Representing and Supporting Children from Homosexual Families in the Elementary Classroom

By Ariel Rosen

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Department of Curriculum, Teaching, and Learning
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Abstract

This research focuses on the education and well-being of children from homosexual families in the classroom. This study explores how teachers are currently representing children from homosexual families, their understandings of these children’s experiences and the resources available to them to support their students. The study investigates the experiences of three educators in the Greater Toronto Area, one of whom shares her own experiences in schools. The findings indicate that there is currently a gap between what teachers are undertaking in their classrooms and what children from homosexual families would appreciate. The findings also highlight certain barriers that prevent teachers from introducing these topics such as their understandings of the topic, the lack of pre-service professional education and fears of stakeholder backlash. The four reported themes mirror the literature in the field: 1) the importance of teacher knowledge, 2) the need for early years education, 3) the need to create safe environments, and 4) the long-term impacts on children. This research paper encourages future teachers to seek out information and support these marginalized communities in their classrooms. It also provides suggestions and strategies on how to ensure a safe and inclusive environment for all.

Key Words: children; homosexual families; same-sex families; elementary; teachers; support strategies; representing children; classroom strategies; classroom barriers; diversity; inclusivity; inclusive environments; safe environments
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Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION

Introduction to the Research Study

As the world changes, so do the minds and opinions of those in it – or so one would hope. However, the safe spaces that we often associate with elementary classrooms and hallways continues to be a site of social and emotional neglect for gay children or children living in gay families (Kozik-Rosabal, 2000). Historically around the world, opinions on same-sex relationships have varied between acceptance, casual integration, religious sin, and repression punishable by law (Pew Research, 2013). The neglect and negative views against homosexuals can stem from personal bias and prejudices towards the community. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines prejudice as, “...preconceived judgment or opinion; an adverse opinion or leaning formed without just grounds or before sufficient knowledge; an irrational attitude of hostility directed against an individual, a group, a race, or their supposed characteristics” (Merriam-Webster, 2014).” The danger of prejudices against homosexuals in society is that the community may be poorly reflected in our classrooms, if included at all. The exclusionary practices of society have grave implications on our lives and our children’s lives.

A homosexual couple, as any couple who loves their children, only want a school and educational community where their children go will feel protected and provide the best learning environment possible (Kozik-Rosabal, 2000). Since the 1800s, schools have served as an important social institution, thus affecting children’s lives mentally, emotionally, physically, and spiritually. Unfortunately,
even in countries where homosexual individuals have been acknowledged and accepted with equal rights, schools neglect to take time to integrate these affirming and equitable understandings into curriculum (Kozik-Rosabal, 2000). In a sense, schools are failing to meet the needs of this marginalized community. Research has shown that heteronormative practices are a dominant force in society and education (García & Slesaransky-Poe, 2010; Kumashiro, 2000). Supporting learners all learners, especially and particularly homosexual children and children of homosexual families, requires teachers, counselors and administrators to take action. They must stand against oppression, prejudice and cruelty children face taking action in schools and classrooms (Kozik-Rosabal, 2000).

As a teacher, one must make the conscious decision of how to create a safe, inclusive, aware and accepting classroom in which students are no longer subject to preconceived judgments or opinions. It is the teacher’s role to provide students with the tools to critically think, the skills to ask questions, and the space to share discussions to promote learning, engagement, and mutual respect (Tribes, 2014). An educator also has the responsibility to honour students identities including the broad range of family dynamics in the classroom. A commitment reflected in recent policies in education such as the revised elementary curriculum (Ontario Ministry of Education [OME], 2009; Ontario Ministry of Education [OME], 2013).

It is now estimated that there are more than 65,000 LGBTTQ families in Canada (Vanier Institute of the Family, 2013). Although the policy support is there, I find there is a gap between policy and practice in the drive for the inclusion of homosexual family dynamics in the elementary classroom. Some communities have
successfully designed their curriculum to include these concepts and others have yet to do so. Several strategies effectively change classroom communities for the better. Some of the most notable for helping raise student-self-esteem and knowledge include: not tolerating name-calling, challenging homophobic remarks, using the words gay and lesbian in the correct context, recognizing homosexual parents, and representing students through literature (Daniel, 2007). According to many inclusive educators, a teacher’s influence might be the difference between ignorance and tolerance, disgust and respect, isolation and acceptance (Gay, Lesbian Straight Education Network [GLSEN], 2014; Kelly, 2012; Shamsher, et al, 2004). For students from marginalized communities, taking steps towards inclusion may be the most relevant experiences students can encounter in a classroom and apply to their lives.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to explore how to better support and represent children from homosexual families in the elementary classroom. It will also investigate the comfort level of elementary teachers in bringing topics of homosexuality into their classrooms and how neglecting to discuss the diversity of families hinders students’ abilities to reach their full potential.

This research study documents the experiences of an educator and advocate of children from homosexual families. Being one herself, she shares her own experiences within the educational community and provides insight into the challenges children face in affirming their families in school. This study will also
explore the ideas, opinions, and attitudes of two current teachers in Ontario and how they deal with working with children from homosexual families in their elementary classrooms.

Through this research, I hope to share with readers some of the barriers and challenges teachers face when addressing homosexual families in their classroom. The findings demonstrate the importance of acknowledging diversity in classrooms in order to assist in the emotional and mental development of young children.

Research Questions

My main research question for this study is: How do educators support and represent children with homosexual parents in the classroom, particularly the concept of family diversity?

Sub questions I am also going to investigate:

1. What policies and legislation mandate teachers to provide emotional, mental, and identity support to children from homosexual families?
2. What challenges do children face in school?
3. What strategies do teachers use in the classroom to represent family diversity or support students from homosexual families?
4. What support strategies are available for teachers and students around this issue?

Background of the Researcher

I was born in Ontario and was adopted when I was nine days old. My biological parents were Caucasian and Filipino, which makes me a biracial child. I was adopted into a colourful and diverse family comprised of two Jewish Mums and
two older brothers. One of my older brothers is adopted as well and is Caucasian, whereas the other is the product of my Mum and her ex husband. For my other mother, I was her first child as she had been waiting for a child to be available for adoption for a long time. Just as any parent giving birth has to prepare, knowing she was about to adopt a child my mother now anticipating all the accommodations she would have to make – particularly, having me grow up in a household that was open and comfortable with homosexuality. Five years later, my younger sister was adopted from Guatemala and joined our family. Homosexuality has never been a taboo or difficult subject in our household. From the beginning, my sister and I have been aware of our backgrounds, our family dynamics and what that means. We had children’s books on inclusiveness, adoption, and homosexuality including those in which the protagonist was a child of lesbian mothers. We also attended rallies and parades in support of queer relationships before attending Pride week in Toronto was a social event and while it was still a political one. Although my parents were able to create a diverse and accepting environment for me, they were unable to control what I would face when I entered the education community.

Growing up in the 90s with lesbian Mums was not something I personally dealt with easily. Although I grew up in a liberal, middle class neighbourhood, once I entered the school system I could not be protected from the opinions, thoughts, and questions of those around me. Continuously having to endure comments and questions such as, \textit{why don’t you look like your Mum? You don’t look Jewish. Where’s your Dad? Having two Mums doesn’t make sense, etc.} became very exhausting for me as a small child. No one wants to stick out or be different but rather blend in and not
be subject to scrutiny. Being asked questions when no one else was being interrogated made me feel alone and defenseless because I didn’t always have the answer – so I lied. As far as my friends were concerned I was adopted and Jewish, but I only had one Mum.

As someone who is a product of the Ontario public school system, I struggle with talking about family dynamics and sharing my personal life and experiences with those around me. However, had there been a teacher who had made the effort to form an inclusive environment by representing the diversity of the individual children of their classroom, I may have become more comfortable with my own family as a result of seeing other people comfortable with it as well.

I believe it is a teacher’s responsibility to take into account the uniqueness of their students and to build that into the curriculum to create a welcoming and inclusive classroom community. As we become more aware of the varying religious, racial, physical, and mental characteristics of our peers, I believe it is just as important to make sure we raise awareness of family diversity, particularly homosexual, families. I believe that, as an educator teaching the world of tomorrow, it is our duty to promote views and model practices that will generate a future population that is respectful and inclusive; not one filled with judgment, limits, and prejudice.

**Overview**

Chapter 1 includes the introduction and purpose of studying the importance of supporting and representing children from homosexual families, the main
research questions, as well as how I came to be involved in this topic and study being an individual from a homosexual family and educator. Chapter 2 contains a review of the literature already generated around child development of the offspring of gay and lesbian parents and their experiences in schools growing up. Chapter 3 provides the methodology and procedures that is used in this study including information about the sample participants and data collection instruments. Chapter 4 discusses the findings from three face-to-face interviews I conducted and Chapter 5 concludes the study with connections and links to the literature, reflections and implications of the research, areas of further study, and suggested practices for teachers in their classrooms. References used to support this study and a list of appendices follows at the end.
Chapter 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Although awareness of the diversity of families has increased among professional educators over the last decade and there has been a large increase in homosexual families with children or having children, these children still tend to be rendered invisible (Kelly, 2012). Ontario schools are built on the belief that all students have the right to a quality education in a safe and nonthreatening environment that allows students to reach their full potential. It is of the belief that Ontario’s diversity can be one of its greatest assets in ensuring that we respect and value the full range of our differences. Equitable, inclusive education is central to creating a cohesive society and a strong economy that will secure Ontario’s future prosperity (OME, 2009). Canadians embrace multiculturalism, human rights, and diversity as fundamental values. However, homophobia has risen to the forefront of issues and research findings show that rejection, exclusion, and estrangement are associated with behavioural problems, lower interest in school, lower student achievement, and higher dropout rates (OME, 2009). Ontario’s Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy states, “all members of the school community [must] feel safe, comfortable, and accepted (OME, 2009, p. 10).” However, many children attend schools where the climate is not safe and secure. As the literature will demonstrate in this chapter, regardless of some attempts to create safer environments, there are still challenges and barriers that prevent students from homosexual families from
feeling included in the classroom community. The literature also shows that there are current misconceptions on introducing ideas of homosexuality in the classroom that must be addressed. If our schools are going to serve all students, staff and students should be expected to demonstrate cooperation, acceptance, and respect for differences (Kelly, 2012).

**Children’s Development: Issue or not?**

The question regarding how child development is affected in a homosexual family has been debated in several studies. Fiona L. Tasker and Susan Golombok from the University of Cambridge have done extensive research on the experiences of children raised by lesbian mothers. Their work debunks common misconceptions on if children’s development is negatively impacted by homosexual family dynamics. In one of their studies, which started in 1976, Tasker and Golombok examined when the children they studied were about 10 years old. They interviewed them again in 1991, when they were around 25 years old. Their researchers’ goals were to recount the experiences from childhood to adulthood of their participants and the impact of having lesbian mothers. Tasker and Golombok in *Growing Up in a Lesbian Family*, examine the assumption that children raised in lesbian households experience emotional or behavioural difficulties as a result of their upbringing. In fact, this study provided evidence that these children do experience additional barriers in comparison to their peers.

In other research, Golombok interviewed mothers about their children’s social development. This study explored if children are ostracized by their peers due
to their parents' sexual orientation. Golombok found that the children did face stigmatization by peers. However, it was not a major problem for these children and that the exposure to teasing did not prevent them from forming meaningful and rewarding friendships (Tasker & Golombok, 1997).

Another study discusses and documents the emotional, mental, and physical assaults that children from gay and lesbian parents face when they enter a school environment (Guasp, 2010). Every day, decisions about curricula and social events are based on the assumption that human beings are inherently heterosexual creating a school life sometimes unbearable for children of homosexual families. When gay and lesbian families only see heterosexual relationships acknowledged and celebrated, the obvious conclusion is that the love they witness in their own homes is neither legitimate nor healthy (Kozik-Rosabal, 2000). Children who are not taught differently, learn expectations of heterosexuality at a very young age and enforce them with their peers, sometimes in hurtful ways. Kozik-Rosabal argues that as educators, we need to approach the entire issue of homosexuality as a safety issue in schools, not as a sexuality issue in order to clear up misconceptions and inform our students with a goal for safe, inclusive, and accepting environments (Kozik-Rosabal, 2000).

**Dealing with the Educational Community**

*Being ‘Not Normal’*

Tasker and Golombok describe in *Growing Up in a Lesbian Family*, that although it is a universal issue, integration is potentially more difficult to achieve
when the family’s divergence from prevailing social norms is greater than the wider social group. They explain that children brought up by lesbian or gay parents may benefit from their personal experience of diversity and may therefore be less restricted in their outlook and more able to appreciate today’s multicultural society (Tasker & Golombok, 1997). I agree that being faced with the challenges of growing up in a family that may not consist of what the majority of society believes to be normal provides a stronger sense of equality. However, I question whether these challenges are beneficial in preparing a young child to tolerate and withstand the feeling of difference and prejudice.

Michelle Kelly, a school psychologist in Virginia, explains that it is typically within the school setting that children from lesbian and gay parents first become aware of the prejudices that many in our society harbor against those who do not live in a traditional heterosexual lifestyle. Hearing their parents described in insulting terms, they begin to realize that the school environment may be neither welcoming nor safe for them and their families. Children from closeted families may be afraid to invite friends over to their house or to form close relationships and many children from lesbian and gay parents experience situations in which the adults in their school environment do not take the misuse of language or harassment seriously (Kelly, 2012). No student is an exception and children of homosexual couples need to feel included, to have their families and experience validated, and to feel safe from discrimination.
Prejudice

April Guasp (2010), also provides insight into issues of prejudice in her article, *Different Families: The Experience of Children with Lesbian and Gay Parents*, for Stonewall’s Education Champions Programme. The Stonewall program provides support to local educators in Cambridge, England with tackling homophobia and homophobic bullying in their schools. Teachers, children psychologists, and social workers work with Stonewall to address homophobic bullying and promote a safe and inclusive learning environment for all young people. Stonewall organizes local and England-wide campaigns on homophobic bullying. The organization commissioned the Centre for Family Research at the University of Cambridge to interview children of lesbian, gay and bisexual parents between October 2009 and February 2010. This study explored the experiences of 82 children and young people between the ages of 4 and 27 (Guasp, 2010).

The research found that the lived experiences of the children in this study are similar to that of Asian or Jewish children in England; that is to say equivalent to racial and religious ignorance. It explains that the prejudices of others cause distress far more significant than their own personal or family characteristics. According to the study, the intolerance a child faces outside of their home is more damaging than growing up with gay or lesbian parents. Guasp also states that the children were able to identify that many of their schools still did not deal with this issue appropriately. In this regard she notes the experience of one thirteen-year-old girl who expresses her difficulty in defending “gays” when people use the term “that’s so gay” (Guasp, 2010).
Responsibility of the Educator

Teaching and learning are social and relational processes that occur within socially and culturally constructed contexts greatly dependent on the established relationship between teachers and learners (Shamsher et. al, 2004). Teaching involves caring deeply about students as human beings and caring just as deeply that all students have rich opportunities to learn and succeed. However, gay and lesbian issues are often ignored in teacher education programs making it difficult for educators to feel prepared and confident in introducing these topics into their classrooms. Such silencing has serious consequences for teachers who feel unprepared to discuss such issues in their classrooms and challenging the silence rarely happens (Hermann-Wilmarth & Souto-Manning, 2008). Through informal interviews with students, their own experiences as teachers, and casual conversations with colleagues, Hermann-Wilmarth and Souto-Manning have found that gay and lesbian issues are absent from teacher education programs and lead to a discomfort for teachers leaving them wishing for resources and methods to address the needs of students in their class. Both women feel there is an undeniable importance for addressing gay and lesbian issues in early childhood classrooms. Through their studies of middle school classrooms they have found that students wondered why they were not told about the reality of gays and lesbians sooner and why teachers did not approach these issues by embedding them into themes such as family, identity, survival, and relationships (Hermann-Wilmarth & Souto-Manning, 2008).
Teachers cannot substitute for social movements aimed at transforming society, but their efforts can and do contribute to those movements in concrete ways down the road by providing students with the knowledge and skills to do so (Shamsher et. Al, 2004). Unfortunately, Lisa Saffron, a lesbian researcher and mother, interviewed 22 sons and daughters of lesbian and gay parents and found a lack of representation for this specific community allowing this entire group of people go unnoticed. In Saffron’s book *What About the Children?* she explains that there are few, if any, obvious signs of recognition of the existence of lesbian and gay parents in the media or in schools. Saffron notes that it is rare for the library to stock the children’s books that are available and almost unheard of for teachers to read them to children at school. When teaching about families, few schools dare to educate their pupils about the diversity of family types or to validate the families of those children with lesbian or gay parents (Saffron, 1996).

Over the past decade, there have been steps taken towards providing teachers with resources to discuss family diversity such as LGBT-inclusive curriculum ideas, revisions in curriculum to include family dynamics, and an abundance of children’s literature. The Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) is an organization based out of the United States that seeks to end discrimination, harassment, and bullying based on sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression in K-12 schools. This network supports Gay-Straight alliances, provides teachers with lesson plans, classroom strategies, and support groups. In 2008, GLSEN released the Think Before You Speak Campaign, designed to end homophobic vocabulary among youth, through the use of television, radio,
print, and outdoor ads (GLSEN, 2014). However, the question is whether or not these resources are being used to ensure all students feel as though their educational community is one of inclusivity and acceptance.

One of the children interviewed in Saffron’s book describes growing up and having his teachers well aware of his family situation, being comfortable with it, yet making no effort to talk about different kinds of families or to create any positive images about lesbian and gay parents (Saffron, 1996). When adults realize their own prejudice they are able to recognize the emotion, voice their opinion, and take a stand. However, children are unaware of the scale of emotional tribulations they may be facing. As teachers and educators who have prominent position and influence on children’s lives, we are taught that it is our responsibility to see inappropriate behaviour, avoid hurtful inquiries, and to confront topics of family diversity before a need for it arises.

Turan Ali who worked for BBC radio and television and was co-chair of the BBC Lesbian and Gay Group for three years, produced a number of dramas and documentaries surrounding gay issues. In his book, *We Are Family: Testimonies of Lesbian and Gay Parents*, Ali’s interviews demonstrate that teachers struggle with their responsibility even when they are supportive of students. One teacher Ali interviewed claimed that she was aware of one student who had a gay father. She had also heard from other teachers that the child had been called “queer” and been told his dad was “poof” (a derogatory term for a gay man in England). She claims she shouted at students to stop and gave detentions but was too afraid to discuss the topic in her class even though she herself was more than fine with this boy’s father
being gay. This teacher asserted that eventually the other students found someone else to tease and they moved on. She said the child, whose father was gay, seemed to be a ‘happy child’ and that she never personally spoke to him about his father (Ali, 1996). This raises the question: as teachers, are we doing enough and if we see a “happy” child should we ignore negative situations that have already happened?

**Curriculum and Legislation**

The Ontario curriculum is set within the theory and practices of multicultural education with the aim of fostering human rights, respect for difference and promoting understandings of alternative life choices (Hulsebosch & Koerner, 1996). This approach to curriculum puts democracy and equality as the core purposes of education (Hulsebosch & Koerner, 1996). The implicit assumption in advocating a multicultural view is that inclusivity is a key element of effective and ethical educational practices. Therefore, as teachers we make a commitment to empower students and to attempt to increase academic achievement by redesigning the entire educational agenda to make learning environments responsive to students’ cultures, behaviours, and learning styles. As previously established, educators have a moral and professional obligation to work toward the integration of all people in the community, and toward the inclusion of all voices in the curriculum. This moral obligation to teach towards these goals overshadows personal beliefs regarding individual families, whether about sexual orientation, work ethic, or child-rearing practice (Hulsebosch & Koerner, 1996).
In the Ontario curriculum that was last revised in 2013, people, communities, and relationships fall under Social Studies. As early as grade one students are expected to think about and understand that, “all people are worth of respect, regardless of their roles, relationships, and responsibilities.” In grade two students are expected to, “understand the diversity that exists among families and within the local community...” in order to instill a greater appreciation of diverse perspectives in our classrooms (Ontario Ministry of Education [OME], 2013, p. 64-74). In fact, these ideas and concepts of understanding and accepting various groups and identities within our communities are specifically placed in the earlier grades so that as students graduate to high grades, they are more prepared and have been provided the tools for appropriate and critical analysis of this issue.

As well, in 2012, Bill 13 the Accepting Schools Act was passed in Ontario. This legislation requires boards of education to support individuals who want to establish or lead activities or organizations promoting gender equity; the awareness and understanding of, and respect for people of all sexual orientations and gender identities, including organizations with the name gay-straight-alliance or another name (Legislative Assembly of Ontario, 2012). The authors of this bill note that they, believe that students need to be equipped with the knowledge, skills, attitude and values to engage the world and others critically, which means developing a critical consciousness that allows them to take action on making their schools and communities more equitable and inclusive for all people, including LGBTTIQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, transsexual, two-spirited, intersex, queer and questioning) people... (Legislative Assembly of Ontario, 2012).

Strong multicultural education assures that no part of a child's life must be closeted for respect and inclusion in the classroom (Hulsebosch & Koerner, 1996).
Opening the closet also opens a window into the experiences of other creating a rich and informative classroom environment for young students (Hulsebosch & Koerner, 1996). Although these changes in curriculum expectations and legislation are an important step forward in requiring and promoting equality in the classroom, there remain many misunderstandings on how these policies and legislations translate into classroom practices.

**Resilience Despite Social Stigma**

There is mixed research when examining the types and frequency of teasing, harassment, and bullying of children from homosexual families. Many studies conclude that the severity of harassment and bullying tends to increase with age and experiences vary from disparaging remarks, taunts, and insulting language to physical assaults and violence (Kosciw & Diaz, 2008). Ellen Perrin and Benjamin Siegal in an article in *Pediatrics*, a journal for the American Academy of Pediatrics, stated that all children have the same needs for, and the right to, nurturing, security, and social stability. Perrin and Siegel present data gleaned over the last 30 years that demonstrates that children whose parents are gay and lesbian have historically been subjected to laws, social policies, and disapproving attitudes that create social distance and ostracism. These laws, policies and attitudes challenge the stability of these families as well as children’s optimal social and psychological development (Perrin & Siegel, 2013). However, Perrin and Siegel assert that despite legal disparities and social stigmas, these children have demonstrated a sense of resilience to social, psychological, and physical health. A reality of childhood
evidenced in earlier cited studies by Golombok (1997) and Guasp (2010). Perrin and Siegel challenge the reader to consider whether educators should have some children prove their resilience from prejudice and ostracism or rather have all students prove their ability to learn and accept the diversity of our society.

**Classroom Strategies**

It has been said that changing schools is hard and changing them to change society is even harder (Shamsher, et al, 2004). Unfortunately, teachers cannot fix the problems of society alone. However, working hard to ensure students are provided with a space in which they feel safe, can have an open forum for discussions on diversity and awareness, and can be given tools to think critically, teachers can create active and participating members of society. Research shows there are already a number of strategies that may tackle the negative experiences that children from marginalized communities face. Schools should address misconceptions about homosexuality and gender variance and challenge practitioners who allow gay and lesbian members of their school community to remain invisible (Kelly, 2012). The following suggestions are based on recommendations from the Youth Leadership and Action Program of COLAGE; Children of Lesbians and Gays Everywhere (COLAGE, 2003).

- **Develop comprehensive safe-school policies.** Include sexual orientations and gender expression in nondiscrimination and acceptance policies.
- **Create a friendly and inclusive school environment.** Use inclusive language and ask parents about supports for their children.
• *Make your classroom accessible to homosexual families.* Changing the language on forms and documents that need to be signed.

• *Always intervene regarding anti-gay or sexist language or actions.* Educators should model inclusive language, respond to homophobic remarks, and confront misinformation and stereotypes.

• *Include topics of diversity in your curriculum.* The curriculum should include information about all cultural groups; bring in people from the community to speak with the class.

• *Never “out” a student with homosexual parents.* It is the child's decision whether or not to share this information.

• *Pursue personal and professional development.*

• *Be involved.* Attend Gay-Straight Alliance clubs or similar meetings to show your support.

• *Open channels for communication with homosexual parents.*

• *Give students access to information.* Make age-appropriate, accurate, and up-to-date literature about homosexual families available for students in the school.

**Conclusion**

On any given day in elementary school classrooms, students are engaged in conversations and activities about their families. Yet not all discussions of family are equally welcome. In 2011, the number of LGBTTQ families in Canada increased by 42% from the 2006 Census. It is now estimated that there are more than 65,000 LGBTTQ families in Canada paving the way for a new generation of homosexual couples aspiring to have children of their own (Vanier Institute of the Family, 2013). However, little is known about the experiences of this growing number of children in schools. The literature seems to show conflicting impressions that some children
are faced with no additional barriers compared to a child from a heterosexual family, yet more are stating that the prejudice faced at such a young age is as traumatic as racial or religious discrimination. The literature also shows that although it may be difficult and challenging for some teachers to discuss topics of homosexuality in the classroom, it is their responsibility to represent all students and discuss family dynamics and the diversity of people according to curriculum and legislation. In fact, curriculum and legislation have proved to be very supportive of these marginalized demographics but it is less clear in the literature on how these documents and policies are being implemented in the classroom. Still, many educators neglect these conversations or are uncomfortable and confused on how to search for appropriate resources. When homosexual parents are made to feel invisible in their children’s schools, schools risk alienating these parents and risk losing the rewards of actively engaging all community members. If schools are not providing children with the safe learning environments that we know they require for maximum potential, we are failing an entire community of students (Children of Lesbian and Gays Everywhere [COLAGE], 2003).

This study attempts to further seek information on the experiences of educators and children in schools. It will explore difficulties that children of gay and lesbian parents have faced in local classrooms and it will investigate how teachers can create a classroom community in which intolerance is unacceptable.
Chapter 3: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This research paper was constructed by reviewing the existing literature on the topic and by collecting qualitative data through interviewing three teacher participants: an educator of homosexual parents from an advocacy organization and two current teachers in the education system in Toronto. A qualitative research method was chosen in order to obtain in-depth and insightful information regarding the difficulties children of homosexual families still face in elementary classrooms and what teachers are and can do in order to create a more inclusive environment. This qualitative study uncovers opinions, awareness, and understanding of these issues in Ontario classrooms. All participants of this study were volunteers.

Participants

Pseudonyms are used to address participants throughout this research paper in order to protect their identity, as the information shared is personal and at times difficult to express openly.

The first participant (Sam) was a young woman that I already knew was willing to speak out on the topic. She is currently an educator and advocate on the topic and works for various support group programs for other children of homosexual parents. She grew up in the Ontario public school system in the 90s and provides insight into how it feels and how it continues to feel for students from diverse family backgrounds.
Finding the second participant (Emma) was extremely difficult. I wanted a teacher of an elementary classroom and many emails were sent out. Finally, I found a participant who I have known for some time and teaches at a local elementary school.

The third participant (Luke) was also difficult to find and this was the longest process. While most peers had completed three or four interviews I was still trying to find a participant. Luke approached me through email saying that he had heard through the grapevine that I was looking for a participant to interview on this topic. He said this is his first year with a student from a homosexual family and he would enjoy the opportunity to discuss the issue and agreed to volunteer. He is in his third year of teaching in Toronto and he currently teaches in an independent elementary school in downtown Toronto with grade 4.

Procedure

I began this study by researching pre-existing literature around the topics of safe and inclusive environments, homosexual families in elementary classrooms, and strategies educators can use in classrooms that are realistic and appropriate. As it turned out, it was extremely difficult to find literature precisely on the topics I was interested in. However, there were plenty articles linked to homosexual parenting and the effects that has on children, or on children who identify as homosexual.

Once I was clear on my research questions I had to find educators who were comfortable speaking out about this topic. I found interviews were the most beneficial method to carry out this research as it allowed for a fluid and natural
conversation beyond the designated interview questions. Considering this is a complicated subject, I wanted the freedom to explore what my participants were knowledgeable in. This was again a challenge as many teachers that were approached were uncomfortable speaking out about topic. Some of my attempts to contact participants were ignored and other individuals claimed that they were not experts and would not be of help. In fact, I did not find two of my participants until January of this final semester.

Each interview was immediately transcribed. I am confident I accurately transcribed our conversation without compromising the anonymity of the participant. I then analyzed the data and wrote this report.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

Since this is a qualitative study, the first steps to gathering information were to review the current literature already composed on the emotional and mental development of children with gay and lesbian parents, the role of teachers in supporting these students, the dangers prejudice and ignorance has on young minds, as well as how family diversity is currently addressed in policy. The main instrument of data collection was the informal interviews with the selected participants. Each participant was interviewed individually and the interview was digitally recorded and transcribed for further analysis. Each participant was asked the predetermined questions structured to gather particular pieces of information but not limited to, allowing for follow up questions and further investigation based on the responses of the individuals. These original interview questions were
designed grounded on literature, personal interest, and the expertise of the specific participant. Each interview lasted anywhere between 30-45 minutes.

Once the interviews were completed and transcribed, the information was thoroughly analyzed and the findings were categorized into key themes that illustrate the findings in the data. First, the transcripts were read thoroughly and the main ideas or concepts that the participant was attempting to get across in their answer were pulled out. Second, these ideas were grouped into themes based on frequency and their relativity to one another. Lastly, these concepts were further placed into subheadings in their respected themes in order to provide a clearer analysis for the reader.

**Ethical Review Procedures**

The ethical procedures of these interviews follows the requirements set by the Master of Teaching program. When recruiting participants I had to decide on the criteria on which I would select them. Unfortunately due to the ethical guidelines for this program, I was unable to interview children from homosexual families that are currently in the education system. However, I was able to recruit a family friend who is an educator and advocate for the support and representation of children from homosexual families in the classroom. For my other two participants, I restricted my research to educators of students at the elementary level but it did not matter whether their experience was in the public or independent board. In fact, it worked out that I had a teacher from both sectors to highlight the potential differences in challenges and barriers that one may face over the other. Once I had
decided on my criteria, I contacted several teachers via e-mail through various leads from professors, colleagues, and personal connections. Participants were sent an information letter about the study describing what the purpose of the research was and those who wished to participate contacted me with their interest. Participants for this research study have voluntarily agreed to take part in the interview and were provided with ample information about the research prior to making their decision. Each participant received a copy of the letter of consent (see Appendix B) before their interview date to ensure that they have had sufficient time to carefully review the purpose of the research and who will have access to the information shared. The letter also ensured that participants were aware that anonymity was assured through use of a pseudonym. The participants were informed that the interview was going to be recorded and that they could withdraw from the process at any given point. Transcribed interviews are available to the individual participants if they desire to look over and reflect on their answers. In addition, they received a copy of their letter of consent while another is being kept for the records of this study. Participants were also encouraged to ask questions and ask for clarifications prior, during, and after the interview period.

**Limitations**

Unlike the research already composed on this topic, this qualitative study is limited to several factors and therefore not necessarily able to be used to draw inferences or general conclusions on such issues. Rather it can be used to spark awareness and understanding about subjects that must be considered.
The first limitation is that this study is time sensitive. Interviews were completed on one occasion and there was no further inquiry or follow up with the participants. In much of the literature I reviewed, studies were completed with children of gay or lesbian parents beginning in the elementary years and followed their development throughout the course of their childhood into adulthood. Participants are providing information about their experiences to date, but will not have the chance to express changes in their teaching styles and strategies after more experience with children from homosexual families and after reflecting on and adapting their inclusion of family diversity in the classroom.

The second limitation is that under the Master of Teacher program I cannot interview minors and therefore my participants will all be over the age of 18 and finished their experience within the Ontario public education system. I was not able to interview students currently experiencing potentially difficult scenarios in the classroom.

The third limitation is that there are only three participants in this research and thus not representative of the entire population. Instead, this research investigates the opinions, experiences, and beliefs of three adults in the educational field. They are able to discuss how the education system in Ontario understands the importance of creating a supportive and inclusive environment for children from different family dynamics but only according to personal experience. I recognize that the information gathered from the interviews and my interpretation of data will not be without bias due to individual experiences and my personal position on certain topics.
The last limitation is that the questions for the interview are limited and consequentially only reflecting a small portion of this subject. For the purpose of this study, I believe that the questions are sufficient for gathering the intended data. However, this research study focuses mainly on the children of and experiences with gay and lesbian parents; it does not discuss other forms of transgendered and queer families.
Chapter 4: Findings

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore how to better support and represent children from homosexual families in the elementary classroom. In this chapter, I present my findings from two face-to-face interviews with elementary teachers in the downtown Toronto area and one face-to-face interview with an educator and advocate of children from homosexual families and she herself is a child of lesbian mothers. After reviewing the data from these interviews, I found four themes and am asserting that these themes contribute to current barriers and challenges in knowledge and representation of children from homosexual families in elementary classrooms. These themes are: teacher knowledge, the need for early years education, creating safe environments, and the long-term impacts of not supporting and representing children. Overall, the research proved that there seems to be an absence of support and representation of this marginalized community and that without an effort to change classrooms and curriculum there will be repercussions.

Meeting the Participants

Luke is a grade 4 teacher at a small independent school in downtown Toronto consisting of kindergarten up to grade 8. He received his teacher education from New Zealand 4 years ago and has been teaching in Toronto since his graduation. He has previously taught grade 2 and has committed to trying to create
a safe environment by focusing on bullying initiatives and seeking professional
development when available to further his knowledge on sensitive concepts and
issues. This is his first year teaching a student who has homosexual parents.

*Emma* has been an elementary teacher in downtown Toronto for 14 years
and previous to that worked for five years as an Early Childhood Educator. She has
taught kindergarten, grade 1 and grade 2 and has a variety of experience working
with infants, toddlers, and preschool aged children. Initially, she admits, she had few
experiences with homosexual parents. However, in the last 5-10 years, at least one
student in each of her classes has had gay or lesbian parents.

*Sam* has been an educator and advocator for a community organization for
seven years. She grew up in Toronto’s West end with two moms. She attended
elementary, middle, and high school in downtown Toronto and is currently an
aspiring health care professional. She is extremely active in ‘queerspawn’
communities and hopes to help pave a safe, supportive, and loving path for other
queerspawn on their own journeys.

**Themes**

*The Importance of Teacher Knowledge*

Teacher knowledge speaks to the capacities of teachers to address family
diversity in the classroom. In this study, participants discuss teacher knowledge in
terms of the importance of understanding communities, a teacher’s comfort with the
topic, his or her awareness of discourse as well as knowledge of recent curriculum
and legislation reforms.
Luke, Emma, and Sam each believe that in order to become more comfortable and confident in our classrooms, our teachers must continuously learn and acknowledge that teaching is a fluid profession. They must be cognizant of the fact that it is constantly changing and adapting to the children for which we provide education. Sam believes that educators enter the profession with the knowledge and information we have been provided with. It is then the responsibility of the individual to become familiar with topics and issues that are perhaps unfamiliar so that they may provide students with truthful, honest, and factual information.

*Personal Comfort*

Many teachers are uncomfortable talking about homosexual families because they are not prepared or informed enough to confidently introduce the subject into their classrooms. Sam shared first hand experiences as to how difficult it was to grow up in a classroom with teachers that were not capable or open to representing and acknowledging her unique family dynamic. She has now made it her job to spread the word and help educators learn. She says that often teachers who are not comfortable are simply not educated on the topic but that they are always receptive and open to suggestions. She notes,

...They just don’t know... The biggest problem is just ignorance and people just not having that information. Anyone who is going to work with children and youth, I think should have some kind of understanding and training on it and it has to be a mandatory workshop.
Language Awareness

Luke and Emma both acknowledge the unquestionable need to change their language in the classroom. Both participants recognize that the language used by educators has typically remained consistent from year to year without much thought or awareness on how it might alienate or segregate. Parents become an essential resource for information and how, as educators, we can learn from them. Emma recalls one particular scenario with a child’s parent that was informative.

I remember being counseled by a gay parent of one of my students about using words other than, “ask your mom and dad for help [with your homework]”; he was right and I learned a valuable lesson.

Curriculum Knowledge/Legislation

Curriculum and legislation are continuously being reviewed and revised so it is difficult to be constantly aware and familiar with adjustments that are made. In the Accepting Schools Act (2012), among other mandates in the document, it clearly states that the school climate shall be inclusive and accepting, regardless of various marginalized groups including sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, marital status, and/or family status and that students must be equipped with the knowledge and skills to be more equitable and inclusive for all people, including LGBTTIQ. However, with many changes not blatantly discussed by current teachers and educators, it falls on teachers to independently seek this information or on teachers doing their pre-service training to become acquainted with changes in curriculum and legislation. This results in a gap in understanding and a unified recognition of what is expected from year to year.
I asked the participants if they were aware of any policies in curriculum or legislation that required them to discuss homosexual families in the classroom and the answers varied. Due to Luke’s educational background from New Zealand and his being at an independent school in which the curriculum is not directly related to Ontario’s curriculum, it was a challenge to be aware of certain modifications of legislation. Sam was aware that certain policies have tried to pass but was also unaware that any had actually been passed. However, Emma was more familiar with the idea that curriculum is ongoing and always changing to better represent the communities around us. She was able to recognize that because she has over 14 years of experience teaching in a classroom, she has had the benefit to build her repertoire of classroom experiences, necessities, and teaching subjects that possibly were not as prominent 5-10 years ago. Emma also notes new changes to legislation and how these mandates help teachers plan for purposeful and appropriate lesson plans and suggested resource materials depending on age groups.

Now, new legislation and curriculum dictates in Ontario require the development of Equity Committees within each elementary school... The mandate of these organizations is to create a schedule of equity foci for the year... Sexual orientation and family diversity are always represented, although in different ways across grade levels (e.g., young students may discuss different family organizations while older ones may explore more deeply the challenges of homosexual parents, in areas like adoption and equal rights to spousal benefits and endowments).

According to Ontario’s curriculum document for Social Studies, starting in grade 1 students are supposed to be learning about identity of people’s roles and relationships and how circumstances may require these to change. One of the ‘Big Ideas’ is that all people are worthy of respect, regardless of their roles, relationships,
and responsibilities. Here students are expected to compare significant events and aspects of their lives with the lives of their peers and members in their communities. They are theoretically to be discussing topics such as bullying and diversity and need the materials, opportunities, and environment to do so.

The Need for Early Years Education

A unanimous view that came through the interviews was the importance of introducing the concept of diverse family dynamics and homosexual families at an early age. The following section shares the participants’ sentiments of the importance of early years education as well as the limitations and barriers educators face with introducing it in elementary schools.

The importance of early introduction

Each participant strongly believed that the earlier children are exposed to a topic or concept, the easier it becomes for them to understand what it really means and to understand that it is normal and represents those around us. Emma expressed that she feels it is her duty to educate her students on authentic circumstances and that using children’s literature is a wonderful way to begin. She also has students represent their own identities through drawing and writing exercises so that students are various levels can express themselves.

I feel my responsibility, as an educator of particularly young children, is to expose my students to a variety of life experiences that are their and their classmates’ reality, and in that way, acknowledge my entire class.
Emma has used literature to familiarize students with what is perhaps a difficult concept for them to understand, considering their limited life experiences, vocabulary, and general knowledge. Presenting these topics at a young age is not only crucial for the character development of students but in providing students with the tools, space, and environment to reach their full potential. She said,

I feel that when younger students are exposed to a variety of family experiences, the more normative those experiences become, and the less prejudice develops. When the very innocent questions of 3 and 4 year olds can be answered honestly and openly, I have found that those responses are accepted quite frankly. When these questions are not answered or worse, never given the forum to be asked, that is when prejudice develops, and children’s psycho-emotional development suffers.

The limitations and barriers

A common misconception among educators is that discussing homosexual families ultimately means you are teaching sexual education or health and that you must then be prepared to discuss sexual orientation and sexual relationships. This misconception then leads to an assumption that it is not a topic that can be discussed in the younger grades. Luke describes this misconception when asked if he believes these topics should be introduced at a kindergarten level.

I've always felt that sex education is poorly taught in our system, just because it is so sheltered and so limited in the way that we teach, the understanding of the body and sex education in general. I still have kids in the school who giggle when they hear the names of sexual organs... If we can't get them to understand that, how are we going to get them to talk about gay parents in the class...

However, as previously discussed this is a topic that falls under recognizing, acknowledging, understanding, representing, and respecting individuals in the
communities around us. It is a Social Studies topic that can be taught in an age appropriate manner using materials that are suitable for younger students – and it is expected to be included according to the Ontario curriculum last revised in 2013. That being said, it is difficult for Luke to be aware of these changes in policy working at a school that is independent from the Ontario curriculum. If an educator were to attempt to discuss these issues in their classroom, Emma states,

> There are some wonderful books written about diverse families or by authors who are also gay parents, which can lead to rich ‘springboard’ conversations. My role is to guide those discussions, challenge misconceptions, and assist in the discovery of new ideas and often, greater levels of tolerance.

**The Need to Create Safe Environments**

Response to children with homosexual parents must focus on their need for and right to a safe, accepting school environment. Schools should address misconceptions and assumptions about homosexuality and challenge practitioners that allow these communities to remain invisible and alienated (Kelly, 2012). Participants in this study share the importance of classroom communication, stakeholder’s communication, and the effects of being unrepresented.

**Classroom Communication**

One of the most important things we are taught during our teacher training is how crucial it is for us to create safe environments for our students in order to prepare them to grow up as productive, contributing and constructive citizens in the diverse society of Ontario. All three participants strongly agree that as educators
you must provide this space for students and this means that you must be flexible and adapt to the needs of the children represented in your class.

Luke has participated in personal development activities on bullying and is facilitating anti-bullying initiatives at his school. He explains how he encourages and demonstrates empathy towards all situations in his classroom to avoid singling out one situation over another and to build a stronger classroom community. He encourages students to talk with each other if they would like to know the answer to something that involves another student rather than it being a lesson the teacher must deliver. This helps shape the classroom’s communication within the community and helps connect students to one another in a more meaningful and powerful way.

**Stakeholder Influence**

Due to the sensitive environment that Luke is placed in, he discusses the challenge parents play in ensuring the classroom is as equitable and inclusive as possible if it is a subject that they would not like discussed in their child’s class. This is specifically an issue in independent schools where the parents have a certain sense of entitlement when it comes to deciding what their children are or are not exposed to. Luke wanted to share a video of a popular artist Macklemore at the Grammy’s where he displayed several heterosexual and homosexual couples getting married, however he states,

> If I knew it wasn’t going to go home and it wasn’t going to be a topic of conversation at the dinner table and if I wasn’t going to get five emails about it the next day, I would probably be a lot more open about it... But I couldn’t bring myself to do it because I am more
concerned about the backlash from the parents that are not open about sexuality in their families and there is no waiver that you can sign... if a parent comes to me and says I don’t want you talking with my child about that, I cannot talk to their child about that.

Emma however, has had a different experience at her public school and has received a great deal of support from staff, administration, and parents regarding types of inclusive curriculum when discussing the idea of homosexual families. This may be because it is not as new of a concept in this community. One strategy that she uses when she begins to feel uncertain or uncomfortable is to ask herself, what she would want her son to learn about the world around him and the people in it. She asks herself how she would like him to view others and what would make him a more inclusive and accepting person. She uses this as a guide along with what she feels are the three most important features in creating a safe, accepting, and inclusive classroom environment.

One, listen to their experiences, and allow that to drive your more authentic teaching. Two, be open to discussion and suggestions, even if (and maybe especially if) they cause some discomfort and three, challenge student’s misconceptions right from the start to prevent intolerance and prejudice from taking seed and growing.

*Being Unrepresented*

Sam is a woman who grew up with homosexual parents and a sense of isolation. She also currently works with children in elementary classrooms that admit to not feeling as though they are identified or safe at school. She describes how children are hurt, sad, and alienated and it could be better – but is not. Sam provides possible support ideas to assist teachers in creating this ideal environment, and mirrors what Luke and Emma also see as important aspects.
We need to talk about diversity from the beginning. In later years, to talk about identity and sex when kids are age appropriate... It really starts in primary because if you get taught from a very young age that these are all the different types of families in the world, you’re not teaching them what a gay person is or what a lesbian person is of what they do in their beds, you're just talking about [various family dynamics]. [Also have] stuff up in their classrooms and around the schools, pride flags, safe space stickers.... [Stop] someone from saying something like, “that’s so gay…”

The Long-Term Impacts on Children

Many students still do not feel comfortable discussing their family dynamics in a classroom setting for fear of embarrassment, being harassed, or having to endure negative comments from their peers. Luke and Emma discuss potential emotional and difficulties and Sam explains how many students feel alienated, alone, different, and excluded from school communities and events. However, these negative emotions are just a small representation of the difficulties these marginalized children feel (COLAGE, 2003).

Emotional Difficulties

Another common belief among the three participants in this research study was that the emotional difficulties of facing misconceptions, ignorance, prejudice, and other traumatic experiences will result in negative long-term effects for these children. When asked about what types of emotional and mental instabilities a child may face if their family is not acknowledged in the classroom, the participants agree that it would be a mix of exhaustion, shame, and anger to name only a few. Emma worries that serious mental health issues may arise and that deep-rooted resentment and shame may build.
There are many mental health issues later in life that can be linked back to emotionally traumatic school experiences in children’s formative years... the case of children with homosexual parents who experience ritual prejudice and intolerance, they may develop growing resentment and even rejection of their own personal history.

Luke acknowledges how frustrating it may become if this particular child has to continuously inform peers about his family, and his life when no one else is being questioned. He makes a personal connection to always being asked about his height as he stands at 6 foot 9 inches.

Yeah, I think that would be grating on anybody. I think it’s grating on you to have to constantly answer the same questions... I started developing some angst towards those questions and I was coming up with my own defense mechanisms to respond in a negative way that would push people away. I could certainly see that being the case for him.

**Speaking From Experience**

Sam speaks from personal experience and confirms what the teachers projected to be possible effects.

A lot of shame... I was definitely very ashamed... I think anger, alienation and ashamed, feeling anger at your family. I definitely feel anger at my family. I definitely wanted to hide them. I’ve definitely been mad that my mom chose – not chose; but as a young child, I thought she chose.

Sam describes the lack of understanding as a child as they begin to wonder, why would my parents do this to me? Why would they be like this? These mentalities in turn lead to lower self-confidence and self-esteem, which ultimately causes more problems as a child enters high school and adulthood. It is also interesting to think if these are the questions that children from homosexual
households have, than what are the questions of students who are not from this community and how will those questions effect their target?

Sam also describes feeling embarrassed but not remembering much else from these years as she has blocked out the negative experiences she had when she was in elementary school. She explains how not only being unrepresented led to serious emotional and mental difficulties as she grew older, but it also led her to simply feel uncomfortable to talk about her family – which no child should ever be ashamed to do. Eventually, Sam admits, that in high school, she stopped being friends with people her age and children at school in general because she struggled to connect with them. She assumed that if they were not going to like her, this was one more thing they weren’t going to like her for. She recalls an experience from elementary,

In grade 2, we were doing family trees and our teacher was explaining how to do them. I said, “OK, what do I put if I don’t have a dad?” And my teacher straight out said, “That’s impossible. Were you born in a bottle?” I don’t remember much else, but apparently, I came home crying... Due to it being traumatic and due to other things like that being traumatic, I have blocked a lot of that stuff out... I was [also] definitely very uncomfortable talking about my family, probably until the late years in high school when I just stopped caring what people thought.

**Conclusion**

This chapter reviews and analyzes the data collected from three interviews. It becomes clear that introducing and discussing ideas of homosexual families is a complicated and difficult subject for some individuals. Misconceptions and assumptions create difficult barriers for teachers to overcome obstacles in
introducing these topics and appropriately informing young students. However, it is also clear that there is a shared respect and desire to learn how to be able to provide these children with the safe and inclusive environment that educators strive to create in their classrooms. It seems as though teachers are aware of the potentially negative and damaging effects that mis- or unrepresented children may face later and it was enlightening and hopeful to hear that although teachers are not always comfortable or informed on how to best approach these subjects and may be discouraged by the reactions of others in their communities, that this is still a topic of interest and something they are passionate about pursuing.
Chapter 5: Discussion

Introduction

As noted in the introduction to this study, this research set out to explore how to better support and represent children from homosexual families in the elementary classroom. In doing so, I investigated the attitudes and comfort levels of elementary teachers when discussing diversity issues that focus on homosexual family dynamics. Additionally, through these interviews and the literature review of research studies in this area, my initial claim has been reinforced and demonstrated. Participants echo Kozik-Rosabal (2000) and Ali (1996) when they state that there are several barriers facing elementary teachers’ ability and ease in discussing family diversity and homosexuality in the curriculum. The objective of this final chapter is to highlight the implications of my findings and my personal reflections on this topic. I shall conclude this chapter with my suggestions for further research and a list of recommended practices for the classroom.

Implications and Recommendations

Implications

Like Saffron (1996) found in her work with school libraries, one of the teachers interviewed described a reticence in including diversity in the curriculum. Luke was hesitant to take up issues, particularly those connected to homosexuality into a variety of areas of the curriculum. He explained that this was more an outcome of potential parental disapproval rather than personal comfort. The
implication of this is the overall issue that educators seek to be able to please what is most often the majority of parents in their classroom. Teachers frequently decide what is to be discussed in their classroom based on their presumptions of parental reactions and needs. What is important to realize however, is that Luke sensed that there was a flaw in his justifications for not discussing these topics in his classroom and was therefore searching for ideas and resources on how to work around this barrier. This would suggest that as an educator, one must realize that you have a justifiable, reasonable, and rational purpose in discussing these topics in your classroom; one that is stipulated and reinforced by the Ontario curriculum and recent legislation.

It should also be noted, that Luke as a teacher in a private school felt constrained by parental approval. This is in contrast to Emma who is a teacher in the public school system and feels she has the support of staff, parents, and administration. One can then conclude that there is a dichotomy between the climate of some independent schools and public schools in regards to implementation of Ontario curriculum and legislation. Even though these policies are instituted for student safety and inclusion (Ontario Ministry of Education [OME], 2009; Ontario Ministry of Education [OME], 2013). A major implication of this study is that schools, teachers, and administrators must better represent curriculum and policy in their schools.

One of the problems that Luke and Emma noted was the difficulty in finding literature and resources on homosexual families in school communities. This challenges teachers to then take it upon themselves to become informed and
educated on skills and strategies to appropriately introduce, discuss, and identify various family dynamics including homosexual families. This would imply that perhaps teacher education must be supplemented with more diverse curriculum tools such as literature, programs, and support strategies (please note list of recommended practices on page #52).

As shown in my literature review, there was a great deal of research and information on growing up in a homosexual family. The conclusions of the research focused on stigmatization by peers on homosexual families, and finally on the ways in how to support these children (Goldberg, A.E., 2010; Guasp, A., 2010; Tasker & Golombok, 1997).

However there was little and quite dated information on the effects that these children might face as being a part of a marginalized group and what they see as necessary supports. In fact, it was difficult to find the actual words of these children. As Sam emphasized, the biggest barrier when advocating for these children, was that teachers are simply unaware and ignorant of their feelings and perspectives. This would imply, that children from homosexual families remain to feel silenced and unheard. Indeed, one could conclude that there is an entire new generation of children from homosexual families that are unrepresented, unidentified, and unacknowledged in the classroom.

Reflection

In researching this topic and conducting the required interviews, I found myself on one hand surprised and disheartened and yet on the other enlightened
and inspired. I was surprised at how difficult it was to find participants willing to discuss diversity and homosexuality in their classroom. Most potential participants that I had approached claimed they were not “qualified” to discuss these issues and did not know enough about them. This demonstrated to me the undeniable gap between what the curriculum and legislation in Ontario is expecting and requiring of today’s educators in classrooms, and what is actually being carried out. As I noted in my discussion of the implications of this research I was surprised at some of the results of the studies done demonstrating that homosexual families were not greatly affected by stigmatization from peers. My personal experience and those of Luke, Emma and Sam would suggest otherwise. For in fact, stigmatization as a result of community ignorance and prejudice cannot but have negative and hurtful psychological effects on some children.

Nonetheless, I was pleasantly surprised that when I did find participants for my study, they were so willing and open to reflect on these issues. They were cognizant of and sensitive to the fact that these children remain marginalized and underrepresented in curriculum and in classroom dynamics. Both Luke and Emma asserted that they occasionally felt that their lack of knowledge regarding homosexual families and where to find materials to discuss homosexual families was problematic. Their honest and their empathy were admirable and demonstrate that there is a shift towards true recognition of the need to identify all forms of diversity in the elementary classroom. In conclusion, I would suggest that had I done this research a decade ago, my data from my literature review and my interviews would be quite different. Progress in Canada and in Ontario regarding equal rights
for homosexual families, the ability in the workplace, and marriage have also opened the door for more open discussion.

*Recommended Practices*

The following is a list of possible strategies, skills, and actions that teachers could easily implement in order to benefit their curriculum and students. These were derived and created from the interviews for this study.

- Teachers should talk to parents and use them as a resource to help learn and shape their classroom dynamics, curriculum, and community. By speaking to parents, the teacher not only keeps them informed of curriculum choices but, as well, allows them the opportunity to understand clearly what and why the teacher is choosing these topics and their content.

- Teachers should bring outside resources into the classroom to talk to the children about family dynamics. In this regard, an appropriate could intelligently and honestly have conversations with students. These adults would be able to answer questions and facilitate discussions in order to clear up misconceptions or assumptions.

- Teachers must become familiar with support groups and opportunities available. There are many relevant groups such as, Camp Ten Oaks, COLAGE, the 519 in Toronto, Through Our Roots, to name a few.

- Teachers must be knowledgeable of and familiarize themselves to current curriculum and legislation in order that all requirements are being met in the classroom. This is also imperative in being fully prepared should there be any backlash or questioning from parents or administration.
• Teachers must represent all the diversity of their students in the classroom through images, videos, children’s literature, and language. These are quite simple ways to ensure that all students are acknowledged. Furthermore, these small changes can and will build a more diverse, understanding, and accepting classroom.

• Teachers must listen to, be open to and challenge themselves and their students in order to create an empathetic and inclusive classroom environment.

Areas of Further Study

Although this study provided some relevant and informative ideas to spark important discussion, it is a limited representation of tools, strategies, and the needs of both students and teachers. One area to further study would be to create more practical tools and resources for teachers in all grade levels, particularly elementary social studies, in order to ensure the curriculum guidelines could be more effectively implemented. This would assist teachers in making the process of introducing these topics easier. It would also assist elementary students in feeling that they are being represented and supported in their classrooms.

Another area for more in depth research would be the formatting of initiatives to bring into every school in order to spread awareness and educate teachers on how to create a forum where students, teachers, and parents feel comfortable discussing topics of diversity and homosexual family dynamics. This would possibly include not only personal and professional development but also inviting specifically trained consultants into the classroom to demonstrate the variety of ways these goals can be met within the classroom.
Lastly, again due to the limitations of this research study and the limited number of participant interviews, this study presents a rather small representation of both teachers and children of homosexual couples. It is important for there to be a more thorough and current research interview representation of these two groups. Only then can we properly understand and assess the needs of students from homosexual families and the needs of teachers to better support and represent this specific and growing marginalized group in Ontario schools.

Concluding Remarks

Representing and supporting children from homosexual families is a crucial issue that Ontario classroom teachers must address. As my research has demonstrated, it is imperative that our classrooms follow the guidelines of the Ontario curriculum. However, these guidelines, practices, and strategies must be more fully developed in order to truly represent this particular community. I feel it is my responsibility as the daughter of a homosexual couple and as an educator to reflect upon, to inform, and to educate my peers regarding this particular issue. It is my contention that we must strive to be inclusive and representative of every individual in our classrooms, in our schools, and in our communities. I assert that if we neglect to do so, our students will develop unwarranted stress and insecurities that will have negative effects upon them. By becoming a teacher, I am making a commitment to help and support my students to be successful members of society. I will strive to create a classroom atmosphere and curriculum that will in no manner unnecessarily or purposelessly embarrass, hinder, or alienate my students. Instead,
I will provide them with the tools, skills, and environment to understand and accept the diversity of the world around them. It is imperative for the sake of all children, that all teachers present, and future, truly open their classrooms to the rainbow of diversity that reflects their student body.
REFERENCES


Perrin, E.C., & Siegel, B. S. (2013). Promoting the well-being of children whose parents are gay or lesbian. *Pediatrics, 131*, e1374 - e1381


*Fascinating Families, Issue 51*
APPENDICES

Appendix A: Letter of Consent for Interview

Date: ______________

Dear _____________,

I am a graduate student at OISE, University of Toronto, and am currently enrolled as a Master of Teaching candidate. I am studying supporting and representing children from homosexual families for the purposes of a investigating an educational topic as a major assignment for our program. I think that your knowledge and experience will provide insights into this topic.

I am writing a report on this study as a requirement of the Master of Teaching Program. My course instructor who is providing support for the process this year is Dr. Susan Schwartz. My research supervisor is Mira Gambhir. The purpose of this requirement is to allow us to become familiar with a variety of ways to do research. My data collection consists of a 40 minute interview that will be tape-recorded. I would be grateful if you would allow me to interview you at a place and time convenient to you. I can conduct the interview at your office or workplace, in a public place, or anywhere else that you might prefer.

The contents of this interview will be used for my assignment, which will include a final paper, as well as informal presentations to my classmates and/or potentially at a conference or publication. I will not use your name or anything else that might identify you in my written work, oral presentations, or publications. This information remains confidential. The only people who will have access to my assignment work will be my research supervisor and my course instructor. You are free to change your mind at any time, and to withdraw even after you have consented to participate. You may decline to answer any specific questions. I will destroy the tape recording after the paper has been presented and/or published which may take up to five years after the data has been collected. There are no known risks or benefits to you for assisting in the project, and I will share with you a copy of my notes to ensure accuracy.

Please sign the attached form, if you agree to be interviewed. The second copy is for your records. Thank you very much for your help.

Yours sincerely,
Researcher name: Ariel Rosen

Phone number: 416-345-6789; Email: arielrosen@oise.ca

Instructor’s Name: Susan Schwartz

Phone number: 416-789-1011; Email: susanschwartz@oise.ca

Research Supervisor’s Name: Mira Gambhir

Phone number: 416-654-9876; Email: miragambhir@oise.ca

Consent Form

I acknowledge that the topic of this interview has been explained to me and that any questions that I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw at any time without penalty.

I have read the letter provided to me by ______________________(name of researcher) and agree to participate in an interview for the purposes described.

Signature: ______________________________

Name (printed): __________________________

Date: __________________
Appendix B: Interview Questions

Background Information

1. How long have you been an educator?
2. What grades have you taught?
3. What experiences have you had working with children whose parents are homosexual?
4. Why were you interested in being a part of my research study and how does it connect to your own experiences as an educator or parent?

Curriculum/Public Policy

1. When you began teaching, what did the curriculum require you to cover under family dynamics and sexual orientation?
2. Which aspects of the Ontario Curriculum, the Ontario Teacher’s Professional Standards, and Ontario Legislation do you believe or know of that require teachers to support children with homosexual parents?
3. What do you understand as your responsibility as an educator, to discuss these topics in a classroom?

Teaching Practice

1. To what extent do you feel various family identities are reflected in your lesson plans? What resources have you used to discuss families?
2. Are your strategies overt or covert, meaning is it something address directly in discussion with the students or something that you include as part of the background (e.g. in a book, the materials you use, the way you phrase questions, etc.)?
3. What types of responses have you received from coworkers, principals or parents when bringing these topics into your classroom?
4. What resources have you used to discuss diversity in your classroom? Are there particular resources you would recommend for primary or junior levels?
5. Has it ever made you uncomfortable or been challenging to talk about these topics in class? If yes, how so? If no, why not?

Prejudice

1. What types of prejudice, if any, do you believe children of homosexual parents face? (If applicable) How do you think facing these prejudice at a young age can affect a child’s mental and emotional development?
2. Have you witnessed a child of homosexual parents facing any type of embarrassment or prejudice? If yes, is there a specific incident you would be willing to share?
3. What are 2 or 3 things teachers can do to support the parents and children of families that face discrimination?
Healthy Development

1. Have any of your students from homosexual households ever claimed to no longer feel as though they are in a safe or inclusive environment?
2. What are the necessary ‘accommodations’ for children from homosexual parents to promote positive and healthy development in schools?
3. What types of emotional and mental instabilities do you believe a child could face later in life, if their family identity had never been acknowledged or discussed in a classroom?

Support Programs

1. What support programs, strategies, and resources are available for students who openly struggle with identifying with the family dynamic?
2. What strategies have you implemented in the past and how may those change in the future?

Wrap up

1. Is there anything you would like to add?
2. Is there anything about this topic that you would like to speak to?
3. Are there any anecdotal experiences you would like to share that you have not?