

THE EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES OF LESBIAN-MOTHER FAMILIES: A SOUTH AUSTRALIAN STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Research continues to find that despite living in a context of ongoing discrimination, lesbian mother families continue to thrive. This is perhaps nowhere more evident than in the educational system. The research reported here sought to explore the educational experiences of a sample of lesbian mothers and their children in the context of South Australia. The findings suggest that a minority of the sample of mothers reported experiencing discrimination within their children's schools, and that a minority of children also experienced such discrimination. Experiences of discrimination were related to the age of the child, outness of the mother, and the socio-economic rating of the school. The research also assessed the degree to which both mothers and children had heard the words 'lesbian' or 'gay' used pejoratively. A large proportion of children had reported hearing such negative useage, as had a minority of mothers. Having heard the words used negatively was predicted by the age and gender of the child, and for mothers, the socio-economic rating of the school. Degree of comfort within school spaces amongst mothers was also assessed, with comfort negatively influenced by experiences of discrimination and the socio-economic rating of the school. The findings highlight areas that require improvement within South Australian schools and indicate the need for further research in the area.

KEYWORDS

Lesbian mothers, children, education, discrimination, heteronormativity.

1. INTRODUCTION

To date, research has identified something of a paradox in regards to the educational experiences of children raised in lesbian-mother families, namely: that in terms of educational achievement, children of lesbian mothers fare as well as, if not better than, children of heterosexual parents, yet in terms of their experiences of educational environments, children of lesbian mothers (as well as lesbian mothers themselves) report considerable discrimination within schools.

In regard to educational achievement, findings from Gartrell and Bos' (2010) twenty-year longitudinal study of children raised by lesbian mothers indicate that the 78 children in the study - now adults - reported significantly higher levels of academic/educational competence when compared to children from a matched sample of children with heterosexual parents (as measured by Achenbach's CBCL/6 -18. $M=5.2$, $SD=0.9$ for children of lesbian mothers, $M=2.8$, $SD=0.9$ for Achenbach normative adolescent sample, $F=33.78$, $p<.001$).

In regard to discrimination, a US study (Kosciw & Diaz, 2008) of 588 lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT) parents and their 154 children reported experiencing multiple forms of discrimination from other students, educators and other parents. This discrimination included verbal and/or physical abuse, exclusion from representation in classrooms or requests not to talk about LGBT-parented families, and generalised victimization/harassment. Specifically, 51% of the children in the sample reported experiencing at least one form of discrimination (with 15% reporting this as coming from teachers, the remainder coming from other students). 26% of the parents reported discrimination, primarily from other parents at the school. In regards to school curricula, less than a third of all participants indicated that they considered there to be adequate coverage of LGBT family issues in the classroom, and only 39% indicated that their school included sexual orientation in anti-discrimination policy.

In Australia, similar findings were identified by Ray and Gregory (2001) in their study of 117 lesbian or gay parents and their 48 children. Of the children, 44% of those in grades 3-6 reported experiencing some form of bullying or harassment, with children across the sample reporting little confidence in teachers' abilities to adequately address perpetrators. Of the parents, 18% with children in primary school and 28% with children in secondary school indicated that their child had been subject to harassment (with 17% of the secondary students reporting that this as perpetuated by teachers). Ray and Gregory did not assess the coverage of LGBT issues in school curricula or in school policies.

Research (e.g., Lee, 2010; Lee & Duncan, 2008; Mercier & Harold, 2003; Skatterbol & Ferfolja, 2007) suggests several reasons why the above mentioned paradox might be the case. These include 1) high levels of involvement on the part of lesbian mothers in their children's schools, 2) that lesbian mothers are typically assertive and upfront early on with teachers to assess the inclusivity they will offer to their children, and 3) that lesbian mothers often utilise recommendations from other parents about inclusive schools. Yet whilst some of the participants in these studies reported success as a result of these strategies (i.e., their families were recognized and included within school spaces), such success was not guaranteed. Further, other Australian research (e.g., Lindsay et al., 2006) suggests that the strategies outlined above may not be available to all lesbian-mother families, and that there exists a continuum between secrecy and disclosure about family composition amongst lesbian-mother families. On one end, parents who perceive schools as homophobic (and who believe they have little control over this) are more likely to refrain from disclosing the composition of their family to educators. On the other end of the continuum, families who attend supportive and inclusive schools are much more likely to disclose the structure of their family and to openly advocate for further inclusion. Yet regardless of their location on a continuum of secrecy or disclosure, lesbian mothers, research suggests (e.g., Lee; Lee & Duncan; Skatterbol & Ferfolja), experience an injunction to be 'perfect parents' in order to facilitate their inclusion within schools, an injunction that can itself be experienced as highly oppressive. Furthermore, and

regardless of their possible self-presentation as 'perfect parents', lesbian-mother families continue to experience discrimination within educational contexts, as outlined above.

Turning to the present study which focuses upon the educational experiences of South Australian lesbian-mothers families, the history of South Australia provides a relatively unique context for examining the educational experiences of lesbian-mother families in Australia. South Australia was the first Australian state to remove legal prohibitions against homosexuality, yet 35 years later it is now the last remaining state to provide full legal protection for lesbian mothers and their children. In the interim, South Australia has been a key site in contestations over sex education in Australia (Gibson, 2007). Yet despite ongoing resistance to the full sanction of LGBT people in South Australia (and lesbian-mother families in particular), a rapidly growing community of such families exist. As such, the fact of the lack of state sanction, the growing numbers of lesbian-mother families, and the unique history of South Australia in regards to LGBT people would, in and of itself, suggest the importance of better understanding the experiences of this community. Moreover, and given the considerable impact that educational contexts can have upon children and their families, and given that research on the educational needs of lesbian-mother families in Australia is in its relative infancy (with only five studies published to date, none of which include South Australian participants), the present research was conducted to identify the particular experiences of lesbian-mother families in the South Australian educational system.

2. METHOD

2.1 Participants

Participants were self-identified lesbian mothers who responded to an online survey about their experiences within the South Australian education system as well as those of their children.

The sample was comprised of 23 lesbian mothers, who between them were parenting a total of 57 school or kindergarten aged children (there were 84 children in total across the entire sample). All but one of the mothers self-identified as white Australian. Four (17.4%) of the participants were single mothers and 19 (82.6%) were partnered. Participants indicated their age in response to pre-determined categories, with 4.4% (1) identifying within the range 18-25, 17.2% (4) within the range 26-30, 13% (3) within the range 31-35, 47.8% (11) within the range 36-40, and 8.8% (2) in both age ranges 41-45 and 46-50.

Of the school or kindergarten aged children sample, 36 were males and 21 were females. Children in this cohort ranged in age from 4 to 15 years ($M = 7.7$, $SD = 2.85$). Of these children, 36.8% (21) were born via services offered through reproductive health clinics using anonymous

donor sperm, 35.1% (20) were born via home insemination using known donor sperm, and the remaining 28.1% (16) were born in previous heterosexual relationships.

2.2 Procedure

Ethics approval for this project was granted by the Social and Behavioural Research ethics committee of Flinders University, South Australia. Information on the study and an invitation to participate was distributed via a lesbian mother-focused South Australian email list, on a lesbian-mother focused South Australian website (www.pinkparents.com), and via snowball sampling (where participants were invited to pass details onto other potential participants). Participants were first presented with a welcome screen detailing the project, where they were then invited to either agree to proceed with participation in the project given the information provided or to decline participation.

2.3 Materials

The questionnaire was administered through the website surveymonkey.com. Participants were required to respond to a minimum of 20 items, including seven demographic questions, ten questions that required a response on a Likert scale, and four forced response questions. Likert scales were scored such that higher values on the Likert scales represented more positive responses. Two of the questions on the Likert scales and three of the forced response questions included further probe questions (18 possible probe questions in total), with five of these being open ended responses.

Of the nine Likert scale questions, seven constituted a measure of comfort. Rated on a scale where 1 = Totally uncomfortable, 2 = Somewhat comfortable, 3 = Mostly comfortable, and 4 = Totally comfortable, the measure of comfort covered topics such as willingness amongst lesbian mother participants to talk with teachers/other parents/other people's children about their family form, willingness to challenge discrimination, willingness to be involved in school events and willingness to do so with a female partner.

The overall questionnaire was constructed so that all participants viewed the 20 required questions, and probe questions were then only presented to participants whose responses triggered the probe questions. So, for example, with the required question 'Have you ever heard the words 'gay' or 'lesbian' (or other similar words) used in a derogatory way in a school/kindergarten that your child(ren) attends?', participants who responded with 'no' were then directed to the next required question. Those who answered 'yes' were then directed through a series of probe questions that asked for information such as 'in what setting did this occur?', 'Who used the word in a derogatory way', 'Did the school/kindergarten do something about this?', and 'What specifically did the school/kindergarten do about it?'. Again, these questions were presented on the basis of the response to the previous probe question (so those

participants who answered 'no' to 'Did the school/kindergarten do something about this' were not presented with the final question).

In addition to the demographic information collected (as outlined above in 2.1), participants indicated the school that each of their children attended. Schools were then coded according to the Australian myschool data which includes an Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA). The myschool website suggests that the ICSEA is comprised of a number of variables including "socio-economic characteristics of the areas where students live (in this case an ABS census collection district), as well as whether a school is in a regional or remote area, and the proportion of Indigenous students enrolled at the school. The average ICSEA value is 1000. Most schools have an ICSEA score between 900 and 1100".

Participants also responded to a simple yes/no/unsure forced response item about whether or not they felt their child(ren)'s school included adequate coverage of lesbian-mother families (e.g., in library materials or curricula).

2.4 Variables

For the purposes of analysis, each case represented either one school/kindergarten-aged child (for analyses relating to children) or one lesbian mother participant (for analyses relating to the experiences of the mothers). Participants responded with information about each of their children, thus allowing for differences across all children as well as differences between participants (i.e., mother respondents) to be assessed.

Independent variables were the participant's degree of outness within the school/kindergarten setting (1 = not out, 2 = selectively out, 3 = totally out); the age of the child; the gender of the child; and the ICSEA rating of the school attended by the child. Dependent variables were the frequency with which both the participant and their child had heard the words 'gay' or 'lesbian' used in a derogatory way (on a scale where 1= Never, 2 = Sometimes, 3 = Often and 4 = Always); whether or not the child had reported being harassed for having a lesbian mother; whether or not the participant had experienced discrimination as a lesbian mother in educational contexts; and the measure of comfort described above.

3. ANALYSIS

Data were analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences 17. Each of the variables of interest are now presented with their accompanying descriptive and inferential statistics.

3.1 'That's so gay'

Two of the questionnaire items inquired as to the frequency with which the lesbian mother participants as well as their children (reported to the best knowledge of the mothers) had heard words like 'lesbian' or 'gay' used in pejorative ways. Of the participants themselves, 57.1% had never heard these words used in negative ways in schools attended by their children, 38.8% had sometimes heard the words used negatively, and 4.8% had heard this often. All incidents of hearing the words used negatively occurred in schools (i.e., not in kindergartens), and all but one of these incidents involved children making the statement (in the one remaining incident it was another parent who made the statement). Unfortunately, and for reasons that will be discussed in the conclusion of this paper, 70% of the participants who heard the words 'lesbian' or 'gay' used in pejorative ways did not notify the school. Of those who did, all schools but one did something about it (which typically involved speaking to the children or parent involved).

Treated as a dependent variable, the degree to which the lesbian mothers participants had heard the words 'gay' or 'lesbian' used pejoratively was significantly related to one of the independent variables. There was a weak negative correlation between ICSEA ratings and having heard the words used negatively, $r(21) = -.116$, $p < .05$, meaning that the lower a school rated on the ICSEA, the more participants reported hearing the words 'gay' or 'lesbian' used negatively.

In terms of participant responses on the questionnaire as to whether or not their child had reported hearing the words 'lesbian' or 'gay' used negatively, 35% of participants indicated that their child had never reported hearing negative useage of the words, 50% indicated that this occurred sometimes, 10% indicated that this occurred often, and 5% that this occurred frequently. All incidents of such negative useage occurred in a school context and all such statements were made by other children. When it came to dealing with their children's reports to them, 53.8% of participants stated that they didn't notify the school, 23.1% reported that they did notify but that the school did nothing, and an equal 23.1% reported that the school did something (which included speaking to the children involved and notifying their parents).

There was a moderate positive correlation between child's age and the degree to which they had heard the words used negatively, $r(55) = .398$, $p < .01$, meaning that older children were more likely to report hearing the words used negatively. There was a significant effect for gender, $t(55) = 1.39$, $p < .001$, with boys ($M = 1.83$, $SD = 0.71$) having reported hearing words used negatively more so than did girls ($M = 1.76$, $SD = 0.61$). Interestingly, there was no significant relationship between the ISCSEA and whether children had reported hearing the words used negatively.

Finally, there was a strong positive correlation between the degree to which participants had heard the words 'gay' or 'lesbian' used pejoratively, and the degree to which their children also reported hearing such negative useage, $r(21) = .532$, $p < .001$.

3.2 Lesbian Mothers' Experiences of Discrimination

One of the questionnaire items asked participants whether or not they had experienced discrimination within the context of their child(ren)'s school or kindergarten. Of the responses, 30% said yes and 70% said no. Examples of discrimination cited included mothers being told to accept discrimination against children as being the 'fault' of their lesbian mothers, mundane examples of heterosexism (e.g., not being introduced on family days, names being forgotten, school administrative forms only addressing mothers and fathers), differential treatment of birth and non-birth mothers (with the latter being treated as second-class parents), and defensive responses from educators about their capacity to include a diverse range of families.

A series of logistic regression analyses were conducted to predict discrimination experienced by participants using two separate predictor variables: degree of outness and ICSEA scores. The test for degree of outness was statistically significant, indicating that this independent variable could reliably predict participants' experiences of discrimination, $X^2(2, N = 23) = 15.83$, $p < .01$. Nagelkerke's R^2 of .238 indicated a weak relationship between prediction and outcome. Prediction success overall was 52.6% (36.7% for yes and 78.8% for no). EXP(B) value indicated that when degree of outness is raised by one unit the odds ratio is 13 times as large.

The test for ICSEA scores was statistically significant, indicating that this independent variable could reliably predict participants' experiences of discrimination, $X^2(2, N = 23) = 18.73$, $p < .01$. Nagelkerke's R^2 of .251 indicated a weak relationship between prediction and outcome. Prediction success overall was 64.9% (43.7% for yes and 87.9% for no). EXP(B) value indicated that when ICSEA scores are raised by one unit the odds ratio is 9 times as large.

3.3 Children Teased or Harassed

Another question similarly asked whether or not children of the participant had reported being teased or harassed for having a lesbian mother(s). Of the responses, 15% of the children had been teased and 85% had not. Examples of teasing included physical violence, verbal harassment, social exclusion, and having food or money stolen by other children. All of the experiences of teasing or harassment were committed by other children. When teasing or harassment did occur, schools were always made aware by the participants, and 66% of the schools did something about this (including talking to the offending child and their parents) whilst the remainder did nothing.

A series of logistic regression analyses were conducted to predict teasing/harassment experienced by children using two separate predictor variables: child age and ICSEA scores. The test for child age was statistically significant, indicating that this independent variable could reliably predict children's experiences of teasing or harassment, $X^2(2, N = 57) = 16.18$, $p < .05$. Nagelkerke's R^2 of .135 indicated a weak relationship between prediction and outcome.

Prediction success overall was 86.0% (35.5% for yes and 64.7% for no). EXP(B) value indicated that when a child's age is raised by one unit the odds ratio is 9 times as large.

The test for ICSEA was statistically significant, indicating that this independent variable could reliably predict children's experiences of discrimination, $X^2(2, N = 57) = 47.34, p < .001$. Nagelkerke's R^2 of .735 indicated a strong relationship between prediction and outcome. Prediction success overall was 93.0% (55.5% for yes and 83.9% for no). EXP(B) value indicated that when degree of ICSEA is raised by one unit the odds ratio is 10 times as large.

Interestingly, there was no significant effect of child's gender upon experiences of teasing or harassment.

3.4 Comfort

In terms of predictors of degree of comfort, there was a weak positive correlation between ICSEA scores and comfort scores, $r(21) = .281, p < .05$, meaning that participants whose children went to schools with higher ICSEA scores reported feeling more comfortable. A weak negative correlation was also found between whether or not participants had heard the words 'lesbian' or 'gay' used negatively and their overall comfort level within the school, $r(21) = -.223, p < .05$, such that the more participants had heard the words used negatively the less comfortable they felt. Finally, there was a significant effect for whether or not the participant had been discriminated against, $t(21) = -2.06, p < .05$, with those who had been discriminated against ($M = 17.58, SD = 6.07$) reporting less comfort than those who had not ($M = 21.06, SD = 6.41$).

3.5 Coverage of materials

In regards to coverage of materials relating to lesbian mother families within schools, the majority of participants stated that they felt there was inadequate coverage (55%), with 35% stating they were unsure as to the degree of coverage (35%) and only 10% stating that they felt there was adequate coverage. Participants made a number of suggestions as to what would constitute adequate coverage. These included posters featuring lesbian mother families in school spaces, greater representation of lesbian mother families in school libraries and within books used by teachers in classrooms, more resources or community information available to lesbian mothers within school spaces, and clearer statements from educators and schools about policies relating to teasing or harassment and the degree of inclusivity of curricula.

4. CONCLUSION

The findings presented in this paper confirm the findings of previous research on the educational experiences of lesbian mothers and their children. Specifically, it was found that

both the mothers and children in this sample experienced discrimination/teasing/harassment within school spaces, albeit not at rates as high as is indicated by previous research. It must be noted that the mother participants themselves in the present research reported slightly more incidents of discrimination than they did of their children's experiences, however this must be interpreted with caution as children may not always inform their parents when they experience teasing or harassment. As such, it may well be the case that incidents of teasing/harassment experienced by children were higher. Further, and given the finding that older children were more likely to report experiencing teasing or harassment, and given the relatively young age of the children in the sample, higher levels of discrimination may well have been identified had the sample included older children. It will thus be important to track this population as they mature to identify whether or not teasing or harassment does increase with age.

Whilst incidences of teasing/harassment/discrimination against lesbian mothers and their children were relatively low, incidences of hearing the words 'lesbian' or 'gay' were quite high, especially amongst children. This finding usefully extends the finding of explicit discrimination identified in the present and previous research, by highlighting the very subtle ways in which negative messages are transmitted to lesbian mothers and their children in educational spaces. That male children were more likely to note this than female children is interesting, especially considering there were no significant gender differences in terms of children reporting teasing/harassment. Future research would do well to further explore precisely how any gender differences amongst children of lesbian mothers play out in terms of discrimination.

In terms of reporting discrimination, it is important to note that a significant number of participants had not informed the school upon hearing the words 'lesbian' or 'gay' used negatively, and that even when they had, this had not always been addressed adequately by schools. This is perhaps one of the most concerning findings of the present research: not only that a minority of schools did not act, but also that the participants felt unable to report. One explanation for this lack of reporting may be indicated by the fact that participants who had experienced discrimination or the negative use of words were less likely to feel comfortable within the school. That feeling uncomfortable could discourage reporting would appear a logical explanation. Nonetheless, it will be important for future research to explore further what prevents or promotes the reporting of discrimination, and what facilities positive or appropriate responses to such reporting within schools.

The finding that children and mothers at schools rated higher on the ICSEA were more likely to report they hadn't experienced discrimination/teasing/harassment, were more likely to report feeling comfortable, and were less likely to report hearing the words 'lesbian' or 'gay' used in negative ways must also be treated with caution. Whilst ICSEA scores across all 57 children ranged across three standard deviations, none of the scores fell more than one standard deviation below the norm of 1000. In this sense, whilst there is some predictive value in terms of the ICSEA, a larger sample with greater variation (particularly at the lower end of the scale)

would be necessary to clarify the meaning of these findings. It must be noted, of course, that it may well have been an active choice amongst the mothers to have their children attend schools rated higher on the ICSEA. Testing this suggestion will require further qualitative research to discuss with mothers their motivations in regards to choosing schools.

Finally, and echoing US research, the present study found that the schools attended were not adequately providing coverage of lesbian-mother families. Future research to be conducted as part of this project aims to further explore the degree to which coverage is included in schools (through an assessment of South Australian curricula) and the opinions of educators as to the degree of coverage provided.

In terms of limitations, it must be noted that the sample size analysed here was relatively small, yet a recent national survey of LGBT families in Australia would appear to indicate that this South Australian sample is relatively indicative of the size of the population of lesbian mother families in the state (Power et al., 2010). It must also be noted that some of the dependent variables relied upon single items, and that future research with this population should therefore utilize variables that provide for a wider range of responses.

To conclude, and as Riggs, McLaren and Mayes (2009) suggest, if lesbian-mother families currently do well despite living in a context of homophobia and heteronormativity, then we can only imagine how well they will do if these impediments to success are removed. Identifying and understanding the educational experiences of lesbian mother families is thus vital to providing a clear picture of the ongoing reality of discrimination, as well as providing ways to address this. As such, the present findings begin this work by mapping out the current situation within South Australia as it pertains to what may be considered a relatively representative sample, the next stage being to utilize these findings to effect positive change.

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