



Stigma or Respect: Lesbian-parented Families Negotiating School Settings

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the interface between lesbian-parented families and mainstream society through the example of schools. Lesbian-parented families are an increasingly visible family form; they are diverse and complex and raise challenges for heteronormative social institutions. Based on qualitative family interviews with lesbian-parented families in Melbourne, we discuss the dialectic between schools and families. In many heteronormative school contexts family members were stigmatized and burdened by secrecy and fear about their family configuration. However, there were also a significant minority of family members who felt respected, supported and safe within the school environment. These parents and children were out and proud about their families, and schools had responded with acceptance in both the schoolyard and the curriculum. We discuss the contextual factors (including social location and family formation), impacting on and constraining the interface between the families and schools, and point to opportunities for change.

KEY WORDS

children / education / family / lesbians / qualitative research / sexuality / sociology

Introduction

In this article we explore the different ways in which lesbian parents and their children negotiate school contexts. We provide new knowledge about how minority families interact within contemporary social institutions such as schools. This is a crucial issue for members of lesbian-parented families¹ who face the possibility of stigmatization and abuse in mainstream settings and reduced educational outcomes (Eliason, 1996; Mercier and Harold, 2003). Schools are key socializing institutions that shape values and identities but they are also amenable to change in some local contexts.

Lesbian intimate relationships and lesbian-parented families have a long history; however the public acknowledgement of, and research into, 'lesbian families' is a late 20th-century development (Allen and Demo, 1995; Parks, 1998). Intentional childbearing outside heterosexual unions is perhaps the most original and controversial genre of family formation to have emerged in the West during many centuries. During the 1980s a lesbian baby boom began in industrialized countries such as Australia and the United States (Stacey, 1996). Since then, lesbian planned parenthood strategies have spread and diversified rapidly (Parks, 1998). Biological constraints mean that lesbians construct their family forms with an exceptional degree of reflection and intentionality (Parks, 1998). There are now a significant number of lesbian-parented families in North America, Western Europe, including Britain, and Australia. Recent estimates suggest that there are around 14 million gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender parents living in the US (Ryan and Martin, 2000). Australian lesbian community surveys indicate that one in five lesbians currently have children and more than 40 percent surveyed planned to have children (Victorian Gay and Lesbian Rights Lobby, 2001). Pathways to lesbian parenting are diverse, and we include lesbian step-families who have formed post-heterosexual relationships as well as lesbian couples who choose to have children in the context of their own relationship (e.g. via donor insemination, adoption, fostering etc.). We use the term 'de-novo' to describe these families.

Research evidence on the strengths of lesbian parented families (McNair et al., 2002; Perlesz and McNair, 2004), and increasing community support for *individual* gay rights in recent years, have not translated into positive community attitudes toward gay *families*. A recent ABC episode of 'Play School', the children's television show, had a brief segment portraying two lesbian mothers and their daughter playing in a park. This raised wide-ranging concerns from politicians, religious leaders and others in the community that playschool was involved in political indoctrination and teaching pre-schoolers about sex (Houlihan, 2004). As McLeod and Crawford (1998) note, 'the perceived violation of traditional gender and family ideologies contribute to the ascription of an "antifamily" status to gays and lesbians' (p. 218). Australian schools have legal obligations to provide 'safe and supportive environments' for students that are 'free from harassment and discrimination' (Australian National Council on AIDS, 1999). However, although there are areas within the Curriculum and

Standards Framework that offer opportunities for inclusion of sexual and gender diversity issues in school curricula, there are no policies on the compulsory inclusion or exclusion of topics such as family diversity or sexual diversity within that curriculum framework.

Lesbian-parented families throw up challenges for the heteronormative organization of social institutions such as schools. For three reasons schools provide a rich example of the interface between marginalized families and mainstream institutions. First, schooling is universal and compulsory in Western countries; second, children are outside the protection of their parents for extended periods of time; and third, schools are hostile environments for both gay and lesbian students (Baker, 2002). The curriculum is based on heterosexist assumptions, and homophobic discrimination and violence are common (Fineran, 2002; Van Wormer and McKinney, 2003). Programs and curricula which foster and support sexual diversity within schools have grown substantially in the last decade but have yet to have a broad impact (Casper et al., 1996; Chesir-Teran, 2003).

There is very little research on lesbian parents and their children negotiating the school context. The central theme of available research is the incidence of homophobic bullying. In Australia a study on the school experiences of children consisting of 117 questionnaires from lesbian or gay parents and potential parents and individual or group interviews with 48 children found high levels of bullying, teasing and silencing about their parents, and the schools seemed unable to tackle homophobia. Younger children in the first years of primary school experienced no teasing about their family but 44 percent of older children (grades 3–6) had been bullied. A climate of fear is more apparent for those in the early years of secondary school while those in their final years had an easier time (Ray and Gregory, 2003). Perlesz and McNair (2004) also found in an Australian survey of 151 lesbian parents that parents were particularly concerned about their children being potentially and/or actually bullied and harassed at school.

Mercier and Harold (2003) conducted in-depth interviews with a small sample of mid-western lesbian parents in the US (21 women from 15 families). They found that families used two strategies to minimize their children's experience of homophobia at school. Parents selected schools known for openness and multi-culturalism and had direct contact with teachers and administrators. Some non-biological parents also had a 'self-imposed invisibility' within the school. In a small Ohio sample of lesbian parents and their children, parents and children reported good experiences within schools (McLaughlin, 1995). While some evidence suggests that children may be subjected to family-related teasing, other studies have found that, overall, children of lesbian parents face no more teasing or harassment than other children (Golombok et al., 1997; Vanfraussen et al., 2002). In this sparse research lesbian families are presented as a homogeneous type and there is little attention to the social context inhabited by different families.

Ryan and Martin neglect the possibility of different social contexts in their solutions-focused article based on a review of the literature and their own previous unpublished studies in the US. They argue:

It is most advantageous for the child, the family and the entire school community when a family chooses to be completely open with everyone about having sexual minority parents. (Ryan and Martin, 2000: 208)

They identify the benefits of openness and acknowledge that openness may invite harassment but argue that this can be directly addressed. As we will argue in this article, what is missing from this progressive outlook is an appreciation of how conservative school contexts may not be amenable to openness about homosexuality, regardless of strategies of disclosure used by parents and children.

We extend the research on lesbian-parented families and schooling by taking a sociological perspective and examining the constraining and enabling characteristics of different social contexts. Moreover, our research method has allowed us to collect more complex and nuanced data through family interviews which simultaneously include the views of parents, children and other family members.

Methodology

This research adopts a grounded theory approach using qualitative data from family interviews with 20 lesbian-parented families. Families were recruited by snowballing and purposive sampling. They were recruited by advertising in lesbian and gay media, at a gay pride march and gay and lesbian festival, lesbian community forums and health professional networks, in a search for less 'out' families. From this pool we selected for maximum diversity a sample of varying ages, family formation, ethnicity, class and geographical location in urban, rural and regional Victoria, Australia.

Lesbian parents were invited to nominate who they would like to be involved in a family interview and all but one family included their child/ren. The families were interviewed in one single in-depth interview lasting from 1.5 hours to 5 hours. Participants included 36 lesbian parents (aged between 29 and 62 years), parenting 43 children (aged 4 years to 34 years), 20 of whom were interviewed, three grandparents, and two donor/fathers. One family included the donor/father in the interview, while one donor/father was interviewed separately.

Of the 20 families interviewed, almost half included lesbian parents who had conceived children through known or unknown donors in the context of their current lesbian partnership (one from a previous lesbian relationship). However, only one of these nine families included a child in the interview who was older than six years of age. In the other 11 families who participated in the study, children had been conceived and partially raised in heterosexual relationships prior to living with lesbian parents and children sometimes moved

between lesbian and heterosexual-parented households. Seven of these families were lesbian step-families and the remaining four were single-parent families. The analysis in this article draws primarily from data from interviews with the 13 families where children were of an age that made schooling issues an important concern.

The families were ethnically diverse and included 11 families with participants from Anglo-Australian backgrounds and two families with Australian aboriginal backgrounds. Two families had participants from Southern European backgrounds, three families had Northern European backgrounds and three families had Eastern European backgrounds. There were two families with Asian backgrounds and one with a Latino background. Although the current study was undertaken within an Australian context, we believe that the findings are relevant to family life in other multi-ethnic, Anglo-based Western societies.

The interviews were audio-taped and fully transcribed. The transcripts were coded according to themes emerging from the data and from the literature. The NVivo qualitative software package was used to support the data analysis.

Conceptual Framework

In the last decade or so heterosexuality has been theorized as culturally constructed and compulsory but increasingly fragile and unstable (Butler, 1996; Hawkes, 1996). Although the idea of sexuality has been deconstructed (Weeks, 2003), the postmodern promise of flexibility and a weakening of the boundaries between heterosexual and 'other' are yet to be realized in mainstream practice (Hawkes, 1996: 147). Increased freedoms and new possibilities for relationships and families are available in some social locations although these are rarely specified in the sexualities literature.

In this article we focus on the ongoing processes that lesbian-parented families engage in when their children attend school. We focus on the strategies individual family members employ, and their agency within the local social contexts of schools. We identify the constraining and enabling features of different settings and highlight the possibilities for challenging the heteronormative organization of social life. We take a largely interactionist approach to explore the dialectic between lesbian-parented families and schools and how this interface is constrained by the wider social context. Insights from classic interactionist sociology are useful in conceptualizing the ongoing performance work and anxiety involved for lesbian parents and children in negotiating potentially hostile mainstream organizations.

Drawing on Goffman's work on stigma, a lesbian identity is a 'discreditable' social identity in many school settings (Goffman, 1973). Put briefly, discredited individuals are disqualified from full social acceptance because they do not fit idealized, normative categories and roles. Goffman focuses on social relationships and social processes rather than attributes and in his schema the roles of stigmatized and normal are played by every individual in some phases of life.

In many contexts heterosexual parents are viewed as 'normal' while lesbian parents are stigmatized. Although members of lesbian-parented families are not obviously different to others, the chance that their 'undesired difference' may be exposed and discredited is an ongoing burden (Goffman, 1973). In most contexts, managing information about parents' sexual orientation is an ongoing and fraught 'coming out' process in which family members must decide 'to display or not to display; to tell or not to tell; to let in or not let on; to lie or not to lie; and in each case, to whom, how, when and where' (Goffman, 1973: 57).

Individuals in lesbian families actively manage information about lesbian identity or 'coming out'. We have identified three major strategies of disclosure which form a continuum – the proud, the selective and the private. The 'proud' strategy involved a commitment to active disclosure of lesbian sexual identity. The 'selective' strategy was where family members chose to disclose or conceal their identity depending on the micro context. The 'private' strategy involved deliberate and active non-disclosure. The private and selective strategies are complicated in school settings because there are multiple interacting audiences including individual teachers and the staff in general, children's friends and peers, and parents' social connections within the school community. These multiple audiences are sometimes unpredictable and their responses are beyond the control of families.

The position of the school toward lesbian-parented families also operates across a continuum. At one end schools can be 'homophobic', negative and stigmatizing in their response to lesbian-parented families. In 'heteronormative' settings lesbian-parented families are not given legitimacy but are tolerated if kept secret. This is an assimilation approach (Hawkes, 1996). At the other end of the continuum 'supportive' schools are accepting of lesbian-parented families in the schoolyard and through the curriculum and administration. Diversity is celebrated and children with lesbian parents are simply one family type among others.

In this article we explore the lived experience of family members when these two continuums meet and the children attend school. Our focus is to document the performances of family that are possible in different social contexts. The interaction between the families' and the schools' approaches has interesting outcomes. Often there is congruence between the family strategy and the school context. For example, families close ranks and hide themselves within a homophobic school environment or, by contrast, families are out and proud in schools that celebrate family diversity. When there is no congruence between the family strategy and the school context, the result can be socially uncomfortable – in some instances parents and children are forced to change their strategy and at other times schools actively change their approach. The interaction and outcomes are context specific. School and family approaches are not always consistent as individuals within a family sometimes adopt different approaches to coming out and, similarly, individual teachers or peers within a school can have a variety of approaches to lesbian-parented families. Nevertheless, the interaction between individuals and schools is also constrained by larger social forces including class and disadvantage. In this article

we aim to provide a nuanced account of the interface between the family and the school but also point out the crisis tendencies in the system and the opportunities and possibilities for progressive change.

Lesbian Parents and Their Children Negotiate School

When the lesbian-parented families in this study negotiate with the mainstream context of school there is a complex interplay between the wider social context and individual family members. Schools are an integral part of family life and the relationship between a family and the school is usually a long-term one. Changing schools requires forging a new set of relationships for both parents and children and therefore cannot be undertaken easily or lightly. For lesbian-parented families and schools the stakes are high. We are not simply talking about progressive families not quite fitting into a conservative context but more fundamental issues of parents and children feeling respected and safe rather than feeling ashamed, excluded, stigmatized, discriminated against or bullied.

The lived experience and strategies chosen to deal with schools depend on the history of family (whether heterosexual or de-novo conception), the age of children (whether children are currently in the early years of primary school or older), and the extent to which lesbian-parented families have a profile in the local community and the school. The presence of other lesbian-parented families within school and/or lesbian teachers at the school was also important. Other key elements include the nature of the curriculum (particularly whether there is a positive acceptance of family diversity), the resilience of children within the family, and the parents' engagement in sexual politics.

The social context and demographics within and around the school are important for understanding school experiences. Those families who live in a generally more open minded, inner city suburb that is both cosmopolitan and diverse had a better chance of having positive experiences within the school setting. The socio-economic status and ethnic diversity in the local community also had an impact on school experiences. Working-class suburbs and middle and upper-middle class suburbs dominated by people from white Anglo backgrounds seemed less accommodating than inner city suburbs that are dominated by the educated middle-class. In Australia recent debates on social divisions identify tertiary education as a key mechanism dividing the population. It has been argued that occupation and income are less influential dividers than previously and tertiary education is now a proxy for class. The inner suburbs of Melbourne have a high proportion of people with tertiary educations (35% compared with a national average of 18%), high access to information and tend to be more accepting of ethnic diversity and immigration (Simons, 2005) and, as we found in this study, more accepting of sexual diversity. Moreover, some theoretical work has argued that it is only within the new urban middle-classes of industrialized economies that queer identities are fully available (Adkins, 2002).

In the next section we discuss examples of the interaction between family strategy and school approach. We begin with conservative ends of the continua, private strategies in homophobic contexts, and move to the progressive ends of the continua, proud strategies in supportive contexts. Approximately half of the families participating in our study used a private strategy in a conservative context while a third were proud in a supportive context and the others lay somewhere in between.

Private Strategies and Homophobic Contexts

Secrecy is a major theme in the families' discussions about school. A key strategy of seven of the 13 families was to largely hide their family arrangements within the school setting, telling us 'It's not their business'. As the quotations below demonstrate, while parents' secrecy was largely designed to protect their children from homophobic reactions, a range of other negative outcomes resulted for some of these children.

'It's Not Their Business'

The families who chose to keep their parents' lesbianism secret in the school setting tended to live in communities they perceived as hostile and intolerant, with no lesbian presence in the local community. For Samantha and Fay this included some working-class suburbs, where they did not know any other lesbians, for Anna and Greta a rich Anglo-dominated suburb, while Helen and Nicky felt constrained in a conservative rural community.

Both Greta and her partner Anna have children from previous heterosexual relationships.

Greta: I knew just what that scene was like and it was vicious ... and I thought it was very important that they be able to keep the situation quiet. I really felt it would have been very unwise, and we didn't do anything at all to rock that boat, because we were highly aware of this situation she [a 15-year-old daughter] was having to cope with.

The private strategy was more likely to be used by families with heterosexual histories. Some fathers were still involved with their children and they were viewed as the legitimate parent at school functions such as parent-teacher interviews. Individual family members have different roles and perspectives and adopt different strategies according to the context. For example, Maureen, a non-birth mother, was out and proud in many social contexts but adopted a more private strategy in the school context. She felt it would be 'too crowded' at parent-teacher interviews with three parents there, even though the children wanted her to be actively involved.

Families using the private strategy were rarely able to keep their family structure completely secret. In all of these families negative social sanctions had

been meted out to the children. All of the parents were highly protective of their children but schoolyard politics were beyond their control. 'Normality' emerges as a key theme in the way many of these children speak about their experiences. Drawing on Goffman, the emphasis on idealized normative categories means that full social acceptance in conservative schools is not possible if you have lesbian parents (Goffman, 1973). In many of the families the children used a process of trial and error to decide how to manage information about their parents' lesbianism. Those who had experienced discrimination at school were more likely to adopt more selective or private strategies to manage everyday life but may try a more open strategy a few years later, as at least three of the children in this study had.

Many of the children in lesbian-parented families are involved in a complex process of information management about their family. They are heavily influenced by their parent/s' stance on secrecy as well as perceived levels of support within the school. Coming out about their families to friends or peers was risky and in some circumstances was a positive experience, but for others it resulted in hostile reactions and negative social sanctions such as exclusion and bullying. Children share the stigma of their parents' sexual orientation and sometimes the sexuality of the parents can be attributed to the child (Ray and Gregory, 2001).

Some children had learned to keep their family experiences out of the classroom. Dianne (aged 13) described how in grade 4 in primary school she discussed the pride march at show and tell. Her teacher, Mr Smith, told her 'We do not discuss those things at school'. Two years later she did not feel able to talk about her lesbian parents' commitment ceremony even though this was a significant family event. It is a poignant example of how a child from a marginalized family is silenced at school.

Dianne: I was disappointed I think. Yeah, I can't remember if I shared the commitment ceremony at school. I don't think I did because of what Mr Smith [her teacher] said [about the pride march], that we didn't really speak about it at school.

Int: Mmm, so that really stopped you speaking about it?

Dianne: Yeah, because otherwise it would have been all over the school.

Penny (aged 13) had also learnt through experience that her family was not socially acceptable. She recounts her cruel awakening in grade 4 which influenced how she managed information about her parents' sexuality subsequently. She began with a proud strategy but subsequently moved to a private strategy.

Penny: I had been really open about it like in grade 4, I remember a time of show and tell and I just go 'Robyn did this' and one boy said 'who was that?', and I'm like 'that's my mum's lesbian partner'. And at that point everybody goes, 'Oooohhhh, that's gross, that's gross, that's gross'. I just burst into tears and ran out. And my teacher told everybody to say sorry to me and everything. But I just knew that everybody had that bad thing against it.

Bianca (now 18 years old) had a long history of discrimination to discuss in the interview. She had been teased and marginalized so by the time she got to secondary school she was careful only to tell people who would keep the secret. Although Bianca put a considerable amount of effort into managing information about her family, her peers at school were unpredictable.

Bianca: I remember Kate, I was best friends with her, and when she found out she didn't talk to me for ages and then she came and apologized to me one day because she found out that her sister was a lesbian so ...

This is a classic example of how fear turns into acceptance when social contexts change. To use Goffman's language the discreditable social identity becomes creditable, the stigmatized person is now perceived as normal by Kate (Bianca's peer).

While for some of the children their family's strategy and teachers' responses influence their disclosure strategy, for others age appears to be a key element in decisions to keep the secret or not. In particular, the secondary school environment was perceived to be less tolerant of difference than primary school and some young people in the early years of secondary school felt intensely stigmatized, or feared being stigmatized, because of their family arrangements. Our data suggest that girls have a more difficult time managing information about their family with peers than boys. Given that self-disclosure is a key element of girls' friendships, perhaps more openness is demanded of them than boys.

In Robyn and Susan's family (with children from a previous heterosexual relationship), there was an acute awareness of the importance of age when negotiating with peers and trying to minimize hostile reactions at school. Young primary schoolchildren and senior secondary students were more accepting of lesbian-parented families than students in late primary and early secondary school. In the quotes that follow note the complex tasks, such as acting and blending and pretending, that are involved in presenting the self in the school setting following a mainly private disclosure strategy. Siblings Mark (17) and Penny (13) have a perceptive discussion of their experiences in the interview.

Int: Mark is saying at his age you know it's really hard but he's kind of saying at your age it's a bit tougher ...

Mark (aged 17): Yeah, until about year 11 I reckon ...

Penny (aged 13): Yeah, but people use ... 'Lesos' and 'dykes' as insults at people, as in like ...

Mark: Like it's a bad thing to be that

Penny: Yeah.

Mark: So you just can't, you can't go up and say yeah well my mum's thingo because otherwise 'What! Your mum's like this?' 'What kind of a person are you?'... It's just shockin'.

Mark felt able to withdraw or 'step back' from conversations that might expose the secret of his family arrangements. But his younger sister Penny is less able to withdraw from conversations with homophobic themes. Some of her peers conceptualize lesbianism as contagious, which leads to further stigmatization.

Penny: Because everyone ... like say Josephine, one of my best friends, she knows and whenever something comes up like that *I happen to be a really good actress at covering things up*, you know. And she's making it really obvious that I know something about that.

Later in the interview she talks about the possible impact on dating boys.

And so if I ever wanted to date another guy from that school, if that rumour happened to be that mum's gay, then they wouldn't be interested, they would think 'Oh my gosh she can't go out with me she's gay as well'.

Penny prefers Robyn (non-birth mother) to have a lower involvement now she is in secondary school in comparison to primary school. Both parents acknowledge and accept this. Robyn stays in the background at school events and accepts the social invisibility that the daughter prefers in this new context. As Robyn explains, 'I blend well'.

One implication of the private strategy is that heteronormative assumptions made by the school are not openly challenged and support for the family cannot be openly requested. Susan (birth mother) and Robyn (non-birth mother) had been adopting a private strategy with Penny's current school but decided to become more selective and disclose to particular teachers when Penny was hurt by a homophobic comment a teacher had made.

In the highly conservative homophobic context that Lorraine (birth mother, child from previous heterosexual relationship, currently single) and Alison (aged 14) inhabit the costs of not keeping their family a secret are high. Alison is struggling at secondary school for a variety of reasons and her mother's lesbianism is a further point of vulnerability. Alison had already changed schools in an attempt to stop bullying. The quote that follows is an upsetting reminder that schools are dangerous for children from families who do not fit the norm.

Lorraine: They were telling everybody that Alison was molested by her mother because her mother is a lesbian ...

Int: So how do you deal with that Alison?

Alison: Sometimes I just try to ignore it, which is very hard because they just keep repeating it and repeating it.

Lorraine: Words can't really hurt. Ignoring it is the best thing and then you come and talk to me and to your teachers.

Alison: But Mum! You try and keep ignoring it sometimes.

Lorraine: Yeah I know it's hard, I'm not saying it's easy.

Alison: Especially when they are piffing a ball at you.

It seems unlikely that this isolated mother and daughter can effectively challenge homophobia in their school context.

Exclusion in School Curriculum and Administration

As family activities are central to most children's lives, and family is a core organizing feature of society, it is inevitable that family life emerges as a topic in the

school curriculum. Lesbian-parented families lie outside taken for granted heteronormative assumptions and are therefore excluded from the classroom discussion. Some teachers seem bewildered when they are asked whether their curriculum supports family diversity.

The embarrassment of some teachers when asked about lesbian-parented families may be due to a common confusion of sexual orientation with sexual behaviour. Some teachers may be confusing openness about family arrangements with a necessity to discuss sexual behaviour which should be kept private (Ryan and Martin, 2000). Discomfort with families being open about the sexual orientation of parents appears to be common in the teaching profession and in the wider society.

Anne (birth mother, currently single, child from previous heterosexual relationship) talks about choosing a school for her daughter Melanie (aged 5). When asked 'what do you teach about gay families?' the teacher was visibly shocked and replied 'We don't teach them anything about that!' In some families quite young children took the lead in challenging and educating their teachers. For example Rebecca (aged 9) corrected her teacher and normalized her family arrangements when she was in grade 2 when the teacher asked 'Why did you put two mums?' 'He thought I'd made a mistake', she explained. 'I said, because I have two mums.'

The most striking example of challenging heteronormative thinking is 5-year-old Wendy (now aged 12), conceived in a de-novo family.

Lucy (birth mother): The principal said 'Oh I've just had the longest argument with your daughter, I told her she has got a father and she's been insisting she hasn't' and the principal said 'She says she's got a donor and I've told her that everyone has to have a father because you couldn't have been born without a father and she's been insisting that she hasn't got one' and um ...

Lillian (non-birth mother): Each time she said 'No, I haven't got a father'.

Lucy: And she was not intimidated by the principal because she had only started school so she didn't know about [authority]. (all laugh)

By the time children are more aware of the wider social context and have been embarrassed or reprimanded within the school setting a late addition to the curriculum can be excruciating. Penny (aged 13) discusses new teachers: 'They've gone to uni and learnt all of this when they haven't lived it', but to get up and discuss her experiences would be to 'humiliate myself'. Despite these agonizing experiences Penny is grateful to teachers who discuss lesbian and gay families and she would like her peers to be educated. 'If they were educated, it would be okay, they wouldn't be negative about it ... adults are so much more okay about it these days'.

Exclusion of lesbian-parented families also occurs at an administrative level. Three families spoke about the non-birth mother being excluded in the school's administrative procedures such as enrolment forms asking for fathers' details.

Inflexible Heteronormative Contexts: 'That's Not Our Business'

Some families may want to adopt a proud strategy with active disclosure but the school is unwilling to credit their lesbian family identities. Four families felt that schoolteachers and principals wanted them to keep their family arrangements secret within the school setting. There is a sense that these teachers were homophobic themselves or they felt unable to deal with sexual diversity in the curriculum or be responsible for consequences if the secret came out. With varying degrees of success the parents in these families actively challenged and educated the teachers about why inclusion and understanding would be important for their children.

Anne (birth mother, currently single) struggled with the idea of secrecy during the process of selecting schools for her daughter (aged 5) and at the current school at a recent parent/teacher interview.

This teacher said 'Oh well, ... What goes on in your own house is nobody's business but your own', and I was just like 'Well to some extent, yeah, but I want you to know. I want you to ... know the background of our family so you can respond to the children appropriately', and say 'Yeah, Melanie's mum does have a girlfriend and that's fine' instead of saying 'Ooh Ooh we don't talk about that'.

Sometimes the school culture is not amenable to change. In a primary school in another rural town the deputy principal stopped children bullying Alison but made no other changes and insisted that 'Alison shouldn't be talking about it at school'. Similarly, when a teacher at the regional town primary school told Dianne, aged 13, that she shouldn't be talking about her family or the Pride March in class, Cath (birth-mother) challenged the teacher directly:

Yeah, I put a rocket under him and I said 'You cannot discriminate against Dianne's family, and if Dianne wants to talk about her family at school then she can do that. And she needs to know it is a safe environment and that it's just as acceptable as any other family'. And he said 'Oh, it's just that the children will go home and you know, their parents will be up here' and I said 'Well you need to educate the parents'.

Cath was later asked by a lesbian teacher within the school to contribute as a parent to a new school policy on sexual harassment. While teachers listened to her suggestions they did not implement them.

Karen and Jean (both birth mothers and non-birth mothers) reflect on the resilience required of families in a conservative context. They parent two girls from Jean's previous heterosexual relationship and one pre-schooler from within their relationship and feel that the school in their local context is damaging their children.

Karen: I think probably children of gay families are a lot more resilient than other kids because of what they have to deal with ...

Jean: Sometimes you just want to trust the so-called professionals, to do the right thing by your child [to be] included and validated no matter what your family of origin. But you know the school system doesn't do that very well I think. Some

schools do it very well, some schools have great policies and yeah we know where they are, and *they're not around here*.

Proud Strategies and Supportive Contexts

Fortunately for some lesbian-parented families, schools are supportive. Over a third of the families (five out of 13) reported significant school support for their family arrangements. This support was created by the actions of both schools and the families themselves. The supportive schools used a number of strategies including responding to families in positive and accepting ways, having lesbian teachers who showed solidarity with the children and parents, including family diversity as part of the curriculum and by buying books representing lesbian-parented families. In this way they educated other parents and children at the school.

Our data also point to the strategies used by families to actively create this supportive environment. This includes carefully selecting schools, coming out to teachers and principals from the beginning and directly challenging homophobia when necessary. These families tended to have younger children and those born within the relationship.

Ella and Sally (de-novo family) sought a supportive environment for their daughter (aged 4) and they had the means to afford a private kindergarten connected to a school. They researched extensively before choosing a supportive school. Their forthright approach appears to be re-shaping the curriculum. They asked: 'How are you going to incorporate difference into the program and how are you going to experience difference as a positive thing?' The kindergarten responded positively and put posters up about different families and purchased new books about lesbian-parented families for their library.

One particular inner city school had an 'out' lesbian principal for 17 years and a supportive culture had been created. Janet and Maureen (de-novo family, both birth mothers and non-birth mothers) researched schools carefully and came out about their family in the first instance, although this style of information management was not without anxiety.

Janet: It's a hard thing to do. It's not something that's easy.

Int: What makes it hard?

Janet: Just having to put your personal life out, out on the table with people at that stage. You don't want to and you're hoping that they're going to sort of take that information with integrity and use it sensibly.

The world can appear quite different depending on the immediate social context inhabited and created by the family. For example, one aspect of Janet and Maureen's professional/political work is to encourage educational settings to support family diversity. Their professional experiences and personal experiences as parents in a supportive inner city school mean they have a different life-world to lesbian-parented families in other settings. In some places, such as

inner city diverse communities, the world has moved on and lesbian-parented families are part of the diverse mix of families rather than a stigmatized group.

Janet: I see from our [lesbian play] group's perspective anyway, there's a high level of anxiety about the whole primary school stuff and a lot of it's not necessary and I think it's partly because maybe well, obviously because we're in the system anyway, we see it from a different angle, but there's such diversity out there as far as family structure ... That our kids ... don't particularly stand out and you know, most [inner city] teachers ... are pretty good now at being very inclusive about the language they use and all that sort of stuff.

However the experiences of Wendy (aged 14) from a de-novo family who have adopted a proud strategy to disclosure suggest that she is under subtle pressure to become more selective as she gets older. There is a definite change in the way Wendy manages information now that she is at secondary school in comparison to primary school.

Int: And what did you say [at primary school]?

Wendy: I don't really remember. I think I just said I have two mums.

Int: And did kids ask you about that when you say that, that you have two mums? Do they understand that?

Wendy: It's hard to tell because when they are kind of like in primary school, like everyone just asks anything and they're like 'how did that happen, what happened?' but when they are kind of older it's just kind of okay we'll leave it. Yeah ... Well not like totally leave it, I just like telling my best friends and stuff.

Int: Mmhm

Wendy: Yeah.

Int: Okay, so you just tell your best friends?

Wendy: Not because I'm keeping a secret but nobody else really wants to know, like nobody asks.

Ray and Gregory's research found that primary school students with lesbian parents were subject to relentless personal questions about their family by their peers or, to use Goffman's term, 'morbid curiosity' where questions follow classic formulae (Goffman, 1973; Ray and Gergory, 2001). Clearly the questions have diminished for Wendy now that she is in secondary school, but instead of acceptance her family is now a conversation topic to be avoided. This suggests she is moving from a proud to a selective strategy.

Conclusion

The data reported here offer an insight into lived experience and lives in progress. We found that progressive change is only possible in contexts where families are able to be selective or proud in their approach to disclosure and schools strive to be accepting rather than homophobic.

There is a complex interplay between the local community, the school setting, individual teachers, families as a whole and the individual child in the ways in which 'coming out' in schools is negotiated. Our data suggest that social

context was an important factor in shaping these interactions with the school system. Children from de-novo families who live in middle-class, inner-city, gay friendly, culturally mixed communities, with schools where there is a lesbian presence on staff and among the school's community of parents, tended to have more positive experiences in both the classroom and the schoolyard than children in more conservative contexts. Our small in-depth study does not allow us to generalize, but these findings about social context are worthy of further research.

The congruence between the parents' preferred strategy for disclosure and the school's tolerance of disclosure is important for understanding experiences of the school system. The progressive argument for openness made by Ryan and Martin (2000) is unrealistic for some families where the risks of rejection, discrimination and harassment are real, and for others who prefer a private strategy, regardless of the school environment. Some families are in a stronger position to challenge heterosexism than others. In a strongly homophobic context it is entirely rational to keep family arrangements secret and for non-biological parents to engage in 'self-imposed invisibility' (Mercier and Harold, 2003). However, in more progressive contexts some parents and children can challenge heterosexism, re-shape school curricula and administration, and educate the wider school community.

Children had various disclosure experiences also. There were multiple influences on their strategies including their parents' strategies, teachers' responses, peer responses and age. These influences created a highly dynamic pattern of disclosure by children and their parents, shifting at times towards, and at other times away from, disclosing their family structure. Homophobic responses created wariness, and positive responses created openness, but this was not static. Children in particular displayed a watchful approach that allowed change and adaptability.

The policy implications of our findings are that, first, it should be education policy that family diversity, including children with lesbian parents, is accepted in school administration and in the school curriculum in all schools. Second, there is an urgent need to educate teachers that diverse family configurations can be accepted within the school without reverting to discussions about sex (although a discussion of diverse sexual preferences within the health education curriculum would be useful too). Third, educational interventions that normalize diverse family forms should be targeted to conservative outer suburban and rural locations and to students in the early years of secondary school.

In conclusion, life in the schoolyard is not easy for the parents and children in this study who are at the forefront of social change. However, we can be inspired by their resilience, resourcefulness and humour as we foster wide social acceptance of diverse families in general and lesbian-parented families in particular.

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Note

- 1 In this article for the sake of brevity we use the term 'lesbian-parented families'. By this we mean that at least one of the parents is lesbian.

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