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## Culturally queer, silenced in school? Children with LGBTQ parents, and the everyday politics of/in community and school

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*Published in:*

Lambda Nordica. Tidskrift för homo/lesbisk/bi/transforskning

2011

[Link to publication](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Gustavson, M., & Schmitt, I. (2011). Culturally queer, silenced in school? Children with LGBTQ parents, and the everyday politics of/in community and school. *Lambda Nordica. Tidskrift för homo/lesbisk/bi/transforskning*, 16(2-3), 159-187.

*Total number of authors:*

2

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## Culturally queer, silenced in school?

Children with LGBTQ parents, and the everyday  
politics of/in community and school<sup>1</sup>

**CHILDREN WITH LESBIAN**, gay, bisexual, trans\* and/or queer (LGBTQ) parents have received heightened attention during the processes of policy making regarding adoption and donor insemination legislation in Sweden during the 1990s and early 2000s.<sup>2</sup> Yet, very little academic knowledge exists about children and young people in LGBTQ families and their experiences in schools (Ray and Gregory 2001; Epstein, Idems et al. 2009).

School, with its major impact on young people's lives, is one of the sites where family as discourse and practise is intertwined with public life. This is why a group of researchers from Humboldt University, Berlin (Germany), University of Ljubljana (Slovenia) and Lund University (Sweden) are undertaking a study on the school experiences of children and young people with LGBTQ parents (Streib-Brzic 2007; Streib-Brzic and Gerlach 2008; Sobočan 2010, 2011 under publication; Gustavson and Schmitt 2010).

In this text, we discuss some findings from our study, and contextualize them in the Swedish public debate. Thus, our first aim is to discuss how these kids are recognized within queer communities. Our second aim is to analyze what we see as a problematic silence in school around these kids. For this analysis, we make use of the concept of ‘culturally queer’ that understands children and young people with LGBTQ parents as part of queer communities, and as having specific experiences and competences that are not necessarily defined by sexual identifications as queer (Epstein 2009a:28). We find this concept useful in our study, as it reflects that social experiences travel outside seemingly closed identificatory categories. Before we discuss our data, we would like to present our study and position our research in the Swedish context.

### **Researching school experiences of kids with LGBTQ parents**

It is not uncommon that children and young people have LGBTQ parents (Thornell 2009). In Sweden, at least some LGBTQ people have gained the right to both legal and medical support for having a family that includes children, while others are getting better at finding ways in creating such families that do not involve the authorities or the medical establishment.

There have been important legal changes such as registered partnership, marriage and reproduction and adoption rights for LGBTQ people (Malmquist and Zetterqvist Nelson 2010; Lundin and Dahlin 2010; Ryan-Flood 2009; Malmquist and Zetterqvist Nelson 2008).<sup>3</sup> Probably more directly relevant to children and young people in our study might be the anti-discrimination law from 2009 that explicitly includes sexuality as well as transgender-identity on the grounds for non-discrimination (Regeringskansliet 2008). Schools are legally obliged to implement the law into their everyday planning and activities.

Recently, there have been a number of publications on children and young people with LGBTQ parents and their families in Sweden (Sverig-

es förenade HBTQ-Studenter 2009; Hjalmar 2009; Bergström 2006; Zetterqvist Nelson 2007; Hulth and Ingelson 2005). In 2002, the Swedish Government Offices published a report on 'Children in homosexual families' as part of the negotiations towards legal change (Regeringskansliet 2002). The existing research on children and young people with LGBTQ parents suggests that these children, more than others, risk being ignored, misunderstood or made invisible in their family situation in pre-school, and indicate similarities to the experiences of LGBTQ children and young people (Östlund 2006; Epstein, Idems et al. 2009; Clarke, Kitzinger et al. 2004).

Earlier studies have focused on legitimating LGBTQ families with children, and on the experiences of children with LGBTQ parents in pre-school (Hamrud 2005; Zetterqvist Nelson 2007).<sup>4</sup> Our study is based on interviews with children and young people between the age of 8 and 18, and their parents. That is, we are focusing on school children born *before* the (lesbian) baby boom after the legal changes for insemination rights in 2005.<sup>5</sup> School, Zetterqvist Nelson argues, is an important place for children where the family is reaffirmed as a socially accepted place for safety and well being. Young people with LGBTQ parents have various strategies on how to talk about or how to avoid mentioning their parents' sexuality in different contexts (Zetterqvist Nelson 2007).

Theoretically, we position this research in critical and queer youth and education studies (Epstein, O'Flynn et al. 2003; Halberstam 2008; Grossman, Haney et al. 2009; Martinsson and Reimers 2008; Rofes 2005; Røthing and Bang Svendsen 2009; Rasmussen 2006; Ambjörnsson 2003; Kumashiro 2002; see also Rosenberg 2002).<sup>6</sup> In recent years, there has been a lively discussion on anti-homophobia education and norm-critical pedagogies (Brade, Engström et al. 2008; Henkel and Tomić 2009; Bromseth and Darj 2010; Ungdomsstyrelsen 2010; Hellen 2009; Meyer 2009; Nordenmark and Rosén 2008; Watkins 2008; Epstein, O'Flynn et

al. 2003). Debbie Epstein, Sarah O’Flynn and David Telford reflect on the need for such work:

Not only are children in primary/elementary schools already knowledgeable about and interested in sexuality in a whole host of different ways but schools are suffused with sexuality. [...] children use the discourses of heterosexuality that abound in playgrounds and classrooms as a resource for identity making. (Epstein, O’Flynn et al. 2003:16)

Our study focuses on people who are ‘queered by association’, who are seen as queer regardless of their own identifications and self-positionings. Thus, we needed to conceptualize the specific negotiations of belonging of kids with LGBTQ parents (Garner 2005). Not surprisingly, queer families and youngsters with LGBTQ parents also need to work out their relationships ‘within’ LGBTQ communities. We see mechanisms within queer communities that overlook some children and young people with LGBTQ parents. How can we account for that? For children and young people with LGBTQ parents are a challenge to our definitions of queer, as Jamie K. Evans underlines:

Queer spawn fit into a unique and sometimes very confusing role in the queer community. We can fit in two distinct ways: as *erotically queer* or as *culturally queer*. [...] This is a delicate subject, one that I often find myself struggling with. It took me a long time to understand that I could identify as queer without failing the expectation I felt was put on me by the heterosexist world, that is, that I needed to be straight in order for my parents to be good parents. (Evans 2009:237; our emphasis)

The concept of ‘culturally queer’ was coined by US American activist Stefan Lynch (Epstein, Idems et al. 2009; Epstein 2009a:28).<sup>7</sup> With this concept, Lynch offers a useful framework for understanding the experiences of children and young people with LGBTQ parents. It also allows a critique of the idea that (LGBTQ) parents ‘pass on’ their sexuality to their children, a conservative suspicion that LGBTQ parents sometimes have to address (see also Hill-Meyer 2009; Epstein 2009a:28; Kuvalanka and Goldberg 2009; Vanfraussen, Ponjaert-Kristoffersen et al. 2002). The term ‘culturally queer’ also challenges LGBTQ communities to reflect on our own practices of exclusion that often do not account for the experiences of children and young people with LGBTQ parents.

Ultimately, the existence of children and young people with LGBTQ parents seriously questions the practices of identity and belonging in our communities. They might or might not be queer themselves, yet they have experiences that might have taught them more about heterosexism, heteronormativity, homophobia and transphobia than most of their peers who grow up with heterosexual parents. Indeed, this issue leads to a reflection on understandings of identity: How do we, as queer activists and scholars, discuss sexualities—as fixed, innate? As fluid?

During the last year, we have interviewed with five children and young people, with 14 parents, as well as five experts (researchers, teachers, authorities) mainly in urban contexts. The parents that met with us for interviews self-identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer and/or trans\*. Therefore, we use the acronym LGBTQ (see Green and dickey n.d.).<sup>8</sup> Both from a methodological and a political perspective, we aim to address not only children and young people with lesbian and gay parents. The communities we live in are networks of bisexual, trans\*, intersex and many other queer people, as well as lesbian and gay folks, many of these working at and with the intersections of these categorizations (Schmitt 2010). Thus, we did not want to limit our study/story to any one part of these communities.

However, our study witnesses a telling paradox. We spread the word about the study both in our personal and professional networks (that include teachers), contacted the association for school nurses, networks of rainbow families, LGBTQ organizations and also created a Facebook site. Maybe naively so, we were confident that our position as feminist gender-researchers and as queer would make it easy for us to get in touch with participants. From the beginning, we have received support from many people who confirmed how important this research would be (and at the time of writing, the project has no less than 370 Facebook friends). Yet, the translation of goodwill into research participation has been less smooth than expected. While we are happy to say that the majority of participants are not related to us through friendship, so far we have been less pleased with our ability to include working-class and/or racialized people.<sup>9</sup> Therefore we are, at the time of writing, continuing to look for ways to reach participants.

Beyond criticising our own research process, we also assume that this has to do with the expectations of who is considered part of LGBTQ communities in Sweden. In this context, we see a need to take the (lack of) ‘internal’ discussion about racism and homonationalism more seriously. These discussions are needed, if we want to address the challenges for example adopted children or children conceived through surrogacy might face (Puar 2007; Duggan 2003; Jiménez 2009; de los Reyes and Mulinari 2005; Gustavson and Olovsson Lööf 2011 in print).

### **Talking about ‘families’ – researching communities**

At the peak of the debate on adoption and insemination rights by the end of the 1990s in Sweden, those speaking in favour of adoption and insemination pointed out that children were already growing up in LGBTQ families (Malmquist and Zetterqvist Nelson 2010; Malmquist and Zetterqvist Nelson 2008). Many of these children had been conceived in

heterosexual relationships, and there was a growing group of people finding ways to have children in their queer relationships (Ryan-Flood 2009; Zetterqvist Nelson 2007). **Nobody could any longer argue that being lesbian, gay, bisexual, or trans\***, or queer necessarily excluded parenting. Yet, the children we focus on in this study, while central to the debates then, seem to be much less visible within queer communities today.

In Sweden, there seems to be a marked divide between children born in a heterosexual relationship, pre-insemination legislation families (often ‘clover families’) and ‘baby boomers’, families with children born after 2005. While any generational ascription implies a simplification, legislation has changed patterns of family construction and might also have created differing understandings of authenticity within queer communities. Behind our terminological reflections lie questions of entitlement and belonging. Who can claim to be a rainbow family?

One of the mothers we interviewed, Annette, had a teenager who had been growing up with two mothers and a father in the familial periphery. Annette was politically engaged and wanted to be involved in a network of rainbow parents and children.

Annette: But one talks about rainbow families but one speaks about a rainbow family up to a certain age. [...] You see I have tried to get in touch with other parents, but then my child is too old, then I don't get to go along. Then I cannot participate.<sup>10</sup>

While Annette was a member of a network of rainbow parents, she did not get information about meetings and other events:

Annette: I am a member there but – I have been member in many years, but no-one has contacted me. No-one has contacted me. Cause I ... eh ... made – made my child in the wrong relationship.



Annette experienced causality between the way her child was conceived and her access to community. Even though she had been living in lesbian relationships for 14 years, there seems to be a conflict about who ‘qualifies’ as a rainbow parent.

The most common household in our study is two lesbian mums, and most of the children we have met were born in a previous heterosexual relationship and raised (partly or completely) in a same-sex household. Another common family structure in Swedish LGBTQ families is the four-leafed clover family with a gay and a lesbian couple **who share custody of the children** they have together. More recently, the term star-families–*stjärnfamiljer* – is used by families with more than two parents to undermine heteronormative understandings of the nuclear family (Gustavsson 2010; Henkel and Tomičić 2009:198). **While this is not directly related to the parents’ sexuality**, it does reflect the possibility of more-than-two-parents constellations. In Swedish, it rhymes with the term for nuclear family–*kärnfamiljen*. The term star-family also expands the four-leafed clover family.

We are wondering how we as queer researchers (and others) speak and write children and young people with LGBTQ parents into the social– do we want them to be ‘normal’ children who just happen to have ‘different’ parents? Or is this an opportunity to re-evaluate the norms and regulations attached to having children and being a child (Lundin and Dahlin 2010; Rubin 2009)?

In writing this text, we feel how easy it is to follow the beaten track. How can we invite research participants to talk about their families without limiting them with references to existing norms of who and how family should be? As in most qualitative research, the wording of invitations to participate in research is crucial. In our case, we have received some feedback on our use of the term ‘rainbow children’–for some this term demarcates feelings of generational belonging and self-identification. Coining the term ‘rainbow family’ became a useful tool in the political debate

that drew attention to sexual diversity as something positive, and away from the pathologization which had dominated the debate on LGBTQ people outside the communities up until the mid 1990s.<sup>11</sup> Yet, it is a contested term. Thus, we are aware of the problematic use and implications of the identifying term ‘rainbow children’. Some of the parents we contacted or who contacted us were worried about how participation would affect their children—would we create a sense of ‘being different’ in their children that they had not had before? Would the children feel that they ‘have a problem’ after the interview? We read this issue both in terms of research ethics in interviews with children and young people, and as one starting point for our analysis. Are the kids identified through their parents’ sexualities by society, and if so, how?

Again, the negotiations of ‘identity’ and strategies of de-identification that are discussed by queer activists and scholars become central. While we are sceptical of projects of ‘forced identification’, we also see a merit in offering the chance for such identification. Here, we can reflect upon concepts such as ‘queer spawn’ to replace or add to the concept ‘rainbow children’ (Epstein 2009b). The term queer spawn is appealing as it gives the children and young people we write about a distinct name, and one that is certainly more fun than ‘children and young people with LGBTQ parents’. Yet, it is clearly a North American term, and one that to our knowledge has not been taken up in Sweden.

While these negotiations of belonging in the community are not explicitly linked to children’s and young peoples’ experiences in school, they can have direct relevance for their strategies of disclosure and participation in school (Epstein, Idems et al. 2009:228).

### **Parental precautions – parents’ negotiations with schools**

Sociologists Sasha Roseneil and Shelly Budgeon find changes in the culture of intimacy that suggest that the concept of family as a heterosexual

lifelong monogamy with children does no longer have bearing in contemporary everyday intimacy and care (Roseneil and Budgeon 2004; Sobočan 2011 under publication; Stacey and Biblarz 2001; Stacey and Davenport 2002). The children in our project often expressed a view on family as a community of intimacy and care. The idea of the nuclear family was challenged, and at the same time guiding how family could be thought.

In school, the image of family has an important influence on identifications – but which image of family is actually presented? In an interview with LGBTQ family researchers Karin Zetterqvist Nelson and Anna Malmquist they underline:

Sometimes legislation has been first out and has been like driving new questions. It is, well, more a question of receptiveness then, if we see it from a wider socio-political perspective. I mean this is still nothing that has really changed the present order.

The children and parents we interviewed needed to negotiate this suspicious gap between a sometimes value conservative society and a possibly liberal legislation.

Inquiring into how schools conceptualize family often shows a tension between school rhetoric and its practice. Curriculum advocates equality and diversity, and the parents in our study expected a high level of acceptance and tolerance, all that would be expected from a school policy in a welfare state system (Skolverket 2010:4). Yet, everyone we spoke with was prepared to give some careful instructions on how to negotiate sexual politics and LGBTQ life in the contact with schools. Indeed, all of the participants had reflected on how the school situation would be before their child started school. Many of the parents had also anticipated problematic situations by doing a ‘security check’ in different ways. Moreover, most of them talked to the teachers to try to see if they were excessively curious,

blatantly dismissive or rude.

Sara and Aster spoke about this anxiety:

Malena: What were the expectations before he started school, what it would be like?

Sara: You mean considering that we're...

Malena: That you're together

Sara: That we live together

Malena: Yes

Aster: I mean, I don't know, I – he was in preschool for two and a half years when I and Sara met. So I was very proactive, I had to go and tell them that now I have had a divorce and I live now with Sara.

Malena: Uhu. It's more like, in preschool, you're more in touch with the staff, you interact more

Aster: Yes, in another way

[ ... ]

Aster: Precisely, I didn't think it was something – it wasn't any problem. But when he started school I went to an information meeting and was introduced to his class teacher there. [...] and I told her right away so, yes, it was – I don't know if I had any expectations

I just knew I had to tell this right away. And I don't know if I had any specific expectations.

Sara: No, you had this usual worry that something bad could happen to him, that, there is something out of his control that yet in some way might affect him, weren't you? I guess you always are worried like that, most of the time around children and so on. And I think it is important to take that responsibility, it's not their burden – you have to prepare and tell people as it is small children. When he grows up he can decide for himself if he wants to speak or not speak, sort of. But, it shouldn't ever be his responsibility or even that he can control it, since he can't. [...]

Aster: Yes, and that's why I told them right away.

Sara: Yes.

Aster: And then there was this relief because she – his first teacher – she said that she had never lived in a nuclear family herself. She had chosen to live by herself, alone as she said.

Malena: Yes.

Sara: So she said, like, yes but I'm also... it's like she feels that she's questioned too.

In our conversations with parents, the issue discussed by Sara and Aster always came up. The parents expected a lack of knowledge and experience in schools that they felt responsible to address—they simply expected homophobia and transphobia. They felt that their relationships/sexuality could

be a burden on the children in the context of school, which they needed to take control of. One couple even engaged a friend, a gender equality consultant, to give a seminar on LGBTQ issues for the teachers at beginning of term.

Another way of trying to protect their children from homophobia-by-association was to select schools that they felt would be relatively 'safe'. Most parents experienced that while there were no guarantees for a school free from homophobia or transphobia, most of them had chosen schools that they felt were tolerant towards 'difference'.<sup>12</sup> This is of course a process of caring for and trying to protect their children. At the same time, this is a culturally queer pedagogic performance; parents teach schools that families can extend the heteronormative relationship pattern.

### **Who's this parent? One teacher's strategy of dis-recognition**

However, some experienced the discrepancy between the theory of inclusion and the practise of silence. Participants experienced that uninformed outsiders might be confused or irritated about the apparent 'lack of clarity' in family relations. Who does a child 'belong to'—who is a legitimate parent? How to fit the parents into the known categories of parenthood?

Parents' presence in school is highly discursive as parents and family life is crucial in teaching practice and often viewed as a cornerstone of the formation of identity and self-recognition. The act of 'leaving/picking up' the younger children is one of the daily situations of interaction between parents and teachers. This could be viewed as an everyday passage with a potential risk of tension as the parents enter the setting where family discourses are produced, and were these discourses could either be challenged or reestablished. Thus leaving/picking up provides a specific space of reinterpretation of the concept of family.

In one parent interview, Isa and Lin described this daily situation as an absurd experience of dis-recognition:

Isa: Some of the new teachers are a bit... [...] they leave a lot to be desired perhaps

Malena: Uhm, how do you mean?

Lin: They're not very open minded, it's more like the classic mum-dad-child version.

Malena: Yes, do you think it is like ... that you get, like, accused, or that it's like ...?

Isa: I haven't been so involved in school [...] but some really rude things, I'm thinking especially of one of the pedagogues, she's not there anymore [...] every time I've met her she said just the strangest things. One time I came to school every day – and, I mean if you meet a person everyday with the same kid every day, you think she might recognize me eventually.

Malena: (laughs) right

Isa: From a security aspect, I feel a bit worried. You know, damn it you'd better know who I am, right? And every day she introduced herself and asked me who I really was. And once she asked if I was his granny.

Malena: No?

Isa: And I was like, eh no, as I said this morning ... – I mean, I was really provoked by that – No, as I said this morning I am still living with his mother and with him. To have to say that every day, all the

time. And [turning to Lin] she said something über-stupid to you at some point too, really, she asked if you were his dad.

Lin: Uhu

Malena: Uhu

Isa: And when you said no, she's like, well why do you choose to look like that? In front of the kids.

This active dis-recognition is a way of positioning someone as socially and culturally unintelligible. It shows clearly how homo- and transphobia are performed by using ignorance and arrogance as means of stating/staging the non-normative family constellation. The negative exposure of the non-conformative gender expression of this mother is part of the strategy of ignorance. Maureen Sullivan elegantly references Sedgwick's discussion of the workings of ignorance in *Epistemology of the Closet* (Sedgwick 1990):

The capacity of ignorance to appear innocent and passive may well be an operation of its power, while the appearance itself of innocence and passivity may be one of its effects. (Sullivan 2004:169)

Hiding behind the innocent looking strategy of 'just asking' also makes it difficult to identify the deliberate homophobic and transphobic act, that might even be excused as curiosity. In the conversation with Isa and Lin, gender became the stepping stone for the teacher's homophobic and transphobic expressions. There seemed to be a sliding translation of sexuality, which is an unspeakable matter, into gender identification of the parents in a process of shaming and disavowal. This hypervisibility of the parents can be paradoxically matched with the children's invisibility in school.



## **The power of silencing and bullying**

Invisibility is recognized as a serious issue in terms of justice and antidiscrimination work (Brade, Engström et al. 2008:74). Earlier research in the field, both in Sweden and elsewhere, indicates that there is little awareness of non-heterosexual life among teachers, and many teachers are not prepared to handle issues of sexuality as a basis of equality and diversity work. Similarly, participants in our study discussed that teachers seemed to be reluctant to refer to the children's family constellations and apparently found it hard to include LGBTQ families in their everyday teaching in a non-exotifying way. Thus, the burden of representation rested with the families.

Unsurprisingly, this also had an effect on the children. In one interview we asked 8-year-old Mika what kind of advice he would give a younger person with two mothers, which was his own family situation. He imagined what he would say to a small girl with two mums:

Mika: Will you be bullied?—No, they don't know anything if you don't tell them.

Mika used this moment to imagine a situation where he would help another child. Analyzing the interview, we wonder what convinced him that it would be best not to tell anyone about his parents. A little later in the interview the subject comes up again:

Malena: You'd say to this child that if you don't say anything you wouldn't have to be afraid of being bullied. Do you have the sense that you are being...

Mika: No, I'm never bullied.

Malena: No, you're not.

Mika: I haven't told anyone in the entire... in the entire school

Malena: Uhu.

Mika: The teachers they know and not even they have said anything!

The teacher's way of carefully avoiding any discussion about 'it' effectively reinstalled feelings of awkwardness or even shame in Mika. Teachers who cannot acknowledge the family situation of children and young people with LGBTQ parents signal to both these kids and their classmates that non-normative families are 'unspeakable'. There is clearly an anxiety around families that are falling outside of the description of normality. The silencing strategies that the parents and kids experienced also show that schools are often not prepared—neither professionally nor personally—to handle differences in family constellations.

This silencing can also create more direct discriminatory situations. While overall, there seemed to be little bullying connected to the parents' sexual orientation, one participant, 16-year-old Robin, had recurring experiences of bullying. Most worrying was that the teachers were the active bullies, he told us that he was bullied by all teachers except for one. Robin was uneasy to talk about it in detail in the interview; yet, the situation had gone so far that eventually the teachers were reported to the authorities. Robin discussed the lack of support he had experienced:

Robin: The only time I could talk to the principal was when she said she could help me change schools.

That Robin was made to change school is an alarming example of the power mechanisms inscribed in school. Another aspect of this is that it seems that the teachers in their bullying never referred to Robin's mother being a lesbian. Therefore is it difficult to assess if this was a case of homophobia. Still, the sort of bullying that adults perform is different from schoolyard bullying. The silence around the discriminatory subject makes it even more manipulative since the bullied cannot pinpoint the reason of being discriminated or harassed, which increases the vulnerability. This is similar to the suppression techniques that are usually mentioned in feminist analysis of gender discrimination, where guilt tripping, exclusion, invisibility, laughter and double failure are some strategies mentioned (Brade, Engström et al. 2008:74-77; Ås 2004).

As we mentioned earlier, we see similarities in the school experiences of children and young people with LGBTQ parents, and queer kids. In research on and with queer kids, teachers have a crucial role in preventing and counteracting exclusion (Égale Canada 2009: 61; Meyer 2009, 2007: 20-22). The silence Mika experienced, and the bullying Robin discussed, can be read as discrimination based on homosexuality-by-association.

### **A bit of prophesy**

Our study can be read in the light of the long-established debate in queer theorizing and activism about the meaning and practises of 'family'. We see a need to further theorize the currently ongoing normalization of queer families. At the same time, there is an equally ongoing need for struggle against indirect homophobia and transphobia.

Some of the experiences the participants discussed in these two contexts, school and community, raise questions about silence as practice and its implications for the children and young people we write about. Schools have not been successful in dealing with indirect homophobia and transphobia, and LGBTQ families are not yet positioned as one of many

possible family formations in school. Rather, schools fail to include children and young people with LGBTQ parents in the classroom and school yard. At the same time, silence can both reflect protection by the parents in relation to school and a lack of support from queer communities that fail to acknowledge children with LGBTQ parents as culturally queer.

This text is about some kids with LGBTQ parents, and their parents, and their experiences with queer communities and with their schools. It is, we hope, also about the powerful and everyday workings of normative understandings of who family should be. Schools and teachers might not see the need to actively include non-normative family-structures in their work; this seemingly innocent-looking process in fact re-constructs ideals of family, childhood, sexuality and gender. We see a need to actively work against the silencing of kids with LGBTQ parents in the context of school. This is important for these kids; it is equally important for children and young people with heterosexual parents to see that family can be more than mum-dad-child.

Intriguingly, as we continue with our research, there seems to be a mobilization to organize a platform for kids with LGBTQ parents who go to school. (And yes, we hope that this sentence is a self-fulfilling prophesy!). Within the queer communities we inhabit, we need to reflect on deep-rooted notions of belonging based on sexual practice, in order to include these children as culturally queer.

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**IRINA SCHMITT** has been teaching and researching at the Centre for Gender Studies at Lund University since 2008. Both in research

and teaching she feels inspired by queer-feminist, anti-racist and post-colonial thinking and work, and also work at the intersection of academic and 'everyday' knowledge, for example in workshops with teachers.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> We would like to thank the anonymous reviewers and our colleagues within the project "Homophobic Motivated Violence As Experience of Children Growing Up with Homosexual Parents in the Context Of School", Ana Marija Sobočan, Antje Lann Hornscheidt, Christiane Quadflieg, Darja Zaviršek, Maja Pan, Silke Bercht, Tiina Rosenberg and Uli Streib-Brzič for wonderful feedback and debates. The project is funded by the EU programme Daphne III (2009-2011) that focuses on violence against children, young people and women. We use the term 'violence' broadly, including structural and personal patterns of making people or groups and their experiences invisible. We especially thank Kristin Linderoth for her critical reading of the text.

<sup>2</sup> By using the term trans\*, we refer to the spectrum of politics and identifications diversely classified and presenting as e.g. transgender, transsexual, cross-dressing, non-gender.

<sup>3</sup> Though illegal in Sweden, surrogacy is considered one of the few realistic ways for gay men to have a child (see also Lehtonen 2009:74). It has been pointed out that legislation has to adapt to the reality of children conceived through surrogacy in order to offer these children the same protections as other children (RFSL n.d.-a). At the same time, surrogacy, both within Sweden and internationally, is highly contested (Ekman 2010).

<sup>4</sup> Statistics Sweden counted 749 children and young people under the age of 22 who lived with either a lesbian or gay parent couple, with numbers rising since 2004 (Statistiska centralbyrån 2009). Over 400 lesbian women who have used access to fertility treatment since 2009, and that

over 150 women have adopted their partners children (Malmquist and Zetterqvist Nelson 2010:13). Certainly, many more young people live with LGBTQ parents than measured by the statistics based on a heteronormative family model.

5 For example, since 2003, lesbian and gay couples can apply for adoption if they are registered or married, including adoption of the partner's child (*närstående adoption*) (Malmquist and Zetterqvist Nelson 2008; RFSL n.d.-b).

6 The National Swedish Agency for Education has recently analyzed the most popular anti-mobbing programs in Swedish schools, and comes to the result that none of the programs actually is effective (Skolverket, Flygare et al. 2011). They argue that the most important anti-bullying activity is continuous work that includes analysis of existing situation and evaluations.

7 See also the US-based network COLAGE, founded in the late 1980s for children of LGBTQ parents (<http://www.colage.org/>).

8 We see the need to problematize 'the litany' of identifications, at the same time, we want to avoid 'queering from above' (Epstein, O'Flynn et al. 2003:8; Haritaworn 2008).

9 While this is not the place for a detailed methodological discussion, we would like to add that we see the merits of in-group and insider research. In the case of this study, however, we felt that research with children of close friends would compromise their anonymity.

10 All names are anonymized. If necessary for the analysis and supported by the way the child or young person presents, we use gender-specific ascriptors. All interviews were held in Swedish. Transcriptions are verbatim, and translated by the authors. Deletions in the interview are marked with [...].

11 A reflection of Swedish rainbow children's experiences can be found in Hanne Gorton Lindblad's exhibition about rainbow children (Parikas 2009).

<sup>12</sup> This opens up to a necessary discussion of the intersections of socio-economic status and LGBTQ parenting in the current debates on school choice and 'active parents'.

## SELECTED LINKS

Facebook group "Värna Stjärnfamiljen!"

Föreningen Regnbågsbarn i Skåne – <http://www.regnbagsbarn.nu/>

Families like mine: <http://familieslikemine.com/about-lgbt-families/resources/recommended-books/>

Colage: <http://www.colage.org/index.html>

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## ABSTRACT

**MALENA GUSTAVSON AND IRINA SCHMITT**

### **Culturally queer, silenced in school? Children with LGBTQ parents, and the everyday politics of/in community and school**

Children with lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans\* and/or queer (LGBTQ) parents have received heightened attention during the processes of policy making regarding adoption and donor insemination legislation in Sweden during the 1990s and early 2000s. Yet, very little academic knowledge exists about children and young people in LGBTQ families and their experiences in schools. We engage the idea of “culturally queer” as a potentially useful framework for understanding the experiences of children and young people with LGBTQ parents.

School, with its major impact on young people’s lives, is one of the sites where family as discourse and practise is negotiated. This is why a group of researchers from Humboldt University, Berlin (Germany), University of Ljubljana (Slovenia) and Lund University (Sweden) are undertaking a study on the school experiences of children and young people with LGBTQ parents.

Our first aim is to discuss how these kids are recognized within queer communities. Our second aim is to analyze what we see as a problematic silence in school around children and young people with LGBTQ parents.

This is about the powerful and everyday workings of normative understandings of who family should be. Schools and teachers might not see the need to actively include non-normative family-structures in their work. This seemingly innocent-looking process in fact re-constructs ideals of family, childhood, sexuality and gender. It is necessary to actively work against the silencing of kids with LGBTQ parents in the context of school. This is important for these kids; it is equally important for children and young people with heterosexual parents to see that family can be more than mum-dad-child.

We see this as a part of the long-established debate in queer theorizing and activism about the meaning and practises of 'family'. We see a need to further theorize the currently ongoing normalization of queer families. At the same time, there is an equally ongoing need for struggle against indirect homophobia and transphobia.

## **SAMMANFATTNING**

**MALENA GUSTAVSON OCH IRINA SCHMITT**

### **Kulturellt queer, tystad i skolan? Barn med HLBQTQ-föräldrar och vardagens politik i skola och samhälle**

Barn med homo- och bisexuella, trans\* och/eller queer föräldrar (hbtq) har fått ökad uppmärksamhet i och med ändrade regler för adoption och inseminering i Sverige under 1990- och 2000-talen. Trots det finns det inte mycket forskning om barn och ungdomar med hbtq-föräldrar och deras erfarenheter i skolan. Vi använder oss av termen 'kulturellt queer' som potentiell användbar utgångspunkt för att förstå erfarenheter hos barn och ungdomar med hbtq-föräldrar.

Skolan har stort inflytande i ungas liv. Det är en av de platser där familjediskurser och -praktiker omförhandlas. Därför har en forskargrupp från Humboldt universitet, Berlin (Tyskland), Ljubljanas universitet (Slovenien) och Lunds universitet (Sverige) en studie om barn och unga med hbtq-föräldrar och deras erfarenheter i skolan.

I artikeln lyfter vi fram deltagarnas berättelser och kontextualiserar dem i den svenska debatten. Dels diskuterar vi hur barnen och ungdomarna blir sedda inom hbtq-rörelser, dels analyserar vi vad vi anser är en problematisk tystnad i skolan kring elever med hbtq-föräldrar.

Genomgående handlar det om de normativa vardagsförståelse om vem som är familj. Skolor och lärare kanske upplever att de inte behöver inkludera icke-normativa familjestrukturer i sitt arbete. Detta förbiseende återskapar i själva verket ideal om familj, barndom, sexualitet och genus. Det är nödvändigt att aktivt arbeta mot osynliggörandet av barn och ungdomar med hbtq-föräldrar i skolan. Det är viktigt för dessa barn och ungdomar. Att familj kan vara något mer än bara mamma-pappa-barn är lika relevant för de barn och unga som har heterosexuella föräldrar.

Vår studie kan ses som en del av den aktivistiska och queerteoretiska debatten om "familj" som begrepp och praktik. Vi ser ett behov för att ytterligare fördjupa den teoretiska debatten kring familjenormalisering i queera sammanhang. Samtidigt måste antidiskrimineringsarbetet även inkludera barn och ungdomar som upplever indirekt homo- och transfobi.