

University of Alberta

Perspectives of Lesbian Mothers Regarding their Families' Experiences
with Alberta Schools

by

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This study explores the perspectives of four lesbian mothers from three different families regarding their families' experiences with Alberta schools. Participants for this study were recruited using snowball sampling and included two recently separated lesbian mothers and one lesbian couple. Informed by case study methodology, data for this study was collected using interviews and artifacts created through pre-interview activities. Findings of the study include: these lesbian-parented families face challenges that are both unique to their family makeup and similar to those faced by other families; the reporting of positive experiences in school by these mothers included examples of what the researcher considered to be disrespect and lack of forethought; these lesbian-parented families feel that the responsibility for educating others about lesbian-parented families falls to the members of these families; these families hope for change in school curriculum, programming and policies that focuses on making all types of difference visible.

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Chapter One: Introduction and Context

“Once upon a time most families in books looked like this – one daddy, one mummy, one little boy, one little girl, one dog and one cat. But in real life, families come in all sorts of shapes and sizes” (Hoffman, 2010, p. 1).

Coming to the Study

I like them to know. I wouldn't say that I'm trying to show off, but I think that they should know:

Dear Parents,

You should be aware that in addition to teaching your children the social ropes of schooling, guiding their development of self-concept and early literacy and numeracy strategies, emotional intelligence and how to properly wash their hands I am also, you know, on the side, getting my Masters degree.

Sincerely,

Tired Teacher

Being a young teacher is tough; you don't quite have the same authority wielded by the older and wiser teachers. So, I like to just throw it out there so that parents may come to see that I am knowledgeable and that I am truly dedicated to my job, their children, dirty Kleenexes, sticky fingers and all. So, I faced a dilemma when the following conversation occurred between a small group of parents and my inner and outer-selves at my school's open house the evening before the first day of class:

Parent: So, you are working on your Masters?

Shannon: Yes, I've just finished my coursework and now I'm beginning to work on my thesis.

Parent: Good for you! What's your topic?

Inner Shannon: *Oh no! What are you going to say? You just met these people; you don't know anything about them. Hmm, do they look homophobic? I don't think so...wait, what does a homophobic person look like? Do I really want to risk starting off on the wrong foot with this family? Wait, how can there be a "wrong foot" when you are talking about tolerance, no, tolerance isn't the word. Acceptance? Acknowledgement?*

Shannon: I'm going to be exploring the experiences of alternative families in our schooling system.

Parent: Oh, ok, so like single moms?

Inner Shannon: *Why did I say "alternative"? Alternative to what? Single moms? Are they alternative? This is the moment; do I tell them that what I really mean is lesbians? Will they suddenly think I'm a lesbian? So what if they do – there's nothing wrong with that. Why do I care? What if they are crazy homophobes and they suddenly don't want me teaching their child?*

Shannon: Yeah, like that. I'm really excited about it.

When you teach four-year-olds you learn that you must go back to the basics: we don't lie. Moreover we don't even say the word "lie," we say other, softer, things like "making up a story." We shouldn't "make up stories," because it is important to always "tell the real story." But what if telling the real story

means that people might have a different opinion of us all of a sudden? An opinion that we think might affect the way they think about us, talk to us, talk about us (or maybe the fact that they talk about us at all)?

Clearly, my desire to “let them know” about my studious endeavors was at odds with my desire to be liked, accepted and acknowledged as “good” by these parents. My concern that my research topic might elicit a less-than-desired response was not unfounded. In the previous school year I had the uncomfortable experience of announcing my area of interest to a dinner table of University faculty and a visiting scholar. After briefly discussing my topic the scholar, seated directly to my right, told me that “such things” would not be discussed where she came from. We spent the remainder of the evening in stilted silence. Engaging in the above outlined inner struggle on a semi-regular basis led me to some deeper questions. What if the real story isn’t just that I am writing a thesis about lesbian mothers? To some this is enough of a crime and to some (like this writer) this is enough to worry about. What if the truth is that you are a lesbian mother? What must that feel like?

My journey to the topic of experiences of lesbian-parented families in Alberta schools began with an interest in the ways gender and sexuality are constructed and imposed by and on individuals and communities. For some time I have been aware of and interested in how gender and sexuality shape our identities through societal stereotypes. Experiences with gay and lesbian acquaintances in my life continued to develop my interest in the subject as I became more aware of the challenges facing the LGBTQ community. Finally, the

opportunity to work with a lesbian-parented family in my preschool classroom shifted my focus from individuals to families. Working with these two inspiring mothers opened my eyes to the ways in which family is represented in our society and the deep-rooted stereotypes we perpetuate with children.

One of these mothers shared with me her concerns regarding how her family would be represented in the classroom. After our initial conversation during which she shared these concerns with me I was troubled and took time to reflect on the need for this parent to worry about her child's inclusion and acceptance in my classroom. After my initial meeting with the family I started to become more aware of the family stereotypes perpetuated in our society and in our schools. I started to think more carefully about the words that I used and the books that I read. I was startled to discover how often I was guilty of presenting heterosexual couples as "normal." Despite the fact that I now had a more heightened awareness of my representation of family I was alarmed to notice the frequency with which I would "slip up" and fall back into heteronormative stereotypes of family.

Next came the books. As I was preparing a project for my class on families I began searching for children's literature that was representative of gay- and lesbian-parented families. I was not surprised to discover that there were few titles available on the topic and I was troubled to learn how difficult it was to access these titles. This thought was in mind as I began taking a graduate-level children's literature course at the University where we spent some time examining and discussing frequently challenged children's book titles. I learned that many

of the frequently challenged books were so because of some (perceived or real) reference to homosexuality. A research paper on a topic of interest was required for this course and I chose to take a closer look at the representative children's literature currently available and how it is used in our schools.

Overall the findings of my research paper were: there is little representative children's literature currently available; the majority of what is available is not of high quality; and that access to said literature is limited. The conclusions that were reached by those scholars writing on the topic were that while much of this literature is not high quality it is still vitally important to the education of both hetero- and homosexually-parented children. Despite its quality, this literature is highly important to the gay and lesbian family community, this literature matters.

During the time I was conducting research for my children's literature paper I became aware that one of the lesbian mothers I was working with wrote an online blog. This blog, I soon discovered, discussed a variety of topics including but not limited to issues faced by lesbian couples and by lesbian-parented families. I was intrigued by the struggles outlined on the blog, many of which I had never considered, and surprised by the overall tone of the writing. I began to see that I had a preconceived idea of what the attitude of a lesbian mother would be towards other families, parents and society as a whole. I reflected on my beliefs and began to see that I was doing this family as much a disservice by projecting onto them my view of their world as prejudiced heterosexuals were

doing by projecting their beliefs of heteronormativity. I knew that I needed to further examine this topic; it was becoming more complicated.

As I worked with my Junior Kindergarten class I began to notice how deeply engrained heteronormative views of family were in children as young as four years old. I began to wonder more and more about how this lesbian-parented family in my class perceived the world of school. I wondered if my classroom felt like a welcoming space to them, I wondered if they would find this welcoming space in their child's next school. Did my efforts to seek out representative literature and use inclusive language help? Or, was this family content with the world that they were a part of? Did they accept it? Did they want to change it? How would they view *my* attempts, a cultural outsider, to advocate on their behalf? Pondering these questions led me to my thesis research topic, or some semblance of it. As I moved forward in blind exploration of the research world I had already encountered obstacles that I did not expect.

* * *

In beginning work on my thesis I had countless discussions with people of varying ages, genders, sexual orientations and education levels on the topic of same-sex marriage and same-sex parenting. Among the most powerful of these conversations was one with my thesis advisor, Dr. Jill McClay, who brought to my attention the startling change of popular opinion concerning the topic. I find it fascinating to think that within the living members of my family there are such vastly different opinions on the topic of homosexuality. My grandfather's generation was not one of tolerance towards gays and lesbians and to hear a

mocking tone, lisped voice and flip of the wrist from him in any discussion of two males together or even one male who happens to enjoy art or interior design would not be uncommon. I would venture to guess, even, that his jokes and subtly camouflaged disapproval of the homosexual lifestyle are toned down because of his understanding of my research. Moving forward to my parents one finds a much more open generation of people willing to accept others as they are but with limited experiences in dealing with gay and lesbian people and their families. Finally, my group of mid-twenties friends exist in a world where homosexuality is beginning to gain clout in the realm of accepted ways of being and relationships and it has become popular opinion that “gay is ok.” It is interesting to think of the response that a statement such as that may have garnered in my grandfather’s youth. Now, in 2012, would the statement “gay is not ok” elicit an equally spirited reaction? It is often said that change is slow and this I believe to be very true. I can imagine that living *within* this change would be tedious and endlessly frustrating but as an outsider looking in I am pleased and surprised by the speed with which popular opinion is beginning to change.

Context

The following section provides an overview of the national and provincial contexts within which this study was conducted. This overview is followed by background information on same-sex parented families including how same-sex parented families are formed. Finally, this section presents a brief discussion of

the representation of same-sex parented families in popular culture and in the school setting.

National Statistics

In July of 2005 Canada nationally legalized same-sex marriage. This made Canada the third country in the world to legalize same-sex marriages following the Netherlands in 2000 and Belgium in 2003. The 2006 Canadian census was the first Canadian census to count same-sex married spouses and same-sex common-law partners. During this census 45300 same-sex couples were counted and of these 16.5% (about 7500) were married. The data found that the age distribution of same-sex couples was far younger than that of opposite-sex couples which logically follows from the knowledge that same-sex marriage was only legalized across Canada in 2005. It is safe to assume that if same-sex marriage had been legalized much earlier the aging population of same-sex couples would be greater. The census found that only 3.8% of same-sex couples were aged 65 or older whereas 16.0% of opposite-sex couples fell within the same age range. Census data found that slightly more than half, 53.7%, of the same-sex married spouses were male whereas 46.3% were female, similar statistics were also true of same-sex common-law partners. (Statistics Canada, 2008)

This census also provided the first national data on same-sex parented families. The data reveal that about 9% of same-sex couples, married or in common-law partnerships, had children. It is much more common for women in same-sex couples to have children than men, 16.3% of female same-sex couples had children whereas only 2.9% of male same-sex couples had children.

Additionally, married same-sex partners had a much higher instance of having children than their common-law counterparts. Comparing these statistics to those of Canada as a whole, the census reports that 41.4% of all Canadian couples (defined as two people of same or opposite sex living in a married or common-law relationship) have children. Although these two groups can not be compared with complete accuracy as the larger group of “Canadian couples” contains the sub-group of “Canadian same-sex couples” it is clear that the percentage of same-sex couples with children is still very significantly lower than the percentage of opposite-sex couples with children. (Statistics Canada, 2009)

Provincial Context

The history of same-sex rights in the province of Alberta is markedly different from that of other Canadian provinces. In her book *Queer Youth in the Province of the “Severely Normal,”* Filax (2006) referenced the comments of former Alberta premier Ralph Klein who used the term “severely normal” to “describe Albertans in relation to ‘outsiders’ who would disrupt Alberta’s conservative ways” (p. 167). Filax described Alberta under Klein’s leadership as “unique in the Canadian mosaic of ten provinces and three territories for its continued refusal to realign its human rights code or to extend human rights protections by reading homosexuality as a protected category into the provincial human rights code” (pp. xii-xiii). Klein believed that the “severely normal” citizens of Alberta did not support the national legalization of same-sex marriage (Filax, 2006, p. xiii). Klein spoke out publically against the legalization of same-sex marriage in Canada repeatedly, even threatening to invoke the

notwithstanding clause in an attempt to opt Alberta out of the legislation; this threat was later revoked (Tayler, 2011).

Klein's belief that Alberta's "severely normal" citizens were opposed to same-sex rights was, unfortunately, not entirely unfounded. In the 1990s the *Alberta Report*, a weekly magazine which, "in almost every issue, represented gays and lesbians as disgusting deviants" was widely circulated and often given free of charge to schools, libraries and businesses in the province (Filax, 2006, p. xiii). Filax described the impact of the magazine:

Alberta Report had a considerable impact on the discussion regarding who constitutes a legitimate Albertan. While in many ways it was a fiscally marginal magazine, *Alberta Report* had a significant impact on discourses about social values. (p. xiii)

It is evident that during the 1990s and early 2000s opposition and discontent characterized much of the public dialogue surrounding same-sex rights in Alberta.

The national legalization of same-sex marriage in Canada in 2005 decreased the "hot-topic" status of same-sex rights in Alberta, though this is not to say that the issue was put to rest. Even in the April 2012 provincial election the topic of 'conscience rights' brought into question, among other things, the right of same-sex couples to be married by any and all legal marriage commissioners (Thomson, 2012). Further, the use of the term "Redneckville" by a lesbian mother living in Alberta whose blog I regularly read lets me know that our province still has a ways to go to catch up with other Canadian provinces and territories with respect to same-sex rights.

The effects of same-sex rights discussions and debates can also be seen in Alberta's educational institutions. Revisions to the Alberta Human Rights Act made by the commonly referenced 'Bill 44,' were put in place by Alberta school boards in September of 2010. These revisions require that teachers, "Shall provide notice to a parent or guardian of a student where courses of study, educational programs or instructional materials, or instruction or exercises...include subject-matter that deals primarily and explicitly with religion, human sexuality or sexual orientation" (Government of Alberta, 2009, p. 8). The document makes explicit that the stipulation to notify parents or guardians of the outlined subject matter applies only to planned activities; "This section does not apply to incidental or indirect references to religion, religious themes, human sexuality or sexual orientation in a course of study, educational program, instruction or exercises or in the use of instructional materials" (p. 8). This provision, protecting incidental or indirect references, unfortunately, was not enough to stop a wave of backlash from Alberta teachers and school community members that played out in a public conversation, "In the pages of newspapers, on internet blogs, on Facebook and Twitter, on the floor of the legislature and in schools and homes across the province" (Theobald, 2009). It became apparent that the majority of teachers and school personnel were unhappy with the revisions and an organized response came from Alberta Education and the Alberta Teacher's Association:

In an effort to limit the potential effect of the bill on classroom instruction, Alberta Education, after consulting with the Alberta Teachers' Association

(ATA) and school boards, has issued guidelines to teachers and administrators that promote a narrow interpretation and application of the legislation. Assuming a business as usual position, the department states that the legislation was not intended to disrupt instruction or the discussion of controversial issues in the classroom and acknowledges that teachers and schools were effectively managing parental concerns relating to religion, sexuality and sexual orientation long before the passage of the controversial law. (Theobald, 2010)

While the efforts outlined above to curb the effects of the Bill are well intentioned the use of the phrase “business as usual” specifically outlines the goal for teachers to maintain the status quo with regard to an issue, the right to equal treatment for same-sex people and families, that requires change and advancement.

The journey to equality for same-sex individuals and families has been uniquely challenging in the province of Alberta. The history of same-sex rights in the province has been characterized by public controversy and with the institution of Bill 44 and the associated wave of support and disapproval this remains a common theme.

Same-Sex Family Formation

There are several ways that gay and lesbian families come to be. In the past it was most common that children entered into a gay- or lesbian-parented family after their parent’s initial heterosexual relationship dissolved and one of the parents began a new relationship with a same-sex partner (Ambert, 2005). In recent years it is becoming more and more common that children are planned by

same-sex couples and come in to an existing same-sex relationship through adoption or donor insemination/surrogacy. In Alberta former Tory leaders Don Getty and Ralph Klein, who pushed for privatization of adoption in order to keep stress off of the public system, rather unwittingly paved the road for same-sex adoption. Allowing private organizations such as Adoption Options to facilitate the placement of children in families meant that same-sex adoption was possible in Alberta long before other areas of the country. While the first same-sex public adoptions did not take place in Alberta until 2006, the former premier inadvertently helped to facilitate the first same-sex private adoption that happened in 1999 (Tayler, 2011).

Popular Culture

Popular culture acts as a mirror reflecting the opinions and values of many. While more than a decade ago gay or lesbian characters were a novelty on such television shows as *Will and Grace*, they are much more commonly represented in television shows and movies today. Now, the popular media spotlight has begun to shine on gay- and lesbian-parented families who are represented in such popular primetime television shows as *Modern Family* and *Grey's Anatomy*. Gay and lesbian actors and actresses are also becoming more open about their families. Newspaper articles are being published locally and nationally discussing gay and lesbian parenting and raising awareness of the existence of these families and the challenges they face. Lackner (2005) wrote in the *Ottawa Citizen* about Camp Ten Oaks and Rainbow Spirit Camp. This article raised the profile of the two camps who cater to children of gay, lesbian, bisexual

and transgendered parents or who are LGBTQ themselves. This article is important not only because it sheds light on the fact that such camps exist, prompting the public to recognize the size of the population they are serving, but also because it challenges the popularly held belief that gay- and lesbian-parented families want to be treated ‘the same’ as heterosexual families. Lackner acknowledged that same-sex parented families have unique needs. Articles such as this reflect, at the very least, general society’s acknowledgement that gay- and lesbian-parented families exist. Other camps similar to the one highlighted in Lacker’s (2005) article exist across the country including Camp fYrefly, sponsored by the University of Alberta, founded specifically to promote leadership among LGBTQ children. A more recent article by Balkissoon published in the *Globe and Mail* in 2011 goes beyond simply acknowledging same-sex parented families. The article, titled “The Seven Habits of Highly Effective Lesbian Families,” shares parenting advice relevant to all families with tips such as, “Let them make their own spaces too” and, “Trust that they love you – even when you stress them out” (p. 4). This article recognizes not only that lesbian-parented families exist but that they have important knowledge on parenting to share with other families, both homo- and heterosexual. Unfortunately, despite public recognition of gay- and lesbian-parented families the three main societal worries concerning the children of gay- and lesbian-parented families written about by Ambert in 2005 are still referenced today: “The offspring will grow up to be psychologically maladjusted because of social

stigma, that they will be molested by their parents or parent's partners, and that they will be homosexual themselves" (p. 8).

Children of Same-Sex Parents

Several studies have been conducted on the functioning of same-sex parented families (Ambert, 2005; Lipkin, 1999; White, Schneider & Liddle, 2009). Most of these studies focus on lesbian-parented families. This may be due in part to the fact that the instances of children within same-sex parented families are greater with lesbian women than gay men. Both Lipkin (1999) and White, Schneider & Liddle (2009) concluded after studying same-sex parented families and their children that they function in the same ways and produce children that are as equally well adjusted as do heterosexual families. The U.S. National Longitudinal Lesbian Family Study (NLLFS), which began in the 1980s, headed by researcher Nanette Gartrell, reports on a group of planned lesbian families. The results of this study have led to publications on a variety of topics ranging from quality of life for children of lesbian-parented families to substance use by children of lesbian-parented families. This study also found that children with lesbian mothers show very similar emotional and cognitive development to their peers raised in heterosexual families (van Gelderen, Bos, Gartrell, Hermanns, Perrin, 2012). Researchers of the NLLFS do caution, however, that extended exposure to homophobic stigmatization can negatively affect the psychological well being of children (Bos & Gartrell, 2010). In essence, it is not the raising of a child by lesbian parents that could damage their development but unfair treatment by others. Some studies have found, in fact, that there may be benefits to lesbian

parenting over heterosexual parenting. These benefits include both parents being equally engaged in their children's lives, more equitable division of parenting and household work which reduces tension in the home, and greater chances of continued co-parenting after the dissolution of a relationship. As well, lesbian-mothers are often found to be older, more highly educated and more committed to their families than their heterosexual counterparts. This is because the addition of children to their family usually requires greater planning and resources than in heterosexual families (as cited in Barton, 2010).

School Curriculum

Societal trends filter into all aspects of public life including the school system. As society becomes more open and accepting of gay- and lesbian-parented families so too must the school system begin to consider the presence of these families in schools and begin to make the necessary changes to ensure that these families feel welcome. Diversity of all types has always been a reality in the Canadian landscape and the acknowledgement and acceptance of this diversity is becoming a priority in many Canadian schools. Now, gay- and lesbian-parented families must be added to the growing landscape of culturally and linguistically diverse learners school boards serve.

In Alberta's Programs of Study, it is clear that learning goals associated with recognizing, representing and respecting one's family and the families of others are present but that these goals were not written with same-sex parented families in mind. Some examples of these goals include the kindergarten Health and Life Skills goal related to "recogniz[ing] that individuals are members of

various and different groups” and the grade one goal from the same document of “recogniz[ing] and accept[ing] individual differences within groups; e.g., one’s own family” (Alberta Learning, 2002, p. 17). As well, the grade one Social Studies curriculum document states as its first outcome, “Students will demonstrate an understanding and appreciation of how identity and self-esteem are enhanced by their sense of belonging in their world...” (Alberta Learning, 2005, p. 1). Similarly, the second outcome titled, “Moving Forward with the Past: My Family, My History and My Community” states that “students will demonstrate an understanding and appreciation of how changes over time have affected their families and influenced how their families and communities are today” (p. 1). Both of these goals call for a look to the past to explore important historical changes that have affected the student’s families and communities, both goals reference Aboriginal and Francophone communities. It is interesting to note that while these goals seem to be talking about “all families” they are really only focusing on two minority groups. It seems unlikely that the curriculum’s call for understanding “how changes over time affected...families and communities in the present” (p. 5) is referencing the legalization of same-sex marriage. Similarly, the goal that students “acknowledge and respect symbols of heritage and traditions in their family and communities” (p. 5) is most likely not referencing the rainbow flag. *(Note: of course, it is evident that the homosexual community is not the only community being overlooked in these curriculum documents but for the purposes of this literature review this culture is highlighted.)*

School Board Goals

A large urban school board in Alberta has recently outlined five district priorities. These priorities reference the development of important character traits such as demonstration of empathy and understanding of equity. As well, the board has made clear the priority to welcome, respect and accept all students and their families. Each of these priorities is highly significant to the gay- and lesbian-parented families served by this school board.

It can be said that the field of education is guilty of the creation, promotion and overuse of catch phrases. One of the biggest difficulties with this is that the terms used are appropriated from their original context and meaning, and they grow to such an extent that two people can carry on a dialogue surrounding the same topic without ever really knowing what the other is talking about. One of these catch phrases is “diverse.” From my professional teaching experience I can say that the term “diverse” is used with various definitions in discussions of learning needs, styles and abilities as well as in reference to students’ cultural and ethnic backgrounds. I can also attest to the use of the word “diverse” to refer to students’ families. Often in this context the word diverse is used to label families who are “different than what society considers to be normal.” Unfortunately, this definition of “diverse families” is limited to each teacher’s conception of family, largely built through personally held values, beliefs and experiences with others. From my experience with colleagues and professional development and teaching resources I can attest that this definition usually refers to children who have divorced, separated or remarried parents or who live with a single parent. This

definition of diverse families often overlooks children who live with other guardians, who live in the foster system and who live with same-sex parents. So, when a school board calls for all families to be welcomed and respected it is my hope that they are widening their lens to stretch beyond many teacher's traditional definition of "family" or even "diverse family" to encompass all those uniquely formed groups of people who share love and support for one another as a family.

Conclusion

After noting the prevalence of same-sex couples and parents in Canadian society, recognizing the shifting image of same-sex parented families in popular culture and identifying the efforts of one Alberta school board to make all families feel welcome I began to explore scholarly literature. This exploration would focus on learning about the body of research that exists surrounding the ways gay and lesbian parents perceive the schools they send their children to. The following section outlines my discoveries with regard to key themes in the existing scholarly literature.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

As many educators begin to consider the possibility of same-sex parented families in their schools they may become uncomfortable. The unknown has a tendency to make people uncomfortable. As I began to work on this topic I was uncomfortable, in fact, I was nearly stopped completely by my concern that I might accidentally say the wrong thing, ask the wrong question, use the wrong term and offend someone. If we stopped everything when we felt a bit uncomfortable, though, where would we be? As I was stuck I asked myself, *what would it be like if you were within this change that you are looking for?* This question kept me moving forward.

As I researched the existing literature on the topic of same-sex parented families I uncovered common themes. I discovered a body of literature devoted to the uncovering of same-sex parented family experiences related to the process of “coming out” to the school or community. I began to learn about some of the common challenges facing same-sex parented families such as constant scrutiny from heterosexuals. Along with this constant scrutiny, I became aware of the prevalence of heteronormativity in our schools and lives in general (Bower & Klecka, 2009; Casper & Schultz, 1999; Epsetin, 1999; Fox, 2007; Mitchell & Ward, 2010; Ryan & Martin, 2000; Ryan, 2010). I looked further into the literature surrounding school experiences of children and parents in homosexually parented families and came to the question, who should be responsible to change the perception of gay- and lesbian-parented families in our schools? I learned

about the perceived need for gay- and lesbian-parents to be heavily involved in their children's school lives to ensure equitable education. Finally, I uncovered a large body of literature written to provide recommendations to schools, administrators and teachers for the respectful inclusion of gay- and lesbian-parented families in our school communities.

Coming Out

The literature accessed for this review on the topic of "coming out" generally identified fears on the part of parents regarding disclosing their family structures to their children's schools. Happily, however, the literature also reported that despite their concern most of the families who did "come out" did not have overly negative experiences but, rather, experiences characterized by support from others, indifference or lack of acknowledgement. Specifically, Bliss and Harris (1998) reported that parents feared negative legal and social ramifications upon disclosure of their sexuality to the school community such as stigmatization and loss of custody but the parents found that reactions from the community were generally positive and that the school provided them with support. One year later, in 1999, Casper and Schultz studied a group of gay- and lesbian-parented families who were met with indifference from their peers upon disclosure of their family structure leaving them wishing that their differences were better acknowledged.

Ray and Gregory (2001) discussed parents' anticipated challenges compared with actual experiences regarding their family structure. This study

aimed at finding out if the experiences of children with gay and lesbian parents were similar to the experiences of youth who identify as LGBTQ. This study focused on same-sex, mostly lesbian, couples either considering parenthood or who were currently parents, and their children. Prospective parents identified their top three areas of concern for their possible future children in school (in order) as bullying, ignoring their unique family structure, and difficult questions. Current parents identified the top three experiences of their children in school (in order) as isolation, lack of inclusive curriculum, and bullying. Children of homosexual parents found that as their age increased so did incidents of teasing. As well, as their age increased the incidents of denigrating language towards homosexuals increased, while such language was not specifically directed at their families children reported this to be personally hurtful. Children of same-sex parented families also reported that teacher response to incidents of bullying was not adequate.

The articles I accessed relating to the experience of “coming out” for same-sex parented families in school were older (1998-2001). I wondered why more recent literature had not been written on this topic. Perhaps this is because homosexuality is more openly accepted now, in 2012, than it was a decade ago and, as such, the “coming out” experience is much less worrisome for families. Maybe as scholars and educators we have, in a sense, moved on from this topic to greater and more currently relevant concerns. Again, it is interesting to note that only just over ten years ago parents feared loss of custody if they were to disclose

their homosexuality to their children's schools and now gay- and lesbian-parent role models are frequently encountered in Canadian society.

Scrutiny

Families who felt that they were accepted or at the very least tolerated by their children's school communities felt that they were being intensely scrutinized by school staff and their fellow parents (Balkissoon, 2011; Casper & Schultz, 1999; Epstein, 1999). Families in both Epstein (1999) and Casper & Schultz' (1999) studies identified feelings of being closely watched by others. These families felt that they were being looked at more closely than their heterosexual counterparts and feared that anything out of the ordinary with regard to their family or children would be attributed to perceived negative affects of homosexual parenting rather than normal family and child-rearing issues. Certainly the weight of this burden is not only felt by adults: Rachel Epstein, the author of the previously mentioned study as well as several other articles and books on lesbian-parenting, has a daughter who testified in a 2005 Ontario court case in the fight to allow Ontario citizens the right to have two mothers' names listed on a birth certificate. Her daughter said years later while reflecting on her experience as a child of lesbian mothers, "You can't talk about anything in your family that could be negative...it wasn't my moms saying I had to do that – it was me feeling that pressure" (Balkissoon, 2011, p. 4).

Heteronormativity

It was not until I had completed extensive reading for this literature review that I began to understand how deeply engrained heteronormative assumptions are in our communities and, particularly, in our schools. One of the greatest challenges identified by same-sex parents was the prevalence and invisibility of heteronormativity in our society and in our schools (Bower & Klecka, 2009; Casper & Schultz, 1999; Epsetin, 1999; Fox, 2007; Mitchell & Ward, 2010; Ryan & Martin, 2000; Ryan, 2010). Ryan (2010) provides a powerful and clear definition of heteronormativity:

I define heteronormativity as the assumption that people are, and should be, straight. I use this term as an umbrella term to refer to the *system* of interlocking regulations of sexuality and gender, or what is sometimes referred to as the heterosexual matrix. This system naturalizes straight desires and relations and marks all others as deviant. I understand heteronormativity to encompass the more specific concept of heterosexism, the belief that heterosexual relationships are right and better than others. I also understand it to encompass homophobia, actions of fear and hatred perpetrated against those who do not conform to heteronormative assumptions. (pp. xi-xii)

Many homosexual parents perceive their children's general school climates and communities to be characterized by heteronormativity (see Casper & Schultz, 1999 and Mitchell & Ward, 2010). Other studies identified specific aspects of the school experience perceived by participants to be characterized by

heteronormativity. Ryan and Martin (2000) identified school staff members' personal beliefs or religious views and their investment in the traditional male-female gender dichotomy to be troublesome. Fox (2007) highlighted language used on school documents such as application forms and newsletters to be highly heteronormative. Ryan (2010) found that many school literacy events are also highly heteronormative. All of these observations add up to Epstein's (1999) conclusion that although schools may not be blatantly discriminatory towards same-sex parented families these families are none-the-less marginalized by latent forms of communication that push the heteronormative agenda.

Personal Experience with Heteronormativity

Reflecting on these articles and my topic I became more and more aware of the literature I used in my classroom and the language I chose to communicate with students and their families. Although I felt that I was improving my teaching practice by examining the taken-for-granted base on which schools operate I found it to be exhausting. I was spending much more time than I anticipated preparing notes to go home and monthly newsletters for my classes. I was scrutinizing the books in my classroom library and I found myself adding caveats to the stories I read to my students. I'll never forget the conversation I attempted to have with my group of eighteen four-year-olds after reading *Cinderella* and *Sleeping Beauty* to them on two consecutive days:

Shannon: Friends, this book and *Cinderella* that we read yesterday are nice stories. They are called fairy tales and we talked about what that means. It means that they are pretend stories and that someone made

them up. The things in these stories don't actually happen in real life.

Can you think of something that happened in one of these stories that can't really happen in real life?

Student 1: Everyone couldn't really fall asleep for a long time like that!

Student 2: People don't really wear shoes made of glass!

Shannon: Right, those are things that aren't real, they are pretend. Do you know what else isn't real? Real love and people getting married doesn't happen like in these stories. You don't just meet someone and see them one time and decide that you are going to get married and live happily ever after.

Kids: Yes you do!

Shannon: Well, no, it's nice in a fairy tale but in real life getting married is a grown-up decision and you have to take a long time to think about it because it's really important. Do you think that Cinderella and Sleeping Beauty HAD to get married to a prince to be happy?

Kids: Yes.

Shannon: No, they didn't have to get married to a prince or to anyone to be happy.

Student 1: Yes they did, otherwise they wouldn't get to be a princess.

Shannon: You don't have to be a princess to be happy. But that's not really what I'm talking about. I'm saying that some people decide to get married to a boy or a girl and some people decide not to get married

and some people are married and then they aren't and then they are again or they never are again and all these people can be happy!

Kids: *blank stare*

Shannon: You don't have to get married to be happy and people can marry whomever they want or no one at all!

Kids: *blank stare*

Educational Assistant: muffled laughter.

I find it fascinating to see how indoctrinated these children are into the heteronormative world we have created for them at only four years of age. As I have begun to see, challenging the heteronormative assumptions under which our classrooms, schools and communities operate is neither an easy nor a painless process. Bower and Klecka (2009) call for making evident the invisibility of heteronormativity to preservice teachers so that it can be identified and challenged by these teachers before they enter schools. Bower and Klecka caution that homosexual families should not be positioned as "other," a category they are usually forced in to by heteronormative assumptions.

Responsibility

Mitchell and Ward (2010) examined the effects of a school-wide move towards inclusion of same-sex parented families that began with an overhauling of school policies at a primary school in Australia. Overall, the movement was highly successful in this school and homosexual families felt welcome and comfortable within the building. At the end of their study the researchers,

unfortunately, concluded that while the change they saw in this school was effective led by school staff the move towards this type of inclusion is usually led by gay and lesbian parents and is most successful only when a critical mass of homosexual families is reached within a particular school. In other words, change spear-headed by school staff is effective but it is not a reality.

As noted earlier, it is an official goal of a large Alberta school board to ensure that all families feel welcome and accepted in their schools.

Unfortunately, much of the research already done with same-sex parented families indicates that homosexual families do not feel welcome in public schools, nor do they feel that school staff are taking the initiative to change this. Participants in Bower and Klecka (2009), Casper and Schultz (1999), and Fedewa and Clark's (2009) studies wondered who should be held responsible for changing the incorrect or negative attitudes held by school staff and community members with regard to homosexually parented families. Epstein (1999) concluded her study by recommending that schools identify ways in which same-sex parented families are marginalized and then take responsibility to shift power dynamics allowing for greater inclusion. Finally, Balkissoon's (2011) *Globe and Mail* article concluded with a reminder to readers that the responsibility to change the minds of society with concern to LGBTQ families should not fall on the shoulders of children from these families.

To change public opinion of your family or ensure positive attitudes about your culture are not responsibilities that the schools place on families of different ethnicities or families of children with special needs -- why is it a burden placed

on gay- and lesbian-parented families? As I continued to research this topic of ‘responsibility’ I came across the experiences of some gay and lesbian parents with children in public schools and I was disheartened to uncover the lengths they felt they needed to go to to ensure a fair and unbiased education for their children. Parents in one study told the researcher that they felt it necessary to interview the teachers of the grade their child would next be entering prior to the beginning of the school year to assess his or her willingness to address homosexual parenting issues in the classroom (Casper & Schultz, 1999). Overall, Rimalower and Caty (2009) found that homosexual parents were more connected to their children’s school communities than their heterosexual counterparts, one wonders why this might be. Perhaps these parents feel it necessary to remain more closely connected to the school to ensure education for their children that is free from discrimination. Apparently, this is a view held not only by homosexual parents but by some teachers as well; Bower and Klecka (2009) surveyed a group of teachers and learned that these teachers held the belief that homosexual parents were required to be more involved in their children’s schooling than heterosexual parents by doing things such as researching safe schools and classrooms. Is this an expectation that teachers place on all “diverse” families?

Some teachers are of the opinion, or at least speak to the opinion, that if they had “that kind of family” in their classroom they would take the necessary measures to ensure that gay- and lesbian-parented families were represented and respectfully included in their teaching. This, I have learned, is a difficult task considering the lack of representative resources currently available and the

previously discussed underlying heteronormative foundation upon which our society and our schools operate, even with the very best of intentions. This is specifically the attitude that Fox (2007) cautioned against, calling for educators to make changes in their classrooms and schools now, reminding schools that it is not the job of the parent to show the teacher how to properly represent their family. Of course teachers do not, or at least should not, discuss diversity, acceptance and inclusion only when they are faced with diversity in their classrooms. Further to this is the question of disclosure. Some gay- and lesbian-parented families do not believe that it is their responsibility to disclose their family make-up to their children's school(s) (Casper, Schultz & Wickens, 1992; Rimalower & Caty, 2009). An unwillingness to disclose this information to a school may be an indication of the school climate as perceived by homosexual parents or anticipated reactions of school staff. Whatever the reason, unwillingness to disclose serves as a reminder to teachers that the responsibility to represent all families at all times is theirs.

Recommendations from Previous Studies

Previous studies on the topic of same-sex parented families have resulted in a variety of recommendations for teachers, administrators and other school staff aimed at making schools and classrooms more inviting, welcoming and safe for gay- and lesbian-parented families. These recommendations generally fall into the categories of: staff, resources, language, and curriculum and policies.

Staff

Recommendations concerning staff focus on ensuring that staff members are well versed in the unique challenges facing gay- and lesbian-parents and their families (Fox, 2007; Rimalower & Caty, 2009; Ryan & Martin, 2000; Sears, 1993). Teacher re-training or education programs are recommended to ensure that school staff feel comfortable discussing homosexual parenting (Mitchell & Ward, 2010; Ray & Gregory, 2001; Ryan & Martin, 2000). As well, encouraging staff to examine their personal beliefs and attitudes towards homosexuality and the ways these inform their teaching practice is vital (Ray, 2005; Casper, Shultz & Wickens, 1992).

Resources

It is recommended that all schools seek out resources that are representative of same-sex parented families and that these resources be used and displayed openly in classrooms (Bower, 2008; Mitchell & Ward, 2010; Sears, 1993). All classrooms should include:

Age-appropriate literature that depicts families with two moms or two dads. A number of people will offer the rationale that this would never be allowed at their child care center or school – that administrators and families would feel someone is pushing a ‘gay agenda.’ There *is* an agenda – to ensure that all children and their families feel welcomed and included in schools. [emphasis in original] (Fox, 2007, p. 280)

Language

Recommendations concerning language use are three-fold. The first aspect of language that must be examined is the way language may be used to exclude or discriminate against same-sex parented families. This type of language is typically found on school forms or in newsletters where student's parents may be referred to as Mr. and Mrs. or where space is provided for only two parents or for only "mother" or "father" (Bower, 2008; Lipkin, 1999; Ray, 2005; Sears, 1993). The second aspect of recommendations surrounding language focuses on the use of inclusive language and the making ordinary of appropriate words such as "gay" and "lesbian." Using language in this way is important because it helps to open spaces for dialogue amongst school community members about same-sex parents and their families (Bower, 2008; Casper, Schultz & Wickens, 1992; Rimalower & Caty, 2009; Ryan & Martin, 2000; Ryan, 2010). Finally, recommendations are made surrounding the appropriate use of language for each individual family and the importance of school staff taking the time to learn about same-sex parented family configurations including appropriate parental surnames and correct co-parenting terms such as "Mommy" and "Mama" or "Dad" and "Papa" (Bower, 2008; Lipkin, 1999; Ray, 2005).

Curriculum and Policies

Recommendations also call for the examination of school policies and curriculum for bias against homosexual families (Ryan & Martin, 2000; Sears, 1993). Common school activities such as Mother's and Father's Day crafts should be reviewed in light of children in all kinds of "diverse" families (Ray,

2005). Mitchell and Ward (2010) wrote about efforts at Spensley Street Primary School in Australia to become more inclusive of same-sex parented families. One of the important changes made to the sexual education curriculum at this school was the inclusion of alternative methods of child conception and family building such as adoption that helped to make families of all kinds feel more welcome. Recommendations are also made focusing on anti-discrimination and anti-bullying policies that can help to reduce negative stigmatization of same-sex parented families and their children (Sears, 1993).

Conclusion

In my examination of the existing literature it became clear that a large body of recommendations for school staff to improve inclusion of same-sex parented families in our schools already exists. From the point of view of someone who is now more familiar with gay- and lesbian-parented families, many of the recommendations seemed like common sense. I was slightly surprised to read recommendations like, “make sure your school forms don’t have two boxes listed for parent names, one saying ‘mother’ and the other saying ‘father.’” I thought, *aren’t we past this by now?* But, as I turned my lens back to the school system I am a part of I was saddened to see that the answer to this question is, no. A great body of recommendations for educators exists; however, it is quite evident that many of these recommendations have fallen on deaf ears or have been met with resistance.

Research Question

As I began my search for literature for this review I naively thought, *this is a new topic, there hasn't been much research done on it – this is going to be a piece of cake!* It is amazing how one can completely ignore the very wise words of one's sage thesis advisor, all the while maintaining the opinion that said advisor is one of the most brilliant women one knows -- I digress. I began the search under the false pretenses that I was going to discover a dearth of research on the topic and a giant cavern of space for my proposed study to fit in to. *Ah, to be young and in love with one's topic.* I soon discovered that not only had much research been done on the topic of same-sex parented families, the topic itself was so vast that it had many subtopics within it.

After discovering the immense size of the existing body of knowledge on this topic, exploring a portion of it, and reflecting on my remaining questions as an educator I came to my research question. Identifying what it is I hope to accomplish through the completion of this study, I have reached the specific question: *What are the perspectives of lesbian mothers regarding their families' experiences with the Alberta school system?*

This study will contribute to the body of knowledge on the topic of same-sex parented families' experiences in our schools by providing a more recent account of parent's experiences in "coming out" to their children's schools. Earlier in this review I surmised that perhaps this topic had been over looked in recent years because it was no longer relevant due to the increased profile of homosexual families in our society; however, I do not know this to be the case. A

more recent account of this experience is needed to inform recommendations for the future in light of the current experiences of same-sex parented families.

Further, from the point of view of a teacher, this research will offer recommendations for specific changes that can be implemented immediately, at the classroom level, to begin change now. Recommendations that concern shifting thinking of entire governing bodies and school divisions are essential to progress in making our schools inclusive for all families and students, however, such recommendations are only distantly relevant to the family whose child is entering kindergarten today.

Chapter Three: Methodology

The following chapter outlines the framework of this study. The chapter then explains the process of data collection, including an in-depth look at the data collection tool. As well, the chapter describes the process for analysis of the data and discusses limitations of the study.

This study is built on the foundation of what is now referred to as sociocultural theory, following the work of the Russian psychologist, Lev Vygotsky (1896 – 1934). Of greatest concern to this particular study is Vygotsky's (1978) conclusion that "the internalization of socially rooted and historically developed activities is the distinguishing feature of human psychology, the basis of the qualitative leap from animal to human psychology" (p 57). This is to say that Vygotsky's belief was that each process of interaction that occurs between two people becomes, through a series of developmental events, a process that occurs within one person. Vygotsky explained, "We call the internal reconstruction of an external operation *internalization*" [emphasis in original] (p. 56). It is through this process of internalization that we come to view our world in the way that we do. Therefore, it can be said that our own opinions, attitudes and perceptions are created socially rather than individually, as they are all to some extent the result of some previous social interaction that we have had with another person.

In the context of this study sociocultural theory provides an explanation for the personally held beliefs of the lesbian mothers who participated in my

research. This theory allows the observer to see the ways that social interactions with others have been internalized by participants and have thus effected their perceptions of their experiences.

Situating the Study

In comparing quantitative and qualitative research methodologies Creswell (2008) states that qualitative research “is best suited for research problems in which you do not know the variables and need to explore” (p. 53). Creswell’s definition is descriptive of this research study in that the variables affecting the lesbian-parented families that I worked with were, prior to our meetings, unknown to me. Although I have located existing research on the topic of lesbian-parented families’ experiences with the school system the findings of this research and the conclusions drawn from it are neither consistent nor significant enough to generalize from. As well, the topic encompassed by this research is highly context-specific and cannot be easily translated from one setting to another. It is clear that a quantitative approach to this study that Creswell describes as providing, “A description of trends or an explanation of the relationship among variables” would not be appropriate (p. 51). Denzin and Lincoln (1998) provide support for the situating of this research within qualitative research by describing the beliefs and goals of qualitative researchers that mirror my own:

Qualitative researchers stress the socially constructed nature of reality, the intimate relationship between the researcher and what is studied, and the situational constraints that shape inquiry. Such researchers emphasize the

value-laden nature of inquiry. They seek answers to questions that stress how social experience is created and given meaning. (p. 8)

Through the use of a qualitative research methodology I uncovered the socially constructed perceptions and experiences of several lesbian mothers and explored them in depth.

Knowing that my study would be situated within the realm of qualitative research was a beginning. Beyond this I knew little. My desire to research the topic of lesbian mothers was sparked by a close, personal relationship with a lesbian-parented family, as such, it would have been counterintuitive to select a research methodology that did not allow the same type of intimate relationship. Further to this, I was aware that the nature of my research topic was both personal and sensitive and that the answers I hoped to elicit from my participants would be much more willingly supplied when a relationship of trust could be built between researcher and participant. I knew that it would be important to select a methodology that would allow for close, personal interaction.

Case Study Methodology

Case study methodology served my desire for the above-mentioned close relationship with my participants. Stake (1998) defined this methodological choice, “A case study is both the process of learning about the case and the product of our learning” (p. 87). The three forms of case study identified by Stake are intrinsic, instrumental and collective. Intrinsic case study is,

Undertaken because one wants better understanding of this particular case. It is not undertaken primarily because the case represents other cases

or because it illustrates a particular trait or problem, but because, in all its particularity and ordinariness, this case itself is of interest. (p. 88)

While in an instrumental case study, “A particular case is examined to provide insight into an issue or refinement of theory. The case is of secondary interest; it plays a supportive role, facilitating our understanding of something else” (p. 88).

Though it seems dichotomous, Stake points out that, “Because we simultaneously have several interests, often changing, there is no line distinguishing intrinsic case study from instrumental; rather, a zone of combined purpose separates them” (p. 88). It is within this zone of combined purpose that my research will exist.

For the purposes of this research study the specific case is defined as each participant family. This means that each case includes data gathered from either an individual lesbian mother, if the family is headed by a single woman, or two lesbian mothers, if the family is headed by a couple. Each case studied is an important, individual entity. Although “we may simultaneously carry on more than one case study [it is important to remember] each case study is a concentrated inquiry into a single case” (Stake, p. 87). As such, within this research where multiple cases are accessed, created and learned from it was important for myself as the researcher to maintain the integrity of each case within the context of the study.

Interview

Stake (1998) writes that, “As a form of research, case study is defined by interest in individual cases, not by the methods of inquiry used,” meaning that the specific method used to collect the data is less relevant than the researcher’s

desire to learn about a specific case. For the purposes of this study I selected the qualitative or semi-structured interview coupled with a pre-interview activity as my method for participant data collection. In her explanation of the pre-interview activity as a tool for use in conjunction with interviewing Ellis (2006) described one of the challenges of interviewing participants:

One of the challenges in interviewing is to create conditions that enable a participant to recall significant experiences, analyze them, and reflect on their meaning. Without a good opportunity for such recollection and reflection, participants are likely simply to draw on available discourses to say something that comes to mind readily and sounds sensible. (p. 113)

To overcome this challenge Ellis promotes the use of a pre-interview activity to begin the process of reflection and recollection for participants before the interview has begun. The specifics of the pre-interview activities selected for this study will be discussed further below (see Pre-Interview Activity).

The interview consisted of a series of open-ended questions to allow participants to “voice their experiences unconstrained by any perspectives of the researcher or past research findings” (Creswell, 2008, p. 225). A semi-structured interview allowed me to gain the information that I was requesting from my participants in a short period of time and resulted in minimal disruption of their everyday lives. Creswell (2008) writes about one of the advantages of interviews most relevant to this study, “They provide useful information when you cannot directly observe participants” (p. 225). This advantage is of paramount importance to this study where observation of the particular experiences my

participants were asked to describe would be almost impossible. The experiences of lesbian mothers may, for example, be characterized by acceptance, negativity, tolerance, silence and/or intrigue. Each of these particular reactions from others, however, would be highly influenced by the specific setting in which they occur, including the presence of an outside observer, particularly if the outside observer is known to be researching this specific topic. As well, the experiences of lesbian mothers are built over time spans ranging from several years to entire lifetimes, a short period of observation could not do justice to a representation of experiences over these extended periods of time. An open-ended interview allowed my participants to “describe detailed personal information” and recount events of significance over an extended time period (Creswell, p. 225).

Of course, interviewing as a data collection technique is not without disadvantages that need to be considered in the process of data analysis and in the formulation of conclusions from this research study. One of the most noted disadvantages to the interview is that the “interview data may be deceptive and provide the perspective the interviewee wants the researcher to hear” (Creswell, 2008, p. 226). Fortunately, this study is concerned with the *perspectives* of its participants and is concerned with accessing only those experiences the participants wish to share. This potential disadvantage to interviewing will actually work in my favour as the most accurate reporting of participant’s perspectives will come from their own words. Another noted disadvantage to the interview as a data collection method is that the researcher’s presence may affect the way participants respond (Creswell, 2008, p. 226). This disadvantage can be

partially overcome with the establishment of good rapport with participants.

Glesne and Peshkin (1992) remind researchers that “rapport is tantamount to trust, and trust is the foundation for acquiring the fullest, most accurate disclosure a respondent is able to make” (p. 79). It was essential to the success of this research that I, as a researcher, was able to “put [myself] in the role of the respondents and attempt to see the situation from their perspective, rather than imposing the world of academia and preconceptions upon them” (Fontana & Frey, 1998, p. 60).

Conducting a pilot interview for this research was helpful in beginning to place myself in the shoes of my participants because it allowed me to gain initial insight into the sensitive issues that I planned to query participants about. As well, my method of identifying potential participants (outlined below) allowed for the establishment of a baseline of trust. It was also highly important that I maintained a heightened awareness of the reactions of my participants to my questions and offered participants the opportunity to clarify their responses to my questions following the interview (this process outlined below). Spradley (1979) likens the qualitative interview to the “familiar speech event, the friendly conversation” (p. 55); I strove at all times during the interview process to maintain this quality of interaction.

Keeping in mind the importance of the development of excellent rapport with my participants it was critical to also note a perceived challenge that may arise from this:

Close rapport with respondents opens doors to more informed research, but it may also create problems, as the researcher may become a

spokesperson for the group studied, losing his or her distance and objectivity or may “go native” and become a member of the group and forgo the academic role. (Fontana & Frey, 1998, p. 60)

Although “going native” might be a slightly over-dramatic outcome, it was vital to the integrity of my research that I was able to avoid becoming too personally involved as an advocate for my participants during this study. I had to maintain what Glesne and Peshkin (1992) refer to as an essential attribute of a successful interviewer, naivety:

Naïve is the term that characterizes the researchers’ special learner role. It entails a frame of mind by which you set aside your assumptions (pretensions, in some cases) that you know what your respondents mean when they tell you something rather than seek explanations about what they mean. [emphasis in original] (p. 80)

As I interviewed my participants I attempted to ensure that I maintained my position as an interested but impartial data collector, not allowing my personal views to interfere with the unbiased reporting of my participant’s experiences.

With this discussion of methodology, the development of rapport and the importance of setting aside my personally-held beliefs, it is important to note here my position within, or more accurately *without*, the cultural group that I studied. As I began to conceptualize this research, exploring and reporting on the perspectives of lesbian mothers, as neither a lesbian nor a mother myself I identified whole-heartedly with the title of chapter four in Michael Agar’s seminal work on the methodology of ethnography, “Who are you to do this?” (1996, p.

91). Although my study is not an ethnography, it will face similar criticism regarding this topic, as a cultural outsider are you qualified/justified in studying and representing this culture? Subsequently, however, different but equally intended questions would be asked of a lesbian mother conducting this same research, as a cultural insider are you qualified to provide an unbiased report and representation of this research? Agar (1996) discussed the disadvantages of studying one's own culture which include the possible inability to recognize "significant behaviour" (p. 94) due to immersion in the culture as well as the historically-held belief that studying one's own culture is, "considered less prestigious than 'pure' research on real 'natives'" (p. 64). It would seem that there are arguments on both sides of this coin, most markedly it appears that the argument against conducting research within one's cultural group is the possibility, perhaps certainty, of conflicts of interest which could lead to biased reporting. On the other side of the coin is the strong argument about the "right" of the researcher to enter into and take away data from a particular cultural group. My answer to this question of the right of the research is that this researcher came to this research topic out of a genuine interest in herself, her students and their families and with the goal of improving education for all -- if these reasons are not well-appointed enough for a particular audience, there will be little that I can do to change those minds.

Data Collection

Interviews for this study were conducted in a private room located on the University of Alberta campus. When considering my methodology I initially thought of interviewing participants in their homes, but upon reflection, I could not think of anything that would be gained from the observation of participant's homes. In fact, I wondered if participants might feel uncomfortable having me in their homes. I knew that, outside of participant homes I wanted to ensure that we could meet in a place that was private enough for participants to be able to speak candidly about their experiences without worrying about others overhearing which might be the case if we met in a public space such as a coffee shop. As well, I thought that meeting on campus would reinforce the purpose of my study, the advancement of educational practices. If my participants were in a committed relationship I interviewed both parents together. When originally considering my methodology I contemplated interviewing each parent separately but I wondered what information I might gain from this that would be different than the information I would gain from the couple together. As well, I reminded myself that the goal of the study, to uncover the perspectives of lesbian-parented families would not be served by a comparison of the perspectives of two parents within one family.

To the initial interview participants were asked to bring with them the product of one of two possible pre-interview activities for our mutual discussion. I planned to speak with each of my participants in an initial interview lasting

approximately ninety-minutes with the possibility of a shorter, follow-up interview. The purpose of the follow-up interview would have been to clarify responses or follow up on specific topics but I did not find that any follow-up interviews were necessary. All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed using my computer. Copies of transcriptions were then sent to participants for their review and participants were given the opportunity to make additions or clarifications to any of their responses.

Pre-Interview Activity

In requesting that my participants complete a pre-interview activity my hopes were that such an activity would initiate thinking about their experiences with the school system. I hoped that by encouraging my participants to begin thinking about these experiences prior to our interview they might have had time for reflection and come to the interview ready to share these reflections. As well, the two options that I gave participants for pre-interview activities had the participants create products that would provide me with more information about their family and the school system. The two options that I presented to my participants were to (1) create a timeline of their family's experiences with the school system or (2) to draw a picture of their family in relation to their child/ren's current school. Each of my participants created a timeline that quickly provided me with invaluable background information about their family and helped to start our conversations off with a level of shared knowledge. One of my participants also created a picture of her family and her son's school that proved

to be highly informative, demonstrating the characteristics she values most highly in her son's education (see Appendix A).

Interview Questions

By whatever means obtained, the questions you ask must fit your topic; the answers they elicit must illuminate the phenomenon of inquiry. And the questions you ask must be anchored in the cultural reality of your respondents: the questions must be drawn from the respondents' lives. (Glense & Peshkin, 1992, p. 66)

My interview questions covered five broad categories; a complete copy of interview questions is found in Appendix B.

Background information. The first category of questions was 'background information' and contained questions focused on gathering basic information about the participants' families such as who the members of the family are and their ages. I was also interested in learning how the family was created. I was interested to know if children had come in to the family with one of the parents, as a result of a previous heterosexual relationship, if the family had adopted children or if children were conceived through insemination. This information is highly personal and I worried that families will not, perhaps, want to share this with me. The reason that I was interested in how each of my participants' families was created, however, was that I wanted to ensure that I was aware of all issues facing the family and I wanted to be sure that I got a complete sense of each family's formation. For example, families who adopt children and families who have children through insemination face different challenges,

particularly if either results in children who are of a different ethnicity than one or both of their parents. Insemination offers a unique set of challenges in that one parent may be considered to be the “real mother” (biological) and legal custody questions come in to play. Also, families created after the dissolution of a previous relationship, such as when one parent brings children from a previous hetero- or homosexual relationship, will bring up issues of shared custody. Each of these options for creating a family affects how each family interacts with their children’s school (e.g. who does the school know as “parents”?) Each of these options also creates a very different family story and will affect the resources that children identify with in the classroom. After explaining my reasoning behind this question each of my participants was comfortable answering it openly. Within the background information section of my questions I also asked participants about their overall opinion of their child’s school and about how they came to their school, was it by choice, convenience, etc? My background information questions concluded by asking participants how and when they disclosed their family makeup to their child’s school.

Attitudes. The second set of interview questions focused on participants’ perceptions of the attitudes held by the school community and by themselves. I asked participants how they would describe the attitudes of their children’s teachers, school administrators and other school community parents towards their family. When evidence was not initially offered I followed this with a “probe” (Creswell, 2008, p. 229), “how do you know?” Desiring to gain the most complete understanding of experiences I also asked my participants about their

own attitudes towards their children's teachers, school administrators and fellow parents. I hoped that this question would allow me some understanding of the overall tone of the relationship between my participants and their children's schools.

Challenges. Following my questions about attitudes I discussed with my participants the challenges they face as lesbian parents which they perceived to be different than the challenges faced by heterosexually parented families. I also asked participants if they felt that their role with concern to their children's education was different than the role of heterosexual parents. Both of these areas of questioning referenced the information uncovered in my literature review where I found that many of the existing recommendations for teachers and school staff cited understanding the unique challenges facing same-sex parented families as a first step towards inclusiveness (Fox, 2007; Rimalower & Caty, 2009; Ryan & Martin, 2000; Sears, 1993), as well as the recorded experiences of several participants demonstrating an increased level of involvement in their children's schooling over what would typically be expected of heterosexual parents (Casper & Schultz, 1999; Rimalower & Caty, 2009).

Experiences. The fourth section of my interview questions, 'experiences,' attempted to uncover the perspectives of my participants by guiding them through an exploration of various facets of their (children's) school experiences. This section began by asking how the participants would describe their families' experiences with the public school system in general. I went on to ask participants if they felt that their family was represented in their children's

classrooms. With answers to that question I asked participants to think specifically of classroom resources, curriculum and language use. Next, I focused on participants' feelings of community, asking if they felt that they were a part of the school community and parent council. With this question I was hoping to gain an understanding of what my participants' role in the school was – were they highly involved parents, often at school events, or are they more removed? I continued questions about my participants' experiences by asking if they perceived any discrimination towards their children, themselves or their family as a whole from any member of the school community. I concluded this section of the interview by asking participants to recall a specific experience when they felt that their family was well represented in the school and a specific experience when they felt that their family was either not represented or was represented negatively.

Recommendations. The final section of my interview focused on recommendations for schools. I predicted that my participants, who are the utmost authorities on the types of changes that could be made to affect lesbian-parented families' experiences in public schools, would provide many excellent recommendations.

Conclusion. Each of my interviews was concluded by providing participants information about the next steps in the research process; I let participants know when to expect a copy of their transcribed interview with the request that they make any additions or clarifications. None of my participants elected to make any additions or clarifications to their transcript.

Participants

In the process of planning for this study I entertained several options for participant recruitment. As I began discussing my proposed research with colleagues in my graduate-studies courses I had several offers from teachers and school administrators who knew of lesbian-parented families in their schools. These colleagues offered to contact families and pass on my name. Initially I was excited about the ease of this option but after some reflection I decided that this process was flawed in a way that would seriously affect my research. While I am a teacher and while I hope my research will inform practices in schools I did not want the invitation to this study to be in any way associated with a school. I wanted to ensure that participants were aware right from the beginning of the study that this research was attempting to get at their uncensored assessment of experiences so I felt that an invitation to participate sent to them through a figure at their child's school might cloud this message.

Following approval of the University of Alberta Research Ethics Board for the study (see Appendix C), participants were located using a small-scale “snowball sampling” (Creswell, 2008, p. 217) technique sourced through Jocelyn (pseudonym), a parent I became familiar with when I taught her son. At the time that I taught her son, Jocelyn, a lesbian mother of two, was married. From my first meeting with this family and, in particular, with Jocelyn, I became aware of her openness regarding her sexuality and her family. Several months after meeting Jocelyn I became aware that she was the author of a blog that she updates several times per week posting on topics such as queer parenting and queer family

life in our city. It was through this blog that I first became aware of and interested in some of the unique issues facing same-sex parented families. Through this blog I learned that Jocelyn felt uncomfortable with questions from relative strangers about the conception of her children. When I first read this I became very uncomfortable as these were questions that I had very nearly asked her on several occasions. Reflecting on this in light of her blog, however, I began to question myself, *why did I think it was appropriate for me to ask a person I barely knew about such private details? Would I feel comfortable asking the same questions to a heterosexual person whom I had just met?* Quite honestly, I began to see that I had associated Jocelyn's openness with me regarding her sexuality as an invitation to pry into her life. I see now that, correct or not, Jocelyn assumed that telling me about her sexuality was necessary to her child's education. Ironically, it was through Jocelyn's writing on her blog that I eventually learned about the way her family of two mothers, a son and a daughter was built.

Having taught Jocelyn's son I knew that as a participant in my research she would not necessarily provide the unbiased type of assessment of experiences that I was hoping for. Nonetheless, I felt that without the influence of Jocelyn and her family I would not have been as inspired to move forward with my research, completely excluding them was not an option. I decided to conduct a pilot interview with Jocelyn to try out the questions that I intended to ask other participants. I felt that a pilot interview would be necessary and important for my study because of the incredible sensitivity of the topic. I knew that conducting a pilot interview would allow me to reflect on the questions asked, the information

gathered and the comfort level of both the participant and the researcher. In addition to asking Jocelyn to participate in a pilot interview, I asked her to help me locate other participants by accessing her group of friends and acquaintances. I was looking for participant families that met the following criteria: parented by a lesbian couple or single lesbian mother, I hoped for at least one couple; one or more child(ren) attending a school in Alberta; elementary or junior high-aged child(ren), I hoped to find participants that represent different children's ages. In asking Jocelyn to help with participant recruitment I specified that she should contact any of her acquaintances who she felt might be interested in participating and pass along to them my contact information which they could use at their convenience should they choose to.

Accessing Jocelyn as a contact within the lesbian parenting community through which potential participants might be sourced was important in recruiting specific kinds of (or, more accurately, a variety of) participants to the study. Another possibility entertained during the process of deciding how participants could be located was the use of posters or other public forms of advertising placed on bulletin boards around the University campus and distributed through local gay and lesbian community groups. Potential participants who would respond to such open and public forms of advertising might have been quite different, more forthcoming about their sexuality and family makeup, than I predicted that participants sourced through a friend and fellow lesbian mother would be. It turned out that I was able to access all of my study's participants through Jocelyn. Building trust and rapport was of extreme importance with both the type of data

collection technique I used, interview, and the topic of my questions. Having potential participants introduced to me through a friend and fellow community member was invaluable in building a trusting relationship between participants and myself. After my initial conversation with Jocelyn about her participation she sent an e-mail out to some of her acquaintances. As a result of this e-mail I was contacted by my second participant, Julia (pseudonym). Following my interview with Julia I was contacted by Adienne and Andrea (pseudonyms), my third participant family.

Data Analysis

“The spoken or written word always has a residue of ambiguity, no matter how carefully we word the questions and report or code the answers” (Fontana & Frey, 1998, p. 47).

Process. As discussed previously, participant data was obtained through collection of artifacts from pre-interview activities as well as one-on-one (or two-on-one) interviews that I audio taped and transcribed. Following transcription of participant interviews and the offer for participants to review and add to or provide clarification of answers the data collected was analyzed and coded. Creswell (2008) succinctly describes the process of analyzing interview data through coding, “Divide it into text or image segments, label the segments with codes, examine the codes for overlap and redundancy, and collapse these codes into broad themes” (p. 251). This process involved careful review of the transcribed data. Themes were then identified from the data by, “Examining codes that the participants discuss most frequently, are unique or surprising, have

the most evidence to support them, or those that you might expect to find when studying the phenomenon” (p. 252). Therefore, the result of the analysis of the participant data was the creation of themes that represented most accurately the data collected based on volume, relevance and interest. After identifying key themes from participant words I considered these themes in relation to the themes I had found in the existing literature and looked for similarities, differences and unique commentary.

Coding. In my initial analysis of the data I identified ten unique codes: positive experiences, school selection, importance of difference, disclosure, children’s future, mothers’ role in education, concerns for participant families, concerns for lesbian mothers, attitudes, and recommendations. I grouped the data into categories based on these codes and compared participants, looking for areas of similarity and difference. I compared these ten codes to the existing literature that I had reviewed and was able to add to most categories with either supporting or contrary information from previous studies. Next, I examined the ten codes for overlap with each other and saw that I was able to collapse the ten codes into five themes. These five themes will be presented and discussed in Chapter Five: Data Analysis.

Limitations

The goal of this study is not generalization of these mothers’ experiences to the greater population of lesbian-parented families; each of the cases presented in this study is just that, a case that is self-contained and entirely dependent upon the context in which it occurs. The major limitation with this study for the

purpose of adding to the body of knowledge on lesbian-parented families is the small sample size. The greatest challenge in conducting this research was the location of and coordination with participants. A greater number of participants would have provided more data for analysis and would have strengthened conclusions where participant families shared common or disconnected opinions.

Another limitation of the study is the ages of participant children.

Jocelyn's son, Thomas (pseudonym), is five-and-a-half and has been in school for two years and, similarly, Julia's son and daughter, Jack and Georgia (pseudonyms), are six-and-a-half and have been in school for four years. While Adienne and Andrea's daughter, Rosie (pseudonym), currently attends high school, she was not yet living with her mothers when she attended elementary school. Unfortunately, each of the participant families has less than five years of experience as members of the school system. It is possible that accessing participants with longer lengths of experience with the school system would have uncovered different experiences and perspectives especially in light of the great changes in societal attitude that have occurred in the past decades with concern to gay and lesbian issues.

As I have already identified, the previous studies on the experiences of lesbian-parented families are now out of date. So too will this study become outdated in the space of a year, two years, or a decade. Given the pace at which societal opinion is changing with regard to gay and lesbian people and their families this study is limited by the very nature of research in general. This study

was conducted at a specific place and time and the results of this study cannot be replicated outside of this culture, society and point in time.

A final perceived limitation of this study is the fact that I, the researcher, am not a member of the community of lesbian mothers. Although I carefully considered the influence that this would have on my research I have no way of knowing how this may or may not have affected the findings of this study. Reflecting back on interactions with my participants I am not even sure if they were each aware of my lack of membership in the community. There were instances in the interview process when I felt that my lack of knowledge about lesbian-parented families was ever-so-slightly frustrating for my participants. However, it is entirely possible that my own frustration with my lack of knowledge of lesbian-parented families caused me to project this perceived emotion onto my participants. Less than a limitation, I suppose that this is more of a question raised by this research: does the researcher's membership to the community influence the research in this case? In fact, being unsure of whether or not my participants knew that I was not a community member another question is raised: what is the effect of ambiguous community membership?

Chapter Four: Data Reporting

This chapter summarizes the data gathered from each participant family during our interview. The chapter is organized into three cases, one for each family, and each case is organized into seven categories: background information, school selection, disclosure, school experiences, attitudes, challenges, and recommendations. These seven categories are reflective of the general categories of questions asked during the interview (see Appendix B for interview protocol). Each case is presented with both the paraphrased and directly quoted words of the participants from the interview transcripts. For the protection of privacy, all names used to refer to participants in this chapter and others are pseudonyms.

Case One: Jocelyn

Background information. Jocelyn is mother to five-and-a-half year-old Thomas and three-year-old Amelia. Having recently separated from her wife and partner of thirteen years at the time of our interview, Jocelyn and her family were transitioning from a two- to one-parent household with Jocelyn and her partner sharing custody of their children. Jocelyn and her partner created their family through donor sperm insemination. Jocelyn carried both of the children and the children share the same anonymous donor sperm. Both Thomas and Amelia share Jocelyn's partner's last name.

Jocelyn reported that her recent separation from her partner had been challenging for the whole family and had had a particular impact on Thomas. As

a pre-interview activity Jocelyn completed a timeline representing her family's history with the educational system, she decided to include on this timeline the date of her separation as she felt that it was "absolutely" significant in terms of Thomas' educational experiences.

School selection. While Amelia had yet to experience any formal school settings, Thomas attended a half-day preschool program in the previous school year and at the time of our interview was attending a half-day kindergarten program. Thomas will continue on to grade one next year at the same school. Thomas attends a public school with a strong focus on fine arts. Jocelyn reported that selecting a school for Thomas was challenging,

Oh man, umm, yeah, that, I mean, that has always been a really big concern for us and it's something...it's one of the things that was my biggest concern about moving [here]. [This city is] not known for its liberalness about many issues, sexual orientation being one of them and so, I was really worried about finding a spot where not only would he be creatively engaged because of course that's a parental first concern. But, where he would be nurtured no matter what his family background was...It, actually, more than that, not no matter what his family background was, but, umm, that he would be nurtured in a way that was inclusive and valuing of his family background is maybe a better way to put it.

Prior to deciding on Thomas' school Jocelyn and her partner researched the school online, through the school's open house and by making personal contact

with acquaintances who had children attending or who had attended the school in the past. For Jocelyn, the most significant piece of information she obtained about the school prior to enrolling her son was a statement made at the open house, “They pretty much said in the presentation which I was so impressed by...if you are not interested in your kids learning about all different kinds of people, lifestyles, parts of the world, this is not the school for you.”

Disclosure. Having previously worked with Jocelyn and her son, I recalled that upon our first introduction, on my visit to their home prior to the first day of school, Jocelyn spoke to me about her family makeup. With regard to her son’s current school, Jocelyn said, “I broached it at the orientation session and I talked to both teachers and I asked them point blank, are you comfortable working with...a child that has two moms?” Further to this she commented that, “I think it’s something that we will always broach, umm, because a level of discomfort just adds a tension that there doesn’t need to be for the kids.... It’s not their baggage and it shouldn’t be their baggage.”

Regarding disclosure to other parents, Jocelyn shared her feelings that disclosing her family makeup is necessary for her comfort prior to having other children to her home:

If we were doing something like arranging a play date and they didn’t know that I had a female partner I would let them know, absolutely, because there is this underlying fear for me about people’s expectations of what, that gay people are hypersexual and lalalala, not safe with children, and so I want it to be clear from the outset.

School experiences. When categorizing her family's experiences with the school system thus far, Jocelyn stated, "We haven't had any negative experiences." The only less-than-ideal example that Jocelyn recalled from Thomas' school years was an administrative glitch she was contacted about by the assistant principal of her son's school. The school's computer data entry system would not allow the school to enter both Jocelyn's and her partner's names as 'Mother,' instead one had to be entered as 'Father.' Jocelyn recalled that the principal was "humiliated, he was clearly bothered by this," vowing to have the error looked into immediately. Apart from this phone call, however, this issue had not been of concern as Jocelyn reported that it had not affected any of the paperwork they had received at home.

Attitudes. Jocelyn described the staff at Thomas' school to be positive and accepting of her family. She shared that her opinion has been changed by the experiences she has had with the school system so far,

I think it's sort of shifted, I think at the beginning, like before Thomas started school I was certainly quite apprehensive, as you noted at one point when you came for the home visit, I had a certain level of trepidation.

Yeah, I was fearful for him and what he was going in to...but having gone through two really positive experiences, I think I sort of feel like I just expect...there to be sort of an appreciation of difference and if there isn't, I go in and heads roll and we'll find a new teacher.

Jocelyn's experiences with parents of Thomas' classmates had also been positive for the most part. She reported that the majority of parents had been

friendly towards her with the exception of some parents from Thomas' preschool class who seemed to avoid her, although Jocelyn wondered if this was a "sexual orientation thing or if that's other parental politics." Despite the fact that, as with school staff, Jocelyn's experiences with other parents had been mostly positive she did not report the same expectation of accepting attitudes from fellow parents that she did from school staff (above),

No I don't have the same expectation of other parents, although I guess I wish I did. I think, I don't know...what that's about. I think when you sort of get used to, what's the word, negativity or fear or sort of misinterpretation and when there's so much media storm around, should gay parents be allowed to adopt, should they be allowed to be boy scout leaders, blah blah blah, pedophilia, like all that stuff that sort of floats around in the media I think you sort of take it in and it lowers your expectations of people. Whether that's fair to those people or not.

Challenges. Jocelyn reported that the greatest challenge for her family is the consistent need to "explain your difference," involving 'coming out' to total strangers multiple times each day. Jocelyn talked about her great fear of experiencing a negative reaction to her family makeup in front of her children, though she said that this had not yet happened. Other challenges Jocelyn perceived for her family included the inevitable discomfort her children will feel growing up with "homophobia and heterosexism" and the feeling that she and her family are responsible for educating others.

Recommendations. Jocelyn’s recommendations for school staff looking to help lesbian parented families feel welcome were forthright. Staff should openly address difference, which Jocelyn noted requires a setting where teachers feel safe and supported in discussing same-sex issues: “Teachers have to feel safe enough, I mean, even if you do feel good, or okay with sexual orientation, teachers have to be in a position where they’re allowed the safety to intervene in those situations.” School staff should work through personal discomfort to openly discuss her family makeup. Schools should display images such as the rainbow flag that serves as a symbol to LGBTQ families that schools and classrooms are safe spaces. Teachers should deliver a curriculum that acknowledges differences in family makeup and have inclusive literature in the classroom and school that is reflective of different family structures. Finally, school staff should use inclusive language which Jocelyn defines:

Inclusive language means not always referring to Moms and Dads and, I mean, that’s not even just about queer parents, that’s about kids who live with their grandparents, kids who are adopted and fostered, kids who, you know, don’t have a Dad, kids who don’t have a Mom.

Case Two: Julia

Background information. Julia is “Mommy” to six-and-a-half year-old twins Georgia and Jack. Julia shares equal custody of her two children with her former partner, the children’s “Mom,” from whom, at the time of our interview, she had been separated for nearly two years. Julia and her partner created their

family through the use of anonymous donor sperm and her children share her former partner's last name. Although it was not legally required, following Georgia and Jack's birth Julia completed a second parent adoption to formally adopt her son and daughter and both her name and her partner's name are listed on their children's birth certificates as 'Parent.'

Julia cited her separation from her partner as "very significant" in her daughter and son's school experiences and highlighted the difficulty in teasing apart the effect of the separation and the effect of transition to a new school, both of which occurred at the beginning of their kindergarten school year.

School selection. At the time of our interview Georgia and Jack were attending grade one at a school close to their homes (Julia and her former partner live near each other); last year they attended kindergarten at this same school. Prior to entering this school they took part in two years of preschool programming at a different school site within the city. When deciding on a school for their children Julia and her partner were interested in a community school experience. They were happy with the school located in the same neighborhood as their home (they lived together at the time) but were unhappy with the out-of-school care program available at the school which they knew their children would spend significant time in. They began looking for another school within their community:

It was more about, partly, location like close to home, friends in the neighborhood, that typical community school experience but also that welcoming relationship, openness factor. There are some schools that you

just get a vibe when you walk in of, hmm, I don't like this or, hmm, this is a, you just get an energy from it, from the kids, from the people that you meet when you first walk in and it had that feel to it in addition to sort of knowing people. And we knew, I knew one set of friends that already had a child there so I spoke a little, not a close friend but enough to sort of say, hey, have you been happy with it?

Julia works within the education system herself and was familiar with the principal of the one of the schools they visited near their home. This combined with the positive recommendation from her acquaintance helped she and her partner select their school.

Disclosure. One of the advantages Julia cited for selecting the school she and her former partner did for their children was her personal and professional relationship with the school administrator. Julia felt that this relationship helped her to feel more comfortable within the school: "She knew us, she knew our situation, like, it was just really comfortable because you don't have to bring it up over and over again."

Regarding disclosure to other members of the school staff Julia said that her family makeup is always presented ahead of time because she makes a point of noting on her children's registration forms that the children have a "two-mom family." While Julia said that she felt it was necessary for her to disclose her family makeup to her children's teachers she said that the conversation is informal, "We're kind of casual in the way we present it and they are kind of casual about the way they receive it."

When I asked Julia about her thoughts on disclosure to parents of other children she expressed her desire to have this information presented as organically as possible. She said that though she never wants to appear that she is hiding her sexuality, she never feels that it is necessary to discuss her family makeup with other parents and that it generally comes up at some point in day-to-day conversation.

School experiences. Julia described her family's experiences with the school system over the past four years as "really positive." She did not cite any negative examples of school experiences for herself, her former partner or her children. Julia also pointed out that she knows of another child who has two moms attending the same school as her children.

Attitudes. When asked how she would categorize the attitudes of the school staff toward her family at the two schools her children have attended, she said that she believes her family is viewed as the same as other families by the school staff: "I don't think we get treated differently than any other family." Julia believes that other parents at her children's school also view her as the same as other mothers and are neither surprised nor upset by her family configuration. Julia cited greater acceptance of lesbian and gay people in society in general as being partially responsible for these attitudes: "It's just accepted as part of the fabric of the classroom and of the bigger school."

Challenges. When asked if her family faces challenges specific to having two moms Julia replied, "Yeah, of course, absolutely." For Julia one of the most evident challenges of schooling is not fitting into the typical family stereotype in

terms of paperwork, Julia recalled several experiences of having to stroke out 'Father' and replace it with 'Mother' on school forms. Another challenge she noted was the need to be highly aware of societal issues reflected in the media relating to gay and lesbian people. Julia also discussed a sense of inevitability with regard to her children experiencing negative reactions to their family makeup,

I think there's more...proactive, explicit planning for it. Like just, you know, it is going to happen, you know, we'd be fools to think it's not so why would...we need to give them the language now to be able to identify and establish positive feelings about the words lesbian, gay so that when they hear them used negatively they don't buy into it.

Further challenges that Julia discussed included the difference in her family's use of the terms "Mommy" and "Mom." Often, other children use these terms interchangeably to mean the same person and this had led to confusion for her children, their peers and teachers.

Recommendations. Julia's recommendations for schools hoping to welcome lesbian-parented families were similar to Jocelyn's. Teachers should deliver the curriculum to students in a way that is representative of the makeup of each group of students, Julia cited the example of same-sex parented, immigrant and Aboriginal families. As well, teachers should deliver programming to students that is reflective of individual difference. School staff should use proper terminology and modify language to use terms that are representative of many different types of families: "It doesn't have to mean everything is individualized

but just have it on your radar screen about who your audience is when you're writing sort of those notes." Teachers should ask questions of all parents regarding who is in their family and how their family functions. Schools should adopt strict policies on homophobic bullying and homophobic language use and dedicate time and money to stocking the library with literature representative of all types of families.

Case Three: Adienne and Andrea

Background information. Adienne and Andrea are mothers to Rosie who, at the time of our interview, is a high school student. Adienne and Andrea adopted Rosie as an adolescent and, as such, were not part of her elementary school experiences. Prior to being adopted by Adienne and Andrea, Rosie lived in foster care with her older siblings, she and her mothers maintain regular contact with her foster and extended family. Prior to meeting Adienne and Andrea, Rosie had had little experience with gay or lesbian people and did not have exposure to gay or lesbian role models. Rosie and her mothers each maintain the first and last names they were born with.

School selection. Adienne and Andrea explained that their intention when adopting a child was always to have that child attend the public school in their home community. When they began the process of adopting Rosie they visited the open house for their local public junior high school. Rosie did not live with them at the time of the open house and both felt that visiting the school without a child was odd but were pleased with the reactions of staff:

We had a very positive experience in terms of the excited responses of staff learning that a child who was going to be newly adopted might be coming to their school and a wonderful experience with the school's principal and for us, if we'd had a negative experience we might have looked at another school but we just had such a positive early experience there.

Similarly, their selection of a high school for Rosie was based on proximity to their home and Rosie's desire to remain with her friends. As well, Rosie has special educational needs, finding a school that could provide the best learning environment possible for her was a chief concern for Adienne and Andrea. While attending the open house for the high school that Rosie and her mothers eventually selected, Adienne was pleased to note many posters displayed in the school's hallways created by members of the school's Gay Straight Alliance, "This really set a tone of inclusion at this school so nobody could pretend they hadn't seen them, you could not miss them and it really set a tone for the expectation of safety in the school."

The only barrier to having their child attend their local school, said Adienne, would have been if the school was religiously based,

We would never have looked at a religious school, we just would not...in fact we would have been a bit stuck I think if that would have been our local alternative and we would have had to put them under some scrutiny.

Disclosure. Rosie's junior high school experience was unique in that her mothers had met her teachers at the school's open house prior to her adoption.

Therefore, her junior high teachers were aware that she came from a lesbian-parented family. In high school Adienne and Andrea recalled introducing themselves to Rosie's home room teacher as "her moms" but said that there was no further discussion about their family makeup. Adienne and Andrea felt that perhaps because Rosie is older and at a level of schooling where parents are less involved their family makeup is not as significant to her teachers and in her education in general.

School experiences. Adienne, Andrea and Rosie have had positive school experiences surrounding their family makeup. Adienne recalled a particularly touching incident where one of Rosie's junior high teachers baked a small cake for each student to take home for their mother on Mother's Day, the teacher baked a double batch for Rosie so she had one to take to each of her mothers. Neither Adienne nor Andrea recalled any negative experiences associated with being part of a lesbian-parented family in Rosie's school career.

Attitudes. Adienne and Andrea describe themselves as highly involved in their daughter's education, regularly attending school functions and participating on parent advisory councils. When asked about her perceived attitudes of Rosie's teachers and other school staff Andrea reported, "It's just been completely normal to everyone." Similarly, Adienne remarked that the attitudes held by other parents towards her family are, "quite neutral," although she joked that perhaps these other parents think that she and Andrea are the same person as they look similar and often do not attend school functions together. Adienne and Andrea noted that they did not know of any other same-sex parented families at Rosie's

junior high or high school, they felt that this fact made their family a “novelty” to some of the staff and other families.

Challenges. When identifying challenges faced as a result of their family makeup Adienne and Andrea highlighted a need to be highly conscious of happenings in society as well as the need to seek out opportunities for Rosie to engage with male role models. Adienne also pointed out a practical challenge faced by the family because of stereotypical naming systems, all three members of the family have different last names and Adienne recalled encountering questions over how she and Rosie are related. Further, Adienne noted the increasing representation of gay and lesbian youth in Gay Straight Alliances at Rosie’s school and other junior and senior high schools but pointed out that these groups focus mostly on gay and lesbian students and do not reach further out to include families.

Adienne commented on challenges experienced by other lesbian mothers she knows with younger children,

Kids from lesbian parented families generally have a lot of room around gender identity.... So then if our families don’t have strict gender rules or roles sometimes our kids run into difficulty over not having the right favourite colour and things like that.

She cited adherence to strict gender norms as another challenge facing lesbian parented and other families today.

Recommendations. Adienne and Andrea made recommendations for schools of all levels to promote positive interactions with lesbian-parented

families. School staff should represent same-sex parented families and other diverse families in images and literature in the school and classroom and post mission statements in the school that specifically speak to inclusion of people of different sexual orientations; Adienne commented on the power of such mission statements, “I think something like that would be really meaningful because a school has to decide to put something like that up.” As well, school staff should work to increase engagement of families of all types with the school. Teachers should provide programming for all types of diverse students and families and ensure that all groups feel safe and welcome within the school. School staff should examine the way that certain school subjects are gendered and work to combat this effect: “It’s important that we watch how gendered the options get so that girls can succeed in construction, boys can take drama and art and the school have some good tone around those things.” Teachers should handle holidays like Mother’s Day and Father’s Day in a way that is respectful of all students’ family makeups and deliver programming to students that represents a diverse variety of historical figures rather than falling into the white, heterosexual male stereotype.

Chapter Five: Data Analysis

This chapter presents findings based on common themes that emerged through analysis of my three interview transcripts and artifacts collected from participants' pre-interview activities. It is important to be aware that the themes discussed below have emerged out of my interpretation of the participants' experiences. These experiences were shared with me through the perspectives of the participants and as such, constitute these women's realities. I am not in a position, nor do I wish to be, to evaluate or pass judgment on the perspectives of my participants. This chapter aims to combine the information that was collected from each participant family with the information from other participant families and the pre-existing literature on the topic to present a clearer picture of the perspectives of lesbian mothers.

Areas of Intersection and Division Among Participant Families

In conducting interviews with my three participant families I was struck by some important areas where the families intersected or divided in terms of their thoughts and actions. These important areas include: factors in school selection, disclosure of family makeup, what lies ahead and chief concerns.

Factors in School Selection

Each of the participant families discussed their desire to find a school for their children that would be respectful of their family makeup. Of the three families Jocelyn went the farthest to find her son's school, seeking out a school

known specifically for its inclusion of sexual minorities. Each of the women, however, explained to me personal factors that were more important or, in Jocelyn's case, equally as important to their decision in selecting a school. For Jocelyn it was important that she find a school where her son would be creatively engaged. When she completed a pre-interview activity of drawing her family in relation to her son's school she wrote down a list of "the things that I find most important and valuable that Thomas be doing in school." The list included fine arts, theatre, literature and music. Julia and Adienne and Andrea felt that finding a school within their local community was most important for their children. Julia said that her family was specifically seeking a "community school experience." Placing value on diversity was an important factor in school selection for each of these families though perhaps not the *most* important factor.

Disclosure of Family Makeup

Contrary to the attitudes reported in some previous studies of gay and lesbian-parented families (Casper, Schultz & Wickens, 1992; Rimalower & Caty, 2009) each of the participant families expressed their belief that it was important for them to disclose their family makeup to their child/ren's school at the beginning of the school year. Interestingly, the three families presented a spectrum of opinions with concern to how disclosure should be handled to school staff and other parents. Jocelyn reported that her disclosure to her son's teachers involved her asking the teachers, "Are you comfortable working with... a child that has two moms?" This is in contrast to Julia who said that she explained to teachers that her children have two moms the "same way I would inform you of

any other sort of factual piece about my kids.” Julia reported that her disclosure is always followed by information for the teachers about how her children address her partner and herself. Adienne and Andrea explained that their disclosure to Rosie’s teacher was short and to the point: “We said that we were her moms, and we wouldn’t have explained anything more than that.”

Similarly, Jocelyn and Julia expressed differing opinions on disclosure to fellow parents. Jocelyn explained that despite the fact that she is separated from her partner and now living alone with her children she would feel that it was necessary to inform the parent of any child coming to spend time at her home of her family makeup. Jocelyn cited the reason for this as being her desire to ensure that there are no “misunderstandings” or “misinterpretations.” Conversely, Julia said that her family makeup would often be disclosed to other parents during her day-to-day conversations but that she did not feel disclosing this information to another parent was ever necessary or required. When I specifically asked if she felt that she would disclose this information to the parent of a child coming to spend time in her home she said that she would not.

It was agreed that disclosure of family makeup to school staff was important for the comfort of the child/ren in each of my participant families; the disclosure of family makeup to fellow parents was deemed necessary by Jocelyn but unnecessary by Julia. Method of disclosure was quite different between participant families and represented two different points-of-view, asking and telling.

What Lies Ahead

Jocelyn and Julia who each have children in elementary school described bullying of some form in their children's future as "inevitable." Both mothers shared their beliefs that it was only a matter of time until their children encountered negative reactions to their family makeup from peers, educators or other parents. Jocelyn recognized that her children would deal with the same "homophobia and heterosexism" that she had dealt with as a lesbian woman. Julia felt that as her children aged they would encounter slang words at school that would be offensive to the gay and lesbian community. Both mothers spoke of their efforts to prepare their children for what they feel is an inevitable future. Julia explained that she role plays scenarios with her children because she feels that they can't afford to be unprepared in a negative situation, that they need to know what to say and who to tell. Jocelyn said that they work at home to build strength in their family structure so that her children will feel secure when this structure is questioned. Understanding this reality for these families is important. Julia explained that one of the most challenging things for a lesbian mother is the need to constantly be proactive in dealing with situations such as this.

Chief Concerns

My participants identified important concerns for lesbian families in general and revealed information about the central concerns in their lives. Julia identified an important concern for same-sex parented families, the school staff they encounter are most often lacking in knowledge about the way same-sex

parented families function. Julia said that these staff members are often uncomfortable with or unwilling to ask questions to gain more information.

Another important concern identified by both Julia and Adienne and Andrea was the more fluid way that gender and gender roles are conceptualized in same-sex relationships, families and homes. Julia said that because of her family makeup she feels that she is more accepting of her children “being whoever they are” as opposed to fitting into strict gender categories. Similarly, Adienne observed, “Kids from lesbian parented families generally have a lot of room around gender identity expression.” Both families spoke about the issues that this sometimes causes in highly heteronormative environments such as the school. Adienne recalled stories from fellow lesbian mothers about their children being teased for liking colours like pink and blue that are typically associated with the opposite gender or for dressing or wearing their hair in certain ways.

Despite their comments about these important concerns for lesbian-parented families it was very clear what the central concern for each of my participant families was and, interestingly enough, or perhaps not at all interesting, the central concern for each family had nothing to do with their family makeup. Both Jocelyn and Julia were most concerned about their children’s adjustment to their new lives as separated families and Adienne and Andrea were centrally concerned with their daughter’s special educational needs. Recognizing that “lesbian-parented” is only one of the many categories into which each of these families fits helps to put into perspective the chief concerns of each family.

Examining Positive Experiences

At this point I kind of think we have been lucky ... we've been lucky that the people our kids have been exposed to have been genuine and loving and supportive and accepting and great people to be involved with them in these really early years because I don't think it's been intentional. *I don't think that we should have been expecting it at this point yet*, right, I mean we talk about the generational thing but there are still a lot of people out there that are teaching that don't share my views, right?

- Julia [emphasis added]

While interviewing my participants for this research I learned many things about my topic and myself. I learned that my interview questions were worded too negatively, I learned that I have the tendency to use 1990's pop expressions when I'm not sure what else to say: "awesome," "fantastic," "absolutely," I also learned that I have to work on my tells.

As I prepared for my interviews I kept in mind the cautions of Fontana and Frey (1992) to leave my preconceptions at the door so as not to push them onto my participants. I thought, however, that the preconceptions to which they were referring meant my preconceived ideas of how my participants might respond to my questions. I did not predict that this would mean my own personal ideas about concepts such as "positive experiences" that I felt were basically universal. As I interviewed my participants I caught myself tilting my head ever so slightly to the right and furrowing my brow each time Jocelyn, Julia, Adienne or Andrea

described their self-identified positive experiences to me. *Head tilt, gosh, I wouldn't make a good poker player.*

Each of my three participant families used the term “positive” to describe their experiences with the school system. As well, each participant family described their belief that they were treated “the same” as the other families in their children’s schools. Examining the dialogue surrounding so-called positive experiences with each of my participants, I found examples, some major and others minor, of less-than-ideal experiences that I would predict are markedly different than the experiences of other families in the school.

Jocelyn

When asked about the attitudes of her son’s teachers towards her family Jocelyn responded that she has “never had a problem” with a teacher. When I clarified later what she means by this she repeated that she had had good experiences with teachers because she “hasn’t had a problem.” The repetition of this statement was what first caused me to examine my conception of “positive experience” against my participants’ conceptions. It appeared that for Jocelyn the absence of visible negativity or discrimination was equal to a positive experience. Reflecting on this personally I realize that my conception of a positive experience means more than lack of negativity, it means the presence of something additional, in my mind Jocelyn’s experience here had been one of neutrality rather than positivity. Jocelyn said, “I tend to think that my experiences would be very different if we were going to the corner school” signaling to me that she felt her

process of school selection, which focused on finding a school that would value her family background, had been paramount in her positive experiences.

Julia

Perhaps Jocelyn's estimate that her school selection had been important in her "positive experiences" was correct. Julia specifically stated that she did not feel that her family makeup was so unique that she needed to seek out a school for her children that was as openly committed to acceptance as Jocelyn's son's school. Julia had had, by my estimation, many more examples of less-than positive experiences than Jocelyn. Julia, as referenced at the opening of this section, used the term "lucky" to describe her children's school experiences. Julia felt that not only have the experiences that she and her children have had in school been positive but that her family had, in fact, been lucky to have had these experiences. Although Julia also told me that she felt that her family's experience with the school system has been "boring" and "typical of any family's community school experience," she provided me with several examples that illustrated lack of respect for her family makeup. Julia recounted many examples of the expression "moms and dads" being used in her children's classroom and school assemblies and even recalled a specific instance where an invitation was sent home inviting herself and her partner to an event in the classroom that was addressed to "Mom and Dad" with "Dad" stroked out and "Mommy" written in. Julia recalled wondering, "Couldn't you take the five minutes it takes to go into your computer and make it look nice instead of just crossing it off?" She said that examples like this show a "lack of forethought" on the part of school staff. Also indicative of

this lack of forethought was Julia's report that in four years of her children attending school she had not yet encountered a teacher who had prepared in advance to accommodate her children's unique family structure when leading Mother's Day or Father's Day activities. Julia said that she must remember to call the teachers in advance and present them with a plan for how the situation could be handled with her children,

Very open to the suggestion but it's never...so four years of schooling they have never come to us and said, you know, we're planning for a Father's Day activity this is what we're planning, what do you think? Or, no, it's always been us directing that or suggesting it.

Julia also said that she does not see any evidence of literature available in her children's school that is representative of her family makeup. When I asked Julia if she felt that her family was represented in her children's school or classroom she answered, "No, not explicitly or intentionally." At the end of our interview Julia repeated the sentiment that her family had been lucky with their very positive experience with the school system to this point.

After interviewing Julia I continued to wonder about the conception of positive experience and began to see that, as with Jocelyn, Julia's conception of a positive was based on a lack of blatant discrimination. In his critical examination of curriculum and ideology, Apple (2004) points out that the status quo is maintained in schools because, "Certain meanings and practices are chosen for emphasis...and others are neglected, excluded, diluted, or reinterpreted" (p. 77). It seems that this is precisely what Jocelyn and Julia are doing, emphasizing the

positive examples of school experiences and diluting or reinterpreting those experiences that some might call negative.

Adienne and Andrea

Adienne and Andrea's experience with the school system is limited to junior and senior high school. As such, they have not had opportunities for many of the types of experiences described by Jocelyn and Julia. The nature of junior and senior high schooling tends to see families less closely connected to the school. Despite the differing types of experiences Adienne and Andrea express the same feeling as Julia that their family is not represented in their daughter's school. Although this is the least severe of the three examples it is still illustrative of a differing construction of the term "positive experiences" which Adienne and Andrea also used.

Conclusion

Of course, each of the less-than-ideal experiences described by my participants serves as an example of the heteronormativity referenced in many previous studies of same-sex parented families and schools (Bower & Klecka, 2009; Casper & Schultz, 1999; Epsetin, 1999; Fox, 2007; Mitchell & Ward, 2010; Ryan & Martin, 2000; Ryan, 2010). The continuously perpetuated "assumption that people are, and should be, straight" (Ryan, 2010) could be the foundation for the actions and attitudes of the staff and school in these examples. This would lead us to believe that these experiences are not, as Julia believes, typical of every family's school journey.

Further examining the conception of “positive experiences” I considered the relative nature of the expression. Positivity cannot exist in the complete absence of negativity. Perhaps the previous experiences of my participants in their lives as lesbians themselves have yielded experiences more negative than mine as a heterosexual woman. Would that mean that the juxtaposition of these, in my opinion, neutral or less-than-ideal experiences against previous highly negative experiences would make them appear positive? Julia spoke to me briefly in our interview about the discrimination she faced professionally at the beginning of her career. Although she did not elaborate on this I can say with certainty that any negative experiences I may have had as a beginning teacher pale in comparison to the difficulty she encountered. Is it possible that positive and negative is a sliding scale wherein positive experiences are measured only in their increments away from negative experiences? Making your positive experiences and mine different depending upon our baseline of negative experiences, and the opposite?

Responsibility: Educating Educators

I’m a little bit torn internally, there’s part of me that thinks I don’t want anything different, I just want to take my kids to school and have them happy and learning and connected and, but in order for that to happen sometimes there have to be some explicit things that happen.

- Julia

A number of studies highlighted in my literature review brought to light the question of responsibility: who is responsible to bring about change in the school system, who is responsible to correct the incorrectly held beliefs about same-sex parented families? (Bower & Klecka, 2009; Casper & Schultz, 1999; Epstein, 1999; Fedewa & Clark, 2009; Mitchell & Ward, 2010). From the conversations I had with my participants concerning their role or their feelings about the general role of lesbian parents in their children's education, it would appear that this responsibility falls quite squarely on the shoulders of the family. Each of my participant families described themselves as highly involved in their child/ren's education but each family also provided a motivation for this involvement that did not relate to their family makeup. When I asked specifically if they felt that their involvement in their child/ren's education was related to their family makeup they all said "no." Julia said that her involvement in her son and daughter's education stemmed from her upbringing that focused on the value and importance of education. Adienne and Andrea said that their involvement was related to their daughter's special learning needs. Despite these statements, however, each parent also made reference to their need to educate teachers and school staff about their family, signaling to me that their involvement with the school may be at least partially motivated by their family makeup.

When I asked Jocelyn if she felt that her role as a lesbian mother was different than the role of a heterosexual parent might be she responded,

I mean, yes, and no....we're going to have to deal with things in the same way that, say, an interracial couple would have to deal with issues of

racism. People with less sort of social capital or social privilege will have to deal with, you know, educational issues. I think that there's just a level of maybe educating that we may have to do ourselves and I mean, we are lucky in that we are equipped and able and sort of armed to do that.

Jocelyn identified that her family faces challenges similar to other minority families and she commented that she is fortunate to have the ability to educate about her family whereas some other minority groups may not. Interestingly, Jocelyn seemed to take her role as educator as a given, not an extra or unexpected duty.

Similarly, when discussing the conversation in which she explains to her children's teacher the terms the children use to refer to her partner and herself Julia said that this is, "part of our job" and later recalled that "we've always had to do the sort of instructing in that." Julia feels that the onus is on her partner and herself to inform teachers about her family makeup and provide information that will make her children more comfortable at school. As mentioned above, Julia has also taken on the role of curriculum planner for her children, regularly phoning the school or meeting with teachers to present them with ideas as to how her children can be accommodated in activities such as Mother's Day and Father's Day crafts. When I asked Julia if she believed that she would maintain this role as her children move on in their school career she expressed her thoughts about her children taking over this role with the responsibility to "teach the teachers" and make adaptations to their own programming.

Near the end of our interview Adienne spoke to me about some of the challenges that her friends who are lesbian mothers of younger children have faced. One of these challenges involved the strict gender roles that many adults place on children. She told me that she had found an excellent online resource that aims to provide lesson plans for teachers to promote tolerance in the classroom; one of the lesson plans available teaches that gender does not place limitations on children. Adienne told me that she has forwarded this particular resource to many friends and encouraged them to “go to the school and teach the teacher that gender doesn’t limit the kids in the class.” This serves as another example of the role some lesbian parents feel they must take on.

Mitchell and Ward’s 2010 study concluded that change necessary to create a welcoming environment for same-sex parented families was possible when led by school staff. Unfortunately, the researchers also recognized that this change is rarely led by staff but more often by parents and when led by parents this change is most effective only once a critical mass of same-sex parented families has been reached within a school. In each of the schools attended by my participants’ children, my participants were aware of few, if any, other families headed by same-sex couples. It can therefore be concluded that while these parents are most certainly taking on the responsibility to effect change their efforts may not produce the outcomes they hope for.

Curriculum of Difference

Asking my participants to discuss with me what was currently lacking from their children's education, I expected to hear that they were specifically concerned with the representation of same-sex parented families. Such a recommendation had come up in my literature review and I expected that I would hear it echoed by my participants (Ray, 2001; Ryan & Martin, 2000; Sears, 1993). Instead of this specific focus on same-sex parented families, however, what I heard from my participants was a desire for a much more global representation of many kinds of difference in the school and classroom. Each time that I asked a participant if she felt that information about her family should be presented to children or available in books, she was quick to clarify that curriculum and resources should be present in the school that is reflective of all kinds of diverse people and families. For example, instead of wishing for a curriculum that would discuss changes in lesbian and gay parents' rights over time my participants asked for a curriculum that would examine how family units have changed over time and how they are different in other parts of the world.

Asking Jocelyn and Julia specifically about the information that they would like to see presented to elementary school aged children they both responded that they would like to see better representation of difference in general. Each mother shared with me the frequent discussions she has at home with her children about the nature of difference in making the world an interesting place and the importance of accepting and respecting difference. Both Jocelyn and Julia felt that a specific discussion about gay and lesbian issues would not be

developmentally appropriate for their children at this time. However, each woman also touched on the importance of having resources available in the school that are reflective of many different family makeups, including their own, for the self confidence of their own children and for the information of other children.

Interestingly, Julia, who works within the education system and who is aware of the realities of curriculum planning and development, said that she would hope that each year a teacher would look at the group of students in the class and plan to deliver curriculum in a way that draws on examples relevant to that particular group of students. This opinion is in contrast to Fox's (2007) call to teachers to make changes in their classrooms in terms of representing same-sex parented families regardless of the backgrounds of their students. Julia's opinion was also interesting in light of her comments earlier in our interview regarding the fact that some same-sex parented families may not be "out" to their child's school. It seemed as if Julia was struggling with her realistic knowledge of our educational system and her desires to see her family represented, offering up an option that would allow for inclusion of her family though perhaps not all same-sex parented families.

Adienne and Andrea shared with me an experience their daughter had at school during a social studies class around the time of an election. They described a spectrum-type activity where students were given an issue and asked to stand in different places in the room depending on their position. One of the topics raised was the right of gay and lesbian people to marry. They recalled that this experience was a very positive one for their daughter who took a strong stand

on the issue and was given the opportunity to speak with her peers about it, many of whom were not aware that she had two mothers. Adienne commented on this activity,

That could have gone really differently and I don't know who [led] that conversation, I'm glad they had it because it was positive for her but ... I hope whoever it was had good skills so that they could manage that because I think it can be, sometimes what people do is they say, do you think this population deserves rights? And then it becomes an opportunity to say all the reasons why they don't deserve rights.

Conversations such as these present a dilemma for children from same-sex parented families who are left, often alone, to reconcile the difference between their lived realities and the moral issues being discussed. Julia commented on this same dilemma, "There's the factual nature of, these kids have two moms and then there's all the other stuff around, should they? Should they be allowed to have two moms? And they are very separate." Although I had previously thought that lesbian mothers would be steadfastly in support of the inclusion of gay and lesbian issues in school curriculum these two families presented new considerations on the topic. Opening the classroom up for discussions of the morality of same-sex partnerships, marriages and families can be damaging for children from these families, school staff must have a plan in place to deal with negative conversations, should they arise.

Each of my participant families was adamant that changes should be made to the curriculum their children encounter at school. Interestingly, however, the

changes that they felt most strongly about dealt with making difference in all of its forms more visible. To these mothers this meant providing children with examples of people from different families, different races and different socio-economic backgrounds. None of my participants felt that the inclusion of information about same-sex parented families was any more valuable than the inclusion of information about other minority groups.

Recommendations

I guess there's all sorts of things that we need to pay attention to and sometimes I'm sure it must feel overwhelming, like, oh my God, there's too many things to think about and maybe there are...

- Jocelyn

Similar to their recommendations concerning changes to curriculum, the recommendations suggested by my participant families with concern to welcoming lesbian-parented families into schools and classrooms focused on changes that would positively affect all minority families. While several studies that I reviewed called for education of staff to increase their knowledge of unique challenges facing same-sex parented families (Fox, 2007; Rimalower & Caty, 2009; Ryan & Martin, 2000; Sears, 1993) my participants seemed more concerned with having staff represent and respect all varieties of families. As well, each participant family made mention of representative literature and their hope that it would be made available to all children, this recommendation echoes the thoughts

of participants in several other studies of same-sex parented families (Bower, 2008; Mitchell & Ward, 2010; Sears, 1993).

Recommendations for appropriate language use made by participants mirrored those provided in many previous studies (Bower, 2008; Casper, Schultz & Wickens, 1992; Lipkin, 1999; Ray, 2005; Rimalower & Caty, 2009; Ryan & Martin, 2000; Ryan, 2010; Sears, 1993). Both Jocelyn and Julia spoke to the importance of examining language use for heteronormative and gender-rigid language that can exclude some families or children. Also, both women encouraged the use of appropriate terminology by school staff such as “lesbian” and “gay” and noted the importance for teachers of becoming familiar with the terms children use to refer to their parents (e.g. “Mom” and “Mommy”).

As recommended by Sears (1993), both Julia and Adienne and Andrea suggested examining school policies and mission statements surrounding inclusion and acceptance and taking a hard line against homophobic bullying. Adienne cautioned against wide-spread use of the term “safe” saying that she felt schools should have to earn this title, taking overt action to combat bullying:

I don't think [displaying a statement that a school is safe] should be mandated by the board because lots of schools aren't safe...we shouldn't pretend that a school is safe, it shouldn't get some kind of special recognition for being safe if it hasn't done any work to make it so.

Although my participants presented a small number of classroom-level changes that could be made to help lesbian-parented families feel more welcome, such as the displaying of LGBTQ symbols like the rainbow flag, the majority of

recommendations were larger in scale. Jocelyn said that most of the changes she suggested were “macro-level” and required “systemic change,” and Julia predicted that the changes she recommended would be most successful moving in a top-down pathway from policy makers to classroom teachers. When I asked Jocelyn if she thought that she would be able to tell whether or not the recommendations she had suggested were in place in a particular classroom at an open house she answered, “clearly not.” Interestingly the type of change that is being recommended by these mothers is not evident in any given classroom and is much more focused on school-wide acceptance and appreciation of and respect for diversity.

Chapter Six: Conclusions and Implications

Through interviews with lesbian mothers of children in the school system, the goal of this study was to answer the question: *What are the perspectives of lesbian mothers regarding their families' experiences with the Alberta school system?* This question emerged out of my personal experiences as a classroom teacher working with a lesbian-parented family and my observations of the unique challenges facing this family as well as my own challenges in creating a classroom environment that was welcoming and respectful of their family makeup.

After reviewing available literature on the topic of same-sex parented families I noticed that the studies documenting the process of “coming out” for these families and that provided information on the unique challenges facing these families were out of date. I wondered if the accounts provided in older studies were still reflective of the experiences of lesbian mothers today. Following conversations with my participants I identified common themes in their descriptions of their experiences with the school system; identified important areas of commonality between their experiences and the existing literature; identified areas of disconnect between their experiences and the existing literature; and identified areas of similarity and disconnect between the experiences of the different participant families. Drawing conclusions from these areas of commonality and disconnect will provide greater insight into the perspectives of lesbian mothers in this place and time.

Conclusions

Following analysis of the data in conjunction with examination of previous studies on the topic I have reached four conclusions on the experiences of my participant families. These conclusions are: (1) these families face some challenges unique to their family makeup; however, the majority of the challenges they face are similar to those faced by all other types of families; (2) the reporting of “positive experiences” by my participants may not be reflective of the success of educational institutions and professionals in making these families feel welcome; (3) the responsibility for educating others about their families falls to the parents and children of these families; (4) these mothers are most concerned with changes in schools that promote acceptance and appreciation of all types of difference.

Challenges

Lesbian-parented families face challenges unique to their family makeup, these challenges stem from the heteronormative basis on which the school system and society is built (Bower & Klecka, 2009; Casper & Schultz, 1999; Epstein, 1999; Fox, 2007; Mitchell & Ward, 2010; Ryan & Martin, 2000; Ryan, 2010). Some of the challenges unique to lesbian-parented families identified by my participants included the belief that bullying is an “inevitable” reality of their children’s future and the non-conformity to traditional family stereotypes making paperwork difficult. As suggested by Bower and Klecka (2009), efforts to make heteronormativity more visible in schools will be among the most successful in counteracting these challenges for lesbian-parented families.

It is also important to note that the unique challenges identified by each participant family in this study were slightly different than the challenges identified by the other participant families. The most marked difference were the varying attitudes surrounding the need for and process of disclosing family makeup to others. Noting the difference in attitudes ranging from “asking” to “telling” serves as a reminder that the common characteristic of being headed by lesbian women does not mean that these families are identical. Just as with any other type of family, lesbian-parented families face challenges and have needs that are both the same as and different from other families of the same makeup.

Alongside the challenges unique to their family makeup, these lesbian-parented families also face challenges similar to those faced by all families. Chief among these challenges were selecting schools that offer the best educational options for their children and reconciling changes in family structure (i.e. separation). When examining the experiences of these lesbian-parented families it was important for me to recognize that, as with all families, there are many different lenses through which these mothers view the world and their children’s education. The lens of “lesbian mother,” while important, may not be the most important or most frequently used lens.

“Positive Experiences”

It would be my prediction that the self-reported experiences of lesbian-parented families in a school or classroom would be the most highly valued estimate of the success or failure of a school at meeting the needs of same-sex parented families. It appears, however, that this measure of success should be

evaluated for correlation with experiences of majority (heterosexual) family experiences. Across the three participants sampled it became clear that the positive experiences they reported included events such as lack of respectful representation of their family that would likely not be described as positive by most majority-makeup families.

One theory for reporting of positive experiences despite examples of disrespect or lack of forethought by my participant families is the contrast their children's experiences in school may have with the mother's personal experiences as lesbian women. It may be the case that experiences of overt discrimination as a lesbian woman have set a baseline for anticipated future experiences allowing these mothers to disregard what they consider to be minimal interruptions to positive school experiences for their children. Another theory is that each of the families interviewed for the purposes of this study brought children into their home while in lesbian relationships, none of these women had experience interacting with the school system as the mother of a child from a heterosexually-parented family. As such, these women may not have the same expectations of the school system as heterosexual parents do and may, therefore, have more easily "excluded, diluted, or reinterpreted" some of the less-than-ideal experiences they described as normal (Apple, 2004, p.77).

Responsibility

Much of the existing body of research on the topic of same-sex parented families focuses on school staff's lack of knowledge regarding same-sex parented families (Fox, 2007; Rimalower & Caty, 2009; Ryan & Martin, 2000; Sears,

1993). Participants in this study agreed that most school staff, teachers in particular, are lacking in their understanding of how same-sex parented families come to be and function. Participants also described teacher's discomfort with or unwillingness to ask questions about lesbian-parented families. The small group of families sampled for this study shared the common experience of taking on the responsibility of educating teachers and other school staff about their family. The mothers in this study described taking the initiative to explain such basic things as the terms their children use to refer to them, providing options to teachers for programming adaptations for their children and discussing important concepts such as gender role assignment with them.

Bower and Klecka (2009), Casper and Schultz (1999), and Fedewa and Clark (2009), among other researchers, have previously wondered who should be responsible for shifting the opinions and changing the incorrectly held beliefs of school staff regarding same-sex parented families. From this study it can be concluded that whether or not they *should* be taking on this role, some members of lesbian-parented families most certainly are. More than a decade ago Epstein (1999) called for educators to take responsibility for shifting power dynamics within their schools to allow for greater inclusion of same-sex parented families. Unfortunately, it seems that the educators working with the participants in this study have not fully risen to this call.

Changes

Based on the recommendations made by this study's participants with regard to changes in school curriculum, programming and policies it is not

difficult to conclude that each participant family aims for the same goal: the making visible of all types of difference. Again, it was not simply through the lens of “lesbian mother” that these women approached the topic of change. Greater representation of difference of all types was vitally important to these women and, they felt, would accomplish the task of making schools and classrooms feel more welcoming and safe for lesbian-parented families.

Implications for Teaching

Recommendations for educators that have developed out of this study fall into two categories, macro-level and micro-level. Although these terms are not completely accurate for their intended purposes the macro-level recommendations I will make focus on administrative and district-level changes whereas the micro-level recommendations focus on classroom-level changes.

Macro-Level Recommendations

Five specific recommendations will be made for changes that policy-makers and administrators can implement to make their schools more welcoming for and respectful of same-sex parented families:

1. Adopt strict policies against homophobic bullying in all areas of the school. Intolerance of slang word use and inappropriate comments and jokes from students and staff sets a tone of respect and inclusion for the whole school.
2. Examine language use in print, online, and oral communication. Look at administrative paperwork, newsletters and general addresses made to the

study body or parents online or in assemblies or announcements for language that is respectful of all family makeups.

3. Ensure that teachers within the district or school feel safe and supported in having conversations with students about diverse family makeups. Fear of reaction from administration may prevent teachers from speaking openly with students even if they feel conversations are necessary.
4. Communicate expectations that the school is a safe and respectful place for all families to all staff members. Inconsistent enforcement of anti-bullying policies or lack of respect is evident to families.
5. Ensure that funds are allocated for the purchase of resources such as library books that are reflective of individual and family differences.

Micro-Level Recommendations

Five specific recommendations will be made for changes that classroom teachers can implement immediately to make their classrooms more welcoming for and respectful of same-sex parented families:

1. Ask questions of all families entering the classroom. The beginning of the school year is likely the most important time to gain information about all of the families making up the classroom. Making efforts to gain as much information as families wish to share about themselves will open up the lines of communication between home and school, signal to families interest in their children and what is important to them and will provide valuable information about the children. This information can be gained through conversations during home visits, meet the teacher evenings or

open houses or can be requested through a newsletter at the beginning of the year. Gaining information about minority family types will be valuable in ensuring that the teacher can provide appropriate programming for their child and that they are able to respectfully communicate with the family throughout the year.

2. Be proactive in planning for children from diverse family makeups. Ensure that activities planned for all children in the classroom allow choice and present options for students. Mother's Day and Father's Day activities may not be as appropriate for classrooms where one or many students do not come from a two-parent, heterosexual family. Instead, look for opportunities to discuss role models of both genders and families of all kinds.
3. Be proactive in dealing with difference and diversity. Allow children time and space to discuss their family makeups, should they choose to, and plan for teacher reaction to the variety of responses that may or may not arise from other children. Unfortunately, this will require teachers to think of the "worst case scenario" for the children in their classrooms and plan ahead for how these situations will be handled. If teachers are unsure how to handle situations of teasing or negative responses discussing this with the child's parents can provide insight and demonstrate the teacher's concern.
4. Examine language use. Language use is a powerful and all-encompassing aspect of the classroom. Ensure that classroom language is respectful of

all students and their families in the classroom and, preferably, in the school, town or city, there are many reasons why a child may not have a mother and a father in their home. Teacher's language use sets the tone for tolerance, acceptance and respect in the classroom.

5. Find ways to openly signal to same-sex parented families that the classroom is a safe space. Although none of the participants in this study specifically suggested this each made allusion to some symbol that they identified in their child/ren's school or classroom that made them feel welcome. This can be accomplished by displaying representative children's literature in the classroom or school library, displaying photographs or drawings of all varieties of families or by positing mission statements in the classroom or hallway that specifically speak to the acceptance and appreciation of all forms of diversity.

Recommendations for Further Study

All recommendations for further study based on this research involve the identification of and focus on one specific topic within the perspectives of lesbian-parented families experiences with the school system. This study resulted in a spread of information on a wide variety of topics; a focus on some of these specific topics would be of benefit to the body of knowledge on lesbian-parented families. One recommendation would be a wider-scale study that examines the specific factors in school selection for same-sex parented families. Such a study would reveal more definitive information about the most important factors in

school selection for same-sex parented families and provide insight for schools hoping to welcome these families.

Another recommendation would be a study that solicits both heterosexually-parented and same-sex parented families who would identify their experiences with the school system as generally either “positive” or “negative.” Following this general identification of experiences this study could investigate the nature of these positive or negative experiences and compare them to each other for the purposes of learning how each group of parents conceptualizes the terms “positive experience” and “negative experience.”

Finally, a study that focuses specifically on lesbian mothers’ interactions with their children’s schools and examines the types of and purposes for these interactions is recommended. A preliminary study in this area could be conducted to develop a set of categories for lesbian mothers interactions with their children’s schools and this study could be followed by a larger-scale study where lesbian mothers’ interactions are compared with heterosexual mothers’ interactions. This comparison could identify the categories of interactions that were the same and different between the two groups and show which interactions are more and less common between the two groups.

Conclusion

It can seem that change of any kind is slow, this can be especially true of change within the school system. Apple (2004) provides a possible explanation for this:

The fact that schools normally seem neutral and are usually *overtly* insulated from political processes and ideological argumentation has both positive and negative qualities. The insulation has served to defend the school against whims and fads that can often have a destructive effect upon educational practice. It also, however, can make the school rather unresponsive to the needs of local communities and a changing social order. [emphasis in original] (p. 78)

The type of insulation that Apple refers to is the specific material through which the participants of this study are currently moving. Each mother and her family provided examples of positive steps taken by the school system to welcome them into the classroom. Each mother also provided examples of areas where classroom teachers, schools and entire districts could make changes to move towards more respectful inclusion of lesbian-parented families.

The participants of this study should provide evidence that positive change is happening in our school system and that this change is being recognized. These families' descriptions of "positive experiences" should also provide motivation to teachers, administrators and school board members to do better, to continue working towards a future of greater representation and respect. The participants of this study have shared the lengths to which they are going to penetrate the insulation of the school culture and shed light on their family makeup.

Unfortunately, as Apple (2004) notes, this insulation is both intentional and effective and these families will most certainly require the support of school staff to pave the way through for lesbian-parented families in the future.

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Appendix A: Pre-Interview Activities

Pre-Interview Activity Information Sheet

Prior to your first meeting with the researcher, Shannon Letendre, please complete one of the following activities. If you are attending interviews as a couple you may decide to complete one activity together, or you may each choose to complete one activity individually (the same activity or different activities):

1. Make a timeline listing important events with regard to your family's experience with the Alberta school system. What constitutes an "important event" is completely up to you. This timeline might include school-based events such as: beginning school, changing schools, moving from pre-school to elementary school or a particularly memorable school activity. This timeline might also include home-based events that could have impacted your school experience such as: moving from one city to another or from one home to another, dissolution or development of family relationships, medical events. This timeline may or may not include specific date information.
2. Make a drawing of your family and your child(ren)'s current school. This drawing can include all, some or one member of your family and may depict those family members at a school event, in your child(ren)'s classroom or be a less literal, more symbolic representation. Who and what you choose to draw is completely up to you. *Don't worry about your artistic abilities -- stick people are fine.

Please bring your completed activity to your first interview. At this interview Shannon Letendre will take a photocopy of your completed activity and return the original document to you.

The purpose of this activity is to serve as a starting point for your interview. In completing the activity you are encouraged to reflect on your feelings associated with the events that you are recalling for your timeline or drawing. This reflection will help to prepare you for your conversation with Shannon regarding your family's experiences with and your perspectives on the

Alberta school system. At your first interview the researcher will go over your completed activity with you, asking you to explain the timeline or drawing that you have created. Then interviewer may ask you additional questions regarding your completed activity.

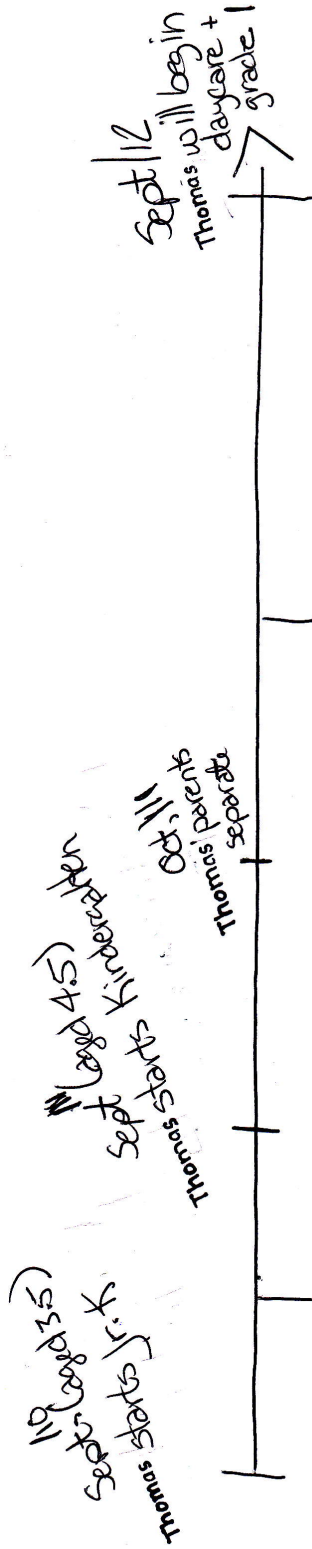
The photocopy made of your completed pre-interview activity will serve as data collected for the purposes of the research study, “Perspectives of Lesbian Mothers Regarding their Families’ School Experiences.” This data will be stored securely in a locked filing cabinet and will be destroyed five years after the completion of the study. Any identifying information provided to the researcher through your completed activity (such as the name of a school, teacher or location) will be masked and will not be used in the publication of findings from this study.

For more information on the completion or use of these pre-interview activities please contact Shannon Letendre at 780-221-8103 or shannon.letendre@ualberta.ca.

Pre-Interview Activities: Jocelyn



Timeline



difficult to put on a timeline, per se, but at some various points between the beginning of pre-K and K, it becomes more and more evident that T struggles with anxiety and environmental sensitivity issues, for which he is currently being assessed for.

Pre-Interview Activity: Julia**TIMELINE OF EDUCATION EXPERIENCES AS A LESBIAN MOM**

OCT 21, 2005	Jack AND Georgia BORN
AUG 15, 2007	ATTEND FIRST SPEECH AND LANGUAGE WORKSHOP
OCT 2007	SPEECH AND LANGUAGE ASSESSMENT PRESCHOOL ASSESSMENT SERVICES Georgia – autism query
	NEURODEVELOPMENTAL CLINIC Jack
APRIL 2008	SPEECH AND LANGUAGE ASSESSMENT Both children diagnosed with severe receptive and severe expressive language delays
JUNE 2008	Children's HOSPITAL Jack and Georgia both get ear tubes put in
SEP 2, 2008	FIRST DAY OF PRESCHOOL – 3 YEAR OLD CLASS
SEP 1, 2009	FIRST DAY OF PRESCHOOL – 4 YEAR OLD CLASS
SEP 1, 2010	FIRST DAY OF KINDERGARTEN
SEP 7, 2010	SEPARATION FROM PARTNER OF 11 YEARS
SEP 1, 2011	FIRST DAY OF GRADE 1
FEB 2012	RAINBOWS PROGRAM Both children begin the 12 week Rainbows peer support group at school for children who have experienced a loss due to divorce or death

Pre-Interview Activity: Adienne and Andrea

March 2008	Adienne and Andrea attend Jr. High Open House (without a child).
June 2008	Rosie begins visits to transition to our family
July 2008	Rosie comes to live with us full-time.
Sept. 2008	Rosie starts grade 7
June 2009	Rosie completes grade 7 - wins school's Merit Award.
June 2010	Rosie completes grade 8. Jr. High School loses an outstanding principal.
June 2011	Rosie graduates from grade 9
Sept 2011	Rosie begins grade 10
June 2012	Rosie completes grade 10.

Appendix B: Sample Interview Questions

Background Information:

Background information on the family (family members, ages, grade level(s), etc.)

Information about how children came to be part of this family (adoption, insemination, etc.)

How did you come to this school? What is your opinion of the school as a whole?

How/when did you disclose your family's composition/your sexuality to your child's school?

Attitudes:

How would you describe the attitudes of your child(ren)'s teacher(s), administrators, other parents towards your family?

How do you know these people feel this way?

How would you describe your own attitudes towards your child(ren)'s teachers, school administrators and fellow parents?

Challenges:

Do you feel that your family faces challenges different than those of heterosexually parented families?

Can you explain some of these different challenges?

Do you feel that, as parents, your role with concern to your child's education is different than heterosexual parents?

Experiences:

How would you describe your family's experience with the public school system?

Do you feel that your family is represented in your child(ren)'s classroom(s)?

If so, how?

If not, in what ways do you think that your family could be represented?

Do you feel that efforts have been made to represent your family in the classroom (through resources, curriculum, language use, etc.)?

Do you feel that you are part of the whole school community (including students, teachers, school staff)?

How do you know?

Do you feel that you are part of the school's parent community?

Are you active on the school's parent council?

Does your family participate in parent-council organized events?

Do you feel that you face any discrimination from the school (staff, students or parents)?

Do you feel that your child(ren) face any discrimination from the school (staff, students or parents)?

Can you think of a specific experience when you felt that your family was well represented in your child(ren)'s school or classroom?

Can you think of a specific experience when you felt that your family was not represented or represented negatively in your child(ren)'s school or classroom?

Recommendations:

What could your child(ren)'s school or teacher do to make you feel more welcome in the classroom?

Do you feel that your family will become more or less accepted in the public school system in the future or that acceptance will remain the same?

What will happen to precipitate this change?

Appendix C: Ethics Approval

Ethics Approval Notice

Notification of Approval

Date:	May 14, 2012
Study ID:	Pro00030322
Principal Investigator:	Shannon Letendre
Study Supervisor:	Jill McClay
Study Title:	Perspectives of Lesbian Mothers Regarding their Families' School Experiences in Alberta
Approval Expiry Date:	May 13, 2013

Approved Consent Form:	Approval Date 5/14/2012	Approved Document Informed Consent Form
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Thank you for submitting the above study to the Research Ethics Board 1 . Your application has been reviewed and approved on behalf of the committee.

A renewal report must be submitted next year prior to the expiry of this approval if your study still requires ethics approval. If you do not renew on or before the renewal expiry date, you will have to re-submit an ethics application.

Approval by the Research Ethics Board does not encompass authorization to access the staff, students, facilities or resources of local institutions for the purposes of the research.

Sincerely,

William Dunn, PhD
Chair, Research Ethics Board 1

Note: This correspondence includes an electronic signature (validation and approval via an online system).

Participant Information/Recruitment Letter

Dear Families,

My name is Shannon Letendre and I am a graduate student in the Faculty of Education, Department of Elementary Education at the University of Alberta. I am currently preparing to conduct my thesis research. The purpose of this letter is to invite your participation in my research project titled, “Perspectives of Lesbian Mothers Regarding their Families’ School Experiences.” This letter is being forwarded to you and you are being invited to participate in this study because you have been identified by a mutual contact as a potential participant.

The purpose of my research study is to explore the perspectives of lesbian mothers with regard to their family’s experiences with the Alberta school system. Through this research I hope to learn about lesbian mothers’ perceptions of the treatment and representation of their families in Alberta schools. As a participant of this study you will provide a voice for the lesbian parenting community and contribute to the development of a better understanding of lesbian families’ perspectives on the school system.

The results of this study will be used in support of my Master’s thesis and may also be used in future scholarly publications or presentations associated with the research findings. As a participant, you can request a copy of the research findings. This research will be of benefit to the Alberta school system by developing a set of recommendations for changes in classrooms and schools that can be implemented to better serve the needs of lesbian parented families. This research will also highlight successful initiatives already in place in Alberta schools with respect to lesbian families and will benefit the post-secondary education of pre-service elementary school teachers by highlighting the perspectives and experiences of local lesbian mothers.

I want to invite you and your partner to be participants in this research. I am looking for participants for this study who are lesbian mothers, either single or in a relationship, of elementary or middle school aged children (ages 4 – 14) who attend school in an urban school district in Alberta. Data collection for this study will not involve direct researcher interaction with children in participant families.

Single mothers will be asked to attend interviews alone (without children) and couples will be asked to attend interviews together (also, without children).

If you agree to participate in this study you will be asked to complete one of two pre-interview activities, either: (1) creating a timeline of your families' experiences with the school system or (2) drawing a picture of your family and your child(ren)'s current school. You will be asked to bring your completed activity to our initial interview where I will make a photocopy of it; you will be given the original document to keep. Our initial interview will take place at a time convenient for your family in a meeting room within the Education Building on the University of Alberta campus. This initial interview will involve a series of open-ended interview questions. This interview will be audio taped and is predicted to take approximately ninety minutes. Following this interview you will be provided with a copy of the transcribed interview via e-mail which you will be asked to read over and add information to as you see fit for the purposes of clarifying your responses. Following this interview it may be necessary for a follow-up interview to be scheduled that would, again, take place in the Education Building, be audio taped and be e-mailed to you for verification.

Potential risks associated with participation in this study are minimal. If a participant chooses to disclose an upsetting experience during the interview process they may experience minor emotional distress. If this is the case, participants will be free to stop the interview at any time, for a break or to end the interview session all together.

All data collected for the purposes of this research study will be kept confidential. All electronic documents including audio recordings of interviews and their transcriptions will be kept on a password-protected computer, accessible only by the principal researcher. Paper documents associated with the study including the copy of your completed pre-interview activity, will be kept in a locked filing cabinet, accessible only by the principal researcher. When reporting the findings of this research your confidentiality will be maintained through the use of pseudonyms for yourself and your other family members (you will be welcome to select your own pseudonym) and any other identifying information

provided during data collection, such as the name of a school (should you choose to disclose this) will be removed or masked. Identifying information about yourself, your family members, your location and the school(s) your children attend will not be published. All data collected for the purposes of this research will be stored securely, as outlined above, for five years following the completion of the study and will then be destroyed.

You are under no obligation to participate in this study. The participation is completely voluntary. Further to this, please be aware that you are not obliged to answer any specific questions even if participating in the study. Even if you agree to be in the study, you can change your mind or withdraw your data. You may choose to withdraw your participation in this study at any time without penalty; your data can be withdrawn from this study up to four weeks following the date of your last interview.

If you have any further questions regarding this study please do not hesitate to contact me at 780-221-8103 or shannon.letendre@ualberta.ca or my supervisor, Dr. Jill McClay at 780-492-0968 or jill.mcclay@ualberta.ca. If you have concerns about this study, you may contact the Research Ethics Office at 780-492-2615. This office has no direct involvement with this project.

If you are interested in participating in this study please contact me directly at your earliest convenience.

Sincerely,

Shannon Letendre

M.Ed. Student - Elementary Education – University of Alberta

780-221-8103 shannon.letendre@ualberta.ca

Please note: the plan for this study has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines by a Research Ethics Board at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact the Research Ethics Office at 780-492-2615.

Participant Consent Form

I, _____ (print name), consent to participate in the research study, “Perspectives of Lesbian Mothers Regarding their Families’ School Experiences.” I will complete one pre-interview activity and will take part in one or two in-person interviews with Shannon Letendre.

I have read the study information letter and I understand that I will be asked to discuss my family’s school experiences with the researcher. I understand that:

- I am not obligated to participate in the research study.
- I may withdraw my participation from the research at any time without penalty.
- I may withdraw my data from the research within four weeks of my final interview.
- All information gathered will be treated confidentially.
- I will not be identifiable in any documents or other reporting that results from this research.
- Any information collected that identifies me will be kept securely by the researcher for five years following the completion of the study and then destroyed.
- I can obtain a copy of research findings by contacting Shannon Letendre.
- I also understand that the results of this research will be used in Shannon Letendre’s thesis paper, presentations and written articles.

If I have any further questions regarding this study I will contact Shannon Letendre at 780-221-8103 or shannon.letendre@ualberta.ca or her supervisor, Dr. Jill McClay at 780-492-0968 or jill.mcclay@ualberta.ca. If I have concerns about this study, I may contact the Research Ethics Office at 780-492-2615. This office has no direct involvement with this project.

Signed: _____

Date: _____

I would like my pseudonym for the purposes of publication to be:

The following pseudonyms should be used for my children:

Child's Name	Pseudonym
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

Please note: the plan for this study has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines by a Research Ethics Board at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact the Research Ethics Office at 780-492-2615.

*Each mother should complete one copy of this letter and return it to the researcher at your first interview; the other copy should be kept for your record.