

FINAL REPORT – July, 2006

The Impact of Homophobic Public Discourse on Children and Youth Living in LGBT-Led Families: A study of the same-sex marriage debate.

LGBT Parenting Network, Family Service Association of Toronto

Principal Investigator: Rachel Epstein

Funded by the Wellesley Central Urban Health Grants Initiative

Executive Summary

This community-based research project explores the following research questions:

- What kinds of experiences are the children of LGBTQ parents having in schools? How do young people, teachers and parents perceive, respond to and talk about these experiences?
- How are children/young people impacted when they are surrounded by a public debate that tells them their families are not legitimate and that they are at risk growing up in their households?

Methodology included interviews with key community informants, group interviews with young people (age 10 – 18) with one or more LGBTQ parents, LGBTQ parents, and teachers interested in LGBTQ issues, and on-line surveys with the same three groups. In total 31 young people, 17 parents and 15 teachers were interviewed; 18 young people, 79 teachers and 77 parents filled out the on-line survey.

Project was guided at key points by a Community Advisory Committee, composed of academics, community activists and educators.

Data analysis is still in process, but some key themes are emerging from the interviews with young people. In summary, we are finding that most school-age children experience quite a profoundly homophobic culture at school (with some notable exceptions, i.e. some alternative and private schools). This includes hearing phrases like “that’s so gay,” consistently and repeatedly; being asked questions by other kids, like, “your parents are gay, can we put a pencil up your ass?” or being told by a teacher that “the best way to grow up is with a mom and a dad.”

Our children respond to this culture of homophobia in very diverse ways. They talk a lot about assessing safety, seeking clues about when and where they might experience homophobia and trying to make decisions accordingly about when and with whom to “come out.” Some develop strategies of “coming out” more; others less. Sometimes they respond with anger and physical aggression, even when this is not their “normal” way of responding to stress. Sometimes they respond by verbally playing with other kids’ ignorance, a form of teasing back. Disclosure to parents and/or teachers varies by situation and individual, but it is not always straightforwardly helpful for parents and/or teachers to intervene. One of the key questions emerging from this research is about how

parents and teachers can *effectively* support the children of LGBT parents when homophobic incidences occur.

Background

The Canadian government's bill (and subsequent law) changing the legal definition of marriage to include same-sex couples sparked a massive national public debate and an enormous homophobic backlash against same-sex families. This research project aims to document the impact of this public debate on children and youth living in LGBT-led families. **How is the emotional well-being of children impacted when they are surrounded by a public debate that tells them their families are not legitimate and that they are at risk growing up in their households?**

While a 2001 poll (Leger) indicated that half the Canadian population believes lesbians and gays should be denied the right to parent, the public debate on same-sex marriage made these homophobic views central to public discourse in an unprecedented fashion (although reminiscent of the public debate surrounding Bill 167 in which the right of gays and lesbians to adopt children was of central concern.)

Over the past two years there has been much media attention focused on the opposition to the same-sex marriage bill. Much of this opposition is based on arguments about the "natural connections between marriage, sex and procreation," on the immorality of homosexual relationships, and the risk to children living in lesbian/gay households. Catholic Archbishop Jean-Claude Cardinal Turcotte made news on September 10, 2003 when he suggested that legalizing same-sex marriage could lead to the condoning of incestuous relationships; others equate same-sex parenting with child abuse.

Studies have shown that gays, lesbians and bisexuals have a higher incidence of mental health problems and higher suicide rates than the heterosexual population, mostly as a result of coping with homophobia. Most recently a three-year British study conducted at University College London found that gays, lesbians and bisexuals had twice the rate of mental health problems as heterosexuals and confirmed findings of higher suicide rates. A 2001 survey of the GLBT population of Ottawa (How Well Are We Doing?) confirmed that suicide is a significant issue in the lives of gay and lesbian youth going through the coming out process. Much less known is the impact of homophobia and heterosexism on children and youth living in LGBT-led families.

In 2001 a series of focus groups conducted by the LGBT Parenting Network, FSA Toronto, indicated that the issues of most concern to LGBT parents are (a) the impact of homophobia and heterosexism on their children and (b) skills and strategies to empower their children to deal with the homophobia they encounter. Of particular concern were their children's experiences in schools. For example, the daughter of lesbians who told her teacher that she didn't have a dad, was told "of course you have a dad, everyone has a dad, what were you born in a jar?"; a Grade 8 daughter of lesbians was forced to eat lunch every day alone because her peers were taunting her for being a "lesbian."

Children's family structures are regularly denied by teachers and administrators, they are denied representations of their families in school curriculum, and they experience homophobic incidences on playgrounds and in classrooms.

This project addresses these concerns in the context of the current political moment, i.e. the same-sex marriage debate. Initial soundings of Parenting Network members with regards to this research project resulted in emails from parents expressing what a difficult time it has been for them and their children. Some were not allowing their children to read newspapers; others described feeling isolated in the face of this backlash. These initial responses indicated the timeliness and significance of conducting this research.

There is an enormous and serious gap in the academic literature with regards to the particular ways homophobia puts emotional stresses on children and youth living in LGBT-led families and attending public schools. Generally speaking, issues of 'sexuality' and 'family' have not been taken up as widely within educational debates as have questions of class, race and gender and when homophobia and heterosexism are addressed it is almost always in the context of the experiences of LGBT youth. This research project will contribute towards filling the knowledge gap that exists about the experiences of children and youth living in LGBT-led families, will inform local initiatives to enhance the lives of children and youth living in LGBT-led families and will have wide-ranging use in struggles currently being waged globally to secure basic civil and human rights for lesbians and gays.

The LGBT Parenting Network currently consists of an electronic network of over 900 lesbian/gay/bisexual/transsexual/transgender parents in the Toronto area. This project will draw on the experiences and expertise of this network to begin to illuminate the effects of the current public debate on the emotional health and well-being of children and young people living in LGBT-led families. Findings will be used to inform innovative programming and public debate.

Methods

Our research methodology is guided by principles of community-based participatory research as synthesized by Israel, et al (1998). These include the establishment of collaborative working partnerships between community members, organizational representatives and researchers in all aspects of the research process, with the aim of increasing understanding and knowledge of research priorities and questions that arise from community concerns. The knowledge generated is used to enhance the health and well-being of community members and to further social justice.

We also agree with Denzin and Lincoln (1994) that "there is no clear window into the inner life of an individual. Any gaze is always filtered through the lenses of language, gender, social class, race, and ethnicity...No single method can grasp the subtle variations in ongoing human experience. As a consequence...qualitative researchers

deploy a wide range of interconnected interpretive methods, always seeking better ways to make more understandable the worlds of experience that have been studied.” (p. 12)

Data collection for this project consisted of:

Key Informant Interviews

Key informant interviews were conducted with:

Steve Solomon, Human Sexuality Program, Toronto District School Board
Dr. Debra Langan, Sociology Dept, York University (specialty in group interviews)
Dr. Debra Pepler, Dept. of Psychology, York University; Director, LaMarsh Centre for Research on Violence & Conflict Resolution (specialty in bullying)
Audrey Cole, Coordinator, Canadian Initiative for the Prevention of Bullying, LaMarsh Centre for Research on Violence & Conflict Resolution
Dr. Tara Goldstein, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (specialty in anti-homophobia education)
Dr. Ena Dua, Sociology Dept, York University (specialty in intersections of identities)
Dr. Mike Walker, Social Worker, Families in Transition, Family Service Association of Toronto (specialty in facilitating groups for children)

Documentation of Same-Sex Marriage Debate

Jennifer Ajandi, a placement student from the Social Work department at Ryerson University carefully documented newspaper coverage of the same-sex marriage debate. Articles from all major Toronto based newspapers have been clipped and filed by date and are accessible for analysis.

On-line surveys

On-line surveys for children/young people (aged 10–18) with LGBT parents, LGBT parents of 10-18- year-olds and teachers interested in anti-homophobia work were drafted and piloted using Survey Monkey, an on-line survey website. Surveys were finalized in June, 2005 (see attached) and ran until the end of January, 2006.

To date, numbers of surveys filled out are:

LGBT Parents – 79
Teachers – 77
Young people – 18

See discussion under “Recruitment.”

Group Interviews

Group interviews were conducted with parents, teachers and young people from July – October, 2005. In total 5 groups were held with parents, 4 with teachers and 8 with young people. Where possible, interviews with young people were divided by age group (10-11-year-olds; 12-14-year-olds; 15-18-year-olds). Size of group ranged from two to seven. In total interviews were conducted with 31 young people, 17 parents and 15 teachers.

All group interviews began with an explanation of the project and the signing of consent forms, and substitute consent forms for young people 16 and under. All participants were offered a \$20 honorarium for their participation. Group interviews were audio-recorded, using both digital and cassette tapes. Tapes have all been transcribed.

Recruitment

The chief recruitment tool for this project was the email list of the LGBT Parenting Network, a list that consists of close to 1,000 LGBT parents, prospective parents and their families, in and around Toronto. Most of the parents and young people involved in the project heard about it through this list.

As well, recruitment notices were sent out through other LGBT organizations and list serves, both local and national, including the Rainbow Health Network, Children of Lesbians and Gays Everywhere (COLAGE), Camp Ten Oaks (an Ottawa-based camp for LGBT families), EGALE, Gay and Lesbian Educators (GALE - B.C.), a queer research list serve at OISE, Lesbians Mother's Association (Quebec), Gay Fathers of Toronto.

Paid advertisements aimed at recruiting Toronto participants ran in NOW (two weeks) and Xtra (one week).(see attached)

Teachers from the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) were recruited through TDSB electronic networks, through connections with staff in the Equity and Human Sexuality Programs, and through teacher's unions, i.e. the Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario and the Ontario Secondary Schools Teachers' Federation. TDSB teachers also circulated information about the project to teacher's networks in other provinces.

Recruitment goals were to conduct interviews with 18 each of parents, teachers and young people, and to have 50 people in each category fill out the on-line survey. We well-surpassed the goal of 18 young people by interviewing 31 young people in total, and came close to our goal by interviewing 17 parents and 15 teachers.

On-line surveys have been filled out by 79 parents and 77 teachers, again surpassing our goals. However, only 18 young people to date have filled out the survey. Interestingly, young people seemed more interested in participating in a face-to-face interview than in filling out a survey on-line. Perhaps this was largely due to the \$20 honorarium offered for participation in an interview, in combination with the time required to fill out the on-

line survey and the fact that filling out a survey is an isolated task, involving no social interaction. We are currently considering re-opening the on-line survey for young people, to encourage participation by more young people, particularly those outside of large urban centres.

Community Advisory Committee (CAC)

CAC members include:

Dr. Karleen Pendelton-Jimenez, York University
Dr. Lisa Barnoff, Social Work, Ryerson University
Dr. Lori Ross, Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, Principal Investigator, MOMS Project
Dr. Ena Dua, Dept. of Sociology, York University
Nadia Bello, Teens Educating and Challenging Homophobia (TEACH)
Steve Solomon, Human Sexuality Program, TDSB
Patricia Koine/Lydia Makoroka, Gays and Lesbians of African Descent (GLAD)
Rebecca Gower, Family Support Worker, 519 Church St. Community Centre
Chris Veldhoven, facilitator, Daddies & Papas 2B
Paul Carr, Gay Fathers of Toronto
Jennet Poffenroth, teacher, TDSB
Zeenat Janmohamed, Coordinator, Centre for Early Childhood Development, George Brown College
Makeda Zook, daughter of lesbians
Sandi Parker, Facilitator, Children of Lesbians and Gays Everywhere (COLAGE)

The CAC has so far met twice in the course of the project, on February 2, 2005 and May 31, 2005. At the first meeting some of the major recommendations of the committee included lowering the age of children being interviewed to ten; considering individual as well as group interviews for children; and considering other options for working with children.

We did subsequently lower the age from twelve to ten, and incorporated some drawing and art exercises into the group interviews for young people. We did not conduct individual interviews with young people due to time and financial constraints.

The second CAC meeting focused on reviewing and modifying the on-line surveys and interview protocols and development of recruitment strategies. CAC members were extremely helpful in utilizing their own networks to publicize and recruit for the project.

Data Analysis

Data analysis, both quantitative and qualitative, is still being carried out. Data from the on-line surveys has been transferred to SPSS for statistical analysis. Assistance with

quantitative data analysis will be obtained through York University's Centre for Social Research and from Jesmen Mendoza, a colleague at FSA who is skilled in quantitative analysis. The on-line surveys also provide qualitative data, as many of the questions encouraged participants to write answers. Qualitative data is being analyzed using NVivo, a qualitative analysis software that assists with the analysis of data using thematic codes. Advisory committee members will be called on to assist with establishing key questions and approaches for data analysis.

Results

Data analysis is still underway. We have focused to date on the interviews with young people, as we see the issues arising from these interviews as at the heart of the project, i.e. what young people with LGBT parents are saying about their school experiences and about the impact of the same-sex marriage debate. We have begun to organize their stories around some key themes or questions:

- How do our kids respond to a culture of homophobia at school, particularly when it is often not intervened on, even by those in authority?
- How do we prepare/equip/support our kids so that the fact that they have LGBT parents is not their "weak" point?
- What kinds of interventions are most helpful from parents/teachers?
- What are the "silly" questions our kids get asked and how do they respond?
- Is it important to them to know other kids with LGBT parents?
- How significant is it to our kids that they have LGBT parents?
- How were they impacted by the same-sex marriage debate?

In summary, we are finding that most school-age children experience quite a profoundly homophobic culture at school (with some notable exceptions, i.e. some alternative and private schools). This includes hearing phrases like "that's so gay," consistently and repeatedly; being asked questions by other kids, like, "your parents are gay, can we put a pencil up your ass?" or being told by a teacher that "the best way to grow up is with a mom and a dad."

Our children respond to this culture of homophobia in very diverse ways. They talk a lot about assessing safety, seeking clues about when and where they might experience homophobia and trying to make decisions accordingly about when and with whom to "come out." Some develop strategies of "coming out" more; others less. Sometimes they respond with anger and physical aggression, even when this is not their "normal" way of responding to stress. Sometimes they respond by verbally playing with other kids' ignorance, a form of teasing back. Disclosure to parents and/or teachers varies by situation and individual, but it is not always straightforwardly helpful for parents and/or teachers to intervene. One of the key questions emerging from this research is about how parents and teachers can *effectively* support the children of LGBT parents when homophobic incidences occur.

The young people we interviewed talked about being asked silly and ignorant questions by their peers, often over and over again. Most say that knowing other young people with LGBT parents is helpful so that you don't "feel like the only person in living history to have parents like I do," but how supportive they feel at school and by other friends, makes it more or less important. Kids growing up deeply embedded in queer communities, talk about knowing other kids with families like their's as "just part of everyday life." A key theme beginning to emerge from this and other research is the relationship of children who grow up in queer/lgbt communities to these communities as children get older. They talk about feeling "culturally queer," as belonging to and feeling comfortable in queer culture and queer communities, and yet not always being recognized or acknowledged by queer communities, especially if they identify as "straight." A key question for LGBT adults is about how to support and make space for our older children in community events and spaces.

When asked about how significant the fact that they have LGBT parents is in their lives, many responded that it is not that significant, until *others make it so*. In other words, it is other people and institutions that define our children by the structure of their families. They themselves recognize their complexity, and that family structure is just a small part of "who they are." Many young people responded to this question by talking about how growing up with LGBT parents had resulted in them being more "open-minded," "seeing more points of view," being "less judgemental." Interestingly, this corresponds to a growing body of research that concludes that children growing up in queer families tend to be more open generally to diversity of all kinds.

With regards to the same-sex marriage debate and related debates about LGBT parenting, young people are aware of the absurdity of a debate which "argues as if we don't exist. If this happens (same-sex marriage) then these children will be born...they act as if we're not here..." We spent some time in each interview looking at the Focus on the Family full-page newspaper ads that were used as part of the religious right's campaign opposing same-sex marriage. We talked about what might be said "back" to these ads, or in an ad taken out by children in LGBT families. The young people who participated in group interviews drew pictures of their families and some of them created posters in response to the Focus on the Family ads. This art work will be used as we develop community dissemination strategies for this research.

Interesting discussions also ensued about the ethics of holding "debates" in classrooms about same-sex marriage. Some felt that, as an issue of basic human rights, it makes no sense to debate. Others felt debates could be useful for other children who were learning homophobia at home and needed a place where their views could be challenged and countered.

Overall, many young people said they were unaffected by the same-sex marriage debate; others, though they supported the final outcome of the debate, found that the debate itself made them more uncomfortable at school and other settings because of the homophobia it unleashed. Most of the young people, though they supported same-sex marriage, did not

have strong feelings about their own parents getting married, but felt they should have the choice if they desired it.

The above are preliminary findings with respect to the interviews conducted with young people. We will be continuing a more in-depth analysis of this data.

With respect to interviews with teachers, our overall questions are: What factors create barriers / positive conditions for teachers to take an active / proactive role in relation to anti-homophobia work in schools? How can teachers most effectively support students who have LGBT parents? Emerging themes include:

- Lack of focus on equity issues generally, and anti-homophobia specifically, in teacher's college – instead sometimes a focus on “how to protect yourself from accusations of bias”
- Lack of training and sense of importance of equity reps in schools
- Dealing with closeted colleagues in schools, particularly school principals
- Complexity of decisions to “come out” in school settings
- Sense of isolation amongst teachers who are attempting to do anti-homophobia work
- Homophobia amongst teachers, eg. teachers who say “that’s so gay”

Data analysis of parent interviews has not yet begun, however, an important focus arising from this research will be a better understanding of the differences between how young people, parents and teachers experience and understand the homophobia that happens in schools and the kinds of interventions that are most helpful. Many young people describe moments of intervention by adults that resulted in an increase in harassment, not a lessening of it. By comparing the interviews done with young people, parents and teachers we hope to gain some insight into what kinds of interventions young people find most helpful.

Outcomes to date

As a CBR project, it has been critical to the success of the project to ensure that participation is useful to participants, as well as to researchers.

Teachers' Meeting

Initial calls to teachers resulted in a lot of immediate response and the teachers who participated in group interviews almost uniformly spoke about the isolation they feel as teachers committed to anti-homophobia work in their classrooms. When it was suggested that the teachers involved in this project might want to meet together to talk about their common issues, all indicated a desire to do so, including offers from some to help organize an agenda for the meeting. This meeting will be held in the Fall, 2006 and will hopefully provide a forum for the teachers involved to discuss and move forward with the equity-seeking work they are all committed to developing.

Young people

Many of the young people who participated in group interviews expressed positive feelings about the opportunity the project provided to meet other young people living in similar family structures. In particular, one group of 12-14-year-olds enjoyed meeting and talking with each other so much that they requested another meeting. This was arranged, in conjunction with another interview with new participants. At the second meeting they engaged in an art project which involved “talking back” to the Focus on the Family full-page newspaper ads that featured prominently in the Christian Right’s campaign against same-sex marriage.

As well, the group interviews with young people raised questions about the most effective ways to engage young people with LGBT parents in on-going support/discussion groups. Do people prefer to meet with others of the same age? gender? family structure? Discussions have begun between the Pride & Prejudice program of Central Toronto Youth Services (CTYS); Children of Gays and Lesbians Everywhere (COLAGE), the on-going support group for children with LGBT parents that currently meets bi-weekly in Toronto, and the LGBT Parenting Network, FSA Toronto about ways to improve and expand current programs available to youth with LGBT parents. The LGBT Parenting Network is at a key moment in its history, having just received secure funding. The need for expanded programs for children and youth with LGBT parents will be foregrounded in the current planning process, and interview data will be used to inform program development.

Egale Safe School Campaign

Because much of the content of interviews and on-line surveys focuses on young peoples’ experiences in schools, we anticipate that many of the policy implications stemming from the project will be directed at the education system. EGALE has recently launched a national Safe Schools Campaign (see attached) which our principal investigator has joined. We are anticipating the research results being used to inform this campaign by providing rich and current information about the experiences our children are having in schools, the meaning they give to these experiences, and their analysis of what would be helpful.

Queering the Family Tree Poster Project

As well, the LGBT Parenting Network has recently been part of a collaborative poster project called, “Queering the Family Tree.” The Queer Parenting Initiative (a collaboration between the LGBT PN (FSA); CAMH; Gay Fathers of Toronto, Chinese Family Services and TGStation. Com) developed a poster which celebrates the diversity of family structures (see attached poster, or go to www.queerparent.ca). The aim of the QPI is to distribute the 10,000 posters that have been printed in daycares, schools,

libraries, community centres, community health centres, and other public spaces. Again, results from this research project will undoubtedly be used to inform this project – the next step of which is to develop curriculum to accompany the poster.

Dissemination

Presentations on initial findings with regards to young people, have been presented at:

- Queer Health Matters, a queer health fair sponsored by the Sherbourne Health Centre and the Rainbow Health Coalition. Toronto, Ont. April, 2006.
- Real Families, Real Facts: A Research Symposium on LGBT-Headed Families, sponsored by the Family Pride Coalition, U.S. Philadelphia, PA.. May, 2006.
- No Borders, No Barriers – A Collaborative Approach for Resolving Disputes Respectfully for Separating LGBT Clients and their Families. Niagara Falls, Ont. June, 2006.
- Parkdale Pride Event, Toronto, Ont. June, 2006.

See attached Power Point presentation used for these events.

Rachel Epstein has recently been invited to participate in a special seminar on the children of LGBT parents at the meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development in Boston, Mass., in March, 2007.

Next Steps

Informal discussions have taken place with the **Vanier Institute of the Family** and they have expressed interest in assisting with dissemination of research results. We will follow-up with this as soon as we have a final research report.

We also anticipate:

- Community forums on research results
- Special issue of *Pride & Joy Newsletter*
- Media campaign, including press release/conference
- Presentations to key social service, health and education professionals
- Journal articles and presentations at professional conferences
- Special sections on the queerparent.ca website (www.queerparent.ca) and Family Service Association website (www.fsatoronto.com)

Programming implications are multifold. At the heart of this project is a desire to assist children and youth to effectively deal with the homophobia they encounter and to promote emotional well-being amongst children and youth living in LGBT families. Research findings will inform the programming developed, which might include:

- (a) a discussion series for children and youth exploring strategies to deal with homophobia; parallel groups for parents about how to empower their children to deal with homophobia, perhaps in collaboration with CTYS and COLAGE.
- (b) a handbook with research results and practical strategies for empowering children and youth to deal with homophobia (perhaps linked to a project currently being developed which involves production of a handbook for LGBT families on how to deal with schools)
- (c) collaboration with AHEC, COLAGE, TEACH, Human Sexuality Program (TDSB), Rainbow Health Network, and other engaged in anti-homophobia education and training, in order to incorporate research results into ongoing work.

Lessons Learned

Key challenges in this project stemmed from the primary investigator also being the coordinator of a major community development project. The multi-focused demands of this kind of work are sometimes difficult to combine with the needs of a research project, which requires blocks of uninterrupted time. As well, the LGBT Parenting Network underwent a major upheaval during the course of this research project, first with a loss of funding and a planned closure, followed by the regaining of funds and a major structural shift. This probably illuminates a difficulty facing many community-based research projects given the instability of and lack of resources available to many community organizations.

Community members, including many members of the advisory committee, provided support in this period of instability but, in retrospect, perhaps could have been drawn on in a variety of ways to provide support to the project through the time when the future of the LGBT Parenting Network, the program sponsoring the research project, was unclear.

Recruitment of participants was also challenging. We were recruiting young people, parents and teachers, each with different needs, daily schedules and motivations for participation. For teachers we had to keep in mind the demands of the school year, for parents (and some teachers) the demands of their complicated work/home/parenting lives, and for young people, the particular demands of their lives. Many of the young people we interviewed live in more than one home, so we were often in touch with more than one parent, or juggling complex schedules. Scheduling limitations resulted in less participation than we might have had, had we had funding to hold more interviews or to extend the project for a longer time period.

Some of these challenges would have been assisted by more staff time devoted to the project, and at least one other staff person besides the primary investigator. A research assistant to help with advertising, recruitment, scheduling and project management would have been invaluable.

Attached:

Recruitment Ad

Surveys for Young People, Parents and Teachers

Info on EGALE's Safe Schools Campaign

Queering the Family Tree Poster

Power Point Presentation: Culturally Queer Kids