

**“Who are you?” Same-gender parented families’ navigating heteronormativity,  
homophobia and inclusion in early education settings.**

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**Abstract**

As children and their families engage with settings outside the home they encounter systems and structures in which prevalent norms and values can differ markedly to their own. This article draws attention to experiences of same-gender attracted parents and their children as they encounter and challenge heteronormativity in early education settings. Drawing on interview data from a small-scale qualitative study that investigated how lesbians and gay men create and maintain family in contemporary New Zealand society, the article also highlights how families manage anticipated and actual homophobia. It foregrounds tensions between such experiences and inclusive legislation and policy. Then, by drawing attention to practices that affirmed these families’ diversity and protected their rights to full inclusion the article shows how family diversity in educational contexts can enrich and strengthen relationships between parents, children and teachers in mutual and beneficial ways.

**Keywords:** heteronormativity; same-gender parents; family diversity; early education settings; homophobia; inclusion

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**Introduction**

In New Zealand, legislation and many educational policies uphold the rights of all children to enrol, attend and participate in inclusive early education settings<sup>2</sup> (see for example, Ministry of Education, 1996, 2007, 2008; New Zealand Government, 1993, 1998). Despite prevalent educational discourses of inclusion however, many settings remain disregarding of or ignorant to family diversity with respect to same-gender<sup>3</sup> attracted parents. Drawing from aspects of the findings of a small-scale qualitative study that explored the ways lesbians and gay men create and maintain family in contemporary New Zealand society (Gunn & Surtees, 2009)<sup>4</sup>, this article provides insights into how such parents’ experience and resist heteronormativity as they navigate their way into and within early education settings. Also providing evidence of experiences that facilitated inclusion, this paper seeks to draw attention to the complexities associated with recognising and welcoming same-gender parented families into these settings.

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<sup>2</sup> In this paper, ‘early education settings’ is used to encompass both services for children from birth to six years of age and primary school for children from five to twelve. Examples of the former include Home-based care services, Playcentres, Kindergartens, Education and care centres and Kōhanga/Puna Reo (Māori language immersion centres).

<sup>3</sup> The term ‘same-gender’ parents, rather than ‘same-sex’ parents, is used for two reasons. First, it is gender rather than sexuality that is the outwardly visible identity responded to by others when they first meet same-gender parents and their families. It is important therefore to draw attention to this, as it makes visible the relationships between gender and sexuality. Second, maintaining an awareness of the differences between gender and sexuality by avoiding the tendency to conflate one with the other within a heteronormative worldview is also important.

<sup>4</sup> The study was commissioned by the New Zealand Families Commission, Kōmihana Ā Whānau and was undertaken by the authors of this article and two associate researchers, Janette Kelly from the University of Waikato and Lisa Terreni from Victoria University. It can be accessed at: <http://www.nzfamilies.org.nz/>.

The first study of its kind in New Zealand since a suite of progressive legislative reforms with respect to the conception and care of children and recognition of same-sex relationships (Care of Children Act, 2004; Civil Union Act, 2004; Human Assisted Reproductive Technology (HART) Act, 2004; Relationships (Statutory References) Act, 2005; Status of Children Amendment Act, 2004), the project explored the ways lesbians and gay men are creating and maintaining family. Documenting the successes and challenges associated with family formation and preservation was an explicit aim of the study. Targeting families' experiences with early education settings was not an express focus. Data about early education settings did however emerge as parents talked.

The early education setting as a specific site of heteronormative or inclusive practice holds the capacity to shape relations between same-gender parented families, educators and other parenting communities. Often the first formal setting outside the home that families with young children encounter long-term, relationships formed within the context of early childhood education can have lasting effects on family and parenting identities (Casper & Schultz, 1999; Lee & Duncan, 2008; Powell, 1998) as well as on the health and wellbeing of the children within them (Bronfenbrenner, 1986, 1994). Where heteronormativity shapes early education settings, same-gender parented families can be 'othered' by a conflation of discourses of the family, gender and sexualities that repeatedly construct heterosexual sexuality as an institutionalised norm and therefore a superior and privileged standard (Gunn, 2008; Sumara & Davis, 1999; Surtees, 2008; Warner, 1993). On the other

hand, practices in early education settings can work against heteronormativity and in doing so, give recognition to family diversity and practice for inclusion (Gunn, Child, Madden, Purdue, Surtees, Thurlow & Todd, 2004; Kroeger, 2001; Skattebol & Ferfolja, 2007).

Through heteronormativity, ‘normal’ families are constructed in the first instance as nuclear: they are assumed to comprise (two) heterosexual adults, whose union has resulted in the birth or raising-up of one or more children. Even in families where parents raise children alone, heteronormativity leads to the “heterosexual presumption” (Epstein & Johnson, 1994, p.198) through which we presume a child’s parent is or has been in a heterosexual relationship that has resulted in the child’s birth. It is the rendering invisible of valid alternative options to the so-called normal family that results in injustice for same-gender parented families: in the heteronormative climate these parents’ relationships with each other and their children might be obscured, met with disbelief or simply not comprehended at all. Where heteronormativity prevails same-gender parents are faced daily with having to declare to teachers and others – whether they desire to or not – their same-gender attractedness; the ‘ins’ and ‘outs’ of parenting and family relationships; and, the methods by which they came by the children they are parenting. Such intimate details of (normal) families’ lives are easily assumed within a heteronormative worldview, but scarcely do these reflect the considerable efforts many same-gender parents have gone to in their efforts to create and maintain family together (Gunn & Surtees, 2009).

Fraser (1997) claims that responding to heteronormativity is essentially a matter of recognition. It requires us to pay attention to cultural values that “privilege heterosexuality, deny equal respect to gays and lesbians, and refuse to recognize homosexuality [and we would add other forms of sexuality] as a legitimate way of being sexual (Fraser, 1997, pp.18-19). Like other same-gender parented families (Lee & Duncan, 2008; Skattebol & Ferfolja, 2007) those in this study provided accounts of routine experiences of heteronormativity that rendered their family structure unrecognizable, invisible or incomprehensible. Our families also spoke saliently about anticipated and actual homophobia. Wanting to make visible the continued challenge of this, the article also draws attention to inclusive practices that work to resist such prejudice in early education settings.

### **Study methodology**

Qualitative in orientation, the study design enabled the gathering of comprehensive and thoroughly detailed data for in-depth interpretive study (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Patton, 2002). In the interpretative approach, the influence of the researcher in analyzing the phenomenon in question is less obvious than is the case in traditional research approaches (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000). While some generalizations and organizing concepts are typical, findings are presented in ways that are “rich in detailed description and limited in abstraction” (Neuman, 1997, p. 71). This was the case for this study.

The open-ended, semi-structured interview was used as the research method. It generated data about two spheres of family life. The first was the means by which lesbians and gay men were creating family; the second centred on ongoing processes of family preservation. The approach proved well suited to the exploration of these spheres and enabled understandings of “the close-up reality...of participants’ lived experiences of, thoughts about and feelings for, a situation” (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000, p.182) – in this case, the participants creating and doing of family. As previously noted, while lesbian and gay-led families’ experiences of early education settings was not a specific focus of the study, data about these settings was generated.

### *Accessing and recruiting participants*

Henrickson, Neville, Donaghey and Jordan (2007) found that lesbian and gay communities in New Zealand are effectively linked through varied networks. Snowball sampling was therefore used to access and recruit participants. This sampling strategy is useful in the identification and selection of individuals who are part of an interconnected network (Neuman, 1997). In this case, it secured the participation of 33 parents in 19 families most of whom were lesbian-led. Most families centred around a primary couple relationship varying in length from six to 20 years. The majority of these relationships had existed for more than 12 years. An additional two couples had separated when the children were under two years old and were subsequently sharing parenting responsibilities. Across the families there were 36 children, 33 of whom were aged under 18 years and living at home. Eight of these children were aged two or under; nine were between three and five years old; five were

between six and 10 years old; seven were between 11 and 15 years old; and, four were between 16 and 17 years.

### *Data gathering and analysis*

Twenty interviews, ranging in length from 45 minutes to two hours, were conducted. Parents were interviewed in family configurations of their choice. Organising the interviews in this way avoided pre-determining who was ‘in’ a family especially where family members lived across more than one household. Using the semi-structured interview guide, researchers asked parents to describe a typical week in their family’s life. This elicited general data about a range of daily activities including children’s attendance in early education settings. Talking about the successes and challenges faced as families formed and were maintained also elicited data related to early education settings – including the responses of these settings to families and examples of inclusion and exclusion therein. All interviews were recorded by digital voice recorder and transcribed. Transcripts were imported electronically into qualitative data analysis software and subjected to content analysis using the research questions as organising concepts for coding. The themes of heteronormativity, homophobia (anticipated and actual) and inclusion in relation to early education settings developed significance through this process.

### *Ethics*

The study received approval from the University of Canterbury’s College of Education Ethical Clearance Committee and adhered to all the usual ethical



requirements including the requirements for informed consent, voluntary participation and confidentiality. Provisions for anonymity were made; real names and other identifying information were not used in the reporting of the study.

## **Findings and discussion**

Parents in the study reported numerous experiences of heteronormativity as they created and maintained family together. In early education settings, heteronormativity materialized as a lack of recognition and representation of their kind of family. Anticipated and actual homophobia was also to the fore. Parents did however report on teacher practices that enhanced their sense of inclusion.

### ***Experiences of heteronormativity***

Typically, parents' experiences of heteronormativity related to a failure by others to comprehend the family's form. Parents, children and teachers routinely framed one or the other of the same-gender parents as family members of a different kind. Comments made by Sandra (partner to April, mothers to Abe) and Sacha (partner to Kari, mothers to Reggie) are illustrative:

I'm sure some of the Mums at kindy [kindergarten] sort of wonder what on earth is happening. April's picking Abe up one day and you know, I think they think April's my sister – I've heard one of them say that, “oh they're sisters.” [Sandra]

They [Reggie's peers] just couldn't understand it [the family], they couldn't quite get their heads around it... the children were, “I just can't understand how it works” and

they do tend to regard Kari as the nanny looking after my baby who pops down to visit quite often. [Sacha]

Speaking of an incident that occurred when they were seeking education and care for their child Sacha also commented, “they [the teachers] did sort of turn around to me and say “and who are you - Grandmother or something?”

We see in these examples how heteronormativity renders some same-gender parents unrecognizable as parents. Nuclear family discourses and discourses of parenting conflate to exclude the possibility of there being more than one mother: thus, Sandra and April are assumed sisters, Reggie’s peers frame Kari as his nanny, teachers think Sacha her son’s grandmother. In situations like these parents can be compelled to both correct assumptions and out themselves<sup>5</sup> as same-gender attracted, whether or not they wished to. At the same time, they must weigh the benefits and risks that disclosure might bring (DeMino, Appleby, & Fisk, 2007; Perlesz et al., 2006; Skattebol & Ferfolja, 2007; Tasker & Patterson, 2007). Questions of safety, discrimination, and the impact on newly forming relationships with teachers and parenting communities, especially when those who’d assumed inaccurate relationships find their assumptions being challenged, are to the fore.

Parents in the study also shared the ways in which a failure to comprehend their family diversity by others could be compounded by heteronormative

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<sup>5</sup> The term ‘out’ is an expression used in reference to coming out of an imaginary closet through disclosure of sexual identity. The ‘closet’ denotes a performance initiated by silence whereby information about one’s sexuality may be with-held (Sedgwick, 1990). By breaking silence the closet door is metaphorically opened thereby revealing or outing its previously concealed contents.

policy, administration and curriculum. Documents for example, regularly required amending to help reflect the reality of their lives. Sandra said:

I notice that like enrolment forms have things like parents, it always assumes that you have a Mum and a Dad, and I know that maybe it just seems trivial, but its not, it actually means a lot to us... the language we use.

Far from being ‘trivial’, Sandra’s comment illustrates that the language used in such documents, and the assumptions behind them, has the power to include or exclude. Constituting families in important documents like enrolment forms as if all were formed in accord with a heteronormative worldview, forces families who do not fit this construct to make a choice: they will either cross out sections of and amend the documents to represent their families accurately, or they conform to the heteronormative worldview and leave details of important family members out. In some cases, partners and parents may even be relegated to the designation of ‘other’.

### *Experiences of anticipated and actual homophobia*

In addition to experiences of heteronormativity, many parents in the study also talked about anticipated and actual homophobia in early education settings.

Regularly parents forecast the possibility that they might encounter homophobic caregivers or teachers and they anticipated peer-to-peer bullying of their children.

Proactive when negotiating with a home-based care provider about a suitable care candidate for their family, Chloe and Anneke worried that the caregiver might possibly harbor homophobic beliefs. Chloe explained:

The thing we've found in trying to get home-based [care]... you go through the agencies... you have to out yourself then... saying that, okay, they need to like dogs, they need to like this kind of person, and they need to be gay friendly. This is the kind of family we've got, and you kind of hold your breath and then just wait.

Kirk, father to children being raised in conjunction with a lesbian couple, talked about expecting to have to coach his children about how much they should reveal about their family diversity to others at school, even though he knew such a move came with a particular cost. He said:

It does concern me for my kids that there is that attitude, that when they get to school they, you know, you have to kind of tell them “look, maybe don't tell them that you've got two mothers” and then you're teaching your kids that there's something weird.

Neve worried about the future possibility that she and her partner Renee's sons might have to face schoolmates' reactions to their family diversity:

I think we've got all the interesting times ahead of us, and the boys as well. You know that's a concern for me. The reaction from their school mates, and how they're going to feel about, whether they say “yes” or “no” – “this is how we are”, and feel ashamed and guilty and bad and all those sorts of things, but... because we are hopefully slightly aware of all these things... we can help them and give them the tools to manage it.

These parents' expressions of anticipated homophobia revealed much about how they prepared themselves, and their children, to navigate potential tensions associated with their family diversity in early education settings.

Largely designed to ensure children's safety we call these strategies

*prevention measures*: steps taken to avoid and deflect any potentially troubling

responses from others. The measures taken by this study’s parents included purposefully outing themselves upon introduction, coaching children about what to reveal about family formation and, providing children with tools to manage homophobia. These strategies are reflective of the kinds of measures reported by parents in other studies (see for example, Casper & Schultz, 1999; Gartrell et al., 1996; Perlesz et al., 2006).

Compounding the parents’ experiences of anticipated homophobia were experiences of actual homophobia. Sometimes, this was directed at the parents themselves. For example, Cindy and Candice had experienced a teacher who had tried to attribute their son’s troubles at school to their same-gender attracted identities and family diversity. Cindy said, “I inferred from his [the teacher’s] implications that there was something slightly unusual about the home life... it was something along the lines of, ‘do you think he’s [their son] a fuck up ‘cause he’s got two Mums’?”

More commonly however, parents reported school-based instances of peer-to-peer homophobic bullying directed at their children. Schools in New Zealand, like those in many other countries, are recognised as sites of such bullying (Brown, 2000; Casper, Schultz, & Wickens, 1992; Henrickson, 2005; Hillier, Turner, & Mitchell, 2005; Laird, 1993; Millbank, 2002; Minton, Dahn, O’Moore & Tuck, 2008).

Nine-year-old Jaelyn, whose mother Laine was in a relationship with a woman, had been subjected to this at her school:

We had an incident with Jaclyn, with a little girl last year saying: “I know your secret and if you don’t do this I’m gong to tell everyone your secret.” And it took Jaclyn a while to tell me, because she was really worried about it and she didn’t want to upset me, and you know all those things.

Laine went on to say:

I’m quite scared that she’ll be separated from the others, by the fact that she’s different. I’m worried that she might not be resilient enough to handle bullying that might go along with it, I don’t want her life to be defined by mine. I want all of it, hers and my interaction with the school to be free, except that it isn’t of course, it’s a constant vigilance.

Laine’s concerns about bullying of her daughter are not atypical for same-gender attracted parents. As Skattebol and Ferfolja (2007) write of other lesbian parents, “witnessing one’s child experiencing discrimination may well be more distressing than experiencing it oneself” (p.14). The children of same-gender attracted parents also express concerns about homophobic bullying, the frequency of which increases with age (Gartrell, Deck, Rodas, Peyser, & Banks, 2005; O’Connell, 1993; Ray & Gregory, 2001; Tasker & Patterson, 2007).

Finally, some parents in our study experienced what they described as school-condoned expressions of homophobia. Ginny and Celia for instance talked about their attendance at a child’s end-of-year school assembly where they sat, incredulously, through speeches that promoted homophobia. Ginny said, “there were kids doing speeches and they were allowed to use... the word gay as derogatory term, in the speech.” The use of the term ‘gay’ as a generalized

form of abuse is documented by Nixon and Givens (2004) in their study of teacher trainees' experiences in relation to sexual orientation. That same-gender parents and their children should have to tolerate such prejudicial language in the public setting of school is cause for concern.

### *Experiences of inclusion for same-gender parented families*

While exclusion and discrimination was an ongoing challenge reported by many parents in the study, some also reported particular teacher practices for inclusion that they appreciated and valued. The first of these was closely tied to an openness towards, and acceptance of, family diversity, that subsequently enabled children to safely represent or talk about their families in the knowledge that this would be honored. This was the case for Bonny who was parented by her mother Nerida, Nerida's partner Belinda and her father (part time). Belinda found Bonny's early education teachers very supportive and caring of their family, making sure that curriculum experiences Bonny became involved in allowed her to represent their family accurately. Belinda said, “the manager and the people there at the time were just very open to diversity. Very inclusive and, you know, Bonny would even come home with pictures of you know, Mummy, Daddy, Rupert [Bonny's brother], doggy and Belinda.”

Similarly, some teachers helped children share their family stories. Celia and Ginny were pleased with how Erica's teacher supported Erica to share news she'd recently learned of her donor father. Celia said, “when Erica was about seven and she'd heard back from her dad, Simon, she wanted to share it with the class... and the teacher was absolutely fine with that.”

A second teacher practice that parents valued was that of welcoming all parents equally, regardless of biological or non-biological connections to children. This was the case for Heather, non-biological mother to Penny. She said:

I've never felt any different to the next person at [childcare], the way they've treated us. In fact the day that Penny started... it was coming up to Mother's Day... and she came home with two big Mothers' Day cards. And Hana [the teacher] had obviously asked her what she calls her parents because one of them has 'Mummy' and one of them has 'Mum'.

In the study some parents reported that being a non-biological parent could lead to being treated differently to partners who were biologically connected to children. This finding confirms Tasker and Patterson's (2007) view that “lesbians and gay men who are not biologically related to their children sometimes must struggle for recognition outside the family” (p.28). While clearly, this was not the case for Heather and her partner Cate at this centre, they nevertheless chose to name their children with Heather's surname, so as to “make things like kindy and school easier.” Short (2007) refers to strategies such as this as ‘signposting’; that is, the deliberate provision of cues to family membership made for the benefit of those outside the family.

A final teacher practice that was valued was the confronting of heteronormativity or homophobia as it arose in early years settings. Earlier, mention was made of the confusion Reggie's peers felt by the fact he had two



mothers – Sacha and Kari. Sacha explained how his teachers responded to this confusion:

The staff were great... one of the staff just explained to the children “there are lots of ways to have families these days!” and that was what she said! And I thought that was a really nice way of explaining it.

Positive stories such as this are particularly heartening given that many same-gender parents and their children do not necessarily feel able to confront homophobia themselves (Clarke, Kitzinger, & Potter, 2004; Ray & Gregory, 2001).

### **Implications for policy and practice**

The experiences that the parents in this study shared suggest the processes of navigating tensions around family diversity in early education settings are complex. As shown, some teachers actively did seek to practice in ways that respected and reflected family diversity in early education settings. Clearly they were working with parents who were open about their families, but the teachers also chose to do something differently: they welcomed and made visible the realities of children’s families in their practice in ways that contributed positively to parents’ and children’s sense of belonging. What more might teachers do to this end?

By adopting Fraser’s (1997) strategy of recognition and making the possibility of same-gender families visible in administration, policy and curriculum, teachers and administrators in early education settings can begin to match the efforts towards inclusion made by many same-gender parented families.

Supporting children to learn that same-gender families exist and addressing heteronormative assumptions by challenging and talking openly about them with others proved a useful means by which families in this study felt included in early years settings. Sharing with colleagues any successful experiences of past work with same-gender parented families can be a powerful technique for entering into such discussions. Explored more fully in Terreni, Kelly, Gunn & Surtees (2010), families who enrolled their children in early years education settings where out gay and lesbian teachers were employed, felt more able to participate in curriculum and community – clear policy about homophobia, heterosexism, and support for same-gender attracted teachers in settings is therefore warranted. Finally, by taking care to find out how people in same-gender parented families name each other, what roles they take and what relationships with parents (and others) who don't live in the child's primary residence exist, teachers can open up possibilities for recognising family diversity and reflecting this in their work.

## **Conclusion**

This article highlights the ways in which families parented by same-gender parents are negotiating heteronormativity and experiences of both anticipated and actual homophobia every day. That in New Zealand these experiences should continue with such ease and regularity makes a travesty of inclusion. This is particularly so when we understand the importance of home-school relationships for family identity and child wellbeing. The continued existence of such prejudice points to the influence of heteronormativity and its enduring reach. For teachers to not engage with difference is to help perpetuate the

status quo: a climate in which same-gender parented families are likely to experience exclusion and discrimination in a multitude of forms. Data from this study illustrates how same-gender parents negotiate this daily: they may guard relationships until their sense of safety is assured; many take prevention measures – purposefully outing themselves on first contact to judge the response received or suggesting discretion; and some explicitly teach their children how to manage homophobia. Such measures point to the effort and care parents are taking to ensure their children’s wellbeing in early education settings. Given educational discourses of inclusion in New Zealand and related legislation and policy this is a task that should not fall to parents alone.

Teachers must match parents’ efforts. While further research is clearly needed, the practices and strategies described here provide a starting point in the move towards inclusive education environments that are respectful of family diversity. Opening up possibilities for a valuing of social diversity and difference in ways that enrich and strengthen relationships between all parents, children and teachers is surely a key aim.

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