

# **<sup>1</sup>Rainbow families and early years teachers: planning for participation, diversity and respect.**

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## Introduction

This paper represents the workshop work that was undertaken between participants and myself at the early years conference. It is an augmented version of the workshop papers that participants used and it contains some of the responses that participants made to the ideas and questions we considered at the workshops in Hamilton. Rather than using the conference proceedings to simply replicate the papers that we worked with in Hamilton, I wanted to provide a way for others who weren't able to attend the conference begin conversations about Rainbow matters, and to think about how Rainbow issues relate with the business of teaching, schooling and education. By representing the work of participants to the workshops in these proceedings, others have opportunities to reflect about how colleagues were thinking about the Rainbow families issues we canvassed. Not everything we talked about is here, a sampling of ideas are presented. I give my sincere thanks to the workshop participants. The generosity they showed to me and to each other by their sensitive contributions and questions and through the connections they made, gave us all a chance to think anew about the roles we play in creating community with diverse children and families in early years contexts.

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A cornerstone of early years teachers work is their ability to develop partnerships with diverse families that are beneficial to young children's educational experiences. But just acknowledging that partnerships are important won't magic them into existence; teachers and families together must work at creating education settings that invite participation, protect diversity and promote respect. In this workshop, we will explore some of the unique challenges faced by early years teachers and rainbow families as they enter into partnerships within schools and early childhood centres. Whilst this workshop is likely to generate more questions than definitive answers, from our discussions participants will have the opportunity to think about their own education settings with a view to implementing practices that respond positively to rainbow families.

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<sup>1</sup> My use of the term Rainbow Families in the context of this workshop refers to households in which lesbian women and gay men parent. It is not a term that all such families might affiliate with, nor is it a term that supposes that these families share similar experiences of parenting. I have used it to delineate lesbian and gay parents from the (hetero)norm in order that workshop participants might appreciate some of the unique challenges these families face on the basis of their non-heterosexual sexualities.

Who might want to attend this workshop?

- Early years teachers who have developed practices that help them work effectively with rainbow families.
- Early years teachers who have questions about how they might begin creating inclusive environments that encourage the participation of rainbow families.
- Rainbow family members' who want to share or discuss their experiences of participation or non-participation in education settings with their teacher colleagues.
- Supporters of early years teachers who are striving to realise inclusive environments for rainbow families in classrooms and early childhood centres.

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As a lesbian mother poignantly writes of her daughter's experience, and the experiences of other children parented by non-heterosexual adults, "a pattern begins to emerge. It is the questions, the incredulity, the insults, the books that unconsciously exclude – the profound isolation – that our children experience" (Danish, 1999 in, Gunn & Surtees, 2004, p. 85).

This workshop is given to wondering about how to address the types of issues this lesbian mother writes of in relation to her daughter's experiences at school. How can we, as scholars, policy makers and teachers of young children work in ways that unsettle the silencing of queer<sup>2</sup> lives in our educational settings, or even, should we presume that it is desirable to do so? By drawing on examples of exclusion, we will discuss instances where teachers and rainbow families have been impeded in their attempts to establish and maintain effective partnerships between home and centre. Together, we will explore some of the unique challenges we face when rainbow families and early years teachers make attempts to work effectively and in the interests of young children.

The workshop takes the form of guided reading and discussion. It is likely to generate more questions than definitive answers yet from our discussions participants will have the opportunity to think about their own power in education settings and how they might choose to use it in order to adopt pedagogies that respond positively to rainbow families. The incidents that we will discuss are drawn from either my own research journals that I have kept as I have gone about the business of my doctoral research project (Gunn, 2003), or have emerged directly from the project's data (Gunn, 2004).

Our first incident relates to an event that occurred between a lesbian family and their son's Year 4 teacher. As we consider what happens here, the beginnings of several discontinuities between the school and this home start to appear. Central questions relating to notions of family structure, who parents' are and who holds legitimacy in the eyes of the school in relation to sharing information about students are raised.

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<sup>2</sup> My use of the term queer is not necessarily one that others' might take for themselves. Nor do I presume that the associations between rainbow families and queerness that I am making in this workshop are unproblematic. Queer lives for me, are those that would typically exist outside of (hetero)normal conventions. I am using these terms to advance thinking about family diversity in the expectation that doing so may provoke recognition for families that exist both within and beyond heteronormative conceptualisations.

### Hamish's family.

Mary and Sam and their children Hamish (8 yrs) and Ria (6 yrs) have been part of the school community for three years. Mary and Sam are named as parents, on their children's enrolment forms and they have fairly distant relationships with their children's teachers - a wave in the morning or nod at the end of the day is typical. They do though both take turns at transporting their children to school, they turn up to concerts and other important events, and both attend parent-teacher interviews for both children at the end of term one and term four. Mary and Sam are each biological parents to one each of the children (Mary to Hamish and Sam to Ria). The children's dads have no day-to-day relationships with the children nor do they live geographically nearby. Mary and Sam both work, and for part of each week Mary travels out of the city on business.

### What happened?

Hamish, entering into Year 4, was having a hard time settling into his new classroom and adjusting to his new teacher. Some of the stories he brought home were worrying to his family, his teacher he said "yelled at the kids who talked in class", he made them do "unfair things like stay in late at lunch time" and he was always looking for kids, according to Hamish, whose name he could write on the board and who in Hamish's eyes, were therefore "in big trouble". One Wednesday, Hamish came home and told his parents that he was scared of his teacher, Mr D. The situation had become intolerable.

Mary and Sam resolved that they would seek a meeting with the teacher so that they could air their son's concerns and establish what might be contributing to Hamish's anxiety about his classroom and his teacher. Sam rang the school and requested that Mr D. ring her home so they could make an appointment. Later that evening Mr D. phoned.

Sam: Hello?

Mr D. Ah, yes, hello, this is Mike D. from school. Hamish's mother rang and asked to make an appointment to meet with me?

Sam: Yes, yes, hello. Um, I rang earlier, yes, I just wanted an opportunity to come and talk with you about how Hamish is settling in at school and um, to talk through a few issues that seem to be arising for him this year.

Mr D. Oh, o.k, sure. Well I can meet tomorrow at 3.30pm how would that be?

Sam: Oh great, yes that'll work fine. I'll look forward to meeting you then.

Mr D: O.k., bye,

Sam: Bye for now.

Mary wouldn't be able to come to the meeting but because Hamish was so upset, it was decided that Sam would go ahead and meet the teacher anyway.

The next day.

At 3.30pm Sam stepped onto the walkway that led up towards Hamish's class. Mr D. came out of the classroom and onto the walkway to greet her. It was the first time she'd set eyes on him; they'd never before been formally introduced.

Mr D. Ahh, hello, hello, you are?

Sam: Hi Mike, I'm Sam, we talked yesterday on the phone about Hamish.

Mr D. Yes, yes, but um, who are you? Are you um Hamish's mother?

Sam: Yes, I am Hamish's parent. Mary my partner couldn't be here unfortunately, she's out of town on business.

Mr D. Oh, well I'm sorry I won't talk to you then about Hamish, um, it's against policy, I checked it out with the Principal before you came. I, I will only talk to Hamish's mother.

Sam: But I parent Hamish, Mary can't be here, she's out of town.

There's a really big problem with how Hamish is feeling about being in your class, we need to get it sorted and you made a time to meet with me.

Mr D. Yes, but, it's not your business. Now if Hamish's mother wants to come in and meet with me then she can and we can talk. Or, she can ring me and give permission for me to talk to you, or I'd be happy to talk with you if Hamish's mum was here as well.

Mr D. turned and walked back into the classroom closing the door as he went. Sam, in a state of shock, turned to talk away. Puzzled, she went to the school office and requested the school policy on communicating with families. To her dismay, she was told that it was currently up for review and therefore unavailable. She left the school in a state of confusion, frustrated at what had happened and worried still about the safety of her son who would need to come back to school the following day with nothing resolved.

What questions might we want to be asking here?

What barriers to participation exist for Hamish's family in this classroom?

How might have Sam's 'parenting' status become a problem? For all Mr D. knew, it could have been Mary that was travelling up the walkway for the meeting - he'd never been introduced to the family and if it was the details from the school office he was going on all he'd have learned was that Hamish's parents were named Sam and Mary.

Who could legitimately be considered 'family' within the construct of the school and Mr D? And what privileges might their interpretation bring to particular members of the school community which families like Hamish's might not benefit from?

### **At the conference, what did participants have to say?**

*When thinking about any ‘barriers to participation’ that might have been erected for Hamish’s family participants responded that:*

- *Mr D.’s attitude was homophobic and he used the principal and policy as instruments of his power in this situation.*
- *The physical barriers that Mr D. and the school erected included, greeting Sam on the walkway, denying her access to the classroom, Mr D. turning and walking away, restricting access to the policy on communicating with families.*

*Sam’s parenting status had become a problem in the eyes of participants at conference because she wasn’t male. Had she been an opposite sex partner to Mary then it is likely that no question relating to her parenting status would have been raised. Following on from this, the question of how Mr D. might have known that Hamish came from a lesbian led household was asked. Participants wondered if the passing on of information from teacher to teacher about matters like the structure of Hamish’s family may in this instance have clouded the relationship with Hamish’s teacher - How could he have known to have asked the principal if he could talk with Sam if he’d not been told of the family’s structure before he’d met them?*

*The third question from Hamish’s story was one about what the school and teacher’s conception of what family was. Clearly biology and legal status were critical in this case. The status of Sam as ‘immediate caregiver’<sup>3</sup> did not appear to offer anything to this situation and Sam was informed that she’d need the permission of her partner in order to hold a conversation with Mr D. about her son’s well-being in Mr D’s. classroom. At the conference we talked about ‘degrees of parenting’, acknowledging that sometimes there might be decisions to take about children at school or in early childhood education that should be made by those with legal status as parent, for example, consent for immunisation, yet, Hamish’s story didn’t seem to fit with this. It seemed as if the teacher and school, in their attempt to do right by the law had lost sight of the day-to-day realities of Hamish and his family’s desire to create with the school, a safe place for this eight-year-old.*

Sometimes the non-inclusion of ideas about rainbow families (let alone actual rainbow family participation) in the centre or classroom environment can be argued for on the basis of community representation or irrelevance. In the following discussion between Peitra, an infant and toddler teacher and me, we are contemplating what it might be like in her centre if the teachers were to work in ways that included diverse representations of family. The discussion isn’t conclusive, but it points to the types of issues and arguments that can inform how teachers decide to do their teaching.

Peitra: ...like in our centre we only have the nuclear family...

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<sup>3</sup> See the Education Act 1989, Part 9, Cl.92 where the definition of immediate caregiver is given. This ‘category’ of parent is used intermittently throughout the Act, its relevance to this work can be seen at least in Part 7 where matters concerning the control and management of state schools is covered.

Alex: yeah

Peitra: ...we only have, mum and dad and one, or whatever, or how many children they have... so I sort of think well if there's nobody there that has two same-sex parents...

Alex: yep

Peitra: ...push it? Because for them it's not an issue... so you know what I'm saying because we don't, ... it's the same as saying "oh we don't have any Māori so we don't use Te Reo, it's not..."

Alex: you don't think it's like that?

Peitra: well, I'm not, I'm wondering if that's why... because we don't have any right now (pause)

Alex: o.k. And so my thinking about that is, all you're ever saying is a valid option is the nuclear family then.

Peitra: hmmm (pause) but I don't know, you're probably right because you don't go into that when you know they're not.

Alex: And so there's this kind of unsaid compulsory... this is what family is...you only know it like this and we're only showing it like this, therefore this is how it is.

Peitra: I, I don't know, because on the other hand, because my children are the age they are, they don't even know what it means to wipe their nose let alone what it could mean to have parents of the same sex.

Alex: And they come to know how to wipe their nose and they come to know about having heterosexual families or families that are diverse...

(Gunn, 2004, FG2b, QA, L.59-75)

What questions might we want to be asking here?

I wonder what it might be like to establish a classroom or centre climate where the visibility of diverse families – rainbow families in our case, was prominent?

Who can recall a time when they were in a learning environment where non-heterosexuality was represented and valued for the diversity it brought to the classroom – centre? What was it like? What did it make you think about that learning environment?

**At the conference, what did participants have to say?**

*Thinking about the creation of climates in which Rainbow families might become visible brought with it lots of ideas about environmental, interpersonal and intrapersonal responsibilities.*

*The representation of diverse families within classroom and centre settings was considered and important and necessary part of this process. As one group at the conference wrote. "How can something be valued if it's not visible?"*

*At the level of relationships, participants' spoke about teachers needing to respond to homophobia – not ignoring it - when it arises in their classrooms*

*and centres. Sending messages about what will not be tolerated (in this case, homophobia & heterosexism) was key here. These ideas call teachers to action and ask them to advocate something beyond the dominant (hetero)norm. And finally, we acknowledged that teachers needed to work on themselves to find out how far they could go in supporting education that welcomed diversity and promoted respect between Rainbow families and the educational communities of which they were part.*

*Sometimes participants in the workshops at conference reflected that their classrooms and early childhood centres were lovely and that they were welcoming places for all types of families and diverse persons. They felt assured that Rainbow families would be welcomed and valued in their contexts. This may be so, and I encouraged participants to do a self-check when they returned to work post conference. What would tell Rainbow families I asked, when they walked in off the street in search of a school or early childhood centre to which they could belong, that they were valued and important members of your educational communities.*

Barriers to participation that can easily be erected by fixing cultures, policies and practices on narrow understandings of family are illustrated in the next example. Here a participant in my research project, Rose, a teacher herself, talks about how she was positioned and distanced by the heteronormative practices of other teachers.

Rose: ... on a personal level my relationship with my niece who is, who I've parented since she was a baby part-time, is one that's not recognised using the word family, even though we're supposed to recognise diverse types of family. People think she's a niece ... and they don't see me in that parenting role because I'm not her biological mother, you know, even though since she was a baby she's had part of every week with me...

(Gunn, 2004, FG3, Gr.4-2, L.118-120)

What questions might we want to be asking here?

How might we proceed to know the families of the children we work with?  
What experiences have you had in coming to know (or not) rainbow families?

Should Rose have been considered a parent in this instance? What might this mean for the education setting? The family? The child?

### **At the conference, what did participants have to say?**

*We didn't get to talk about Rose when we were at conference except to acknowledge that the problem she is grappling with here is not only one that Rainbow families must negotiate. Where children live between households, where they are living in extended care situations, where Nanny or Auntie or Pop takes primary parenting responsibility we have questions about whom we (as teachers) should consider to be children's parents.*

*When Mr D. phoned Hamish's home, he said Hamish's mother had phoned and Sam said yes, she had. Who was Mr D. referring to? What would have happened if Sam had said to Mr D. that yes, she was Hamish's mother that day on the walkway outside of Hamish's classroom? These are complex questions with no formulaic answers, and they matter in many ways, not the least, in relation to recognising the adults who live their lives with the children in ours.*

In my present research I adopt a stance that teachers and education settings should develop cultures, policies and practices that respond to positively to diversity and in doing so, represent positively non-heteronormative families, parents and households. I think that as teachers we should use difference for positive means and should work towards viewing difference as an opportunity, in order that we can appreciate the complexities of our lives<sup>4</sup>. What this means practically in a field like mine is, rather than work to silence them, teachers must recognise and respond to non-heterosexual households and the experiences of children who live their lives in them.

Before this workshop comes to a close I want to take a moment to think about a central assumption that this work holds to.

Can we assume that it's going to be o.k. for rainbow families to be 'out' at school – the centre? What might some considerations need to be?

Should teachers share information about the families of children that they are to be responsible for? Does another teacher have the right to 'out' a rainbow family at the school or to the child's next teacher? What might the implications be of doing or not doing this?

Negotiating successful relationships with rainbow families can allow us as their children's teachers to know more than half of some children's realities. Yet, we must also appreciate, that to expect all rainbow families to be 'out' and visible in our classrooms and early childhood centres is probably a step too far. This is delicate work yet if we are open to the challenges and possibilities it offers up, working alongside diverse families will make the educational experiences of all young children in our classrooms and centres meaningful and relevant. Acknowledging and respecting the rainbow contexts in which some children live their lives provides many avenues for early years teachers to make meaning from. Understanding the complexities of working towards such pedagogies provides a challenge for us all.

Hei kona,

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<sup>4</sup> I appreciate that such a view requires thinking beyond the notion of 'different as deficit'. Such a discursive shift is culturally difficult to secure, however, provides an ongoing project for those who choose to work beyond the (hetero)norm.

### **At the conference, what else did I have to say?**

*To end the workshops I gave some tentative suggestions about ideas I considered useful in helping teachers move beyond the (hetero)norms in their schools and early childhood centres. They are replicated below.*

#### *Cultures, policies and practices that include:*

- Cultures:*
- Revisit dominant norms continually
  - Affirm difference and diversity through the languages and actions we use
  - Build core values in education settings that centre on participation, diversity and respect.
- Policies:*
- Name sexual diversity, heterosexism, homophobia and heteronormativity in policies that matter
  - Include heterosexism and heteronormativity as annual or bi-annual PD topics in your school or centre PD policy
  - Add sexual diversity to the criteria with which you evaluate the inclusivity of the settings in which you work: how would this place be for a rainbow family? Can children of rainbow parents see their family circumstance reflected positively here? etc...
- Practices:*
- Be honest about how homophobia and heterosexism has hurt those in your education communities: collect data about this regularly and use it for leverage to move forward
  - Discuss what we're afraid of and what we could gain from taking steps to represent and know our worlds in more complex ways e.g., including rainbow families or using rainbow issues to frame discussions and ask questions about the way things are done around here.
  - Use policy and legislation in ways that support you to teach beyond the (hetero)norm.
  - Review dimensions of curriculum e.g., the places and the things

Gunn, A. C. (2003). *Early childhood pedagogy: Social justice and some puzzling queries/queeries*. Unpublished doctoral research proposal. University of Waikato, Hamilton.

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