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Positioning discourse on homophobia in schools: What have lesbian and gay families got to say?

Christine Cocker, Trish Hafford-Letchfield, Peter Ryan, Charlotte Barran

Abstract

This paper reports findings from a study in England, which investigated the experiences of lesbian and gay parents in relation to homophobia in primary and secondary schools. The study was part of a larger European Union project investigating the impact of family and school alliances against homophobic and transphobic bullying in schools across six nation states. Qualitative in-depth semi-structured interviews with seven lesbian and gay parents from five families were conducted to explore their unique experience and perspectives on these issues. Discourse analysis was used to facilitate understanding of how lesbian and gay families negotiated the outsider/insider and public/private spheres of the school and communities of which they were a part. Parents identified a number of strategies to address their experiences of homophobia within schools. The findings have implications for how social work recognises and promotes diversity and equality when working with lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender families, as social workers have a powerful role in supporting families. This involves recognising the strengths of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender families in their assessments.

Keywords

Discourse analysis, gay men, homophobia, lesbian and gay parenting, lesbians, social work practice

Introduction

Recognition of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) families is a main theme in the work of ILGA Europe (ILGA, 2015). International collaborations have been influential in efforts to eliminate discrimination in law, policies and practices relating to forms of partnership or parenting (including marriage, partnership, reproductive rights, adoption and parental responsibility); some have focused on the elimination of restrictions on the rights and responsibilities of parents based on sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression. The rights of the child are a core and guiding principle in this recognition. Within this context, *The Rainbow Homophobia And Schools* (Rainbow HAS) European alliance brought together seven institutions across six EU nations to research the role that schools play in offering support and dealing with homophobic and transphobic bullying and discrimination (Arateko, 2015). This paper discusses findings from data collected in England within one of Rainbow HAS workstreams. Seven lesbian and gay parents were asked about their experiences in local schools and their perspectives on homophobia. Specifically, we sought to examine how their involvement and engagement positioned both their own perspectives and the perspectives of the schools on homophobic bullying.

The paper outlines relevant literature in relation to the changing nature of contemporary family life in LGBT parenting. The method used in this small qualitative study is then presented. Discourse analysis is used to analyse the findings with reference to Foucault's key concepts of subjectivity and discourse (Foucault, 1990). We apply these findings to social work with children and families and conclude with some important messages for practitioners in challenging homophobia within schools and social work.

Changes to lesbian and gay parenting in England

Substantial legislative achievements in the UK, which support and endorse lesbian and gay partnerships, have been complimented by other shifts in society, including diversification and radical re-conceptualisation of traditional parenting and family forms (Hicks, 2011). Published accounts of the experiences of lesbian parents in the 1970s and 1980s show a range of different ways in which discrimination occurred for lesbians who lost custody of their children, as they were seen as deviant parents by the Courts (Richardson, 1981, Rights of Women Lesbian Custody Group, 1986). This was in stark contrast to how heterosexual women were treated, who almost always gained custody; the prevailing view was that children had better outcomes living with their mothers than with their fathers (Hanscombe and Forster, 1982).

In response, Susan Golombok researched the effects of lesbian parenting on children to provide evidence about the implications for children growing up with lesbian parents. Longitudinal studies (Golombok et al., 1983, Golombok and Tasker, 1996, Golombok et al., 2003, Tasker and Golombok, 2005, Patterson, 2005, Goldberg, 2010) demonstrated that children raised by lesbians have good relationships with their peers, with male and female adults and experience good mental health. There is no resultant evidence of gender identity confusion or differences in gender role behaviour (Tasker and Golombok, 2005). Similar outcomes have emerged from studies of gay fathers (Barrett and Tasker, 2001, Barrett and Tasker, 2002). More recently, research into outcomes for children adopted by lesbians and gay men and found these parents were highly motivated and more

actively involved in the lives of their adopted children than heterosexual parents (Mellish et al., 2013). Outcomes for adopted children placed with gay fathers have been found to be particularly positive (Golombok et al., 2014). Whilst mostly comparative and based on small samples, these studies have contributed to an increasing body of positive research evidence on outcomes for children adopted by lesbians and gay men in terms of children's functioning, family relationships and quality of parenting (Erich et al., 2005, Leung et al., 2005, Kindle and Erich, 2005, Erich et al., 2009, Farr et al., 2010, Ryan, 2007). They challenge earlier concerns about the impact of lesbian and gay adoption on children facing adversity in their early lives and their potential for adjustment later on (Cocker, 2015).

Research on transgender parenting is scarce; is often subsumed with LGBT parenting with significantly less or no discussion or identification of the 'B' or 'T' in this acronym; particularly in the UK (Hines, 2006). More research is conducted in the USA, which acknowledges that trans parents face both similar and different challenges to cis-gender parents, including those who are LGB. Support to manage the intersection of trans identity and parenting requires sensitive services that are rare (Haines et al 2014), given the multiple stressors resulting from transphobia (Pyne et al 2015) and during any parental gender transition (Veldorale-Griffin et al., 2016).

In summary, discussion about lesbian and gay families has pushed boundaries about what families and parenting comprise, '...away from a nuclear, heterosexual, monogamous, reproductive family' (Hines, 2006, p355). Similarly, significant studies of lesbian and gay parenting (Tasker and Golombok, 2005, Patterson, 2005) including adoption and fostering

over the last two decades (Mallon, 2004, Lewin, 2009, Hicks, 2011, Brown, 2011, (Cocker, 2011), Goldberg 2012, Mellish et al., 2013) have all drawn attention to the outcomes for children growing up in different families and how this has made a significant difference to UK culture and society in conceptualising families.

However, these findings remain marginal to the mainstream social work academy and although discourses on sexualities and gender politics in families attract a level of academic debate, theorising of lesbian, gay and queer parenting is not yet mainstream (Hicks, 2011, Weeks et al., 2001). These changing family forms are promoted as relationship ‘innovators’, but often in a hostile environment. Coming from a social constructionist position, Weeks’s (2001) concept of identity, familial and social relationships (‘families of choice’) has contributed to international debates. Hicks’s (2011) engagement with narratives and practices concerning lesbian and gay parenting within everyday contexts has theorised how concepts and social categories are produced and practiced, such as kinship, family, race, gender, sexuality, lesbian and gay, thus arguing against lesbian and gay parenting as an assimilative position or a radical act. Some authors have also critiqued the emulation of heterosexuality and mainstream ways of living as buying into the ideology of the family as the organising logic of intimate and social life (see Bell and Binnie, 2000). Rainbow HAS adopted a similar approach against such assimilative or radical positions to its exploration of different perspectives on homophobia and transphobia in schools by recognising the potentially complex relationships between different groups.

Homophobia in schools

In England during the 1990s, schools were inhibited by Section 28 of the 1988 Local Government Act (repealed in 2003 in England and Wales), which prevented both positive representation of LGBT people as well as tackling homophobia and homophobic bullying. Despite anti-bullying in schools being a legal requirement since 1995; bullying in relation to sexual orientation was not recognised or strategies identified until 2000 (Department for Education and Skills, 2000). The Education Act 2002 set out requirements for strategies and guidance on homophobic bullying (Department for Education and Skills, 2003a) based on evidence of the damage to the educational and social achievements of children affected by bullying (Department for Education and Skills, 2003b). A Government select committee also investigated and reported on prejudice-driven bullying (House of Commons Education and Skills Committee, 2007).

Evidence suggests that LGBT and those perceived to be LGBT young people may be more at risk of homophobia and bullying (Hunt and Jensen, 2007, Adams et al., 2004, Department for Education, 2013). While determining the extent of bullying is difficult, due to lack of record keeping and problems with establishing a consistent definition, some studies have identified that more attention is given to the person bullied rather than the bully, and that LGBT pupils are told to keep a low profile (Greytak et al., 2016). Little is known about the experience of teachers and homophobic bullying. The research literature has highlighted the importance of challenging homophobic attitudes and the inclusion of homophobia within the school curriculum (Stonewall, 2007).

Adams et al. (2004) researched the impact of formal policies and curriculum on homophobic bullying, which tends not to be mentioned

specifically in Equal Opportunities policies. McDermott (2010) attempted to systematically capture evidence on the disadvantages experienced by young people due to their sexual orientation such as homophobic bullying, mental health issues, rejection from family and friends and increased risk of homelessness. There is limited evidence on LGBT families own perspectives about their children's experiences within schools, including homophobia and transphobic bullying, from the US (Russell et al., 2008; Bower and Klecka, 2009), Australia (Lindsay et al., 2006), and England (Guasp et al., 2014). Thus, Rainbow HAS capitalised on this knowledge by adopting this latter focus.

Methodology

This was a descriptive and exploratory study, given the shortage of literature on lesbian and gay parents' views about homophobia in schools. There are methodological challenges, particularly with sampling and accessibility (Cocker and Hafford-Letchfield, 2010). We chose a qualitative method capable of generating data directly from parents about what they think and say about schools' approaches to tackling homophobia, including acknowledged or hidden knowledge of the topic and the context it reflects (Fairclough, 1995). A combination of snowball and convenience sampling strategies were employed by making contact with lesbian and gay families through professional networks, lesbian and gay associations and personal contacts. Within the resources available to the English workstream, given that this was a comparative study (Hafford-Letchfield et al., 2016), this resulted in the recruitment of 7 parents from 5 families with some geographical and demographic variability. The small sample made it impossible to make any comment or meaning from these differences. All the families recruited lived in the

south east of England and were ‘out’ to the school. Table 1 shows characteristics of the family structure in the sample achieved.

Table 1: Characteristics of English lesbian and gay families

Family no.	Parents - lesbian/gay	Parents - ethnicity	No. of Adopted Children	No. of Birth Children	No. of children at Primary School	No. of children at secondary school	No. of parents in family
1	lesbian	White British	0	2	2	0	3
2	gay	White British, Black Brazilian	2	0	1	1	2
3	lesbian	White British, White European	1	1	1	1	2
4	gay	White British	2	0	2	0	2
5	lesbian	White British	0	1	0	1	2

Individual qualitative in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore their unique experience and perspective (Given, 2008).

These were based on a topic guide designed from a core set of questions agreed with European partners and contextualised for the UK context. Building on key constructs and domains derived from the literature review, the topic guide aimed to facilitate capture of the family’s narrative about their experiences of their school community, alongside exploration of their views and experiences of homophobia and any strategies they had devised to overcome these problems. The topic guide also formed the basis for the theoretical coding categories which would help to identify subsequent discourse strands in the analysis. Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. The transcripts were subject to evolutionary coding against the coding categories and assigned attributes to specific units of analysis, such as paragraphs,

sentences, or individual words (Fairclough, 1995). Two members of the research team did this independently. We also examined the structural features of the transcripts to look for discourses across the five interviews. Drawing on Fairclough's (1995) work, the intersecting and combination of categories within the data enabled the identification of patterns of everyday talk and practices that legitimise power and serve to reinforce or challenge homophobia. A discourse analytical approach was used to identify knowledge, claims and practices through which to further understand and explain different positions taken on homophobic bullying in relation to how it has hitherto been presented at both a micro and macro level. Ethical approval for the English work stream was granted by xxxx University Social Work Ethics Committee (Ref no: SWESC12 /51).

Results

Three broad discursive themes were identified and are reported, giving attention to any cultural references, linguistic and rhetorical mechanism used by the participants. These related firstly to the 'stories' participants told in response to problems they experienced in school and the strategies they had to devise to overcome them. Secondly, the discourses about the different alliances developed to position themselves and others in relation to LGBT issues in schools; and thirdly, the insider/outsider narratives they used to position themselves in relation to normative conditions within the school community. These themes are explored below.

Problems and strategies

All families felt generally accepted within the school community but they also reported specific events that they or their children had faced associated with the parents' sexuality. These ranged from parents' interactions with teaching staff, other children's responses to their child's family structure and individual school's approaches to normative activities like 'Father's Day'. Family 3, for example reported that staff had made assumptions about their family composition.

Parent 1: "When N was at nursery and Father's Day came around they didn't know how to deal with it."

Parent 2: "Yeah I remember them saying "would you like to make a special friend card", while everybody else was making a Father's Day card, and N would be like "I'd just like to make a card for my dad" because he'd make it for his donor dad. And they didn't know how to deal with that..." (Family 3)

Another issue that families raised was their anticipation of what children with lesbians and gay parents might have to deal with from their classmates, particularly in terms of what many children might consider a 'normal' family. Parents tended to address this in an open and straightforward manner, as evidenced across all the families we interviewed.

"I have always operated on the assumption that my family is a normal, ordinary part of the community and I've never told people. When I invite a child, whose parents I don't know, to a playdate, I don't say, 'By the way, we are lesbians, if that's okay?' ((laughs)) I just carry on and it sometimes comes up in conversation and I assume that sooner or later they'll figure it out." (Family 1)

This was further compounded in families where children were adopted by gay or lesbian parents, but the same approach was evident.

“Where the gay thing plays out differently is that every single person who comes to our house, asks about it, where you got them, where they came from, particularly the children, and their parents are embarrassed about it.” (Family 4)

“Fairly recently there was an incident that came up where D was teased about being adopted and her not having a real mum. I went over to the girls and I said, “you know, what do you think a real mum is? I think it's the person who looks after you very day and loves you,” and they went “yeah, that's true actually. D you're really lucky because you've got two. I wish I had two. You know and that's not fair” and D said, “actually I've got three. So actually I've got four,” because she counted her foster mum as well. (Family 3)

Some parents were prompted to contact their child's school about the teachers' attitudes toward them in relation to their sexuality:

“The last parents evening... we met the physics teacher. We sat down and we said we're X's mothers. And he was like [makes a face] ‘I don't understand’. I said, ‘what don't you understand?’ He said, ‘Why X has got two mothers?’... I then replied, ‘We're in a civil partnership and X's our daughter’. ‘Physics is very difficult anyway’ he said. The next day I called the head of year who is fabulous and gay himself and he said, ‘that is my jaw hitting the desk... what can I say, he's a physics teacher’. I said, ‘I'm not making a complaint but perhaps someone needs to have a word with him to bring him up to date’. He said ‘absolutely.’” (Family 5)

This latter comment raises issues about professionals who are lesbian or gay being approached by lesbian and gay parents about homophobic experiences that they or their children have had in schools. This ‘inside community’ link was valued by some of the families interviewed. Family 5 received a sensitive response from the teacher concerned, who understood the issues being raised and felt listened to and respected by the teacher.

Parents also spoke about the repetitive experiences of having to ‘come out’ to teachers about their family structure year on year:

“I’ve been surprised to discover that when my children have made the transition from one class to another, their classroom teacher doesn’t know about our domestic set up. I would assume that that was both sufficiently remarkable and sufficiently unremarkable, as it were, to have been passed along, but it sometimes isn’t” (Family 1)

One parent became a parent governor at her children’s school, which increased her visibility within the school and enabled her to influence school policy on a wide range of issues.

“I’m very involved in the school, I’ve been the Chair of the Parents’ Association and I’m currently the Chair of Governors.” (Family 1)

This narrative highlights that at a macro level, discourses about different families and inclusion within education settings is dependent on how well these are managed at a micro level. Parents appear to engage constantly in deconstructing and challenging practices, which perpetuate and institutionalise homophobia, albeit in subtle ways.

Family/school alliances

As earlier stated, the constant ‘coming out’ to the school community was common to all participants; this also had potential for building alliances between LGBT parents and LGBT staff. Parents noted the importance of inclusiveness both internally and externally; in the example of having an inclusive environment for staff. They noted this inconsistency thus:

“I spoke to the chair of governors, and I’m going to have a blitz on the new head so that teachers feel comfortable coming out. It’s a relatively small number of people, and could be to do with the people they have got (the teachers who are gay), but there are things that could be done to get people in the school to make those connections”. (Family 2)

Secondary schools are expected to have in place policies and procedures for responding to bullying, including homophobic bullying (Department for Education, 2013) seen by parents as a necessary to creating a school culture with a zero tolerance to homophobia. In addition, parents took up issues around other kinds of difference to be embraced: which suggests a more complex layer to their identities, for example, where children are adopted:

Parent 2: “For me, adoption is more the issue here.... I think there are certain parts of the curriculum which are about draw your family or bring pictures of when you were a baby which are standard practice, but for families that are non-standard this brings up real issues. It’s taken as a standard exercise without thinking of the implications. And I’m also thinking about single parents.

Parent 1: But this is about adoption not about being a lesbian. ”

(Family 3)

Foucault (1993) identified factors characterising the boundaries of discourse such as when and where agents are allowed to speak about any given situation. In our data this was the boundaries around who and where homophobia could be discussed. Within the school, the presence of formal guidance and procedures on LGBT issues filter and assert the hierarchy of main speakers or actors and exclude others from the discourse altogether. In this study, teachers were noted as not being ‘out’ despite the rhetoric of policies on sexual identity. This suggests exclusionary mechanisms in the form of hierarchies of identities, i.e. being adopted and with gay parents was seen as acceptable; the status of teachers however was less acceptable. For those actors who were aligned with both the institution and community, this lack of authenticity, or impact of a changing context had the potential to fragment alliances and inhibit different the power structures being challenged.

Family structures

Participants varied in family structures and these could determine how the wider community understood or responded to these. One parent talked about the differences between heterosexual and homosexual families and not wanting to have their ‘success’ in parenting measured by heterosexual conformity. Lesbian and gay families referred to their different family structures that do not emulate heterosexual relationship patterns.

“As a gay man, my morals, identity, sexual identity are different. And all of these are a big part of who I am. Heterosexuals assume that as parents we are going to be just like them. Community is

seen to be about ethnicity, or socio-economics, whereas I know that gays living in London, are more likely to be part of an international community of LGBT people and that there are so many different communities that we feel part of". (Family 4)

"There is a weird issue there, which is not to do with the school or the community, it's to do with the fact that the government doesn't acknowledge that you can have three parents legally in a family, which is obviously, from our point of view, a poor description of our lives and doesn't match the reality." (Family 1)

How these differences are explained to children is important, as children interacting with their peers will be made aware that their family structure is different. According to the families we interviewed, the parents' role in these situations is to facilitate this process for the child and provide a safe place for the child to be able to ask questions and seek assurance.

Family 2 raised issues about social class as a middle-class couple who had adopted children from a working-class background.

"Class is totally the issue, for the children coming into a posh family where there is nothing about their previous lives that would make any sense. There is a sense of wanting to wipe the slate clean, for example, the whole thing about coming to London, having to reframe their lives, all of which fits the dream of being adopted. Definitely, the changes that they have made, have been totally about that and not about gay parenting". (Family 2)

The impact of more lesbians and gay men choosing to have children has given rise to families sending their children to schools where other children of lesbians and gay men also attend.

“And there are now so many gay families at the school, but there is at least one lesbian couple in the school I’ve never been introduced to. When we first arrived it would be a case of, ‘Come and meet the other lot who are like you.’” (Family 1)

A limitation of this study was that all participants lived in a large metropolitan city. Living in a more rural or less diverse urban environment may present a different set of challenges.

A diversity of experiences and issues were raised by parents about their family structures and how this impacted on their relationships with schools. These ranged from the numbers of parents that children might have and how this was recognised within the school, to how over time, the presence of many more children from lesbian and gay families in schools has changed the school environment in a positive way.

Discussion

The diversity of lesbian and gay, and all families is raised within the literature (Weeks 2001; Hicks 2011; Cocker 2011). Heteronormative family biases were experienced by all five families in their dealings with schools. This concerned other issues such as in the example of Family 1, who had three parents, and the response from the school and other parents to this. All participants were middle class with considerable personal ‘agency’, which some used to navigate acceptance within the school community, to become ‘insiders’. Giddens (1992) referred to these changing family forms as relationship innovators, often within a

hostile environment. Many 'blended' heterosexual families also have different structures. Whilst parents and their children wanted to be accepted by the school community, and the legal frameworks allow some assimilation to occur, conscious and unconscious assumptions of heterosexuality and heteronormativity within public sector service settings remain. In our sample, some lesbian and gay families were still perceived as 'outsiders' by other families in the school, due to 'othering' (Foucault 1990), which is the way in which people perceive and understand difference in relation to themselves. This was connected to acquisition and use of power and knowledge. For example, being a school governor offered powerful opportunities to influence policies around LGBT from an 'insider' perspective. Not all LG parents wanted to be 'insiders', but they did not want their children to experience discrimination.

Whilst these examples of parental involvement in school life drive change, they also fulfil neoliberal ideologies about the good (gay) parent and the good (gay) citizen (Hicks 2011). There is a need to deconstruct and reconstruct the diversity of lesbian and gay families outside of this normative framework, including acknowledging how families with intersecting oppressions may not have the power, resources or social capital to negotiate across different institutional boundaries and spaces. Any insider/outsider status may not acknowledge the complexity of experiences within diverse LGBT communities.

The schools referred to here all had inclusive policies that addressed homophobia and other forms of discrimination seen as essential to strategies to promote LGBT student safety or the safety of children with LGBT parents. However, teacher intervention in incidences of

harassment or discrimination and the presence 'Gay/Straight Alliance in secondary schools which promote individual student safety are noted to be more effective than policies alone (Russell et al., 2008). Family 3's example of the nursery inviting a child to make a 'special friend' card on Father's Day, provided a superficial view of educators awareness of diversity within the classroom and evidences assumptions about how a lesbian or gay family is structured (two parents of the same gender and children, with no other parent of the opposite gender), rather than inviting the child to reflect their own family reality. Many children from heterosexual parents may not have ongoing contact with their father for example and share the same assumptions about a 'normal' family.

In relation to discourses around LGBT adoption in schools, our two adoptive father participants commented that having gay dads was less pertinent than the impact of the reasons for adoption and thus the support needed to facilitate good learning experiences (Cocker, 2011, Brown and Cocker, 2011, Cocker and Allain, 2013). Agencies may thus problematise lesbian and gay parents, and see their help-seeking as indicative of difficult or different parenting rather than an act of strength (Brown and Cocker, 2008).

The narratives regarding how children came to be in lesbian and gay families differ from heterosexual families. The assumption that the children of heterosexual parents are birth children, is not shared in assumptions made about the children of lesbian and gay parents, resulting in lesbian and gay families having to constantly 'come out' within the school environment. This recurring theme for lesbian and gay parents requires them to constantly manage the interface between private and public spaces within the home and community for their

children (Cocker and Brown, 2010). Lindsay et al (2006, p1073) commented that, 'progressive change is only possible in contexts where families are able to be selective or proud in their approach to disclosure, and schools strive to be accepting rather than homophobic.' Bower and Klecka (2009) connect parental involvement in schools and children's academic progress, alongside the role of teachers in affirming the diversity of parents in order to promote social change.

None of the families interviewed for this study were the only lesbian or gay family within their school community. One had specifically moved to a 'lesbian and gay friendly' area to make positive connections for their children. A noted bias within this study was that all families were 'professional', had one or both parents working, and owned their own homes, so they had significant financial resources to exercise choices about where they lived and schooled.

Foucault's analysis of how power is manifested within society provided a vehicle for analysing the narratives of the lesbian and gay parents interviewed for this study. The productive, not just repressive, aspects of power and the potential for 'reverse discourse', which is the voice of the 'disqualified' speaking 'on its own behalf', or as we heard in the voices of the gay fathers, to demand legitimacy (Foucault 1990), are powerful drivers for change. An example of where this works repressively in social work, is through categories used when discussing or describing families such as the 'gay family', This serves to reinforce dominant 'familial/ist' ideologies and move away from a strengths perspective of what families might bring rather than need, given that these labels are based solely on identity (Hicks, 2014).

According to Hicks (2014) social work has an intimate relationship with ‘the family’, since many aspects of practice are concerned with family life and family problems including trans/homophobic bullying and responding to experiences of discrimination. Social work produces powerful claims about families and intervenes in similarly powerful ways (Gavriel-Fried et al., 2014). This involves skills in being able to deconstruct traditional or dominant accounts of family life (Hicks, 2014). Family diversity may be the result of new reproductive technologies (such as medically assisted conception or surrogacy); ethnic or cultural diversity in family forms; LGBT families; stepfamilies and other reconstituted formations; foster-care, adoption and kinship care; and residential care and other forms of community living. Perspectives on diversity are important to recognise a range of family forms and what should or is typically prioritised. However, Hicks (2014) questions whether ‘family’ is the best model for understanding, since it tends to prioritise biological relations over others and may reinforce private/public spheres. ‘Personal life’ (Smart 2007) on the other hand opens up the field to forms of relationality which grapples with heteronormativity and a shifting focus on to how people ‘do’ family. Our study echoed these issues and raised implications for how social workers understand family structures.

Implications of findings for social work practice, education and policy

Whilst the term ‘family’ may be the most appropriate concept to describe intimate, private and domestic relationships between adults and children, regardless of the sexuality, number and domestic arrangements of the parent(s), the challenge for social workers is to think beyond a narrow

heteronormative prescription about what ‘family’ is, so that the public agencies support **all** families outside of this normative frame. Social work with LGBT families means not only avoiding making heteronormative assumptions, but also not making assumptions about how LGBT families construct and define themselves. Therefore, any support or intervention is ‘tailored’ to the needs of that specific family.

In our study, families only engaged with social workers during fostering or adoption process, and these parents were highly articulate about themselves, their children and their family’s needs. Data on safeguarding in LGBT families is very limited, although researchers suggest that they are no more or less likely to come social services’ attention than any other family from a similar class background (Brown, 1998; Brown and Cocker, 2011). Where families are referred, they will need to have confidence that the assessment they receive takes into account the uniqueness of their family (Brown and Cocker, 2011). LGBT families’ experiences in school communities are different from their heterosexual counterparts, as all families in this study experienced some form of prejudice and discrimination. Social workers need to consider the impact of discrimination on the children they work with and, in assessing their needs, listen to what children and young people are saying so as to explore with them how they can be supported. LGBT families have been shown to develop resilience and survival strategies in these situations and social workers need to value and learn from these skills and valuable markers. This was clearly evidenced in the experiences of the families interviewed, since all proactively participated in school communities to mitigate potential negative consequences for their children. The strength of LGBT resilience and resourcefulness may

well manifest itself in other aspects of parenting and should be explored in a strength-based assessment.

Social workers need to feel confident about asking the right questions, what language to use, and where to draw on additional resources to support LGBT families, at whatever stage of the child's journey. Building cultural competence and being aware of LGBT specific issues should be part of education and employment strategies to enable training and qualified social workers to work with all areas of diversity. More innovative partnerships between social work education with LGBT organisations (e.g. the Albert Kennedy Trust) could provide opportunities for students to build competence and confidence in this challenging area of practice. Training and development programmes for social work practitioners could also draw on LGBT organisations to provide information (New Family Social), or training, support and advice on employment practices (Stonewall). Multi-agency forums such as Local Safeguarding Children Boards could deliver training and share good practice across different professions. It is also possible for regional and national networks, such as the Association of Directors of Children's Services and the Principal Social Workers, to raise awareness and develop partnerships to support LGBT children and families. Sexuality is one of the protected characteristics of equality and diversity policy in England and so organisations delivering services are required to consider how their services meet the needs of the diverse communities which they serve.

This research is limited to the experiences of lesbian and gay parents. In the interviews conducted for this study, we did not explore the relationship between parents' resilience and the developmental stages

of their children, as children move between primary/secondary school and childhood/adolescence. This remains an area for future research. Research about the experiences of LGBT families and young people who have received social services support e.g. children in need, subject to safeguarding provisions, looked after or leaving care, is also needed. LGBT service users should be involved in helping to design research studies, service provision and policies to support good practice.

Conclusion

This paper reported on findings from a small qualitative study investigating the experiences of five lesbian and gay families with their local schools. The voices of lesbian and gay parents in this arena have been neglected and we address gaps in the literature which recognises their perspectives. All families had identified at least one issue within the school environment that related to the structure of their family being different. They talked about having to constantly ‘come out’ to a class teacher, to other children and to other children’s parents. However, parents also demonstrated how they developed their own strategies to ensure that their children’s educational experience was as positive as possible. They were active in the life of the school and made themselves visible as a result.

Parents highlighted areas for development including more dynamic thinking and management of issues and difficulties in schools beyond producing policies and procedures to address homophobia. They reported that sexual identity was just one aspect of their children’s education and the importance of schools being able to grapple with difference and diversity in a range of areas outside of sexual identities was important. Having good reporting structures within the school and

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being able to follow through to actively challenge, learn and protect rights requires a good ongoing dialogue with the LGBT community.

Social work has a powerful role in supporting lesbian and gay families. This involves recognising the strengths of LGBT families, through their negotiation of insider/outsider discourses formed through everyday experiences of homophobia including within education settings. Social workers would do well to recognise these strengths, and move away from heteronormative understandings of LGBT family structures and forms as dominant factors affecting their assessments, to counteract homophobia.

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