
The *policyscape* of transgender equality and gender diversity in the Western Australian Education System: A case study

Key words: transgender, cisgenderism, gender diversity, trans-inclusion, critical policy analysis

**Abstract**

In this paper, our purpose is to investigate policy informing texts and discourses referencing transgender equality and gender diversity in the Western Australian education system. Drawing on scholarship from transgender, queer and policy studies (Bacchi 2009; Ball 1993; Butler 2004; Connell 2012; Namaste 2000; Ozga 2000; Rands 2009; Serano 2007; Stryker 2006), we highlight the interplay of progressive and conservative forces affecting the Western Australian education system’s commitment to supporting transgender and gender non-binary students. Based on results from a ______funded study, the paper constructs a Western Australian case study, which threads together the critical examination of policy informing texts, qualitative interview data and media discourses surrounding public narratives, such as the Safe School Coalition Australia’s attempt to implement a school program, which builds awareness about gender and sexual diversity. Emerging through the material, discursive and spatial elements of locales and networks, our case study has the potential to deepen knowledge regarding the heuristic capacity of employing *policyscape* as an analytic category (Ball 2006; Mettler 2016). In this vein, we draw attention to the possibilities and challenges for re-conceptualizing gender and providing trans-affirmative school spaces that promote equality.
Introduction

The United Nations Human Rights Council (2017) called for significant national and international measures to counter global and local discrimination against LGBTQI people, based on sexual orientation and gender identity (Jones 2016a; 2016c). This independent, expert report, details issues of legal recognition and pathologisation, citing how transgender identities are not officially acknowledged in many countries, while the realities of transgender people are routinely affected through social exclusion and violence (Namaste 2000). In Australia, developing policy to support gender democratisation and trans-inclusivity and implementing LGBTQI inclusive practices remain fraught with tensions, gaps and uncertainties (Jones 2015; Taylor et al. 2016; Ullman and Ferfolja 2015). Despite progress to improve conditions for LGBTQI people, school-based transphobia, cisgenderism and heteronormativity, continue to play out at unacceptable levels (Kahn 2016; Kosciw et al. 2016; Robinson et al. 2014; Ullman 2017). The situation in Australia is particularly grave for young transgender people, who experience discrimination, depression and self-harm at much higher rates than young people generally (Commissioner for Children and Young People, WA 2017; Jones & Hiller 2013; Strauss et al. 2017).

Located within this complex landscape, our research aims to unpack the Western Australian educational *policyscape* (Bacchi 2009; Ball 1994; 2006; Mettler 2016; Ozga 2000) that references equality and diversity in support of human rights for transgender and non-binary students, as well as their families. To proceed with our arguments, we employ a number of research strategies and methods. Along with qualitative interview
data, we examine policy-informing texts and media discourses surrounding conflicted public narratives related to Safe School Coalition Australia’s local, state and national attempts to implement a program designed to educate school stakeholders, such as staff and students, regarding gender and sexual diversity. In mapping the WA policy trajectory, we draw attention to the interplay of local, state and national forces, both progressive and conservative, which impact on how an education system may commit to and/or resist addressing transgender equality and gender diversity.

To theoretically ground our analysis in transgender and queer studies, we draw on several lenses, such as: Rands’ (2009) gender complex framework, Connell’s (2009) interpretation of gender democratisation, as well as trans-informed scholarship regarding institutionalized cisgendersim (e.g. Serano 2007) and Butler’s notions of embodiment, livability and a desire for some sort of stable gender. These trans-informed epistemological insights inform our knowledge of the WA educational policy context, with its distinctive terms vis-à-vis transgender equality and gender diversity. Given our interest in policy making and policy informing processes and practices (Bacchi 2009; Ball 1990; Ozga 2000), we also undertake critical analysis involving relevant Australian media discourses as central to understanding the articulation of trans-focused policy discourses. As Ball (1994) pointed out, policies must be viewed as “representations which are coded in complex ways (via struggles, compromises, authoritative public interpretations and reinterpretations) and decoded in complex ways (via actors’ interpretations and meanings in relation to their history, experiences, skills resources and contexts)” (16). To this effect, our analysis of the Western Australian education policy
context is concerned to critically investigate how the discourses citing transgender equality and gender diversity emerge, are mediated and contested (Ball 1994; Foucault 1991).

**About the study**

Funded by ……, this study examines school policies and practices which support transgender and gender non-binary students in three designated countries: Canada, United States and Australia. Based on stage one of the study, which involved analysing existing education policies, in this paper, we focus on initial policy analysis and enactment in Western Australia. Despite recent efforts to address diversity in the education system (see Equal Opportunity Commission 2013; 2012), the emerging *policyscape* (Ball 2006; Mettler 2016; Authors et al, in press) as it pertains to addressing gender and sexual diversity, and specifically to transgender people, suggests a distinctive Western Australian context grounded in a legal history of explicit discrimination. For example, in 1989, when the WA criminal code was amended to decriminalize same-sex sexual relations, the legislation provided for an age of consent for heterosexual sexual relations of 16 years, while the age of consent for same-sex sexual relations was established as 21, contributing to WA’s image as the most highly discriminatory Australian state in the area of LBGTVI human rights (Dharmananda and Kendal 2001; Law Reform, Decriminalization of Sodomy Act 1989, WA Parliament). Furthermore, until 2002, the 1989 Act contained additional discriminatory items, such as the proselytizing clause, making illegal teachers’ so called ‘promotion’ or ‘encouragement’ of homosexuality in primary and secondary schools (author 2018; Law Reform, Decriminalization of Sodomy
Act 1989, WA Parliament, part 2, 24.). There has also been longstanding discrimination in WA against transgender people, based on the requirement for them to be single, prior to making an official application for a change of gender identity. In this regard, the WA Attorney General (Quigley 2018) recently announced that he lodged a request to the Law Reform Commission to reevaluate sections of WA’s legislation pertaining to gender re-assignment, so that individuals wishing to alter their gender identity no longer need to divorce their partners to have their new identity officially recognized.

Internationally, the United Nation’s Human Rights Committee (2017) criticized Australia for its track record in LGBTQI human rights, recommending that domestic policies be amended, such as those currently requiring court approval for the second stage of hormone treatments for children diagnosed with gender dysphoria and whose parents or guardians and medical practitioners agree to appropriate treatments. Ball (2006) draws our attention to the local and global manifestations and implications of policy design and enactment; the term *policyscape* references the broader interconnected networks that transcend national and local sites involving policy borrowing and influences from other locations, as well as the role of media in circulating policy related discourses. Mettler (2016) refers specifically to *policyscapes* “as densely laden with policies created in the past that have themselves become established institutions, bearing consequences for governing operations, the policy agenda, and political behavior” (369). In this sense, we conceive of the Western Australian *policyscape* as one with historical contingencies and characteristics, which cannot be confined to a local analysis. As we will illustrate, global and national debates about addressing transgender inclusivity and sexual diversity are a
defining feature of navigating this complex terrain regarding schooling for transgender equality and gender democratisation (see Authors et al, in press).

Through the Western Australian research site, we interacted with numerous educational stakeholders, including key members of the local LGBTQI community, thereby gaining access to rich information about trans-affirmative policy production and enactment (Patton, 2015). Due to our concern for depth of analysis, in this paper, we focus on relevant Western Australian education policy documents, qualitative interview data and media discourses relating to LGBTQI specific legislation and activism. Our purpose is to generate much needed insight into mapping the terms of transgender inclusive policy and policy making circumstances in this specific site (Ball 1994). Our overall research question is:

- How does the policy for gender democratisation and transgender equality play out in the Western Australian educational context?

Given its struggles as a politically fraught site, which is imbued with conservative politics regarding gender and sexual diversity and an acknowledgment that improving the mental health and well-being of young WA transgender people requires a holistic government plan (see Commissioner for Children and Young People, WA 2017; Wearne 2017), the Western Australian case was identified as a strategic locale.
Aligned with Flyvbjerg (2006), we view the selection of this site as useful for unveiling insights into policy-making processes and discourses, which address transgender inclusivity. To support transgender and gender non-binary young people in the education system, deep knowledge about the conceptual and analytic potential of transgender specific *policyscapes* can sharpen understanding of the terms of policy governance and maintenance. In addition, such consciousness foregrounds how policy governance is embedded in networks that extend beyond the local site, and which are simultaneously imbued with specific historical and political legacies, impacting on policy formation, negotiation and enactment (Mettler 2016; Authors, in press).

**A gender complex and trans-informed theoretical framework**

We utilize a trans-informed theoretical approach to gender (Connell 2012; Connell and Pearse 2015; Namaste 2000; Rands 2009). The complexity of this approach allows educational stakeholders to engage with concepts, such as gender oppression, gender privilege and gender hierarchy. Transgender scholars and activists, such as Serano (2007) extend our theoretical and epistemological comprehension of the need to consider cisgender and cissexual privilege as a taken-for-granted, universalising strategy based on rigid assumptions about birth assigned gender (Teich 2012). For example, Serano (2007) identified cissexism as “(an albeit distinct) form of prejudice”, founded on the belief that “transsexual” identified genders are inferior to, or less authentic than, those of cissexuals (i.e. people who are not transsexual and who have only ever experienced their subconscious and physical sexes as being aligned)” (12). Further, Lennon and Mistler (2014) defined cisgenderism as a systemic cultural construct which “… denies,
denigrates, or pathologises self-identified gender identities that do not align with assigned
gender at birth, as well as resulting behavior, expression, and community” (63). Such
values re-enforce “a gender oppression matrix” (Rands 2009, 63), which serves to stratify
gerender roles and identities, thereby delegitimising transgender people or those who self-
identify as gender non-binary. Associated with gender stratification, prejudice and
discrimination protect the elite who designed such systems, which support the repression
of non-normative gender identities and expression. The institutionalisation of such binary
systems enforces a rationale of gender hierarchy, that is grounded “in rigid beliefs and
rules about many aspects of gender, including gender identity, expression, and roles”
(Lennon and Mistler 2014, 63). Consequently, transgender and non-binary individuals,
whose gender identity or expression do not fit within society’s restrictive gender
categories, are often judged as abnormal, and with contempt (Dentice and Dieter 2015).
These trans-informed epistemological interpretations about cisgenderism and cissexism
are central to how we examine policy and practice for addressing transgender equality
and gender diversity in the education system.

Highlighting ways in which institutionalized gender binary systems impact society,
Rands (2009) generated conceptual categories such as “gender category oppression” and
“gender trangression oppression”, with specific attention to those individuals who
challenge gender binary categorizations or presuppositions that gender is aligned
transparently with biology (423). In this respect, Rands’ gender complex approach
facilitates reflections about how gender oppression operates in classrooms and
interweaves with socio-economic, racialized and cultural realities. When we take for
granted binary gender arrangements in everyday life, Connell (2012) claims that they are dangerously perceived as “common”, “familiar” and “natural” (3). Because all students do not fit into binary notions of boy and girl, a gender complex lens acknowledges fluidity between gender categories (Bryan 2012; Butler 1990). Describing how the gender binary instills a distinctive mode of gender opposition, which denies the existence of trans people, Airton (2009) asserts, “When gender is thought of as a gender binary, oppositional characterizations of male and female fill many blanks. If a particular trait is associated with femaleness (e.g., emotionalism, the capacity for nurturing, etc.), its absence or opposite is associated rather arbitrarily with maleness (e.g., stoicism, an inferior capacity for nurturing, etc.)” (236).

Rands’ (2009) gender complex framework also addresses key concepts such as gender identity, gender expression, gender attribution and gender assignment (420). Despite its historical legacy with the classification of mental health disorders (American Psychological Association 1980), the term gender identity is useful to examine one’s sense of self as a man, woman, trans, non-normative and/or non-binary person, etc. (Bornstein 1994; Rands 2009). In this vein, Butler (2004) explained the formation of gender identities through a metaphor of on-going performance, which may be authored by the individual, but is mediated with other people, either in physical or imagined realities. Similarly, the term gender expression, according to Rands, is helpful to explain the behaviors, which individuals use to demonstrate their gender. In everyday life, Rands views gender attribution as the ways that people signpost gender by utilizing physical and behavioural signals, such as hair, voice, gestures and actions. In contrast, gender
assignment involves the official identification of one’s gender in society, which a medical practitioner usually completes at the birth of a child. For trans people, whose gender identity does not align with their officially assigned gender at birth, such social rituals “…can undo one’s personhood, undermining the capacity to persevere in a livable life.” (Butler 2004, 1).

Further, Namaste (2000) argued that to better appreciate the lives and experiences of transgender people, scholars must go beyond feminist and queer theory lenses to develop knowledge that is “…theoretically sophisticated, politically engaged and practically relevant” (9) (see Authors 2016; 2015; Authors et al, in press; Author 2016). Butler (2004) proposes that, “the transsexual desire to become a man or a woman cannot be reduced to forms of anatomical essentialism”; such desires are discerned in terms of developing “a livable life” (8). Whilst an unlivable life is one without categories of recognition, a life controlled through the constraints of limited gender categories is also unacceptable (p. 8). For scholars such as Connell and Pearse (2015), the political project of gender democratisation is concerned to abolish gender hierarchies rather than gender per se. We see such positions as aligned with Butler’s insights into the recognition and livability of transgender personhood. “The critique of gender norms must be situated within the context of lives as they are lived and must be guided by the question of what maximizes the possibilities for a livable life, what minimizes the possibility of unbearable life, or indeed social or literal death” (Butler 2004, 8). These sorts of insights underpin our trans-informed policy analysis of the Western Australian context, one which routinely
marginalises transgender and gender non-binary students, leading to poor academic and social outcomes.

The Western Australian case: Methodology and analytical tools

Drawing on critical policy analysis and a collaborative approach to working with participants (Patton 2015), this article focuses on a case study of the Western Australian context. Aiming to build cognizance about what constitutes trans-inclusive policy and/or pedagogical interventions in schools, our exploratory methodology draws more specifically on relevant WA and inter-state media generated reports, as well as semi-structured interviews from our local advisory board and a group of key informants, who were recruited via snowballing and professional networking. As Lingard and Rawolle (2004) have pointed out, the articulation of local and global policy is influenced by “a heavily mediatized process” in which “media considerations affect both policy processes and texts” (361).

This advisory group, which in effect serves as a consultative body, is composed of members from the educational community who have knowledge of transgender-informed policies and/or who work directly with trans/gender diverse young people, as well as activists and individuals from the trans community, with appreciation of the geographic and historical specificities of trans policy. In this paper, we draw on insights from four semi-structured interviews: two with advisory board members, and two with key informants employed in the field of education, through government or community funded organisations. In follow-up contact via e-mail with the researchers, individual participants were invited to review and comment on their interview transcriptions. As per university
protocol, we received institutional ethical clearance; in this article, we use pseudonyms to protect the anonymity of our participants.

To generate a complex methodological approach to policy analysis in support of trans equality, Spade (2015) calls for a Foucauldian inspired lens, which examines power across a range of formal and informal networks. “The disciplinary mode of power refers to how racism, transphobia, sexism, ableism and homophobia operate through norms that produce ideas about types of people and proper ways to be.” (Spade 2015, 53). Therefore, to complement trans-informed theory in investigating how gender diversity and transgender inclusivity are articulated in various policy texts and public discourses, we integrate the work of Ball (1993), Ozga (2000) and Bacchi (2009). Ozga argued that educational policy is not seamlessly launched or accepted, but is mitigated through “contested terrain” (1), which links to complex contexts and diverse processes. Describing educational policy as encompassing broad, official discourses as well as local practices and procedures, Ozga framed the usefulness of policy research as presenting alternative viewpoints and developing informed, active citizens.

In tandem, we draw on the work of Ball (1993) who argued for a synthesis of micro, macro, global and local elements, including policy dilemmas, tensions and polarisations. Advocating for an approach to policy reform, which acknowledges local level complexities, Ball suggested that as well as investigating pre-determined systemic factors, we must confront, rather than avoid uncertainty, such as unanticipated, awkward and challenging processes and actions. “We cannot rule out certain forms and
conceptions of social action simply because they seem awkward or theoretically challenging or difficult.” (Ball 1993, 10). Aligned with the work of Ball (1993) and Ozga (2000), Bacchi’s (2009) critical examination of policy offers a useful analytical tool, beginning with the rationale that our response to a problem reveals how we determine the problematic. Although Bacchi did not design this approach to be formulaic, she posed specific questions to facilitate critical investigation of policy. Drawing on Bacchi’s original model (2009, 21) and on the adapted model of Bills and Howard (2017, 57), some critical questions, which have supported our on-going reflections are: How is the “problem” represented? Which assumptions underpin this representation?

Our Western Australian case forms part of a larger collaborative project seeking to balance the authorial voices of researchers and participants during the conduct of studies. Hence, we conceptualise research as a democratic project involving co-participation, especially of minority or vulnerable populations, through processes such as inquiry and problem solving (Pushor 2008). This conception reflects a commitment to developing safe spaces which are respectful of the voices, lives and experiences of transgender, transsexual and gender minority subjects (Girshick 2008; Halberstam 2005; Stryker 2006). Thus, we see our case study approach as both critical and paradigmatic (Flyvbjerg 2006). Critically, the Western Australian case generates cognizance about particular historical contexts, discourses and processes, which have come to define geo-specific landscapes, which are laden with policies for addressing gender diversity (Authors et al, in press). Paradigmatically, the case provides an exemplar of trans-informed analysis, which illuminates the discursive and material aspects of a policy dispositif pertaining to
gender democratisation (Bailey 2013; Flyyvbjerg 2006). The texts, media discourses and public narratives we will examine related to the Western Australian case constitute specific contingencies surrounding the emergence of this dispositif, which yields much needed insight into the enactment and administration of trans-inclusive policies and their terms of possibility and constraint.

The limits and possibilities of supporting gender and sexual diversity in Western Australia

Whilst there is no official transgender inclusive policy in Western Australia, it can be argued, nonetheless, that a dispositif emerges through “spaces and locations where policy is performed and disposed in particular ways” (Bailey 2013, 807). On one level, this dispositif is articulated through local complexities and contingencies, creating both restrictions and possibilities (Ball 1994; Ozga 2000). For example, from a state perspective of human rights, The Western Australian Equal Opportunity Commission (EOC) (2013) published Guidelines for supporting sexual and gender diversity in schools to create awareness about diversity in gender and sexuality and counter homophobic and transphobic bullying. This policy informing publication resulted from many months of collaborative discussions lead by a Steering Committee, including stakeholders from government school sectors, non-government and government organisations and religiously affiliated associations. To support diversity in gender and sexuality through inclusive and safe schools, the guidelines identify areas, such as:
• staff professional development;
• student, parent/carer resources, etc.;
• school policies and practices to protect students against gender and/or sexuality-based discrimination;
• inclusive school curriculum which addresses diversity in gender and sexuality and related discrimination (10).

Despite the positive outcomes resulting from the Western Australian EOC’s collaboration with community and government stakeholders, inherent in the Guidelines is a caveat that school staff can opt to use (or not use), this resource to counter school-based transphobia and homophobia. In this sense, the absence of compulsory policies, processes and strategies would appear, on a deeper level, to suggest a policy vacuum, in relation to supporting trans-inclusivity and gender democracy in Western Australian schools. As Advisory Board Member 3 explained, in the interview transcript below, although the EOC text is “really useful” for schools, as an optional document, it does not carry legal and administrative weight, particularly for supporting changes in “gender markers”, an area of institutional norms, which is challenging for many transgender people (Spade 2015):

The guide is really useful in I think identifying different areas of the school environment for people to consider in supporting a trans or gender diverse student but it doesn’t have the ability to go to the complexities of you know administrative functions of schools and of course it will vary by school and it will vary by state, but it doesn’t have the ability to go into detail around changing gender markers on the
Leading to administrative uncertainty, this policy vacuum was further revealed in the unexpected impact of local media discourse (Ball 1993), when Robertson (2014) reported in the Western Australian Sunday Times that the EOC’s draft Guidelines would be published by the end of the year. As Key Informant 3 remarked, in the transcript below:

There was a front page of the Sunday Times article that said that, oh you know these are guidelines to make everybody a homosexual and make everybody a transgender person. Well it didn’t actually, it wasn’t even that bad really but there was a political direction towards the Department to back off.

Our analysis of the Sunday Times’ report confirms that Robertson (2014) did not imply that the EOC Guidelines would engender non-normative sexuality and transgenderism; however, supportive strategies were listed, such as: retaining records about transphobic or homophobic bullying and including transgender and non-heterosexual content in disciplines such as History and English. As per Key Informant 3’s comments, within a week, the Western Australian Department of Education and Training (2014) publically distanced itself from the EOC Guidelines, announcing that the Sunday Times had reported on a provisional version of the text, which had not “…been finalized or endorsed”. Furthermore, the Department took the precautionary measure of reassuring the public that “diverse sexuality” was not part of the Human Biology curriculum, and
that all curricular change was mandated by the School Curriculum and Standards Authority (Government of Western Australian, Department of Education 2014 retrieved from: https://www.education.wa.edu.au/web/newsroom/-/department-clarifies-sexual-and-gender-diversity-guidelines, par 8). In this vein, it can be argued that local media coverage steered the trajectory of the Western Australian policy discourse towards averting the topic of gender diversity. This local discourse illustrates how, in permeating public knowledge, power operates in complex ways, involving more than the “…oppressor/oppressed’ and “dominator/dominated” (Spade 2015, 6). Moreover, as Lingard and Rawolle (2004) have pointed out, the articulation of policy is influenced by “a heavy mediatized process” in which “media considerations affect both policy processes and texts” (361).

Under the Western Australian Equal Opportunity Act (1984), the EOC’s (2013) Guidelines clearly outline the legal responsibilities of administrators to eradicate discrimination, as much as possible, on grounds, such as “…sex, marital status or pregnancy, family responsibility or family status, sexual orientation, race, religious or political conviction, impairment, age…. ” (2). Notwithstanding, in contexts such as employment and education, restrictions apply for lodging complaints concerning discrimination on the grounds of gender history. Further, by not employing terminology which is inclusive of transgender and gender non-binary individuals, The Western Australian Equal Opportunity Act (1984), as per The United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child (1989), appears to presuppose that all humans fall under binary, cisgendered categories of gender identity and expression (see Serano 2007). Textual
language, which limits gender identity choices to male or female, highlights the need to develop trans-informed policy understandings (Flyvbjerg 2006; Lennon and Mistler 2014; Rands 2009; Stryker 2006). Signposting trans-affirmative terminology will facilitate understanding of transgender members of the community, whose identities may not align with society’s rigid, cisgender expectations of masculinities or femininities and a gender binary system (Human Rights Watch & Gender Spectrum 2014; Author and colleague 2003; Namaste 2000). Nonetheless, the EOC Guidelines propose practical opportunities for promoting gender inclusivity and gender democracy, including:

- a spectrum of gender, family and sexual orientation in classroom conversations;
- confidentiality of student records concerning gender transition and intersex status;
- appropriate toilet/washroom facilities for transgender and/or intersex students
- options for providing all students with access to “gender-neutral uniforms”;
- “safe” and “gender-neutral” school camping/excursion sleeping arrangements;
- ‘gender-neutral’ language in school paperwork and invitations (12).

Bailey (2013) argues that policy is enacted locally and is threaded intricately through multiple power relations, including macro levels of legislation. For example, specific references to diversity in gender and sexuality are excluded from The Education Act of Western Australia (1999). However, the Act stipulates that all Western Australian children have the right to “receive a school education”, while “government schools” must cater for the “needs of all children” (2). The Western Australian School Curriculum and Standards Authority (2013) provides another exemplar of how trans-inclusive language is
contextualised ambiguously across macro and micro networks. Informed by the Melbourne Declaration (2008) and the United National Conventions on the Rights of the Child (1989), the Western Australian School Curriculum and Standards Authority (2013) states that all kindergarten to end of secondary students are entitled to an “equitable” education, which “embraces diversity” (Government of Western Australia 2013, par. 1). However, specific reference to diversity in gender and sexuality is absent across these texts, highlighting a liberal framing of equality rather than one which is explicit about the politics of difference and justice (Young 2011). Despite the significance of the Conventions of the Rights of the Child, which stipulate that children should be protected and not be discriminated against on any grounds, children are referred to as “he” or “she”, which seems to presuppose that all children are cisgender and fit within a binary category of male or female (Lennon and Mistler 2014; Serano 2007). Nonetheless, pursuing a theme of equity, the Western Australian School Curriculum and Standards Authority (2013) declares that factors such as “…ethnicity, language (linguistic background, culture, gender, socioeconomic status, disability, sexual orientation or geographic location” must not compromise the quality of a child’s education (https://k10outline.scsa.wa.edu.au/home/principles/guiding-principles/student-diversity, par 2).

**Trans-inclusivity and gender democratisation: The narrative surrounding the Safe Schools Coalition Australia**
In the areas of trans-inclusivity and gender democratisation, Western Australian educational policy has been informed by a plethora of local and national networks governance involving quite contingent and specific power relations. The emergence and role of The Safe Schools Coalition Australia (hereafter referred to as Safe Schools Coalition) in addressing trans-inclusivity and gender diversity is a specific exemplification of this networked governance and speaks to the specific case of the transgender *policiescape* in the Western Australian context. Provoking debate across Australia, the public narrative surrounding Safe Schools Coalition ultimately became a prosecution through media discourse and conservative commentary. As a national network of organisations, Safe Schools Coalition collaborates with primary/elementary and secondary schools across the country to implement a program to create safe learning environments and counter gender and sexuality related bullying. Designed primarily by researchers from La Trobe University, in 2010, the Victorian state government initially adopted the Safe Schools’ model, prior to its scope being widened and managed through the Foundation of Young Australians (The Foundation for Young Australians 2017; Lucke 2016). Although a national Labour government initiated Safe Schools Coalition, ironically, in 2014, former Prime Minister Tony Abbott’s federal coalition government launched the program nationally (McKinnon, Waitt, and Gorman-Murray 2017). As Safe Schools Coalition gained momentum, with an increasing number of schools requesting assistance to support LGBTQI affirming young people and their families, numerous powerful, conservative politicians and media commentators unleashed a torrent of criticism, creating a cloud of moral panic over the program.
For example, in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, Kevin Donnelly (2016) a popular media commentator/academic from Australian Catholic University, declared that the SSCA was using the phenomenon of bullying to promote “… a radical view of gender and sexuality” (http://www.smh.com.au/comment/government-and-teacher-union-hypocrisy-as-lgbti-agenda-plugged-in-schools-20160208-gmp18h.html, par. 7). Furthermore, in a publically disseminated speech, citing a petition which he presented in parliament to the Commonwealth government, Cory Bernadi (2016), then Senator for South Australia, argued for removing all federal funding from Safe Schools Coalition. He accused the Program of extending beyond education to encourage student advocacy through “… a social engineering agenda.” (Bernardi 2016, retrieved from http://youtu.be/gCjKyKO6zT0).

As mainstream media began to portray Safe Schools Coalition as “not-so-safe” (Law, B. 2017, par 1), the Program’s implementation became increasingly scrutinised and represented as problematic (Bacchi 2009; 2012). Dismissing an openly signed letter by over 360 educators and support from more than 100 organisations for Safe Schools Coalition in 2016, Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull commissioned an urgent review. Shortly thereafter, Bill Louden, a prominent Western Australian-based academic, evaluated Safe School Coalition’s program, concluding that the teaching resources were aligned to aims of countering transphobia, homophobia or intersexphobia; lessons were also viewed as appropriately linked to the Australian Curriculum. Despite Louden’s (2016) largely positive, independent review, Federal Education Minister Simon Birmingham revoked Safe Schools Coalition’s national funding beyond 2017, and
stipulated numerous program amendments, such as requiring parental consent for student participation, eliminating delivery in primary schools, removing some lessons and deleting links to external websites. Altman (2016) commented that because certain conservative politicians were frustrated by Louden’s insufficiently critical review, they intensified the resistance toward Safe Schools Coalition. Ironically, former federal education minister Christopher Pyne, other federal politicians and some members of the mainstream press, supported the Program (Rhodes et al. 2016). But the deeper paradox, according to Nicholas (2016, par 1), was that while young people were increasingly expressing diversity in gender and sexuality, a few “white, cisgender, heterosexual male politicians” (and we would include privileged), were prevaricating over trivial aspects of Safe Schools Coalition’s program. This right-wing political and media brouhaha had a domino effect, characterised by tensions and polarization in the policy landscape (Ball 1993), particularly in Western Australia.

Two of our study’s Western Australian participants, for example, related how, despite increasing numbers of transgender and gender non-binary students “coming out”, the intense public scrutiny regarding the appropriateness of Safe Schools Coalition, was associated with reticence from some educational practitioners (see Carroll 2005; Jones 2015). In the interview excerpt below, Key Informant 1 commented that the idea of introducing Safe Schools Coalition’s program was met with resistance at a local school. Nonetheless, there appeared to be general acceptance for supporting young children who face a “gender issue”, a term which echoes the historical, medical pathologisation of transgender and gender non-conforming people (Spade 2015).
...I have been trying to introduce ...Safe Schools and there was just a.... People are interested but fearful at the same time because there’s been a whole lot of media discussion about Safe Schools and its suitability and so it wasn’t met positively but, but there was positive acceptance of a need for developing some kind of approach to helping students who may have a gender issue.

Below, Advisory Board Member 3 also raised the theme of Safe Schools Coalition’s public ‘positioning’, which became associated with a problematic representation of diverse genders and sexualities (Bacchi 2009). In particular, this board member identified the role of the “media”, which described Safe Schools Coalition’s ideology as “radical” and “Marxist”. “Awareness” and “education” about diversity of gender and sexuality are perceived as indispensable for staff to support students. Further, Advisory Board Member 3 suggested that the branding of Safe Schools Coalition as “Communist” may have incited “fear” for some teachers and principals about gender related discussions, as well as provoked negative reactions from “parents” and “community members”:

And given all the media and stuff around Safe Schools and the positioning of it you know to seem like this radical, Marxist ideology, I think people just have a fear around, around how we’re talking about gender....Yeah the fear is just around...and so a lot of it is, yeah, education and awareness with staff around what gender diversity is so that they feel confident to support these students in
schools. I think a lot of the fear comes from what will other parents and community members who might not be as tolerant and understanding, like how we respond to them, what they will think, how do we [school practitioners] manage that.

As the interview unfolded, Advisory Board Member 3 explained that the majority of parents are actually supportive of Safe Schools Coalition’s program. Hence, the “fear” of negative parental response in relation to LGBTQI topics in the classroom appears to be largely unfounded (see Authors 2014 and Ferfolja and Ullman 2017). Rather, this “fear” which Advisory Board Member 3 raised in the interview excerpt below, reveals a broader anxiety in response to “something different or something new”:

No one’s ever had …a huge, you know, community backlash. They’ve had one or two parents call up for some more information or they’ve you know talked about something in the car park and based on what they may of heard or not heard about trans and gender diverse people. You know they might call the school for some more info but then we’ve worked with the principal to give them some more information to be able to talk about that or refer parents elsewhere. So you know it’s only ever one or two parents who’ve called up and everyone else is you know is either doesn’t care or is really supportive. So yeah it’s sort of fear of yeah of, of something different or something new. Fear of the unknown, fear of what will parents and community members think.
Often based on rumor and irrationality, “fear” from the gaze of “parents” and “community members” can promote stigmatisation and misunderstanding of the embodied experiences of transgender and gender non-binary folks (Prosser 1998; Serano 2007).

As social and mainstream media increasingly reported on the axing of Safe Schools Coalition’s funding, tensions between state and federal politicians amplified, alluding to a **policyscape**, characterised by publically disseminated and disputed interpretations and re-interpretations (Ball 1993). For example, determined to support Safe Schools Coalition, Victorian Premier Andrews allocated state funding to deliver a new compulsory program, from 2017, in all Victorian public secondary schools (ABC News 2016; Ferguson and Urban 2016). In Western Australia, Education Minister Ellery confirmed that the state labor government would provide $350 000 AUD per year, over four years, to support schools wishing to opt into Safe Schools Coalition’s program (Law 2017). However, as Advisory Board Member 2 commented below, on the ground, local teachers and principals faced resistance from higher echelons of the education system, which prevented staff from “doing” Safe Schools Coalition:

> If you don’t have that support from higher up, it’s such a battle for the people from lower down….like in the system, so for teachers to deal with that more organisational support…. But hopefully principals are good and then there’s, you know, there’s principals facing needing to be resilient for the higher up…because literally all primary school principals were told, do not do Safe Schools, even though some of
Given this systemic resistance ‘from above’, it is not surprising that Western Australia’s participation in Safe Schools Coalition has been limited to approximately 20 schools (Law, P. 2017). Although some school practitioners and administrators may be committed to supporting primary school students who are transitioning, it can be argued that this work is carried out largely “against the grain” of neo-liberal governance in ways that may be perceived as risky (see Author 2014; Authors 2017; Ferfolja and Ullman 2017).

More generally, the mediatisation of policy informing discourses draws attention to Ball’s (1994) premise that policy processes impact on the design and dissemination of texts. In such instances, public attention focuses on a limited number of texts, thereby restricting the number of legitimised voices. The narratives surrounding such media discourses also contribute to an understanding of Bacchi’s (2012) point about how educational stakeholders can come to perceive topics such as gender and sexual diversity as increasingly problematic. Such discourses are equally embedded in a macro dispositif (Bailey 2013) involving national debates about transgender rights and same-sex marriage legislation (Alcorn 2016). Therefore, our analysis of educational policy regarding addressing gender and sexual diversity, including the mediatisation and public representation of Safe Schools Coalition, is consistent with Ozga (1990)’s invocation to
“bring together structural, macro-level analysis of education systems and educational policies and micro-level investigation” (359).

From a policy *dispositif* and governance perspective (Bailey 2013), it must also be stressed that rather than relegating the responsibility for such programming within the federal Australian bureaucracy, with flow-on repercussions to state education departments, the Commonwealth Department of Education and Training strategically allocated the task to an external body. In fact, Safe Schools Coalition became the de-facto education body, allowing the conservative government to distance itself from “morally” supporting education regarding diversity in gender and sexuality – a matter perceived as threatening to the federal government’s constitutional and electoral base. Such an arm’s length tactic at policy governance enabled the Australian government to avoid taking direct responsibility for addressing gender and sexual diversity in schools, with the stipulation that this sort of programming, offered through Safe Schools Coalition, not be a mandatory requirement. A media controversy erupted, which contributed to an amplification of conservative voices in parliament (Jones 2016b), leading ultimately to the demonisation of Safe Schools Coalition (Alcorn 2016).

Undeniably, extensive scholarship has exposed the devastating impact that school-based transphobia and cisgenderism have on the health and well-being of transgender and gender non-conforming students (Bartholomaeus and Riggs 2017; Jones and Hiller 2013; Kosciw et al. 2016; McKinnon, Waitt, and Murray 2017, Robinson et al. 2014; Strauss et al. 2017). Yet, the public controversy surrounding Safe Schools Coalition, combined with
contradictions in federal, state and local discourses, unveil a deep administrative and moral malaise with regards to addressing LGBTQI human rights. In the public domain, this troubling narrative unfolded as key aspects of educational policy were relinquished to external stakeholders, via the privileging of “opt-in programs”. While the Western Australian political terrain deviated from developing a systemic and affirmative approach to working with LGBTQI students, a further paradox arose; an opaque policy trajectory in the area of mental health appeared to contradict the official mandate of primary and secondary school “opt-in programs”, which claim to promote diversity and empowerment of high school students.

With the dust settled on the public controversy surrounding Safe Schools Coalition, Smith (2017) argued that whilst incorporating LGBTQI topics as part of a broader anti-bullying program is a step in the right direction, teachers must receive institutional support to infuse curricula with diversity in gender and sexuality. To this effect, inspired by Connell (1995), Ozga (2000) argued that teachers represent strategic participants whose capacity to critique, contest and inform policy can promote active citizenship and reduce inequality in social structures. Here, The Western Australian’s EOC Guidelines (2013) represent a thread of hope in challenging gender and sexuality derived stereotypes and discrimination by: increasing staff and student knowledge, providing appropriate resources and professional development and promoting inclusive language. But the shifting Western Australian policiescape with respect to students whose gender identities, behaviors or appearances digress from prescribed cisgender norms, raises critical
questions about the underpinnings of policy development at the material, discursive and spatial levels (Bacchi 2009; Ball 1993; Ozga 2000; Serano 2007).

**Concluding Remarks**

Our purpose in this paper was to investigate policies referencing transgender equality and gender diversity, with a focus on the Western Australian education system. Using policy texts, qualitative interviews, and media discourses surrounding narratives, such as Safe School Coalition’s attempt to implement a school program to increase understanding about gender and sexual diversity, we constructed a Western Australian case study. Mapping the history of Safe Schools Coalition, which ultimately was disparaged by conservative media and political forces, illustrated how power circulates steadily and surprisingly across institutions and individuals via contingent and specific modes of networked governance, rather than being directed uniquely from the top-down (Foucault 1995; Jones 2015). According to Ball (1994), policy texts are “cannibalized products of multiple (but circumscribed) influences and agendas [involving] adhocery, negotiation and serendipity…” (16). Our work also highlights Bacchi’s (2012) remarks that the policy process may be less about governments’ aims to resolve problems, rather than to construct agendas. In this respect, examining transgender equality and gender diversity in the Western Australian education system aligns with Ball’s (1984) *policy ensemble*, revealing that the exertion of power involves discourses, terms and limits about “what can be said, and thought, but also about who can speak, when, where, and with authority” (9).
Beyond the public backlash over Safe Schools Coalition and the ambiguity of the Western Australian *policyscape*, McKinnon et al. (2017) debunked popular assumptions about schools as “innocent” (146) and protective spaces, devoid of diversity in gender and sexuality; at the heart of such assumptions is also the belief that all children are (or will become) heterosexual and cisgender. Rather, argued Robinson (2013, 2), even young children at school engage in hegemonic behavior, normalizing sexualised violence through “heterogendered relationships”, a reminder that institutional knowledge is dependent on power relations, which continually shift to regulate and surveil differences (Foucault 1978). Similarly, Pyne (2014) highlighted gender independence over gender non-conformity, ultimately posing the question: “Is gender conformity healthy?” (1 & 3). Despite the predominance of normalised images and narratives that children encounter at school, Robinson argued that students can learn to engage in an ethical process of “openness to the Other” (4).

Extending the analogy, Ozga (2000) suggested that students can engage in policy making at numerous levels, from classrooms to the national arena. Across Australia, for example, while the Australian Christian lobby criticised Safe Schools Coalition as inappropriate, hundreds of families publically supported the Program, including an eleven year-old transgender student, who explained at a public rally how staff had scaffolded them at a West Australian school (Seeber 2016). Such testimonies reinforce previous research suggesting that in spite of (or due to) high levels of transphobia and institutionalised cisgenderism in schools, transgender and gender diverse young people are more likely
than their cisgender counterparts to engage in activism around LGBTQI topics (Authors 2017; Jones and Hillier 2013; Robinson et al. 2014). Resonating with a critical approach to policy, this type of public engagement can encourage educational stakeholders to comprehend problems from different viewpoints (Bacchi 2009). As Connell (2009) argued, gender erasure, or what she referred to as “gender abolition”, is not the answer:

Many feminists think that gender is inherently about inequality. They see the patriarchal dividend as the core of the gender order, and gender harm as unavoidable in any gender system. Logically, then they aim at the abolition of gender.... But there is another possibility: a strategy that seeks to equalize gender orders, rather than shrink them to nothing. Gender does not, in itself, imply inequality … A strategy of gender democratization, rather than gender abolition, has some points to recommend it. It allows us to preserve good - the many pleasures, cultural riches, identities, and other practices that arise in gender orders and that people value. (Connell 2009, 142-43, our emphasis)

Strategies of gender democratisation highlight that policy articulation and enactment need to account for the multiple voices of diverse people comprising the trans community, including those who do not embrace non-binary identifications and those who desire more stable gender identity (Butler 2004). These informed narratives require an epistemological commitment to desubjugation, thereby highlighting the authentic voices of transgender people (Stryker 2006). Integrating transgender perspectives must also consider the embodiment of the individual and their life experiences, providing
references which are considered equally valid as more “objective” forms of knowledge (Stryker 2006, 12). In light of our analysis of trans-informed and trans-affirmative educational policy, this embodiment is particularly pertinent for educational institutions where the voices of transgender and gender non-binary students have been largely erased and marginalized. Although the presence of trans-affirming educational policy does not unilaterally equate with seamless inclusion and protection of LGBTQI students, clarity can serve to promote positive representations of those who fall outside the cisgendered and heterosexual matrix (Allen 2015).

Describing educational policy as encompassing broad, official discourses as well local practices and procedures, Ozga (2000) framed the usefulness of policy research as presenting alternative viewpoints and developing informed, active citizens. At its very core, argued Ball (1993), policy analysis is qualitative and unpredictable at the micro and macro levels. Over time, texts, discourses and media coverage can actually produce social issues that “function as de-facto policy…” (Rawolle and Lingard 2014, 601). Therefore, our methodological mapping of a messy Western Australian policy terrain, foregrounds the on-going power struggles, possibilities and constraints for supporting transgender inclusivity and gender democratisation in the education system (Bacchi 2009; Bills and Howard 2017; Foucault 1978). Such cases, posited Flyvbjerg (2006) have the potential to deepen educational stakeholders’ understandings of the heuristic potential of policiescape in local, national and global networks (see Authors et al., in press). Although we have focused on gender democratisation and trans-equality in Western Australia, our
work has the potential to provide broader, analytical insights regarding *policyscapes* and their material, discursive and spatial enactments.
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i LGBTQI is an umbrella term referring to Lesbian, Gay, Transgender, Queer and Intersex people. We acknowledge that there is diversity and even controversy in relation to such terminology, which is continually evolving. We also recognize that inequity can exist outside and within LGBTQI communities, with transgender people often experiencing the highest levels of discrimination and exclusion.

ii Cisgender refers to an individual whose gender identity aligns with the sex they were assigned at birth. Cisgenderism refers to prejudice against those groups or individuals who are not cisgender.