

Our Kids in the Hall

Lesbian Families Negotiate the Public School System

My daughter has two mothers. Shortly before she started kindergarden we tried to prepare her for the fact that having two moms could make her the brunt of jokes or teasing. The possibility was beyond the scope of her imagination. To her it was not fathomable that anybody would do or say anything to deny the reality of her family. She is in Grade Two now and, although her experiences to date have consisted of daycare teachers who did not know how to answer questions from other kids about her family, a classmate telling her it was weird that she has two moms, and some awkward moments on Father's Day, we are anticipating, as an older, more experienced daughter of lesbians puts it, "it gets worse in the grades."

The bulk of this article explores some of the issues facing lesbian families (parents and children) in the Toronto public school system. It has grown from eight years of research on lesbian parenting and many conversations with lesbian parents about the public school system as a source of fear, anxiety and disempowerment. The quotes are selected from 20 interviews conducted between 1992 and 1997.¹ The article is organized around three theoretical assumptions: (a) that schools not only *reproduce* dominant cultural norms such as homophobia, sexism and heterosexism, but are important sites for the *production* of sexual and other identities; (b) that understandings of the meanings and practices that make up broader student cultures around issues of sexuality and family are crucial to developing pedagogical and administrative practices that effectively challenge dominant norms; and (c) that the experiences of lesbian parents and their children are not monolithic, but intersect with other complex and contradictory issues of knowledge, power and identity. In a postscript at the end, I raise some methodological questions about the uses and limitations of "realist" research, as represented by the first part of the article,

and about the possibilities contained in research perspectives that allow space for “not-knowing.”^o

Schools as cultural producers

In effect schools operate as important public spaces in which young people learn about and construct their sexualities and come face to face with the different value society places on heterosexual as opposed to gay and lesbian identities...heterosexualities are put in place, and maintained through complex social relationships which serve to marginalize and subordinate specific social groups (lesbians and gays, girls and women, black and minority groups, disabled people). (Redman, 1994:141-43)

The privileging of heterosexuality and heterosexual family structures manifests itself in a multitude of blatant and subtle ways in daily school life:

- The erasure of anything but depictions of heterosexual family life in curriculum materials.
- Lack of acknowledgment of the nonbiological lesbian parent, or other parental figures, in school forms, for inclusion in parent-teacher interviews, and as potential participants in school activities and outings.
- Lack of visibility of other than heterosexual teachers and administrators.
- Lack of support from the school for children and their parents going through a “coming out” process.
- Denial of the reality of children’s family structures.

In Grade One, which seemed to be the big time when everybody learned the straight version of the facts of life, there was a lot of telling her that she had the facts wrong and that she must have had a dad that died, that we weren't telling her the truth, and that kind of stuff. She would come storming home from school and say “Kathy says you lied to me.”

- Rejection by friends and/or the parents of friends

I picked Tanya up one day visiting her friend and she was sobbing, just sobbing. It came out that her friend had called her “faggot,” had said we weren't normal. From then on Tanya didn't want to have anything to do with her.

The marginalization of lesbian families is not always experienced as blatant or aggressive homophobia. Often it is experienced as a sense of dis-

comfort in teachers and administrators, a feeling that cognitively they want to deal appropriately with the issue, but are being confronted with challenges to their own deeply-held ideas and values about sexuality and family.

Nobody's calling me a dyke or a lezzie or anything like that, it's all undercurrent, it's all quite insidious and hidden and covered.

We're talking about a very nice public school with very devoted teachers who like their work... They were trying very hard to do the right thing and they were very uncomfortable. Their body language and tone of voice were saying, "I WISH YOU WEREN'T DOING THIS. THIS MAKES ME VERY UNCOMFORTABLE."

Common in Toronto schools is a reluctance to acknowledge the systemic nature of the exclusion of lesbian and gay families, and a notion that efforts made in areas of anti-bias education have dealt with the "problem," at least at the level of teachers and administrators.

Lesbian families sometimes sense that they are being viewed through a lens that foregrounds their lesbianism, and that sees the ideas, actions and parenting practices of individual lesbian parents as representative of *all* lesbian parents. A lesbian mom coaching a girl's softball team feels watched and pressured to "be really the best coach they'd ever had" so that "no one can say you're a perverted lesbian trying to seduce children." A lesbian couple that has split up feels exposed and,

that somehow we've failed in this experiment of lesbians having babies.... There was a huge pressure having the kids and then being the biggest role model throughout the school, and then when you split up it's not just like a heterosexual couple splitting up, it's like, you know, "you see what happens to these lesbian families, they can't provide stability."

Particularly salient are issues around gender role behaviours. Lesbians raising boys are frequently confronted with others' concerns about the "lack of male role models." When there is a difficulty or problem with a student, the issue of male role models is sometimes raised to foreground lesbianism as the possible source of the problem.

It was Grade 4 and I don't think this teacher knew how to relate to boys, so she wasn't very creative in terms of how she dealt with a "behaviour problem." So Karl was in the office a lot. At one point she thought that perhaps he was acting out because he didn't have male role models.

Response from lesbian mothers to the "lack of male role model" argument is varied. Some point out the large numbers of children who have unknown, absent (physically or psychically), or abusive fathers. A 1981 study (Kirkpatrick,

Smith and Roy), comparing lesbian mothers to heterosexual single mothers, found the lesbians to be more concerned with providing opportunities for their children to develop ongoing relationships with men. The study also indicated that lesbian mothers had more adult male family friends and included male relatives more often in their children's activities than did heterosexual mothers.

There's people who believe that a kid has to have a man in their life. I believe it's great for a kid to have good men in their life. There's few children in this world who can say that's true for them. My kids are some of those few.

A more complex argument points out the problematic assumption that mothers and fathers, simply due to biological gender, provide their children with essentially different experiences. Important to consider are the potentially positive aspects of separating "masculine" and "feminine" behaviour from biological gender, particularly given the nature of dominant forms of masculinity.

Max regards my friend Cynthia as his best male role model. If you think of role modeling in terms of behaviours and attitudes, then Cynthia is indeed quite a lovely role model in that she's vigorous and protective and powerful and tender, and likes things like trucks.... To detach certain kinds of behaviours that are seen as "masculine" from what you've got between your legs, allows for far more openness and range in deciding how you are going to grow up into a human being.

Each time the child of a lesbian exhibits behaviour outside of what are considered "normal" gender roles, there is the potential for lesbianism to be focused on as the source of the "problem." A good example is the story of Karl, the son of lesbians, who decided to wear a dress and barrettes to daycare. The next day the supervisor of the daycare called having had a big reaction and complaints from parents, including some who were concerned about transmission of the HIV virus! While the supervisor was not as upset as the parents, she was sympathetic and expressed concern for Karl, that his peers would tease him and that he would get hurt. Karl's parents paraphrase her comments as: "You already are lesbians and now you're doing this. This is going to be extra hard on your kid."

Karl's parents, on the other hand, felt that even though there was a possibility that he might get teased, it was more important that he learn to make his own choices based on the reactions he might receive, and they did not want to be the bearers of the message, "boys don't wear dresses."

As a result of the incident the daycare held a workshop on sexuality where a high level of general discomfort with issues of sexuality and reproduction became apparent. A teacher expressed her discomfort with Karl's level of knowledge about women's periods and reproductive processes. One of Karl's

mothers says:

...because what "normal" is for most children is they don't have that information at the age of four, so the fact that Karl had that information and could articulate it meant that it was 'abnormal' and it being "abnormal" was probably related to us being lesbians. So somewhere lesbian gets attached to the problem. Even if it's not verbally stated, that was clearly the undercurrent.

The impact of incidents like this one can be pressure on lesbian parents to encourage their children to conform, generally, and specifically in terms of gender roles. One parent describes the tension and inner conflict she experiences:

We're clearly not aiming to fit in and we have this joint role of influencing our children with the message, "Be who you are." There is such pressure on us, as dykes, as weirdos, as outsiders, and you know that anything that goes wrong with these children, somebody's going to blame it on your sexuality and how you're bringing them up. So that puts pressure on you to bring them up as perfectly fitting-in children. And you have to stop all the time and say "no, no, no, no, no." And we're into pretty wild and raunchy sex and leather outfits and all this stuff and how do you go into the world and balance all this? For a while I think I decided "Okay, I'm going to give up that sex stuff, I'm going to become a nice safe academician, couldn't I just get a Ph.D. and I'd be a famous smarty cakes, right" And then I go "no, no, this is the devil talking, you're about to make a really sick deal here, so put back on that leather jacket, get out to that dance, you know and let the kids see all of that." ... I want them to do well academically, that's their survival ... but they've got to be them in that, and wear whatever they want to wear, talk whatever way they want to talk, and be sure of who they are inside themselves. That's probably one of the hardest struggles.

Parents deal with this pressure to conform in different ways, and often with mixed feelings and ambivalence, as illustrated by the following quote from another parent of a boy who wanted to wear dresses:

Bill went through a dresses phase. And I did not let him wear his dress to daycare. I just decided there was already enough stuff around people looking at us and looking at him as the son of lesbian mothers. I thought "he doesn't need to be exposed to people's reactions that he is not going to think for a moment are coming." But I felt guilty and I feel like something got lost there. I sent him a message and maybe if he'd had the blatant message that we could have talked about, maybe it would have been better.

This tension between conformity and resistance can also mediate parent interactions with school staff. Lesbian parents are often fearful of the negative impact their lesbianism might have on their children's experiences, and, conscious of the tendency for their behaviour to be seen as 'lesbian behaviour,' sometimes hesitate to make waves.

I find with her teacher, for example, I become this little kid. I won't speak up, which is quite shocking. Neither of us do. Whereas I know other parents who don't get as worried about things like this... I think it has a lot to do with lesbianism, I think definitely. Because I think it would be easy to discount what we have to say because we're lesbians.

However, many lesbian parents, including the woman quoted above, do often find themselves in a position to intervene on behalf of their children, but find it a complicated process that requires negotiation with their children and awareness of the cultures their children inhabit at school.

Student cultures

The production of gender and sexual identities in schools take place within the context of student cultures, cultures which differ according to one's positioning in various relations of power, i.e. class, race, gender, age, ability, sexual orientation, etc. The student cultures inhabited by boys and girls are, as one mother puts it, "like two different worlds." While I am not equipped to fully discuss the implications for lesbian families of gendered student cultures, I can make a few observations.

Perhaps because homophobia is less integral to girls' culture than to boys', girls, particularly those who exhibit 'normal' girl behaviour, seem to experience less direct, brutal forms of homophobia, and certainly less concern from school staff about the lack of men in their lives. Valerie Walkerdine (1986) analyses the ways that, even though they on average perform better at school than boys, girls are often presented as "passive', 'hardworking', 'helpful', and 'rule following', characteristics seen as antithetical to the 'active, enquiring' nature of childhood (more often exhibited by boys), but compatible with the requirements necessary to join the caring (female) professions" (71-72). Interestingly, one lesbian mother describes her daughter in terms similar to Walkerdine's, and links her daughter's desire to please and to 'fit in' with the receiving of less attention, negative or positive:

Tanya is fine in whatever setting she's in, and I think the sexism in all that is that she kind of gets lost in the shuffle. She's perceived as a great student because she's always on top of her school work, she's quiet, she's cooperative, she's very studious and she really likes to please people. She's all of the things little girls are supposed to be.

Tanya's other mother says:

Karl gets it (homophobic harassment) more than Tanya does. Partly she's younger, partly she's a girl, so the social scene for her is very different.

For Tanya most of the reaction to her lesbian family has come in the form of teasing from friends. Twice she has had friends abruptly reject her because of their parents' reaction to lesbianism. As a result she does not make a lot of new friends, and carefully chooses those she does. Clearly more work is needed on the ways that homophobia and compulsory heterosexuality impact girls at school, and, specifically, the daughters of lesbians.

In the process of schooling, boys learn different lessons than girls with regards to gender and sexual identity, the most important being—heterosexuality is 'normal,' and 'macho' is the most acceptable form of masculinity. To maintain this sense of 'normal' masculinity, boys learn to distance from, render invisible and subordinate other, less 'manly' forms of masculinity, and their association with the feminine. Homophobia, then, is used as a tool to police gender and sexual boundaries, to subordinate behaviour and attitudes not appropriate to 'real' men (or boys).

One lesbian mother describes the combination of factors leading to her son Max's harassment on the playground, including name-calling and physical violence:

The playground was a nightmare for him, an absolute nightmare. He dreaded recess, he dreaded the end of school. They were times when he was in danger. First, he's not at all macho, and never was. His gender identity, I'm proud to say, was not rigid in any way. Piece number two is he was identified in first grade as having a learning disability. And for quite a long time he had to wear a patch over one eye.

She goes on to describe her own commitment to non-violent conflict resolution and her attempt to encourage her son to adopt these methods in the school yard. Eventually he came home in tears, saying "Mom, I have to start hitting back." He did, and the violence decreased.

Max deviated from cultural norms of masculinity in several ways—his gender identity was flexible; he was, at least temporarily, physically and learning disabled; and he did not fight back with a tough or macho style. His mother wonders, "how it would have been had he already been a kid who took care of himself in a way that worked, who had that kind of street wise toughness. He might have got away with the lesbian stuff quite readily, I don't know."

This then, is the context within which boys of lesbians in urban centres live—a student culture that another mother describes as "tough, competitive, you're always working out who's going to trick you, and you know, little gangs form."

In this context, it is a complicated judgment call for parents as to when and how to intervene on behalf of their children, when, in some cases, intervention can make things worse. Also involved in decisions regarding interventions is the belief, echoed by many lesbian parents, that their children need control over the “coming out process” in the school environment.

I think as adults we can only have the vaguest idea of what life is really like at school. I think a lot of the time we think it's better than it really is. I think we need to listen to our kids and ask our kids and consult our kids, because it's their lives.

Parents express sadness about their inability to protect their children from pain, while also talking with pride about the resources and survival strategies their children develop.

How do you allow your kid to learn how to live in the world and not be ashamed of who they are, but also negotiate safety all the time around being kids from a lesbian family, from a family that's split up ... all these things, money-wise, class-wise ... I spent a lot of time crying about the fact that I can't protect them all the time and the fact that I can't run into the school everytime there's a problem in the schoolyard. They're going to have to negotiate some of these things themselves.

It's actually quite fascinating to watch how they will figure out what to do. Karl was once asked, "Which one is your mom?" He told the kid, "Well, I came out of her body." He wasn't denying his relationship to Barb (nonbiological mother) and he told the truth. I thought "That's pretty brilliant." It teaches you a lot about how kids cope with oppression.

The children of lesbians develop a wide range of innovative ways of negotiating their own and their parents' identities through an intricate web of social norms and expectations. Choices regarding “coming out” and the strategies used to manage other children's reactions to their parents' lesbianism are diverse, and vary contextually and at different ages and grade levels. It seems that as one gets older issues get more complex and there is a perceived need for greater caution. Decisions to come out to friends are often based on careful gauging of potential reactions and safety levels. For example, safety is gauged by noting a friend's reaction to a book about lesbian moms, or by noticing who uses the term “faggot” in the schoolyard. One child of lesbians does not have close friendships at school and reserves these for other children of lesbians; another develops friendships with kids who in some way challenge traditional gender roles, more “androgynous types.” One boy asks his mother to remove lesbian content from their shared living space so he will feel more comfortable bringing friends over; another makes friends with tough kids as a way of

ensuring his own safety; another, expressing fear of teenage boys, asks to go to an alternative school where he hopes to find more like-minded kids and less macho behaviour; and another begins to refer to his "moms" as "parents," to avoid direct confrontation with the issue.

Lesbian parents *and* their children reiterate again and again the difference that the presence of other children of lesbians *and* openly lesbian or gay teachers makes to their experience at school.

However, the identities and experiences of the children of lesbians are multi-faceted. The presence of other lesbian families, while clearly important, is not a guarantee that the school environment will meet the needs of a population, who aside from their membership in a lesbian family, are differently located in relation to a multitude of other social identities.

Complex identities

The coming out discourse that emphasizes the need and desirability of coming out to family and friends, has been critiqued for failing to recognize the risks, particularly for gays and lesbians of colour, of losing important involvement and connections to communities of families and friends. The discourse of 'coming out' is seen to isolate and privilege the gay or lesbian aspect of one's identity, while not recognizing the impact of multiple and intersecting identities. The experience of coming out to family and friends can differ vastly depending on one's location vis a vis race, class, age, religion, able-bodiedness, etc.

The children of lesbians have complex identities and there is a danger of defining identity in terms of a single component and offering simplified solutions to problems that are embedded in complex social relations. For example, for Max, the boy mentioned earlier who suffered much playground abuse, his identity as the son of a lesbian was just a small part of a matrix of factors (gender performance, learning disability, physical disability, mother who advocates nonviolence) that influenced his experience. His mother wonders how things would have been different had not all these factors been present and, in fact, he now reports that much of the harassment against him ended when he got contact lenses! A perspective that sees him only as the child of a lesbian, misses significant aspects of his experience.

Similarly, Karl, the son of a lesbian couple, has not told his friends at school about his family structure, and has recently been reluctant to bring friends home. His parents and sister, however, attribute this to the fact that his best friend's parents are both professionals and have a lot of money, and that Karl does not feel his house is up to the standards of his friend's.

While Karl, who is white, has chosen to attend an alternative school where lesbian families are (somewhat) more easily accepted, his sister Tanya, who is "mixed-race," has stayed in a regular public school where she has more access to friendships with children of colour, something that is increasingly important to her identity.

Important to keep in mind, too, is the fact that the experience of lesbian parents and their children in the schools is not uniformly negative or unproductive. Lesbian parents also describe the ideas, attitudes and skills their children develop, related to the challenges they face as the children of lesbians. These include: skills in negotiating difficult situations; sophisticated understanding of the dynamics of oppression; understanding of complex political issues; knowledge and understanding of gender issues:

...awareness that there are choices, possibilities, that there is a range of behaviour other than the strictly culturally defined one. It means he is growing into his sexuality with a much more open field to play in, and I think that's wonderful.

...he has a nose for bullshit and hypocrisy and for not doing stuff because you're afraid of what people will think about it, that I think is unusually acute, and I love that.

Conclusion

School administrators, teachers and policy makers who want to seriously address the needs of lesbian families must first become familiar with the ways that schools actively produce hierarchically ordered gender identities, sexualities and family structures. Effective pedagogical and administrative practices will address the power dynamics involved in the marginalization of lesbian families, and will attempt to take the burden of responsibility for transforming these dynamics off the shoulders of lesbian families. One small example is a teacher who, at a parent-teacher interview, took the risk of asking "Is your partner a man or a woman?" In this way, she opened a space for lesbian existence.

In Ontario, 1999, attempts to shift school structures to accommodate the needs of lesbian families take place in the context of large-scale budget cuts and a hitherto unseen dismantling of the education system. In the face of the resurgence of conservative "family values," and a lack of anything resembling government commitment to social justice, lesbian families, and others marginalized in the school system, face an uphill battle. The struggle is inevitable, however, as increasing numbers of lesbians choose to make children part of their families. Parent night will never be the same.

Postscript

This work on lesbian families in schools grew out of eight years of researching various aspects of lesbian parenting. My research interests followed my life: when I was pregnant I produced an information kit on alternative insemination; when I had a baby and toddler I explored the division of labour and "roles" in lesbian parenting couples; when someone close to me was denied access to her nonbiological child, I interviewed nonbiological parents, and

when my kid hit school age, I began to look at what was happening in schools. Thus my research came, not from a place of knowing, but from a place of not knowing, not being sure what my daughter would experience at school, how I could prepare her, where we should send her to school, how much could we/should we intervene?

Yet, with the publication of an expanded version of this paper in a local, left-wing journal about schools (Epstein, 1998), I came to be seen as someone who knows about lesbian families in schools, and I begin to enact the part. I accept the invitations to sit on panels where I present the "truth" about what is happening. I make suggestions about the kinds of thinking and actions people might want to take around these issues. I answer people's questions with authority. Thrust into the position of knower, I am left with less room not to know, less room for my own questions and uncertainties to exist and propel me, and less room for new approaches to the whole question. Suddenly I see this happening all around me. We live in a world of experts, whose interpolation into that role gets in the way of opportunities to create from a place of not-knowing. I begin to think of my realist tale as something that has plugged up what should be flowing. Like a dam in a river, the realist tale creates energy, produces order, and does useful work. But the dam is not innocent, it blocks the "natural" flow of the river, it impacts on the environment, and it creates dependencies in people. Soon more dams are needed to create more energy and more order, to create the illusion of control. Dams breed more dams, and realist stories breed realist stories in order to maintain the illusion of unified subjects and mastery of a knowable world.

But dams do useful things, and so does this article. It is an attempt to stay close to the things lesbian parents said about their experiences in schools, and to make visible and bring to a larger audience's awareness the concerns and experiences of lesbian parents. Given the significance of visibility/invisibility for lesbians generally, and lesbian parents particularly, the article makes visible a group of people and experiences not typically, in fact rarely, foregrounded in mainstream culture. The article stems from my excitement about its contents, and is my attempt to do justice to people's stories by ordering them in a way that makes sense, that communicates some of the subtleties and nuance of their experiences and that fits conventional formats enough to be publishable. Lesbian parents who have read the article have responded positively: that it "captures what it's really like," "is both theoretical and accessible," "gets at some of the complexities." They are often delighted that someone has put something down on paper about a largely undocumented experience, and they frequently request copies for friends and for use in schools and daycares. I have used the article in workshops with teachers, including at my own daughter's school, and at other presentations and speaking engagements. The article provides a framework for political direction and concrete demands around which to organize. Yet the story I tell is just one of many that could be told.

An inquiring tale

Last summer, in the context of a graduate course, I used the same data on which I had based the original article (which I refer to as the “realist tale”), to experiment with the writing of what I called an “inquiring tale.” It was my attempt to carry out research from a place of not-knowing, of uncertainty, from a place that troubles what can be known and the validity of the “real.” My inquiring tale looks very different from the original. The text is a collage, an ensemble of juxtapositions of its various parts—my narrative in the middle of the page, quotes from lesbian parents running down the sides and sometimes invading the middle column, a theoretical piece, a set of ‘discussion questions’ and a poem excerpt at the end. The pieces do not fit together neatly. One does not totally explain the other and they do not make a neat package of “sense.” These unconventional textual practices were my attempt to make visible the constructed nature of the framework, to surprise and/or shock the reader out of stereotypes and common assumptions, to make apparent my own questions and lack of knowing, to produce a thinking reader and to resist a smooth sail through a nice story.

The inquiring tale begins by recounting a conversation I had with a young South Asian woman. We were talking about children and schooling and I spoke about a recent decision to move our daughter from the neighbourhood school to a nearby alternative public school, where we anticipated her experiencing less homophobia. The woman I spoke to was clear that “she doesn’t believe in protecting her kid from these things.” She experienced a lot of racism at school in England, and it was through these experiences that she learned what she knows about oppression and survival, and she does not regret it. She seemed clear in her view that children should not be protected, while expressing some doubt about exactly how she would handle specifics when they arose. The perspective she offered was not new to me, but that evening it had a strong impact. I remembered another conversation, a few years earlier, with a black lesbian mother who described the racism her daughter had endured at school¹. She also spoke about the good things she had learned as a result. “The more st they deal with the better,” were her words.

Recalling these conversations led me to think in a different way about the approaches lesbian parents take to their children’s school experiences and to consider a framework that “poses as a problem what has been offered as a solution” (Lather, 1994: 118) by problematizing the tensions between protecting one’s children on the one hand, and preparing them for the dangers of life on the other. Perhaps these tensions are illustrated by the two stories described earlier of lesbian mothers figuring out how to respond to their son’s desire to wear dresses to daycare. This line of thought led me back to Valerie Walkerdine and Helen Lucey’s 1989 book, *Democracy in the Kitchen*, in which they use transcripts of interactions between four-year-old-girls and their mothers to develop theory about middle- and working-class mothering practices. In their analysis, middle-class mothers are more likely to convey the illusion to their

children that the world is safe, and that it can be known and mastered, and to raise children for whom the belief that they are empowered, autonomous and free is part of the mechanism of their regulation. Working-class mothers, on the other hand, are more likely to prepare their children for survival in a world where relations of power and conflict are visible.

My aim here is not to give a detailed synopsis of Walkerdine and Lucey's arguments, nor to fully develop this tension between protection and preparation, but to point out the instability of data interpretation. My original article offers one interpretation of the data. An exploration of the tensions between protecting/preparing our children, and of the meanings of "protection" to different parents and different children would offer other interpretations and different conclusions.

Having spent much of my academic life to date unable to find an embodied place from which to write, writing this 'inquiring tale' was an exhilarating experience. Allowing my not-knowing the space to live seemed to enlarge possibilities, and I lived and breathed this writing in a way I had previously associated only with creative writing.

Of course, there are dangers associated with this kind of data interpretation and writing—the danger that data can become clay for artists' hands, disconnected from the meanings it has to those who are its source; or that creative presentation and interesting textual performance can substitute for rigorous thinking. Figuring a way into the portrayal and performance of complexity can take a lot of time and space. The realist tale seems to lend itself more easily to summarizing and categorizing a lot of data. It can draw cohesive conclusions which allow readers to walk away as if they too are now knowers and can choose to adopt the stance and the praxis stemming from the author's interpretations. I wonder, though, if tales of not-knowing were generally allowed more space, whether we might generate some insights and strategies that would poke us out of the tried and true. How can we do research on lesbian mothering that both makes space for and acknowledges the knowing that stems from the experiences and voices of a previously invisible group, and leaves space for our not-knowing to live and breathe?

Thank you to Patti Lather for an exhilarating shift in perspective.

¹These 20 interviews were conducted in the context of three different research projects. In each case the women I interviewed were asked how they identified in terms of class, race and ethnicity. Their identifications are as follows: working class—nine, middle class—eleven; English, Scottish or "WASP"—ten, Jewish—four, assimilated Francophone—two; French-Canadian—one, African-Canadian—one, South Asian/Black—one, African/English/French/Portuguese Jew—one. They ranged in age from 29 to 55 years old. I located women to interview through personal networks and with the assistance of a Toronto-based support group for lesbian mothers.

References

- Campey, J., T. McCaskell, J. Miller, and V. Russell. 1994. "Opening the Classroom Closet: Dealing with Sexual Orientation at the Toronto Board of Education." *Sex in Schools: Canadian Education and Sexual Regulation*. Ed. S. Prentice. Toronto: Our Schools/Our Selves..
- Casper, V., Schultz, S. and Wickens, E. 1992. "Breaking the Silences: Lesbian and Gay Parents and the Schools." *Teachers College Record* 94 (1).
- Epstein, D., ed. 1994. *Challenging Lesbian and Gay Inequalities in Education*. Buckingham, Philadelphia: Open University Press.
- Epstein, D. and R. Johnson. 1994. "On the Straight and the Narrow: The Heterosexual Presumption, Homophobias and Schools." *Challenging Lesbian and Gay Inequalities in Education*. Ed. D. Epstein. Buckingham, Philadelphia: Open University Press.
- Epstein, R. 1998. "Parent Night Will Never Be the Same: Lesbian Families Challenge the Public School System." *Our Schools/Our Selves* 9 (1).
- Epstein, R. 1996. "Lesbian Families." *Voices: Essays on Canadian Families*. Ed. M. Lynn. Toronto: Nelson Canada.
- Epstein, R. 1994. "Lesbian Parenting: Cracking the Shell of the Nuclear Family." *Resist: Essays Against a Homophobic Culture* Eds. M. Oikawa, D. Falconer, and A. Decter. Toronto: Women's Press.
- Griffin, P. 1992. "From Hiding Out to Coming Out: Empowering Lesbian and Gay Educators." *Coming Out of the Classroom Closet: Gay and Lesbian Students, Teachers, and Curricula*. Ed. K.M. Harbeck. New York: Harrington Park Press.
- Khayatt, M.D. 1992. *Lesbian Teachers: An Invisible Presence*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Kirkpatrick, M. 1987. "Clinical Implications of Lesbian Mother Studies." *Journal of Homosexuality* 13.
- Kirkpatrick, M., C. Smith, and R. Roy. 1981. "Lesbian Mothers and Their Children: A Comparative Study." *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 51.
- Kissen, R.M. 1996. *Last Closet: The Real Lives of Lesbian and Gay Teachers*. Portsmouth: Heinemann.
- Lather, P. 1997. "Staying Dumb? Feminist Research and Pedagogy With/in the Postmodern." *After Postmodernism: Reconstructing Ideology Critique*. Eds. H. Simons and M. Billis. London: Sage.
- Mac An Ghaill, M. 1994. "(In)visibility: Sexuality, Race and Masculinity in the School Context." *Challenging Lesbian and Gay Inequalities in Education*. Ed. D. Epstein. Buckingham, Philadelphia: Open University Press.
- Patterson, C. 1992. "Children of Lesbian and Gay Parents." *Child Development*. 63.
- Redman, P. 1994. "Shifting Ground: Rethinking Sexuality Education." *Challenging Lesbian and Gay Inequalities in Education*. Ed. D. Epstein. Buckingham, Philadelphia: Open University Press.

- Sears, J. 1994. "Challenges for Educators: Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Families." *The High School Journal*. Oct/Nov 1993, Dec/Jan 1994.
- Sears, J., ed. 1992. *Sexuality and the Curriculum*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Sears, J. 1991. *Growing Up Gay in the South: Race, Gender and Journeys of the Spirit*. New York: The Haworth Press.
- Sears, J. 1990. "Problems and Possibilities in 'Homophobia' Education." *Empathy* 2 (2).
- Snider, K. 1996. "Race and Sexual Orientation: The (Im)possibility of These Intersections in Educational Policy." *Harvard Educational Review* 66 (2).
- Sullivan, C. 1993. "Oppression: The Experiences of a Lesbian Teacher in an Inner-City Comprehensive School in the United Kingdom." *Gender and Education* 5 (1).
- Walkerdine, V. and H. Lucey. 1989. *Democracy in the Kitchen: Regulating Mothers and Socializing Daughters*. London: Virago.
- Walkerdine, V. 1986. "Post Structuralist Theory and Everyday Social Practices: The Family and the School." *Feminist Social Psychology: Developing Theory and Practice*. Ed. S. Wilkinson. Milton Keynes, Philadelphia: Open University Press.
- Warren, H. 1994. *Talking About School*. London: Gay Teenagers' Group.