam, 1993, as cited in Córdova, et al., 2019). Through social capital, young people create a collective identity to negotiate and reclaim their space within the public sphere, challenging established political discourses and hierarchies (Bosco, 2010).

Young people can undergo hardships, rework structures, and resist oppression through building social capital and forming bonds with others (Jeffrey, 2012). Building social capital, relies on participating in a struggle that is not just your own. It is also important that you are also capable to struggle as ‘other’. More specifically, Thiele (1990) relays the importance of being able to associate yourself with being “a member of a group whose self-constitution is at hand” (p. 919). Thus, building friendships, trust, and mutual support is vital in building social capital as it not only provides a safe space to those most vulnerable, but also provides the opportunity to learn from one another, reinforces self-esteem, and provides opportunities to broaden their geographical imagination (Bain & Podmore, 2021; Börner, et al., 2020; Cheng, 2016; Córdova, et al., 2019; Hung, 2011).

Social and political movements help bring together various groups across geographical scales (Kirshner, 2015). Although Aitken (2019) states that many acts of youth activism demonstrate unsuccessful outcomes, most student-led protests have found widespread support. An example of this can be seen in the case of *Griffin v. County School of Prince Edward*. In April 1951 a student-led walkout occurred to protest the

segregation of whites and racialized people in public education, arguing that there were inadequate and unequal physical facilities (Griffin, 2014). Although the protest had an unsuccessful and detrimental outcome, such as schools for racialized people closing, this was not for lack of community support (see Griffin, 2014).

In more recent times, we can see student-led protests continuing to occur all over the world through March for Our Lives, Youth Strike 4 Climate, #FridaysforFuture, March for Our Education, and Black Lives Matter protests. This support is in part due to the social capital accumulated while organizing these social action projects as social movements build power (Kirshner, 2015). Alongside social capital, I contend that these protests reflect what Mouffe (2016), Pickett (1996), Tambakaki (2017), and Thiele (1990) refer to as ‘agonism’ where “conflict does not take the form of an ‘antagonism’ (struggle between enemies), but the form of an ‘agonism’ (struggle between adversaries)” (Mouffe, 2016, para. 8). In other words, agonism involves two opposing views that share a common allegiance based around the democratic principles of ‘liberty and equality for all,’ but disagree about their interpretation (Mouffe, 2016; Tambakaki, 2017). These agonistic expressions provide “openness by exposing and challenging the closures, normalizations, and exclusions generated by dominant practices, norms and institutions – the ways in which they silence and repress difference” (Tambakaki, 2017, p. 14). Since humanity and society create themselves socially, culturally, and historically through multiple systems of power as well as various political tactics and strategies, Thiele (1990) and Tambakaki (2017) contend that it is ever-changing.

Agonism challenges the focus on “mainstream liberal theory on institutional and rights-based accounts of politics” whereby political institutions tend to exclude politics

and identities that do not conform to dominant norms (Tambakaki, 2017, p. 15). To further expand, political struggle and political power are not strictly negative (Pickett, 1996; Thiele, 1990). Although it may often be perceived as ‘a struggle against’, it can also be interpreted as ‘a struggle for’ (Thiele, 1990). According to Foucault (1983) part of the human condition is to exist within multiple systems of power; but it is also the human potential to relentlessly resist its reach and to reposition the boundaries of power by challenging its authority (as cited in Thiele, 1990). Instead of a head-on potentially violent confrontation, Mouffe (2016), Pickett (1996), and Thiele (1990) argue that an agonistic model is most ideal.

The agonistic model does not aim to silence the political emotions of groups into the private sphere, but rather establishes a logical consensus. The goal of protests and activism is not to set attainable goals. Instead, it is to resist, confront, and challenge the current discourses that have caused individuals to struggle. Protests and activism are done to not only display the defining characteristics of the minority group but to also offers those who are in the minority a sliver of freedom and hope for social and political change through acts of resistance (Thiele, 1990).

Youth activism promotes a collective of students who assert their needs within a public space (Taines, 2014). Additionally, activism provides the opportunity for self-creation, where the claim for individuality and otherness is feasible (Thiele, 1990). Although a low success rate, these movements in the public sphere are not just about spatial justice but provide the opportunity to inform the public of student realities and struggles (Sack, 1999, as cited in Aitken, 2001). This includes engaging in cultural changes that transform the norms, beliefs, and values that support the acceptance of a

particular policy (Kirshner, 2015). This change goes beyond reflecting and learning about social and cultural contexts, but also requires the unlearning of pedagogical practices that reinforce systemic injustice (Dunlop, et al., 2020). Since students are the central purpose of schooling, it is argued that their voices and everyday experiences should be considered in school decision making (Dunlop, et al., 2020; Kirshner, 2015; Taines, 2014; Thomas & Aggleton, 2016). Thus, the next section further explores the emergence of student-led protests as well as provides an example through the March for Our Education protest.

4.3 Student-led Protests: March for Our Education

Student-led protests erupted in the sixties (Gibbons, Petty & Sydney, 2014; Glazer, 1967; Van Dyke, 1998). The majority of these protests occurred in American colleges and universities as students fought against racial discrimination, admission policies, curriculums, hiring practices, the war on poverty, and the war in Vietnam, creating a highly charged and explosive atmosphere (Gibbons, et al., 2014; Glazer, 1967). The emergence of protests in the 1960s came about as “old compromises ha[d]... suddenly seen a new light, as inadequate, immoral, hypocritical” (Glazer, 1967, p. 602). Through the use of marches, sit-ins, and strikes, student activists ensured that their voices were heard and changes were made. This was evident in the late 1960s when a series of protests brought dramatic changes to universities in the US. For example, at San Francisco State College there was a demand for the “admittance and enrollment of more students of colour, the hiring of more minority faculty members, and the creation of a School of Ethnic Studies” which was eventually achieved in 1969 (Gibbons, et al., 2014). The changes which had occurred in the late-1960s had demonstrated that student activism provides an opportunity for change.

Student-led protests contradict and disrupt the discourses, containment, and structure of the school. The purpose of these student protests is arguably more significant than a civil rights movement and a student movement, as it aimed to restructure social relations in multiple ways (Van Dyke, 1998). According to Glazer (1967)

“student protests represent a growing discontent with conditions of American life, despite the revolution and change... in race relations, in social legislation, in economic expansion, in the growth of educational and cultural institution... [and] all advanced societies, as they solve their most obvious problems, will have to deal with difficult problems of quality and meaning of life. Student protest is reminding us of all these problems, and of the greatest challenges society will have to face in the future” (p. 605).

In many ways, the student-led protests and the Movement in the 1960s paved the way for young people to fight for what they view as unjust. When children and youth participate in social and environmental change, it can have long-term benefits for political engagement, environmental awareness, and civic identity (Börner, et al., 2020; Hung, 2011). This is demonstrated in the March for Our Lives, Youth Strike 4 Climate, Black Lives Matter, and March for Our Education protests. Although not always successful, student-led protests provide a significant avenue for their voices to be heard.

Although protests and school walkouts have been occurring since before the modern civil rights movement (Griffin, 2014), school walkouts as a form of protest have increased in popularity over the last couple of years. Kirshner (2015) argues that these walkouts “symbolize the dual meaning of public schools for social justice movements” where “students walk out of schools to protest the failed promise of public education” (p. 135). The failed promises within the public education system are evident in the September 2018 student protest of the reinstatement of the 1998 Ontario sex-ed curriculum. Students argued that the 1998 sex-ed curriculum not only took away their

rights to proper education, but failed to protect students who are most vulnerable to bullying, harassment, and abuse (March for Our Education, 2018).

In July 2018, newly elected Premier, Doug Ford, announced that the government would be repealing the 2015 Human Development and Sexual Health curriculum and would temporarily replace it with the 1998 Growth and Development curriculum (The Canadian Press, 2018; Thompson, 2018). This sparked outrage amongst several organizations including The Canadian Civil Liberties Association (CCLA) and teachers, in particular, the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario (ETFO). Several students across Ontario argued that this step backward was not only “ideologically driven” and “pure politics” (The Canadian Press, 2018, para 15), but also extremely irresponsible as it leaves vulnerable students, such as LGBTQ+ students, at risk of (cyber)bullying, harassment, and abuse (Crawley, 2019; Rieti, 2018).

The decision to repeal the 2015 sex education curriculum was not only met by disappointed adults claiming that it promoted inclusion and aligned with modern-day issues, but it also encouraged students to take action to fight for their right to proper education. In July 2018, two grade 12 students founded a “non-profit advocacy group [March for Our Education] fighting to protect education for students across Canada” (March for Our Education, n.d.). On September 21, 2018, this student-run organization, March for Our Education, organized a student-led protest using social media to promote it (Teotonio, 2018). An estimated 38,000 students from approximately 75 schools across Ontario participated in a walkout protesting the reinstatement of the 1998 Growth and Development curriculum (Teotonio, 2018; Thompson, 2018) with approximately 35 of

these protestors marching Queen's Park to ensure their message was heard (Teotonio, 2018).

Chants including, "no ignorance, no hate, let's not go back to '98" and "we the students do not consent" (Teotonio, 2018; Thompson, 2018) filled the streets. The students argued that the 1998 curriculum was not only outdated but non-inclusive (Teotonio, 2018). One student stated that "[w]ith times changing and everything updating, we should also update our sex education instead of going back in time" (Thompson, 2018, para.3). Another student asserted, "[w]e find it appalling we don't have a curriculum that is up to date... for some vulnerable teens, these are issue of life or death" (Thompson, 2018, para. 9).

In addition to the student walk-out March for Our Education's issued a press release stating three prominent things. First, they stated "vulnerable students are filing lawsuits against the litigation-mired provincial government over their decision to prevent education on vital topics such as same-sex marriage, gender identity, consent, cyberbullying and sexting" (Hong, 2018, para. 3). In agreement with the CCLA and the ETFO, March for Our Education argued that repealing the 2015 sex-ed curriculum goes against the Ontario Human Rights Code as it "will not keep our students, our women, our LGBTQ+ community, or our Indigenous population safe" (March for Our Education, 2018). Secondly, their press release further demonstrated the support of other organizations as they state that they have "the full backing of teachers' unions and school staff associations, [as] teachers and principals at schools registered for the Walkout" (Hong, 2018, para. 4). Thirdly, March for Our Education asserts, "We the students will show our government that we do not consent to their actions" (Hong, 2018, para. 5),

therefore firmly positioning themselves against the Ontario government's standing.

Although this resistance may seem like an act of rebellion, these protests are in no way an attack on the institution, but rather the schools, notwithstanding its issues, are viewed as an essential part of a community (Kirshner, 2015).

Altering students' positions within the education system's stratified hegemonic structure is difficult and relies on the endorsement of teachers and administrators to build collective political power (Bain & Podmore, 2020; Elliott, 2016; Lapointe, 2014; Schroder, 2012; Taines, 2014) as the solutions to injustices tend to spread across national or regional sets of policies (Kirshner, 2015). The success of student-led movements greatly improves as social capital increases, which is why the protest organized by March for Our Education had such a successful turnout. With the backing of teachers' unions and school staff associations, March for Our Education was able to successfully reach out to 35,000 students, teachers, and staff across Ontario to support their cause, allowing for the voices of tens of thousands of individuals to be heard.

The March for Our Education student-led protest not only shows how much students care and value their education with one student stating that "...it [the protest] shows we value something over our learning" (Teotino, 2018, para. 6) but also reveals the abilities young people have to be political and social actors. Aitken (2019) states that with the rise of protests, it is difficult to denounce young individuals as ineffective agents of change. It is no secret that schools and curricula filled with adult-constructed discourses that attempt to civilize, control, and fabricate children into law-abiding citizens (Collins & Coleman, 2008; Henry, 2020; Holloway & Jöns, 2012; Mills & Kraftl, 2015; Valentine, 2001). However, these student-led protests contradict and disrupt these

discourses alongside the containment and structure of the school. Student-led protests such as March for Our Education have shown that young people and children are social actors who have the ability to employ various tactics and strategies that dispute and challenge adult spatial hegemonies.

With the emergence of social media and the digital space, youth activists have broadened their scope beyond their community. Young people are expanding their geographical imagination. In doing so, children and youth continue to build social capital that allows them to not only render strategic opportunities for themselves, but others that are struggling from the uncomfortable realities of their environments (Hung, 2011). By sharing the perspectives and struggles of youth and children, it offers an alternative insight as to how space and place are defined. The goal is not solely to oppose hegemonic discourses with the objective of procuring privilege, but to enable community and self-empowerment by optimizing a collective good.

Concluding Thoughts

Up to this point, I have reviewed three sub-disciplinary geographic literatures – geographies of education, geographies of sexualities, and geographies of children and youth with a focus on geographies of student activism – as well as relating this literature to the sex education curriculum. In doing so, I have proposed that although these dissimilar areas of work are relatively sequestered, they share a common connection. All of these bodies of work encompass child and youth agency, notwithstanding in different and multifaceted ways. I argue that by bringing these sub-disciplinary bodies of work

together, we can infiltrate a space that was once frequently ignored – children and youth in political geographies.

The spatiality of children and youths' everyday lives is highly reliant on adults and their practices. Children and young people have been frequently dismissed from participating in the public and political sphere due to the notions of being viewed as incompetent social and political actors who are unable to govern themselves and make thoughtful decisions. However, what I have demonstrated in this paper is that children and young people are politically active and exhibit competence in understanding political processes and take political action. Whether it is through everyday life politics or student-led protests, it is evident that children and youth have the ability to participate within the political sphere.

This research opens the door for more conversations to be had between children, youth, and adults. By allowing children and youth to participate in the public and political sphere alongside adults, it allows for a new perspective in which adults are not able to comprehend. For example, what was once thought of as a desexualized space, schools in fact have been proven to be highly sexualized environments. In the case of school curriculums, particularly the sex education curriculum, putting children and young people at the forefront broadens the potential of creating an inclusive safe space for all students.

While geographical work has frequently used schools as a way of accessing children and youth, few studies have focused on the space of the school and the importance of this space in children and teenagers' lives (Valentine, 2000, as cited in Evans, 2006). More research in combination of these three sub-disciplinary fields needs to be done to dismantle the hegemonic heterosexual norms, which will create safe spaces

for all children and youth to thrive in. By understanding the impact schools have on children and adolescents' lives and involving discussions surrounding curricula and student activism, geographies of education can expand beyond schools as a disciplinary site and allow for alternative perspectives towards education.

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