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## Queering school, queers in school

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ESSAYS ON EDUCATION,  
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# CONFERO

QUEERING SCHOOL, QUEERS IN SCHOOL

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## Confero: Essays on Education, Philosophy & Politics

Volume 1 Number 2 December 2013

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## Queering School, queers in school: An introduction

*Anna Malmquist, Malena Gustavson  
and Irina Schmitt*

Queer studies of education have become a growing field with a range of theoretical and political positions and methodological approaches. Moreover, research with lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) kids is tightly connected to anti-homophobia, anti-transphobia and norm-critical activism. One of the key contentions within this field is what researchers and activists mean by “queer” in the context of education: is it a focus on queer/ed subjectivities? Is it about using queer theories to critique forms and norms of education in a given sociopolitical context? Who is queer/ed in schools? Is the language of homophobia and transphobia the best or even correct way to describe and analyse normative educational settings and frameworks?

The ways in which queer education activists and researchers address normative school settings vary, but many are driven by hope for survival and better times. Education researchers Susan Talburt and Mary Lou Rasmussen have opened up for a serious

evaluation of what they read as a “restorative agenda” in queer studies of education, questioning:

... the very repetitions we were struggling with: a relentless search for ‘agency’, a belief in pedagogical improvements to encourage diverse gendered and sexual subjectivities, and ideas of a future made better by new imaginings.<sup>1</sup>

What Talburt and Rasmussen point out is the problems of a deep-rooted belief in change for the better that are based on the individual instead of on systemic changes. We learn from them to argue that such hopes for a future, which can take us towards experiences of education less pointedly marked by practices of exclusion, certainly require critical reflection and theoretical challenges. At the same time, we cannot do without those local interventions, albeit short-term, that are necessary just there, just then. One of the questions that remain is how we can build lasting conversations between these spaces. A participant in one of the editors’ studies challenged her to organise a conference “to bring us all together.” With this issue, we are attempting to be part of that conversation, and to pass on that challenge.

In this issue of *Confero*, we highlight both ethnographic investigations of queer and queered kids in school and critical views of school’s policy making and normative frameworks. Queer education research is a rapidly growing area of study. Where researchers and activists insist on the entanglements between not least sexual, gendered and racialised structural formations, we also insist on our expectation that principal values in schools meet the increasing challenges from queer activism and research.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Talburt and Rasmussen, 2010, pp. 2-3.

<sup>2</sup> Kusmashiro, 2001.

Reviewing previous studies in this field, it is notable that statistics show that queer/ed kids are at risk of harassment and violence,<sup>3</sup> and experiencing an increased risk for depression, drug use and suicidality.<sup>4</sup> Recent studies address both the experiences discussed and the logic of victimhood inscribed.<sup>5</sup> In particular, several studies in North America discuss initiatives for creating safe schools or safe units within schools, with student support groups and the so-called gay-straight or queer-straight alliances as the most well-known and well documented.<sup>6</sup> Although these studies suggest that the presence of a gay-straight alliance is associated with less homophobic harassment, little is known about the causality. Are these groups prohibiting homophobic and transphobic harassment, or is it a less homophobic and transphobic environment that is required for a gay-straight alliance to be initiated? Other researchers argue that such initiatives, while important respites, are not much more than “band-aids” in contexts that eschew more structural changes.<sup>7</sup> Some call for other interventions to address heteronormativity and cisnormative cultures in schools, such as incorporating LGBTQ issues in teacher education<sup>8</sup> or school counselling.<sup>9</sup> An important intervention in this debate is to fundamentally question the logic of queer kids as victims – and therefore subjects – of homophobia and transphobia. Instead, it is necessary to analyse processes of subjectivation through heteronormativity and cisnormativity in the context of education in schools.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Grossman, Haney, Edwards, Alessi, Ardon and Howell, 2009; Black and Gonzalez, 2012; Birkett, Espelage and Koeing, 2009; Blackburn and McCready, 2009.

<sup>4</sup> Birkett et al., 2009.

<sup>5</sup> Haskell and Butch, 2010.

<sup>6</sup> Black et al., 2012; Fetner, Elafros, Bortolin and Drechsler, 2012; Heck, Lindquist, Stewart, Brennan and Cochran, 2013.

<sup>7</sup> MacIntosh, 2007.

<sup>8</sup> Greytak, Kosciw and Boesen, 2013; Kitchen and Bellini, 2012.

<sup>9</sup> Goodrich and Luke, 2009.

<sup>10</sup> Rasmussen, 2006.



Besides a core focus on safe school environments, several previous studies engage with LGBTQ issues in relation to sexuality education. According to many of these studies, sexuality education most often teaches compulsory heterosexuality,<sup>11</sup> sometimes, and typically for North America, with an absence-only-until-marriage mission,<sup>12</sup> or a one-sided focus on heterosexual experiences and prevention of STDs in heterosexual intercourse,<sup>13</sup> leaving non-heterosexually identified pupils' experiences, questions and needs unspoken. Furthermore, research on school cultures, teacher education and school policy covers some of the questions queer education researchers address.<sup>14</sup>

A crucial node for intellectual work on queer education would be to work through conceptualisations both of childhood and youth, and of identity formation/subjectivation. It becomes more than obvious that queer education studies reach far beyond heteronormative perceptions in which LGBTQ-subjectivity is perceived as a minority.<sup>15</sup>

## Our special issue

When initiating this special issue, we had a double aim: wanting to both address queer people's everyday experiences of school and to focus on the theorization of queerness in education. We have been fortunate to gather research(ers) and activist work that highlight a broad and deep range of queer perspectives on school. Taken together, the articles provide an overview of *how*

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<sup>11</sup> Connell and Elliott, 2009.

<sup>12</sup> Elia and Eliason, 2010.

<sup>13</sup> Formby, 2011.

<sup>14</sup> Schmitt, 2012; Meiners and Quinn, 2012.

<sup>15</sup> Bromseth and Darj, 2010; Røthing and Bang Svendsen, 2009.

heteronormativity permeates schools, from the abstract prescriptions of legislations, pedagogical methods, social edginess in classrooms or school yards, to self-conceited straightness in textbooks, manuals and implements. The origin of these articles are found in Australia, Canada, Slovenia, Sweden and the US. We wish to further engage in a discussion on the geopolitics of queer issues, without assuming that there is one recipe for dealing with heterosexual normativity, as has been earlier discussed in Jasbir Puar's critique of homonationalism.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, the liberal idea of schools as a platform for life-long learning of tolerance, inclusion and anti-mobbing seems to resist the influences that queer and feminist theories have had both in research and in activism, which is discussed in several of the articles in this issue.<sup>17</sup>

In "*Taking homophobia's measure*," Australian researcher Mary Lou Rasmussen analyses manuals employed in sexuality education in Australian and US schools, where homophobia is presumed as a condition that can be measured on various scales. Rasmussen's exposition over various methods to handle homophobia indicates that they often pinpoint certain groups and classify archaic personality types. Following Rinaldo Walcott's argument that what we understand as 'homophobia' is still in question, Rasmussen queries these methods and the scientification of the scale as a model for measuring homophobia. Unlike many scholars who usually point out the problem but leave the tools of implementation to practitioners, Rasmussen suggests alternative ways of discussing LGBTQ in school.

The second contribution for this special issue also engages with text analysis. While Rasmussen focuses on scales where homosexuality is 'othered', Swedish researcher Malin Ah-King's

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<sup>16</sup> Puar, 2007.

<sup>17</sup> Bromseth and Darj, 2010.

article, “*Queering animal sexual behavior in biology textbooks*,” draws on an analysis of how animal sexual behaviour is depicted in biology textbooks by showing texts where non-heterosexuality is systematically ignored. Given that any biology school textbook must simplify the richness of sexuality in nature, it is striking how the textbooks continue to show such simplification through the lenses of *human* heterosexual and gender norms. As Ah-King points out, biology gives us knowledge about nature and thus impacts on our ideas of what is ‘natural’. When non-heterosexuality is left unmentioned, the impression of its non-existence is easily given.

Similarly, invisibility of non-heterosexuality is central in the third contribution for this issue. Switching focus from text analysis to lived experiences, Slovenian researcher Ana Sobočan’s research on the situation in school for children with homosexual parents in Slovenia is built on a unique interview study. Since Slovenia joined the European Union as a member state, there has been new legislation recognising same sex relationships. However, according to Sobočan this has had limited impact on the level of hate speech, ignorance and defamation that queer people experience. In fact Sobočan notices, what she coins, “moral homophobes” who use the protection of children as an excuse to express homophobic attitudes. This fundamentalist view imposed on children reproduces the well-worn idea that LGBTQ people are incapable of transferring good values to children, which affects the political debate in Slovenia. Sobočan also discusses a generation gap between older and younger homosexual parents and that the younger generation is more active in claiming openness and education on LGBT-issues, what Sobočan calls a “denormalization”, and key to moving away from harassment and hatred.

Another piece that engages with lived experiences is US-American researcher Mel Freitag's article "*A queer geography of a school: Landscapes of safe(r) spaces.*" A US school, known by reputation as the "gay school" is the context for Freitag's ethnographic fieldwork. Drawing on the experiences of youth and staff in this school, she discusses notions of safety and safe spaces. Freitag discusses how queering a space can provide a safe(r) space, not only for queers themselves, but for straights as well. Despite the school's reputation, and the researcher's expectations, most of the pupils did not identify as LGBTQ. Rather, the school is described as an area where pupils are able to self-identify in a broad spectrum of sexuality and gender positions, or not self-identify their gender or sexuality at all. A safe(r) space seems to be a space where identities are not limited to a repertoire of alternatives that have been established beforehand; rather a much more fluid and dynamic lived experience is depicted. The safe(r) space is thereby providing a richness far beyond the fixed stages of "tolerating" or "celebrating" homosexuality, as in the homophobia measuring scales discussed by Rasmussen in this issue.

From the almost comforting feeling of following Freitag through the corridors of the so-called "gay school", the reader must be ready for an abrupt shift to take in the second US contribution, the position paper "*Safety for K-12 students: United States policy concerning LGBT student safety must provide inclusion.*" April Sanders departs from one of the most serious consequences of homophobia in schools, namely young queers' suicide following homophobic harassment. Sanders argues that US policy documents directing school organisation should and must address homophobic harassment. Statistics and examples of non-heterosexual youth being exposed to violence and harassment

due to homophobia is employed to show this alarming situation that demands necessary political and policy changes.

The final article in this issue shares with Sanders an activist point of departure. Rachel Epstein, Becky Idems and Adinne Schwartz are LGBTQ activists from Canada. Their contribution “*Queer spawn on school*” engages with school experiences of children with LGBTQ parents.<sup>18</sup> The authors show how homophobia affects those who are culturally queer, i.e. those growing up with non-heterosexual parents, regardless of whether they are emotionally queer or not. It is a gloomy read to take part in children and teenagers’ experiences of being bullied. However, it is also encouraging to hear queer spawn speak up about their obstacles, within the context of research. During the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, children in non-heterosexual (mainly lesbian) families were the subjects of interest in several studies. Specific experiences of these children, or any deviation from other children and youth, were however most often played down in these early studies, partly because an overt focus on difficulties was seen as a risk in feeding homophobes with arguments against queer families. With Epstein, Idems and Schwartz’s text, queer spawn are able to speak in their own right, demonstrating a political and societal advancement of non-heterosexual families in Canada – and possibly encouraging further developments that are to come.

Working with this special edition has been an enormous pleasure for us. Thanks to the authors for their fierceness in activism and intellectual astuteness! We hope that the conversations in this issue can contribute to ongoing debates and challenges in education research and in schools.

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<sup>18</sup> For more on this subject, see Gustavson and Schmitt, 2011.

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## Taking homophobia's measure

*Mary Lou Rasmussen*

To make the claim that there is not a universalized form of homophobia might strike some as strange. In fact, it might strike others as even stranger that what constitutes homophobia in one geopolitical space does not translate seamlessly to another geopolitical space. And if homophobia is in question, the what and the how of the idea of homosexuality are also in question.

- Walcott, 2010: 315

**M**y focus in this article is on the topic of homophobia and its place in the sexuality education classroom in Australia and the United States (US). This paper draws on research in anthropology<sup>1</sup> law<sup>2</sup> and, on studies of gender and sexuality<sup>3</sup> in an attempt to complicate predominantly psychological understandings of homophobia that may underscore the popular use of scales to measure homophobic attitudes in pre-service and in-service teachers. These interdisciplinary approaches to homophobia provide the basis for

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<sup>1</sup> Murray, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> Monk, 2011.

<sup>3</sup> Butler, 1999; Hooghe, Dejaeghere, Claes and Quintelier, 2010; Hooghe, Claes, Harell, Quintelier and Dejaeghere, 2010; Puar, 2007, 2012; Walcott, 2010.

a critical reading of some contemporary pedagogical approaches to anti-homophobia education in diverse education contexts.

Clearly, Australia and the US provide different contexts in which to understand the place of homophobia in education. The concern of how to address problems related to homophobia and heterosexism in education has been more fraught in the US context than in the Australian context, where states have generally endorsed some form of comprehensive sexuality education.<sup>4</sup> This is not to say that homophobia is not seen as an issue in the Australian context, though attempts to address homophobia in teacher education and university education have not been confronted with as much organized resistance as in the US context.<sup>5</sup> It is also true to say that in both the US and the Australia the question of how to deal with homophobia, and resistance to inclusion of issues related to diverse genders and sexualities has not been uniform.<sup>6</sup>

In sexuality education it is often taken as read that homophobia is problematic and the focus becomes ways in which to intervene against the reproduction of homophobic attitudes.<sup>7</sup> As a consequence, strategies are devised and implemented to help students and teachers become less homophobic.<sup>8</sup> Teachers and students who refuse this help maybe seen as ineffective or a 'problem' in the battle against homophobia.<sup>9</sup> Those who stand up and confront homophobia are lauded.<sup>10</sup> Some of the resources I discuss below are illustrative of how Australian's working to

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<sup>4</sup> Weaver, Smith and Kippax, 2005.

<sup>5</sup> Gibson, 2007; Rasmussen, 2006.

<sup>6</sup> Rasmussen, 2005, 2006.

<sup>7</sup> Morrow and Gill, 2003; Ollis, 2010; Serdahely and Ziemaba, 1984.

<sup>8</sup> Elia, 1993; Franck, 2002.

<sup>9</sup> Morrow and Gill, 2003.

<sup>10</sup> Blackburn, Clark, Kenney and Smith, 2009; Ollis, 2010; Witthaus 2011; Zack, Mannheim and Alfano, 2010.

combat homophobia in diverse education contexts have sought to craft US scales so they are fit for purpose in the Australian context.<sup>11</sup> However, if what we understand to be homophobia is in question, as Walcott suggests, what does this mean for some of the tools used in anti-homophobia education? In this article I aim to consider how scales that measure homophobia<sup>12</sup> (a common tool deployed in anti-homophobia education in Australia and the U.S.) might be read against the proposition that what we understand homophobia to be is still in question.

In the first section of this paper I look at research from psychology, education, and sexuality studies in the US and Australia that attempts to situate homophobia on different scales. My focus is on the conditions of possibility that have brought three particular scales into being: Daniel Witthaus' adaptation of Betty Burzon's classification of homophobic types for use in workshops (in and outside of schools in rural and regional Australia); Ollis' pedagogical use of Riddle's Scale of Attitudes in a national Sexuality Education Resource produced in Victoria, Australia; Zack, Mannheim and Alfano's classification of archetypal responses to homophobic rhetoric, for use in teacher education in the United States. My critique of these scales should not be read as a disavowal of the problem of homophobic bullying. I appreciate that for some young people experiences of homophobia are profound, frequent and devastating. Rather, my focus is on how particular truisms have developed about homophobia, and its treatment, manifest in scales organized to measure levels of homophobia in particular groups. It is these understandings that I want to complicate in this article.

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<sup>11</sup> Ollis, 2010; Witthaus, 2011.

<sup>12</sup> Clark, 2010; Rogers, McRee and Arntz, 2009.

Following on from an analysis of scales that have been developed to measure homophobia, I move to a consideration of the logics that underpin these scales. How is homophobia being interpreted in these scales? What is the relationship between anti-homophobia education and post-homophobic imaginings? How does homophobia intersect with cultural and religious difference in these scales and what does this mean for the continued use of scales that purport to measure homophobia? Finally, I turn to some other ways of theorizing homophobia that might prompt educators and researchers to think differently about the question of homophobia, and their use of scales that measure homophobia.

## Scaling Homophobia

Homophobia is commonly associated with psychological understandings of sexuality. There are hundreds of studies that use scales to measure homophobia; the following studies are just a few examples.<sup>13</sup> The scales generally originate in psychology, and their history in the measurement of homophobia goes back to at least 1980.<sup>14</sup> It is beyond the scope of this article to provide a detailed analysis of the formation of these scales, for a history of the logic underpinning the development and validation of homophobia scales in the discipline of psychopathology see Wright, Adams and Bernat's *Development and validation of the homophobia scale*.<sup>15</sup> In this article my focus is on the pedagogical use of these scales to educate people in such a way that it may assist them to become less homophobic. I situate such a rationale for the use of scales in educational contexts alongside

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<sup>13</sup> Clark, 2010; Elia, 1993; Franck, 2002; Morrow and Gill, 2003; Pain and Disney, 1996; Rogers et al., 2009; Witthaus, 2011.

<sup>14</sup> Hudson and Ricketts, 1980.

<sup>15</sup> Wright, Adams and Bernat, 1999.

contemporary research that is critical of how homophobia is conceptualized and sometimes utilized as part of “progressive” educational agendas.

As indicated by Debbie Ollis, an education researcher working in the Australian context, sexuality educators may employ scales of homophobia as tools to support them in developing educational spaces that they perceive to be more affirming of sexual diversity. Ollis argues that:

The successful pre-service and in-service teacher education programs which do exist have demonstrated a number of elements that have been seen to have promoted their success. These include a group-teaching model, seen as effective in developing the key skills of working together and communication (Thomas & Jones 2005; Walker et al. 2003); and questionnaires and rating scales (including Riddle's scale of attitudes) on participants' own reactions, designed to provoke self-reflection amongst participants (Levenson-Gingiss & Hamilton 1989; Thomas & Jones 2005; Ollis 2010).<sup>16</sup>

For Ollis, the scales are a means to provoke students to reflect on their own thinking about diverse sexualities. The scales are also held to be particularly pedagogically persuasive because they enable pre-service and in-service teachers to measure their own attitudes and to see how these measures might change in comparison to other points on the scale.

In their work with teachers Ollis, Harrison and Maharaj advocate the use of Riddle's scale.<sup>17</sup> Dorothy Riddle, the developer of Riddle's scale, was a psychologist and a part of an American Psychological Association Task Force that effectively lobbied for the removal of homosexuality as a psychiatric

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<sup>16</sup> Ollis, Harrison and Maharaj, 2013, p. 4.

<sup>17</sup> Riddle, 1994.

disorder in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual. The Riddle scale of attitudes was developed in the early 1970s when Riddle was based at the City University of New York.<sup>18</sup> The first published version of the scale did not appear until 1994. It is worth noting the context in which the Riddle Scale was developed; it is now nearly 40 years old but researchers and educators in Australia and the US still see the scale as having applicability within and outside the US.<sup>19</sup> Let me be clear in stating that Ollis' decision to use the scale in her pedagogy is in many ways unremarkable. For instance, *Gay & Lesbian Health Victoria*, the peak body for lobbying on issues related to enhancing the health and well-being of *Victoria's Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex* communities also employs Riddle's scale in its professional development programs.<sup>20</sup>

However, researchers in counselling psychology have questioned the value of such scales, arguing:

The long-standing theoretical assumption that heterosexual attitudes can be understood only along the unidimensional, bipolar continuum ranging from condemnation to tolerance (Herek, 1994) has been challenged by these findings. We speculate that these results are not only a function of the evolution of heterosexual attitudes since Herek's seminal work in the area but also reflect an increasing need and interest in the precision of measurement in this area.<sup>21</sup>

While Worthington and colleagues seek to develop a more precise measurement building on the research of Herek, in this article I

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<sup>18</sup> See <http://newsarchive.woodstockschool.in/Alumni/DistAlum/riddle.htm> accessed 20 April 2013.

<sup>19</sup> Hirschfield, 2001; Ollis, 2010; Ollis et al., 2013.

<sup>20</sup> See [http://www.glhv.org.au/files/Training\\_session\\_plan.pdf](http://www.glhv.org.au/files/Training_session_plan.pdf) accessed 29 April, 2013.

<sup>21</sup> Worthington, Dillon and Becker-Schutte, 2005, p. 116.

seek to question the drive to measure such attitudes – at least through the employment of scales which employ continuums.

Ollis has identified, and I would concur, that some teachers are reluctant to “recognise and affirm sexual diversity” in public schools and she has developed a series of workshops to help teachers think about what might cause this reluctance.<sup>22</sup> The workshops, which were part of a national Talking Sexual Health program, also feature in a more recent resource, *Sexuality Education Matters*<sup>23</sup> (an online resource for Australian teacher educators<sup>24</sup>) which aims

...to present teachers with an examination of a range of discourses that have operated to position sexual diversity in a constraining and negative way...These include discourses of fear, illness, difference, and abnormality. The workshop also aimed to present teachers with others [discourses], which Johnson (1996) calls ‘a way forward’ that can enable teachers *to deconstruct heterosexuality, affirm diversity and position sexual diversity as the part of the normal spectrum of sexuality; in other words the positive subject positions.*<sup>25</sup> (Emphasis mine)

In Ollis’ workshop, as discussed in her 2010 article, participants position themselves and their school in response to heterosexuality and homosexuality using ‘Riddle’s Scale of Attitudes’.<sup>26</sup> The following attitudes in relation to both heterosexuality and homosexuality appear on Riddle’s scale:

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<sup>22</sup> Ollis, 2010, p. 218.

<sup>23</sup> Ollis et al., 2013.

<sup>24</sup> See <http://www.deakin.edu.au/arts-ed/education/teach-research/health-pe/projects.php> accessed 20 April 2013.

<sup>25</sup> Ollis, 2010, p. 220.

<sup>26</sup> Ollis, 2010, p. 221.

*Celebration*

These people celebrate gay and lesbian people and assume that they are indispensable in our society. They are willing to be gay advocates.<sup>27</sup>

*Appreciation*

These people appreciate and value the diversity of people and see gays as a valid part of that diversity. These people are willing to work to combat homophobic attitudes in others.

*Admiration*

This acknowledges that being gay/lesbian in our society takes strength.

Such people are willing to truly look at themselves and work on their own homophobic attitudes.

*Support*

These people support work to safeguard the rights of gays and lesbians.

Such people may be uncomfortable themselves, but they are aware of the implications of the negative climate homophobia creates and the irrational unfairness.

*Acceptance*

Still implies there is something to accept, characterised by such statements as 'You're not a gay to me, you're a person'. 'What you do in bed is your own business.' 'That's fine as long as you don't flaunt it.' This attitude denies social and legal realities. It still sets up the person saying 'I accept you' in a position of power to be the one to 'accept' others. It ignores the pain, invisibility and stress of closet behaviour. 'Flaunt' usually means say or do anything that makes people aware. This is where most of us find ourselves, even when we'd like to think that we are doing really well.

*Tolerance*

Homosexuality is seen as just a phase of adolescent development that many people go through and most people 'grow out of'. Thus, gays are less mature than straights and should be treated with the protectiveness and indulgence one will use with a child. Gays and lesbians should not be given positions of authority (because they

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<sup>27</sup> Riddle, 1994 in Ollis et al., 2013, p. 92-93.



are still working through adolescent behaviours), as they are seen as 'security risks'.

*Pity*

Heterosexual chauvinism. Heterosexuality is seen as more mature and certainly to be preferred. Any possibility of becoming straight should be reinforced and those who seem to be born 'that way' should be pitied, as in 'the poor dears'.

*Repulsion*

Homosexuality is seen as a 'crime against nature'. People who identify as homosexual are sick, crazy, immoral, sinful, wicked etc., and anything is justified to change them (e.g. prison, hospitals). You might well hear this expressed as 'Yuk! When I think about what they do in bed!'

The hierarchy at play in the scale is readily apparent; people who are repulsed by homosexuality appear at the bottom. In this structure it appears that the most desirable position a teacher might assume is that they come to celebrate homosexuality. The desirability of achieving celebration on Riddle's scale is discussed below:

...teachers also talked about the importance of Riddle's scale in challenging their notion of what the attitudes 'tolerance' and 'acceptance' really meant in relation to being inclusive. Kim was one of the three teachers prior to the professional development to feel that her program did not need changes to be inclusive. Yet even for her, the 'Scale of Attitudes' activity challenged her understanding and attitudes and made her reflect on the possibility that she too had some movement towards inclusiveness to make. She could remember thinking: "I was so liberated in my thinking but I'm probably not yet at celebration, you know, that's still one step on for me. So I guess that struck home because I thought, well, everybody's got somewhere to go as far as their thinking on homosexuality". (Kim, Phase 3)<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Ollis, 2010, p. 224.

Kim's statement that "everybody's got somewhere to go as far as their thinking on homosexuality" demonstrates that she has absorbed the lesson of the scale, namely that many people's thinking about homophobia is in need of advancement. Ollis is, I think, pleased with this outcome because it points to the productivity of these scales in helping people diagnose their own shortcomings in regards to affirming sexual diversity.

What interests me, both in Ollis' and Kim's (the pre-service teacher participant) use of the scale, is their investment in the logic employed by Riddle in developing the scale, namely, that celebration should be every teacher's ultimate destination. Later in this paper, I critically consider this impulse to move us to celebration. But first, I want to illustrate some other scales that are currently being used in anti-homophobia education in Australia and the US.

Daniel Witthaus is a prominent Australian anti-homophobia activist who has been doing advocacy related to gay and lesbian issues since the early 1990s. He spends a lot of time talking to school and community groups in rural and remote Australia. Currently he is endeavouring to develop support for NICHE – (National Institute for Challenging Homophobia Education). On his *Beyond That's So Gay* website in a resource entitled *The Faces of Homophobia: Everyday resistance quantified...* he states that he has adapted Betty Burzon's (sic) model homophobic types for the Australian context as part of his Beyond that's so gay, Australia wide training program. In her text *Setting them Straight*<sup>29</sup>, Berzon, an author and psychotherapist, developed a series of types in order to help readers who encountered homophobic messages in everyday conversations. Other

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<sup>29</sup> Berzon, 1996.

researchers have also drawn on Berzon's types in their anti-homophobia work.<sup>30</sup>

In creating types that draw strongly on Australian stereotypes Witthaus' is no doubt using a form of language that he thinks will engage his audiences in regional and remote Australia. Witthaus has developed the following descriptors of different personality types which he relates in the following order.

*The Romper Stomper*<sup>31</sup>

Feel vulnerable and constantly under attack; Mobilised to counterattack those things and people that threaten their well-being; Typically male, their definition of reality is described as 'narrow' and their outlook 'hateful'.

*The Frustrated Bogan*<sup>32</sup>

Trouble coping with reality, and shows inflexibility in adapting within their environment; Frustration is primarily handled using aggression; Emotion is an important weapon, often shown by lashing out.

*The Politician*

Conservative individuals who jump onto the nearest 'bandwagon' (e.g. polls); Desperate to fit in with the 'in-group' and be seen to distance themselves from the 'out-group'; Avoid taking responsibility for their attitudes and actions.

*The Sheep*

Thinkers who are dependent upon the opinion of others (i.e. the flock); Don't spend much time considering the consequences of discrimination; Their lack of a self-determined belief system paired with their apathy makes them dangerous in the hands of the wrong shepherd.

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<sup>30</sup> Rostosky, Riggle, Horne and Miller, 2009; Wormer and McKinney, 2003.

<sup>31</sup> The name Romper Stomper evokes the 1992 Australian film of the same name directed by Geoffrey Wright. The focus of the movie is racism enacted by a neo-Nazi skinhead group in a Melbourne working class suburb.

<sup>32</sup> Bogan is an Australian pejorative used to denote somebody who is lacking in culture or manners.

*The Stirrer*

Attempts to exploit the fears and frustrations of the other homophobic types; Exploits people's ignorance and fear of difference; Adept at stirring up anger in others and experts in uniting and building cohesion against a 'common enemy'.

*The Almost Ally*

Invariably well-educated and older people, often females, who pledge their LGBT allegiance; Often unaware of their own homophobia; Unwilling to put themselves in situations where they, or others, could assess them as prejudiced.<sup>33</sup>

These portraits portray people who are homophobic as paranoid, hateful, conservative, and unable to think for themselves. The 'type' classified as The Sheep, which appears to evoke religious metaphors (the shepherd) and their followers (sheep), are constituted as unthinking and non-agentic.

Akin to Ollis' use of Riddle's scale, for Witthaus' advancement of people along the scale is a clear goal of its use. This is apparent in the citation below:

Experienced LGBT advocate and friend to religious communities, Anthony Venn-Brown, is clear that in any everyday conversation he has with homophobic opponents he only has one goal: to identify where they are on this very scale and to shift them one step forward.<sup>34</sup>

Ollis and Witthaus are both committed to anti-homophobia education, and they share a belief that anti-homophobia education can help people become less homophobic. These scales

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<sup>33</sup> Witthaus, D. (2011) The Faces of Homophobia, Everyday resistance quantified in *Beyond That's So Gay*. See [http://thatssogay.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2011/08/For\\_the\\_hand\\_BTSG.pdf](http://thatssogay.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2011/08/For_the_hand_BTSG.pdf) accessed 10 October, 2012.

<sup>34</sup> See [http://thatssogay.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2011/08/For\\_the\\_hand\\_BTSG.pdf](http://thatssogay.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2011/08/For_the_hand_BTSG.pdf) accessed 10 October, 2012.

are assembled within a liberatory framework which sees the value in progressing all people along a scale. In the logic of the scale, becoming less homophobic, constitutes a more enlightened or liberatory position. Together with Harwood, I have previously argued that the expression of competing truths about homosexuality [including the expression of homophobia] is an important part of pedagogy and that to curtail speech that is homophobic privileges particular understandings of inclusion.<sup>35</sup> Consequently, I read these scales as imposing particular truths on people who are asked to participate in lessons based on their use vis-à-vis where they should situate themselves in relation to homophobia.

US education researchers j. Zack, Alexandra Mannheim and Michael Alfano have also designed a scales to measure “the varying levels of ability and willingness of the participants [111 student teachers] to address homophobia in their classroom. Ideally, we hoped that our participants would move from the lower levels of avoiders and hesitators to the higher levels of confronters and, ultimately, integrators”.<sup>36</sup> Below are brief descriptors of each of the archetypal responses to homophobic rhetoric classified by Zack et al.:

*Confronters*

Many student teachers took it upon themselves to take time from the scheduled lesson plan to address homophobic slurs that were leveled against students. It was the consensus among these student teachers that homophobic rhetoric was widespread, considered socially acceptable, and posed a challenge to them as educators that was nearly impossible to conquer singlehandedly – but they were willing to give it a try. (103)

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<sup>35</sup> Harwood and Rasmussen, 2012.

<sup>36</sup> Zack et al., 2010, p. 102.

*Integrators*

A few student teachers sought to combat the issue of homophobia within the school by integrating homophobia reduction into the curriculum. These student teachers understood that queer culture is an important part of the multicultural repertoire and should not be excluded. (104)

*Hesitators*

By far the largest archetype, “hesitators” describes the largest group, those who felt a call to action to address the homophobia they witnessed, but lacked the set of skills necessary to create an atmosphere free of homophobic rhetoric or move students toward more accepting ideologies. The reasons for this lack of confidence varied among the student teachers, but were most commonly the result of 1) being accused of being gay by students, 2) encountering religious opposition in the students, and 3) feeling pressured to focus on content. (103)

*Avoiders*

While there was heated discussion regarding homophobic rhetoric, made evident by the numerous student teachers who volunteered the topic and confirmed how rampant the problem was, some student teachers chose to remain silent during the discussions. It is impossible to state with any certainty the reasons for these participants’ withdrawal from the conversation. The silence may imply that they were on some level complicit with the level of homophobia being exhibited by students and unwilling to address these behaviors...Some of the avoiders may have been struggling with their own sexual identity. Or, we hypothesized, perhaps some were uncomfortable talking about anything dealing with sex in a public forum. While no student teacher freely admitted to doing nothing when encountering homophobic speech at their schools, their silence was telling. (102)

The archetypal responses developed by Zack et al. produce a hierarchy that measures people’s capacity to address homophobia in a way that the researchers’ perceive as appropriate. The notion of progress is also apparent. The researchers, in talking about Confronters, observe “we were pleased that many felt confident enough to address homophobic

speech when it presented itself and had the knowledge and skills to move students in a positive direction”.<sup>37</sup> So participants who were characterized as having most able and willing to address homophobia were the one's who conceptualized themselves as having the capacity to move students on from homophobic attitudes.

Avoiders, the archetype situated at the bottom of Zack et al.'s scale, are seen as potentially taking up this position for a multitude of reasons. Below they provide an account of the type of teacher education student who might take up the avoider position:

Knowing that the discourse within our program favors pluralism and a regard for diversity, it is likely that some participants in the discussion remained silent because their personal views were in opposition to homosexual lifestyles. Perhaps they believed that the religiously, morally, and politically charged issue of homosexuality was outside the purview of public schooling. Or, maybe they were just too shy. Whatever the case, it seemed unlikely that these beginning teachers would be addressing the issues of homophobic hate-speech in any meaningful ways in the near future.<sup>38</sup>

As opposed to the classifications describing the lowest points in Riddle's scale and Witthaus' types, this discussion allows that participants might have religious objections which would account for their being labelled as avoiders. There is also recognition that the space of the university classroom featured in the research, which is described as one that “favors pluralism and a regard for diversity”, meant that “some participants in the discussion remained silent”.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Zack et al., 2010, p. 104.

<sup>38</sup> Zack et al., 2010, p. 103.

<sup>39</sup> Zack et al., 2010, p. 103.

This is a particularly salient observation because it indicates the ways in which religious objections to homosexuality have become unspeakable in some university classrooms. Avoiders read the classroom climate and know that homophobic utterances are unacceptable in this particular space and thus they know to keep silent. This shared understanding, on the part of professors and their teacher education students, that homophobia is unutterable, sets up a space which sets specific limits on pluralism and diversity, no doubt with the best of intentions.

Below Zack et al. provide Confronters with tips on how to deal with religious beliefs of students that are perceived as discriminatory:

Student teachers should also be equipped with information that challenges the religious beliefs of students (when these beliefs are mired in discrimination) ...Some organizations that can aid those entering the teaching profession in solidifying their responses to religious and legal arguments against homosexuality include [freedomtomarry.org](http://freedomtomarry.org), which provides advice on how to talk about marriage equality, and [informedconscience.com](http://informedconscience.com), a group that explores homosexuality and the Catholic Church and provides alternative interpretations of scripture.<sup>40</sup>

I am concerned at what such directions might mean for teachers when they are working in schools and they encounter remarks that they perceive as homophobic from peers, parents or students. Such an approach could set up teachers to the conclusion that certain students' beliefs are in need of correction, or, at least, movement in a "positive direction". This prompts me to ask: When does saying no to homophobia become a means by which to discipline specific types of religious beliefs in the classroom?

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<sup>40</sup> Zack et al., 2010, p. 109.



The binaries at work in the production of scales utilized in anti-homophobic research and pedagogies are well summed up in a recent doctoral thesis entitled *With us or against us: Using religiosity and sociodemographic variables to predict homophobic beliefs*.<sup>41</sup> In this study Erin Schwartz, a graduate of the Indiana State University doctoral program in Counseling Psychology, utilizes a psychological scale to measure the homophobic attitudes of people in the US who were, and were not, religiously affiliated. By employing a particular scale Schwartz found that people who identified as fundamentalists in Christian traditions were more likely to be homophobic. While the body of thesis does not appear to make mention of its title, one interpretation might be that scales of homophobic beliefs are useful because they are helpful in determining who is “with us or against us”. What is not clear, is who is “us”?

Schwartz was surprised to note that level of education among people who were fundamentalist did not alter their level of homophobia – though age did.

*The finding of no differences in homophobia based on level of education was surprising.* It had been expected that having more education and thus, more exposure to various points of view from sources other than family-of-origin and one's religious congregation, would play an important role in differences in homophobic beliefs. This unexpected finding indicates that education alone may not have an important impact on changing prejudicial beliefs.<sup>42</sup> (Emphasis mine)

Such a finding is surprising to Schwartz, I would argue, because there is a firm belief that more education and exposure to gays and lesbians will have the effect of moderating people's

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<sup>41</sup> Zack et al., 2010, p. 109.

<sup>42</sup> Schwartz, 2011, p. 47.

homophobic tendencies. The strength of this belief, that people will become less homophobic when exposed to anti-homophobia education, is apparent in all the scales that I have discussed above. In the context of this discussion of homophobia and sexuality education, this belief is key because it reflects a repeated tendency to attribute homophobic beliefs to a lack of education, rather than to religiosity.

In their research on homophobia among adolescents in Canada and Belgium, Hooghe, Claes, Harell, Quintelier and Dejaeghere<sup>43</sup> also trouble the belief that there is a link between homophobia and educational attainment. They note that

Despite arguments that hostility toward LGBT rights among Muslims can simply be attributed to their lower average education level or to a Mediterranean cultural factor, our study does not find support for these arguments. Our models included controls for educational background from two separate country samples with diverging immigration patterns. This allows us to isolate the religious factor quite unequivocally as an important element for the occurrence of negative feelings toward equal rights for LGBT groups.<sup>44</sup>

It is clear in this study that level of education does not correlate with level of homophobia. Hooghe et al. state that their finding that religion and homophobic belief are correlated in some people of Christian and Muslim faiths is unremarkable. They go on to note that several research studies suggest “adherence to strict and fundamentalist forms of religion is positively associated to homophobia and anti-gay attitudes”.<sup>45</sup> The correlations Hooghe et al. see between homophobia and religious fundamentalism

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<sup>43</sup> Hooghe et al., 2010.

<sup>44</sup> Hooghe et al., 2010, p. 396.

<sup>45</sup> Hooghe et al., 2010, p. 385.

leads them to question the assumptions that underpin scales that measure homophobia.

In an article by Hooghe, Dejaeghere, Claes, and Quintelier's subtitled: *The Structure of Attitudes toward Gay and Lesbian Rights among Islamic Youth in Belgium* the researchers draws attention to the specific ways in which race, ethnicity and religion are often highlighted as markers of increased homophobia in studies using homophobia scales. Hooghe et al. seek to problematize this type of research arguing that:

...the scales ...all originate in a liberal, rights-oriented approach toward homosexuality, which is often at odds with a more religiously based understanding of homosexuality and homosexual behavior. Basically, this would imply that the measurement scales for homophobia that are conventionally used are not sufficiently cross-culturally valid to allow for unbiased understanding of the feelings toward homosexuality among various religious groups. These scales indeed originate from a secularized Western research setting and very little effort has been devoted to the question [of] whether these scales can be used meaningfully in a more religious context.<sup>46</sup>

For the purpose of this discussion of scales and homophobia in the context of sexuality education, Hooghe et al.'s comments are particularly salient. While continuing to employ scales in their research, there is also recognition by these researchers of the limitations of scales that measure homophobia.

Hooghe et al. illustrate the complexities of defining just what homophobia is in quantitative and qualitative research. Their own research using these scales has prompted them to question how scales that measure homophobia are rooted in systems of belief that almost ensure particular groups of people will be

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<sup>46</sup> Hooghe et al., 2010, p. 50.

classified as homophobic. As I have asked elsewhere “how might I understand religious reasoning on sex education, using a frame that eschews the authority of secular reason?”<sup>47</sup> In the context of this discussion, I am constructing scales that measure or classify particular types of homophobia as embedded in the authority of a secular reasoning in which an anti-homophobic response is often conflated as a combination of ignorance, irrationality, religiosity and miseducation.

What are the consequences then of employing these scales in anti-homophobia research and pedagogy to, once again, and, often not surprisingly, identify particular members of specific populations as homophobic? To my mind, the repeated use of homophobia scales is problematic because in, a Butlerian<sup>48</sup> sense, the findings they produce are performative. Through the continued utilisation and production of the scales we come to know particular subjects first and foremost as homophobic; in this respect the employment of scales can be seen as a liberal mechanism of exclusion.

## **Thinking differently about homophobia in teaching and research**

As David Murray notes “Homophobia has gone global”<sup>49</sup> and it is “increasingly attached to moral, political, and economic agendas around the globe.” Homophobia has, indeed, gone global, but as the epigraph to this article suggests, this is not to say that homophobia cannot be easily translated across geopolitical sites. In countries like Australia and the U.S. that both have large communities of new immigrants this is an

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<sup>47</sup> Rasmussen, 2010, p. 701.

<sup>48</sup> Butler, 1999.

<sup>49</sup> Murray, 2009, p. viii.

important consideration because if homophobia is not a universal phenomenon, then anti-homophobia education needs to be attuned to this. Though, as I discuss below, significant differences in how people understand the question of homophobia are by no means confined to immigrant communities. For instance, people within Protestant religious communities across the U.S., hold markedly different understanding of homophobia and heteronormativity.

Daniel Monk in an article entitled, *Challenging homophobic bullying in schools: The politics of progress*, see discourses related to homophobic bullying as first and foremost political, and therefore necessarily subject to critique. He writes,

...while issues such as gay marriage and gays in the military are campaigns that have been exposed to lively critique within the LGBT community and academic literature, there has been very little similar debate about homophobic bullying, located as it is within the 'benign' emancipatory liberal discourses of education and future-focused discourses of innocent and universal childhood.<sup>50</sup>

The critique of scales that are used to measure homophobia has been limited, partially because it is commonly understood that such scales are fundamentally benign. Monk goes on to make the point that anti-homophobic discourse is founded in "imagination and representations of a post-homophobic time".<sup>51</sup> I construe scales that measure homophobia as part of broader constellation of discourses that seek to challenge homophobia, and as I have tried to illustrate above, I do not perceive such scales as benign or emancipatory. By challenging

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<sup>50</sup> Monk, 2011, p. 191.

<sup>51</sup> Monk, 2011, p. 191.

the use of these scales I want to join with Monk in scrutinizing the politics that underpin anti-homophobia education.

The progressive narratives implicit within scales that measure homophobia can be conceived as a technology explicitly designed to help students and teachers develop imaginings of post-homophobic time. Scales of homophobia very specifically construct responses to homophobia as something which might be improved, over time, by moving people along the scale from a position of repulsion to celebration<sup>52</sup> or from romper stomper to almost ally (Witthaus). The scales simultaneously produce, and are embedded in, imaginings of post-homophobic time. Homophobia, (so the logic of these scales suggests), we can all agree, is a problem. Consequently, it is also held to be true that individuals, who are identified as holding homophobic beliefs via technologies such as scales, can only benefit from exposure to anti-homophobia education. Part of my task here then is to elaborate why I think it is problematic to develop educational practices that are embedded in the reproduction of post-homophobic imaginings.

Imaginings of a post-homophobic time are problematic in part because such imaginings assume that some consensus has been derived on the subject homophobia, yet recent anthropological studies of homophobia point to inconsistencies in the way that this concept is understood.<sup>53</sup> For instance, Constance Sullivan-Blum in her study of contemporary American Christian homophobia notes that the evangelical Protestants she interviewed consistently denied that they were homophobic. Sullivan-Blum accounts for this reticence in part by drawing attention to the way in which her participants conceptualized

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<sup>52</sup> Ollis, 2010.

<sup>53</sup> Murray, 2009.

people who are homophobic. They believed that “homophobes harbor an irrational fear of homosexuals” and they did not perceive their attitude towards homosexuals as therefore homophobic. Rather, Sullivan-Blum notes, “most evangelical Protestants I spoke to are not afraid of homosexuals; rather they believe that homosexuality is sinful and must be rejected as morally wrong”.<sup>54</sup> Such distinctions in the way that people understand the concept of homophobia, and the ways in which they imagine themselves and others as homophobic (or not), points to the challenges of anti-homophobia education and imaginings of post-homophobic time.

Scales of homophobia might suggest that particular groups of people, such as evangelical Protestants, are more likely to be homophobic. However, if these people do not apprehend homophobia as something that is applicable to them, what does this mean for the application of the scale? Monk suggests that:

One might reasonably ask whether in highlighting the existence of homophobia in schools and developing strategies that enable it to be acknowledged by policy-makers it is necessary to engage with conflicting imaginations about an idealised post-homophobic world. The argument here is that it is, for if homophobic bullying is made speakable through discourses of heteronormativity, then those outcomes become the form through which its success is evaluated.<sup>55</sup>

Monk rightly points out that the success of anti-homophobia education is predicated on particular imaginings of homophobia that rarely admit conflicting perspectives. The scales can only be ruled a success, if there is a concomitant agreement about the discourses of heteronormativity. As Sullivan-Blum notes,

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<sup>54</sup> Sullivan-Blum, 2009, p. 51.

<sup>55</sup> Monk, 2011, p. 194-195.

evangelical Protestants perceive same-sex marriage as problematic for many reasons, one of which is that it disrupts the authority of scripture.<sup>56</sup> I do not perceive scripture in the same way as evangelical Protestants, nor do I support same-sex marriage - but for very different reasons to evangelical Protestants. My point here is that sometimes when homophobia is construed as irrational or uneducated or illiberal – it is worth interrogating further whether or not such claims can be sustained. Surely, sometimes homophobia may result from the above. But it also worth considering that sometimes the tendency to construct particular events, people, places and or religions as homophobic may be a maneuver that has the effect of constructing all objections to post-homophobic imaginings as necessarily pathological, ignorant and regressive. As a result, people who don't agree that heteronormativity is a problem may come to be seen as in need of re-education.

Of course the necessity of conforming to post-homophobic imagining does not fall equally upon all people of different faiths. Discourses of homophobic bullying, that are reproduced through the use of scales that measure homophobia, may also operate to reify binaries between Islamic fundamentalism and secular freedoms.<sup>57</sup> So the problem of not conforming to particular readings of homophobia and post-homophobia is not limited to the sphere of religion, it may also become associated with homonationalism and terrorist assemblages.<sup>58</sup> Particular groups of people who are marked as homophobic according to these scales can also be construed as a danger to the secular state, and to the safety of the imagined nation.

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<sup>56</sup> Sullivan-Blum, 2009, p. 56.

<sup>57</sup> Monk, 2011, p. 200.

<sup>58</sup> Puar, 2007.



## Conclusion

I do recognize that discrimination related to gender and sexual identifications does exist. At the same time in this article I have been attempting to complicate the pedagogical power that is associated with taking up the position of challenging, and measuring, homophobia. Scales of homophobia may be difficult to speak back to precisely because their righteousness is affirmed through images of the vulnerability of gay youth.<sup>59</sup> Though as Monk illustrates, the cost of such righteousness is “the extent to which it effectively silences other voices and reduces the experience of lesbian and gay young people to one of passive victimhood.”<sup>60</sup>

In this article I have situated scales that measure homophobia as part of a broader political project that is embedded in emancipatory imaginings of a post-homophobic world. In order to do this I have tried to consider some of the logics that underpin the use of such scales. By way of a conclusion, I have sought to make a list of provocations that illustrate what I perceive to be troubling logics that support the use of scales that measure homophobia of teachers and students. My hope is such a list might provoke ongoing debate about the ways that homophobia is taken up in education about gender and sexuality.

## Provocations

- That we can agree on what homophobia is
- That we can therefore measure homophobia

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<sup>59</sup> Rasmussen, 2004; Puar, 2012.

<sup>60</sup> Monk, 2011, p. 188; Rasmussen, 2004.

- That there is a “right way” to respond to homophobia
- That progressive teachers and students will challenge homophobia
- That affirming homophobia is inadmissible in the bounds of liberal, secular, education
- That people who are homophobic can benefit from anti-homophobic education

My hope is that taken together these provocations might be used to open up conversations in which homophobia becomes less familiar. It is only by making homophobia strange in the context of anti-homophobic education that it may become possible to think differently about motivations and assumptions that underpin such pedagogical projects. Such provocations about homophobia are, as indicated in the epigraph to this article, also designed to provoke questions about the what and the how of homosexuality. If an aim of anti-homophobia education is to create spaces in which young people who are lesbian or gay identified may be safer – can we assume that taking homophobia’s measure will necessarily have this outcome?

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# Queering animal sexual behavior in biology textbooks

*Malin Ah-King*

**B**iology is instrumental in establishing and perpetuating societal norms of gender and sexuality, owing to its afforded authoritative role in formulating beliefs about what is “natural”. However, philosophers, historians, and sociologists of science have shown how conceptions of gender and sexuality pervade the supposedly objective knowledge produced by the natural sciences.<sup>1</sup> For example, in describing animal relationships, biologists sometimes use the metaphor of marriage, which brings with it conceptions of both cuckoldry and male ownership of female partners.<sup>2</sup> These conceptions have often led researchers to overlook female behavior and adaptations, such as female initiation of mating. Such social norms and ideologies influence both theories and research in biology.<sup>3</sup> Social norms of gender and sexuality also influence school cultures.<sup>4</sup> Although awareness of gender issues has had a major impact in Sweden during recent years, the interventions conducted have been based on a heteronormative understanding of sex; this has rendered sexual norms a non-prioritized issue and thereby rendered non-heterosexuals invisible

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<sup>1</sup> Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1993; Keller, 1982.

<sup>2</sup> Lawton, Garstka and Hanks, 1997.

<sup>3</sup> Gowaty, 1997a; Hrdy, 1986; Zuk, 2002.

<sup>4</sup> Bromseth, 2009.

in teaching and textbooks.<sup>5</sup> Since this research was published in 2007 and 2009,<sup>6</sup> norm critical pedagogics<sup>7</sup> have been included in the Swedish National Agency for Education's guidelines for teaching. This inclusion represents one way to tackle the recurring problem of heterosexuality being described as a naturalized "normal" behavior and homosexuals, bisexuals and transsexuals being described from a heteronormative perspective.

In this paper, I employ gender and queer perspectives to scrutinize how animal sexual behavior is described and explained in Swedish biology textbooks. The analysis is based in gender and queer theory, feminist science studies, and evolutionary biology.

The article begins with an outline a discussion of my theoretical framework, relating gender and queer perspectives on evolutionary biology to a discussion of queer methodology. I then scrutinize some empirical examples drawn from five contemporary biology textbooks used in secondary schools (by students aged 16-18 years old). Finally, I discuss the implications of the textbooks' representations of animal sexual behavior, the problems of and need for a "textbook-version", and providing examples of what an inclusive approach to biology education might look like.

## Gender and queer perspectives

Gender studies is mostly concerned with critical investigations of the cultural construction of gender as it occurs across various times and cultures. Although gender studies have largely adopted a constructionist framework, this does not imply a denial of

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<sup>5</sup> Bromseth and Willow, 2007.

<sup>6</sup> Bromseth and Willow, 2007; Bromseth, 2009.

<sup>7</sup> Bromseth and Darj, 2010.



material reality. Rather, gender studies problematizes how material reality is portrayed; for example, by questioning stereotypical portrayals of the sexes and reminding us that portrayals and descriptions of biological phenomena are themselves cultural conceptions.<sup>8</sup>

Queer studies challenges “heteronormativity” – the ways in which heterosexuality, through everyday speech and behavior, is presented as the only natural and normal way of living, while other sexualities are simultaneously rendered abnormal.<sup>9</sup> Queer theories are critical theories for emancipating thought and action, while questioning both ways of knowing and indeed the very nature of being.<sup>10</sup> Queer theories also involve questioning binary categorizations.<sup>11</sup> Many researchers are engaged in applying queer theories to research and activism in school education systems.<sup>12</sup> Vicky Snyder and Francis Broadway argue that queer theory can have a number of implications for science teachers: it offers ways to foster critical thinking, to question categorizations and norms, and to challenge cultural practices that privilege heterosexuality as normal and natural.<sup>13</sup> These perspectives enable critical analysis of the ways in which knowledge is produced and represented. Therefore, what is rendered invisible by these norms, as they impact upon teaching in practice, is relevant to students’ views of nature, of other human beings, and their self-image.

To teach biology is to mediate knowledge that shapes the

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<sup>8</sup> Thurén, 2003.

<sup>9</sup> Kulick, 2004; Rosenberg, 2002.

<sup>10</sup> Greene, 1996.

<sup>11</sup> One critique of queer theories has been that they have been formed from a mainly white subject position and that sexuality is inextricably linked with racialized subjectivities (e.g. Barnard, 1999).

<sup>12</sup> Bromseth and Darj, 2010; Bryson and de Castell, 1993; Kumashiro, 2002.

<sup>13</sup> Snyder and Broadway, 2004.

understanding that students create of themselves and of science. Snyder and Broadway suggest that:

Using the lens of queer theory, we can view the hegemonic matrix, interrupt heteronormative thinking, and broaden all students' potential for interpreting, representing, and perceiving experiences.<sup>14</sup>

Gender and queer perspectives have the potential to increase critical thinking about science among both teachers and students through elucidating the fact that scientific endeavors are always conducted within a social context.

## **Gender perspectives on evolutionary theories of sex differences**

In order to contextualize my analysis, I will begin with a brief overview of the development of evolutionary theories, explaining sex differences from a feminist science studies perspective.

Sexual selection is the element of Charles Darwin's theory of natural selection most often used to explain sexual difference as evident in morphology and behavior, and it also provides the basis for the textbook descriptions analyzed here.<sup>15</sup> Darwin explained the evolution of sexual difference by sexual selection as mainly due to male-male competition (resulting in, for example, male horns) and female choice (resulting in, for example, male ornaments), but he also mentioned exceptions, such as instances in which females compete for males. It has been pointed out that a focus on male competition and female choice, which both consider how variation in male reproductive success

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<sup>14</sup> Snyder and Broadway, 2004, p. 621.

<sup>15</sup> Darwin, 1871.

is produced, has resulted in the assumption that sexual selection is always strongest in males and unimportant for females.<sup>16</sup> Darwin, although describing much variation among species, generalized his observations into a collective view of eager, competitive males and coy, choosy females.<sup>17</sup> This depiction has been criticized, especially from a gender studies perspective,<sup>18</sup> and numerous recent findings, such as those involving female multiple mating, have changed the theoretical framework within which sexual selection research is undertaken.<sup>19</sup>

Anisogamy (a form of reproduction in which the sexes produce different sized sex cells), provides a biological definition of the sexes: individuals producing large sex cells are females, those producing small sex cells are male. This asymmetry of initial investment, in combination with parental investment, has been suggested as causing sex differences in sexual strategies, so that carriers of small gametes compete for access to females, and females are choosy about mates.<sup>20</sup>

However, proponents of the dominant theoretical framework for studying sexual selection today continue to use their criticized basic assumptions, namely: 1) Male reproductive success is more variable than that of females, 2) Males gain more by increasing mate number than do females, and 3) Males are generally eager to mate and hence are indiscriminate in mate choice, while females are choosy and less eager.<sup>21</sup> Even though these notions might hold true in many cases, this framework has, until the last four decades, hindered research into, for example, female mating

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<sup>16</sup> Gowaty, 1997a.

<sup>17</sup> Darwin, 1871.

<sup>18</sup> Gowaty, 1997b; Hrdy, 1981, 1986.

<sup>19</sup> Knight, 2002.

<sup>20</sup> Parker, Baker and Smith, 1972.

<sup>21</sup> Dewsbury, 2005.

outside of a social pair, male choice, and the cost of sperm.<sup>22</sup>

## Current evolutionary biology

Currently, as evidence for the variability and dynamics of sexual strategies accumulates (it is almost a ubiquity that females mate with multiple partners), sexual selection theory is itself transforming. Evolutionary biology has partly incorporated females' role in evolution, by (for example) highlighting other sexual selection mechanisms: male choice, female-female competition resulting in variation of female reproductive success, male coercion of female choice (males may aggressively condition female behavior) and interactions between the sexes other than mate choice which influence reproductive success.<sup>23</sup> The number of studies of male mate choice has increased relatively recently: discoveries of females in some species gaining as much as males in reproductive success by multiple mating, and females actively initiating mating, form part of an ongoing re-evaluation of traditional views of female and male reproduction.<sup>24</sup> Recent developments have also moved towards a more inclusive view of variation in sexual behavior, for example, same-sex sexual behavior.<sup>25</sup> Same-sex sexual behavior has been found in over 1500 species, among a wide variety of animals.<sup>26</sup>

Anisogamy and parental investment may partly explain sexual difference in mating strategies, but the connection is not as simple as was first theorized, and a more complex view has emerged.<sup>27</sup> Traditional theories postulate that anisogamy and parental

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<sup>22</sup> Tang-Martinez and Ryder, 2005.

<sup>23</sup> Gowaty, 1997a.

<sup>24</sup> Tang-Martinez, 2010.

<sup>25</sup> Bagemihl, 1999; Bailey and Zuk, 2009; Sommer and Vasey, 2006.

<sup>26</sup> Bagemihl, 1999; Bailey and Zuk, 2009; Roughgarden, 2004.

<sup>27</sup> Clutton-Brock, 2007.

investment cause mate competition and mate choice (sexual selection), but the causal relationship may be reversed so that sexual selection may cause differences in parental investment, which has been shown to be the case in cichlid fishes.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, alternative models now predict sexual behavior in ways that do not rely upon the assumption of anisogamy.<sup>29</sup>

## Current evolutionary biology

The life sciences emerged from a positivistic tradition of striving to make objective and value-neutral measurements of the world. Within this tradition it is unusual to consider the impact that politics and culture exert upon the “doing of science”. Science is often envisioned as objective and thus as reflecting nature “as it really is”; as such, it may claim the ability to produce universalized facts. This understanding is probably prevalent among students reading biology textbooks in school. By contrast, feminist science studies have shown that science is a cultural process which is influenced by social ideologies.<sup>30</sup> Hence, another way of presenting science in context is to emphasize that science is itself context bound, value laden, and indeed a human endeavor in which human beings are critical in formulating the theoretical framework through which nature is observed, interpreted, and named. This is not to suggest that nature itself is a construction, but rather that our understandings and presentations of nature will always be influenced by the theoretical framework that we are using in order to access it. Alternatively, as some theoreticians have argued, we may say that knowledge about nature is co-constituted, so that nature is an

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<sup>28</sup> Gonzalez-Voyer, Fitzpatrick and Kolm, 2008.

<sup>29</sup> Gowaty, 2008; Gowaty and Hubbell 2005, 2009.

<sup>30</sup>e.g. Fisher, 2011; Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1993; Mayberry, Subramaniam and Weasel, 2001.

active participant in knowledge-making.<sup>31</sup>

## Methods

I have conducted a textual analysis of Swedish secondary school biology textbooks. I selected the five until recently available textbooks<sup>32</sup> for education in biology as a subject (there are also books available for education in nature oriented subjects, which give a less comprehensive exposition of animal behavior) in order to ensure a substantive sample. I have selected those sections that describe and explain animal sexual behavior.<sup>33</sup> Various authors have chosen to discuss animal sexual behavior in slightly different sections. Inga-Lill Peinerud et al. have a focused section on “Sexual strategies” under the over-arching heading “Behavioral Ecology”, while Gunnar Björndahl et al. have two sections under the heading “Behavioral Ecology”: “Reproduction“ and “Different mating systems”, and also refer to them in the Summary of that chapter. Anders Henriksson has one page on “Sexual selection” in a section on “life evolving”; under “Behaviors and life strategies” there are sections on “Birdsong”, “Different kinds of territories”, “Fight for a territory”, “Partner choice and relations” and “Toad seeks partner”. Lars Ljunggren et al. use the heading “Evolutionary ecology and ethology” to cover sections on “ornaments”, “To invest in the offspring”, “Polyandry”, “Mate guarding”, “Nuptial gifts” and “Polyandrous females”. Janne Karlsson et al. have a section on “Sexual systems” under “Behavioral Ecology”.

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<sup>31</sup> Barad, 2007; Latour, 1987.

<sup>32</sup> Biologi A: Peinerud, Lager-Nyqvist and Lundegård, 2001; Biologi A med Naturkunskap: Karlsson, Krigsman, Molander and Wickbom, 2005; Biologi Kurs A: Henriksson, 2003; Liv i utveckling Biologi A: Ljunggren, Söderberg and Åhlin, 2007; Spira Biologi A: Björndahl, Landgren and Thyberg, 2007.

<sup>33</sup> See appendix for selected sections. All books include sections on biological diversity (covering e.g. bacteria, plants, animals), sex determination mechanisms, sexual and asexual reproduction and evolution.

Guiding questions for the analysis have been: How is sexual difference in animal sexual behavior described and explained? What are the emerging, primary narratives, and are there counter-examples? Are anthropomorphic terms used? What is described as the norm and what is described as deviant? Which animal examples are selected, and what do they represent? Are there any examples of variation in sexuality, and if so, how are these described? I read the texts closely in order to identify common themes, then re-read the texts several times to ensure all themes were covered similarly. The emerging themes were: 1) Descriptions and explanations of sex differences, 2) Counter-examples, 3) Choice of animal examples and illustrations, 4) Criticism of anthropomorphism and value judgments, 5) Diversity in sexual behavior. Under the first theme, I have identified several sub-themes: Males compete, females choose and care; Active males/passive females; Anisogamy as a general explanation for sex differences in behavior; Parental investment as an explanation for sex differences in behavior; Mating system theory; Extra-pair paternity/Certainty of paternity as explanation for sexual behavior; and Alternative reproductive tactics. I extracted excerpts and described the coverage in accordance with the themes, both examples that illustrate the main narratives and counter-examples. Since my aim was to analyze not just whether these themes are covered, but how they are represented, I have focused on excerpts that are interesting from gender and queer perspectives.

I noted the number of animal species, which animal groups were presented and whether the text was implicitly referring to any particular group of animals. The illustrations were scrutinized for which animal species were represented and what the illustrations were conveying. I also noted value judgments and whether there

were instances of anthropomorphic terminology. Finally, I checked whether the books covered variation in sexuality, for example, examples of same-sex sexuality. I have decided not to privilege any particular textbook; if the reader wishes to compare them, table 1 (at the end of the article) gives an overview of how the various textbooks have covered the themes of the analysis.

## **Analysis of textbooks from gender and queer perspectives**

The results of the analysis are summarized in table 1, where I provide examples of the emerging patterns and themes on which my analysis focuses. In the results section, I provide excerpts from the textbooks as well as my interpretations and reflections (an overview of the themes and additional excerpts are available in table 1).

### *Descriptions and explanations of sex differences*

#### Males compete, females choose and care

Generally, among the textbooks, female and male sexual strategies are explained in dichotomous terms: “females choose and males compete”,<sup>34</sup> “males have to show their competence” and if he “competes with other males” as well as “shows his competence as a father”, he can “be accepted and be allowed to fertilize the female's eggs”.<sup>35</sup> “Most often the most ostentatious, largest and strongest males win the struggle to get to mate”<sup>36</sup> and

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<sup>34</sup> All citations are translated from Swedish to English by the author.

<sup>35</sup> Peinerud et al., 2006, for page numbers see appendix.

<sup>36</sup> Ljunggren et al., 2007.



“females most often choose partners”.<sup>37</sup> One of the five textbooks did not mention male competition.

While giving the same general picture, some accounts in the textbooks open the readers’ minds to more diverse possibilities, such as “different species have different sexual systems” and “the pre-requisites are most often different for the two sexes”.<sup>38</sup> There is also a difference between general claims such as “females that care and males that waste”,<sup>39</sup> and making the same claim but adding “most often”<sup>40</sup> in front of it; doing so allows for a more variable understanding of sexual difference in behavior.

In one of the textbooks, sexual difference in sexual motivation is described as follows:

Males have high sexual motivation and react more easily than females on sexual signals. As mentioned a male turkey can try to mate with a briefcase, which would hardly be expected by a female. The female demands stronger signals to react and is more selective for which signals she reacts to.<sup>41</sup>

This statement is in line with the dominant paradigm’s criticized assumption of generally eager males and coy females, discussed previously.

While it is often ascertained that females choose, there are very few descriptions of females actually choosing; one is an account of an experiment in which the tails of widow-birds were

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<sup>37</sup> Henriksson, 2003. One might think that these two statements are contradictory, but they reflect two different mechanisms by which sexual selection may act to produce sex differences, such as horns and ornaments.

<sup>38</sup> Karlsson et al., 2005.

<sup>39</sup> Peinerud et al., 2006.

<sup>40</sup> Henriksson, 2003; Karlsson et al., 2005; Ljunggren et al., 2007.

<sup>41</sup> Karlsson et al., 2005.

experimentally prolonged or shortened, which found that females preferred long tails.<sup>42</sup> This observation leads to the next theme, that of describing males as generally active and females as passive.

### Active males/passive females

The portrayal of males as inherently active and females as inherently passive represents a deep cultural dichotomy, especially pronounced in Western societies.<sup>43</sup> Janne Karlsson et al. write, concerning birds: “Among species in which one partner has to guard the nest while the other makes flights to eat, the male often *mates with the female* when they return”<sup>44</sup> [my emphasis]. Concerning sea elephants: “It is almost only the dominant males that mate”. Another example: “Since practically all females among both birds and mammals *become fertilized*, from an evolutionary perspective it is more beneficial for a weaker individual to be a female than a male”<sup>45</sup> [my emphasis]. Though in many species males do have larger variation in reproductive success among themselves than females, many species also show similar patterns for males and females.<sup>46</sup> Furthermore, there are mammal species in which dominant females suppress reproduction of sub-dominants in the group (e.g. wolfs, primates<sup>47</sup>), hence not all females get the chance to mate or reproduce. Similarly, Karlsson et al. describe female mating in passive terms: “The male that manages all this [fighting for a territory etc.] gets accepted and *is allowed to fertilize* the

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<sup>42</sup> Karlsson et al., 2005.

<sup>43</sup> Haraway, 1986.

<sup>44</sup> Karlsson et al., 2005.

<sup>45</sup> Ljunggren et al., 2007.

<sup>46</sup> Tang-Martinez, 2010.

<sup>47</sup> e.g. Abbot, 1984.

female's eggs"<sup>48</sup> [my emphasis]. In line with this, females are generally described as passive in narratives of sexual selection: "Males fight intensively among each other [...] dominant males hold a harem of females. Almost only the dominant males mate".<sup>49</sup> However, one figure illustrates how females may influence mating: "A sea elephant female that mates with a male wobbles her body back and forth and screams loudly. A male with higher rank that hears the screams chases away the intruder and mates with the female himself".<sup>50</sup> Even when female choice is exemplified, the example illustrates a mating system with pronounced male domination.

#### Anisogamy as a general explanation for sex differences in behavior

Four of the textbooks refer to the sexual differences in the size of the sex cells (anisogamy) in order to explain behavior in more or less deterministic terms: "Because the sex cells among males and females differ the evolutionary strategies in the game has become different", and "the difference in size and amount of sex cells has through the course of evolution contributed to increase the differences between the sexes among many animals".<sup>51</sup> Again, a small inclusion of "at least partly" makes a considerable difference in how static sexual difference is perceived to be: "Much behavior can at least partly be explained by the male's sperm being much smaller and not as costly to produce as the female's egg cells".<sup>52</sup> "For a female it is a large cost in the form of energy to produce eggs. A male's sperm are "cheaper" to produce and therefore he can afford considerably more sex cells

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<sup>48</sup> Peinerud et al., 2006.

<sup>49</sup> Karlsson et al., 2005.

<sup>50</sup> Karlsson et al., 2005.

<sup>51</sup> Peinerud et al., 2006.

<sup>52</sup> Björndahl et al., 2007.

than the female”.<sup>53</sup> Janne Karlsson et al. refer to the high cost of reproduction for females producing eggs, gestating and lactating, and to the importance of carefully choosing mates, compared to males who can mate with many at a small cost.<sup>54</sup> By relying heavily on mammalian examples in order to make generalizations about animal behavior (see choice of animal species below), the described pattern becomes biased toward female care and parental investment. In scientific discussions, however, the degree to which the initial investment in gametes affect subsequent sexual strategies remains contested.<sup>55</sup>

### Parental investment as an explanation for sex differences in behavior

Several of the books refer to the large cost of care, either explicitly or implicitly, using mammalian examples as the basis of the argument. For example: “In order for a female to produce a large amount of surviving offspring the female’s sexual strategy becomes to invest in *quality* of the care of offspring”. “She shall also readily find a male, that can help her with this”. “Since the male’s production of sperm does not require much energy it is instead the number of females he can fertilize during a lifetime that determines how many offspring he can get. The male therefore invests in *quantity*”.<sup>56</sup> Here the implicit assumption is that we are dealing with mammals, or birds. Among animal species overall, however, few undertake any care of their offspring. The (generalized) female is assumed to care, and the male to “help” with that caring, a description colored by cultural assumptions about the gendered responsibility to care. In

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<sup>53</sup> Henriksson, 2003.

<sup>54</sup> Karlsson et al., 2005.

<sup>55</sup> e.g. Ellingsen and Robles, 2012.

<sup>56</sup> Peinerud et al., 2006.

contrast, one textbook explains that: “Parents put a lot of energy into reproduction and care of the offspring”<sup>57</sup> – a gender-neutral description which does not reflect culturally specific gender stereotypes.

### Mating system theory in the textbooks

Polygamy and monogamy are mentioned in all the textbooks, and all but one mention both polygyny (a male mating with several females) and polyandry (a female mating with several males). In one textbook, the term polygamy is described as, and only in the context of, “a male has several females”.<sup>58</sup> Polygamous literally means “many marriage”, and so is a gender-neutral term. Hence, while it is not strictly incorrect to use it in the way described above, the opposite pattern – of females having relationships with several males – is made invisible in this particular example.

“Polygamy among mammals” is often contrasted with “monogamy among birds”.<sup>59</sup> Recent decades of DNA-testing have revealed that few birds are mating monogamously, and although many birds live in social monogamy, the majority of them mate numerous times with several partners.<sup>60</sup>

Examples illustrating mating system theory to be found in the textbooks include a description of bee-eaters (birds) in which males defend territories with resources upon which the females depend, and females who mate with territorial males.<sup>61</sup> Another example is the polygyny threshold model, describing how females may prefer to mate with an already mated male if his territory

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<sup>57</sup> Ljunggren et al., 2007.

<sup>58</sup> Peinerud et al., 2006.

<sup>59</sup> Björndahl et al., 2007; Henriksson, 2003.

<sup>60</sup> Griffiths, Owens and Thuman, 2002.

<sup>61</sup> Karlsson et al., 2005.

provides more resources than that of another, unmated male.<sup>62</sup> In accordance with the gender criticism of the scientific accounts, these descriptions depict females as passive resources for males, while many other examples show that active interactions between females and males result in the mating system.<sup>63</sup>

### Extra-pair paternity/Certainty of paternity as explanation for sexual behavior

Several books mention how DNA-analysis has revealed both frequent female multiple mating and the ways in which males ensure their paternity, such as by guarding females. For example, “Eurasian Sparrow hawk [pairs] mate several hundred times during one breeding season. In this way he ensures that he is the one to become father of the pair's young”.<sup>64</sup> For perhaps obvious reasons, this category of explanations is rather male biased, which is not necessarily wrong. However, while they are all described from a male perspective of guarding females or ensuring high levels of paternity by other means, there are other examples one might choose, such as female aggressive behavior to keep other females from laying eggs in their nests, i.e. strategies for maternity assurance.<sup>65</sup>

### Alternative reproductive tactics

Alternative mating tactics are described in three of the five textbooks, for example: “There are also males, often younger, that choose to prowl around, court and fertilize females that have already formed a pair with a male”.<sup>66</sup> This wording is rather

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<sup>62</sup> Karlsson et al., 2005.

<sup>63</sup> Gowaty, 1997a.

<sup>64</sup> Peinerud et al., 2006.

<sup>65</sup> Gowaty and Wagner, 1988.

<sup>66</sup> Peinerud et al., 2006.

negative and frames alternative reproductive tactics as a behavior outside of the norm. It also suggests the male plays the active part while females have no influence over mating. Extra-pair matings and alternative reproductive tactics are often described in culturally loaded terms (see anthropomorphic terminology below) such as young males who “prowl around”,<sup>67</sup> and are hence called “sneaky fuckers”.<sup>68</sup> Similarly, female Great Reed warblers are described as having “casual relations”,<sup>69</sup> which has a negative connotation, being suggestive of promiscuity.

Other examples of how alternative reproductive tactics are described include: “Large frog males attract females more than small ones. But the latter have a trick [...] to keep themselves in the vicinity of the large male that attracts most females”. “The ‘sneaky fuckers’ may then fertilize the eggs”.<sup>70</sup> In the scientific literature, “sneakers” is the common terminology; I have never before seen “sneaky fuckers” employed in a scientific context, and indeed the term turns up no hits on Web of Science, but a search for “sneakers” resulted in 181 matches.

### *Counter-examples*

That sexual behavior can be modified by environmental factors (for example, when male frogs adjust their song to predation pressure and female density<sup>71</sup>), is one instance of what I identify as counter-examples to the traditional generalizations of competing males and choosy females. These are examples that disrupt the presentation of strict patterns for male and female

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<sup>67</sup> Peinerud et al., 2006.

<sup>68</sup> Ljunggren et al., 2007; “Sneaky fuckers” is written in English in the original text.

<sup>69</sup> Ljunggren et al., 2007.

<sup>70</sup> Ljunggren et al., 2007.

<sup>71</sup> Karlsson et al., 2005.

sexual strategies. Similarly, Anders Henriksson describes how male singing abilities differ between two toad species depending on female density in the area and length of the mating season.<sup>72</sup> Furthermore, Janne Karlsson et al. discuss the phenomenon of members other than a social pair providing care for young (so called “helpers”) and mention that some insects reproduce through eggs developing into new individuals without fertilization.

Gunnar Björndahl et al. give examples of caring males in some fishes and birds, and point out that, among many fishes, neither sex care for young. Lars Ljunggren et al. mention that polyandrous females are often larger than males, that female cuckoos perform egg dumping, and that in praying mantis and spider species, the male can be eaten by the female during mating and thereby provide resources for the offspring. Inga-Lill Peinerud et al. observe that both males and females may abandon a partner with a clutch of eggs in their nest.<sup>73</sup> Hence, all textbooks provide one or more counter-examples to the main narrative (table 1).

### *General questions of representation*

In this section I consider the choice of animal examples, illustrations, anthropomorphism and value judgments in the descriptions, as well as the lack of examples of sexualities other than heterosexuality.

#### Choice of animal species

Three of the five books take mammals as an implicit starting point for discussing sex differences in sexual strategies among

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<sup>72</sup> Henriksson, 2003.

<sup>73</sup> Peinerud et al., 2006.



animals. This leads to an emphasis of female caring in relation to what is the most common pattern in animals overall, namely to not care for the offspring. The diversity of species per textbook illustrates how the authors have attempted to present diversity in this particular context (see table 1). Clearly, the overrepresentation of mammals or pair-bonding birds, especially in two books, does not provide an accurate or even a thorough understanding of the diversity of animals' sexual strategies.

### Choice of illustrations

In Inga-Lill Peinerud et al.'s textbook, there are two illustrations for this section, both of pair-bonding birds, namely a pair of bullfinches accompanied by the caption “the female that chooses, the male that displays”, and a pair of swans “that often live in a life-long relationship and therefore it has not been as important for the male to put extra resources on external attributes as bright colors”.<sup>74</sup> In this book, the choice of examples mirrors a (human) cultural norm of opposite-sex pair-bonding species in which (by the descriptions in the textbook) females care by default, while males may or may not choose to care. All the other textbooks have illustrated both polygamous and monogamous examples, and various other examples, while one textbook is also illustrated with diagrams (for details see table 1). The choice of illustrations probably reflects whether the authors are aiming to illustrate diversity or offering a general portrayal of sexual strategies.

### Anthropomorphic terminology

Generally, within the sciences, it is considered erroneous to use

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<sup>74</sup> Peinerud et al., 2006.

anthropomorphic<sup>75</sup> terminology to describe animal behavior, since to do so allegedly departs from the objective ideal of scientific work. Scientific literature is not devoid of anthropomorphic terminology, however, so in many cases the textbook terminology follows scientific convention. As Eileen Crist has shown, the behavioral sciences have contained two contradictory traditions: the tradition of natural history, to which Darwin belonged, which often used anthropomorphic terminology to describe animal behavior, and the subsequent classical ethology tradition in which such terminology was regarded unscientific.<sup>76</sup> Yet, others have argued that anthropomorphic terminology is related to the human capacity for feeling empathy with animals and hence should not be assumed to always be negative.<sup>77</sup> With the young audience in mind, it is especially important to reflect upon how anthropomorphizing affects their views of what is “natural” human behavior, such as common references to human forms of child care as observed in nonhuman animals: “father of the children”, “carrying a fetus”, “single father”.<sup>78</sup> These wordings, combined with value judgments following societal expectations of females to care, and notions that male caring is optional (see above and below), has the effect of mirroring and reproducing societal norms in accounts of animal behavior.

Other textbooks use “harem”, “betray”, “nuptial gifts”, “childhood”, “casual relation”, and “prowl around”, many of which have sexual connotations and give value-laden meanings to the descriptions, especially those of sexual relationships

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<sup>75</sup> Anthropomorphism is the “attribution of human motivation, characteristics, or behavior to inanimate objects, animals, or natural phenomena” ([www.thefreedictionary.com](http://www.thefreedictionary.com)).

<sup>76</sup> Crist, 1999.

<sup>77</sup> Libell, 2004/2009.

<sup>78</sup> Peinerud et al., 2006.

outside of a social pair. There is one textbook in which I did not find any anthropomorphic terminology, namely Henriksson's "Biologi Kurs A".<sup>79</sup>

Yet another example of anthropomorphic language is the description that: "One might say that four different roles have crystallized among males/females: faithful and unfaithful males, faithful and unfaithful females".<sup>80</sup> Biologists use the same terminology of fidelity/faithfulness/cuckoldry, but this use has also been criticized within the behavioral sciences.<sup>81</sup> Moreover, the question is whether it is appropriate to simplify animal behavior by categorizing males and females into four roles depending on their fidelity to their partner. What does the term "role" imply here?

#### Value judgment of male and female behavior

Deserting a partner with eggs in the nest is described in positive terms for males who "of course readily seek out another female as quickly as possible" and this "has been beneficial from a genetic point of view". The same behavior in females is described in negative terms involving the attribution of blame: "[when she leaves] the male has to choose between caring for the young himself or letting them perish", and "in this way even the female can increase the number of offspring somewhat". This is a notably extreme example of how cultural conceptions of male promiscuity and female caring are inscribed onto animals in the textbooks' accounts. From a scientific point of view, the male and the female increase their fitness equally, and their behavior is just as beneficial from a genetic standpoint. This is the only example

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<sup>79</sup> Henriksson, 2003.

<sup>80</sup> Peinerud et al., 2006.

<sup>81</sup> Gowaty, 1982.

in which these value judgments are so salient (but see the section of anthropomorphic terminology for more subtle examples).

### Diversity of sexual behavior

Only one of the textbooks mentions non-heterosexual sexual behavior, namely male frogs mounting both sexes. This same-sex interaction occurs because males are unable to distinguish the sex of other individuals until they emit sounds, which only males do.<sup>82</sup> I do not claim that this is untrue, but it is remarkable that there are no other accounts of same-sex sexual behavior in the textbooks. In the scientific literature, same-sex sexual behavior has often been described as abnormal, arising from mistakes, or renamed in order to avoid sexual implications – all reasons why it took a comparatively long period of time before the extent of such behavior to become known among biologists in general.<sup>83</sup> Gunnar Björndahl et al. even write that: “Even if all behavior aims at increasing the survival ability and carrying the genes on [to the next generation] it is especially obvious when it comes to the animals’ different mating behavior”. Thus, they express the (criticized) assumption that every behavior is adaptive.<sup>84</sup> This expression is especially noteworthy as it ignores the diversity of mating behavior, such as same-sex sexual behavior. Another book states that “reproduction is among those urges that are totally governed by instincts”.<sup>85</sup> This wording suggests that sexual strategies are genetically determined and hence fixed, which is greatly misleading.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Henriksson, 2003.

<sup>83</sup> Bagemihl, 1999.

<sup>84</sup> For a critical perspective see e.g. Gould and Lewontin, 1979.

<sup>85</sup> Ljunggren et al., 2007.

<sup>86</sup> See for example a chapter summarizing mate choice flexibility in relation to ecological and social circumstances: Ah-King, 2010.

## Discussion

Current Swedish biology textbooks describe female and male sexual behavior as generally dichotomous and mutually exclusive: males compete, showing their ornaments and abilities, while females choose and care for the offspring. Although these generalizations may be in accordance with scientific consensus of general patterns in nature, females caring for offspring is a generalization based on the behavior of certain species, especially mammals. The most common pattern among animals overall is to not take any care of offspring, and among fishes it is common for males to care (Gunnar Björndahl et al. do point out that among many fishes neither sex care for their young). Overall the textbooks display a male-biased focus on male activity and male ornaments/weapons/strategies which, nevertheless, reflects the scientific literature.<sup>87</sup>

All the textbooks provide one or more counter-examples to these descriptions, and open up for a more varied view of sexual strategies as varying between species as well as being also dependent on ecological circumstances. This approach is an effective way of providing insight into nature's diversity. The number of animal species used as examples gives a hint as to whether the authors have maintained this provision of insight as a goal in their descriptions. Relying on bird and mammal examples alone allows for only a very limited view of female and male sexual behavior. Excessive simplification gives the impression that there is a lawfulness to how females and males behave, when in fact scientists are trying to make sense of, and often making generalizing explanations for, an immense diversity.

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<sup>87</sup> Fausto-Sterling, Gowaty and Zuk, 1997.

Furthermore, all descriptions of animal sexual behavior are focused on reproduction, and none of the textbooks mention the research of recent decades which shows enormous diversity in sexual behavior among animals.<sup>88</sup> This selective exclusion, combined with adaptationist claims such as: “Even if all behavior aims at increasing the survival ability and carrying the genes on [to the next generation] it is especially obvious when it comes to the animals different mating behavior”<sup>89</sup> and “reproduction is among those urges that are totally governed by instincts” designate all non-reproductive sexual behavior as abnormal. These descriptions reflect the heteronormative assumptions built into the Darwinian evolutionary theoretical framework combined with reductionist, adaptationist claims.

Textbooks are inherently oriented towards consensual understandings of current knowledge, since including the most recent and most controversial research findings could render editions redundant as new findings continue to be reported. It is perhaps not a coincidence, then, that there is such a thing as “the textbook version” – the simplified, conventional and perhaps outdated version. In this light, given the practicalities of textbook production and publication, it may seem unfair to criticize the textbook authors for simplifications and generalizations. However, writing textbooks involves the power of deciding what knowledge should be included and excluded. Furthermore, what is taught in most schools is guided by the content of the textbook.<sup>90</sup> At the same time, textbook authors have to relate to the Swedish curriculum goals of gender equity.<sup>91</sup> In the preceding analysis I have sought to distinguish between what is normative

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<sup>88</sup> Bagemihl, 1999; Bailey and Zuk, 2009; Sommer and Vasey, 2006.

<sup>89</sup> Björndahl et al., 2007.

<sup>90</sup> Snyder and Broadway, 2004.

<sup>91</sup> Lpg2011.

within animal behavioral studies and what may be due to the popularization of animal behavior in the textbooks. I have also provided a feminist critique of conventional wisdom in the animal behavioral sciences, such as the over-representation of the evolution of male behavior and ornaments, and the under-representation of sexual selection in females.<sup>92</sup> It might seem unfair also to criticize the use of anthropomorphic terminology, which is commonly used within the scientific literature, but it is important to note that within the scientific literature the term usually has a well-defined meaning that differs from its everyday meaning. The use of terms such as nuptial gifts, casual relations, father, parents and harem are loaded with culturally-specific meanings and also encourage the drawing of parallels between animal and human behavior. Furthermore, there is ongoing criticism within the scientific community of the use of such terms.<sup>93</sup>

Although this analysis reveals some problematic aspects from a gender and queer perspective, it also provides examples of solutions: showcasing diversity; avoiding stereotypes of female and male behavior; explaining how behavior varies in relation to ecological circumstances, and using gender-neutral language such as “parents invest in their offspring”, and “different species have different sexual systems”. When seeking to include examples of natural diversity across species within textbooks, there are pitfalls, one of which is that the diversity described may mirror normative understanding. For example, the description of one counter-example in particular, in which abandoning a nest is described in terms of completely different values depending on whether the subject is male or female, strengthens stereotypes instead of broadening perspectives. These portrayals may have a

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<sup>92</sup> Gowaty, 1997a; Hrdy, 1981.

<sup>93</sup> e.g. Gowaty, 1982; Karlsson Green and Madjidian, 2011.

large impact on what students perceive to be “natural” male and female behavior.

What does it mean to teenagers to read that males naturally have higher sexual motivation than females? Martha McCaughey has shown how projections of the cave man have been used by people in motivating male sexual aggression against females, behaving in unruly, brutal, and asocial ways.<sup>94</sup> Additionally, scientific findings of sexual difference have been distorted and misappropriated, which has affected Western society’s collective understanding of gender roles.<sup>95</sup> Furthermore, the dominant paradigm’s contentions of eager, indiscriminate males and coy, choosy females are not in accordance with current evidence of females’ active roles in sexual interactions.<sup>96</sup> Females mate multiply in many species and have been shown to overtly initiate and seek matings.<sup>97</sup> Indeed, a rather depressing picture of female sexuality emerges from reading recurring, male-focused descriptions, and in addition, there is one example of a female sea elephant screaming when a male mates with her, leading to a higher-ranked male chasing away the first male and mating with her instead. The text does not report whether females ever do not scream during mating, or whether they may not approve of any mating they are subjected to. Although animal examples are not meant to be taken as mirroring human behavior, it is nevertheless useful to ponder what picture emerges of female and male sexuality in nature. In contrast, it is generally known that it is impossible for male butterflies to mate with a female unless she accepts to mate.

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<sup>94</sup> McCaughey, 2009.

<sup>95</sup> Eliot, 2011.

<sup>96</sup> Tang-Martinez, 2010.

<sup>97</sup> e.g. Hrdy, 1981; Lawton et al., 1997; Small, 1993; Tang-Martinez, 2010.



In what sense does it matter that sexual behavior in animals is described almost only in a heterosexual context by secondary school textbooks? The silence and omission of variation in non-reproductive and non-heterosexual sexual behavior does impact on students' understanding of biology. Our understanding of biology, in turn, affects our social identity-making and often shapes discussions about, for example, having children or not, and sexual orientation. The belief that homosexuality "is unnatural" is one of the misconceptions many people have to deal with on a daily basis. Of course, morality should not be based on arguments of how things are in nature, because it is perfectly possible to argue for any stance depending on which natural examples one chooses and which perspective one adopts. For example, all the four possible combinations of claims about the incidence of homosexuality among humans and animals have been used: homosexuality among humans is unnatural/refined because it does not occur among animals, or homosexuality among humans is natural/beastly because it does occur among animals.<sup>98</sup> However, teaching about sexual diversity among nonhuman animals is one way to counter claims of homosexuality's "unnaturalness."

It is worthwhile here to recall that the term "heterosexuality" was coined only a little over one hundred years ago to describe sexual acts between a man and a woman that did not aim to result in reproduction, a practice which was considered by physicians at the time as a perversion that required a medical cure.<sup>99</sup>

### *A norm-critical perspective of sexual selection*

Biology still describes, explains and generalizes sexual behavior

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<sup>98</sup> Sommer and Vasey, 2006.

<sup>99</sup> Katz, 1995.

in stereotypic terms of what is the most common behavior for females and males. The language used expresses the norms of biological discourse by pointing out certain behavior or patterns as *alternative or reversed*.<sup>100</sup> Hence, such behavior is viewed as an exception to a general pattern while dividing several continua of behavior into conventional or reversed “sex-roles”.<sup>101</sup>

Recently, it has been suggested that sex should be viewed as a dynamic interaction between genetic sets and environments, as illustrated by multiple evolutionary examples of changes between genetic and environmental sex determination, as well as variability within individual development.<sup>102</sup> This is in line with recent developments in the field of ecological developmental biology.<sup>103</sup> Many animals change sex in relation to environmental or social circumstances. Mate choice strategies are flexible in relation to predation risk and density of potential partners (as pointed out in one of the textbooks), parasite load, age, and experience.<sup>104</sup> These findings should be incorporated in textbooks and teaching in order to provide a more contemporary and inclusive education for secondary school students.

## Recommendations

Why limit descriptions and discussions of sexual behavior to their reproductive functions? Recent developments in biology have shown that there are numerous other functions of sexual behavior, such as social bonding, affiliation, and conflict resolution.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Ah-King, 2009.

<sup>101</sup> Ah-King, 2013; Ah-King and Ahnesjö, 2013; Ah-King and Nylin, 2010.

<sup>102</sup> Ah-King and Nylin, 2010.

<sup>103</sup> Gilbert and Epel, 2009.

<sup>104</sup> Jennions and Petrie, 1997.

<sup>105</sup> Bagemihl, 1999; Bailey and Zuk, 2009; Small, 1993.

Current textbooks describe female and male behavior as if they were distinctly different and mutually exclusive. It is important to give students knowledge of variation and overlapping distributions and to emphasize that an average represents a summary of data rather than what is “normal”.<sup>106</sup>

Even if the textbooks at hand are lacking information about variations in sexuality, there is much information available elsewhere about variation in sex and sexual behavior in animals. These are topics that usually generate interest, so why not develop student exercises involving exploration of sexual diversity among animals? Several chapters in Bagemihl’s *Biological Exuberance: Animal Homosexuality and Natural Diversity*, for example, can be used to provide historical accounts and reviews over evolutionary explanations of variation in sexual behavior. Some museums have produced exhibitions about variation in animal sexual behavior, such as “Against Nature?” at the Natural History Museum in Oslo<sup>107</sup> which has ambulated around Europe in the subsequent years. Sociologist Myra Hird describes how her social science students often take sex as an unchanging biological given and that they rely heavily on biological explanations of sex differences. She then describes how she problematizes their understandings of sex as static – through showing animal and human diversity (asexual reproduction, sex-changing and intersexuality), and introducing the perspective of science as a cultural system.<sup>108</sup>

I urge textbook authors to deepen their awareness of how gender and heteronormativity bias shapes the representation of animal

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<sup>106</sup> Condit, 2008.

<sup>107</sup> Natural History Museum in Oslo, 2006.

<sup>108</sup> Hird, 2003.

behavior, and to describe such behavior with care, care for what knowledge about biology means for the identity-making of young people. These textbooks have power over how biology and what is “natural” comes to be perceived in society at large. Feminist critiques of male bias in the natural sciences apply to science education too. Furthermore, as the analysis shows, simplifications do not have to be over-generalizations; variability and natural diversity are often more interesting than those examples sought out merely to mirror a human, pair-bonding, heterosexual, males-competing-and-females-caring norm.

In addition, gaining knowledge about variability in sex, sexual behavior and sexual characteristics, such as genitalia, includes not only awareness of deviations from norms, but the realization that we are all included in these continua. In my own teaching practices I aim to destabilize dichotomous conceptions of sex, as illustrated by a students’ take-home-message from one of my lectures: “[I learnt] that sex is not two poles but a scale and that I cannot know my sex”. This is not to imply that I deny sex differences or categorizations of women and men, but rather should be seen as a result of a discussion of intersexuality<sup>109</sup> and the insight that some intersex people realize their condition rather late in life. Hence, my goal is to problematize understandings of biological sex and to encourage students to adopt a critical attitude to knowledge itself.

## Conclusions

Overall, the textbooks offer dichotomous descriptions of females and males, and they are heteronormative in that they all describe sexual behavior in only the context of opposite-sex interactions and reproduction. However, there are also examples of openings

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<sup>109</sup> Dreger, 2008.

for understanding biological (heterosexual) diversity and sexual strategies as also dependent on ecological circumstances.

Much remains to be done before current textbooks will include recent developments in the understanding of sex and sexual behavior in animals. Changing stereotypical portrayals of animal sexual behavior into a more variable view of sex and sexuality will benefit students and provide a more accurate basis for the development of these issues.

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Biologi A: Peinerud, Lager-Nyqvist and Lundegård 2001: “Sexual strategies” p. 133-135.

Biologi A med Naturkunskap: Karlsson, Krigsman, Molander and Wickbom 2005: “Sexual systems” p. 258-264.

Biologi Kurs A: Henriksson 2003: “Sexual selection” p. 61, Under Behaviors and life strategies: illustration p. 154, “Birdsong” p. 163, “Different kinds of territories” p. 164, “Fight for a territory” p. 165, “Partner choice and relations” p. 166, “Toad seeks partner” p. 167.

Liv i utveckling Biologi A: Ljunggren, Söderberg and Åhlin 2007: Under Evolutionary ecology and ethology: “ornaments” p. 63, “To invest in the offspring” p. 64, “Polyandry” p. 66, “Mate guarding” p. 66, “Nuptial gifts” p. 67-68, “Polyandrous females” p. 67.

Spira Biologi A: Björndahl, Landgren and Thyberg 2007: Under Behavioral ecology: “Reproduction” p. 211-212, “Different mating systems” p 212-213, “Summary” p. 214.

### Table 1.

Table 1. A summary of the analysis, themes and examples from the different biology textbooks.

	Peinerud et al. 2006	Björndahl et al. 2007	Henriksson 2003	Ljunggren et al. 2007	Karlsson et al. 2005
<b>Males compete, females choose and care</b>	Yes, "females that care and males that waste" "females that choose, males that display"	Does not mention male competition; implicitly uses mammals when describing general	Yes, bird song attracts partners and/or deters other males from entering his territory;	Yes, "Most often the most ostentatious, largest and strongest males win the struggle to get to mate" "males may also invest in the offspring by participating in	Yes, "The pre-requisites are most often different for the two sexes" Female choice of song, plumage,

		patterns of sex differences: "males do not invest much in each offspring" "female... carry a fetus" and need to be careful in partner choice	"females most often choose partners"	the care"	male feeding. Male bullfrogs occupy territories, sea elephant males fight intensively with each other
Males active, females passive	"To show that he will do as a father [...] perhaps first builds the pair's nest and fights for a territory" "The male that manages all this gets accepted and is allowed to fertilize the female's eggs."		"...the males are allowed to fertilize the eggs"	"Since practically all females among both birds and mammals become fertilized..."	"Among species in which one partner has to guard the nest while the other make flights to eat, the male often mates with the female when they return" [Sea elephants:] "It is almost only the dominant males that mate."
Anisogamy as general explanation for sex differences in behavior	Yes, "because the sex cells among males and females differ the evolutionary strategies in the game has become different." "females invest in quality of the care of offspring" "it is the number of females he can fertilize during a lifetime that determines how many offspring he	"Much behavior can at least partly be explained by the male's sperm being much smaller and not as costly to produce as the female's egg cells."	"For a female it is a large cost in the form of energy to produce eggs. A male's sperm are "cheaper" to produce and therefore he can afford considerably more sex cells than the female."		"The female uses a lot of energy to produce the eggs" "In total there is a large investment by the female. The male produces a very large amount of sperm to a relatively low "cost". A male can fertilize one female one day and another female the next."

	can get. The male therefore invest in quantity."				
<b>Parental investment</b>	"In order for a female to produce a large amount of surviving offspring the female's sexual strategy becomes to invest in <i>quality</i> in the care of offspring"	"it takes a lot of resources to produce big eggs and carrying a fetus"	"the female... that can reproduce only at maybe a single occasion per year, has more to loose from a bad mate choice than the male has" Implicitly long-lived animals, perhaps mammals	"Parents put a lot of energy into reproduction and care of the offspring"	High cost of reproduction for females - more important to choose with care than for males who can mate with many at a small cost.
<b>Extra-pair paternity</b>	"Through genetic tests of young birds, ... one has showed that a clutch of young do not always have the same genes as the male in the family" "this could be the explanation for some pairs of birds ... to mate several hundreds of times during one breeding season"	"The male can never be sure of the paternity"		"The viper female [...] mates with several males during her mating season.... the males have to compete to mate with the female, then their sperm have to compete to first reach the eggs" "DNA-fingerprinting [...] can reveal the identity of the father"; In the Great Reed warbler (bird), females have "casual relations"	DNA-analysis has shown that "up to a third of the young among some bird species have other fathers than the mother's partner"
<b>Certainty of paternity</b>	Yes, "The Eurasian Sparrowhawk mates several hundred times during one breeding season. In	"The male can never be sure of the paternity. The more probable it is that he is the father, the more he		"male birds often guard their female especially strictly during the days before egg laying"	"There are several strategies to ensure certainty of paternity for the young he will help bringing up" (birds) "to mate often"

	this way he ensures that he is the one to become father of the pair's young."	performs care of the offspring."			"to guard his female"
<b>Alternative reproductive strategies</b>	"there are also males, often younger, that choose to prowl around, court and fertilize females that have already formed a pair with a male"			"Sneaky fuckers" among char fishes	bullfrogs, territorial males and small non-calling satellite males. Sneaking male sea elephants.
<b>Polygamy</b>	Described as "a male that has several females"	polygyny, polyandry	"Polygamy among mammals" large size difference correlated with polygyny and intense male competition	polygyny, polyandry large size difference correlated with polygyny/polyandry	"Polygamy among mammals" Polygamy as either polygyny or polyandry
<b>Monogamy</b>	"for animals living in monogamy it is not as important for the male to invest in [...] external attributes"	"monogamy is quite common among birds"	"monogamy among birds"	Not mentioned explicitly, but "males living in crowds usually have larger testicles that monogamous males" and "it is important for a male to make sure that the female does not betray him."	"90 % of birds are monogamous" but also includes an example of extra-pair paternity
<b>Counter-examples</b>	"Sometimes [...] after the female has laid her eggs, the female leaves the nest"	Males caring in some fishes and birds; among many fishes neither sex care	Contrasting two toad species, one with intense male competition and one with exaggerated male singing abilities depending on female density	Polyandrous females are often larger than their males; female cuckoos egg dumping; in praying mantis and spiders the male can become the nuptial gift and be eaten by the female during mating; among birds few species have penises.	Some insects reproduce through eggs developing into new individuals without fertilisation; helpers at the nest (caring individuals that are not parents). Male frogs adjust song to predation

			and length of mating season		pressure and female density.
<b>Animal taxa</b>	Implicitly mammals, Birds, 4 species	Implicitly mammals, 5 birds, red deer,	Implicitly mammals, 12 species of birds, mammals generally and 1 primate, 2 ungulates, sea lions, plus snakes, 3 toads,	6 species of birds, hedgehog, giant deer, red deer, lions, opossum, cuckoo, frogs, salmon, 4 insects, spiders.	6 Mammals, 7 birds, 2 frogs, 1 insect
<b>Illustrations</b>	A pair of bullfinches; a pair of swans with eggs	Two swans; A male red deer and two females.	displaying peacock; male and female sea lion; pair of frogs; male Willow warbler attacking male model; male vipers wrestling; a pair of stork; Hamadrias baboons; male toads in a struggle for a female; chirping toad	Mating seagulls. Polygynous capercaillie male with females. A big and a small male char about to mate with a female. Mecoptera (insect) presenting nuptial gift and mating with female.	Singing starling; male feeding female Arctic tern; diagram of male sand martins guarding females during egg laying; lekking male black grouse; diagram of number of females per male Paradise Whydahs depending on tail length; diagram of number of surviving embryos of frogs depending on male body length; diagram of number of matings for male sea elephants depending on rank; fighting male sea elephants; a pair of mating sea elephants, in which the female is



<b>Antropomorphic terminology</b>	father of the children, carrying a fetus, single father, prowl around	childhood, adolescence, harem, parents, carrying a fetus, father of the children		harem, parents, betray, nuptial gift, casual relation	screaming guards his own female, harem
<b>Different value judgement of male and female behavior</b>	Yes, deserting a partner with a clutch of eggs is described in positive terms for males, and negative for females				
<b>Sexual behavior outside of reproduction</b>	No	No, "Even if all behavior aims at increasing the survival ability and carry the genes on it is especially obvious when it comes to the animals' different mating behaviors."	"Male frogs cannot distinguish females from males. [...] males mount both males and females", it is then described how mounted males emit a sound whereby they are released.	No, "reproduction is among those urges that are totally governed by instincts"	No

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## Two dads / two moms: Defying and affirming the mom-dad family. The case of same-gender families in Slovenia

*Ana Sobočan*

'F'amily' remains a site of ideological struggles. What constitutes a family and who can become/have/define a family is a matter of ongoing political and other debates and discourses. These become evident in the programmes of political parties, for example, as well as in the agendas in family legislation and social welfare policies, even in the changes in sociological textbooks, and so forth. Families where two male or female partners are parenting together are simultaneously gaining visibility in the public space (and legislation in certain countries) and their children are becoming central in different discursive practices, where their presumed interests are used in argumentations of (mostly) the opponents and advocates of equal rights for all family constellations. A vast research body of studies about lesbian and gay families (begun in the 1970s) contributes to the visibility and understanding of a variety of forms in which families are created. As Malmquist and Zetterqvist Nelson write, it is 'important to understand "family" as something that is continuously performed – "doing family" – rather than a specific

structure – “the family”.<sup>1</sup> Weeks, Heaphy, and Donovan claim<sup>2</sup> that it is exactly non-heterosexuals who are at the forefront of wider changes to family life, and Haimés and Weiner,<sup>3</sup> for example, write how non-heteronormative family models present an important challenge to the heteronormative model.

The times of transitions and transformations are usually the most interesting because the dynamics of resistance and empowerment in relation to change are most visible. In regard to families where both parents are of the same gender and are in a partnership relationship,<sup>4</sup> Slovenia is one of the countries in such transformative times. Between the commencement of the struggle for equal rights and, subsequently, for the first time explicit opposition to such equality, parents and children from same-gender families are developing strategies for survival in an environment where conflicting and deficient legislation<sup>5</sup> is set against a background of negative public opinion and often very positive interpersonal experiences. This essay will present some of these strategies, drawing on research on the intersection of same-sex families, their children, and the school environment and

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<sup>1</sup> Malmquist and Zetterqvist Nelson, 2013, p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> Weeks, Heaphy, and Donovan, 2001.

<sup>3</sup> Haimés and Weiner, 2000.

<sup>4</sup> I will use the term *same-gender families* in this essay when referring to families where both parents identify with the same gender and are recognized as individuals with the same sex in their environment. Because of their gender identification, parents in these families are also recognized as homosexual (names such as gay, lesbian, rainbow, etc., families are also used elsewhere). Recognizing the vast array of human experience and identities, I will nevertheless in this essay not address, problematize, or discuss these different experiences and identities (and will hence not refer to queer, intersex, transgender, bisexual, etc., identifications), because I will not be interested primarily in the adults' sexuality practices, gender practices, or other practices and identities, but in the experiences and strategies of children whose families don't pass as 'normal' (mom-dad families), because the parents have a recognized same gender.

<sup>5</sup> Parents from same-gender families do not have by far the same rights as different-gender families; nevertheless, there are some children in Slovenia who have two same-gender parents in a legal sense.

homophobia.<sup>6</sup> I will use this research, which aimed at elucidating the school experiences of children from same-gender families (denormalization,<sup>7</sup> homophobia, and the strategies to deal with it), to focus on how parents in same-gender families face and deal with their children's school environment, and I will present the wider context of the struggle for equality and responses to it in Slovenia. I will thus shed light on the current debates relevant for same-gender families in Slovenia and discuss the phenomenon of the moral homophobe, both of which will serve as a framework for understanding the parents' strategies to deal with their children's school environment. Another aim of this essay is to reflect on the research production in relation to children in same-gender families. To frame these discussions, I will first refer to the existing research and research interest related to same-gender families, as well as try to bring attention to how the classic research actually frames the family debates with heteronormativity.

## Researching life in same-gender families

A vast collection of research on non-heterosexual parenting has been growing since the 1980s.<sup>8</sup> Importantly, the majority of this research grounds in, reconfirms, or does not at all challenge the dominant ideas about gender, gender roles, and sexual identity. It is exactly by referring to the mainstream ideas about

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<sup>6</sup> Zaviršek and Sobočan, 2012. The research taking place in Slovenia was part of an EU (Daphne II) funded research study involving researchers from Germany, Sweden, and Slovenia who explored the intersections between society, school, rainbow families, and children from these families (see Streib Brzič and Quadflieg, 2011). The complete research study involved interviews with 34 children from rainbow families, 63 parents from rainbow families, and 30 expert interviews.

<sup>7</sup> Streib and Quadflieg, 2011; Sobočan and Streib, 2013.

<sup>8</sup> For meta-analyses of the research, see, for example, Anderssen et al., 2002; Gartrell and Bos, 2010; Lesbian and Gay Parenting, 2005; Perrin, 2002; Parks, 1998; Stacey and Biblarz, 2001; Tasker, 1999.

‘normality’ that these studies aim to show that empirical data and findings do not confirm the general stereotypes, prejudices, or negative claims about life in families where both parents are of the same sex or/and are not heterosexual. Such research nevertheless has been valuable to an extent in securing more equality and ‘acceptance’ for same-gender families. The research has suggested that children in same-gender families are not experiencing more crises or emotional/mental health troubles than those who grow up in different-sex families,<sup>9</sup> that they are not experiencing more peer violence compared to other children,<sup>10</sup> that their sexual identity is not more often homosexual than in the general population, and that their gender roles (as adequate to the normative model) are clearly defined.<sup>11</sup> Some studies speak of more equal and quality relationships between parents and children in same-gender families in comparison to the ‘average’ different-sex family,<sup>12</sup> and of the quality of the relationship between children and non-biological parents as comparable to relationships between children and biological parents.<sup>13</sup> The research has shown that sexual orientation or identity is not relevant to the benefits and interests of children in their development<sup>14</sup> and that the processes inside the family (for example, the quality of parenting and attachment) importantly influence the child’s development, whereas the structure of the family (for example, the number of parents and their gender and sexual identity) does not. This has been

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<sup>9</sup> For example Chan et al., 1998; Golombok et al., 1983; Patterson, 1994; Tasker and Golombok, 1997; Wainright et al., 2004.

<sup>10</sup> For example Lindsay et al., 2006; Tasker and Golobok, 1997; Vanfraussen et al., 2002.

<sup>11</sup> For example Golombok, 2000; Tasker and Golombok, 1997; Wainright et al., 2004.

<sup>12</sup> For example Brewaeys et al., 1997; Chan et al., 1998a; Flaks et al., 1995; Golombok et al., 1997.

<sup>13</sup> For example Bennett, 2003; Vanfraussen et al., 2002.

<sup>14</sup> For example Ryan-Flood, 2009.

confirmed by various research approaches – research in families where the children and parents are biologically related and in families where children are adopted, as well as research in families where parents identify either as heterosexual or non-heterosexual.<sup>15</sup> One of the more recent research studies that compares families with adoptive and biological parents has shown that the processes in families are more important than the structure of the family: regardless of the sexual identity of parents, the children were prospering the most in families where parents were using effective parenting techniques and were happy in the relationship with their partner.<sup>16</sup>

Hence, all this research production in the field of same-gender families demonstrates the irrelevance of sexual identity in regard to parenting competence and child development. At the same time, it also clearly exhibits a specific research interest in relation to children, childhood, and child development. A larger part of research on non-heteronormative families is focused on researching the anticipated risks for children and the psychosocial consequences for their development and childhoods. The main question that usually seeks to be answered is: is the life with homosexual parents in any way deficient or risky for children? The research interest thus speaks mostly to how scientific epistemologies cannot avoid the demands of heteronormativity.<sup>17</sup> I agree with Hicks that the research interest should actually be distanced from ‘proving the acceptability’ of same-gender

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<sup>15</sup> For example Chan et al., 1998; Erich et al., 2005; Lansford et al., 2001.

<sup>16</sup> Farr et al., 2010.

<sup>17</sup> With heteronormativity I refer to a set of norms, beliefs, and attitudes that prescribe and frame the reality in a way that people belong to either of two genders (male and female; in relation to their biological givens), which involve also ‘natural’ roles in life. In this frame, the appropriate / natural sexual orientation is heterosexuality, and hence the sexual and marital relations are ‘naturally’ between a man and a woman. Heteronormativity thus prescribes alignment of biological sex, gender identity, gender roles, and sexuality.

families towards exploring why certain family forms remain marginalized (socially, legally, etc.) and ostracized, as well as how the discourses of the ‘otherness’ and ‘deficiency’ of these family forms keep being reproduced.<sup>18</sup> In this sense, the most valuable research pays attention to the lived experiences of children (and parents), away from comparability and comparisons (and assessments of the behavioural, psychological, social, and sexual ‘appropriateness’) with the norm, and away from building arguments against the background of ‘otherness’. Such research also holds the promise of stepping away from the victim/success narratives, which currently still dominate the research on non-normative families.

Drawing on the available research on same-gender families (for example, the research I refer to in the previous paragraphs), (at least) two kinds of narratives can be observed: the victim narratives and the success narratives. The victim narratives speak of the ‘inherent difference’ of such families and children, which is potentially a cause for discrimination and violence; they call for political action, but can be used at the same time to strengthen the ‘otherness’ discourses. The success narratives speak of such families and children as ‘absolutely the same as everyone else’ and claim the right to equality against the background of ‘sameness’; they potentially delegitimize positive discrimination and political action, and possibly contribute to heteronormative discourses. Nevertheless, even if these two narratives seem to oppose each other (which would hint at the ‘authenticity’ of one narrative and the ‘falseness’ of the other), they do not exclude each other, because different perspectives of the life-world and experiences of families and children can be legitimately and correctly observed and understood from different viewpoints – the difference in the viewpoint creates a different contextualization

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<sup>18</sup> Hicks, 2005; Sobočan, 2011a.



and does not necessarily reduce the veracity of the findings. The first narrative-set usually speaks of the attitudes in the society/environment (school, peers, etc.) as they affect the child's and family's reality; the second is focused on researching the child's development and achievements. Both narratives are relevant, important for understanding family life and social life; nevertheless, to answer some questions, the first narrative victimizes the children, and the second narrative unifies them – erases their specific experiences. Both narratives reinforce heteronormativity: by incorporating an anticipation and inscription of their 'sameness' or 'otherness' in the research instruments itself.

### **Families: Gender and sexual identity trouble**

The concepts of 'otherness' and 'sameness' speak foremost to how both narratives cannot escape heteronormativity and how they hence reinforce it. The norm of heterosexuality with adjacent gender roles and the binary division between what is normative and non-normative are the grounds, a reference pool for the majority of all interactions.<sup>19</sup> Most research studies until now have measured the factors that influence child development and the childhood life-course<sup>20</sup> (social and family factors: the intertwining of interactions between the child, his/her family, and the environment); these studies are inevitably marked by the contextual viewpoint and normativity that is framing both the researcher's view as well as the responses of the researched.

The alignment of these expectations and offered responses is homosexuality. The sexual identity of the parents (self-identified

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<sup>19</sup> For discussions on this see, for example, Fairclough, 1992, 2003; Moore, 1994; Butler, 1990, 2004; Jackson, 2006.

<sup>20</sup> I present these in Sobočan, 2012; see also Hicks, 2005.

or prescribed) is the focus: many children have two carers of the same gender (mother and grandmother, biological father and mother's new male partner, etc.), and many parents do not practice only heterosexuality; nevertheless, concern is raised primarily in one of these combinations – parents of the same gender who practice homosexuality. Why is this combination particularly alarming and disturbing? Two issues seem to be especially provocative: (visible) homosexuality and the question of the gendered division of labour.

Despite the fact that homosexuality, at least in some Western countries, seems to be less and less pathologized in interpersonal relationships and that homosexual individuals and groups may be less demonized and excluded than they used to be, this kind of 'acceptance' and 'tolerance' in most cultures often still necessitates a silencing of sexual identity and even 'way of life'. Smith,<sup>21</sup> drawing on Britain, for example, wrote about how the 'homosexual citizen' is – in exchange for certain rights – coerced into keeping his or her sexuality confined by the socially and legally defined limits of privacy. Ward and Winstanley,<sup>22</sup> in their research on workplaces in the United Kingdom, use the term 'absent presence' to describe the dynamics of forced silencing among sexual minorities; Švab and Kuhar<sup>23</sup> in Slovenia write about the transparent closet and intimate citizenship<sup>24</sup> to explain consenting to invisibility and silencing of one's own (homo)sexual identity. As Švab and Kuhar claim, homosexuality, at least in Slovenia, is accepted, 'permitted' as long as the sexual activity and identity are limited to private spaces and non-heterosexual environments—that is, away from the public

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<sup>21</sup> Smith, 1995 in Richardson, 2000, p. 269.

<sup>22</sup> Ward and Winstanley, 2003.

<sup>23</sup> Švab and Kuhar, 2005.

<sup>24</sup> Kuhar, 2010.

sphere.<sup>25</sup> Such a tightly closed (even if transparent) bubble, which disables contamination (of the presumably sexually neutral) public space with homosexuality, becomes in the case of same-gender families very fragile and prone to bursting. Even if the majority of the same-gender families involved in the first research study in Slovenia (2006–2008) had positive post-coming out experiences in their interpersonal relationships, the generalized public response was negative.<sup>26</sup> The fear of general visibility and presence of same-gender families, foremost in the legislation, has generated a considerable and loud public opposition against making these citizens/families more equal. The entry of these parents and children into the institution of family (legally and socially) is still unsupported and unwanted in Slovenia.<sup>27</sup>

This ‘interdiction’ is a consequence of not only the negative attitude towards (visible) homosexuality, but also a consequence of the negative attitude towards destabilization of gender roles and division of labour and power. Heimes and Weiner<sup>28</sup> write about three main challenges to the existing social order for same-gender families: ideological (because they are seen to destabilize the fixed gender roles and phantasms about who/what is/can be a mother), structural (because they change the ‘ordinary’ and ‘proper’ family constellation), and biogenetic (reproduction, which used to be exclusively in the domain of the normative family, is no longer limited to heterosexual intercourse, neither to medical interventions). Inclusion of different family forms as legitimate thus signifies foremost a destabilization of the role and the superiority of the image of the normative family – mother

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<sup>25</sup> Švab and Kuhar, 2001.

<sup>26</sup> Sobočan, 2009.

<sup>27</sup> In Slovenia, a public referendum about new family legislation was held at the beginning of 2012 and the result was a denial of the proposed legislation. I referred to this further along in the text.

<sup>28</sup> Heimes and Weiner, 2000.

(who nourishes, cares), father (who disciplines, teaches), and their (biological) children. Despite the fact that such family form is actually a novum – at the forefront only a bit longer than the last two centuries – is its exclusivity of grave importance for maintaining the structures and power relations in society (from the perspective of gender, national, economic, etc., interests)?<sup>29</sup>

As can be observed in public reactions to it, when a minority breaches the forced silencing and thus destabilizes the prescribed gender roles, the initial response of the dominant group that we can most surely expect is a general opposition – with an attempt to strengthen and reinforce the power relations that it shook for a moment.<sup>30</sup> Hence, the response to the first wave of public visibility and demands for equal rights of same-gender parents in Slovenia was reactive. If I started this paper saying that lately, same-gender families and their children are becoming more visible in the public sphere, the newly acquired visibility nevertheless does not erase their absence from ‘family’ – this absence seems to be one of the central characteristics of the life of same-gender families in Slovenia. Namely, families build their legitimacy mostly on two pillars: biological and legal ties. In families where both parents are of the same gender, the children are usually biologically tied to only one parent, and Slovenian legislation does not provide the right to marriage or joint adoption to homosexual partners.<sup>31</sup> Legal non-recognition thus both creates and maintains the cultural attitudes towards non-heterosexual partnerships and families. The first research on

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<sup>29</sup> Coontz, 2000; Goody, 1983.

<sup>30</sup> Sobočan, 2013a.

<sup>31</sup> Currently, there are two families where both male partners are legal parents of the child (both adopted the child abroad, and acquired parental rights there), and six families where the female partner of a biological mother adopted the (fatherless) child. The one-parent adoptions actually took place within a legal ‘loophole’, so it cannot be claimed that the rights of social parents are secured.

same-gender families in Slovenia<sup>32</sup> demonstrated that lack of awareness about the existence of non-heteronormative family forms, along with a domination of biological ties, often leads to posing questions, such as: ‘Whose actually is this kid?’ or ‘Who is the kid’s *real* mother?’. The second research study on same-gender families in Slovenia showed that the family life and visibility of same-gender families does pose a challenge to the social concepts about what/who is a family, as well as what/who is a parent, and with this addresses the limits that are set with heterosexuality as well as those that homosexuality seemingly delineates.<sup>33</sup>

## Moral homophobes

When borders are shaken and fences are crossed, the keepers of the borders awaken. The effects of protecting the (presumed) limits and borders of the family definitions were especially visible in Slovenia in early 2012, when there was a possibility for new family legislation to be passed – one where marriage rights of heterosexual citizens would be extended also to homosexual citizens. As a result of a referendum, the legislation was not passed. The public debates about the possible legislative changes involved expressions of intolerance, hate speech, open homophobia, and violence against those who attempted to cross such borders – that is, against homosexual adults. In Slovenia, the topic of homophobia has been discussed (only) in the last decade:<sup>34</sup> The testimonies of young homosexual adults vividly portray the attitudes towards homosexuality in Slovenia. Such attitudes can be expected in all situations connected to

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<sup>32</sup> Sobočan, 2009.

<sup>33</sup> Sobočan, 2011a.

<sup>34</sup> Kuhar et al., 2008; Kuhar et al., 2011; Kuhar et al., 2012; Magič, 2008; Magič and Janjevak, 2011; Maljevac and Magič, 2009; Švab and Kuhar, 2005; Tuš Špilak, 2010; Velikonja and Greif, 2001.

homosexuality, because homophobia targets not only persons who openly identify as homosexual, but actually uses 'homosexualization' to legitimate intolerance, hostility, and violence. Homophobia is a mechanism which uses the label of homosexuality as a tool for hostility: homosexuality as a label is used to mark an individual or a group with 'otherness'.<sup>35</sup> A homophobe<sup>36</sup> needs an individual, group, or phenomenon which he/she can label with homosexuality to justify his/her acts: this may be a person's self-identification with homosexuality or homosexuality 'externally' ascribed to a person. Therefore, homophobic responses also can be expected in the case of children from same-gender families, where the sexual identity of their parents is used to 'homosexualize' the children.

What is important in this scenario is the way the main (moral, but not rational) argument against same-gender families or child-rearing in same-gender families is formed. The moral homophobe does not expose himself or herself as violent and intolerant – he/she is someone who claims to defend the rights of the child, who advocates for the child's good and a healthy childhood for her/him, who calls for protecting the (innocent) child against the parents who will supposedly harm the child with their homosexuality – and parents who expose the child to homophobic violence identified in society by such moral homophobe.<sup>37</sup> The moral homophobe himself/herself generates

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<sup>35</sup> See also 'new homophobia': violence and discrimination against different social groups; in Kuhar, Humer, Maljevac, 2012, p. 53; the authors also refer to Rener, 2009; Švab and Kuhar, 2005; Ule, 2005.

<sup>36</sup> Homophobia (and a homophobe) does not signify only a violent, discriminatory act or ideas of an individual or a group. As Kuhar, Takacs and Kam-Tuck Yip write, we can talk also of the 'social and cultural norms and values, which explicitly and implicitly construct homosexuality as "the other"', in: Kuhar, Takacs and Kam-Tuck Yip, 2012, p. 16.

<sup>37</sup> The term 'moral homophobe' may sound like an oxymoron; nevertheless, it adequately describes individuals, groups or ideas which can be identified as homophobic, but who present themselves and claim to be moral, against the

intolerance and hostility in the society to which he/she refers; nevertheless, his/her claims and behaviour are effective because they mobilize emotions through forming the victimization of children. The mobilization of emotions is especially effective because the moral homophobe presents the children's rights as opposed by the agendas of adults, who – according to the interpretation of the moral homophobe – fight for equal rights of all families exclusively to gain rights for themselves (and not the children) and answer their own (and not the children's) needs. This perverse shift portrays the parents as violent, as those who sexualize their children with their sexual identity and hence are dangerous to the child. The moral homophobe identifies this sexualization in at least two ways: as symbolic – social sexualization, that is, contamination of the child with the homosexuality of the parents, which will evoke negative responses in the environment (in school, etc.), and as moral – identity sexualization, that is, involving fear that such parents cannot 'teach' their children right, normative sexuality—that is, heterosexuality.

## **Parents in same-gender families in Slovenia**

Attitudes towards homosexuality in Slovenia, which are presented in various research studies (see above) and were confirmed in public debates around possible legislative changes, also provide a background for understanding that parents and children in same-gender families can expect intolerance, discrimination, and negative attitudes, which might be why they have difficulties speaking out about their family reality. Previous

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background of certain societal, cultural, or religious values. I coined this term when I was describing and discussing the public debates around suggested changes in the family legislation in 2010-2012; see Sobočan, 2012.

research studies about same-gender families in Slovenia<sup>38</sup> have been explorative: they opened a space and gave voice to topics and meanings that the interviewees conceptualized as the most important and relevant to their family reality. Thus, the first research presented topics connected to the dynamics inside the family and issues that describe the position of same-gender families in the society.<sup>39</sup> The next research identified a growing awareness about the unequal status and treatment, strategies for establishing legitimacy of family life and potential effects for the conceptualizations of the ‘family’ and homosexuality.<sup>40</sup> The last major research study about same-gender families also involved the narratives of the young people living with two parents of the same gender.<sup>41</sup> The analysis showed that parents (and children) expect homophobic responses from their environments and identified the different behaviours or strategies that the parents developed with the aim of protecting their children from the negative attitudes of others.<sup>42</sup>

Even if every family story is specific, sixteen in-depth interviews with parents from same-gender families provided information on the basis of which an understanding of strategies for dealing with (expected) homophobia could be developed. In Slovenia, 16 parents from 11 families were interviewed: two men, 14 women, 29–54 years old, all except one from urban areas. In these families 15 children are growing up (five aged up to 6 years, six aged 6–14, three aged 14–18, and one older than 18).<sup>43</sup> The composition of the families of the interviewed is quite diverse:

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<sup>38</sup> Sobočan, 2009; Sobočan, 2011a.

<sup>39</sup> Sobočan, 2009.

<sup>40</sup> Sobočan, 2011a.

<sup>41</sup> Zaviršek and Sobočan, 2012.

<sup>42</sup> Sobočan, 2012.

<sup>43</sup> A detailed description of methodology that was used in this research, along with ethical and other considerations, can be found in: Streib and Quadflieg, 2011 as well as Zaviršek and Sobočan, 2012.



children in five families were born in heterosexual relationships (eight children), and children in four families were born in homosexual relationships (five children), and in one family, one child was born in a heterosexual relationship and one in a homosexual relationship. Ten of these children have (more or less active) fathers and five children were conceived either with assisted donor insemination or donor insemination at home, but the identity of the donors is anonymous. In relation to previous research in Slovenia,<sup>44</sup> in which families of two same-gender partners, families of two same-gender partners who share custody with a previous (different-gender) partner, and families of two same-gender partners who parent together with two other same-gender partners or a gay person, this sample includes families in which children have been conceived in a heterosexual relationship but after the recognition of a parent's homosexual orientation, both parents still take care of the children on a daily basis (possibly also by still living together). In addition, three young persons who grew up in same-gender families were interviewed. Their ages were between 16 and 23 years; all of them were conceived in heterosexual relationships and have two active biological parents of different genders. A boy (17) and a girl (16) are living with two mothers; a young woman (23) has a gay father.

All the interviewed parents expressed the expectation of homophobic responses, even violence, while at the same time they cannot fully control—or protect—the lives of their children; they address and deal with the expected homophobia in ways they feel best. The parents experience constant pressure to ‘justify’ and ‘demonstrate appropriateness’ of their family life and fight for recognition of the parental status of both parents, symbolically as well as legally. ‘Justifying’ along with fighting for equal rights

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<sup>44</sup> Sobočan, 2009, Sobočan, 2011a.

can be very demanding, and the pressures create feelings of uncertainty and fear and encourage silencing and invisibility. Being recognized like ‘all others’ or as ‘normal’, according to the opinion of many parents, still guarantees the most safety for children from same-gender families, especially in an environment where there are no known or recognized models for how parents and children should behave or present their families at school or in a wider environment. The strategies of parents can be classified into three clusters, with different approaches, different levels of understanding what would be best for their families in school, and different ways in which they themselves (re)construct ‘normality’.

### *Family structures and passing strategies*

Passing strategies are a response to societal expectations (in Slovenia) that every child needs to have a father and a mother, because this is how the ‘real’, ‘natural’ family is constructed.<sup>45</sup> It can thus be expected that a child living with two mothers who has a father (i.e., a child born in a heterosexual relationship or a child with a known donor or father) will be perceived and accepted differently than a child who does not have a father or was conceived with anonymous donor cells. Namely, the child whose biological mother and father are both involved in his/her life might more easily answer the pertaining questions (voiced by just anyone in their heteronormative environment)—‘Don’t you have a father?’ ‘Where/who is your father?’—and pass as ‘ordinary’ child, who has the ‘proper’ role models in his/her life. These strategies give a chance for the environment (teachers, etc.) to relate to what they believe is ‘normal’ or ‘right’. The ways in which the interviewed parents ‘normalize’ the situation,

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<sup>45</sup> The term *passing* refers to the theory of Erving Goffman, who wrote about identity management in connection with stigma.

approximate their family to the normative pattern, are through involving both biological parents and through the legitimization of family relationships through biological connections, such as presenting the mother's partner as the child's aunt (mother's sister). The last strategy was explained by one parent:

To make it easier for the child, we decided that in [primary] school, I would function as his aunt. They accepted this completely normally, they even found that we [the biological and the social mother] are visually very similar. (Ina)

As the mother explained, the role functioned well in a suburban school, where these two mothers felt it was too dangerous to disclose themselves as a lesbian couple. They felt this worked well, and it gave the opportunity to the social mother to participate in the school-life of the child (e.g., teachers' meetings, etc.). The child also has an identifiable (but not present) father, which probably cast aside any other 'suspicion' about the 'aunt' being in any other relationship to the mother.

A model also identified in the interviews can be described as a family model where the parents were previously a heterosexual couple but now have new sexual partners, yet remain in a close familial relationship, functioning fully in the child's life on a daily basis without necessarily disclosing information about their sexuality. Thus, the family functions in a way recognizable as a 'proper', as just a 'divorced' family, while other carers of the child (parents' same-gender partners) are not really involved in the child's life in the sense of being recognized, positioned, or (self)-identified as persons who hold a parental/carer role.

In these parents' views, such passing strategies protect the family from 'sexualization' – that is, against being identified as homosexual parents, which produces the 'deficits' of one of the

parents and consequential ‘illegitimacy’ of such family forms and family relations. It needs to be noted also that the respondents have spoken about violence and discrimination against children who have disclosed in school in what kind of a family they live. Rigidity and fixation on the limits of the normative concept of family also constrain the parental status outside the nuclear matrix: legally and symbolically (but not on the level of everyday practices), two parents simultaneously mean the exclusion of the third parent (for example in the mother-mother-father constellation). This also is demonstrated by the imperative of social services in cases of single-parent adoptions – for example, in cases where the non-biological, social mother wants to adopt the child, the father needs to be excluded from the relationship with the child, not only legally, but also physically and symbolically.<sup>46</sup> Not only does the strategy of passing protect the family against homophobic responses; exclusion of the social parent is coerces the family into choosing which of the parents will be invisible in the public space – and the parents rarely choose the exclusion of the other biological parent (especially in cases when the child was born in a heterosexual relationship).

Such strategy simultaneously perpetuates the invisibility of same-gender families in society: invisibility is thus both an experience of same-gender families (invisibility in the legal and symbolic sense, invisibility in public representations – schoolbooks, advertising, and the like) as well as their strategy: the parents consent to invisibility or maintain it because of the expected negative attitudes and intolerance for a non-normative family reality. The passing strategies where the presence of both

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<sup>46</sup> The praxis in this field is developing only now, because of the low number of cases they are dealing with. As testified in the conversations with those who are in the process of second-parent adoption of the child, the absence of the other biological parent (father) is necessary for a successful adoption. See also Sobočan, 2011b.

biological parents (sometimes or often at the cost of the social parent) is important involve selecting who will get to know the family situation and when; the strategies of protecting are connected with a (full) invisibility of the partnership relationship between the adults, whereby the partners do not assume a visible parental relationship with the child.

### *Invisibility and strategies of protecting*

Certain parents understand that the invisibility of their sexual relationship protects the child from becoming himself or herself sexualized, which is a part of these strategies; that is, some parents do not even disclose their (same)-sexual relationship to the child – which they justify by their wish to protect the child. This invisibility seems to be restricted not only to the school (public) life, but it sometimes or often overarches the family sphere. Many parents who were previously living in a heterosexual relationship felt reluctant to speak about their (new) sexuality to the children, even if they were, for example, already living with a partner of the same gender. One of the parents explained that she is reserved about coming out to her children (aged 10 and 13) because she believes she has to protect them from the burden of (their) coming out in a non-urban homophobic environment – if the children knew their mother was a lesbian, they would have to be open about it when someone asked them questions. This kind of behaviour is often connected to the issues of custody: parents fear that the other biological parent (usually the former partner) will demand full custody of the child and would be successful. Some parents said that they believe that their children already ‘suspect’ their homosexuality, that they ‘understand what is going on’, but that they have not yet gathered enough courage to speak about it with them — again, not because of their personal relationship with the child, but because of the anticipated consequences for the child in

his/her environment. In this way, parents perceive the secrecy of their sexuality as actually protecting the children from being part of it.

One of the gay fathers spoke of the mother of his child confronting a schoolteacher when the pupils were supposed to speak about their families in school: she claimed these were personal issues which should not be addressed. Such assertiveness protects the family by preventing an ‘information leak’. Much effort is invested in the information not leaking – one of the mothers spoke about her daughter confiding in her best friend only after they had been friends for almost ten years (and the family obviously managed to remain invisible).

Nevertheless, parents recognize that there are two sides to the coin of invisibility. One of the mothers presented a case of abuse of her daughter in school after she told in class that she lives with two women: bad marking and bullying from teachers led to deteriorating health conditions, while her mother was constantly confronted by two teachers who claimed ‘that the reason for that was that her daughter terribly misses her father’. The mother transferred her daughter to another school, but only after recognizing that the reasons for her daughter’s bad school outcomes and hospitalizations actually lay in the attitudes of two homophobic teachers. Her family appealed to her that she should report to the police what was happening and sue the school, but she decided against it, concluding that because they were not officially ‘out’ at school, she would not be able to claim discrimination on that basis. When signing out of this school, the mother said:

The headmaster agreed immediately as she wanted to be out of this matter as soon as possible. All she was actually interested in was

whether anyone would ‘pay for it’: if we would report them – she was afraid of that. (Irina)

### *Activism and positioning strategies*

The parents who are less reluctant to out themselves as a family in school or in public space are those who jointly planned the family and where the child was born in their (same-gender) relationship. It is more frequent in such cases that both the biological parent as well as the social parent present themselves as parents in school and elsewhere, partly because of the absence of the threat of custody issues. Nevertheless, social parents who are out to the child’s teachers as ‘parents – partners of biological parents’ report that this is often a struggle: they have to be active in the relationship with the school, which they report is often cold and distanced. Some teachers have a hard time getting used to the equal parental role of the same-gender social parent, but in time and with persistence, they become used to it and accept it. Nevertheless, these parents often find the active role really important because, as one mother explained, it is likely that the teachers would ‘discover’ the family structure through the children’s narratives, essays, and the like. Some parents report that they believe the teachers know they are a same-gender family, but do not feel like discussing it with them yet. On the other hand, one mother said:

My partner didn’t agree that we tell them that the kids live with two women; she said, it’s not their business, who is sleeping with whom. But I told the teacher. She never said anything to me about it afterwards. But when they were drawing families in school, there were no comments anymore. With the first kid, when she drew two grown female figures, the teacher said: ‘today we are drawing family, not friends.’ Now, there were no more comments. (Ela)

Some parents also feel that it is important that they are out as a same-gender family in school, but would themselves not be out in some other spheres of life (such as their work environment and the like).

Recently, more and more families purposefully speak or plan to speak about their family to kindergarten and schoolteachers in what they conceive and describe as a truly activist manner. They see the importance of ‘educating’ teachers – so that the children would be able to talk about their family reality freely, without any confusion, secrecy, or doubts. Especially the very young families in the research sample, where children were born with the aid of donor insemination, feel that what is important is immediate confrontation of the teacher with their family form and parental roles, as well as clear demands for introduction of images of various family structures in the learning materials. These mothers would all agree that what is important is how one positions oneself: as a ‘potential victim of homophobia’ or as an ‘equal parent, who just wants the best for his/her child, as most parents do’. They see this open position as an opportunity to demand equal recognition and participation. At the same time, it is of crucial importance for them to raise their child in a self-confident, empowered way and to equip her/him with the strength needed for an ongoing social battle.

### *Young people from same-gender families*

The young people who were interviewed in the framework of the same research study have not yet developed such ‘family pride’ as the activist parents. For these young people, the main strategy was silence and secrecy about the family reality.<sup>47</sup> The young people’s experiences show that their environment (peers,

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<sup>47</sup> Zaviršek and Bercht, 2012.



teachers, extended families) often implicitly demands and rewards silencing.<sup>48</sup> The strategy of silencing partly protects the children and young people against violence while at the same time has its consequences for the young people's perceptions of themselves and their relationships with others. The concept of 'normality' is very important for young people: their strategies of dealing with the environment and the expected homophobia are tightly connected to the feelings of denormalization<sup>49</sup> and a desire to be accepted, to have their families recognized as 'normal'. Belonging is equally important in both cases – loyalty and belonging to one's family as well as to one's peer group and other non-family contexts, which creates a conflict. How heavy this conflict is depends on the severity of expectations and pressures of the heteronormative environment.

### *Summary: Same-gender families in Slovenia*

All the strategies that parents employ are directed towards protecting their children from anticipated homophobia in school and relate to the different approaches and understandings of what might be beneficial for their families and school and the different levels of what the parents perceive as being open as well as how they (re)construct 'normality'. These strategies were identified as: passing strategies (father figure strategy, biological relative strategy), protective strategies (strategy of invisibility in the family, strategy of the invisibility of the family), and positioning strategies (active parent strategy, activist parent strategy).

All of the participating parents anticipate a danger of homophobic attitudes or even violence, but the school life of their

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Streib Brzič and Quadflieg, 2011.

children is to some extent uncontrollable, so they approach this anticipated danger in different ways. What is characteristic is that there are no models, even to some extent no culture of families where both parents are of the same sex, which surely is a consequence of the fact that same-gender partners in Slovenia are only recently really embracing and claiming their right to become parents. Nevertheless, in the current social climate, the parents seem to have experienced pressures and demands connected to their family life, which result in insecurity, fear, and secrecy on many levels. The feeling and appearance of 'sameness' or 'normality' seem still to be the most promising and safe place for children in the view of their gay and lesbian parents, who are only now developing models of how to approach schools, talk with children, and deal with their environment.<sup>50</sup>

## Concluding remarks

Children in same-gender families surely have some specific experience linked to their family reality. Gustavson and Schmitt, for example, use the expression by Stefen Lynch, 'culturally queer', to describe their particular situation: an experience of associative stigma, that is, stigma that is acquired on the basis of their parents' sexual orientation and at the same time through association with the LGBTQ community.<sup>51</sup>

To better understand and give recognition to the role of their experiences, new research in the field of childhood and family life should be encouraged, research that conceptualizes children and childhood outside of the matrix of adaptability, success, and victimization. Critical research should address and present the

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<sup>50</sup> As one of the reviewers of this paper remarked, 'it is a paradoxical tragedy that safe space means remaining in homophobic normality'.

<sup>51</sup> Gustavson and Schmitt, 2011, p. 161.

experiences of children and youth through a perspective relevant to them. Children and youth are recognized today as social agents, who are not simple copies, victims, or rebels in relation to their environment or parents but actively co-create meanings in the society.<sup>52</sup> Such perspectives may hold a promise to defy the discourses of moral homophobes and abuse of children that suit their different agendas. These approaches might also be important for trying to confront the heteronormative discourses in which the two-dad or two-mom families can present only a challenge (sometimes presented as threatening) or an affirmation (sometimes presented as heteronormative conformity) of the mom-dad families.

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<sup>52</sup> Sobočan, 2012.

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# A queer geography of a school: Landscapes of safe(r) spaces

*Mel Freitag*

A whole history remains to be written of space –  
which at the same time would be a history of power  
– from the great strategies of geopolitics to the little  
tactics of the habitat.

– Michel Foucault, 1986

**W**hat does it mean to queer a schooled space? When queers are physically visible in schools, how does that change the power relations and relationships within it? Researchers in the field of Human Geography have explored physical spaces that are “queered” – the gay ghettos – such as the gay bar, neighborhood, or city.<sup>1</sup> While celebrating these gay spaces, and markers such as the safe space triangle sticker that allies in schools in the USA utilize to mark their offices as places where LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning) students can “go” to feel comfortable, or at least not bullied, that does not always mean that queers feel safe(r) in those spaces. Also, if one space is marked safe, what happens to the other

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<sup>1</sup> Rushbrook, 2002.

unsafe spaces? Do they stay intact, and if so, is that to the detriment of all students? Therefore, it is imperative also to define what a safe or safe(r) space is, and then why they should exist at all. According to a recent nationwide survey conducted by Joseph Kosciw, Emily Greytak, and Elizabeth Diaz,<sup>2</sup> nine out of ten LGBTQ-identified youth state they have been harassed and bullied in their schools. This is unacceptable.

One option in particular for queer subjects is to construct, live, and utilize these “queered” cities, neighborhoods, and schools. A physically separated “gay space” could be a countersite for other, more privileged landscapes and narratives. For example, geographer Dereka Rushbrook takes Michel Foucault's idea of “heterotopias” and defines it as “places that hold what has been displaced while serving as sites of stability for the displaced”,<sup>3</sup> which I will use as a framework in this article. Much of the literature on queer geography has been on isolated or commercialized spaces, neighborhoods, cities, workplaces, bath houses, media, drag shows, sex workers, and more recently on immigration, transnational politics, public health, and globalization.<sup>4</sup> The level of inclusivity of a school, for example, is traditionally a space that holds potential economic and social power for underrepresented students, including but not limited to queer-identified individuals.

## Queering a school: Is it possible?

Safe schools are not and should not be limited to exclusively queer-identified students. Although queer-identified students are in these safe spaces and in fact do “feel” safer, it is because of the

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<sup>2</sup> Kosciw, Greytak and Diaz, 2009.

<sup>3</sup> Rushbrook, 2002, p. 185.

<sup>4</sup> Brown, Lim and Brown, 2007; Johnston and Longhurst, 2010; Willis, 2009.

practices, strategies, curricula, and policy decisions that the schools make in and outside of the classroom. I argue that it is possible for a heterosexual-identified student to in fact feel “safer” in a queer space. There is a gap of work on heterosexualities, and as long as queers are discriminated against, “queer spaces will remain something that,” to borrow Spivak’s phrase, “queers cannot not want.”<sup>5</sup> In this article, I would like to argue how and why schools should be queered, and not only with exclusively queer-identified subjects. For the purpose I have done fieldwork at the Unity Charter School, as a space and opportunity for this space to be produced. Unity Charter School produces a model not only to build a safe(r) space for queer-identified subjects, but for all students.

Queering these architectural sites of power could also point to how even material spaces, or maybe especially material spaces that are more formal and institutional – schools – can and do become “queered”. Without reproducing sexual identity politics that singles out one student against another, I will analyze what practices and curricula are used to queer a school.

## **School context and data collection**

For purposes of comparison, it is important to acknowledge that currently, there are two known schools that are queer-positive in the United States. I will later discuss how the policies and climate at Harvey Milk is similar and different from Unity school, where I conducted my fieldwork. Harvey Milk High School in New York City is one of the two only schools in the United States that explicitly states that all students, regardless of their sexual orientation, “deserve a safe and supportive environment.”<sup>6</sup> The

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<sup>5</sup> Oswin, 2008, p. 100.

<sup>6</sup> Hetrick-Martin Institute, 2013.

second school that I will define as queer-positive is Unity Charter School. The Unity Charter School is a public school located in Great Lake City, which is a large, urban metropolis with over 560,000 residents in the Midwest. Through Unity's definition of what constitutes safety in a school, their (dis)location from heteronormative schools will play a crucial role in re-defining their own queer geography - and also complicate the idea of physical, psychological, and social safety within and outside of those walls and boundaries.

Unity and Harvey are the two only known schools where the mission is explicitly to address bullying and students who have been bullied in their previous schools. Unity and the Harvey Milk High School are somewhat unique in the United States in that they are part of the larger public school districts in their cities, which means that they are able to enroll any student who wishes with no additional fees.

According to the Great Lake City School District's website, the district is one of the largest in the region with over 80,000 students and 29 high schools. Unity Charter School's demographics reflect much of the same racialized diversity as the district. The following statistics are racial and gendered categories that are pre-determined by the school district as a whole, and is not necessarily reflecting how the Unity students self-identify.

It is important to understand the demographic and academic context of the school to lend a broad perspective and to highlight how the intersections of race and socioeconomic status influence and interplay with sexual orientation. Of Unity's current 163 students, 52% are African American, 20% are Hispanic, 26% are White, and 1% is Native American. Although the racialized

categories are linked to the United States census categories and race is a social construction, it is important to note the racialized diversity of Unity students.<sup>7</sup> One reason may be to compare it to the White teachers at Unity, and what factors have contributed to not hiring teachers and staff of color. Furthermore, 58% of the students identify as female and 42% as male.<sup>8</sup> The irony is that these pre-conceived categories of race and gender are prescribed by the district, and currently there is no categorical box for transgender students, for instance. Although Unity is well aware that many of their students identify as transgender, there is no district-wide or school-specific statistic for that population. In addition, the state-wide reading, language and math scores at Unity were comparable to the average of the school district at large. The school is racially and ethnically diverse and also has a high percentage of special education students and English Language Learners, but their numbers are very close to the school district's as a whole. In addition, many of the students are from economically disadvantaged neighborhoods, and the school itself is within one of these identified communities.

The mission of Unity school is to provide a safe space for students who have been bullied and harassed in their previous schools. Although the school's reputation is being the "gay school" to the outside community, the school does not explicitly state that they only enroll LGBTQ or nonheterosexual students. It is important to note that factors such as the students' race, socioeconomic status, family backgrounds, and learning and physical disability status also put the students at-risk for bullying. As discussed later, the reasons students were bullied many times were because they were marked as "different," or outside of the norm of whiteness and heterosexuality. Although this study focused on sexual

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<sup>7</sup> Great Lake City School District website, 2010-2011.

<sup>8</sup> Great Lake City School District website, 2010-2011.



identification or lack of sexual identification of its students, these other factors braid into the students' identities and communities as well.

Charter schools are smaller schools that still remain in the public school system, but have more autonomy when it comes to decision-making in regards to school policies, procedures, hiring practices, curricular strategies, and discipline. Historically, charter schools have been formed around a specific theme or focus, such as science and technology, fine arts, or honors courses. Unity is unique in that its focus is not exclusively about an academic subject, although the mission is clear that one of the school's goals is to be academically challenging. Based on interviews with the teachers and students and my own hallway and classroom observations, the curriculum and pedagogy, for instance, are not much different than other small schools in the area, both private and public. Unity's test scores, attendance rates, graduation rates, and many of the other indicators of what makes a "good school" according to many of the policymakers are similar to its other educational counterparts.<sup>9</sup>

Using narrative inquiry<sup>10</sup>, over a six month period, I conducted 21 individualized life history interviews with twelve current Unity School students, six teachers, one "lead" teacher, one social worker, and one school psychologist. I also conducted numerous classroom and hallway observations. The students identified as female, male, and transgender, and their sexuality identifications were more diverse than the LGBTQ categorical box as discussed previously. Of the twelve students interviewed, five students presented as White, two as African American, two were Latino, one was Native American, and two were multi-racial. Ten of the

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<sup>9</sup> Great Lake City School District website, 2010-2011.

<sup>10</sup> Clandinin and Connelly, 2000.

twelve students were seniors and two were juniors. By being in the hallways, offices, and classrooms of the school, I was able to build relationships with them and ask them to have a conversation with me during their lunch hour or free time before or after school.

After transcribing every interview, I then used both inductive and deductive analyses to find themes, patterns, phrases, and stories that cut across all of the interviews. All of the names of the participants, the school, and the city are pseudonyms to protect the confidentiality of the subjects, the institution, and the context of them.

The school as a whole is well accustomed to media and research attention alike. In fact, I met two separate researchers from different states at Unity during my time there. During one of my full days at the school, one of the teachers pointed out: “what would [Unity] be without a resident researcher?” This question illustrated not only the amount of local, state-wide, national and international attention the school has received, but also that the staff, teachers, and community are probably aware of how different their school is from others around the U.S. and outside of it.

As a queer researcher, my assumption was that I would gain leverage with the students because of my sexual orientation as an out lesbian. Although I mentioned my identification in a few interviews, it did not seem to matter. Before the study, I naively assumed that I would simply come out as a lesbian and we would proceed to have an in-depth conversation about all of the participants’ experiences of being LGBTQ. Because of my identification alone, I assumed I could build more trust in the researcher-subject relationship. Since many students did not

come out, or chose not to identify, I had to change my questions and adapt to this newly found, perhaps more uncomfortable space.

Some of the strongest supporters of Unity Charter School, its students and teachers, identify as straight. On the other hand, just because an individual identifies as queer, does not mean that they automatically queer a space when they enter or reside in it. Many queer-identified individuals may even, intentionally or unintentionally, want to “fit in” to the heterosexual matrix.<sup>11</sup> Queer spaces, then, are distinct from LGBTQ spaces. Imploding the binary between queer and non-queer subjects occupying a space, then, is crucial to understand what it means to queer a space. Therefore, a queer space or geography transgresses binaries such as hetero/homo or man/woman in order to go beyond normativity.

## A definition of queer

In order to use queer geography literature as a framework for how safety and community are defined in the Unity Charter School, it is important to define queer and then queer geography in these contexts. First, I use the term queer as both a subject-identifier and a politic, as defined by US-based education researcher Marla Morris.<sup>12</sup>

Queer-identified students lend room for the in-between sexuality-identifiers, including polyamorous, pan-sexual, or un-identified. Many of the students at Unity did not identify as LGBTQ, even though the school is labeled “the gay school” from outside their community and even in the media. When asked what their

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<sup>11</sup> Butler, 1993.

<sup>12</sup> Morris, 1998.

identification was, many of them chose not to identify at all. This lack of identification by many of the youth, regardless of age, social class, race, or other factors, was not simply because they wanted to resist the label of the “gay school.” In fact, many of the students I talked to took pride in their school, and insisted that it was not just a “school for gay kids,” but rather that those sexual identification markers did not matter. The teachers echoed the same sentiment when they argued that the school does not necessarily have students who are “unique” or had different problems or stories from students at traditional schools. The difference, as I will discuss later, was how they responded and listened to these stories. In this way, the institutional policies and teacher practices specifically were perhaps more out of the norm, or queer, than the students themselves.

The second definition of queer is when the term is used as politic, a verb, a state of mind, an action, and a way of being. Queering is about re-defining the traditionally-held norms, binaries, beliefs, values, institutions, and structures.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, a queer-positive school can and does enroll queer-identified students, but the purpose, policies, and culture of a queer space can go well beyond what the sexualities are of its subjects. Recent work in the field of queer geography defines a queer space, then, as dissident, progressive, resistant, and claimed, but also challenges the very “privileging of sexuality [markers] above all processes of identity formation by considering queer subjects as simultaneously raced, classed, and gendered bodies”.<sup>14</sup> Further, space is not naturally “straight” or heteronormative, but rather constructed, “actively produced and (hetero)sexualized.”<sup>15</sup> According to Eve Kosofsky

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<sup>13</sup> Morris, 1998.

<sup>14</sup> Oswin, 2008, p. 91.

<sup>15</sup> Binnie, 1997, p. 223

Sedgwick and Michael Warner, even people who identify as heterosexual may not be heteronormative.<sup>16</sup>

When queer subjects enter into heterosexualized spaces, it reminds people that these streets, malls, motels, and schools have been “*produced* as heterosexual.”<sup>17</sup> Phil Hubbard further explains in “Here, There, Everywhere: The Ubiquitous Geographies of Heteronormativity” that everyday, ‘normal’ space, then, is “perceived, occupied, and represented as heterosexual”<sup>18</sup> and that “non-heteronormative heterosexuality would be based on not privileging heterosexual identity over other categories.”<sup>19</sup> Non-heteronormative heterosexuality, would have a place in queered spaces, that is, these types of allies can and do belong in queered spaces. This notion of heterosexuals “belonging” in queer(ed) spaces, which often times seems contradictory, was a challenge throughout the study. That is, originally the proposal was to research a space where queered subjects resided, but the more students I interviewed, the more I came to the realization that I would have to re-frame one of my major questions: “are you LGBTQ, and then, was that identification the reason you were bullied?” The old question assumed that the student would identify within the LGBTQ categories, and since that was not the case, it changed not only my definition of their sexual orientations, but also my definition of what populations the school served and how they served them.

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<sup>16</sup> Sedgwick, 1990; Warner, 1993.

<sup>17</sup> Bell and Valentine, 1995, p. 18.

<sup>18</sup> Hubbard, 2008, p. 644.

<sup>19</sup> Johnson, 2002, p. 301.

## Notions of safety and pedagogies at Unity

We need to look seriously at what limitations we have placed in this “new world,” on who we feel “close to,” who we feel “comfortable with,” who we feel “safe” with.

- Minnie Bruce Pratt, 1984

What makes Unity different from other initiatives such as Gay Straight Alliances (GSA's)? One of the distinctions between Unity and other schools is that its mission is to enable students who are able to communicate, not judge, and explore or “try on” their own identities, religious beliefs, and sexualities. The traditional solution to the question in schools in the US and Canada “what do we do with the gays?” has largely been to create GSA's, or Gay Straight Alliances, which are generally student-run groups within larger high schools.<sup>20</sup> These are intended to be a “safe place” for queer-identified youth to go, and they often sponsor various activities, social outings, and programs to support queer-identified students and their allies. However, even though Gay Straight Alliances have been supported and successful in many schools, some members of GSA's have struggled to gain respect from school administrators, parents, and other students.

American Geographer Christopher Schroeder points out that GSA's run the risk of becoming “complicit with heteronormativity. With a fragmented and much more manageable queer youth population and with minimal influence from queer adults, the school becomes much more efficacious in its (re)production of docile bodies.”<sup>21</sup> Vancouver-based Lori Macintosh further pushes this notion of teaching

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<sup>20</sup> Macintosh, 2007; Mayo, 2004.

<sup>21</sup> Schroeder, 2012, p. 647.

“antihomophobia curriculum” in schools, and argues that “we subsequently assume that it is homophobia that must be understood, leaving heteronormativity as a live incendiary device.”<sup>22</sup> If educators continue to create these “Band-Aid” solutions or add on a day or class to talk about the “Other” LGBTQ kids, we miss turning the table on teachers to examine their own positionalities and learn how to engage with and facilitate conflict in the classroom. This argument reflects many of the queer practices inherent in Unity, and further contests how queer theory as it relates to education and schools is not just about learning about queer subjects.

Since there is such a strong prevalence and recent surge of GSA’s throughout many high schools,<sup>23</sup> much of the outside community wonders why there needs to be a separate “school for the gays.” However, this label, as the students and teachers informed me, does not accurately reflect Unity’s mission. Although Unity engages with and creates queer programs, policies, and curricula, as stated before, not all the students or teachers are queer-identified. I argue that a school can be queered regardless of the sexual identifications of the teachers and students residing within it. The idea of safety for whomever enters the school’s door, then, becomes a central theme, and it is a work in progress.

Mary Louise Rasmussen examines the idea of safe spaces by calling on Foucault’s definition of heterotopias. Rasmussen looked at Harvey Milk High School’s policies, and argues that Harvey Milk High School, much like Unity become “heterotopias of deviation.”<sup>24</sup> That is, in order to exist, these schools must create spaces that “illuminate the exclusions produced by wider

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<sup>22</sup> Macintosh, 2007, p. 36.

<sup>23</sup> Schroeder, 2012.

<sup>24</sup> Rasmussen, 2006, p. 165.

social and educational relations of power. These relations of power continue to be simultaneously contested and reinscribed by the people who construct the heterotopic spaces.”<sup>25</sup> She names these “spatial dividing practices” and points out that many of the teachers and administration would argue that these students have nowhere else to go, which many of the teachers and administration echoed at Unity. In fact, simply by being a student within Unity’s walls, these students are marked as different.

Laura, the school social worker at Unity, shared that a lot of people from outside the school think this is an “alternative school,” that is, a school separated for the “troublesome” students, i.e. the ones with multiple disciplinary problems, pregnant students, or students who have criminal records. Unity’s mission is not to support students who are “troublesome,” but rather students who are different and want a space to explore their identities, as any adolescent would. She also spoke about “individual choices” as they relate to physical and emotional safety, which is true for many teenagers, regardless of their queer identification. When asked to define what a “safe school” means, she replied:

Well, there's physical and emotional safety. Ideally, that's what we're striving for. You know, I think it's always a work in progress. I think people's individual choices can make themselves unsafe - and we try to address that. Whether it be plugging them into resources outside of school or working with resource people in school. Our own work - I mean, everyone kind of wears a counselor hat. That doesn't happen in other schools. Are we perfect? Absolutely not. We try to be proactive, though. I think that makes a difference. We're a work in progress. Because everyone has "stuff".

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<sup>25</sup> Rasmussen, 2006, p. 169.



Unity also provides social services and case management, or refers students to external community resources. This is reflected in the space of the school. When I first entered Unity, it felt more like a community centre. Students were in the hallways, in the classrooms, teachers were present. However, the space itself felt different from a school. Many of the students also agreed that Unity didn't "feel" like a school, but more like a home, a family, a comfortable place, and a place of belonging. Foucault echoes this by arguing that "space is fundamental in any form of communal life; space is fundamental in any exercise of power."<sup>26</sup> Unity reflects much of the inherent power struggles, and as the social worker pointed out, Unity itself is a work in progress. "We're not perfect" is a phrase I heard a lot during the interviews, even though many schools do come to the school to observe the practices and community building there, and even attend training sessions for restorative justice circles and other ways to create a safe(r) community. The space is intentionally created by its teachers, staff, and students, but people are aware that inter-school bullying still exists. That is not what makes Unity different. What makes Unity different from other schools is their response to bullying; their ability to listen, respond in a thoughtful way, facilitate conflict, and mentor their students to do the same.

Much of the media focuses on physically separated spaces for students who are discriminated against in school, stating that it is an "extreme solution" to bullying and harassment in the regular public schools. When I asked Terri, the lead teacher and founder, about these comments that separating to support is a radical solution to the problem, she responded:

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<sup>26</sup> Foucault, 1984, p. 252.

I don't think that's what it's about at all. Like I think that the bigger schools could do a lot of things that we're doing now. I mean one of the first things that I would do if I was an administrator of a bigger school would be go and start talking to students about what they wanted...not just student government students who are always part of everything, but really pulling in groups who are traditionally underserved or ignored...listening to them and trying to implement some of the things they say. Because their – *their issues are real*. And it makes a difference like when you see that they are part of that community, too, then they'll work to keep it strong.

As I interviewed the teachers and staff at Unity, I began to ask not only what their definition of a safe space and safe school was, but also what other elements of this school were unique, and could be perhaps transferred to all other public schools to address bullying. I chose the following excerpts to discuss further because they begin to construct a definition of what it means to be a queered school. Interestingly, the school does not have any explicit anti-bullying workshops for teachers or students; and does not say the word “bullying” or “LGBTQ” in its mission or even on the posters that state the school’s objectives posted on nearly every door of every classroom.<sup>27</sup> Instead, words like “community,” “welcoming,” and “safety” are used to describe the school.

One of the first differences I noticed about the school was before I even entered into its doors. On the school’s website, there was no principal listed. I was looking for someone to contact for my research study, but I wasn’t sure who was in charge. Then, I noticed that Terri, one of the teachers, had “lead teacher” next to her name. I wasn’t sure what that meant, and I remember thinking that maybe the principal just was not listed. However, when Terri returned my message and confirmed that I could visit,

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<sup>27</sup> See Appendix A.

I suspected that she was in fact the leader of the school, but she chose not to have “principal” next to her name. Later I realized that this first encounter accurately represented the school’s democratic culture and intentional community. After asking Terri about it in the interview, she echoed the school’s mission for democratic governance, and that she has always believed in shared decision-making:

I don’t make decisions and give them out to people. I’m going to bring it to the community and we’re going to vote on it. We’re gonna discuss it and you know – if I’m making assumptions, people will call me on it right away.

This culture of trust, team-building and community is not just part of the mission statement; the teachers and staff live it every week during their 3 hour staff meeting. They participate in “circles,” which is actually a ritual that is adapted from “restorative justice circles.” Restorative justice is a concept that is often used in the criminal justice system in the United States for finding alternative methods for the criminal to repay or “restore” his or her debt to the community in which he or she hurt. For instance, for a minor crime, instead of serving time in prison, the convicted person may volunteer at the local homeless shelter or apologize to the families he or she hurt.

The restorative justice circles in the school are used for alternative discipline measures, but also a way for students and teachers to connect and dialogue with one another. The circles are one of the defining features of the school, and they are taught and used explicitly in a restorative justice class that many of the students take throughout their time at Unity. Even though many of the students are enrolled in the restorative justice class, other students can request a formal “circle” if they are having a conflict with each other. I participated in one of these circles during one of my

classroom observations. At first I thought I would just sit in the back of the room and observe, but I quickly realized that I was going to have to be an active participant. The lights were off, and about ten students were sitting around a circle, along with two teacher facilitators. There was a candle lit in the middle of the room, and there was a “talking stick” that the teacher facilitator had. When we opened, she said “we’re just going to start off today with a check in and go around and see how everyone is doing.” She had given me a few materials to read before about these “circles,” so I knew what to expect. Still, it was a little uncomfortable at first to be put in the position of “checking in” as the researcher. How should I respond to this? What was I feeling? What was I doing here?

I was surprised about the candor of many of the students to talk about their issues, their stories, and their feelings in the middle of the day at school as they passed around the talking stick one by one. If this had been a support group, for instance, it would not have seemed out of place, but for some reason it did in a “school” environment. When it came to my turn, I was honest. I talked about how excited I was to be here, but I was tired from the drive. Previous participants also talked about their upset about the recent unsuccessful recall of the governor since it was the day after, and so I felt compelled to talk about my perspective on that issue. One of the students admitted that she did not know much about what was going on, and asked us to explain it to her. The nonverbal communication during the “circle” was just as critical as the person talking. The students made eye contact, asked follow up questions, nodded, and genuinely cared about what one another was saying.

I was glad that I participated in this circle because it is the foundation of Unity charter school. When I later interviewed

Jennifer, the restorative justice teacher and facilitator, I asked her what one of the main differences was between Unity and other schools. “We listen to students’ stories.” This was echoed in many of the other teacher interviews as well. The teachers also participate in their own “circles” during the staff meeting – sometimes they serve as a quick check-in, and sometimes they go for more than 45 minutes to address deeper issues and maybe even conflict within the teacher and staff community. In addition to the formal restorative justice circle class and the teachers “circling” during their staff meetings, Terri also has observed students “circling” on their own time, in the hallways and outside of class. “We do it for both community building...if the conversation starts out with people interrupting each other...somebody will go, OK, hold on, hold on, we need to pass a talking piece.” The students circle “automatically.”

## Community

When Laura, the school social worker, first gave me a tour of the school, she said it was interesting that the students who were truant stayed in the building. In her 23 years of being in the school district, she had never seen students staying in the school – the bathrooms, the hallways, outside on the grounds – when they were supposedly “skipping.” This is one of a few first indicators that this school was different – not only in its mission and practices, but also in the students’ behavior. My initial response was: why are these students skipping at all? But when looking back at the attendance and truancy rates, I remembered that this school was similar to the many of the other district’s schools, both small and large. The more compelling question, then, was why were the students staying the same place where they were “supposed to” be in school? Why would they want to

stay there if they were not in class? Would they not want to go somewhere else? Somewhere like home?

According to Sue Kentlyn in her article regarding domestic labor practices in gay and lesbian homes in the United States specifically, she discusses how sacred the notion of “home” is for gay and lesbian adults in her study, many of whom cannot and do not go back to their home of origin because of a very real fear of rejection. For gays and lesbians, Kentlyn defines home as a “place of belonging, intimacy, security, relationship, and selfhood.”<sup>28</sup> One of the most interesting pieces of that definition is the notion of home as a place to “be yourself.” Most heterosexual-identified people, or more importantly people who present as traditionally male or female, most likely do not make the distinction between “being themselves” in public versus private places and everything in between, simply because they are accepted in many location that queer subjects historically have not been. For queer subjects, however, the notion of performativity and where they can feel “safe” to be who they are hinges on where they are standing, many times quite literally. For instance, one of the transgender-identified, male to female students who chose her pseudonym, “Exotic Barbie,” shared that she “had to dress like a boy” at her previous school. This made her feel uncomfortable, and so she used to never go to that school. At Unity, however, Exotic Barbie presents and dresses as a woman, and even though she still chooses to “dress like a boy” at family barbeques and other spaces, at Unity, she feels safer enough to always accurately express her gender.

Lisa Weems discusses how many times school is imagined to feel like home, as many of the participants iterated during my conversations with them. She argues that instead of imagining

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<sup>28</sup> Kentlyn, 2008, p. 335.

school as home or even school as prison, perhaps home as camp is a better metaphor.<sup>29</sup> Camp is a retreat, a positive location, where students are separated from their traditional homes, but also a place where a new home, a new community can be formed. Perhaps this community, this camp or classroom, could be more comfortable and arguably safe(r) than some students' actual homes. Since the classroom is a contested space already with historical, cultural, social, political, and psychological discursive practices,<sup>30</sup> it is important to conceptualize how schools and classroom spaces are reproducing heteronormativity and hegemony, or are places of resistance to these gendered, sex, and sexualized norms. Thinking of school as camp still conjures up collective positive memories of respite and support, but also keeps the institutional practices, some of them mandated by the local and state governments in mind as a backdrop of the story. Because school and the classroom more specifically are contested spaces, this distinction is important. Still, many of the students at Unity used the word "home" and not "retreat" or "second home" or even "camp" to literally describe how they felt in that location.

In fact, instead of defining Unity as their "second home," some of them said that their relationships at Unity were closer than their home relationships. Some of the students who I interviewed were currently homeless or living in a group-home, and so going to Unity was the first physical place they want to "go to." Further, Terri echoed this by talking about how excited students are the days before school, and even post to Terri's facebook page about how excited they are to come back, and how much they missed her and everyone. Bobby, a gay, African American student

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<sup>29</sup> Weems, 2010.

<sup>30</sup> Lefèbvre, 1991.

at Unity, knew about Unity during elementary school, and always knew that he would be going to Unity once he was in high school.

B: It's like they already knew what I was when I got there, so it was like torment and torture, so throughout those years I'm hearing my teachers say, "Oh, well, there's hope for you there." Like when you get to high school, there's a school, [Unity], it's for people like you, you know what I mean? It's a safe haven. It's a home....

M: So you knew about it for awhile.

B: For awhile before I actually got here, and I strived and got out of middle school and kept my head up because I knew I would come here. And, um, this would be like home.

When I asked many of the students what they would have done if Unity had not been an option or did not exist, they said that they would have dropped out, been homeless, or even been dead. This space, then, becomes more than a school, although many of the teachers reminded me that this is in fact a school – a public school – which means there is the reality of grades, state test scores, funding, and renewal contracts for the teachers and the school itself. Although Unity looks like a school, it is much more than that. It is a community. Does a community have to “happen” or be created a separate space? A separate school building? There may be another way to think about how these types of communities could infiltrate into larger schools and spaces. Marc Augé defines non-places as places where there are not necessarily just brick and mortar walls, but rather a discourse of belonging, and places to build community. Augé argues that we need to “relearn how we think about space,”<sup>31</sup> perhaps creating a hybridity between places/non-places and instead of looking at them like binaries, they are more like “palimpsests on which the scrambled game of identity and relations is ceaselessly

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<sup>31</sup> Augé, 1995, p. 29.



rewritten”.<sup>32</sup> Augé not only argues that we need to rethink what it means to have space and place, but also how non-places function in/around “real-life” or “in real life” spaces like schools. Queer spaces would be both non-places and places simultaneously. If we define these spaces as non-places, it may mean that more meaning making and identity construction can “happen” here. Queer identities must have places and non-places to breathe, and these environments, as stated before, may be the place to do it.

“Who does that?” Terri said when I asked her if she ever expected to be “doing this” ten years ago. “Who starts a school?” This seemingly simplistic question resonated with all the other students’ stories about Unity as home, Unity as family, and Unity as a welcoming, accepting, and very different place from their previous schools or experiences.

### **Creating an identity of solidarity**

We must not see any person as an abstraction. Instead, we must see in every person a universe with its own secrets, with its own treasures, with its own sources of anguish, and with some measure of triumph.

- Elie Wiesel, 1995

Unity School sits behind a parking lot in a low-income, high-crime neighborhood of Great Lake City. Most of the students take the bus from other areas of the city, and receive bus passes every day from the teachers. Directly next to the Unity school’s building is a middle school for the arts, and some of the Unity students have had bullying issues with middle school students. In

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<sup>32</sup> Augé, 1995, p. 64.

fact, Terri, the lead teacher at Unity, told a story of Unity solidarity. A few years ago, some of the middle school students from the arts school nearby ran up to the Unity building and said they wanted to “touch” the stairs of the gay school. They ran back to their school, laughing, and continued to shout, “gay school!” as they were running away. Terri noticed what they were doing, and walked outside up to the middle school students in the parking lot. She asked a few Unity students to come with her. Terri and the Unity students asked the middle school students what they were doing, and they responded that they were just messing around. She told them that they were not “the gay school,” but rather a school that accepted everyone, including gay people. Terri and the Unity students also gave the middle school students a pamphlet about the school’s mission and goals. Unity school has also experienced picketers protesting the school itself, and she has used the same strategy as she had with the middle school students from the arts school. Terri has decided to make the reputation of the school and administrative policies not just her “problem” or decision, but rather constructed a culture of school-wide responses and decision-making.

For instance, many of the students decided what media could and could not be allowed in the school. Terri told a story of how CNN wanted to come and interview some of the students on during the first week of the school’s existence eight years ago, and the students said no, we’re not ready. Terri had to call CNN and tell them that they could not do the interview. In the same vein, the students decided not to let MTV do a reality show in the school. Rick, one of the students I interviewed, reiterated his sentiments about MTV coming, which really spoke to Unity’s mission:

R: [Terri] told me that MTV wanted to do a reality show here.  
M: A whole reality show? Wow. I knew that MTV wanted to come, but not a whole reality show.  
R: Yeah, [Terri] said no. And I'm - thank God. Oh my God, thank God.  
M: There would have been cameras everywhere.  
R: No it would have been fake and not what this school is.  
M: So why do you think it would have been fake? Because it's MTV, so they would have made it like  
R: Have you seen MTV?  
M: Yes.  
R: Like Real World?  
M: Not recently, but yes Real World.  
R: Real World, you know Jersey Shore all that crap... It's - it's like I don't know man. [They have] all this drama crap.  
M: It's almost like they try to start it. They try to get people riled up.  
R: Mmm hmmm. And that's what high school is. *And that's not what we're about.* So go to any other high school, and you'll get a good reality show. Because they start up all the drama - we don't.

The solidarity was also echoed by the use of the pronoun “we” throughout numerous interviews. Rick’s last line regarding the MTV invitation was that “that’s not what we’re about,” and I began to notice throughout my interviews with the teachers as well that participants expressed a sense of community and that school was more about “we” than “I.” This small pronoun really speaks to how the participants view one another and their community in this space.

## **Bodies in queer spaces**

The definition of queer(ed) spaces goes beyond the physical and emotional manifestations of a shared community like a school, and infiltrates the body as well. When a school or any space has queer(ed) subjects moving through it, especially if they are predominantly queer(ed) subjects, it is necessary to define and

grapple with the queer(ed) body, and its re-construction in these safe(r) spaces. The queered bodies at Unity, mostly students but even teachers, are a reflection of how the hybrid queer identity in/outside of schooled spaces could reside. The queered body is a walking contraction; a student may feel safe to wear a wig or present as a different gender than when they go home for a family barbeque, for example. Marginalized bodies have always, already been re-constructed in these dynamic ways throughout time. How do queered bodies currently get constructed in these worlds? Queered bodies are both how the individual subject identifies nonheterosexual, but also the ascriptions of these identities by others. Many times students' bodies are (mis)read as different from the gendered norm, and that is the justification for bullying. This has nothing to do with their actual queer identifications or dis-identifications. How does queer corporeality complicate Judith Butler's notion of performativity, specifically for sexual minorities? According to Butler, performativity is not a one-time, single act, but rather the "reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names."<sup>33</sup> Further, Butler goes on to argue that "heterosexuality shapes a bodily contour that vacillates between materiality and the imaginary."<sup>34</sup> This imagined, figured world then could reside and be in material spaces and places. Performing in a space "matters" to the body in that there are many of the same representational codes, and embodied manifestations that take place. The representation of emotions and identities, for instance, that are displayed in these queer, separate spaces have just as many real behavioral and social consequences as their similar counterparts in the mainstream and master narrative worlds.

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<sup>33</sup> Butler, 1993, p. 2.

<sup>34</sup> Butler, 1993, p. 17.

Students who were harassed and bullied in their previous schools were not necessarily discriminated against because of explicit sexuality identifications. In fact, Elizabeth Meyer reminds us that many times the reasons students bully has to do with clothing, behavior, and mannerisms outside of the gendered norms. Queer bodies are regulated and violated not because of the subject's identifications, but because of their perceived defiance of what it means to be traditionally male or female. Meyer argues that the "social constructs of ideal masculinity and femininity are at the core of much bullying behavior."<sup>35</sup> Karen Corteen agrees that sexual dissidents are only allowed to be gay in specific spaces and places just like one of the participant's, Exotic Barbie's, decision to "dress like a boy" depending on where she was, and that lesbians need to display the "signs of being lesbian" or possess "signifiers of lesbian-ness" in order for bullying and violence to happen.<sup>36</sup>

Other students have echoed this by telling stories of how their bodies were interpreted to be anything from outside the norm of what it means to be a traditional male or female, and often had little or no correlation with their sexuality identifications. Elizabeth Grosz discusses how the body's surfaces already have "inscriptions...in three-dimensional space," and that materiality should "include and explain the operations of language, desire, and significance."<sup>37</sup> Grosz's definition of virtuality, then, could be used as a framework to ask questions about what it means to be virtually embodied, as a framework for how queer students have both a spatial present and their "link" (figuratively) to a larger world space.<sup>38</sup> Grosz defines virtuality as "the spark of the

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<sup>35</sup> Meyer, 2008, p. 39.

<sup>36</sup> Corteen, 2002, p. 271.

<sup>37</sup> Grosz, 2001, p. 210.

<sup>38</sup> Grosz, 2001, p. 128.

new that the virtual has over the possible...the capacity of the actual to be more than itself, to become other than the way it has always functioned.”<sup>39</sup> This new embodied virtuality may be a new embodied utopia, which could be argued is paradoxical and an oxymoron. When cultural inscriptions are made on the body, these cultural inscriptions must be transformed because of their environment, including their school. Although we can agree that virtuality is permeable, these identities are not protected by the reality of the spatial worlds – these spaces could be initially safe(r) places (spaces?) than their rural communities, farms, families, schools, homes. These spaces where (queer) students, as well as their teachers, “try on” different gender expressions, for instance, may be utopic at first glance, because this very re-location, for queer youth, as Grosz would argue, can in fact change their memories of experiences,<sup>40</sup> or how those memories (both “good” and “bad” ones) are constructed, told, and re-told in these environments and communities.

One of the teachers discussed his wardrobe choices at Unity, and how his clothing may change if he worked at a different school. Augustine is a middle school Math teacher at Unity and presents as fairly traditional-looking, White, heterosexual male. He shared a few stories about his clothing choices throughout the last year he has been a teacher there.

M: What would you miss if you had to leave?

C: Everything. My haircut. My outfit. I mean - this - this is me. I'm not joking. This is me - this is me before I started student teaching in college. This was me in high school. This is me in the summer time. It's just - it's me. Anywhere else - I'm not calling it a lack of respect or respect for any type of dress code or culture, but I would - I would respect another school's culture if that's what it was. And

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<sup>39</sup> Grosz, 2001, p. 130.

<sup>40</sup> Grosz, 2001, p. 119.

I would maintain a different type of professionalism. But like, I'm comfortable. And I don't lose any respect with my students because of the way I look.

Augustine's assertion that "this is me" and "I don't lose any respect with my students because of the way I look" re-emphasizes how performativity of the body and clothing choices go beyond the student community. The way in which the teachers choose to express themselves in the material world also plays a role in how Unity is a safe(r) and perhaps more comfortable space than other schools or settings. During my first day as a researcher at Unity, I dressed more professionally with "business casual" attire, and my response from the students was not unkind, but it was not friendly either. I was unintentionally creating a separation and looked more like an observer than one of the teachers, staff, or students. After about a week there, I changed my attire to more casual, to a T-shirt sporting queer-of colour idol Margaret Cho one day, and quickly realized that not only were the students more comfortable with me, but perhaps I was more comfortable in the space as well.

Partly because of this, my interactions changed, and so did my research. I also became more accustomed to the space, the people within it, and their comfort with me in that space as well. What will their memories of Unity be, and how are these memories, these stories, going to change how they quite literally walk through these spaces? Many of the student participants told me that they realized that their definitions of a school and a community began to shift. They were able to literally dress and express their gender in ways they had been intensely scrutinized for in their previous schools and homes. This new embodiment has shifted not only how they view and accept their own queer and nonqueer identities, but also how they view their relationships with their teachers. Because their spatial world

changed, their expression through their bodies, which is vital to any youth's development, began to change as well. Even the students who were not transgender have expressed how surprised they were at their ability to "dress the way they wanted" at Unity. It could be something as simple as dying their hair blue, or wearing makeup, or having long hair. Butler argues that if these bodies are visually represented in these safe spaces, then perhaps the norms of heterosexuality will be repeatedly "subverted, parodied, or challenged, [and then] dominant 'scripts' might change...geographers argue that *place* is the stage on which such performances are played out."<sup>41</sup>

The students are not the only ones subverting the gendered norms and boundaries at Unity. Augustine, shared one of his favorite Unity stories with me. He challenged the students in his class to improve their Math test scores with an incentive: he would dress in drag with two of his biological brothers and play a game of basketball with them. Trusting that Augustine would actually do it, many of the students test scores improved drastically in the next few weeks. In true Unity form, Augustine and his brothers all dressed in drag and played a game of basketball with the students. Augustine's team won, and he still has the dresses they wore hanging up in his classroom.

Many artifacts such as these from this newly constructed queer spatial world are evident at Unity. Augustine pointed to the dresses hung up on his wall with pride. Walking through the halls, it is evident that this place is truly the "island of the misfits," as one of the art teachers so eloquently named it. Many of the students are defiant of the gendered norms simply by how they walk, talk, dress, breathe, and present themselves in this school. The school psychologist is currently starting up a

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<sup>41</sup> Butler, qtd in Valentine, 1993, p. 650-651.



transgender student support group, and many of the students whom I interviewed talked about some of the transgender students having a “clique” and their own set of drama at this school. The transgender students are perhaps the new terrain and frontier of what it means to have a body that is well outside of the gendered scripts in schools. Still, there are grades of difference within Unity, specifically for the transgendered students, but they may not be as distinctive. Many of the non-transgendered students noted the transgender student clique, but instead of speaking about them as a marginalized group or a group that was not as popular as their own, they simply noted that the transgendered students felt they could “be themselves,” which was their example of how Unity was different from other schools. These are just some examples of what it means to be materially represented at Unity, and how those queer manifestations shape how the community defines the school.

## **Beyond violence and safety: Problems and implications**

Earlier, I have argued with Foucault, Morris and Rushbrook that queer bodies can be part of queering a space, and gone on to expand this view with Hubbard’s assertion that a queer person might choose to disengage from this process to protect themselves. When queer subjects occupy a space, one could argue that they are also making new meaning for that place, but this visibility, this being or living in a space, has its limitations. According to Larry Knopp, this very visibility that placement brings can “make us vulnerable to violence as well as facilitate our marginalization and exclusion from the security and pleasures that placement usually brings members of dominant groups. Many queers find a certain amount of solace, safety, and

pleasure being in motion or nowhere at all.”<sup>42</sup> This transitory “feeling” is echoed with many of the students’ literal homelessness, or sitting in between two different homes or families. This vacillation between these spaces and places provides a location to interrupt – specifically as it relates to not only social relations in and of these spaces, but also identity construction within them and through them. Kristie Fleckenstein emphasizes the reciprocity of space and relations, and explains that “places are created by actions and the interpretations of individuals as they wrestle with the problems posed by the place they create.”<sup>43</sup> Further, places emerge as a result of social interactions, relationships, and these places are nonlinear, always shifting constellations of identity formations and re-formations. “Space is often understood as interrelational, open, and multiplicitous”<sup>44</sup> and “not entirely synonymous with physical place.”<sup>45</sup> What does it mean, then, to not just think of space as a “backdrop,”<sup>46</sup> but rather multiple constructions of community, safety, and even visibility?

One example of “Unity transference” was shared during my conversation with Jennifer, a teacher at Unity and the leader of the restorative justice program there. She and some of the other teachers planned a workshop for some teachers at another school to learn restorative justice circles. The outside teachers were interested in learning “how” to facilitate the circles so they could “bring them back” to their school. As Jennifer and the other Unity students moved through the circle process, Jennifer could tell that some of the teachers just were not “getting it” because they were not fully participating in the process. They still had the

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<sup>42</sup> Knopp, 2007, p. 23.

<sup>43</sup> Fleckenstein, 2005, p. 165.

<sup>44</sup> Massey, 1999, quoted in Chavez, 2010, p. 4.

<sup>45</sup> Chavez, 2010, p. 4.

<sup>46</sup> Shome, 2003, p. 39.

mindset that they wanted to “fix” the students problems, instead of facilitate a discussion and conversation between the students, and ultimately set up a community of trust. Jennifer said she was disappointed, but pointed out that Unity’s practices cannot necessarily always be simply transplanted into another school simply by taking a day-long workshop or retreat. Unity lives and breathes its foundations, and the teachers in particular are committed, above all else, to “listen to the students’ stories.”

Yet, as Laura, the social worker, has pointed out, Unity is not a totally frictionless, un-problematic space. The intersections between race and queerness specifically should be addressed, and the fact that all the teachers are White, which was pointed out by the school social worker, is still an issue. How can many (queer) students of color, for instance, feel truly safe when all of their teachers are White? Zeus Leonardo tackles the idea of safe spaces in relation to race dialogue. His argument is that no space can really be safe when there are subjects present who are already in positions of power. In this case, one could make the case that since all of the teachers are White and many (but not all) are heterosexual-identified, how safe is Unity? Further, Leonardo suggests that the violence that Whites embody toward people of color is often “violence of the heart rather than the fist.”<sup>47</sup> One of Leonardo’s solutions to this is to create risk as the antidote to safety,<sup>48</sup> and perhaps a comfortable dialogue about race “belies the actual structures of race, which is full of tension. It is literally out of sync with its own topic.”<sup>49</sup> I agree that safety is not always possible even within spaces where community is strong, and even in places that people define as home, as is the case with Unity.

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<sup>47</sup> Leonardo and Porter, 2010, p. 151.

<sup>48</sup> Leonardo and Porter, 2010, p. 153.

<sup>49</sup> Leonardo and Porter, 2010, p. 153.

There are the realities of race and power relations embedded and seeping through all seemingly “safe” spaces. Unity is not immune.

Queered spaces and Unity in particular provide a new space of occupation for marginalized groups, a new area of exploration for underrepresented populations, however limited, constrained, and reflective of the “real world” (former school, home, community) they may be. These situated identities within these imagined spatial worlds and spaces provide different avenues for expression, identification, and identity work to take place. What does it mean to queer a space, and to “make it safe”? Catherine Fox calls for a re-definition of safe spaces by changing the “safe” to “safer”. She contends that by adding an “r” to safe:

... calls attention to the tensions inherent in any discussion and action aimed to counteract multiple forms of terror and violence...it calls to ‘unfix’ our definition of safety, and, instead engage safety as a process through which we establish dialogues that create and re-create spaces where queer people are more free from physical and psychic violence...it calls us to consider the ways that safety has been too often equated with comfort around normative gender and race identities that reproduce a White male guy at the center of these spaces<sup>50</sup>

Through practices that range from the more formal restorative justice circles to conversations with picketers to a basketball game in drag, Unity has set a standard for a more transformative learning process for its students, regardless of their identifications. By committing to simply listen to students’ stories, teachers have re-created and been integral players in this community as much as the students. Through taking risks that resist some of the norms of formal education, Unity is in a way creating different avenues of learning and being.

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<sup>50</sup> Fox, 2010, p. 643.

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## Appendix A: Poster on every classroom door

### *Respect*

Use appropriate language  
Help to keep noise levels down in hallways and common areas  
Reserve elevator use for those who need it  
Knock softly before entering classrooms, if not your own  
Be mindful of your surroundings and the work of others  
Congratulate others on their successes

### *Responsibility*

Work together to keep our school tidy both inside and out  
Leave it better than you found it  
Be impeccable with your words  
Stay positive and motivated  
Represent yourself and others using positive language  
Use your time wisely  
Do your BEST at all times

### *Safety*

Let the staff know if there is a problem  
Use cell phones responsibly  
Remind guests to sign in at the office  
Be a role model by being in class on time  
Use the BUDDY system at the bus stop  
Be aware of your surroundings  
Enter and exit the building using the front doors

**Dr. Mel Freitag** is currently the Director of Diversity Initiatives in the University of Wisconsin-Madison's School of Nursing. She recently finished her PhD from the Department of Curriculum and Instruction, and her dissertation is titled "Safety in Spaces: A School's Story of Identity and Community." Using the insight she gained from her research, she plans to continue to serve historically underrepresented students in her new role through mentoring, student programs, curriculum initiatives and faculty/staff professional development. She hopes the students' and teachers' voices and stories will shape how and what it means to be a welcoming, supportive, and safe(r) school. She lives on the bustling east side of Madison, Wisconsin with her partner, two cats, and one adventurous dog.

## Position Paper

### Safety for K-12 students: United States policy concerning LGBT student safety must provide inclusion

*April Sanders*

**S**tudents who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT) are at risk for harassment due to their sexual orientation or gender identification with over 85% of LGBT students in the United States (US) reporting such harassment.<sup>1</sup> These statistics demonstrate one aspect of the significance of this issue, but the cost of human life in some instances has revealed another layer of importance related to a need for safety policies for LGBT students. Even though a need exists for such policies, the practice of heteronormativity found in US policymaking regarding bullying does not protect victims or curb the violence. This essay highlights several recent developments in anti-bullying policy in US schools that shows the existence of heteronormativity, which is not helping to protect LGBT students. By understanding the discrimination encouraged by current policy, future policy can be better shaped to protect LGBT students.

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<sup>1</sup> Biegel and Keuhl, 2010.

## Overview of heteronormativity

Heteronormativity is a theoretical concept that analyzes the difference between homosexual and heterosexual, and establishes heterosexuality as the norm. Homosexuality is then judged as an alternative against the norm. Even though heteronormativity does not explicitly label homosexuality as deviant, the practice does encourage the inference that homosexuality is in opposition to what is considered normal. Silencing is one way to practice heteronormativity, and it can be done through the process of systematic exclusion.<sup>2</sup> Systematic exclusion can be defined as “ignoring or denying the presence of lesbian, gay, and bisexual people.”<sup>3</sup> Such silence does not always have to come from heterosexual individuals. When LGBT people remain silent about their relationships and lives, they convey an LGBT identity as something of which to feel shame.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, when teachers and administrators are silent about anti-LGBT bullying, the same inference about shame is given to students. Along with silence, teachers and administrators imply negative connotations about LGBT identities when they demonstrate they are not comfortable saying words like gay and lesbian.<sup>5</sup> Yet, the way to oppose heteronormativity is to be open when discussing LGBT issues with students so that they can form their own truth.<sup>6</sup> Hoffman describes such absence of discussion and acknowledgement as a “conspiracy of silence we have all entered into” with a result that “can only damage their [students] chances of emerging whole from their school years.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Friend, 1993.

<sup>3</sup> Friend, 1993, p. 210.

<sup>4</sup> DePalma and Atkison, 2009.

<sup>5</sup> DePalma and Atkison, 2009.

<sup>6</sup> Nelson, 2009.

<sup>7</sup> Hoffman, 1993, p. 56.

## US education and policy

All children in the United States have access to free public schools. Formal schooling in the US lasts 12-13 years, beginning at age 6 in kindergarten and lasting until around age 18 in the 12<sup>th</sup> grade. The requirement to attend school ends by age 16 in most states; the remaining states require students to attend school until they are 17 or 18. Education is primarily the responsibility of state and local government; the individual states have great control over their schools, and policy is largely created by each individual school district at a local level.<sup>8</sup> This brief explanation is included to demonstrate that school policy affects the life of US school children for the majority of their first two decades of life, thus shaping their perspectives.

## LGBT students: An at-risk population

The National Mental Health Association (NHMA) has designated LGBT students as an at-risk population in US schools, and reports that their high level of risk is a result of the stress around them and “not because of their inherently gay or lesbian identity orientation.”<sup>9</sup> The high level of suicide rates as well as homelessness in this population of students could be connected to Tomsho’s study showing LGBT students or those perceived to be LGBT were bullied twice as often as students who were not LGBT.<sup>10</sup> In a 2008 study conducted by the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN), students said they did not report bullying due to their belief that no action would be taken by school officials, and 1/3 of the students surveyed said they had reported the mistreatment with no response from the school. The lack of response from school officials is another link in the chain

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<sup>8</sup> *United States Department of Education*, <http://www.ed.gov/>

<sup>9</sup> National Mental Health Association, <http://www.nmha.org/go/information/get-info/children-s-mental-health/bullying-and-gay-youth>

<sup>10</sup> Tomsho, 2003.

of harassment LGBT students experience resulting in negative self-images and stunted emotional growth, which contributes to problems with social interaction.<sup>11</sup> LGBT students are developing an identity in a society that is telling them that homosexuality is deviant. Most of their credible sources of leadership, such as ministers or teachers or family members, are sending the message that homosexuality is not the accepted norm, and these young people then could begin to learn that hiding their identity when their adolescent years begin is one way to navigate when “social interaction and sexual strivings coincide with formulating an adult identity.”<sup>12</sup> Although, the precarious nature of how LGBT students will respond to developing their identity will vary, especially as various perspectives of inclusion are introduced.

## Heteronormativity in policy

Local policies within school districts across the US vary in whether or not sexual orientation is specifically listed in the bullying policy observed by school administrators. One trend in policymaking is to avoid discussing LGBT issues as they are connected to the bullying. Tennessee State Senator Stacey Campfield is the sponsor of State Bill 049, which is also known as the “Don’t Say Gay” bill. Campfield believes school officials should be banned from discussing LGBT issues at school even in relation to anti-gay bullying and harassment. The bill is described as a neutral bill since school officials would not be allowed to discuss LGBT topics through the ninth grade.<sup>13</sup> Far from neutral, the bill encourages discrimination against LGBT students through the silence mandated in this attempt of neutrality policy. The message this bill teaches youth is that school officials cannot even talk about LGBT topics because of the associated shame: “Schools are always and already addressing oppression, often by reinforcing it or at least allowing it to continue playing out unchallenged, and often without realizing that they are doing

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<sup>11</sup> Ryan and Futterman, 1998.

<sup>12</sup> Ryan and Futterman, 1998, p. 5.

<sup>13</sup> Humphrey, 2011.

so.”<sup>14</sup> The silence mandated by this bill is a clear reinforcement of oppression against LGBT students through the practice of heteronormativity.

Anoka-Hennepin School District in Minnesota has been debating this neutrality policy. This district is Minnesota’s largest district serving over 40,000 students. The district had 6 suicides throughout the 2009-10 school year, and friends and parents of the students claimed that all were experiencing anti-gay bullying and harassment. One of the suicide victims was Justin Aaberg who was 15 years old and hanged himself in his room in July of 2010. Justin’s mother, Tammy Aaberg, believes the neutrality policy encouraged anti-gay bullying against her son, and she claims to have not even been notified of some instances of anti-gay bullying of which school officials were aware. The neutrality policy instructed administrators not to discuss that anti-gay was the root of the bullying. In August 2010, the district amended the policy to specifically include anti-gay bullying, but opponents of this policy contend that addressing specifics about the victim is not necessary and should not be discussed in the school setting.<sup>15</sup> The silence in schools when discussing anti-LGBT bullying is a clear example of how heteronormativity works to create an environment where only one sexual identity – heterosexuality – is considered normal and without shame. The neutrality policy is in essence a silence policy, and silence leads to further prejudice.

## **Solutions for future policy**

Even though school districts can choose whether or not to include sexual orientation in policy, one particular landmark court case in the US could begin to have great impact on local policies created by school districts. In *Nabozny v. Podlesny*, the ruling determined that a public school could be held accountable for not stopping antigay abuse.<sup>16</sup> Jamie Nabozny experienced repeated

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<sup>14</sup> Kumashiro, 2004, p. XXIV.

<sup>15</sup> Crary, 2010.

<sup>16</sup> Brief of Appellant, *Nabozny v. Podlesny*, No. 95-3634, 1995.

antigay harassment at his public school in Ashland, Wisconsin, eventually leading to his need for surgery from being kicked excessively in the stomach. When Nabozny reported the bullying, his middle school principal told him: “If you’re going to be openly gay you have to expect this kind of stuff.”<sup>17</sup> This case is important because it demonstrates that one possibility for providing protection for LGBT students in a heteronormative society is through the legal system. Since school districts and school officials can legally be held accountable for not intervening in antigay harassment, the legal system could motivate school officials to protect LGBT students. Such protection might be motivated only by fear of large settlements that could financially bankrupt the school district, but protection would still be provided.

The Nabozny ruling was a historic decision and held public schools responsible for intervening in LGBT bullying in order to provide a safe school environment for all students – no matter the sexual orientation or sexual identity. Nabozny settled for just under \$1 million in damages with the school district.<sup>18</sup> This significant case relates to local policy because school officials and districts can now be held responsible for not stopping anti-LGBT bullying, which means students and school officials must be allowed to discuss LGBT issues related to the bullying. Overcoming silence is one very effective way to combat heteronormativity.

Legal action is not a fully effective solution for helping LGBT students targeted by bullying. In spite of the Nabozny ruling, most states only have a policy that prohibits bullying based on race, sex, religion, national origin, and disability.<sup>19</sup> Only 13 states prohibit sexual orientation discrimination against students who are victims of bullying: California, Colorado, Connecticut, District of Columbia, Illinois, Iowa, Massachusetts, Minnesota,

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<sup>17</sup> Brief of Appellant, *Nabozny v. Podlesny*, No. 95-3634, 1995.

<sup>18</sup> Brummel, 2010.

<sup>19</sup> Wolfe, 2010.



New Jersey, New York, Vermont, Washington, and Wisconsin.<sup>20</sup> Additional measures must be taken to help overcome heteronormative policies.

The Safe Schools Improvement Act (SSIA) would amend the Elementary and Secondary Education Act to require school districts that receive federal funds from the national government to create a policy addressing bullying based specifically on sexual orientation. The SSIA would also require states to report data on bullying and harassment to the Department of Education, and this report would be provided to Congress every two years. Senator Robert Casey (Democrat Party Member from Pennsylvania) and Senator Mark Kirk (Republican Party Member from Illinois) reintroduced the SSIA in the Senate on March 8, 2011; currently, the bill is being discussed in committee.<sup>21</sup>

In the past two years, several significant changes have been made in policy at the district level in some areas across the country concerning the bullying and harassment of LGBT students. In April of 2011, the San Diego Unified School District Board of Education unanimously approved an anti-bullying, harassment and intimidation policy including anti-LGBT specifically as a cause.<sup>22</sup> The Minneapolis School Board voted unanimously in January of 2011 to add to the district's anti-LGBT bullying policy with a resolution requiring incidents of anti-LGBT bullying to be tracked. In addition to the policy change, the district will also add LGBT health issues to the sexual health curriculum and provide a yearly training for teachers on how to deal with LGBT training.<sup>23</sup> By addressing anti-LGBT bullying, the silence can begin to be broken because allowing policies that do not address anti-LGBT discrimination further justifies that the discrimination is acceptable and should be tolerated.

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<sup>20</sup> Biegel and Kuehl, 2010.

<sup>21</sup> S. 506--112th Congress: Safe Schools Improvement Act of 2011.

<sup>22</sup> Braatz, 2011.

<sup>23</sup> Williams, 2011.

A model policy should be enacted within all school districts across the US to protect LGBT students as well as the school district. Clearly stating in policy that bullying and harassment of LGBT students will not be tolerated sends a message to teachers, administrators, and students that the school should be safe for all students and not just the socially favored ones. The NEA, the National PTA, the American Association of School Administrators, and the National Association of Secondary School Principals all endorse the specific listing of anti-gay bullying and harassment in public school policy as a way to help provide a safe school environment for LGBT students.<sup>24</sup> Policy alone will not solve the problem of violence and homophobia directed at LGBT students. The recognition of the problem in policy at all levels including local, state, and national is simply a starting point in an attempt to provide LGBT students a basic right of safety in school. By establishing a policy that is uniform across all US school districts, students will then be able to go beyond the silent tolerance of difference and instead be able to discuss, respect, and accept differences.

## Conclusion

In spite of the heightened awareness of the bullying issue and the strong concern for students, the majority of states within the US do not have anti-bullying laws specifically focusing on anti-LGBT bullying. By avoiding the inclusion of anti-LGBT bullying measures in school and public policy, a silence related to homophobia is currently being allowed to exist around the issue of protecting LGBT youth. Such silence and avoidance of including anti-LGBT bullying in the policies demonstrates the practice of heteronormativity. Local school policy as well as state and national legislative measures should break the silence and very clearly include anti-LGBT bullying, and until such inclusion exists, public officials and school administrators in the US are encouraging a clear expression of discrimination.

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<sup>24</sup> Wolfe, 2010.

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## Queer spawn on school

*Rachel Epstein, Becky Idems  
and Adinne Schwartz*

**T**his article is about the school experiences of young people with LGBTQ parents.<sup>1</sup> Based on 31 interviews with youth, ages 10 – 18, the article attempts to summarize what these young people had to say about the challenges they encounter in school, and the strategies they adopt in the face of them.

There is a large and growing body of literature addressing the experiences of sexual minority youth. Many studies have documented the stresses of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and queer (LGBTQ) identities (disclosed or not) on young people. Schools, in particular, are identified as environments where LGBTQ-identified youth experience ongoing harassment and bullying.<sup>2</sup> Distressingly, the literature shows that little is done to address homophobic aggression. It appears that, while teachers are aware of homophobic bullying, they are “confused, unable or unwilling

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<sup>1</sup> A previous version of this text has been published in “Who’s your daddy and other writings on queer parenting, 2009, edited by Rachel Epstein. Toronto: Sumach Press.

<sup>2</sup> Baker, 2002; D’Augelli, 1999; Goodenow and Hack, 1998; Renold, 2002; Russell, Seif and Truong, 2001; Savin-Williams, 1994; Thurlow, 2001; Warwick, Aggleton and Douglas, 2001.

to address the needs of lesbian and gay pupils.”<sup>3</sup> In recent years, this research on the impacts of homophobia on LGBTQ youth has been utilized, alongside the efforts of community activists, to support struggles for basic human rights with regards to sexual and gender diversity. One such hard-won victory is the legislated requirement that all publically funded school boards in the province of Ontario, Canada must support students who want to establish a Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA).

However, anti-homophobia initiatives in schools typically focus on queer youth, often excluding children and youth with LGBTQ parents, sometimes referred to a “culturally queer” or “queer spawn” (QS), terms coined by Stefan Lynch of COLAGE (Children of Lesbians and Gays Everywhere).<sup>4</sup> Many young people with LGBTQ parents are recognizing, as they grow older, that their experiences being raised in LGBTQ communities and cultures can have a bearing on their identities and sense of belonging. Many are challenging queer communities to create spaces that are welcoming to them, particularly to those who are, in Lynch’s terms, erotically straight but culturally queer. The term “queer spawn,” like “queer”, is not embraced by all to whom it refers. Differential responses to these terms are embedded in history, in preference, and in identity. We choose to use the term “queer spawn” (QS) in this article to refer to children and young people with one or more LGBTQ parents. We recognize that not all the people for whom we are using the term would self-identify in this way.

However, we do think that most young people with LGBTQ parents would agree that they often have a unique experience at school. The homophobic, transphobic and heterosexist teasing

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<sup>3</sup> Warwick et al., 2001.

<sup>4</sup> Garner, 2004.

and harassment of which they may be targets are not necessarily due to their own sexual orientation or gender identity, but often stem from their parent's sexual and/or gender identities and their family structures. They may be straight-identified themselves, but find themselves identifying with and defending queer people and cultures. Abigail Garner, in her book *Families Like Mine*, refers to the "bicultural identity of heterosexual children who are linked to queerness through their heritage." While not all children of LGBTQ parents identify as straight, those that do sometimes find that it is not always clear where they fit, in relation to queer or straight culture.<sup>5</sup> Sometimes even in anti-homophobia initiatives and committees such as Gay/Straight Alliances (GSAs), queer spawn have to explain their presence, as reported by one of our participants:

There was one instance where I was at the lesbian/gay orientation week activity. And people were like 'why are you here?' They were kind of confused and so I had to explain my history to them... (girl/16/lesbian moms)

This exclusion of queer spawn within LGBTQ communities is echoed in the relatively scant literature attending to their lives and concerns.

Studies that do exist on culturally queer children and youth link their safety at school with strategic choices about whether, and how, to disclose the sexual and/or gender identities of their parents.<sup>6</sup> Elsewhere, queer spawn experiences of school are framed more theoretically, exploring how experiences of heterosexism and homophobia impact personal identity development.<sup>7</sup> For the most part, research on queer spawn

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<sup>5</sup> Garner, 2004; Gustavson and Schmitt, 2011; Ryan, 2010.

<sup>6</sup> Garner, 2004; Gustavson and Schmitt, 2011; Ryan, 2010.

<sup>7</sup> Kavalanka and Goldberg, 2009.



experience provides broad accounts of queer spawn life, with school as one facet.

Between 2007 and 2009, the Egale Canada Human Rights Trust<sup>8</sup> surveyed more than 3,700 students across Canada and found that more than a third of youth with LGBTQ parents reported being verbally harassed about their parents' sexual orientation, and 27 per cent reported being physically harassed. Those youth were also more likely to be harassed about their own gender expression, and their own perceived sexual orientation or gender identity. Just over 60 per cent of students with LGBTQ parents reported that they feel unsafe at school, and that young people will sometimes avoid disclosing that their parents are LGBTQ in order to protect themselves.

This article foregrounds the voices of 31 queer spawn, as they share the day-to-day nuances of the challenges they face at school, the strategies they adopt in response to these challenges, and the supports they feel are important. Based on these accounts, we offer QS-centered recommendations to help parents, teachers, and administrators offer appropriate supports, while working towards transformative changes that will make schools safer for all members of LGBT communities, including queer spawn.

## **The study**

The LGBTQ Parenting Network (PN), a community-based program located in Toronto, Canada, provides resources, information and support to lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and queer (LGBTQ) parents, prospective parents and their families

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<sup>8</sup> Taylor and Peter with McMinn, Elliott, Beldom, Ferry, Gross, Paquin, and Schachter, 2011.

(see [www.lgbtqparentingconnection.ca](http://www.lgbtqparentingconnection.ca)). The PN was initiated in 2001 by the Family Service Association of Toronto, and is currently a program of the Sherbourne Health Centre in downtown Toronto. At its inception in 2001, the PN held a series of focus groups asking LGBTQ parents about the kinds of programs they would find helpful. Across the board, the issue of biggest concern was schools: How will our children experience homophobia/heterosexism at school and how do we prepare them to respond? When and how do we intervene individually and/or collectively with other parents and community members?

In 2004, partially in response to these concerns, the PN initiated a research project designed to explore the experiences of young people with LGBTQ parents in relation to the ways that homophobia, transphobia, and heterosexism manifest in their daily lives, with particular emphasis on their school experiences. The project took place at a particular political moment in Canada: a nation-wide debate about same-sex marriage. While, in fact, the majority of Canadians supported same-sex marriage, the debate unleashed a torrent of homophobic outrage, based on arguments about the “natural connections between marriage, sex and procreation,” on the immorality of homosexual relationships, and the risks to children living in lesbian/gay households. Many LGBTQ parents were concerned about their children being subject to these debates; some were shielding their children from news sources, and others felt isolated in the face of this backlash and worried for the well-being of their children.

In this context, and with funding from the Wellesley Central Health Corporation, the PN launched a research project designed to explore the impact of the same-sex marriage debate on children and youth with LGBTQ parents, with particular emphasis on what was happening in schools. Centered around

the level of awareness of children and young people about the public debates on the marriage rights of parents like theirs, this study engaged 31 queer spawn, as well as 17 parents and 15 teachers in discussion about the school experiences of culturally queer kids. These conversations were specifically focused on the impact of the public debate about whether or not it is good for children to live in LGBTQ households, on queer spawn and their parents; while more generally exploring the experiences of culturally queer kids in urban, rural, and suburban Canadian classrooms. Our questions included: What have teachers who are committed to anti-homophobia work in their classrooms noticed in terms of the impact of the debate on what is happening in their classrooms? What kinds of experiences are kids and young people with LGBTQ parents having in schools, with extended family, in community? What factors help them to feel safe to talk about their families, experiences of discrimination, exclusion, bullying, name-calling or other forms of homophobic and transphobic harassment at school, in their families and in communities?

Our research methodology was guided by principles of community-based participatory research as synthesized by Israel, et al.<sup>9</sup> These include the establishment of collaborative working partnerships between community members, organizational representatives and researchers in all aspects of the research process, with the aim of increasing understanding and knowledge of research priorities and questions that arise from community concerns. The knowledge generated is used to enhance the health and well-being of community members and to further social justice.

The project was guided by a community advisory committee, consisting of partner organizations, academics, community

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<sup>9</sup> Israel, Schulz, Parker and Becker, 1998.

activists, LGBTQ parents, teachers, and service providers to LGBTQ families. Our triangulated research approach included documentation of the public discourse surrounding the same-sex marriage debate; interviews with key informants; and on-line surveys and group interviews, with children/youth living in LGBTQ-led families, LGBTQ parents and teachers. In total we conducted group interviews with 31 young people with LGBTQ parents, 17 LGBTQ parents of teenagers, and 15 teachers.

This article is based solely on the group interviews with 31 young people with LGBTQ parents. The interviews were conducted by Rachel Epstein, a long-time LGBTQ parenting activist, coordinator of the PN, and an LGBTQ parent herself. Interview groups consisted of 2 – 7 young people at a time, based on age group (10-11; 12-14; 15-18) and availability. Most were held at the Family Service Association offices, although one took place at a regular meeting of COLAGE (Children of Lesbian And Gays Everywhere), a support group for children/youth with LGBTQ parents. Interviews were guided by a set of questions (see Appendix A), with room to follow up on areas of interest and themes generated by participants. We found that the interviews, in most cases, became primarily focused on school experiences. Young people spend an enormous amount of their time at school and it appears to be at school that young people with LGBTQ parents are most confronted with negative ideas and behaviours based on the composition of their families and/or the sexual orientation/gender identity of their parents. We have focused in this article on young people's accounts of their school experiences.

Below we have tried to capture some of the distinct and under-recognized school experiences of queer spawn, and to draw out some of the strategies they employ to deal with the homophobia

and heterosexism they encounter. Our interviewees range in age from 8-18. 18 are girls, 13 are boys. More than a third speak a language in addition to English, and they identify with a variety of cultures and ethnicities, including Canadian, WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant), Jewish, Sri-Lankan, First Nations, Caucasian, Portuguese, Italian, Polish, African-Canadian, British, Chinese, and Armenian. They describe an array of family arrangements. About one quarter have at least one heterosexual parent. Others describe a gay, lesbian, and/or trans two-parent “nuclear family,” or a “blended family,” created when their birth parents separated and formed new families. Several are co-parented by lesbians and gay men. Because the majority of the young people we interviewed have parents who identify as gay or lesbian, the workings of bi and transphobia are less addressed in this article. For an excellent resource for children of trans parents, see the *Kids of Trans Resource Guide*,<sup>10</sup> developed by COLAGE.<sup>11</sup>

The main commonality amongst the QS interviewed here is that almost 90% have at least one lesbian parent. Another common feature is their urban location: 87% were living in a large Canadian city at the time of the interviews; 4 respondents describe living in a mid-size community.

This article is written by three queer activists, one of whom is also a parent. Thus our use of the words “our” and “us” rather than “they” or “them” when talking about members of LGBTQ communities. Interspersed with our reflections, the voices of these 31 queer spawn offer insight into the questions: How do homophobia and heterosexism manifest at school? What helps?

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<sup>10</sup> Canfield-Lenfest, 2008.

<sup>11</sup> People with a lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or queer parent: [www.colage.org](http://www.colage.org)

What doesn't help? More specifically, how do those who are involved with QS in school (their peers, parent of their peers, teachers and administrators) contribute to making the experiences of QS more or less challenging? This article is written for parents, teachers and school administrators and we conclude with a summary of suggestions from QS about the factors that assist in creating positive experiences at school. These suggestions can help inform the practice of parents, teachers and administrators as well as others who are in a position to advocate for the well-being of QS.

### **What happens: Queer spawn at school**

It is important to state at the outset that while the young people we talked to described profoundly heterosexist and homophobic school cultures, they do not have only negative experiences at school. Some have experienced very little homophobic harassment at school; others describe supportive actions and attitudes from teachers and peers. This section will focus on QS's accounts of their experiences of homophobia and heterosexism within classrooms, and attempt to tease out their understandings of the links between institutional practices, and the attitudes and actions of teachers, parents and peers.

#### *Everyday heterosexism: "Straight until proven otherwise"*

Despite the positive experiences described by some respondents, the culture in most schools continues to be deeply homophobic and heterosexist. QS describe a range of ways this manifests in daily school life, from every-day put-downs, to direct teasing, to harassment and bullying from peers and their peers' parents, as well as from teachers. They are aware of heterosexism within day-to-day administrative practices and curriculum:

It's also about forms, when it says 'father' and 'mother' (*a lot of agreement in the background*) and we have to cross it out and write 'mother.' I hate that. I should be like parent or guardian one and parent or guardian two. It's really oppressive, every time having to cross it out...even at my school which was very progressive, a very awesome school, but even they had forms that said 'mother' and 'father.' It's just annoying...it's like straight until proven otherwise. (girl/18/lesbian mom)

Last year I was taking an introduction to sociology, anthropology and psychology and you had to make this chart and I couldn't do it - it didn't work with my family so I went up to my teacher and she's like "oh well, you can just do it on some other famous family." And I'm like, "No, I don't want to. I want to do it on my family, just like everyone else is doing". She was like, "No you can't." It's this scientific stupid thing. So I made one up and was like "You can fail me if you want because it's not real, but I don't care. I'm not doing it". She's like "do the Eaton's." I was like "No, I want to do my family." She knew my parents were lesbians and didn't even think when she gave the assignment that it might be an issue, and it was just ridiculous. (girl/16/lesbian moms)

Identifying the exclusionary functions of ordinary classroom practices such as permission forms and classroom activities, respondents describe feelings that range from invisibility and not-belonging, to a sense of being deliberately ignored, uncared for, and/or excluded.

*Harassment: "That's so gay! Who's your real mom?"*

A sense of not belonging is heightened when QS become the target of teasing or harassment. QS describe harassment from peers that ranges from yelling "ewwww" at them in the playground, to taunting them for supposedly "gay" behaviours, to shutting them out of social circles. They recount many variations on the ubiquitous "that's so gay": many of their peers commonly use words like "Gaylord", and "Lesbo", and sing homophobic rhymes and songs.

The time I felt most awful... I was talking to one of my best friends and I told him my parents were gay....He kind of like sat there and looked at me and he's like 'are they Gaylord?' (boy/10/ trans lesbian mom and bi mom)

Some interviewees distinguish between these more generic insults, which are often applied as random put-downs, devoid of understanding, and more deliberate teasing, name-calling and harassment.

They were just always teasing me...I'd be minding my own business in the playground or doing whatever at lunchtime and they'd just come up and start calling me names...I don't think they knew the word lesbian, they weren't smart enough, they were just like 'you're gay' or 'you're a fag'. ...always asking me questions about my mother, 'do you have two mothers...that's so weird, that's so stupid.' (girl/16/lesbian mom)

Name-calling, calling me stupid and saying that it was my fault that my mother was a lesbian and that it was a problem that she has a partner that was a woman...and that it was against every religion known to mankind and that it was the wrong way to be... He wasn't a Christian, but he used that as an excuse to pick on me. (girl/14/lesbian mom)

QS also describe questioning from both peers and adults, based on stereotypes and misinformation, framing it as unwanted and intrusive:

'So who's your real mom?' 'Where or who's your dad?' 'Do you know your dad?' 'How were you born?'...the worst I got that from was actually adults...a close family friend [*of a friend*] was there and she found out I had four moms and she just didn't get it, and I spent the whole TTC ride trying to explain. (girl/16/lesbian moms)



It is within this context of teasing and unwanted questions about the intimate details of their home lives that QS describe the emotional and social impact of negative messages and homophobic attitudes:

I kind of built a wall against myself like to shield myself from certain people. (girl/14/lesbian mom)

They would suddenly accuse that boy of being gay and say ‘Oh, you’re so nasty. Oh that’s wrong.’ It’s kind of like a movement-sensored dynamite - you flick, you take one little move, the dynamite goes off. (boy/10/ trans lesbian mom and bi mom)

I especially wanted to beat the crap out of one guy...but I knew that I’d be the one who’d be hurt, cause it was all of them who were saying it...I was like really sad and angry at the same time, but I didn’t do anything. I didn’t say anything, I just, I just stood there, and then I felt like, why am I gonna stand here with six bastards around me, so what I did was go back inside the school...they like, nobody knows, nobody except people I can actually trust. (boy/9/lesbian mom)

Faced with the ever-present possibility of a homophobic comment or unwanted question, QS describe their school experiences as sometimes involving constant vigilance, self-protective behaviour and a sense of helplessness.

*The target of teasing: “They go for your weak spot”*

Some kids note the constant presence of teasing in their lives, “every day, every week.” Many come to understand that homophobic teasing, like most teasing, is designed to hit at your ‘weak spot.’ One young woman describes how information about her parents was used against her:

...once they found out about my parents they used it against me. I was harassed on MSN...they accused me of looking down girls’

shirts, and because my parents were gay they suspected that I was gay. And everyone knew it and no one defended me and honestly it was terrible, and I'm thinking to myself 'you know that I'm not, and you're just making this up so you can get to me'. And then it really did. (girl/16/lesbian moms)

This account stands in stark contrast with that of another respondent who describes mostly positive school experiences:

All my life I've gone to an alternative school and I've never been bullied. It's also like how confident you are. It's part of my opening introduction now, it's like "Hi, I'm ... and I have two moms." Just because I want to get it out in the open, I don't like to leave it there cause then someone figures it out...so like I feel confident about it. If you're not then people might see that weakness and start bullying you. It's about being confident and not trying to hide it. Cause you try to hide it and I think that's how people see your weakness. (girl/13/lesbian moms)

Both of these accounts suggest the need to look more deeply at how classrooms address bullying and harassment more generally. They also suggest the need to examine individual supports for children and youth—the ways that teachers and parents might encourage comfort and confidence in QS, which the second respondent seems to suggest has the effect of inoculating her against potential teasing.

### *Attitudes from home: "Bad as poo"*

While education of teachers, school administrators, and students is critical, these accounts from young people call for education on a much broader front, by reminding us that children's attitudes do not develop within a vacuum. Many QS suggest that many of their peers learn homophobic attitudes at home, from parents and other family members.

...there are the kids who are exposed to homophobic views from their parents or wherever...when I first started school they weren't knowledgeable enough to even verbalize what they thought, like they wouldn't even know what a lesbian was, because if your parents don't literally talk to you about the issues, you wouldn't be able to even approach it at all. (girl/18/lesbian moms)

...with the kids you kind of have to say 'look, this is what it is,' and then after they've learned a bit about it then often they're fairly supportive but often they don't even really know about it at all...and then they'll say something that they've learned at home or that they've heard somewhere and it will be something bad about gays or lesbians, like once somebody actually said he heard it at home that gay and lesbian people were as bad as poo. (girl/13/gay dads)

These accounts, and others, call for recognition of the complex and layered ways that the beliefs and prejudices of families of origin play out in the schoolyard and classroom behaviours of individual students. In particular, they suggest that lessons learned at home have an impact on what children and youth perceive as normal or deviant, and thus might view as a 'weak spot' in their QS peers.

*Teachers' attitudes: "A child should be raised by a man and a woman"*

Complicating matters is the reality that not all teachers are on side. Many lack the cultural competency necessary to fully support the QS in their classrooms, while still others inadvertently or intentionally perpetuate homophobia and heterosexism. This lack of knowledge, awareness, and sensitivity to the realities of LGBTQ families can lead to serious exclusions in curriculum and classroom activities:

When I handed [*the family tree assignment*] in to the substitute he was just utterly confused about how I could not have a father and

how could I not have filled it out properly. So I just didn't fill it out and I sat at my desk the whole day, the whole day, because he said that until I finished my work I wasn't allowed to do anything. (girl/11/lesbian moms)

...my teacher was really great except my mom told me that when I was in senior kindergarten, we were making pots for Mother's Day, and they didn't buy me two, but just because they forgot...like, the teacher was really supportive and it wasn't because she didn't want me to have two pots... I guess they just weren't aware to buy the second one. It wasn't anything against me, it was just like they weren't thinking about it. (girl/17/lesbian moms)

These accounts, and others, uncover heterosexist ignorance and oversight by teachers, which respondents link with feelings of invisibility and not belonging, as previously discussed. While these actions seem to be perceived as unintentional by QS, some young people report blatantly homophobic attitudes from their teachers:

This teacher was completely and entirely horrible and when he said that a child should be raised by a man and a woman I completely ripped his head off. I'm like, "You know what, you're completely, totally wrong 'cause I've grown up all my life with a woman and a woman raising me and I've had no problems." And he goes "Well, wouldn't you have liked a male role model in your life?" And I'm like "you're raised by who you need to be raised by. (girl/14/lesbian moms)

My Grade 5 teacher openly confronted me one day, he held me back from recess and he's like "Your parents are lesbian, and that's really wrong. You're like really screwed up"...I was really depressed for the next couple of days cause I didn't know anyone else with gay or lesbian parents, so I thought that I was the only person in the world who was royally screwed up like this... (girl/12/lesbian mom/FTM parent)

Respondents report feeling more or less able to respond to teacher homophobia, for a variety of reasons. The second young woman chose not to tell her parents about this incident, because:

I didn't want them to get all mad or something and get him in trouble or fired or anything like that. (girl/12/lesbian mom/FTM parent)

This participant's comments demonstrate the powerful effect that the attitudes of teachers and other authority figures can have on QS.

*Lack of intervention: "There's so much homophobia and they never do anything!"*

In the face of ongoing and pervasive use of homophobic language as insult, the young people we talked to were sometimes astonished at the lack of intervention on the part of teachers and administrators. Over and over, they relate how, even within equity-mandated boards, homophobia goes ignored and unchallenged:

...it's weird at my school cause there's so much homophobia and I know there are a few gay teachers, and they never do anything. They just see the kids doing it and they just sort of pretend like it didn't happen, like when kids say stuff they'll just look the other way, when it comes to the gay stuff they just brush it over. (boy/15/lesbian mom)

One participant explains that while certain types of teasing are off limits, homophobic teasing continues to be acceptable:

...there's hardly any kids who tease kids about fatness or anything else...cause they get in trouble more about the fatness and other things...this boy in my class came up to my friend and said 'oh

you're gay, you're stupid' and everything like that, and the teacher didn't do anything. (girl/9/lesbian moms and gay dad)

Confronted with the pervasiveness and acceptance of heterosexist, homophobic, and transphobic attitudes, and the use of these prevalent societal attitudes as targeted weapons by their peers, it might be tempting to view QS experiences as overwhelmingly negative, consisting of constant harassment and bullying. However, as mentioned previously, not all respondents reported such experiences, and those who did experience homophobic bullying were not hapless victims.

### **What helps: Queer spawn fight back!**

This section focuses on QS descriptions of resistance and support. It explores the complex strategies they deploy; the ways that they access support within their peer groups; and their perceptions of the impact of these strategies, on themselves, their peers, and their families.

*Strategies: "Confront, deflect, diffuse, poke back"*

Many QS do carry a deep sense of confidence in themselves and in their families, and choose to directly confront homophobia as a problem that is external to them, and not a reflection of their worth. Sometimes they find themselves defending themselves, their LGBTQ friends, other kids with LGBTQ parents, and LGBTQ people generally:

...my friend whose dad is gay, they wouldn't stop bugging him and teasing him and all that, so I just went looking for the guys. I said, 'You make my best friend cry one more time, you will have to deal with me, and trust me, I am shorter than you but I can beat your ass up.' And then they like just stopped bugging him after that cause I think they kind of got scared... (girl/15/gay dad)

Many expressed incredulity at the ridiculousness, ignorance and stupidity of some of the remarks and attitudes they encounter. One response strategy involves toying with this ignorance by reversing what are perceived to be silly questions, agreeing with or not responding to provocative statements, and generally using humour to diffuse and to poke back:

She walked up to me with four girls behind her and they kind of pushed her forward and she looked back and she's like, 'can I ask you a question?' And she stood there for like 20 seconds and I'm like, 'what do you want to know?' 'Are your parents lesbians?' After like 20 seconds and I'm like, 'yeah' and she's like 'oh.' So then I said, 'okay Nancy, let me just back up here. Just stand there for a second.' And I walked down to the other end of the hall and I walked up and I like looked behind me sort of to the side and stuff and I'm like 'Nancy, could I ask you a question?' She was totally confused. And I'm like 'Are, are your parents straight?' (*laughter*) She was so taken aback. It was hilarious. And then she asked, 'why did you do that?' And I'm like 'cause you ask the stupidest questions in the world. You know, just ask me, 'are your parents lesbians?' And I'd be like, 'yeah.' But no, you know, she had to make a big deal about it, be all like creeped out by it. So that was fun. (girl/14/lesbian mom)

We were talking and I was like, 'yeah, no, I come from a sperm bank' and she's like, 'what's that? I was like, 'it's this place where you go if you don't have a male. She was like 'oh, really,' So she asked me all these questions like, 'how did the sperm get into your body?' I was like, 'you breathe it, it like goes through your mouth,' and she's like 'really?' (*laughter*)...It took like 20 minutes to describe what a sperm bank is. And then she's like 'which mom do you like better?' She actually asked me that, like which one. Like uh, 'both,' and she's like 'no, but like which one do you like more?' Like, 'do you like your mom or your dad more?' and she was 'neither' and I'm like 'there you go.' It was just really funny...I really enjoyed it. (girl/13/lesbian moms)

Although elsewhere in their accounts, both respondents describe feeling annoyed and targeted by intrusive and ignorant questions, they have each developed sophisticated assertiveness techniques to deflect and diffuse these unwanted questions, while educating their peers. Moreover, their accounts suggest that when these strategies are successfully deployed, they feel a sense of enjoyment and pride.

### *Peer support: Queer and straight*

In the face of the uncertainty of support from school staff, and because so much of young people's school experience is centred around their peers, QS often give prime importance to peer interactions. Decisions about whether, when, and how to disclose their family configurations can be big issues for QS, and their disclosure and coping strategies vary widely. Some embrace a strategy of coming out early and always, as a way of heading off homophobic reactions and establishing their family structures as "not their weak point". Others are more careful and selective about where and with whom they disclose. Always involved is a process of safety assessment:

I don't really know, it's just sort of like you have a reluctance bringing it up with certain people, there's just something about them... (boy/13/lesbian mom and gay dad)

I went to a day camp and there would be two boys playing together and then kids would go, like 'ewww, that's nasty' and then later they were making rude jokes about gay people...Oh no! I never told them, the first time I heard those comments I zipped my lips, I did not want to get tormented. (boy/10/trans lesbian mom and bi mom)

In these, and many other, accounts, QS emerge as sensitized to clues about safety, and picky about choosing friends. Sometimes it is hard to describe what the clues are, but there is just "something about them" that inspires caution; while in other



cases, they listen for homophobic remarks and limit their disclosure accordingly.

Youth describe the significance of a single bully in creating situations where QS are not safe to come out to their peers, for fear of being targeted:

He pretty much changed everyone's mindset to 'you have to pick on her because she has two moms.' (girl/14/lesbian moms)

The bully kid who had the anger management problem...if he saw two women walking down the street near my school he would be like 'oh my God, they're lesbians, oh my God everyone.. And then he would get everyone to point and laugh...there was no direct bullying but...it had an effect because...I knew that if I was...out like that...people would do that to me also. So now this person isn't in my class anymore but I still don't want to say anything... (girl/11/lesbian moms)

In both of these instances, QS demonstrate sensitivity to the complex dynamics of schoolyard interaction. In particular, they describe an awareness, bordering on hypervigilance, to the impact that one powerful person—whether an ally or an enemy—might have on the behaviours of the rest of the children or youth in their peer group.

It is within this understanding of group dynamics that knowing other QS can be an important, sometimes crucial, source of support and comfort.

At my new school there is a girl and her dads invited me over and we really bonded and I found that having someone to talk to about these kinds of things, it kind of helped, because you know I didn't feel like I was the only person in living history to have parents like I do. (girl/17/lesbian moms)

...at the beginning of Grade 7, we were in equity studies class, and I said “my dad and his partner are gay, so please don’t use gay as a general insult around me cause I could get very mad at you”...and then a number of other people stood up and said, ‘yeah, my parents are gay or lesbian too...so we’ll all get mad at you.’...I’m not sure if they would have said it if someone else hadn’t said it already because there are other people in the school who have gay or lesbian parents, you can see it on the phone chart, but they don’t say it...it’s nice to have help, instead of being the only one (girl/13/gay dads)

...(knowing other kids with LGBT parents)...I don’t feel like E.T. or something. And they back me up in lots of situations. (boy/10/trans lesbian mom and bi mom)

These accounts speak to the powerful roles that both visibility and shared experience can play not only in lessening isolation, but in creating opportunities to challenge homophobic harassment and bullying.

Similarly, support from straight peers—friends who will recognize and confront the homophobia of other kids, and who will put themselves on the line—is equally, if not more, significant.

“...then one of the guys made a joke, I knew they were talking about me but they weren’t saying my name, and then a girl goes, ‘oh my god, gay people are so egghhh.’ And one of the other guys says ‘shut up and sit down, no one wants to hear you talk.’ Everyone was just quiet then. (girl/17/lesbian moms)

...and then she’s like ‘you’re dad’s gay. Oh my god, that is like so weird!’ At first I kind of started crying a bit, and then my other friend she was like, ‘what’s wrong?’ and I said ‘...is talking trash about my dad...’ So then my friend, she’s known my dad the whole entire time, for like seven years almost, we say like she’s their adopted daughter, she just rolled up her sleeves, and she’s a year younger than me, and she’s like, ‘that’s it, where’s that ...(she called her the ‘b’ word) and then she went looking for her. (girl/15/gay dad)

These accounts point to the importance of recognizing ‘strength in numbers’ approaches as powerful strategies for resistance and education within child and youth peer groups. Sometimes, given the expectations young people come to have, they describe a sense of surprise and relief when they are supported:

...one time this 11<sup>th</sup> grader girl came up to me and she’s like, ‘is it true that your dad is gay? And I was like, ‘what makes you think that?’ and she’s like ‘I don’t know, we saw him come and pick you up..’ and I’m like, ‘well, maybe he is, maybe he isn’t,’ right, so kind of like not your business, right? And then she’s like, ‘no, no, no it’s just I wanted to ask you cause like a lot of kids when they’re your age and they come here they’re all worried about it,’ and she’s like, ‘don’t worry, here it’s a good school, everybody’s open about it. Like if your dad’s gay, good for him...’ I was like almost crying cause I was so happy... (girl/15/gay dad)

### *Teachers and parents: To tell or not to tell*

While direct confrontation, peer support, and other forms of assertiveness can help, young people are often compelled to make complicated decisions about if and when to tell teachers or parents about painful incidents. As discussed above, QS describe teacher interventions as being rare and outside the norm: This, combined with experiences of homophobic attitudes from teachers, often makes asking for adult interventions a last resort. Moreover, these are not easy decisions when the consequences of teacher/parent interventions are not always straightforward, predictable, or helpful. Sometimes, despite good intentions, teacher and parent interventions backfire:

One day I couldn’t handle it (*harassment from other kids*) and I went to talk to the teacher about it. She seemed pretty okay and stuff, so the next day she tells me to go next door and so I leave the class, I hear her slam the door and yelling...when I came back the girl next to me told me she had screamed at them because they were treating me different and if she heard anything they would be

suspended.... She made it worse. Because I couldn't even go outside, I had to stay inside to help the teacher with something, because I couldn't handle it out there. You know it was ten minutes, but ten minutes of hell. "Oh, you need a teacher to defend you. Oh, you and your gay parents, why don't you just move out, go to the country man, no one wants you here. We're straight." Like, oh my god, it was terrible. (girl/17,lesbian mom)

In this case, the ongoing harassment that this student experienced was exacerbated by a teacher's well-intentioned intervention, which failed to take into account how a punishing lecture might be received, and the impact of this on the child in question. In other accounts, parental attempts at support or intervention had similar results, further alienating the student and escalating the behaviour of their peers.

I was working in the office and the girls come in "oh look, that's the girl with the gay parents, neh, neh neh." So my mom, for Easter, she sent me a flower to school right, to make me feel better. And then people found out, "Oh my god, see, see, she is gay, her mom had to send her this, neh neh.' The thing is I know my mom had good intentions but oh my god, it was terrible. I had such a bad experience, like honestly half the time I can't even talk about this stuff because it really hurts. [crying] (girl/17/lesbian moms)

In Grades 4, 5 and 6 I had a lot of problems, the students were making fun of me, calling me a fag, and I never told my mom and then one day I just got so upset and I called her and I just started bawling and she went and told my principal and then the principal suspended the two people who were doing the most. But then one of my best friends at the time was friends with them and she stopped talking to me because she said I got them suspended. (girl/16/lesbian moms)

*Do you guys generally tell your parents when stuff happens at school?*

You better believe this, never!

*You never tell your parents?*

Hell no!

*How come?*

Because once I told them and they told the principal and it made me really embarrassed in front of my friends. (boy/10/lesbian moms)

From these and other accounts, it emerges that zero tolerance approaches can have unforeseen negative impacts on the students who are targets of harassment. These accounts point to the need for sensitive, thoughtful and non-formulaic interventions from teachers and parents. In the instances above, the adult responses, while well-intentioned, are made without consultation with the student involved. This serves, in the end, to disempower them. We would advocate for approaches that are consultative and that leave targeted students with some sense of control.

*Violence: “The build up just made me snap”*

In the face of inaction from school staff, and the complexities involved in turning to parents or teachers for support, some young people respond to homophobic harassment from their peers with violence. Interesting, and potentially troubling, is the number of young people who respond with anger and with violence when they were harassed—and who describe it as the most effective strategy. Kids who do not perceive themselves generally as violent or angry people, talked about how, when incidents and anger accumulate, they sometimes snap:

I wasn't the type of kid who would yell and get aggravated, but I guess the build up of these kids just constantly tormenting me...it was winter and I think they were throwing snow at me, and so the build up just made me snap and I threw him in a tree...It was really an odd action for me to take cause I'm not usually that physical with anybody, but I don't know what happened. I just got really aggravated. But he never did anything like that ever again. (boy/16/lesbian moms)

I've known six kids that have had lesbian and gay parents, or bi or trans. And basically we would just hunt out the homophobic people and nail them down...Someone actually came up to me and said that they didn't like the fact that my parents were gay. Next thing they had a fist in their face. So yeah, that like went by pretty fast...I beat up a Grade 3 when I as in Grade 1.

*Did you tell the teacher why you had punched the lights out of him?*

Yeah. They said violence wasn't the answer. (boy/13/lesbian moms)

While these accounts speak to the effectiveness of violent responses in addressing the immediate problem—ending their experience of harassment—it is clear that violence has unwanted side effects. When QS respond with violence, they sometimes end up being punished, while the person perpetrating the original homophobic attack gets ignored. This can increase frustration, and reinforce that idea the only way to achieve justice is to take matters into one's own hands. One young man explains how his teachers' lack of interventions led him to react violently, and often end up being the one punished:

I usually got in a lot of trouble 'cause I got mad at them [kids who initiated homophobic bullying] and started punching them.

*Did you ever tell the teachers?*

They didn't do anything.

*At which school?*

At every school. (boy/10/lesbian moms)

I got all pissed off at a kid 'cause he insulted me. He made fun of me 'cause I was adopted, so I got all mad at him. I sent him home with a black eye and a bloody mouth...I was sent to the principal's office. I was starting to be suspended.

*And did you tell them what it was about?*

Yeah, and then he didn't get in any trouble at all. So the next day he was still insulting me so he still went home with bruises. And then the next day he came to school with like a hidden stick... So when he insulted me, I wasn't going to do anything that day

because I had gotten in enough trouble, he started smacking me with the stick. (boy/10/lesbian moms)

While we would not advocate for QS to react with violence, the above accounts illustrate how it sometimes seems like the only viable option. When harassment is incessant, when teachers ignore everyday homophobia, and when teachers or parent interventions can lead to negative reactions from peers, why not resort to violence—especially when it works?

*“The key to change”: Queering education*

It is within the context of individualized actions and double-edged interventions that the following section turns to a broader discussion of the transformative potentials that arise from the accounts of QS experiences of bullying and harassment, and their strategies of resistance. We offer some recommendations for parents, teachers, and administrators that are rooted in the voices and reflections of queer spawn themselves.

Starting with QS experiences, we argue for the importance of addressing how home life filters into the classroom, both for QS and for their peers from straight families. QS who express comfort and resilience point to the importance of feeling confident in themselves and their families. For LGBTQ parents this signals a profound need to reflect on ways to encourage and build confidence in our children. This might begin with a willingness to identify and confront the internalized shame we may still be carrying. If we convey to our children, in deep ways, that there is absolutely nothing wrong with their families, and that no shame is necessary, perhaps they will carry this confidence to school, and their family structure will not be their ‘weak point,’ the place they can be ‘gotten.’

QS experiences of the ways that their peer's attitudes are rooted in their families of origin can similarly be translated into a plea to straight parents to educate themselves and their children about the existence of a diversity of sexual orientations, gender identities and family configurations. QS accounts remind us that, just as homophobia can be taught, so can acceptance:

..there's this girl across the street and she teased our other friend because she's fat and me cause I have gay parents...but then she realized what she was doing cause her parents talked to her...she had a friend who had told her gay people are bad, which is why she kept teasing me. Her parents told her it wasn't right and then she stopped...if everyone had parents and they would talk to their children... (girl/9/lesbian moms and gay dad)

Little attention has been given to this kind of community anti-homophobia education; that is, education that could touch and potentially change the beliefs and attitudes of QS's peers and their parents – who are often the source of the attitudes that get carried to school, and that become the basis of harassment. Our interviews suggest that young people who are educated in their families about the diversity of sexual orientations, gender identities and family configurations may be less likely to ask intrusive, uninformed questions, and less likely to harass. This shift in individual attitudes could eventually transform school climates.

Moving beyond individual interactions, QS accounts point to the ways in which homophobia and heterosexism are deeply embedded in the culture of most schools. Transforming school culture requires more than a desire to oppose homophobia. It requires an ongoing commitment to understand the day to day experiences of queer spawn (and queer youth), the thoughtful implementation of education programs for teachers,



administrators, students and community members, and interventions and approaches that seriously prioritize the perspectives and recommendations of young people.

With regards to teachers, administrators and school practices, some of what these young people have to say is not surprising. Identified as helpful are the presence of both “out” and ally teachers and students.

*[The teacher]* had a meeting with all the kids in our class (*after an incident of homophobic name-calling*)...You know, we talked about what happened and how everyone felt, and we worked it out...in fact, I don't think I heard an anti-gay or lesbian comment for a year. (boy/10/trans lesbian mom and bi mom).

My (*straight*) teacher comes to school in like dresses and skirts and he's really cool and really supportive...He wears pink triangle shirts and he didn't want to support Canada so much because Canada doesn't really support everyone, so he hung up a rainbow flag in his classroom. (girl/13/lesbian moms)

High school's been the best, people don't care and our school is really good about that, you can say whatever you want and be really open. And people are really accepting, the teachers especially. (girl/16/lesbian mom)

From their teachers, QS express that a willingness to confront and challenge homophobia; gender non-conforming attitudes and expressions; the display of LGBTQ-positive symbols; and a simple attitude of openness, respect and support can go a long way.

Within the classroom, and in schools, QS point to the importance of visible supports and ongoing education and activism. Some of the initiatives they identify as helpful include Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs) and/or equity committees working on anti-

homophobia; curriculum inclusion of LGBT issues, including books, films and discussions; and anti-homophobia workshops like those offered by TEACH (Teens Educating And Challenging Homophobia – Planned Parenthood of Toronto). QS particularly appreciate when LGBTQ issues are integrated into school curriculum in an everyday way:

I think the biggest problem is that the only time that LGBT issues are discussed is when something like same-sex marriage comes up, when it's a huge, big controversial thing...it creates a huge gap in the two views and people feel they have to take one or the other side, it separates people, whereas it should be an issue that gets discussed in everyday life, the more basic things, like growing up with gay parents or being gay, what is homophobia...these are things that should be discussed everyday in school and in our community, and they're not. (girl/16/lesbian moms)

This account asks us to think about how queer families might be integrated across subjects and activities, rather than pigeonholed into a one-time workshop or discussion. More importantly, it reminds us of the potential negative impacts of discussing queer families exclusively through the lens of controversial issues, such as same-sex marriage.

As an overall strategy, the young people we interviewed stressed the need for education, on many levels, as the most effective challenge to homophobia and heterosexism in schools:

...the cliché answer – education. For every social issue everybody is always like 'education', it's all about education, but it's true. The thing is you can't start when you're in high school...if the first time you're hearing about it is when you're 16 and you're struggling to be cool, it's difficult to break a bad habit. So you have to start when they're really young and that's where it becomes complicated because when you're young you don't have the ability to stand back from your parents and form your own opinions and say 'I don't agree with my parent's opinions.' That's when it becomes

really hard - you're going to have parents who don't want their kids to know about this. But it really is important that you have that in school, you have those books, you have discussions, especially when you do stuff like family trees because for a kid to not see their family represented or talked about and then they have to go and make this family tree, what do they put? They know they have two moms but if the teacher didn't say anything about it, 'is it okay if I put that I have two moms?' and then other kids are like, 'How do they have two moms? That doesn't make sense.' It's really up to the education system to kind of get on it... (girl/16/lesbian moms)

QS call for the education system to represent queer families in the early grades: Virtually all the young people we interviewed described the level of homophobia as much higher in elementary school than in high school. Many of the most painful incidents they described happened in Grades 1 – 6. For many, life got easier in high school. While this suggests an avenue for future research, we can conjecture that it may be due to maturity of their peers, an increase in confidence on the part of queer spawn or the development of a stable, supportive peer group. Whatever the combination of reasons, it is clear that anti-homophobia education cannot begin too early.

### **Summary of suggestions from queer spawn about what helps at school**

- Facilitate ways of queer spawn connecting with other queer spawn to share experience and strategies.
- Discourage shame in queer spawn.
- Develop strategies for community anti-homophobia education that recognizes that homophobic attitudes are often learned in heterosexual families and communities.

- Establish anti-homophobia education for students from JK - high school, with special emphasis on elementary grades.
- Implement compulsory pre and in-service teacher education on anti-homophobia and other equity issues, with explicit inclusion of queer spawn experience.
- Include LGBTQ-led families and recognition of the particular experiences of queer spawn in school curriculum, beginning in elementary school.
- Solicit commitment from school staff to intervene in the everyday use of homophobic language and insults in school environments.
- Consult and empower students who are the targets of homophobic harassment when intervening in youth peer to peer conflicts.
- Encourage the formation and work of gay/straight alliances and equity committees.
- Display LGBTQ positive symbols in classrooms and schools.
- Create or modify school forms to recognize diverse family configurations.
- Promote a school environment which encourages teachers, administrators and students to be “out.”
- Create a school environment of openness, respect and support.

To the queer spawn who so enthusiastically participated in this project – thank you! We also acknowledge the generous support

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## **Appendix A: Interview questions, young people**

Perhaps we could start by having each of you tell us a bit about your families...who are your parents or significant people, do you have siblings or others who live with you?

As you've grown up, have you known other children or young people with LGBT parents? How easy or difficult have you found it to connect with other LGBT families? What has made it easy or difficult?

Having lesbian, gay, bi or trans parents is only one part of who you are. How significant do you think the fact that you live in an LGBT family is in your daily life? Are there other parts of who you are that seem bigger or more important or more significant in a daily kind of way?

Tell us a bit about the school you are attending, or the school you attended most recently?

Where located, how big, what kind of school (private, public, religious)?

In general, how supportive would you say the school you are attending or recently attended is to LGBT families? What would you base this on?

What's it been like for you at your school, or schools, having an lgbt parent or parents? (Is it cool?) Have there been incidents that you recall? What's the stupidest thing somebody has said? How did you, your peers, teachers, administrators respond to these incidents? When these things happen at school, who do you talk to and where do you get support from? (other kids with lgbt parents? Siblings? Friends? Teachers? Others?) Who did you find really supportive, what did they do? What do you sometimes not

say, that you'd like to say? Do you generally tell your parent/s about what happens? What helps you decide whether or not to tell your parents? (protection, resentment)

In the past two years do you think there have been more/less/same number of these kinds of incidences in your school?

How comfortable are you telling other students at school about your family? What kinds of things help you decide whether or not to tell people about your family?

How do you mostly find out about things that are going on in the world?

Have you heard/seen anything in the media about the same-sex marriage debate? If so, what you have seen/heard and from what media sources?

Have you heard/seen anything in the media about lesbians and gay men raising children? If so, what you have seen/heard and from what media sources?

If you have heard negative things about lesbians and gay men raising children, how do you feel when you hear them? What are the commonly held ideas about what it's like for children to have gay or lesbian parents?

What would you like to say back? What do you not say? What would your full-page ad say?

Have you talked to your parents and extended families about these issues? If so, tell us about the conversations.

Do you think the media attention on lesbians and gay men raising children has had an impact on how comfortable you are talking about your family at school? On the number or kind of homophobic incidences at your school?

Have you heard other students in your school talking about same-sex marriage or about kids growing up with lesbian or gay parents?

Have any of your teachers brought up the subject of same-sex marriage or lesbian/gay parenting in their classes?

Has the subject of same-sex marriage or lesbian/gay parenting come up in your church, synagogue, temple or religious school?

Overall, do you think that the same-sex marriage debate and the media attention on lesbian/gay parenting has created a safer or a less safe environment for you and your family?

Do you have any other comments about how the same-sex marriage debate and the arguments about lesbians and gays raising children have impacted you or LGBT families generally?

What do you think would really make a difference in terms of making things easier for kids growing up in LGBT families?

Any other comments generally about the discussion we've had or any of the things that have come up?

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# Confero: Essays on Education, Philosophy and Politics

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