Introduction

In March 2022, a short, four-page bill was signed into law by the Florida Governor Ron DeSantis, with the inconspicuous title “Parental Rights in Education.” Despite the unassuming appearance of the bill, it had a striking impact, sparking protests and condemnations across the country. The bill, dubbed the “Don’t Say Gay” bill by its opponents, prevents teachers in Florida classrooms from discussing issues related to sexual orientation or gender identity with students in elementary school. Given that human sexuality is not a significant part of any curriculum for students that young, many people believe that the bill is inconsequential and at best, prevents students from being exposed to ideas that are inappropriate for young children (Campo-Flores). In further discussion of the bill, as media coverage increased, it became clear that the intent of the bill extended beyond simply preventing discussions of sexual orientation or gender identity. Rather, its covert goal is further discrimination under the guise of protecting children from “indoctrination” and “grooming” from LGBTQ adults (Campo-Flores, Swisher). This narrative is not new to the discussion of LGBTQ rights, especially in Florida.

In considering the issue of LGBTQ rights, it is also important to recognize that the terminology has changed over time as we gain more awareness of human diversity with respect to sexuality and gender identity. In this paper, I use the historical terminology of each period to reflect the ideas at the time. The modern day term LGBTQ includes transgender individuals, who were not visible to the public on the same scale as homosexual people until the last twenty years, but all people under the LGBTQ umbrella existed during the history that I cover, even if not
explicitly named. While the language of the 1950s and 1970s uses the term homosexual almost exclusively, the narrative of predation and indoctrination applies to a wider stretch of identities.

The idea of LGBTQ individuals as child predators, who recruit, indoctrinate and otherwise convert children to their sexuality or orientation is one that has a long legacy in Florida, starting in the 1950s, when a committee was formed to find and remove suspected homosexual teachers from Florida universities and schools. Florida was also the location of the most famous anti-gay campaign of the 1970s, Anita Bryant’s Save Our Children campaign. In an attempt to reverse the increasing public acceptance and legal recognition of LGBTQ individuals of the 1970s, the Save Our Children campaign spread the idea that gay rights movement was a face for pedophiles who wished to molest and recruit children. This narrative terrified Floridians into opposing any movement towards equality and helped to reinforce the cultural belief that has now resulted in the Parental Rights Education Bill.

The framing of LGBTQ individuals as perverts, and child predators out to recruit children, is incredibly effective for leading people to oppose LGBTQ rights – both legally and culturally. It harnesses our evolutionary need to protect children, one even those without children can usually relate to. As such, the best course of action is to find ways to counter the narrative that the two ideals are in opposition. Providing data that LGBTQ individuals are not more likely to commit crimes against children and actively promoting positive images of LGBTQ families helps to reframe the public mind. In order to do so, it is critical to understand the history and origin of this imaginary opposition and its legacy.

**The Johns Committee**

*Cultural Perspectives on Homosexuality in the 50s*
In the early 1950s in Florida, the framing of homosexuality as a direct threat to the health and wellbeing of children primarily came alongside the anti-Communist attitudes of the McCarthy era. Before WWII, there was a relatively benign cultural portrayal of homosexuality (almost exclusively male homosexuality) in the media as a somewhat humorous, but harmless, effeminate man. The “Communist threat” of the 1950s turned this cultural narrative on its head, and fueled the idea that “in the minds of most Americans, gays were predators who used children or young people to satisfy unnatural sexual appetites; like godless Communists, immoral gays and lesbians were corrupting America’s future: its youth” (Poucher). One of the drivers of this change in framing was the publishing of the Kinsey Reports, which indicated that homosexuals were not easily identifiable and that human sexuality exists along a spectrum (Fejes).

This ambiguity elevated the concern about unidentified, “undercover” homosexuals that could exist undetected in heterosexual society, in government, in positions of power, and as the media of that era proclaimed, in your children’s schools. It also resulted in a new fear for many American parents. Given that sexuality is more flexible than previously considered, parents began to worry that their children would be “recruited” or made gay by adults in their life. An increase in media portraying homosexuals as predators, perverts, and child molesters fed a moral panic that ran parallel to the paranoia of the McCarthy era (Frank). Anyone could be a Communist or a homosexual and both wanted to indoctrinate your children.

*The Lavender Scare in Florida*

In Florida, these national forces resulted in a senator at the time, Charley Johns, launching an investigative committee into the existence of Communists and/or homosexuals in Florida universities and public schools. This committee played into fears that the public had
about protecting their children from indoctrination and over a decade (1956-1965), the committee called for the “dismissal of fifteen people at UF and a number of public school teachers and other state employees” (Poucher). In 1959, the committee released a report that claimed: “certain “facts” discovered by the committee, such as: highly educated people were more likely to be gay; homosexuality was a result of environment rather than genetics; gays, particularly teachers, were excellent recruiters of youth (and thus adept at inducing them to become teachers); and a good investigator could find proof of homosexual conduct at any school, using only photos of school personnel” (Poucher).

While the colleagues of those dismissed were often sympathetic, there was not yet a cultural movement to protest the tyranny of the Johns Committee and it continued to operate, creating a culture of persecution and mistrust until 1965. In 1964, the committee published a report titled “Homosexuality and Citizenship in Florida,” which contained sexually explicit images and erotic colloquial terminology, with the intent of shocking the general public into moral outrage. Unfortunately for the committee, the result was not what they had hoped. Branded as pornography, legislatures in Florida voted to ban the printing of the pamphlet and disbanded the committee for wasting state resources in 1965.

While there was not a significant or vocal gay rights movement in the 1950s, by the 1960s, several advocacy groups existed and many of them worked to shift the public opinion on homosexuality away from perversion and threats to children. Advocacy groups pushed an image of conventionally dressed, well-mannered, and middle-class homosexuals, in hopes of making the idea palatable to the more conservative heterosexual population. This commitment to changing public opinion around homosexuality was the first move toward reframing the topic in
the United States prior WWII. This would continue to be the approach of most gay rights groups until the social and cultural change of the late 60s and early 70s.

**SAVE OUR CHILDREN: ANITA BRYANT AND DADE COUNTY**

The late 1960s and the 1970s were characterized by the gay rights movement, alongside the Civil Rights movement and the women's liberation movement. In contrast to advocates in the 1950s, the gay liberation movement of the 70s was uninterested in pandering to heterosexual America’s sensitivities. The removal of homosexuality from *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* in 1973 especially aided the fight toward equality. Local and state legislation that refused rights and/or equal access to LGBTQ individuals lost the scientific justification for their discrimination. This fact, coupled with the increased representation of LGBTQ individuals on the national level meant that advocacy groups could begin targeting discriminatory legislation that restricted access to housing, services, and jobs.

*Dade County, Florida*

As part of this nationwide effort, in 1977, an ordinance was passed in Dade County Florida that made discrimination against individuals based on sexual orientation illegal in housing, and employment. This ordinance was not particularly unique, around thirty-five other cities and counties across the country had passed similar legislation. However, this ordinance sparked a heated debate about the nature of homosexuality and became the rallying cry of a vehement anti-gay rights movement that pushed back against the newly made progress of the last decade. This movement made use of the same pernicious public beliefs about homosexuality, namely that gay people were actively recruiting and sexually abusing children and teenagers. The
same narratives that were rife in the 1950s made a comeback in the late 70s at the hands of religious conservatives, the most notable being Florida darling Anita Bryant.

*Anita Bryant and Save Our Children*

In the 1970s, Anita Bryant was a B-List celebrity and performer who had become a household name, not because of her musical career, but as the spokesperson for Florida citrus. She appeared in orange juice ads which would be broadcast on televisions in living rooms across the country. Bryant was a devout Christian, who saw the Dade County ordinance as the final blow against the American family from the immoral and predatory gay rights movement (Fejes). Inspired to take action, she started a campaign called Save Our Children from Homosexuality, Inc. that quickly drew nationwide attention. Bryant mastered the image of the violent, predatory homosexual of decades past, tapping into deep fears about the protection of children. This was devastatingly effective.

On June 7, 1977, the county voted to repeal the anti-discrimination ordinance by 69 to 31 percent. The role of women in this vote can not be overstated. Before the Save Our Children campaign, a survey found that 66% of women in Dade county did not support a repeal of the ordinance, enough of the voting population to uphold the ordinance as law (Clendinen 302). However, the targeted rhetoric of the Save Our Children campaign obliterated the progress that had been made over the last decade in reframing homosexuality in the eyes of the public. Instead of benign, if odd, members of their community (“hairdressers, dress designers, or dog groomers”), the Save Our Children campaign was explicit: “This recruitment of our children is absolutely necessary for the survival and growth of homosexuality - for since homosexuals cannot reproduce, they must recruit…” (Clendinen 302).
Seizing on the real fears that parents have about their children becoming the victims of sexual predators, the Save Our Children campaign repurposed the decades-old fear of the homosexual child molester. They printed articles in the newspapers, like the Miami Herald, stating, “The other side of the homosexual coin is a hair-raising pattern of recruitment and outright seduction and molestation, a growing pattern that predictably will intensify if society proves laws granting legitimacy to the sexually perverted” (Clendinen 304). It was this shift in public perception, especially among women, that resulted in the repeal of the anti-discrimination ordinance and set gay rights in Florida back 15 years. It wasn’t until 1989 that Dade County reversed the repeal, and passed an anti-discrimination ordinance for sexual orientation.

Reframing the Family Issue 1980 to Today

The intervening years between Anita Bryant’s Save Our Children campaign and the modern-day encompass fundamental change in the public perception of gay rights. While effective in Florida, the Save Our Children campaign inspired a surge of LGBTQ activism against similar legislation across the nation, as well as in Europe and Australia (Clendinen 328). Setbacks occurred with the tragedy of the AIDS crisis in the 1980s, with some religious groups claiming that the HIV virus was divine punishment for the sexual immorality of the gay community. However, the AIDS crisis also acted as a rallying cry for many LGBTQ advocates seeking equal rights and treatment before the law.

An important shift occurred when the generation of activists in the 1970s reached the age of wanting to start families in the 1990s. LGBTQ parents and families ran counter to the narrative of recruitment and sexual abuse by homosexuals. For many gay couples, this galvanized the push for the legalization of same-sex marriage. Same-sex marriage made LGBTQ
rights a family issue, not in the context of protecting the children from abuse, but in defense of
children with gay parents. To be clear, this shift was not in the majority of public opinion until
the mid-2010s, but the existence of a family-centered narrative in favor of LGBTQ parents was
and is powerful in changing the public’s conception. In the 2015 Obergefell vs. Hodges case in
front of the Supreme Court, the court case that overturned the Defense of Marriage Act, a portion
of the legal argument focused specifically on the “hundreds of thousands of children raised in
same sex households now… who don't get the stabilizing structure and the many benefits of
marriage” (35). Going into the current debate about Florida’s Parental Rights in Education Bill,
centering on the needs and wellbeing of both LGBTQ children and LGBTQ parents is vital to
shift public opinion.

**Florida’s Parental Rights in Education Bill**

*The Build Up*

While the overturning of the Defense of Marriage Act marked a high point in gay rights
equality in the United States, the political landscape since then has proven more challenging.
Parallel to the responses to shifts in gender roles in WWII and the activism of the 1960s and
1970s, conservative public opinion reared its head in opposition to the progress of the 2010s.
Barack Obama’s 2008 election, the overturning of DOMA, and a significant increase in
conversations about racial, gender, and identity justice have all contributed to a cultural backlash,
especially in conservative states, like Florida. In the area of LGBTQ rights, this backlash is
marked by a return to the idea of the violent and/or predatory queer people who have as a goal
the recruitment of American children. Despite the shifting landscape of American public opinion
on LGBTQ rights, the fear of child molestation and indoctrination is a powerful tool, used intentionally to appeal to moderates who might otherwise support LGBTQ rights.

In March 2022, as part of a movement against progressive initiatives in schools, Ron DeSantis, the governor of Florida, signed into law HB 1557 - Parental Rights in Education, a bill banning the “classroom discussion about sexual orientation or gender identity in primary grade levels or in a manner that is not age-appropriate or developmentally appropriate for students” (Florida House of Representatives). The bill also prevents schools from withholding information from parents about the mental or physical well-being of their students. While the bill, referred to by liberals as the “Don’t Say Gay” bill, sparked nationwide outrage, the language used is deceptively benign. In contrast to the bigoted language of the 1950s and 1970s anti-gay movements in Florida, this bill seems almost like a pleasant footnote. However, it is grounded in the same mental framework that has been established over the last 6 decades: LGBTQ issues are in opposition to the health and safety of children because LGBTQ people are child predators and are trying to recruit our children.

A Tale as Old as Time

This underlying belief came through in the statements of those promoting the bill. DeSantis himself said that opponents of the law "support sexualizing kids in kindergarten. They support injecting woke gender ideology into second-grade classrooms" (Block). This particular quotation brings to light an new element to the debate about LGBTQ rights and children; namely, the increased visibility of transgender youth. Unlike the previous discussions about sexual orientation, which is an inherently adult concept, issues of gender identity are applicable to many different ages. While previous concerns about the indoctrination of youth pertained only to
sexuality, much of the current concern focuses on the spread of gender ideology and the prevalence of transgender youth. As such, concerns about indoctrination loom large in the public psyche, especially in conversations about education in schools.

That is not to say that the narrative of child abuse has not also played a significant role in passing the bill. Christina Pushaw, DeSantis’ press secretary, tweeted “The bill that liberals inaccurately call ‘Don’t Say Gay’ would be more accurately described as an ‘Anti-Grooming Bill. If you’re against the Anti-Grooming Bill, you are probably a groomer or at least you don’t denounce the grooming of 4-8-year-old children. Silence is complicity. This is how it works, Democrats, and I didn’t make the rules” (Swisher). While the language is somewhat different, the same fundamental concern is fueling legislation today that led to the purge of LGBTQ teachers and professors in Florida through the Johns Committee. Another lawmaker referred to the bill as a response to “young people coming out as L.G.B.T.Q.” (Swisher). These descriptions are thinly veiled repetitions of the same rhetoric used in the 20th century around abuse and recruitment by LGBTQ people.

**Potential Impact**

However well-intentioned the prevention of grooming by child predators is, Florida teachers, who have everyday contact with the children impacted by the bill, have concerns about the effect the bill would have on LGBTQ youth and those with LGBTQ family members. The reframing that occurred leading up to 2015 of diverse LGBTQ families being important, vital, and wholesome is at risk of losing its representation. One Florida teacher wonders how it would impact discussions of students' families; “am I going to be violating this law because the children were having discussions about what their family looks like?” (Block).
It also ignores the experience of LGBTQ students, many of whom have some indication that they may be different in some way at a young age. It is perfectly reasonable to limit discussions of sex and sexuality to age-appropriate curricula, and teachers already do this. To completely prohibit any discussion of human diversity concerning sexuality or gender identity, as this bill does, removes teachers’ agency to help their students with what they are struggling with and limits how they can respond to issues like bullying. The bill claims to protect children, but functionally it only protects non-LGBTQ children.

Reframing the Issue

Given the long legacy of Americans’ fears about LGBTQ people seducing, abusing, and recruiting their children, the possibility of fully eliminating that misconception in the mind of the American public is negligible. However, the best approach for changing this frame likely comes in two forms; both countering misinformation and actively creating positive portrayals in the media. Supporting societal change around the protection and support of children also would support more positive narratives around this topic as well.

Combating Misinformation

The first response to the child abuse narrative is clear from the scientific literature on the matter. There is simply no evidence that LGBTQ individuals are more likely to abuse children. In a study conducted in 1994, researchers found that of all of the cases they evaluated, between “0-3.1% of abuse cases involved homosexual adults” which is “within current estimates of the prevalence of homosexuality in the general community” (Jenny et al). However, two high-profile cases of child sex abuse have been in the public psyche in recent years, those within the Boy
Scouts of America and the Catholic Church, both of which deal with male-male sexual abuse. Because of their incredibly public nature, these horrific cases of abuse have unfortunately informed the narrative of LGBTQ individuals, and gay men in particular, being predators.

As such, it is essential to the reframing process to make a distinction between homosexuality, defined as attraction to same-sex adult men or women, and pedophilia, defined as attraction to children. This distinction can be hard to grasp, because of the pervasive cultural rhetoric around the issue, but is well documented in psychological literature, both on homosexuality and on child sexual abuse. As detailed by the National Research Council, "the distinction between homosexual and heterosexual child molesters relies on the premise that male molesters of male victims are homosexual in orientation. Most molesters of boys do not report sexual interest in adult men" (National Research Council). Male-male child sexual abuse is most often committed by exclusively child-attracted pedophiles, who could not be considered homosexual men by definition. Education around the realities of child sexual abuse would help, both to combat the false narrative that LGBTQ individuals are more likely to offend, and to help bring into light the widespread and complex nature of child sexual abuse.

The response to the issue of transgender indoctrination is more complex, as there not as much research that has been done in this field of study. There is significant pressure from both conservatives and transgender activists to prevent studies on the “social transmissibility” of transgender identity, as both fear that the results could be weaponized for/or against the transgender rights movement. While there are fewer studies, there is evidence to suggest that like homosexuality, being transgender is not something that can be caught and as such, not something that can be induced in child (Smith et al). This fear comes out of both historical narratives of indoctrination, and also from the real phenomenon of higher rates of transgender people being
public about their identities. While there are higher numbers of both youth and adults identifying as transgender, this can be explained by rapidly increased social acceptance for a historically invisible and heavily oppressive population.

Creating Positive Narratives

A strong counter-narrative to the child abuse frame is the existence of happy, healthy families with LGBTQ parents and family members. Normalizing positive images of these families, like in the classic children's book, “Heather Has Two Mommies” provides a cultural baseline for a safe and healthy understanding of LGBTQ families, and futures. Positive and subtle representation, like that of the lesbian parents in Disney’s “Finding Dory”, or more historically, Will from “Will and Grace”, help to disarm the fears that more conservative America has as a result of this cultural frame. Another important cultural force for change is transgender celebrities and public figures being able to be public with their identities. Celebrities like Laverne Cox, Caitlyn Jenner, and more recently Elliot Page, regardless of their activism and political views, have helped to raise the public awareness of transgender experiences. Having these models of diverse, successful transgender people, especially individuals that the American public already has a relationship with, helps to demystify and destigmatize the “transgender ideology” that the bill, and Gov. Ron Desantis, is responding to.

Conclusion

Considering LGBTQ issues to be in opposition to the health and protection of children both prevents progress towards LGBTQ acceptance and also hinders legislation that would actually prevent the abuse of children. The two goals are not in opposition and the fact that they
are portrayed this way silences the experiences of both LGBTQ children and LGBTQ families, two groups that need the most legislative and cultural support. In Florida specifically, the Parental Rights in Education bill perpetuates this idea, pitting the needs of LGBTQ people and children against each other and impeding educators from serving the needs of their students. This comes as the final act in an ongoing saga of misdirection in Florida, starting with the Johns Committee and the Save Our Children Campaign. By listening to and promoting the voices of researchers who have found no correlation between LGBTQ individuals and child abuse, we can help both children and the LGBTQ fight for equality and acceptance.
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