Lesbian and Gay Parents' Experiences and their Relationships with/in Schools: An Alberta Study

Craig Kenneth Michaud & Bonnie Stelmach
University of Alberta

Abstract

Researchers have identified challenges for sexual minority individuals in schools; however, attention to lesbian and gay parents' experiences with their children's schools has not been given. We used a qualitative case study involving one identified gay couple and one identified lesbian couple to document their experiences and relationships with/in their children's urban publicly funded schools. Individual interviews with these parents were the chief data source, which we augmented through reviewing school documents. Through the lens of critical queer theory, we interpreted three themes: (1) lesbian and gay parents are shaped by the teachers', administrators', and other parents' openness of attitudes and willingness to question assumptions about family; (2) lesbian and gay parents feel included, or excluded, depending on the policy and administrative processes that symbolically frame definitions of parenthood; and (3) lesbian and gay parents are sensitive to school climate as expressed through gesture, speech, and artefacts in the school. These four parents had the social capital to navigate barriers and opportunities. However, through the lens of critical queer theory, we conclude that there are real and symbolic markers and practices that normalize a heterosexual understanding of 'parent' in two-parent families that necessitates lesbian and gay parents to be intentional and vigilante about their positions in ways that heterosexual parents are not required to be to feel welcome in schools.

*Keywords***:** *LGBTQ, parent involvement, queer theory, qualitative case study, Alberta*

Introduction and Purpose of the Case Study

According to the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association, being a sexual or gender minority in the 21st century can be complicated and often dangerous (The International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association, 2017). Globally, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) individuals experience significant discrimination (Dankmeijer, 2012). For example, identifying as LGBTQ is a criminal offence in seventy-three state/countries and, most concerning, punishable by the death penalty in thirteen state/countries worldwide (The International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association, 2017). Canada fares better in this regard. Amendments made to the criminal code in 1969 decriminalized homosexuality, and *The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* guarantees individuals freedom from discrimination based on sexual orientation. Nonetheless, we know from educational research that sexual orientation is among the factors that marginalize students and parents (Burn, 2000, Burn, et al. 2005; Ferfolja, 1998 Kelleher, 2009; Morrow & Gill, 2003; Shields, 2012; Swearer, et al., 2008).

In Fraynd and Capper's (2003) words, "schools have become the stage for society's most complex dramas" (p. 97). Given the national commitment to safe and caring schools (e.g. Canadian Forum on Public Education, 2018), educators are positioned to interrogate religious, cultural, and ideological value systems that threaten the equality of LGBTQ individuals. Nevertheless, while heterosexual individuals

might contribute to broader discussions of social justice as an academic exercise, LGBTQ identified individuals, in particular, whether they are teachers, administrators, students, or parents, may find themselves in the centre of debates and controversies regarding heterocentricity, both intellectually and personally.

Educational research on LGBTQ topics has predominately focused its lens on postsecondary and adult education settings (Burn, 2000; Burn et al, 2005; Butler, 1994; Chonody et al, 2009; Cotton-Huston, 1999; Getz & Kirkley, 2006; Grace & Hill, 2004; Szymanski & Carr, 2008), LGBTQ youth in schools (Grace, 2007; Graybill et al, 2009; Kellher, 2009; McCabe & Rubinson, 2008; Swearer et al, 2008), Gay-Straight Alliances in schools (GSAs) (Poteat et al, 2017), or LGBTQ educators (Ferfoljia, 1998; Griffin, 1992; Mayo, 2008; Morrow & Gill 2003; Schneider, 2001). Researchers have identified the challenges sexual and gender minority individuals in K-12 schools encounter (Burn, 2000, Burn et al. 2005; Ferfolja, 1998; Kelleher, 2009; Morrow & Gill, 2003; Swearer, et al., 2008). Researchers have not, however, concentrated on LGBTQ parent perspectives with/in school communities (Cloughessy & Waniganayake, 2014; Ryan & Martin, 2000). Cloughessy and Waniganayake (2014) emphasize that school communities require supports to affirm LGBTQ identified parents and their children; our focus on parents thus broadens the empirical literature on the relationship between lesbian and gay identified parents with/in school communities.

We came to this research as a gay white-male educator from a large urban school district in Alberta, and as a white female academic whose current research agenda is concerned with what makes parents feel *in community* in their children's schools (Stelmach, 2017). This study was a natural progression and extension of our interests, particularly with respect to amplifying perspectives that may contribute to safe and caring schools.

Two questions guided the study:

1. How do gay and lesbian identified parents experience their relationship with, and participation in, their child(ren)'s schools?
2. How do gay or lesbian parents perceive their sexual orientation as impacting their relationship with their child(ren)'s teachers and others in the school community?

The majority of empirical research in the field of sexual and gender minorities subsumes lesbian and gay individuals within the broader community of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and/or queer--often referred as LGBTQ or queer (Cassandra, 2016; Spencer & Patterson, 2017). Throughout this article, we refer to participants in this study as gay and lesbian, but took care to respect the LGBTQ acronym, and the term *queer*, when integrating findings from empirical research drawn from the field of sexual and gender minority studies.

Theoretical Framework

Queer critical theory provided an appropriate theoretical frame for interpreting the data because this research was premised on the assumption that paternal heteronormativity must be questioned. Classrooms and schools are never neutral environments, and queer theory seeks to disrupt and challenge modes of normalization and heteronormativity (Britzman, 2012; Friend, 1998; Meyer, 2012). The transformative process of critical theory encourages educators to question assumptions, challenge heteronormative categorization, and seeks to promote inclusiveness (Meyer, 2012). In interrogating how we teach, queer pedagogy observes the reinforcement of gender practices and challenges gender harassment and other forms of gender or identity discrimination in both schools and curriculum (Britzman, 2012). Concerning parents, queer critical theory can illuminate how parent involvement strategies, administrative practices, or parent-teacher interactions work for, or against, the inclusion of lesbian and gay parents.

Heterosexism, homophobia, and sexism are perpetuated in our school systems through exclusive actions including omissions of positive role models, messages, images, and representation in curriculum (Friend, 1998). A queer pedagogical approach focuses on questions raised by Britzman (2012): What have we learned and how do we unlearn? How can we rethink the unthought-of and challenge the "normal" that is our hegemonic default? Regarding parents, we might ask: What underlying assumptions do teachers and schools maintain about gay and lesbian parent communities? How do these assumptions affect relationships with, and the experiences of, this parent group with/in schools?

Review of the Literature

LGBTQ families are more prevalent in society and schools, yet educational systems struggle to meet their needs (Ryan & Martin, 2000). In our review of pertinent literature, we explored discourse(s) and research findings that inform the current educational understanding impacting the relationship between gay or lesbian-identified parents and the schools their children attend. Research has continually identified the many challenges faced by sexual and gender minority individuals in the school system (Burn, 2000, Burn, et al. 2005; Ferfolja, 1998; Kelleher, 2009; Morrow & Gill, 2003; Swearer, et al., 2008), mainly from the positionality of educator and student, but not the parent.

To begin, we consider that constructive family-school relationships are characterized as informative, collaborative, and mutually respectful (Deslandes et al., 2015). Furthermore, when shared responsibility and common interest are the central focus, this partnership improves both educational programming and school climate, empowers parents, and improves student achievement (Epstein, 1995). School effectiveness research (Teddlie & Reynolds, 2000) correlates the effects of parents' involvement with children's academic skills acquisition (Chang, Choi, & Kim, 2015; Dove, Neuharth-Pritchett, Wright, & Wallinga, 2015; Jeynes, 2015; Kyle, 2011), homework completion (Gonida & Cortina, 2014), school attendance (Sheldon & Epstein, 2004), and engagement (Bempechat & Shernoff, 2012). When home-school relationships are cooperative, students' motivation, attitude, and attendance are enhanced, while dropout and truancy rates decline (Bæck, 2015, Whitaker & Hoover-Dempsey, 2013). These potential effects on students are a compelling reason for ensuring all families experience a positive relationship with the school.

Parent involvement has been problematized as gendered, class-based, and Eurocentric (Anderson, 1998; Araujo, 2009; Blackmore & Hutchison, 2010; Scott-Jones, 1993; Connell, 2004; Cooper & Christie, 2005; Cooper, Riehl, & Hasan, 2010; Crozier, 2000; Flessa, 2008; Gerena, 2011). However, family composition is another factor that influences parents' experiences in their children's schools, therefore more insight into gay and lesbian parented families will broaden our view of school-home relations. In what follows, we address the challenges experienced by LGBTQ individuals in schools and conclude with literature that examines the complicated relationship between LGBTQ parents and schools. Through the lens of queer critical theory (Meyer, 2012; Britzman, 2012) we aimed to situate the reader with an acute understanding of how this parent group may experience a more complex school-home relationship than their heterosexual counterparts.

The cultural capital of a school is constituted by the widely shared attitudes, behaviours, and knowledge of the dominant group at the exclusion of other cultural groups (Whitaker & Hoover-Dempsey, 2013), including the LGBTQ community. LGBTQ identified individuals often experience vilification, homophobic harassment, derogatory comments, violence, forced censorship of queer-friendly literature, and termination in schools (Cloughessy & Waniganayake, 2014; Schall & Kauffmann, 2003; Smolkin & Young, 2011). It is alarming to discover teachers often lack awareness of the policies that protect sexual and gender minority individuals in schools (Connell, 2015; Meyer, 2010), and, that due to barriers such as parent protest or lack of knowledge, teachers hesitate to introduce LGBTQ issues in their classrooms (Schneider, M. & Dimito, A., 2010).

We know that LGBTQ youth face many ongoing challenges in schools including heterosexism and homophobia (St. John, et al., 2014). Queer youth face rejection, harassment, discrimination, and violence because of their non-heterosexual gender identification or sexual orientation (Ahuja, et al., 2015; Peter, et al., 2015; Veale, et al., 2015). These students also experience homophobic bullying which can lead to truancy, dropping out, and lower academic achievement, especially when teachers fail to address incidents effectively. LGBTQ student populations are more likely to resort to substance abuse than their heterosexual peers, and are more likely to engage in self-harm or suicidal ideation (Ahuja, et al., 2015; Peter, et al., 2015; Veale, et al., 2015). What is less understood, if at all, is how parents' sexual orientation impacts upon student's interactions with teachers and with other parents or staff at the school.

Educators often perceive obstacles in addressing LGBTQ parent participation in schools. Obstacles include: homophobic prejudice of school staff, religious beliefs of school professionals, heterosexism, anxiety about traditional male and female gender roles, unwillingness to view gender as non-binary, misunderstanding that sexual orientation is a "private" issue, fear of questions about sexual behaviours, unfamiliarity with vernacular used to discuss LGBTQ issues, lack of training, lack of information, and fear of conflict with the dominant heterosexual parent community (Ryan & Martin, 2000).

Our legal and social landscape is changing to promote broader and more inclusive definitions of the family. Inconsequently, more LGBTQ parents are raising children (Kosciw, et al., 2008); therefore, how they experience life in school is consequential. Educators have reported feeling inadequately prepared to address LGBTQ issues, even though they have an increased interest in addressing this challenge (Cloughessy & Waniganayake, 2014). Moreover, teachers face internal and external obstacles; for example, parental surveillance of controversial issues may cause teachers to be cautious about the use of same-sex family resources in the classroom and increase their vigilance regarding the age appropriateness of these materials. The reluctance to address same-sex parent literature directly results in teachers employing scaffolding methods that tend to de-emphasize, or leave unaddressed, important heteronormative and hegemonic issues (Martino & Cumming-Potvin, 2011). Including empirical research that documents lesbian and gay parents' perspectives may assuage a teacher's reluctance to engage with this reality and further equip them to challenge heteronormative and hegemonic assumptions regarding family composition.

While parent involvement research has focused extensively on parents who are marginalized because of their ethnic background or socioeconomic status (e.g. de Carvalho, 2001 Mapp & Hong, 2010; Pushor & Murphy, 2004 Vincent, Rollock, Gillborn, & Ball, 2015), it is equally important that educators be aware of the family dynamics and parental preferences of LGBTQ parents when interacting in schools (Cloughessy & Waniganayake, 2014). LGBTQ families benefit when educators incorporate approaches that seek to normalize sexual and gender minorities, for example, by treating these groups as "one-of-many" forms of family unit (Martino & Cumming-Potvin, 2011). At the same time, lesbian and gay teachers who are open and transparent about their sexuality further support this normalization (Martino & Cumming-Potvin, 2011). Without including the voice of LGBTQ identified parents and their children in the research, educators run the risk of continuing to entrench what Butler (1990) calls "compulsory heterosexuality" (p. 202); thereby neutralizing a limited category of parent and family. The inclusion of same-sex parents in the parental involvement agenda is imperative to creating socially just schools where all families feel celebrated and safe (Cloughessy & Waniganayake, 2014).

Research Design

We examined our questions using case study (Stake, 2010). The case study approach allowed for the exploration of this complex parent-school relationship from the context of participants' experiences and for the discovery of new understandings of gay and lesbian parents' interactions with the school as phenomenological events (Creswell, 2008; Stake, 2010). The interpretivist orientation of case study emphasizes that individuals interpret and make meaning of their experiences and that the researcher is part of the interpretive frame (Cohen, Kahn, & Steeves, 2000). This approach was appropriate for trying to enhance a *macro* understanding of gay and lesbian parents based on *micro* experiences (Schwandt & Gates, 2018) of four parent participants.

Research Site and Participants

Participants were recruited through the processes of convenience and snowball sampling (Creswell, 2007; Seidman, 2006). Data was collected from a female, lesbian-identified parent couple, and a male, gay-identified parent couple whose children attended school in two large, urban public school districts in the province of Alberta, Canada. Alberta is committed to ensuring that all students have equitable and positive learning experiences regardless of "family status" as outlined in its *Inclusive Education Policy* (Alberta Education, 2018, p. 31). In November 2017, *An Act to Support Gay-Straight Alliances* (formerly *Bill 24*) amended *The School Act*, which further demonstrated its commitment to safe and caring schools. Additionally, the sites of research embodied LGBTQ protections under the *Canadian Charter*, the *Alberta School Act*, the *Alberta Teacher's Association's Rights and Responsibilities Policies*, and local district *Sexual Orientation Policies*.

Jose and Steve (pseudonyms) were a married same-sex couple living in an affluent urban community located in close proximity to a local university. They had one adopted male child attending junior high school. Jose and Steve were both first generation Canadians with doctorates and careers in academia. The couple both participated in their son's education and considered themselves active members of the school

community. Their experience as parents included early childhood education, elementary school, and junior high. Kelly and Jane (pseudonyms) were a married lesbian couple living in a different Albertan city. Jane and Kelly underwent the process of in-vitro fertilization and gave birth to a baby boy. They were young professional mothers navigating the early childhood education system. Both Jane and Kelly reported being involved in their son's—here named Ben (pseudonym)—education; however, because Kelly travelled extensively with her full-time job, Jane was the primary contact between home and school.

Data Collection and Analysis

Semi-structured individual interviews (Brinkmann, 2018) were conducted with each participant. We selected individual interviews as our chief data source because this method affords evocative exchange of information and experiential accounts of the events that enrich phenomena (Drever, 1995; Stake, 1995; Wilson, 2015; Yin, 2002). The interview structure in this study was adapted from Seidman's (2006) three-interview series model consisting of two parts: (1) a personal historical component, and (2) a detailing of experience component. Given that two participants were located in a city several hours from us, Skype, FaceTime, and telephone were used in some circumstances for interviews and follow-ups. Interview locations were quiet, private, and safe (Creswell, 2007; Seidman, 2006); conditions we deemed imperative for conducting the study in an ethical manner, and pseudonyms have been used to protect participants' identity. Permission was obtained to record the face-to-face interviews and, for the purpose of member check, each participant was provided summary notes of the interview (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Since the interpretive orientation of our case study inevitably draws upon ethnography (Schwandt & Gates, 2018), we examined school registration forms, teacher-generated parent information sheets, and student handouts that these parents identified as *non-inclusive*. Augmenting interviews with documents gave us insight(s) into the material and symbolic ways that shape the school landscape for parents.

After transcribing the interviews, we employed a two-step exploratory constant-comparison model in our analysis (Creswell, 2007; Saldaña, 2013). This model aligns closely with the qualitative data analysis approach outlined by LeCompte (2000) who emphasizes developing "meaningful criteria" to create themes and sub-themes—or items and taxonomies as she calls them. Based on an initial reading of the transcripts, provisional codes were generated as a "start list". Initial codes, for example, included "general acceptance," "LGBTQ visibility," and "heteronormative documentation". The preparatory investigation (Saldaña, 2013) generated coding categories based on information acquired by revisiting the literature review of the topic, the research questions, and interview questions. Data were coded descriptively in the first cycle (Saldaña, 2013), then reorganized in a second phase where we utilized LeCompte's (2000) notions of frequency, omissions, and declarations to ground emerging themes in the data and to eliminate redundancies (Creswell, 2007, Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Britzman (2012) and Meyer's (2012) notions of queer critical theory were useful guides in our interpretations of the data in that we approached the relationship between parent and school from a mode of interrogation to challenge notions of heteronormativity. Presented in the next section, the most salient themes and subthemes were developed in this process and are represented in the findings.

Presentation of Themes

Based on our analysis, three themes were prevalent:

1. The attitudes toward, and assumptions held, by parents, teachers, and principals are a contributing factor in establishing and maintaining positive relationships between gay and lesbian parents and the school.
2. Policy guidelines, documentation processes, and protocols that include registration procedures and reception by administrators, are factors that can positively or negatively affect how gay and lesbian parents experience their relationship with schools.
3. The climate of the school and greater community affects how gay and lesbian parents experience their relationship with, sense of safety in, and belonging to the school.

Attitude and Assumptions Make all the Difference

There was coherence among participants when asked about their relationship with teachers, the principal, and other parents, and whether identifying as gay or lesbian had any perceived impacts on these relationships. Participants experienced teachers' acceptance toward their lesbian or gay identities, and reported that their sexuality did not have any negative effects on their relationship with teachers as noted in the following:

> She [the teacher] has been open and really supportive of our lifestyle and our family uniqueness. (Jane)

> We have had a very good relationship with the teachers in general. I can't think of any situation where I feel like I was treated differently than any other parent. (Steve)

Similarly, when addressing relationships with other parents, participants described a sense of social acceptance, and their "uniqueness" had no bearing on those relationships. Participants reported positive experiences and expressed the sense that heteronormative families were teaching acceptance to their children at a young age. Kelly expressed the following:

> Clearly there is that social acceptability because we see each other on a semi frequent basis and now we are starting to turn some of these relationships into friendships which is exciting. (Kelly)

The principal and staff played an important role in ensuring schools were a space that accepted these parents. Jose expressed how he actively engages with staff, and strategically communicates to builds relationships that benefit his positionality. Before any concerns needed to be addressed, he wanted to know he had established general relationships with the principal and other staff. These relationships were established by volunteering in the school and participating in the School Council. Jose expressed how he felt the principal-parent relationship was more important than his relationship with teachers. Likewise, Jane communicates:

> My relationship with the director has been very good; there is no prejudices, there are no stereotypes or anything in those conversations. When I am being spoken to I am being spoken to as a loving, caring parent and that applies with my child. (Jane)

Participants identified the important role teachers play in creating an environment that is friendly and supportive for gay and lesbian parents. When teachers positioned themselves as supportive advocates who celebrated diversity, participants felt that "being gay" was a non-issue. One participant said that identifying as gay was advantageous to his relationship with the teacher and the school:

> I think my relationship with teachers has been affected by being gay, but in a very positive way. The[re] [were] experiences where I noticed that the composition of our family, [and] our sexual orientation, affected the relationship. I felt this in a positive way. People that like diversity like to have their school community come from different walks of life and such, so I remember several interactions with teachers that felt more welcoming, more receptive, because of the composition of our family. (Jose)

These parents appreciated teachers who took the time to address specific issues affecting their family dynamic. They noted the teachers who created classroom environments that invited conversations about diversity, made diverse families observable in the classroom and had conversations about diversity with students. Jane illuminates:

> They have a collage on the wall where this book is found that explains different family types. They've got adoptive parents, they've got grandparents, they have single moms, single dads, and then they have a picture of two dads with a child, and two moms with the child. I think in that sense it's probably changing the relationship a little bit because I feel like they are definitely going out of their way to respect our family and make sure that the kids really have a clear and strong understanding that families come in all shapes and sizes. (Jane)

These parents also expressed an appreciation of teachers who reached out and communicated when they had questions or were about to address a possible "sensitive" topic. Teachers proactively contacted them before addressing classroom activities that traditionally represented heteronormative celebrations, such as Mother's Day or Father's Day. Although participants reported these conversations were, at times, awkward, it was encouraging that teachers challenged heteronormative assumptions and, in doing so,

earned these parents' respect:

> I had teachers contacting me ahead of time because they knew that Chris was adopted and had two dads. 'Mother's Day was coming, everybody is making something for Mother's Day. What do you want me, no, what do you want Chris to do?' The teachers would come to me and from the very beginning my answer was 'Ask him!' Ask him [because] he should decide, and [Chris] would come up with usually the best solution to the conundrum. (Jose)

The coherence amongst participants demonstrates the belief that attitudes held by parents, teachers, and the principal contributed to gay and lesbian parents' sense of positivity in their relationships at the school. General acceptance, supportive positionalities, creation of inclusive environments, and positive communication made all the difference.

It is in the Details: Policy Guidelines, Documentation Processes, and Protocols

School guidelines, documentation processes, and protocols were factors that affected how gay and lesbian parents experienced their relationship with schools. Participants reported being proactive in their selection of schools; they examined their children's curricula with a critical eye, and they spoke about the importance of inclusive documentation. The initiative parents took to investigate schools and meet with school staff suggested that lesbian and gay parents are inevitably positioned to confront heteronormativity; sending their children to school involves more than registration, as it might for conventional families.

Before enrolling their children, participants acknowledged their need to research possibilities before selecting a school in order to be better informed about the potential school's operations, philosophy, and culture. It was important that these gay and lesbian parents enrolled their children in schools that were openly inclusive. They reported scheduling school walk-throughs, attending orientations, and getting familiar with instructors prior to registration. Participants committed themselves to comprehensive inquiries when researching potential schools. Additionally, they expressed that it was important that they disclose their sexual orientation to the school community at the outset before any issues arose:

> I need to be careful when I start talking about my family [and] volunteer that I am married to a man early on in the conversation, because if I start talking about my son[then] immediately people assume that you have a wife. They're going to ask you a question: 'What does your wife do?' And for you to come at that point and say, 'Actually I don't have a wife. I have a husband,' usually some people take it in stride but others are like, 'Oh, I made a mistake.' (Jose)

These parents did not enter these conversations casually as other parents might, because they were acutely aware of the need to pre-empt awkwardness that could arise from assumptions about family composition.

Furthermore, these parents unanimously articulated their concerns about the curriculum being taught in schools and expressed their desire to see curriculum reform that reflects family diversity. At the same time, they felt this was an aspect of schooling that was out of their locus of control. Participants were aware of the heteronormative nature of curriculum and had concerns with this impact on non-heteronormative students. The health curriculum was called out specifically as an area parents wished to see rewritten to better reflect all sexualities. Jose spoke about the hegemonic unconscious bias toward heteronormativity that can exist in schools and society:

> I feel there is a lack of understanding of the impact of this [bias], I believe there is an unconscious bias. I believe there is a bias in the curriculum that does not contemplate that there are some of those kids in the room that may one day be involved with someone of the same sex. It's not part of the curriculum, it just doesn't exist, and that's when you see or hear some of those jokes from the kids, that I have never heard from the teachers, but they do appear. (Jose)

School registration forms provided evidence that *mother* and *father* defined a family:

> Completing the documentation was not inclusive the first time around. You try not to get your back up right off the hopper about it, but we definitely did a lot of crossing out. Like changing the word father to mother, that sort of thing. (Jane)

Kelly acknowledged that documents were evolving to reflect current social reality by having the option to select *parent* or *guardian* instead of only *mother* and *father.* She pointed out the importance of new selections, saying:

> Even something as simple as that, where you are looking at forms, and you see mother-father.

> That starts to set a tone right there out of the gate. So, that has the opportunity to make you question, do I even want to send my kid to the school? (Kelly)

Our analysis of district-level registration forms showed that the diversity of families was indeed reflected. Teacher-generated forms and resource materials, however, tended to be less inclusive. As Kelly stated, a tone is set for lesbian and gay parents when they can see themselves in administrative processes. This tone ultimately factors into how they select their children's school or engage with these schools. Whether they are pre-screening schools to ensure inclusive environments, selecting principals who are advocates and role models for the LGBTQ community, or encouraging curriculum and document reform, participants in this study were cognizant of their children's learning environment. At a classroom level, teachers must prioritize the revamping of their documents to ensure vernacular that is inclusive of gay and lesbian family units.

A Safe, Positive School and Community Climate is Paramount

School climate (the overall atmosphere of a school) and the greater community affected the participants' sense of safety and belonging. In this section, the semiotics of *belonging* is the focus. In particular, how the space itself includes, or excludes, lesbian and gay families, and whether all family structures are reflected in pictures, posters, and information leaflets; these considerations mattered to these parents. Who enters and inhabits a school also made a difference to how lesbian and gay parents perceived school as a positive, safe place for themselves and their children. Were there advocates and role models? Were other lesbian and gay parents connected with the school? Moreover, to what extent could these parents expect to enjoy a positive climate when their children moved onto the next school? These are the underlying questions discussed in this section.

A positive school climate for these parents was, in part, a place where parents could be themselves. For example, they wanted the same freedom to express themselves as heterosexual parents would, as noted by Jane's statement:

> The fact that Kelly and I can go in and hold hands and the fact that we can go into the classroom and they have the picture book with all the families where everyone can show who their family members are, [means] clearly [the school is] creating that open environment that is free to have those conversations and they are embracing the students and having open conversation about how people can be different and it's okay. (Jane)

Furthermore, these parents wanted to see their families visibly reflected on the walls and classrooms of their child's school, and they were pleased when they visited schools and saw posters for Gay-Straight Alliances or stickers that advertised Safe Spaces. Additionally, seeing resources for adults and students regarding lesbian and gay families was important. Resources included brochures in the office and books in the school library. All of these were indications of whether the school was interested in normalizing family diversity, and it made a difference to how these parents felt when they interacted with the school. Kelly articulated her uncertainty about whether all schools were prepared in this way:

> I get the sense, in my son's environment he has right now, I think we have it really good…I am just nervous about that point in time where it's not going to be the fact that they have a library of books as a resource, where they are happy to talk to kids about differences, and accepting differences and being open. I just don't know if every environment is going to be like that. (Kelly)

The semiotic construction of inclusion was, therefore, as important as the interactions these parents had with members of the school community. What is poignant about the above statement is the precarious nature of belonging and feeling welcome for lesbian and gay parents. While the *Alberta School Act* requires that schools be safe and caring for all, these parents knew that being gay and lesbian could put this safe environment in question. For this reason, knowing there were advocates and role models in the school was important, and creating opportunities for gay and lesbian families to participate in the school was viewed as a strategy for making diversity visible. These parents did not assume they had allies in the school community, but rather, inclusiveness was something they discovered by observing the facility itself. Indicators included what was communicated about the definition of family in school documentation, and how easy or difficult it was to connect with other gay and lesbian families. In short, the experience of school can be more complex for gay and lesbian families. Jane indicated that it was often a struggle for LGBTQ parents

to contact other gay and lesbian parents, and she suggested one way for schools to make these families feel welcome would be to broker those relationships. Through the development of such networks, she suggested that parents could strengthen their advocacy and ensure that the school would be a safe place for all families.

Role models and advocacy are important considerations, for even though these four parents did not share egregious experiences of exclusion, they were mindful that being in affluent urban environments might have removed potential barriers:

> I'm sure that it [being gay or lesbian] can be more of an issue, especially with these private schools that are really resistant. I can't imagine others [gay or lesbian parents] going to deal with those people. It would be hard. (Steve)

> I do think my situation would be different if I lived in a smaller city. I think it would take a lot more work on our part to educate parents. I don't know if it would be so much with the actual school, I think it [educating] would be more with parents and peers and I think it would be a lot more of breaking down walls and educating kids. [Including] having the kids deal with opinions at home conflicting with the more diverse and more accepting environment that a school can offer. (Jane)

Importantly, what these parents shared with us highlights the contextual nature of their sense of belonging, and that belonging cannot be taken for granted for all parent groups. Even if schools are motivated to include all families and their children, there are structural elements and cultural norms that may not register as problematic for mainstream parents and teachers but are not benign for gay and lesbian parents who may interpret their place on the school landscape as threatened because of unquestioned administrative procedures and expectations. A registration form, for example, does more than collect information from families; a registration form defines family, reinforces criteria for exclusion, and, most significantly, places upon gay and lesbian parents the responsibility of advocating for diversity. Celebrating diversity, creating visibility, and addressing LGBTQ topics in schools was important to the participants in this study. These parents want to know their children's school include role models, advocates, and allies, while at the same time, they express a desire to see schools create opportunities for the LGBTQ community to connect. Next, the findings in this study are discussed and the implications of the research are explored.

Discussion and Implications

These parents' experiences demonstrate that schools' family involvement practices do not reject normativity, and queer-friendly family practices should re-align "normative," moving it from the foreground into the periphery (Rasmussen, 2016). Critical queer theory helps to identify a need to disrupt, destabilize and decentre the heteronormative nature of schools while, at the same time, stabilizing, asserting, and including sexual and gender identity as a premise of community and celebration (Pinar, 1998).

First, the data suggests that attitudes toward, and assumptions held by, both parents and teachers contribute to establishing and maintaining (or impeding) positive school-family relationships between gay and lesbian parents and the school. The positionality of the teacher is one of power and rank, therefore, teachers can be the catalyst for strengthening relationships (Dinkins & Englert, 2015). In general, participants in this study were impressed with teachers' active engagement toward building bonding relationships and catering to the needs of the gay and lesbian community. This finding is consistent with previous research which demonstrates that to work effectively with LGBTQ parents, stakeholders must: 1) ensure all families are being reflected with/in schools and classrooms, 2) become aware of the issues and challenges LGBTQ parents and children experience in schools, and 3) embrace (rather than miss or ignore) opportunities to discuss LGBTQ issues (Cloughessy & Waniganayake, 2014). Our study yielded data that both departed from and aligned with other reports of LGBTQ parents' negative experiences with school. Dinkins and Englert's (2015) study, for example, concluded that school personnel foster environments that make it difficult or impossible for LGBTQ individuals to express their identities. At the same time, our findings reflect Kosciw's (2008) report that LGBTQ parents experienced a low incidence of negativity from school personnel. What warrants emphasis is that LGBTQ parents are not a monolithic group and that there is much to be examined in the physical and social spaces of schools to advance knowledge

about the factors and conditions that bear upon the parents' sense of belonging. Queer theory advocates for the deconstruction of discourse that regulates the normalization of gender behaviours that favour compulsory heteronormative society and limit access to power for gender nonconforming individuals (Blaise & Taylor, 2012; Britzman, 2012; Pinar, 1998). As queer theory would suggest, school spaces are normalized, and sexualized, in heteronormative terms through seemingly innocuous school artefacts such as registration documents, information brochures, and lack of visibility in hallways. Whereas heteronormative parents might feel intimidated by the teacher-parent hierarchy, gay and lesbian parents' experiences are complexified because, not only is their role as parent *vis-à-vis* teachers an interaction to navigate, they also may feel the need to defend their family reality - depending on the prevailing attitudes in the school community.

Additionally, this study also emphasizes the impact of teachers' positive attitudes toward gay and lesbian identity and the important role they play in creating inclusive environments, addressing the specific needs of LGBTQ parents, and actively communicating with gay and lesbian parents. Regrettably, research indicates that teachers experience barriers such as lack of knowledge, perceived parent protest, and concern with addressing gay and lesbian topics in their classrooms (Schneider, M. & Dimito, A., 2010). While we did not investigate teachers' perspectives in this study, we learned, through participants, that gay and lesbian parents play a central role in educating others about how to make them feel safe and welcome in the school. These parents take up the responsibility to point out oversights such as how conventional categories of family discursively position gay and lesbian families on the periphery of schools. Goldberg, et al. (2017) have found that lesbian and gay parents who proactively share their family structure reduce the chance that their family history will negatively impact their child. Parents' tacit understanding of the need to be pre-emptive in social situations with school staff and other parents is an additional burden that gay and lesbian parents bear compared to their heterosexual peers. These parents in our study experienced open-minded school settings, but their default was to anticipate the need to confront assumptions made about their relationship status—an indicator that their safety is precarious. So that lesbian and gay parents are not alone in problematizing family as a construct, it begs the question: How can this responsibility be shared? Furthermore, how can those parents who reside in more conventional settings, such as rural or denominational schools, flourish?

Heteronormativity is a conceptual tool that marginalizes "abnormal" bodies and perspectives while simultaneously regulating and normalizing heterosexuality in educational practice (Rasmussen, 2016). We know from the research that schools are not necessarily level, optimistic playing fields for the marginalized. Those who do not align with the "norm" are viewed as the "other". This interpretation silences and oppresses the history, culture, and experiences of the non-dominant group, creates a sense of worthlessness, and degrades the group's individual and social identity (Ghosh & Abdi, 2004). The evidence in this study suggests that commitment from teachers to include resources and materials that foster inclusivity of LGBTQ topics and, at the same time, address and counteract circumstances that may exclude gay and lesbian parent families contribute to a welcoming school climate. This finding is supported by research suggesting that inclusion of queer literature and resources in schools, with a focus on non-heteronormative family structures, help address social justice concerns, builds threshold knowledge, limits heteronormative thinking, and fosters pedagogical approaches dedicated to interrogating heterosexism and heteronormativity (Martino & Cumming-Potvin, 2011). A key step in educators becoming informed allies is to become familiar with literature featuring queer topics (Haertling, 2013). Children's literature, for instance, is used by adults and teachers to instil social values, societal expectations, and cultural beliefs and identity in children (O'Neil, 2010).

Notably, parents in this study articulated the need for the educational system to create LGBTQ friendly curriculums. Martino and Cumming-Potvin (2011) found teachers are often reluctant to address same-sex parenting literacy directly and employ scaffolding methods that can de-emphasize and/or fail to address important heteronormative and hegemonic issues. By omitting LGBTQ family representation in schools, children with LGBTQ parents may feel there is no space to include, or discuss, their families and therefore remain silenced (Cloughessy & Waniganayake, 2014). Not recognizing, or misrecognizing, is a harmful oppressive act that reduces non-dominant cultures' efficacy and perpetuates the dominance of the oppressor (Ghosh & Abdi, 2004). Choice of programming and selection of resources in schools sends specific messages to students and parents that both produce and reproduce representations of family that can favour heteronormativity and silence other forms of family unit (Cloughessy & Waniganayake, 2014).

What needs to be problematized exists below the surface of activities: Who, and what, is absent sends a strong message about how the school and educators value family. Queering curriculum involves demonstrating appreciation toward sexual differences, avoiding binary categorization, and making heteronormative practice visible and open to criticism (Pinar, 1998).

The second emergent theme from this study indicates that school policy, documentation, and protocol are important factors that can positively or negatively affect how gay and lesbian parents perceive their relationship with schools. Participants in this study indicated an obligation to make informed choices when considering a school site, expressed the important role the principal and administration shoulder in establishing strong relationships with gay and lesbian parents, and acknowledged the need to reform both curriculum and documentation. In a broad national survey, Kosciw (2008) found that LGBTQ parents are more involved in their children's education than their heterosexual counterparts. Our findings are supportive of previous research indicating schools and teachers can cultivate better relationships with same-sex parents by using inclusive language in communications, creating school brochures that foster visibility for same-sex parents, revise forms to include designations of *parent 1* and *parent 2*, and guaranteeing confidentiality and protection of information (Ryan & Martin, 2000). Queer theory "seeks to bring even language itself into question" (Pinar, 1998, p.60). If same-sex families do not feel safe in schools, they may not disclose their family unit and therefore remain invisible (Ryan & Martin, 2000).

The final theme addressed the greater cultural and school community climate and its effect on how gay and lesbian parents experience their relationship, sense of safety, and belonging with/in the school community. Participants indicated a desire to see schools creating more equitable visibility for gay and lesbian individuals. LGBTQ parents often report mistreatment and negative comments for being LGBTQ from other parent groups (Kosciw, 2008). In approaching "transformative diversity," the objective is to achieve equitable outcomes for all; specifically, the redistribution of power for marginalized groups based on race, gender, and sexuality (Blackmore, 2006). A community of difference is a community that treats all students and families with respect, encourages full participation in activities, values all members, exhibits a willingness for growth and change through dialogue, and re-evaluates established practices and traditions to ensure inclusiveness (Shields, 2012). Critical queer theory is cognizant of interventions that benefit, rather than harm, the marginalized, and avoid solutions that further burden those harmed, rather than those who benefit, from the advantages of the heteronormative status quo (Rasmussen, 2016). The school principal inevitably takes a leadership role in the creation of a positive school climate when they are friendly and inviting, and when they ensure parents feel secure and comfortable. As Shields (2012) argued, social justice work calls for transformative leadership, and although setting goals does ensure success for diversity, it is just a starting point.

Limitations

Because we delimited the scope of the study to four individuals in two large cities in Alberta, Canada, we cannot generalize our interpretations to suggest that gay and lesbian parents have good experiences in their children's schools. A problem with queer theory and research is that non-normative sexualities located outside the urban sphere can be overlooked or subverted (Rasmussen, 2016). Our aim was to cleave existing scholarship on parents in the spirit of emphasizing that schools are increasingly diverse and that taken-for-granted categories such as "family" may no longer serve us. Our study reflected parents who were in positions that permitted them to be selective about where they lived and where their children would attend school. We also noted the progressive context (inclusive policies and legislation) in which our participants engaged in their schools. As well, their socioeconomic status may have entitled them to situate their families in positions more affirming than other lesbian and gay families. Furthermore, only lesbian and gay participants are voiced in this study; therefore, our interpretations may not apply to bisexual, transgender, queer, or questioning parents.

Future Directions and Compelling Questions

One resonating undertone revealed in this case study is that conditions are improving for gay and lesbian parents in schools; however, we acknowledge that the positive experiences of these parents is not universal. We see a number of important implications for practice and future research.

This work points to the need for inclusive strategies toward curricular reforms that include: more LGBTQ perspectives, implementation of LGBTQ-friendly resources, the creation of spaces for LGBTQ parents to connect with each other, and strengthened preservice and professional learning opportunities for educators (Connell, 2015; Schneider & Dimito, 2010 Van Leent & Ryan, 2016). Results also indicates that there should be an examination of teacher and school documentation in order to omit heteronormative tendencies.

In considering our participants' acknowledgement of the importance of teachers' ability to address LGBTQ issues, advocacy for empowering preservice education programs is required to provide new teachers with the skills to negotiate different and ever-changing families (Bæck, 2015). Leaders and educators must know and understand the history and statistics of LGBTQ communities in order to defend them from any beliefs that may exclude this population from the public forum of education (Shields, 2012). Development and learning opportunities for teacher and leaders could include: the harmful effects of homophobia and heterosexism, how gender can work to limit opportunities, how teachers reinforce intolerance when they ignore homophobia, and how queer pedagogy can transform schools (Rodriguez & Pinar, 2007). Future research is required to strengthened the voice of LGBTQ parents and to explore effective strategies that address the inclusion of LGBTQ issues and topics in educational settings and policy development (Cloughessy & Waniganayake, 2014).

Rural and denominational educational jurisdictions require an insertion of LGBTQ parent voices. Urban schools may have an advantage over rural schools when it comes to celebrating diversity. As participants in our study noted, schools in more conservative contexts, such as rural or denominational settings, may not possess the tools and strategies that would make gay and lesbian parents feel safe and welcome. According to Semke and Sheridan's (2012) literature review, research on parent involvement in rural schools is recognizably sparse, and gay and lesbian parent experiences in rural schools are decidedly absent (e.g. Nugent, Kunz, Sheridan, Glover, & Knoche, 2017).

In conclusion, our work has implications for educational leadership theory and research. Illuminated in Shields' (2012) work on transformative leadership, there are progressive developments in leadership theory that reflect the increasingly diverse population in schools. The question is: How do we advance the field and support school leaders towards including all family types without objectifying groups and contributing to "adjectival leadership" (Eacott, 2011). When diversity is ignored by educational structures and practices, queer theory, as with any critical theory, places an emphasis on the diversity of the human experience and the inequities that emerge. Conversely, how do we reconcile the inevitable paradox that emerges when we hone in on marginalized groups, namely that we are, at the same time, totalizing and atomistic about LGBTQ parents' experiences in the school system? Where do we tread if we encourage school leaders to focus on leadership for gay and lesbian parents? For instance, Ladwig and Gore (1994) have observed that there is common assumption made in many frameworks of critical research: By amplifying the voices of the marginalized, we avoid perpetuating the Grand Narrative of the Master's Voice (p. 227). We are aware that the parents in our study, irrespective of their membership in an identified marginalized group, possessed capital, and therefore power. It is incumbent upon researchers to trouble these intersections. Furthermore, as Ladwig and Gore (1994) point out: "there seems to be an assumption that as soon as research…is moved into the context of some specific non-dominant social group, then issues of power and method have been addressed" (p. 227). Equity among parents is a laudable goal that should continue to drive this area of study and educational practice. We challenge researchers to continue the interrogation of the real and symbolic ways in which school procedures, practices, and ways of thinking continue to demand the vigilance of lesbian and gay parents regarding how their family structures may, or may not, be included in the school community.

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