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Lesbian and Gay Parents' experiences of their children's primary school education

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Background

This paper reports the findings of a pilot study focusing on the experiences of lesbian and gay parents as their children begin formal education within the British school system. The pilot forms part of a wider PhD project that aims to explore lesbian and gay parents' interactions and experiences of supporting their children's schooling. Several significant phases will be addressed, namely; the selection of and entry into a primary school, the primary/secondary transition, the teenage years and finally the reflection of young adults with lesbian and gay parents of their memories of being at school.

The school system of Great Britain has claimed considerable advances in protecting both staff and pupils from prejudice and discrimination. Stonewall's (2005) Education for All campaign has targeted homophobic bullying and The Every Child Matters agenda has acknowledged the fundamental rights of all children to be happy, healthy, safe, make a positive contribution and achieve economic well-being (DfES 2003). Despite these socio-political advances there is still evidence of a strong anti-lesbian and gay male parenting discourse (Donovan and Wilson 2005). It has also been argued that the needs of these children and their families remain largely absent from the literature around sexuality and schooling and, as importantly, absent from the minds of all those involved in education; from policy makers and academics to teachers and the curriculum. (DePalma & Atkinson 2006, Gabb 2005a, Paechter 2000).

Research Questions

The focus of this pilot project was to explore the thoughts, concerns and experiences of 5 sets of lesbian parents as their children begin school. The interview questions reflect three broad themes; firstly the parents' initial discussions and decisions about the choice of school; secondly the formal contact with the school(s) including meeting significant staff members, engaging with the curriculum, experiences at parents' evenings etc, and thirdly the experiences in the less formal aspects of the school including relationships with other parents and children, the school run and helping with school activities.

Methods

The project is a qualitative study involving in-depth semi-structured interviews with same sex parents. I used the 'snowball' method of attracting participants, since the population is essentially 'hidden' and the pilot included 5 sets of lesbian parents. Using this method risks the recruitment of potentially homogenous research participants in terms of their social class, gender, race and ethnicity. I also recognise the importance of including gay male parents, and the wider PhD project will seek to explore issues around masculinity and parenting. It is also important to recognise that in categorising lesbian parents that one guards against the danger of producing what Gabb (2004b p. 174) describes as a 'community narrative' - a version of lesbian parenting that has become idealised, erased of diversity and used as a model by which all lesbian parents are measured.

Frame

Theoretically this study draws on a range of conceptual frameworks. I draw on feminist theory in order to look at the intersections of gender and sexuality, specifically the compulsory nature of heterosexuality - the assumed sexuality of parents. Poststructuralist theory provides an imaginative framework of power relations. In acknowledging the hierarchical structure of schools it is possible to employ the Foucaultian notion of power indicating that in addition to the established hierarchy i.e.

teacher/pupil, there is scope for the creative reworking of power in moments of activity and agency. Since schools are dominated by a heteronormative discourse, queer theory provides ways of deconstructing this heterosexual/homosexual binary in ways that imaginatively explore relations of power and suggest creative possibilities and policies of sexuality.

Research findings

The findings reveal a diversity and range of experiences and call for the need to listen closely for those moments and incidents that reveal indecision, ambivalence and contradiction. For some parents the choice and selection of school was made on the basis of face to face reassurances from the head teacher and frank discussions about the parents' sexuality. Other parents did not feel a need to be so overt about their family circumstances and expected that the school should be qualified to deal with their child as it would with any other issue of diversity and were disappointed when issues arose that revealed a lack of awareness often from individual teachers. Some schools were well resourced and had a range of curriculum materials to draw on that reflected diversity within families. However one couple were forced to do their own research and take in story books involving lesbian and gay parents since their child's class teacher was not aware of the existence of such resources. In terms of the less formal aspects of schooling one lesbian couple in a rural area managed to meet and form relationships with other parents, form support networks, and mutually supportive childcare arrangements. Another couple, however, at a similar type of school had a very different experience and felt conspicuous as 'the' lesbian parents whilst waiting for their child in the playground they spoke of feeling conspicuous and vulnerable to criticism or comment.

This early data reveals the diversity of parents' experiences as they navigate their way through the discursive practices of schools. In moments of activity and agency some parents become involved in the creative reworking of power by providing educational resources for their child's teacher, whilst others feel vulnerable, marginalised and powerless to confront their school's hierarchy. The range of experiences suggest that the dominant heteronormative discourse in schools is both powerful and fragile, fragmented, unpredictable and contested: as much about what is absent and omitted as it is about what is said and done. The intention if the wider study is, then, to map and explore lesbian and gay parents' experiences of the places and spaces of their children's schools, within a context characterised by dominant discourses of heteronormativity.

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