“How Do You Spell Family?”:

Literacy, Heteronormativity, and Young Children of Lesbian Mothers

DISSERTATION

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate School of The Ohio State University

By

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2010

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Abstract

There are an estimated 14 million children with one or more parent who identifies as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender (LGBT), but there is little to no research about these children’s experiences in schools. This study investigated elementary school-aged children with lesbian mothers from five families as they moved between their (gay) homes and (straight) schools. It drew on a theoretical framework that combined sociocultural theory, queer theory, and New Literacy Studies to foreground the social nature of the self and language. The research design was a multi-sited ethnography that combined qualitative, ethnographic methods with queer theory to create a project appropriate for researching the liminal positions of children with lesbian mothers with/to larger LGBT communities in a variety of discursive locations. Data was collected via participant observation and informal interviews in homes, schools, and community sites over fourteen months. The data demonstrated that even young children with lesbian mothers are attuned to normative expectations of families and adjust information they share in socially savvy ways. The study illustrates how literacy is one mechanism through which they manage information about their LGBT-headed families in the face of heteronormative demands.

At home, representations of family that included LGBT people and relationships were normalized. Such kinship was frequently indexed by language and literacy practices, yet not discussed on a regular basis. In schools, heteronormative
representations of family were normalized, yet again not explicitly discussed. The
discursive and textual representations of family by children with lesbian mothers served
as the bridge connecting these two extremes, and comparing these uses of language and
literacy became a way to bring the unspoken assumptions of different contexts into
greater relief. A summer book club conducted by the researcher with a subset of the
participants served as an example of a hybrid space where children with lesbian mothers
spoke openly about their families, as in their homes, but with their peers, as in their
schools. In this space discursive productions about family were not assumed nor
silenced, but instead actively negotiated by the children in new ways.

Overall, this study documented the ways young children with lesbian mothers
undertake sophisticated discursive work to position themselves in social situations that
are shaped to various degrees by heteronormativity. They are attentive to and monitor
their discursive productions of family and other self-authoring practices as they
participate in settings of their everyday lives that may or may not be queer friendly.
These children use an awareness of the contextualized nature of talk and literacy to
understand heteronormative assumptions in these settings and shape knowledge about
their families appropriately. The study encourages teachers’ attempts to respect
children’s own choices about discussing their families, while still including books and
language that represent LGBT-headed families in their classrooms. The research finds
that the more choice children have in their immediate work environments, and the more
they are surrounded by others they know to be supportive of their families, the more
likely they are to share information about their family comfortably.
This document is dedicated to the families who participated in this study.

Thank you for being my teachers.

It is also dedicated to COLAGErs everywhere and all those who work to create a less heteronormative world for children.
Acknowledgments

This is a project about family, one that required a whole family of its own to bring it to fruition. The people I have the opportunity to thank here have all parented the project in their own ways, helping me and the research grow and develop before I could eventually bring the work into the world. I could never have anticipated the support I needed for this work or the support that people around me would so generously extend. That I have a chance to thank them here is good, but hardly feels like enough to repay them for the kindness they’ve shown. At least it is a start.

My first and deepest thanks go to the families who participated in this study. You welcomed me into your homes more generously than I ever had expected. Spending time with you and with your children was always enjoyable and enlightening. Thank you for your time and your ideas. I am honored that my relationships with you have continued after the project, and I look forward to all that you will help your children accomplish in their lives.

My dissertation committee has been a strong source of support, encouragement, and guidance as I stumbled my way through this work. Mollie Blackburn, my advisor, consistently and generously helped me sort through my own thinking to come to an idea or plan or question that was worth pursuing further. She pushed and encouraged, praised
and critiqued in just the right ratios to keep me moving forward. Her willingness to share her personal and professional experiences with me kept me motivated and reminded me that I wasn’t alone in my doubts and frustrations, or in my pride and excitement. I especially appreciate that I was able to do this work with an advisor who is herself a lesbian mother and who has created an academic life based on activist work with LGBT youth. She has provided me with a model for being a woman, scholar, advisor, activist, and mother, all lessons for which I am profoundly grateful.

I had the incredible good fortune of arriving at Ohio State at the same time as Harvey J. Graff. After enrolling in his class, he immediately welcomed me into the world of LiteracyStudies@OSU. As a result, my scholarship and my approach to literacy have been positively and permanently changed. Harvey not only provided me with one-of-a-kind opportunities for learning, but supported me in all of them. I thank him for his confidence in my abilities, his deep care and attention to my work, and his friendship.

Marcia Farr’s vast body of scholarship and her reputation as a sociolinguist first drew me to Ohio State, for which I will always be grateful. Her early guidance through my coursework and the ethnographic training she provided were invaluable to my development as a scholar.

Patricia Enciso’s abilities to theorize pedagogies of literacy and literary reading set me on my own path of research about children, texts, social positioning, and meaning-making. My work has benefitted from hearing her think through the layers of complexity within social interactions. As an editor of Language Arts, Pat and the other members of the editorial team – Laurie Katz, Barbara Kiefer, Detra Price-Dennis, and Melissa Wilson
all listened patiently to my questions, shared their thoughts, and generally supported my research and writing even when it took time from my work at the journal. Denise Davila’s assistance assured we met publication deadlines while I met writing deadlines. I have been lucky to have many friends rally around me during this process. COLAGEr Kate Ranson-Walsh and Hope Berry Manley were my first teachers about the experiences of children with LGBT parents. Hope read early drafts of several chapters and encouraged me to write in ways that communicated the respect I have for my participants. My writing groups - Melissa Wilson, Marlene Beierle, Sara Childers, Sean Connors, Daniel Newhart, and Ryan Rish – provided feedback on my prose and, more importantly, provided structure and friendship in what can be an isolating process. My SwL group – Lee Evans, Noah Demland, Cinnamon Reiheld, Claire Williams, Megan Chawansky, Monica Carroll, and Shelley Smith – were my queer chosen family during my writing, encouraging study time and answering ethical dilemmas of all sorts. Joby Ryan and Stephanie Davis, Audra Slocum, Carrie Malcom Tench, and Emily Newhouse Dillingham all shared their homes as a writing space even when I was not a very fun guest and talked through ideas when I was stuck. Ann Palcisco helped me shape the beginning of the project and helped me not throw my computer across the room in frustration as I formatted it at the end. Jill Hermann-Wilmarth, Tara Cyphers, and Mary Beth Ressler read drafts and somehow convinced me that they made sense and I should keep writing. Ruth Friedman, Anna Scanlon, Ashianna Esmail, Sarah Bauer, Anne-Marie Angelo, Matt Jackson, and Emma Beringei made me laugh when I worried I might have forgotten how.
Finally, I want to thank my family of origin. They are, without a doubt, the most incredible and loving people I know. When I came out to my parents, Joe and Mary Pat Ryan, ten years ago, I couldn’t have imagined a time when my mother would call me to discuss the heteronormative aspects of a story she saw on the news or my father and I would sit in their family room and discuss the details of the LGBT-inclusive non-discrimination policy he wants to implement in his professional organization. I know I haven’t always made it an easy process, but their support has been unwavering and their love unending. At the end of this project, where I wrote and thought about families of all sorts for several years, I can say for certain that such is the definition of family. I owe them more than I could ever repay, but I give them my thanks and my love.
Vita

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Graduate Interdisciplinary Specialization: Literacy Studies
Transcription Conventions

[brackets] explanatory information including items like pronoun referents, intended message recipients, and paralinguistic information such as laughter, emotional emphasis, etc.

xxxxxx unintelligible speech; number indicates approximate number of syllables spoken

[[double brackets]] uncertain transcription; not completely unintelligible, but not completely clear

colon vowel lengthening; number indicates approximate number of beats

**bold text** strong emphasis

ellipsis… pause in speech; often, speaker retains the floor

Speaker 1:

… lines of transcript unrelated to discussion (usually interruptions, asides) deleted

Speaker 2:

*italics* text read aloud from a book

Other punctuation used conventionally as in written English.
Notes Regarding My Use of Terms

COLAGEr

This term derives from the name of the organization COLAGE (originally Children of Lesbians and Gays Everywhere), the nation’s only organization by and for children with one or more LGBT or queer parent. I use this term to speak about the experiences of those with LGBT parents broadly, especially when referring to a sense of shared identity. Using COLAGEr is also a way to index and honor the work of COLAGE in organizing efforts through which COLAGErs can speak as the experts on their own experiences.

Heteronormativity

I define heteronormativity as the assumption that people are, and should be, straight. I use this term as an umbrella term to refer to the system of interlocking regulations of sexuality and gender, or what is sometimes referred to as the heterosexual matrix. This system naturalizes straight desires and relations and marks all others as deviant. I understand heteronormativity to encompass the more specific concept of heterosexism, the belief that heterosexual relationships are right and better than others. I also understand it to encompass homophobia, actions of fear and hatred perpetrated...
against those who do not conform to heteronormative assumptions.
I use this term in my writing because of its breadth, because it
highlights ideas of normalcy that both mark and silence LGBT-
headed families, and because it parallels my use of the word queer.

**Literacy**

My understanding of literacy follows scholars of New Literacy
Studies (see Chapter 2) in that I understand literacy to be a social
process deeply embedded in other social practices and networks.
The contextualized nature of literacy means that it is multiple,
political, and ideological. I limit my focus on literacy to
interactions around the creation and interpretation of written
language and texts (and not all semiotic practices) to create some
confluence with how literacy is understood by schools, one of my
research sites. Interactions around text are also at the core of
Street’s definitions of literacy practices, discussed further in
Chapter 2.

**Queer**

I use queer as an umbrella term to refer to identities and desires
that break heteronormative assumptions of what is normal, natural,
and expected and what is deviant. This includes a particular focus
on sexualities and genders but, following its use in queer theory,
also incorporates the destabilizing of normative ideas broadly
conceived. The breadth of the term allows me to understand children from LGBT-headed families as queer no matter what their present or future orientations. It also parallels my use of the word heteronormative.

Queerspawn This is another term being used in the COLAGEr community, one that emphasizes political activism and pride in the queerness of children’s and families’ experiences. Like the word queer in general, it also references the insufficiency of labels to describe an anti-foundational sense of identity.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

The first time I walked into the Powell’s house was on a Sunday morning. Ethan (11) and Isabella (9) (all names are pseudonyms) were trying to figure out which outfits of theirs were both clean and appropriate to wear to church in just a few hours. Suzy was trying to make breakfast while negotiating the kids’ different food requests and holding a cleaning rag, since their new dog had just cut his foot and was bleeding all over the kitchen floor. She was trying to keep the dog contained in the kitchen with a baby gate, since the linoleum floor was easier to wipe up, but either the cats or the kids would inevitably knock the gate down and the dog would sprint for the living room, trailing blood on the carpet as he ran. The kids would scream and run after him, eventually dragging him back to the kitchen, while trying not to get too close to the pan of oil that was heating up on the stove to cook some eggs and bacon.

In many ways, very little about this moment at the Powell’s had anything to do with the fact that Suzy is a lesbian. Although this particular scene may be out-of-the ordinary even for the Powell family, change some of the details and for many families around the country, this was much like any Sunday morning: another experience of negotiating the constant energy and unpredictability of children with the occasionally mind-numbing routinization and responsibility of running a household day after day. It is mornings like these, in all their middle class, American “normalcy,” that many lesbian,
gay, bisexual and/or transgender (LGBT\textsuperscript{1}) parents think of when their families are accused of being dangerous for children or destructive to society. Although some right-wing pundits might argue otherwise, LGBT-headed families are, actually, families. They love and fight and laugh and cry and teach and learn and hug and encourage and frustrate and drive car pools. After all, laundry is laundry, schedules are schedules, cooking is cooking, and pets are pets, no matter the gender of the people with whom you choose to partner.

Given the history of prejudice against LGBT people in general and LGBT parents in particular, this has been the rallying cry of acceptance for and by gay families: we’re good, “normal” families\textsuperscript{2}! What else can you say when courts have argued that a woman’s “failure to ‘keep her lesbian relationship separate from her role as a mother will have a detrimental effect upon the children’” (DiStefano v. DiStefano, cited in Hitchens and Thomas, 1983, p. 6), or when children have been taken away from the only father they’ve known because the state believes “the absence of harmful incidents [resulting from a father’s bisexuality] in the past does not eliminate the probabilities of the future” (Commonwealth v. Bradley, cited in Hitchens and Thomas, 1983, p. 6)? Arguing one’s normalcy in order to gain acceptance makes strategic sense if courts consider homosexuality in such a negative light that they’ve ruled, “The continuous existence of a

\textsuperscript{1} I recognize that identities of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people are connected through their disruptions of compulsory heteronormativity and the heterosexual matrix (i.e., Butler, 1991; Rich, 1980), but that people who identify as transgender might also identify as gay or lesbian. Therefore, although I write LGBT for clarity, I mean this term to be understood as “LGB and/or T.” I also choose LGBT rather than GLBT to make the experiences of lesbian women primary, which is appropriate given the focus of the study. For more explanation of terms used in this dissertation, see the glossary page included just after the table of contents.

\textsuperscript{2} See, for example, Janet Wright’s ethnographic work (1998, 2001). She uses a quote from one of her participants for the title of a chapter (2001): “Aside from one little, tiny detail, we are so incredibly normal.”
homosexual relationship in the home where the minor is exposed to it involves the
necessary likelihood of serious adjustment problems” (In re Tammy F, cited in Hitchens
and Thomas, 1983, p. 13). Courts have even claimed, “the substituting of two male
homosexuals for parents does violence not only to the literal definition of who are parents
but offends the traditional concept of what a family is” (In re Davis, cited in Hitchens and

Consequently, dominant approaches to considering LGBT-headed families and
parental rights revolve around linking parent sexual orientation to child outcomes to
make sure children will not suffer from their parent’s/parents’ identification as LGBT.
Will these children be different than other children? Will their lives be harder because of
homophobia? Will they resent their parents or harbor other psychological harm? Will
they be confused about their own sexuality or gender identity? And of course, will they
be more likely to be gay themselves? In the face of such questions, many researchers
have conducted investigations to prove scientifically that children with LGBT parents
fare the same - if not even a little better! - on a wide range of developmental and
psychological indicators, as a subset of psychological research literature has done (e.g.,
Golombok, Spencer, and Rutter, 1983; Golombok and Tasker, 1996; Patterson, 1992,
1994, 1995; Tasker and Golombok, 1997). Being the same, it is assumed, will earn
LGBT-headed families safety and respect.

And yet, one argument this research study will make is that there are differences.
Having one or more LGBT parent matters, not at the most basic, love-and-care-for-your-
kids-the-best-you-can level as some on the religious right may argue, but in the ways that
family life is lived in the day-to-day. Therefore, having LGBT parents also matters for the ways that children must learn to move from their homes to their schools.

My project is not to justify LGBT families, to show how they are “just like” straight families\(^3\), as has been the tendency in previous research. Nor is it my aim to engage in an exoticizing tell-all, detailing just how “gay” and therefore different and remarkable these families and their kids really are. Instead, I want to explore the means through which these families negotiate and relate to the heteronormative society of which they are a part. I’m interested in how they, especially the children, use resources including spoken and written language to position themselves in relation to LGBT people, straight people, and issues of (hetero)normativity in the various contexts of their everyday lives. For this study, the question is not, “How do we explain LGBT-headed families?” But rather, “Why are people so interested in LGBT-headed families?” Or, as Valentine and Wilchins (1997) ask, “By what ‘spiral of events’ has an explanation become required?” (p. 220), since it is the very requirement of having LGBT parents explained as “exceptional” cases that can, ironically, further naturalize the unmarked norm of straight families in the first place.

Rather than a study of LGBT-headed families, this is a study of the social force(s) of heteronormativity, the assumption that people are, and should be, straight. From this

\(^3\) Indeed, if one attempts to take into account the diversity within and among families with LGBT parents (i.e., Stacey, 1996) and the diversity within and among families with straight parents (i.e., Coontz, 1992), one wonders what comparisons of this type are even possible. Within this study I have tried to take account of the family diversity that exists within and among my participants (including but certainly not limited to the presence of lesbian mothers), making connections to issues of parental separation, divorce, adoption, interracial families, and step parents among many, all of which are common to many straight families. Although these family features are not my main focus here, I acknowledge these factors and many others above and beyond the gender and sexual orientation of parents play important roles in the overall experiences of families. Furthermore, to the extent that the findings of this study are shaped by these characteristics, they may suggest implications of this research for a variety of diverse families.
perspective, I am interested in studying the lives of children with lesbian mothers in order to trace the moments when this fact matters to them, when it doesn’t, and how they react to those different situations in order to investigate whether those occasions are when and where we (adults in education) might expect them to be. I am interested in how schools play a role in perpetuating heteronormative and homophobic assumptions about people and families, especially when they assume that all discussions of LGBT issues are inappropriate for young children, and in examining if and how such absences add to a sense of difference and exclusion for children with LGBT parents. More specifically, I am interested in how children create and respond to texts to make certain kinds of knowledge about their queer families public or not and how those uses of literacy might change as the features of children’s social settings change.

My goal in describing the wide variety of experiences of family children have in different contexts is to sketch a map of the various heteronormative assumptions that shape the spaces of children’s lives. Such a map illustrates the multiple ideas of “normal” that children with LGBT parents encounter as well as detail their numerous responses to these different, and often conflicting, ideas. No similarly detailed pictures of the everyday experiences of children in LGBT-headed households are currently available in educational research, and only very few studies in other disciplines take account of children’s experiences at all (the few exceptions include Garner, 2004; Lewis, 1980; Ray and Gregory, 2001; Thomas-Jones, 2006). This study addresses that gap.
LGBT-Headed Families: Demographics and Contexts

Such an absence in the research literature cannot be attributed primarily to numbers. While it is difficult to obtain a firm count of gays or lesbians who have children since many people still do not feel safe disclosing their sexual orientation due to concerns about safety, job security, or loss of parental rights, Patterson (1995) estimated that 2 to 5 million lesbian or gay parents were parenting between 4 and 14 million children in the United States. These numbers have grown in the last fifteen years and will continue to grow as reproductive technologies develop, foster care and adoption laws become more equitable, and governments provide greater protections involving employment, accommodations, marriage and other civil rights that make people more likely to come out. In fact, we will have access to updated numbers in the near future.

As forms are being distributed for the 2010 census, the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force has partnered with other organizations to sponsor a Queer the Census campaign to encourage an accurate count of the community, including queer families. The 2000 census indicated that LGBT couples live in 99.3% of all counties in the country. Data from that census also found LGBT couples living in Mississippi, South Dakota, Alaska, South Carolina, and Louisiana were the most likely to be raising children (Gates and Ost, 2004). While media portrayals can sometimes suggest that LGBT-headed families are all white, upper middle class, and live in coastal urban centers, these numbers suggest such myths are far from the truth.

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4 It is, in fact, one reason why I wanted to do research in a Midwestern state with as diverse a set of families as I could find. See Chapter 3 for more information about sampling procedures.
Regardless of the numbers, sexuality remains a “difference that makes a difference” in our society. At the most macro levels having an LGBT parent matters because children’s health and welfare is threatened when LGBT people do not have full, equal rights. For example, in the state where this research study took place and many others, parents cannot be married to each other, and as a result children may lack access to health insurance or other social benefits. In twenty nine states, parents can be fired from a job or evicted from an apartment for being LGBT (Task Force, 2009). In cases of adoption, children may have officially authorized ties to only one parent, since second parent adoptions are not currently legal in this state or in 42 others. Without these formal, legal ties, a parent is not assured continuing custody in the event that something happens to the legal or biological parent, especially if any extended family members who may not have approved of the parents’ relationship step in or if the case happens to go before a particularly conservative judge. In this situation, a non-biological or non-adoptive parent has no legal claim to children he or she may have raised since birth. The children would have no legal claim to their parent, even if that parent is part of the only family they have ever known.

Choosing Children

Despite cultural and legal barriers, LGBT people have formed their own families for centuries even if those families remained largely invisible legally and socially (Stacey, 1996). For many years, most children were born in heterosexual marriages before one or both parents came out as LGBT. Changing reproductive technologies and

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5 The iconic lesbian poet Sappho, for example, had a daughter named Cleis whom she mentioned in her poetry.
cultural norms have led to the “gayby boom” or “lesbian baby boom” of the last few decades, with increasing numbers of LGBT couples choosing to welcome children directly into LGBT-headed families via adoption, surrogacy, or assisted insemination (AI) in addition to caring for children from heterosexual relationships.

Choosing children in spite of the biological and legal barriers can be understood as one of the ways that LGBT people have formed families of choice historically outside of blood or formal adoptive ties (Weston, 1991). Kath Weston’s groundbreaking study of lesbian and gay kinship around San Francisco in the 1980s explains how traditional ideas of family in the United States depend on the matrix of gendered difference, heterosexual intercourse, and consanguineal procreation. This assumption maintains that “straight people ‘naturally’ have access to family, while gay people are destined to move toward a future of solitude and loneliness” (p. 23). If gay people aren’t able to get married or reproduce, the thinking goes, they are – at best! – destined to remain perpetual children in their family of origin. If their parents and other blood relations rejected them after coming out, even that role was denied them. Such perspectives assume gay men and lesbians do not establish lasting relationships and that they “invariably alienate adoptive and blood kin once their sexual identities became known” (p. 22), thus promoting increasing isolation from family.

Instead, Weston’s ethnography documents and confirms that many LGBT people use different definitions of kinship to create families of choice, including but not depending on heterosexual and biological ties. In these families, “In the absence of a

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6 As announced, for example, on the cover of a 1997 issue of Curve magazine.
procreative referent, individual discretion regulated who would be counted as kin” (p. 40). Love, choice, and an active sense of creation organize gay or chosen families in contrast to “straight,” “biological,” or “blood” families, and may incorporate “friends, lovers, or children, in any combination” (p. 27). Although the increase in children born to or adopted by LGBT couples highlights legal and biological ties within chosen families, Weston argues that “chosen families do not directly oppose genealogical modes of reckoning kinship. Instead, they undercut procreation’s status as a master term imagined to provide the template for all possible kinship relations” (p. 213). Such incorporation, in Weston’s terms, displaces rather than disallows biogenetic symbolism. Rather than maintaining a heterosexual façade or sacrificing gay relationships to raise children, LGBT couples who raise children integrate their children into the gay families that they create.

Children from these LGBT-headed families, however, occupy different circumstances than their LGBT parents. Their positioning is a complicated, contested ground situated squarely between straight and queer worlds. Such children are certainly influenced by the queer community – author Abigail Garner (2004), a child of gay fathers, refers to being “culturally queer” and “erotically straight7” – yet they may or may not be(come) LGBT-identified themselves. As young children, they are often assumed to be straight or asexual, yet they suffer from homophobic harassment, and frequently have to do their own “coming out” about their families, not unlike the coming out of LGBT people themselves (COLAGE, nd; Garner, 2004). What’s best for their lives has been

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7 This phrase, Garner notes, is originally attributed to Stefan Lynch, first director of the organization COLAGE (Children of Lesbians and Gays Everywhere).
decided historically by homophobic courts. Their voices and perspectives are often marginalized or ignored altogether in research on LGBT parents or LGBT issues in schools (e.g., Casper & Schultz, 1999; Koerner & Hulsebosch, 1996; Mercier & Howard, 2003; Ryan & Martin, 2000). They may feel intense pressure to be successful in order to validate the abilities of their LGBT parents. Proving that they can grow into healthy adults becomes a way to affirm their family’s right to exist. Frequently this includes feeling pressure to identify as heterosexual. Garner (2004) deems this a different kind of closet that restricts LGBT parents and their children to always demonstrating that everything is fine. As she writes, “Our families currently lack the ‘luxury’ to be as openly complicated, confusing, or dysfunctional as straight families” (p. 6). Even hinting at difficulties LGBT parents face, from a political perspective, can be seen as fuel for the anti-gay position that LGBT people should not be allowed to raise children, yet this is true only if one assumes that a parent’s sexual orientation is the problem, not rampant, often socially supported homophobia that conditions these families’ lives.

*Myths and Realities for LGBT-Headed Families*

For both parents and children, then, life in LGBT families can be difficult. Reflecting on the realities American LGBT families face daily, Casper and Schultz (1999) write, “Our world is enveloped by an atmosphere of discrimination, with its attendant consequences of guilt, fear, and hatred. It shouts at parents and children to keep their lives secret” (p. 16). In spite of recent modest legal and cultural gains, gay issues of all types are still highly divisive and hotly contested. (Just think about the talk
surrounding California’s Proposition 8 or the arguments for and against the military’s policy of Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell).

When those outside the LGBT community equate being LGBT with sex and sexual acts rather than with relationships, emotions, and interpersonal connections, issues that bring LGBT people and children together become particularly sensitive. Because of the propagation of myths connecting gay men to pedophilia and those suggesting that LGBT people keep their community alive by “recruiting” children to be gay, many people distrust gay adults who spend time around children. Such specters persist regardless of how thoroughly disproven as these claims may be (e.g., see Patterson, 1992). Therefore, LGBT parents and their children live their lives surrounded by these fears and stereotypes (Garner, 2004). The negative images and myths make day-to-day realities for many LGBT families a challenge.

As Osborn (1996) writes:

Sixty-five percent [of Americans] don’t support us raising children, and 62 percent don’t want their kids playing with ours. A blanket of negativity still shrouds the truth. Ignorance, sex phobia (fear of sex and sexuality), and those dirty old stereotypes still promulgated by the right – gays as child recruiters, pedophiles, and sex fanatics – combine with the closet to hide the real truth of gay lives: lesbian and gay people create and thrive with happy, wonderfully vibrant, loving families. (p. 90)

These are still bleak statistics from the point of view of an LGBT family. People reference increased LGBT visibility in popular culture to suggest that homophobic
attitudes are changing, but fear and hatred is still the reality facing many children from LGBT-headed households. Therefore, having an LGBT parent matters because we still live in a heteronormative, heterosexist world in spite of important recent political and social progress. That reality influences the choices LGBT families have and the ways they operate within a frequently hostile world. Even in the normal, typical morning at Suzy’s house detailed above, her family was going to was a church that specifically welcomed LGBT people, and Suzy was negotiating the parental tasks of cooking and cleaning by herself because she and her partner had split and the partner had moved out of the house with no formal divorce procedures or arrangements for child support. In other words, being “normal” still does not mean being equally protected or exactly the same.

Details of this Study

Originally, I had expected this study to focus solely on reading practices in families with LGBT parents. I had heard stories of my LGBT friends with children revising their reading to make more room for non-normative genders and sexualities in their interactions around books with their children (changing pronouns, reading “Papa” for father, naming two non-gender specific animal characters as two mothers, etc.). I was interested in the ways such queer reading practices happened in homes and how they would be received in schools if and when children made similar connections to and interpretations of texts while outside their homes. I envisioned the study as a contribution to the research that illustrates the disconnections between reading practices in homes and communities outside of straight, white, middle class norms and the
practices encouraged in schools (e.g., Compton-Lilly, 2003; Delpit, 1995; Farr, 2004; Heath, 1983; Hicks, 2002; Hull & Schultz, 2002; Lee, 1993; Michaels, 1981; Phillips, 1972; Richardson, 2003; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988; Zentella, 1997). Instead, during the fourteen months of formal data collection, I realized the instances where children were navigating heteronormativity often involved literacy but were actually more general and more prevalent than just around reading literature or even around reading more generally.

Specifically, I found that homes and schools were both marked by their own normativity. In homes, queer constructions and representations of family were normalized and so were indexed by language and literacy practices, yet not actively discussed in depth on a regular basis. In schools, heteronormative constructions and representations of family were normalized, yet again not explicitly discussed. The discursive and textual representations of family by children with lesbian mothers served as the bridge connecting these two extremes, and comparing these uses of language and literacy became a way to bring the unspoken assumptions of different contexts into greater relief. Therefore, the study examines social relationships and the various social practices people participate in - including language and literacy practices - that reinforced, rearticulated, and revised those relationships across contexts. The questions that guided this research project were:

1. What are the experiences of children with LGBT parents in elementary schools?
2. How do children from these families negotiate differences between their (gay) homes and (straight) schools?
3. What roles do language and literacy play in mediating these experiences?
More specifically, in order to trace instances where having LGBT parents matters to children, this study pays particular attention to children’s various discursive productions of family – the ways that families were talked, read, and written about – by the children and those around them across a range of contexts. Before this study, research had not addressed children with lesbian mothers’ everyday experiences of family, children’s experiences in schools, or children’s voices about authoring and reflecting on their own experiences generally.

After investigating the lived experiences and discursive productions of family of children with lesbian mothers in homes and community sites, schools, and an out-of-school book club for children from the study, it is my contention that talking, reading, and writing about families changes for children with lesbian mothers in these various contexts of their lives because of different messages sent about the appropriateness of their queer family. For example, children are a part of talking, reading, and writing about families in their homes that constructs and validates their specific family features, thus establishing a queer or non-heteronormative “norm.” At the same time, these children attend schools where, in spite of many individual teachers’ best efforts, children are expected to talk, read, and write about families in ways that validate and perpetuate heteronormativity through silence or even verbal attacks on families like theirs. Their representations of family, therefore, either must find ways to conform to these expectations or disrupt them. Both options position children in particular ways and carry accompanying personal and/or social consequences (Garner, 2004). An out-of-school summer book club for children from the study was a different kind of space from these
two extremes, one that created an opportunity outside the intimacy of the immediate family but one populated with supportive and similarly-positioned peers. In this space, speaking, reading, and writing about family allowed queer and heteronormative perspectives to be brought together safely, negotiated, and complicated. Furthermore, it illustrated the types of discussions and readings that were possible yet did not happen in other, more overtly heteronormative spaces such as schools.

Broadly, the data collected from this study indicate that a) children live in families where non-heterosexual people, kin, and relationships are given language, normalized, and communicated; these relationships are discussed in relationship to other descriptions of family and descriptions of other identities; and b) children attend schools where traditional and heteronormative concepts of families are highlighted; while children with lesbian mothers bring up their own family structures sometimes, they also downplay or don’t talk at all about others. In other words, their liminal positioning between (gay) homes and (straight) schools is real and should be acknowledged and attended to by schools.

This study, following Garner (2004) and other activists from LGBT families, centers the unique experiences and perspectives of young children with lesbian mothers, and honors the complex choices that they make. I respect those varying representations as strategic decisions that position children in particular ways in particular settings with particular people, and therefore do a certain kind of work for the child at a social level. My hope is that by presenting children’s responses in contexts, illustrating the ways they are attuned to heteronormative assumptions, highlighting the sophisticated choices these
children make in their everyday lives, and demonstrating possible alternative conversations and understandings that develop in queer-friendly contexts, educators will begin to understand the need for addressing LGBT issues in elementary school classrooms. In this way, I intend this study to be used to make classrooms more welcoming and emotionally safe for children from LGBT and other types of diverse families.

Empirical Research Foundations

The multi-site nature of this research combined with its focus on young children with lesbian mothers and its interest in literacy means that it does not fit easily into a pre-established body of empirical research. Several different streams of empirical research contribute to my understanding of this study, specifically studies that explore language and literacy and/or LGBT family issues in the various contexts in which I conducted this research: homes, schools, and an out-of-school book club.

To understand participants’ homes, I draw from the few ethnographic studies that explore experiences within LGBT-headed families. Studies of this type have been done in counseling and family studies (Wright, 1998), sociology and women’s studies (Sullivan, 2004), and anthropology (Weston, 1991). This research does not focus on children, but it helps me understand the perspective of adults in LGBT families, the decisions they make to have children or to live as families, and the ways in which they handle stress, coming out, relationships with extended family, and other issues in their lives. I also draw on Garner (2004). She uses her own experience and interviews from others with LGBT parents to sketch a broad portrait of youth’s perspectives on the issues
LGBT-headed families face. Her writing contains powerful statements in children’s own words, but does not follow their daily experiences over time. Together, these studies provide a research base about LGBT-headed families but do not take up language and literacy as a focus. Ethnographies by Heath (1983) and Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines (1988), illustrate a range of ways that different communities define, value, and make use of literacy. Heath suggests that children’s socialization to language and literacy practices equip them well for life in their various communities, but that those might be at odds with practices and expectations in the white, middle class world of school. Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines also demonstrate how the marginalized and disadvantaged families in their study were involved in a wide variety of literacy activities in which they encouraged their children’s participation. They argue the families’ marginalized positions did not distance them from literacy but actually required additional use of particular literacy practices. They suggest these experiences with literacy served as a support for their children’s school literacy learning, counter to Heath’s attention to the disconnection between the two. Although these studies do not address the particular privilege and marginalization of LGBT-headed families, they argue for paying close consideration to literacy practices in homes and the way those meanings may align and/or conflict with practices in other settings.

To understand the experiences my participants may have at schools, I look at studies such as Blaise (2005), Davies (1989), Schall and Kauffman (2003), and Epstein (2000). The latter two studies address the possibilities and tensions around reading books with lesbian and gay characters in middle and elementary schools. Schall and Kauffman
(2003) are more convinced than Epstein (2000) that this practice is a promising way to create more inclusive classrooms, but both studies indicate the layers of cultural and institutional heteronormativity that such work must break through. Blaise (2005) and Davies (1989) document children’s multiple identities and positions within and around gender and sexuality as they are constructed and lived out in early childhood and elementary school classrooms. Their uses of poststructuralist perspectives bring to light the ways these normative ideas circulate and are regulated through texts and talk in the school lives of young children. They warn how unyielding those norms may be even to careful pedagogical practice. Some studies, such as Casper and Schultz (1999) and Ryan and Martin (2000) are helpful for understanding the ways that LGBT parents interact with their children’s schools and the work it takes to make families visible and acknowledged, but do little to explore the experiences of the children from those families. Ray and Gregory (2001) is an Australian study that investigated both LGBT parents and their children about children’s experiences in schools through interviews and focus groups. They found that young children were more willing to openly discuss their families at school, but that 22% of upper elementary school students had not told anyone about their parents’ sexuality and 22% had only told one person. They also found bullying and offensive language were issues many children with LGBT parents faced at school. This study reconfirms the need for research to investigate children’s everyday negotiations of information about their families.

To understand the out-of-school book club that some participants and I created, I draw on multicultural children’s literature (Bishop, 1997) to understand how powerful it
is to be represented in books; Enciso (2001) and Sumara (1996) to understand how changing location, fellow participants, and positioning within reading events can expand the identities that are available for children to take up; and Freire (Freire and Macedo, 1987) to remember that students should have opportunities to read both the word and world. Research by Royster (2000) and Sicherman (1989) remind me of the power and enjoyment that marginalized readers can get out of meeting together to read and discuss books that relate to their lives. Out-of-school literacy research (Hull and Schultz, 2002), especially with LGBT and queer youth (Blackburn, 2002, 2003), helps me understand the potentials of exploring reading with my participants outside the limitations of heteronormative schools, even if they are young and do not identify as LGBT themselves.

I situate my project at the center of these various strands of empirical research. I draw on studies of language and literacy in homes and communities and apply these approaches to LGBT-headed families. I consider the findings about LGBT-headed families, but look more closely at both literacy and children in these households. I get information about school dynamics from research with LGBT parents, but those are adult-centered. I am interested in the experiences of the children in their everyday learning. Studies exploring the use of lesbian- and gay-themed literature in elementary schools and poststructuralist accounts of the effects of sexuality and gender norms on the lives of young children are helpful, but they do not generally consider the ways that children might have experience with LGBT people and issues outside of schools that they bring to classrooms. Such assumptions are another silencing of children with LGBT parents even by the research that could most directly illuminate their challenges. Finally,
I draw on concepts from multicultural children’s literature and out-of-school literacy studies - particularly those with LGBT youth - for the book club. I consider how those ideas translate to queer work with young children from LGBT-headed families.

Outline of the Project

The remainder of this chapter introduces the children and families who participated in the research. These descriptions provide a snapshot of each participating family with a particular focus on the children. These overviews are meant as initial thick descriptions (Geertz, 1973) that illustrate the first discursive location of family in broad brush strokes. They give readers insight into some of the various aspects of diversity and complexities of the families that play a role in the data and analysis including race, religion, family composition, modes of family formation, and other features that played a role in the day-to-day operations of the households. Reading about each family individually provides an insight into the particular people and features of that family, while reading across the various descriptions introduces the reader to complexities and disconnections between the participants in order to define the field that the research is constructing. A chart highlighting the names and some central characteristics of the various families is available as Figure 1. The reader may find it helpful to locate that figure and keep it handy as a reference when reading the chapters of data and analysis to come.

Chapter 2 contextualizes my study within sociocultural and critical poststructuralist theories that foreground the social nature of self and language. Specifically, I explore language, self-authoring, and social positioning through the work
of Bakhtin (1981, 1986) and related scholars. I also establish my views of literacy as a particular instantiation of language through the theory of literacy as social practice, or New Literacy Studies (NLS). And finally, because this study is focused on the experiences of queer people and queer families within traditionally heteronormative institutions of (nuclear) families and schools, I draw on queer theory to understand the social ways normativity might be constructed and disrupted.

Chapter 3 details the methodology employed in designing this study and in collecting and analyzing the data. It explains the ways I combined qualitative, ethnographic methods with a queer theoretical frame to design a project that was appropriate for researching not only queer families but the liminally (i.e., queerly) positioned children of those families in various contexts and discursive locations. It justifies the multi-sited nature of the ethnography and accounts for the ways the research and the researcher had to be attentive to queer issues while at the same time able to “pass” within the heteronormative structures of elementary schools. This chapter also speaks to the ethical and political bases of the research and provides more detail about my relationships with participants since those relationships shaped the data available for the project.

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 present findings and analyses from the three contextual and discursive locations of this study. Chapter 4 examines the types of speaking, reading, and writing about families, including themselves, that took place within the families’ homes and within the family as a group in times they traveled out in public together. It examines the various ways a queerly-inflected “normal” of talk and literacy practices
established a taken-for-granted queer context of family. Chapter 5 introduces data collected at the children’s elementary schools. It documents the heteronormativity of schools as a whole and explores various ways both teachers and children generally supported that expectation and occasionally intervened in it. It suggests children from lesbian-headed families were careful about their speaking, reading, and writing about family at school and were conscious of the social positioning that sharing or not sharing such information may have. The children chose to talk about their families and therefore address messages of heteronormativity at schools in a wide variety of ways and to different degrees. Chapter 6 describes an out-of-school book club led by me and attended by a subset of the participating children. While reading books that highlighted family diversity, including lesbian-headed households, children were able to share information about their queer families with their similarly-situated peers. In book club, children’s discursive productions of family created connections, explored complexities and vulnerabilities, and allowed for rehearsal against homophobic reactions. The book club served as a hybrid setting, one outside the intimacy of the home but in a less heteronormative environment than school, where discursive productions about family were not assumed nor silenced, but instead actively negotiated by the children in new ways.

Chapter 7 offers some final analysis and conclusions based on the data presented. It also considers implications of the study for LGBT-headed families, K-12 educators, and teacher educators. I also point towards directions for further research.
Notes on My Own Positioning or Suggestions for Reading this Text

Although I began this chapter by commenting on my first visit to the Powell’s house, my presence has been suspiciously absent from pages that followed. Therefore, I return briefly to my own role in this research as this chapter ends by highlighting for the reader the ways my own story is wrapped up in the stories of my participants and of this research.

This work is important to me on many levels. To begin, I am a queer-identified woman who has spent nearly all of my life in classrooms as a teacher or student. I also love children and very much look forward to having a family of my own one day. In fact, at the beginning of this project my partner at the time and I met many of the eventual participants through an LGBT parenting group we attended to find out more about options for having children. I am therefore deeply personally invested in learning about the experiences of LGBT parents and families, and improving the experiences that queer youth and children with LGBT parents have in schools. Much of my academic work and teaching of teachers reflects these commitments.

I bring my identification as a queer woman and hopeful future lesbian mother to this project, but I also understand that such a perspective on family is not the same as the point of view of children with LGBT parents, who are my primary focus of study here. I will never have the lived experience of such children, sometimes lovingly referred to as a queerspawn or COLAGers (from the advocacy organization COLAGE: Children of Lesbians and Gays Everywhere) because my parents are straight. Nevertheless, I am fortunate to have been involved peripherally in the COLAGE community for nearly a
decade. Several good friends are among COLAGE’s earliest and most active members. I have volunteered with COLAGEr youth at Family Week in Provincetown, Massachusetts and helped other COLAGErS organize a chapter of the organization in Columbus, Ohio. Through these friends and the amazing community of youth activists of which they are a part, I learned queerspawn perspectives on family well before I started thinking seriously about being a parent myself. Their teaching, advice, and desire to tell their own stories about their families have deeply influenced the way I approach this work. While I am sure I still have many blind spots, misunderstandings, mistakes, and misconceptions, I have attempted to honor the choices and self-definitions of the children in this study. My hope is that the findings and implications presented here might create some small positive change or benefit for the COLAGE community that has been so much a part of the study’s foundation.

That having been said, I know this research will never be a complete and ultimate pronouncement on “the” reality of children with lesbian mothers. As a researcher, I deal in the words and meanings of others, yet I shape and reshape what is known, said, and experienced, and I do so in ways that may carry ideological weight. I am aware that I get my words from others’ utterances (Bakhtin, 1986). Because of this privileged position, I must resist the temptation to see others as messy but myself and my ideas as solitary or complete. I agree that as an author I

must learn that, no matter how much [I] revise and edit [my] texts (and despite the importance of those tasks), [I] can never ‘own’ meaning, because meaning only exists in the meeting of voices. So authors never
have the last word, just (hopefully) a good turn that furthers or deepens an ongoing conversation. (Juzwik, 2004, quoting Dyson, 1993)

This research highlights the extent to which meaning making always remains open and unfinished. The goal is not to seek total convergence, but rather multiple voices and many perspectives, highlighting the voices of my various participants while not forgetting my own positioning. It is now my challenge to try to hold these multiple views together to achieve a partial, temporary, but meaningful understanding. I begin this task by introducing the families who shared their lives and words with me for this project.

Descriptions of the Participating Families

I worked with five lesbian-headed families in and around a large Midwestern city8. While my participating parents were all white women who identified as lesbians, the families were diverse in terms of children’s ages, children’s genders, children’s race(s), overall family composition and method of origin, geographic location, religious affiliation, and the type of school attended by the children (urban, suburban, and rural, both public and religious). I provide an overview of the family members and significant characteristics here. A synopsis of this information is presented in Figure 1. The families are listed in alphabetical order by last name.

The Jensen Family

The Jensen family consists of Katherine and Linda and their two girls, Mary and Noel. When I met them, Mary was 6 (in first grade) and Noel was 2. Katherine is a social worker, although she spends most of her time now raising the girls and only

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8 Details about participant recruitment and sampling procedures can be found in Chapter 3.
working outside the home in occasional consulting or training meetings. Linda is an engineer and plans large construction projects. She has recently been staffed on out-of-town job sites, which requires her to spend most of the week away at work, coming home only for weekends. The family lives in a large, comfortable home in a mostly white, middle class suburb of a major city. They owned a dog, Lucy, who had been Katherine’s dog for over ten years. Although Lucy passed away during the course of the study, the family got another dog, Lola, and sent a sweet slideshow of photos and stories out to their friends and family introducing Lola to everyone.

Katherine and Linda chose to have children by using a sperm donor. Katherine carried and gave birth to both girls. The Jensens purposely chose from a California donor registry so they could select a “yes” donor. This means when their children turn eighteen the children could receive his information and can contact him if they so choose. A few years ago, Mary expressed a lot of interest in her donor. Katherine and Linda said they got out all the paperwork they had and showed it to Mary, explaining what they knew about him (such as hair color, eye color, and similar kinds of questions collected by the sperm bank). The girls know they have the same donor and they know, as Mary says, “We have a form about him.”

The girls call their moms Mommy (Katherine) and Eema (Linda). Eema is the Hebrew word for mother. This is an especially significant term of address because the Jensen family identifies as Seventh Day Adventist, and religion plays a central organizing role in their lives. First of all, Mary attends a Seventh Day Adventist school. The school is many miles away, across town through heavy traffic, but the Jensens value this
experience enough to endure the difficulties. Although Katherine grew up Methodist, Linda’s family has been Seventh Day Adventist for several generations. She attended Adventist schools, both K-12 and post-secondary. While the Adventist church does strongly encourage close and nurturing families, they are officially not supportive of homosexuality. Linda reconciled this dissonance for herself many years ago, and the family negotiates this tension without much stress. Linda is a member of the LGBT Seventh Day Adventist group, Kinship, even writing a memoir for a book they recently printed about being lesbian and Adventist. The family attends the annual Kinship gathering nearly every year.

Other Adventist beliefs structure the Jensen’s family life. They include a Saturday Sabbath, plain dress, no drinking or smoking, and a vegetarian diet. In these, only Linda and Mary participate strictly, with Katherine attending services and offering her support for her daughters being raised in the church, but not necessarily identifying as Adventist individually. The whole family participates in Sabbath services in their home most Friday evenings before attending church on Saturday mornings. They are a visible and active part of the church and school community.

A strong connection to their extended families of origin may be one of the features that neutralizes some of the tensions between the Jensen family and the institutional church of which they are a part. The Jensens actually returned to church at the time of a visit from Linda’s family. Linda and Katherine had attended various churches as a couple, but wanted to settle in one religious community after having children. Since Linda’s parents are Adventist, they all attended an Adventist church
together while her parents were visiting, and the couple eventually decided to stay and make that their religious home. Linda’s parents appear to be fully accepting of their daughter and her family. Katherine’s mother has passed away, but she remains close with her father, siblings, and their children. Both Katherine’s sister and some of her nieces and nephews are adopted, so Katherine says because her family of origin was interracial she is used to being in a family that stands out as “unconventional.”

Mary is a quiet, shy girl with an active imagination. She is highly self aware, extremely sensitive to exclusion and competition, and frequently silly. Although she struggles with several school tasks, such as the physical act of writing, she does not like to be positioned or to think of herself as struggling. Therefore, she has learned to avoid tasks that are likely to raise her anxiety and she frequently comments on how easy tasks are that she is able to do well to demonstrate her competency to those around her. Some of these traits have been complicated by a more recent diagnosis of sensory-processing disorder. Since the diagnosis, Mary has been receiving physical and occupational therapy at the local children’s hospital in order to strengthen her muscles and physical sensory receptors and to learn other psychological skills for coping with her challenges. She loves to perform plays and musicals on stage, and recent experiences in community youth theater shows, or “try-out shows” as Mary calls them, have connected her with children outside of her school community and boosted her self-esteem.

Mary is acutely aware of her status as the child of two mothers. She recognizes that she is the only child of LGBT parents at her school, and she has experienced some bullying and teasing from a classmate because of it, or so she surmises. Although they
are the only lesbian-headed family at the church and school, the Jensens are connected to many other LGBT-headed families around the city. They have an extended network of “chosen family,” a term that Mary uses. They are also a part of a city-wide LGBT families group, where we met, and have marched as a family in the annual Gay Pride parade. They also participated as a family in a poetry-writing contest in support of LGBT-headed families sponsored by a national LGBT family advocacy organization, and Mary knows that the poem was meant to “help change the laws for two moms…or two dads to marry each other.”

*The McKinney-Robbins Family*

The McKinney-Robbins family consists of two moms, Denise Robbins and Maelee McKinney, Denise’s biological son from a previous relationship, Seth, and Denise and Maelee’s six adopted children, Moriah, Aaron, Jonathan, Chloe, Abigail, and Logan McKinney-Robbins. Seth is in his mid-twenties and lives on his own, coming by the house for some family gatherings. He was not a part of the research project. The other children were all between the ages of five and nine years old when I first met them and all were adopted from the local county children’s services agency. The children call Denise “Mommy Denise” and Maelee “Mom Maelee” or “Mommy ‘Lee” (which are phonetically about the same). Because Ohio prohibits second parent adoptions, Denise and Maelee each officially adopted three of the children, but this is not a fact that organizes the family in any way.

One reason that the McKinney-Robbins family adopted so many children in such a condensed time frame is because a few of their children are biologically related to each
other. After Denise and Maelee had adopted children from two particular birth mothers, social services alerted them when those women gave birth to other children that they were also not able to care for. In two instances they accepted those new children into their home as well. Although these biological connections do not seem to organize the family in any particular way or hold any special significance for family members, the children know that Jonathan and Abigail had the same “tummy mom” as did Chloe and Logan. The children know the names of their “tummy moms,” but their existence plays only a small part in their thoughts about family at this point in their lives.

The McKinney-Robbins family is very open about their children’s adoptive status, in part because Denise and Maelee are both white, but their young children are all black or biracial. Being an interracial family is significant to both the moms and the kids. Denise and Maelee are also particularly sensitive to the comparisons that other people make between their darker-skinned and lighter-skinned children. Chloe, the fourth oldest child, is the fairest and “whitest” of the kids. She also has hair that is less textured than her siblings. Consequently, Chloe gets the most attention from others in public. With so many children, and as an interracial family, the McKinney-Robbins attract a lot of attention from others when they are out and about. Although people may remark on the family as a whole, they often single Chloe out for being “cute” or “pretty” or “beautiful.” Moriah, one of the children with darker skin, is especially sensitive to this dynamic, and is often quick to point out that Chloe is her sister and is not white even if she “may look like it.”
The McKinney-Robbins family lives in a middle class area of the city that is known for its sense of community, its progressive values, and its many lesbian couples. The family’s home is a bit chaotic, about what you would expect with a family of six young children, two moms, and a variety of pets including two big dogs. Children fill nearly all the spaces in the house in some way, either with their toys, their clothes, their art work, or their bodies. The house has a huge yard that the children spend a lot of time in, whether on the swing set, riding scooters and bikes in the driveway, or kicking a soccer ball in the back grassy area. Mealtimes take place around a big table in the kitchen, although Maelee and Denise only briefly get to sit down because of the food preparation and serving.

Maelee is an elementary school teacher in the urban district where her children are students. She spent many years as a reading specialist in a particularly under-resourced school in the district. Recently, however she got a job at her children’s school, one of the top schools in the same district, known for its informal approach, its diverse and progressive community, and its arts-infused curriculum. Because her children attended this school before she taught there, people in the school community knew she and Denise were partnered and raising children together. Now, as a teacher, most parents, children, and staff members know she is a lesbian with children. Therefore, for the first time she decided to be fully out as a lesbian in her classroom. This is also the first time all the children have been at the same school. Since entrance into the school is by lottery, Moriah, Jonathan, and Chloe have been attending for several years, but Aaron just was able to join them. Abigail and Logan have graduated from preschool and began
elementary school there as well. This helps the family to unite around and within this particular school community.

Because of the circumstances of the children’s births, several of them have a variety of special needs. Some of the children were born with conditions such as low birth weight, fetal alcohol syndrome, and crack addiction. Currently, five of the children take medication for things like ADHD, and dispensing medications is a nightly ritual in their home. Logan, the youngest, previously attended an inclusive preschool program for children with special needs and has some of the most significant challenges of all the siblings, although Jonathan has displayed attachment issues and Abigail has had issues with her gastrointestinal health that also occasionally create tension in the family. Overall, the special needs of the children are a factor in their family’s life, but the needs have gotten less extreme as the children have gotten older.

The McKinney-Robbins family is also religious. They are members of and active participants in a local, inclusive United Church of Christ congregation. The congregation consists of straight families and individuals, including some biracial families, and other LGBT families and individuals. The McKinney-Robbins family attends services, religious education classes, and participates in the annual Christmas musical. Denise also attends retreats and a women’s group offered by the church.

Members of the church and other families from their neighborhood form an extended network of support and kinship for the McKinney-Robbins. All of the children have at least one godparent, and the children spend regular quality time with many neighbors and family friends. Maelee has a large family or origin, but it is members of
this extended kinship/friend network who are more frequently present for family celebrations and events. The children refer to many people as their “Aunties.” The family is also an active part of two community groups, one for LGBT families, where I first met them, and one for biracial families, where they attend more regularly. Recently, the children have become old enough to start doing other community activities, such as soccer, judo, and Girl Scouts.

Moriah is sensitive, sweet, empathetic, and thoughtful. She listens carefully to others and is not afraid to ask questions to be sure she understands the topic at hand, but she also likes playing and doesn’t mind getting dirty. Aaron has recently hit a growth spurt and is tall and lanky. He loves to move around and engage in physically active play. He regularly directs his siblings when they play outdoors. He enjoys extra-curricular activities and has strong connections with his godfathers. Jonathan is extremely smart and an excellent reader. He sometimes has trouble engaging with others, but has become significantly more social over the years. He loves playing any kind of game on a computer and can spend long segments of time engrossed in Lego’s or other building toys. Chloe is creative and confident. She is interested in all things involving hair, make up, beauty, and fashion. She has recently made great strides in her reading ability and now has a book in her hand nearly every time I see her. Abigail has an independent spirit. She is fearless and loves to play with all the other children. As the youngest girl, she is learning the traditional little sister role of “instigator” well, bugging her siblings and messing with their games if they don’t let her play. Logan is rambunctious. He has strong emotions, but when they are positive ones he is extremely
sweet with a smile that can make nearly anyone melt. He pays close attention to things going on around him and engages easily with his family, their friends, and people in the community. He is also completely fascinated with fire trucks and fire fighters.

The Powell Family

The Powell household currently consists of Suzy and her children, Ethan and Isabella Davis, although their family composition has taken a variety of forms over the years. Originally, Suzy was married to a man, and they had Ethan and Isabella together. When the children were young, Suzy and her husband divorced and Suzy returned to Powell, her maiden name. Suzy then came out as a lesbian and began dating women. She partnered with a woman named Cynthia. The kids call Cynthia their second mom, and refer to her as CeCe. Just before I met the family, Suzy and Cynthia had split up and Cynthia had moved out and into her own place. At the end of the time of my study, after having spent some time on her own, Suzy introduced her new girlfriend to her children. I have seen them together at several family and community events since then.

During the time I spent with them, Ethan and Isabella identify as having two moms (Suzy and Cynthia), and a dad. They call Suzy “mom” and refer to Cynthia either as their “other mom” or, more frequently, their “stepmom.” The children live with Suzy and see their dad on a regular basis. They spend some time with Cynthia when possible, but Suzy and Cynthia were still recovering from their break up and were not on comfortable terms with each other, although Cynthia would help in the child-rearing by attending sports events or taking the children to doctor appointments when Suzy had to be at work. Neither Cynthia nor Mr. Davis were participants in the study.
Suzy is a funny and energetic woman. She works as a social worker at a local hospital and the family lives on the outskirts of a mostly white, upper-middle class suburb with deep pride in its historical roots. As a single mom looking to connect with others, Suzy and the kids keep an active social schedule. They frequently have close friends over for dinners or potlucks. They socialize on a regular basis with a group of lesbian-headed families who live in their neighborhood, and they are a part of the same community group of LGBT families that the McKinney-Robbins family and the Jensen family attend. Suzy even took an active role in organizing this group for a time, and children from the group’s families are some of Isabella and Ethan’s most frequent playmates. The family also attends the same United Church of Christ as the McKinney-Robbins family. They attend services and some other functions, including participating in the annual Christmas musical. They have a dog and a cat that take a lot of the family energy. Their house is cluttered and comfortable.

When I first met them, Isabella was in third grade and Ethan was in fifth. The kids spend a lot of time together and play together frequently, although they seem to fight and quarrel just as frequently. Isabella identifies as a tomboy. Although she has long blonde hair and likes to dress up at times, she also loves soccer and engaging in physical play. She is also in Girl Scouts and goes with Suzy on camping trips with her troupe. Ethan keeps his hair long like many boys in his class. He likes music and began playing the upright bass in the school orchestra. He had the opportunity to travel to Australia as part of a junior ambassador program to get to know about other cultures. This seemed to increase his independence and confidence since this was his first time away from home
for such a long time. Both the children are active in community sports teams, including basketball and soccer. Suzy and Mr. Davis try to get to these games when they can. Cynthia also attends games occasionally, especially because she seems to have a more flexible work schedule than either Suzy or Mr. Davis. Isabella and Ethan each have a best friend with whom they spend most of their play time, although like most girls her age, Isabella’s best friend designee changes based on who is in her class at school in a given year.

_The Smith-Kendall Family_

The Smith-Kendall family is made up of two moms, Jayne and Johanna, and two daughters, Jadyn and Julia. They live on a small farm about twenty miles outside of the city limits in an area historically known as Jaybird Bend. They love being all “J”s, even using this shared feature to name their farm: The J’s at Jaybird. Johanna is from a large city in a neighboring state, but Jayne grew up in Jaybird Bend and many of her family members, including her parents, still live very near by on other small farms. Jayne and Johanna met through mutual friends at a fourth of July party and have been together for 15 years. Jayne spent time working as an athletic trainer before getting her PhD in Nutrition. She is currently a professor at the local university. Johanna works in business and accounting at a large food distributor in the city.

Johanna and Jayne chose to have children biologically, with each of them carrying and giving birth to one child, using the same donor for both pregnancies. Biologically, then, the girls are half-siblings with Julia biologically related to Johanna.

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9 This is a pseudonym.
and Jadyn biologically related to Jayne. The girls know the circumstances of their conceptions and births. Although the family makes some jokes about how the temperament of the girls mirror the temperament of their biological mothers, the family generally makes very few references to these biological ties, acknowledging instead that they are all one family. The girls call Johanna “Mommy” and Jayne “MyMy.” Even Johanna refers to Jayne as MyMy in front of the kids.

The Smith-Kendalls’ rural residence is an important component of their family life. Together, they raise mostly goats on their farm, although they also have rabbits, a few other farm animals, and some fields. Jayne is the leader of the farm operations, having grown up raising animals herself, but Johanna has become more and more comfortable with taking a greater leadership role as she learns about the farm and gets used to it. Jadyn and Julia are both active on the farm through chores and through participation in their local 4H club. Jadyn and Julia both show goats at the local county fair, winning ribbons for their work. The space of their farm gives the girls lots of space to play outside; the girls and their moms frequently engage in family games and sports activities in the back yard. They eat dinner together as a family nearly every night, with Jayne (the nutritionist) making sure they have balanced meals, often with local ingredients or with something made/baked/canned by Jayne’s mother who lives around the corner and visits frequently. Jayne’s father and other family members also come over often, usually to borrow some farm equipment or assist with chores.

Recently, the girls transferred from a private, religiously-affiliated Montessori school in the city to their local public elementary school. Although less diverse than their
previous school, Jaybird Bend Elementary is where Jayne attended elementary school and is in the district where Jayne’s mother and other relatives worked (as a bus driver and maintenance workers, respectively). Although the area around Jaybird Bend is quickly developing with suburban housing developments and strip malls, Jayne remains connected to the rural heritage of the area, one reason why she wanted her daughters to attend school in the district. In fact, when local parents new to Jaybird Bend complained that they wanted to change the school name because it was too “country,” Jayne helped organize the fight to keep the name.

Julia was in third grade when I first met her. She is a sweet and sometimes serious little girl, a typical responsible oldest sibling who likes rules and structure, who is annoyed by but always looks out for her younger sister. She does very well in school and extracurricular activities, but holds herself to high standards, sometimes getting anxious and worried about her achievements. She is a hard working child who is very popular at school and loves Tinkerbell, singing, and reading. Jadyn, who was in first grade when I met her, is a typical youngest child, an instigator bursting with silliness and energy. She is also popular at school, and enjoys hanging out with her sister and her sister’s friends. She loves animals – both real and stuffed animals, especially Webkinz toys that many children collect. In Jadyn’s calculus, the “cuter” the animals are the better. She likes to draw animals as well as create elaborate narratives using her toys as characters.

Outside of their work on the farm, the Smith-Kendalls tend to spend time together mostly as an immediate family or with their extended family, taking trips to visit Johanna’s parents, welcoming relatives to their house, and taking an annual vacation to
the beach. They also do some activities with the larger local community, especially spending time coaching and/or cheering on the girls’ community sports teams. Although there are photos of other women in the children’s baby books, whom the children refer to as “Aunts,” the Smith-Kendalls have not reported spending much, if any time exclusively with other LGBT families. In fact, they were the only family who preferred I not share the specific focus of my study – children in lesbian-headed families – with the girls so they wouldn’t feel any undue pressure when I accompanied them at school. Instead they introduced me as a graduate student who knew their mom. Later, I explained to Julia and Jadyn I wanted to learn about being a kid from them to help teachers be better teachers. The family attends a Presbyterian church in the city where a few other lesbian-headed families attend. This church is also attended by one of my colleagues, which is how I first made contact with and was introduced to the family.

_The Winston Family_

When I first met them, the Winston family was made up of Sally, the mom, and her daughters Mallory and Lila. Prior to that, Sally had had a partner, the girls’ second mother, Hillary Chen, but Hillary and Sally had broken up and Hillary stayed in Wisconsin while Sally moved with the girls to their current city to be closer to her parents and extended family and friends. Mallory and Lila are about 2 ½ years apart. When Sally and Hillary were partners they adopted both girls from orphanages in China. The family is multiracial; Sally is white and Hillary is ethnically Chinese. The girls call Sally “mom,” “mommy,” or “Momma Sally” and they call Hillary “Momma Hil” or, more frequently “our other mom.” Hillary was not part of this study.
The Chinese heritage of the Winston family is a central part of the ways they understand themselves. Mallory regularly and openly refers to herself “a Chinese person.” Both girls attend Chinese heritage language school regularly on weekends and Sally often accompanies them so they can learn Chinese language skills together as a family and so Sally can help them with their homework and other Chinese language practice at home. For example, certain items in their home, especially foods, are referred to in Chinese. The girls also have Chinese names, but I didn’t hear them used in the home, just mentioned by Mallory. Sally can speak some basic Chinese. She runs a school that teaches massage and alternative medicine, with Eastern roots, and she travels to China for work and training on an ongoing basis. The family is not religious – Sally left the Catholic church of her upbringing by choice – but Sally’s work is informed by Buddhist practice and she has had the opportunity to hear the Dalai Lama speak on a number of occasions. Also, at certain points in time the girls have attended a local Christian church with friends from the neighborhood.

As with any family, divorce and parental changes are hard and took a toll on the girls, especially Mallory. According to Sally, Hillary was generally absent from the girls’ lives after the break up, which added to their distress. Hillary was inconsistent about checking in with them and would cancel phone calls and visits at the last minute. Occasionally, Sally would drive the girls to a pre-arranged drop-off point and Hillary would simply never show up. Sally was left with the task of trying to comfort the girls and reframe what had happened in a way that wouldn’t disparage the mother they love. After becoming increasingly quiet while in kindergarten, Mallory joined a support group
for grieving children at her school led by the guidance counselor. Sally was glad she had
this opportunity, and Mallory, Sally, and Mallory’s teacher all said it seemed to help her
deal with her feelings over the loss of Momma Hil. Nevertheless, both girls still identify
as having two moms, one they live with and one who lives in Wisconsin.

Sally was living as a single mom when I met her, but she started dating and has
been partnered with another woman for about two years now. This woman, Amanda,
moved into the Winstons’ home and plays an active role in parenting the girls. Sally is
happy to be partnered again, but was nervous about how the girls would react. I have
heard Mallory and Lila refer to Amanda as their “friend,” because indeed they have a lot
of fun with her, but I am unsure if they consider her another “mother” at this point or not.
Amanda is also not a participant in this study.

The Winstons live in a somewhat diverse part of a mostly white, middle class
suburb. This suburb, the same one the Powells live in, takes great pride in its historical
roots. The family socializes with many other LGBT families, some from the local
community families group where I met them, some from Sally’s sports teams, and some
from work and other social contacts Sally has. The family also spends time in the same
local network of lesbian-headed families that the Powells are a part of. They get together
for potlucks on a regular basis, the moms setting up the food and talking while the kids
play together, taking turns checking on the kids when they get too noisy or when
someone cries or gets hurt.

Mallory can be a quiet, serious child, a little professor type with glasses to match.
Sometimes she is also silly with an active fantasy life, but it depends on her mood. She is
especially relaxed and silly with her sister. She likes science and reads many books about
different science topics that Sally buys her. She also likes Disney princesses and has
many books with those characters as well. Lila is a bouncy and happy child who will
socialize with anyone. She is slightly more physical and rambunctious than her older
sister, and she brings out the more playful side of her older sister. She encourages the
whole family to play in the yard together.

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These are the people whose experiences and stories fill the pages of this text. In the next
two chapters I first establish the theoretical frames and relevant research that are the
foundation for the study, and detail the particular methodology that shaped the study
design, data collection, and analysis before returning, once again, to these participants’
voices in the remaining chapters.
Chapter 2 – Theoretical Frames that Shape This Research

This study draws broadly on a range of theoretical and methodological underpinnings that ground my views of people, their relationships to one another, the means through which they mediate those relationships, and the ways one might go about understanding those people, relationships, and tools within a research project. Specifically, I combine sociocultural and critical poststructuralist theories to develop a framework that foregrounds the social nature of self and literacy, both fashioned through language\textsuperscript{10}, to support this project.

Theoretically, I draw extensively on the work of Mikhail Bakhtin (1981, 1986), his contemporaries (Voloshinov, 1973; Vygotsky, 1978, 1986), and scholars who have taken up and expanded his work around ideas of language, self-authoring, and social positioning (e.g., Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain, 1998; Holquist, 1990). I look at literacy as a particular instantiation of language through the theory of literacy as social practice, sometimes referred to as New Literacy Studies (NLS). This perspective, developed through work by Street (1984; 1995; 2003; 2005), Heath (1983), Gee (1989; 1996), and others, grew out of opposition to the notion of literacy as a universally-common acquisition of discrete skills. Finally, because this study is focused on the experiences of queer people and queer families within traditionally heteronormative institutions of (nuclear) families and schools, I also draw on queer theory (e.g., Britzman, 2001).
1995; Butler, 1999; Foucault, 1980; Jagose, 1996; Morris, 1998; Sumara & Davis, 1998; Warner, 1999) to better understand the social mechanisms through which normativity is constructed and disrupted. In addition, I draw on aspects of Bakhtin’s work that highlight similar issues of multiplicity and disruption. Queer theory also provides a basis for my methodological frame (see Chapter 3). I bring these various perspectives together in order to focus on social processes and engage in, as Bloome et al. (2005) suggest, an “ongoing attempt within the social sciences and humanities to understand and describe the ways in which people engage in and construct their everyday lives” (p. 2), with language given special attention as a primary tool in creating and negotiating these lives.

Self, Language, and Literacy as Social Phenomena

Overall, I believe that individuals are a part of a complex dialectic involving the people, communities, and institutions around them. My perspective follows from both sociocultural and poststructural theories. These bodies of thought suggest that just as there are always cultural, historical, and institutional constraints on a person’s thoughts and behavior, so too are there always opportunities for improvisation and agency. The specific resources available to people and the ways they can be taken up for what purposes are contextual and develop within the community of people engaged in those particular practices. Recognizing this relationship means recognizing the sociocultural nature of the self.

The idea that all human activity is inherently social is fundamental to the field of sociocultural theory. What eventually become our own habits, understandings, and ways of being first originate in our activities and interactions with others. As Vygotsky (1978)
writes, “A sign is always originally a means used for social purposes, a means of influencing others, and only later becomes a means of influencing oneself” (p. 157), thus “[i]t is through others that we develop into ourselves” (p. 161). In this way, individual minds are not separate from society but are instead saturated with society, thinking with all types of tools that were used in particular ways by particular people in particular types of social interactions whose patterns and meanings we have taken on for ourselves. This balance creates the idea of personhood which is “socially and historically construed, yet creative” (Holland, et al., 1998, p. 34).

Bakhtin argued that social interaction is dialogic and mediated through resources shared within the social group, creating a tripartic structure of interaction. Signs, in other words, have no inherent, abstract meaning, but instead are assigned meaning in social processes. As a result of their history of use in social interaction, signs carry meanings that go beyond their particularity. In other words, they shape and are shaped by social practices. This mediation allows for transformations both of the sign itself and of the people involved in the interaction. The semiotic nature of signs means that they are not just swallowed up whole by others, but they are internalized (Vygotsky, 1978) through a reconstructive process - guided by, yet not identical to - their use in the social plane. As children master the meanings of more and more complex tools, they also master the ways in which their community makes sense of and uses such tools. In this way, developmental transformation occurs as children appropriate the cultural systems of meaning within their social groups, leading to the development of higher mental
functions. All higher mental functions are internalized social relationships (Vygotsky, 1978). Such a process relies on selves acting in a social world.

This perspective leads me to view my participants as socially constructed but not socially over-determined. It provides a lens for considering the relationships between people and their connections to social settings of which they are a part. For my project, a sociocultural approach to thinking about the self is especially helpful for conceptualizing the relationships between children and their families, schools, and other social settings that provide resources that they take up within their own lives. Such a perspective acknowledges that children create their own sense of self from cultural resources, yet they internalize them in unique ways that fit their specific locations in the world.

*The Role of Language*

In the same way that the use of tools and other signs is inherently social, so too is any use of language. Like all other tools, particular utterances in language have social histories that are carried into new uses. Thus, the meaning of an utterance cannot be known until it is seen in relation to the particular uses and relationships of a given social group. Voloshinov (1973) explains, “Individual manipulation of the social sign takes place in a concrete utterance that is regulated by social relations” (p. 3). This regulation is actually the source of the meaning of an utterance, so “*The utterance is a social phenomenon*” (Voloshinov, 1973, p. 82, emphasis in original). The social is so embroiled in meaning making that, as Bakhtin suggests, even the “single utterance, with all its individuality and creativity, can in no way be regarded as a completely free combination
of forms of language” (1986, p. 81). An individual’s language use is not independent but takes shape through her relations with others.

The social aspect of language exists in units beyond the individual utterance. These exist in long successions of signs responded to with other signs. Voloshinov (1973) writes, “Any utterance – the finished, written utterance not excepted – makes response to something and is calculated to be responded to in turn. It is but one link in a continuous chain of speech performances” (p. 72). In other words, all utterances are inherently answers to other uses of language (Holquist, 1990) that will, in turn, require answers from future utterances. As Bakhtin (1986) writes, “The entire utterance is constructed, as it were, in anticipation of encountering [a] response” (p. 94). In this great chain of communication, individuals have the freedom to recombine and re-articulate words to create shades of their own meanings, even though they will always be interpreted and understood by others in particular contexts and communities.

This is the connection between language and the social positions we take up in the world. As Bakhtin writes, “Language enters life through concrete utterances…and life enters language through concrete utterances as well” (1986, p. 63). Language produces the categories through which we experience our identities and actions; language gives shape to ourselves and our world. It can create material effects. As Voloshinov explains, “There is no such thing as experience outside its embodiment in signs…It is not experience that organizes expression, but the other way around – expression organizes experience” (1973, p. 85). Language is the practice that gives shape to these judgments and decisions. It is a site of ongoing, communal meaning-making.
In a Bakhtinian conception of existence, both language and living are events (Holquist, 1990). The event of an utterance, because it is social, is never neutral or abstract but always directed to someone. This is to say that every time an actor engages with another, they are at the same time reacting to the reaction of the actor that they addressed in the first place. An utterance is therefore a form of address, and human existence\textsuperscript{11} is the condition of being addressed. This is what is known as addressivity.

Authoring the self means forming a response to the world that addresses the individual. In authoring the self, one uses familiar language juxtaposed against the contexts of the new utterance. Bakhtin argued that all language had its origin outside of the self and that all words had already been spoken and assigned meaning by others, but that the self was responsible for a unique arrangement and orchestration of those external discourses. In this way, one authors one’s self into being within and against a set of constraints that is also a set of possibilities. As Holquist (1990) explains:

Each one of us occupies a place in existence that is uniquely ours; but far from being a privilege, far from having what Bakhtin calls an alibi in existence, the uniqueness of the place I occupy in existence is, in the deepest sense of the word, an answerability: in that place only am I addressed by the world, since only I am in it. (p. 30)

\textsuperscript{11} As Holquist (1990) writes, “The world addresses us and we are alive and human to the degree that we are answerable” (p. 30).
Therefore, this dialogue is a required human behavior. There can be no passive authoring, only active responses from a self’s specific location.

Our authoring decisions matter because our answers to prior utterances create a new address to someone else and, in turn, qualify and shape statements yet to come. When a self responds to an utterance, she answers from her unique position in the world, therefore bringing her history and ideology into the interaction through her use of language. In this way, when one responds to an utterance, one authors herself into this world, creating an identity within the social world in which she finds herself and adjudicating between center and non-center relationships (Holquist, 1990). According to Holland et al. (1998), “In Bakhtin’s system the self is a position that is ‘addressed’ by and ‘answers’ others and the ‘world’ (the physical and cultural environment). In answering (which is the stuff of existence), the self ‘authors’ the world - including itself and others” (p. 173). In this theory of language as a chain of addresses and answers, we cannot avoid our role; we are addressed by others and we must answer that address in some way. We take part in the chain of communication, participating in its shaping in ways that reflect who we are and how we are located in the world.

As Bakhtin (1986) states, our place in the event of existence is decidedly situated but still ours to claim and live out through words, action, and being. “It is only in the highly specific, indeed unique placement that the world may address us…It is only from that site that we can speak” (p. 167). Claiming this position and participating in such dialogue is necessary yet still has consequences. Over time, choices are constrained. Eventually, addresses to and responses from the unique position of a socially situated self
“[begin] to assume the form of a text, a kind of book….for all of us write our own such text, a text that is then called our life” (p. 30, emphasis in original). Undertaking this process actually becomes a way of seeing the world – it finishes and categorizes ourselves, otherwise open and infinite, as well as the world around us, hence the self-authoring. The authoring self is invisible to itself, but is made knowable to itself and others through the words of others in the continual process of being addressed and answering (Holquist, 1990).

**Positioning**

Authoring the self is important because it makes information about an individual available to others. According to Holland et al. (1998):

Thinking, speaking, gesturing, cultural exchange are forms of social as well as cultural work. When we do these things, we not only send messages (to ourselves and others) but also place ‘ourselves’ in social fields, in degrees of relation to – affiliation with, opposition to, and distance from – identifiable others. (p. 271)

Within the socially-based chains of addressivity and answerability, people become discursively positioned into relational identities. The result is that “people develop different relational identities…because they are afforded different positions in those worlds” (Holland et al., 1998, p. 136). Again, these positions become part of the chain of communication, shaping future language use and subsequent positioning. It is this positioning, inextricably linked to power, status, rank, and the groups privileged by society that leads to a discussion of power and agency (Holland et al., 1998).
The way that a person is positioned can restrict her way of being in the world not only because of how she positions herself, but also how she is positioned by others. Occupying various positions has an effect because people “look at the world from the positions into which they are persistently cast” (Holland et al., 1998, p. 44). These are the consequences of discursive productions that constitute relations of “hierarchy, distance, or perhaps affiliation” (Holland et al., 1998, p. 128). While such positionings have constraining influences, they are not absolute. Given that the self is never completed but always in dialogue with others, the self is in flux as the world around the self alters. As Holquist (1990) explains, “Agency and hopefulness occur because the relation between the utterance and reply changes as times and places change. [I]n conjunction with that [other] other, my self will be differently understood” (p. 38). For good or for bad, while the self may have been authored and positioned in particular ways, there is always an opportunity for future change in the presence of dialogue.

*Applying Bakhtin to My Research*

Taken together, Bakhtin and associated scholars help me understand the complicated ways that people exist in relation to one another and to larger patterns of institutions and cultures. They also help me consider the role of language in shaping these relationships, including offering a theory of language which foregrounds interaction and the affordances and constraints on an individual’s self-authoring. This focus on interaction and self presentation is especially important given my focus on children’s discursive productions of family. Furthermore, the suggestion that one’s self-authoring may change over time and various social situations encourages me to examine language
use and positioning of participants at different times and in different settings. I will not search for a “true” or “original” identity, but instead will focus on individuals’ ever-changing positionings and accompanying relational identities communicated through language in a variety of contexts.

_Literacy as a Social Practice_

NLS recognizes literacy as multiple, contextualized, and “[i]mplicated in power relations and embedded in specific cultural meanings and practices” (Street, 1995, p. 1). These meanings and practices, mediated by written texts, are always temporally and spatially defined and located. Scholars working within an NLS framework have conducted a number of ethnographic studies in a wide variety of settings (e.g., Blackburn, 2003; Compton-Lilly, 2003; Farr, 2004; Heath, 1983; Hicks, 2002; Hull & Schultz, 2002; Morrell, 2004; Richardson, 2003; Street, 1984, 1995) to illustrate how what is understood and valued as literate behavior changes in different communities. These scholars provide an alternative approach to the individual, skills-based autonomous model of literacy particularly common in schools. As Street (2003) explains, “NLS, then, takes nothing for granted with respect to literacy and the social practices with which it becomes associated, problematizing what counts as literacy at any time and place and asking ‘whose literacies’ are dominant and whose are marginalized or resistant” (p. 77).

While Heath characterized a “literacy event” as “any occasion in which a piece of writing is integral to the nature of the participants' interactions and their interpretative processes” (Heath, 1982, p. 93), Street (1984; 2003) uses the phrase “literacy practices” as a means of focusing on both “events” in Heath's sense as well as on the social
interactions around literacy that participants bring to bear upon those events and that give meaning to them (Street, 1988). I use “literacy practices” here in the same broad way as Street suggests, foregrounding social interactions and their attendant meanings that are created through and around the creation and interpretation of texts. Such a definition “not only attempts to handle the events and the patterns of activity around literacy events, but to link them to something broader of a cultural and social kind” (Street, 2003, p. 78). Furthermore, because literacy practices vary from one context to another and from one culture to another, so do the accompanying meanings and effects of different literacies in different conditions. Following NLS scholars, therefore, I recognize that since social practices are embedded within sets of human relationships, the practices are never neutral. They come laden with and contribute to sets of power relationships.

These perspectives are significant for my work because they move thinking about literacy away from a binary of literate/illiterate and instead to the ways that different people interpret and interact around text in different situations for different reasons. For my project, I am not interested in answering if my participants can read and write, but instead how they engage with reading and writing, recognizing texts as mediating devices for social interactions. Furthermore, an NLS perspective breaks the myth of literacy as neutral and instead keeps a focus on the ideological components and power inherent in literacy practices, ideologies and power relationships that I am investigating in this research.
Speaking to the Social Lives of My Participants - Queer Theory

Since the theories detailed here direct my attention to the social settings and relationships of my participants, I also need a theory that will address their particular lived experiences. Queer theory is a deconstructive theory that grew out of the work of Gay and Lesbian Studies although it is not necessarily tied to a particular identity category (Jagose, 1996). While it is not simply one, unified approach, it is a perspective that questions all that is taken-for-granted and common sense while keeping a focus on bodies, sexuality, and desire. Queer theory recognizes that binary categories of identity that we often treat as stable, coherent, and reasonable – man, woman, gay, straight – are actually messy, slippery, and always in flux. Sumara and Davis (1998) use queer to indicate a general disruption of what is considered normal, drawing attention to “the polyvalent ways in which desire is culturally produced, experienced, and expressed” (p. 198). Overall, queer theory is a “discipline that refuses to be disciplined, a discipline with a difference, with a twist” (Sullivan, 2003, p. v), although one that most often is used to point out “incoherencies in the allegedly stable relations between chromosomal sex, gender and sexual desire” (Jagose, 1996, p. 3).

Queer theory teaches that the search for foundations and a singular view of normal is unrealistic (Britzman, 1995) and that every category is complicated (Sumara & Davis, 1998). Therefore, many queer theorists go beyond categories of sex and gender to focus on efforts of queer theory to destabilize the normative, writ-large (cf., Cohen, 1997; Morris, 1998; Warner, 1999). They pay particular attention to sexual and gender identities, but also highlight the possibilities of movement among many intersecting
identity categories such as race or disability (Cohen, 1997). Those using a queer theory framework examine how these categories are continuously constituted and reconstituted through performance and discursive practices (Butler, 1999; Foucault, 1978) that constitute sexuality in a particular culture and historical time. This framework also draws attention to the subjective positions that are available as a result of these productions, and how a person’s ways of being may conflict with the ways others view and react to the person. Attention is given to language in as much as language is a primary means of creating, perpetuating, and resisting particular subject positions. Such work draws our attention to particular, even temporary instances within the ceaseless movements and flows of identity and difference. The resulting realization of human complexity and contradictions leads some queer theorists to consider the suspension of identity categories entirely (Butler, 1999; Pinar, 1998), highlighting, disrupting, and expanding the traditional ways we think.

Queer theory recognizes that people of all experiences and inclinations are caught up in “conditions of normative heterosexuality” (Butler, 1999, p. xii) which regulate us all. Such an approach assumes that because we all operate in a world of artificially strict categories for understanding gender and sexuality, the gay/straight binary commonly used to label sexuality masks how the heterosexuality is just as diverse and constructed as homosexuality. By making all types of difference explicit in their very specificity and variety, queer theory has the power to complicate the traditional homogeneous, heteronormative binaries of normal and perverse.
In my study, queer theory helps me to foreground sexuality and the penalties suffered when people try to disrupt its normative practices. It also supports the consideration of multiple meanings people make and multiple positions they take in relation to regulations of bodies, genders, and desires. With its focus on destabilizing various norms, it also helps me to think about the ways a variety of identities, including race, class, gender, and religion in addition to sexuality, intersect and play out in the lives of my participants. Taking a critical orientation to queer theory reminds me to pay attention to circulations of power within and through these various forms of normativity, and encourages me to situate my research as work to make these relations more equitable. These ideas also play a prominent role in the methodological considerations of the study, and therefore are revisited in Chapter 3.

*Queer Theory’s Echoes in the Work of Bakhtin*

Although the work of sociocultural theorists and queer theorists often take different approaches to different questions, I find Bakhtin’s work lends itself particularly well to a poststructuralist reading. In many ways, I view Bakhtin’s work and the work of queer theorists as complementary or even overlapping, and I see several common assumptions between these two bodies of work that suggest they can be productively combined for this project. The first shared premise is the presumption of disruption or conflict. The second, related notion is the presumption of multiplicity. I will address each of these Bakhtinian-poststructuralist connections in turn before detailing the areas of overlap between the other sections of my theoretical frame.
Presumption of Disruption

Bakhtin’s work insists that because a self is socially-defined, the “other” is inherently implicated in the “self,” making the self always disrupted, conflicted, and messy. Our selves are never “just” selves, but are always and already relational selves. In this conception, the “other” is fundamentally united with the self and implicated in and by the self. Given that the “other” implies difference and distinction from the self, when the self and the “other” are seen as structural necessities of each other, difference is then a fundamental part of the self as well as part of the “other.” This structural necessity of otherness means that the “I” can only be known, even just temporarily, through relation with others (Nealon, 1997). In this relationship, with the self dependent on past and future unknown others encountered in all social contexts, the self is never finalized but always open to future change. The dialogic self/other relationship does not imply an eventual synthesis of opposites (Sidorkin, 2002), but instead requires constant interaction with an “other” in which the relationship is always changing, always answerable to new people and mediated by new situations. In queer theory terms, we might say that the self of Bakhtin, to the extent that it is made up of difference, is always somewhat queer.

In his description of carnival (Bakhtin, 1984), Bakhtin applies these ideas of the relational, open, incoherent self with a focus on physical bodies that gets closer to an explicitly queer turn of what it means to consider the “other.” In carnival, the actual physical body refuses confinement and order, representing a co-mingling of incompatible elements. Such a combination in a carnival setting makes possible impossible identities in the midst of unstable boundaries (Michaelson, 1999). In carnival settings, selves and
others interact not only through speech, but through raucous, embodied recreation that bends the everyday rules of what is expected. These ruptures dismiss fossilized aspects of traditional relations, changing “automatic performance and recognition to commentary and re-cognition…This hermeneutic moment leads persons to specify the figured world that prefigures everyday activity” (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain, 1998, p. 141). Therefore, it is in such relations with the world where boundaries of the normative are in flux and (im)possible identities are lived out, mirroring queer conceptions of the social interplay of untamed bodies and identities in the world.

The Presence of Multiplicity

Related to the fundamental interrelation of self and other is the pervasiveness of multiplicity in these two bodies of theory. In both Bakhtin’s work and in queer theory a singular, unified subject is rejected in favor of a complex subject, whether an individual or a field of study, created from many different parts. For example, Holquist (1990) explains that “dialogism is the name not just for a dualism, but for a necessary multiplicity in human perception” (p. 22, emphasis in original). Bakhtin insisted on this multiple, dialogic perspective of any talk, text, interaction, event, or relationship (Holquist, 1990; Voloshinov, 1973), and rejected the way that modern linguists attempted to analyze language “from the speaker’s standpoint as if there were only one speaker who does not have any necessary relation to other participants in speech communication” (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 67). Instead, as Voloshinov (1973) explains, “Differently oriented accents intersect in every ideological sign” (p. 23), so that, “Multiplicity of meanings is the constitutive feature of word” (p. 101). Bakhtin’s theorizing encourages resisting the
unified, singular understanding and instead see multiple and different ideas refracting each other. His work is about recognizing the multiplicity that already exists in complex and contradictory ways in our words and our ideas. The resulting dialogue is not a tidy, orderly back-and-forth, but a process of meaning-making that only takes shape through the interrelation of multiple differences.

I emphasize that Bakhtin and Voloshinov do not posit such struggles and negotiations of meaning as temporary interruptions in an otherwise smooth process of communication. In fact, they argue that they are inherent in all linguistic/social/human interaction since all words carry varying degrees of “otherness” and “our-own-ness” (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 89). Sidorkin (2002) agrees, and highlights the role of both disruption and multiplicity, saying, “Nothing is ever fully presentable...a true and full understanding is impossible. Any understanding implies co-authorship” (p. 92). Because all understanding requires multiple, conflicting voices, misunderstanding becomes “not an exception, but rather a universal practice: any understanding includes misunderstanding – any presentation includes misrepresentation” (Sidorkin, 2002, p. 92). The “gap” in Bakhtin’s theory is not something to lament, but a prerequisite condition of understanding. It is a queer reality of our social world. This concept of multiplicity is so central to Bakhtin’s work that any talk lacking this interaction of voices and perspectives is not a pure truth, but rather a monologic utterance that silences the natural chain of utterance. It is the yet-to-be-finished aspect of existence that keeps the sequence of being and communicating going. For Bakhtin, truth can never be expressed as one statement (Sidorkin, 2002). Instead, the presence of multiplicity is key. Bakhtin’s ethical dialogue
is tied to the “bewildering specificity of others and social contexts” (Nealon, 1997, p. 134). It is this same idea of multiplicity that is at the heart of a destabilized conception of the normative advocated by queer theory.

Connections between Other Components of the Theoretical Frame

While Bakhtin’s ideas and queer theory have points of overlap, so too do Bakhtin’s theories coalesce with an NLS perspective. As described above, both these bodies of work converge around the idea of language and literacy being social and multiple. Both view linguistic material as capable of mediating social interactions with particular consequences for people’s positions and identities. The meanings of utterances for Bakhtin and literacy for NLS do not exist in the abstract, but must be understood in social contexts based on how the utterances are answered (Holquist, 1990) or how the texts are taken up (Besnier, 1993) by participants.

Queer theory and NLS also direct attention to certain shared topics. Specifically, both queer theory and NLS are interested in multiplicity, as well as equity (Gee, 1996; Morris, 1998; Rodriguez, 1998; Street, 1995). They also share a focus on embodied practices. There is no neutral or single abstract “literacy” for Street and other NLS scholars, only iterations of lived practices enacted in particular, specific contexts. Queer issues take shape in similar ways, through what Butler calls “regulatory practices” that shape identities (1999, p. 23). What counts as literacy or sexuality - or, more specifically, correct or appropriate literacy or sexuality - is therefore performatively (often discursively) constituted and “understood depending on how the field of power is articulated” (Butler, 1999, p. 25). In other words, for both NLS and queer theory, the
expression of an activity or identity creates that activity or identity. Both sets of theories investigate the effects of institutions, practices, and discourses – asking what it is about the social contexts that gives literacy or sexuality their particular meanings - rather than taking the practices themselves as automatically intelligible.

Together, the theories of Bakhtin and other sociocultural scholars, New Literacy Studies, and queer theory all highlight the social nature of self and literacy, formed through language, in ways that are particularly fitting for thinking about the social and queer lives of the participants in this study. From here, I turn to the ways I drew on this larger framework to conceptualize a methodological approach and specific research design for this project.
Chapter 3 – A Queer(ed) Ethnographic Methodology for Literacy Research

Research creates particular subject positions and tells particular stories about particular people. Data and findings are not neutral, discrete bits of information waiting to be plucked out of the air. They are constructed through choices, relationships, and attention paid to particular features of the field rather than others. How a researcher sets about doing her research and the methodological decisions she makes along the way matter deeply to the data she collects and, in turn, the interpretations and claims she makes. In Chapter 2 I highlighted theoretical frames that guided my thinking as I planned this research. In this chapter, I explain how those perspectives were translated to choices within this research study. Specifically, I outline the epistemological and ontological assumptions that shaped the tools and approaches I used to build the relationships and gather the data that have become the stories of this dissertation. I detail not only the research design, or what I did to collect data, but also what informed these choices. I consider how my process of research had an impact on - and in many ways constructed - the data I collected. Therefore, the chapter traces not only the actual methods – participant observation, informal interviews, and so forth - but the methodology that shaped the study as a whole. By “methodology” here, I mean my rationale for combining particular theories or theoretical frames with particular research methods in order to answer given research questions.

This chapter continues the story of my research project by discussing particular methods I have been trained to use, specifically the ethnography of communication and
ethnographic studies of literacy; particular theoretical approaches (i.e., queer theory) that best complement and challenge those questions and methods; and the particular research design I created that followed from such a connection.

This chapter is divided into three main sections. First, I build on the queer and social theories described in chapter 2 to outline how and why I combine queer theory with ethnographic approaches to language and literacy. Second, I detail the new features of an ethnographic study that results from such a combination. Specifically, I explain the multi-sited nature of this work and its implications for my data. Third, I describe the procedures of the study, giving accounts of the data collection and data analysis procedures. I close with a discussion of the politics and ethics of my research.

Conceptualizing a Queer(ed) Ethnographic Methodology for This Project

This research study’s methodology is situated at the intersection of queer theory and ethnographic methods. The project is an ethnography because it involves prolonged engagement in field work, uses qualitative methods such as participant-observation and informal interviews to understand people in their natural settings as they go about their lives, and attempts to understand the meanings that participants have of their own experiences and everyday situations. On the one hand, it draws in a general way from Dell Hymes’ ethnography of communication (EOC) framework (Hymes, 1962/1995; 1974) because it is a study of language (and literacy12) in social contexts conducted in order to explain and account for meaningful variation in everyday language practices. On

12 Although some suggest that Hymes intended EOC to include attention to writing and literacy (Schultz & Hull, 2002), it was taken up at first nearly exclusively around spoken language until scholars began applying of analogous methods to understanding written language (Basso, 1974; Farr, 2004, 2006; Heath, 1983; Street, 1984; Swzed, 1981). Each of these studies emphasizes that if spoken language is seen as social and intimately tied to particular contexts, literacy can be examined in a similar way.
the other hand, the project is queer because I am a queer researcher doing research with/in queer families and communities to document the queer parts of their lives that often go unspoken by children in schools. In other words, while the study makes particular use of the techniques and approaches developed to study the use of spoken and written language in context, it proceeds with those methods in ways complicated by critical postmodern considerations espoused by queer theoretical perspectives. This combination is not an easy or entirely unproblematic one, yet to my mind is entirely necessary for the questions this study is asking and the type of work this study takes on. In this chapter, I explain this union of ideas in greater depth and describe how the combination of these perspectives and approaches constitutes a particular queer(ed) methodology for literacy research that serves as framework for this study.

*Queer(ing) Ethnographic Methodologies in Literacy Research*

Qualitative methods, including ethnographic approaches, are a foundation for this project and its design. Qualitative methods allow me to gather data in ways that value the contexts in which people’s knowledge and experiences are situated socially, and that respect the various meaning-making processes that participants assign to phenomena with which they interact. They provided the material with which to create “thick descriptions” (Geertz, 1973) of people and events in order to produce comparably thick interpretations of the situations at hand. Such methods were also appropriate for getting close to participants’ lives. They enable deep understandings and sensitivity to the context(s) of the participants and the research. They provide a way to learn about participants’ stories,
both the stories specifically told to the researcher and the stories that participants chose to
tell as they lived their everyday lives.

I wanted to have connections with participants that would be consistent over time
in order to understand people in greater depth and respect the complexities of their lives.
This seemed particularly important given the ways the LGBT community historically has
been measured and judged by “experts” from medical, legal, religious, and other power-
wielding institutions (Foucault, 1978). Because I have personal ties to the local queer
community, ongoing participant observations were a fitting way to spend the extended
amounts of time necessary to get to know people, build trust, negotiate access to multiple
sites, contribute reciprocally to the community, and see first hand how participants spoke,
read, and wrote over time and in different contexts. In these ways, the methodology of
my project followed from ethnographic traditions of scholars such as Heath (1983), Street

When initially formulating this particular project with such a methodology in
mind, I encountered a variety of questions that did not seem to have easy answers.
Ethnographic sites are traditionally physical communities of people, but the LGBT
families I knew lived all over the city. Where would I find my participants and where
would I “study” them? The families all had a variety of different characteristics. How
should I label them? How would I understand and account for the vast diversity both
within and among the different families? Even if families knew one another, they were
not, strictly speaking, a single community who interacted only or even regularly with
each other as far as I could tell. What if they didn’t consider themselves members of a

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group? Wouldn’t that break the “rules” of ethnography that encourage the documentation of an emic perspective, an attempt to understand a group as they understand themselves? I was interested in working with multiple families and following the children of those families within and between a variety of institutions, including homes and schools. Where was my “research site”? How would I define the “field”?

While I recognize getting stuck (Lather, 1998) is inherent to some degree in most, if not all, research projects, these questions made me realize a major component of the project was missing. To deal with these questions in a productive, generative way, I turned to queer theory. Described in more detail in Chapter 2, queer theory may be considered a branch of poststructuralism (Jagose, 1996). While queer theory is itself a slippery, non-unified term, I define queer as a general, fluid destabilizing of the normative with a focus on marginalized bodies and sexualities. This interpretation follows others, including those who take up queer theory within sites of education, such as Pinar (1998), Sumara and Davis (1998), and Warner (2004). As Sumara and Davis (1998) write, queer work is a “form of cultural study” (p. 198) where sex is a relation rather than an object (see also Morris, 1998). Such an interpretation means the “queer” in “queer theory” is more a verb than an adjective; it is a way to make “theory queer rather than having a theory about queers” (Warner, 1993). A focus on the myth of normalcy writ large implicates not just those who identify as LGBT, but people of all sexualities, including the children in my study. It recognizes that people of all experiences and inclinations are caught up in “conditions of normative heterosexuality” (Butler, 1999, p. xii), and it assumes that the heterosexual closet is just as unruly and diverse as that of the
marked half of the binary. I needed this type of queer theory to shape and make sense of what I would see in the study in ways that honored complexity and spoke back to pervasive conditions of (hetero)normativity.

I find the ways that queer theory and qualitative methods of ethnography stretch, strain, and support each other within my larger project particularly promising. In other words, I now believe that both queer theory and these qualitative methods offer me resources for answering my questions, but are incomplete on their own. My attempts at visualizing this relationship look like this:

![Figure 2 – Combining Queer Theory and Qualitative Methods](image)

This diagram illustrates that both queer theory and qualitative methods have strengths and weaknesses (especially in the particular context of my language- and social-practice-
focused research questions), but that these strengths and weaknesses can be seen to support each other and at least fill in the weakest spots.

For example, within literacy research queer theory can generally be critiqued for being too theoretical and insufficiently empirical in ways that do not deal with people’s material realities (i.e., Chang, 2005; Sedgewick, 1990; Talburt, 1999). Such an approach merely theorizes subjectivities rather than grounding them in data and/or experience. In addition, queer theory has thus far had minimal focus on literacy or on young children and schools (but see Blaise, 2005, and Tobin, 1997). I argue, however, that qualitative methods employed in an ethnographic frame can support queer theory’s limitations for my questions by being empirical, highlighting the voices of participants, drawing attention to context(s), and providing a general structure for researching literacy.

Inversely, qualitative methods in general and ethnography in particular have been criticized as being colonizing and colluding in a version of history in which some people are the “know-ers” while others are the “known” (Vidich & Lyman, 2003). Furthermore, traditional ethnography relies upon and reifies a modernist assumption of a “there” there with a foundational view of the subject that tends to artificially fix subjectivities in motion. Queer theory can support qualitative methods’ limitations for my questions by foregrounding the construction of bodies, sexuality, and desire; encouraging flexible representations of sites and subjectivities; and providing a frame for understanding multiple voices and their accompanying conflicts and contradictions. It is in this

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13 Although these critiques have been addressed by Britzman and others exploring poststructuralist ethnography, I have not seen that their concerns are widely accepted or taken up in the field of literacy research.
intersection of these mutually supporting but also conflicting categories that I situate this research.

*Translating a Queer(ed) Ethnographic Methodology into Practice*

A traditional approach to ethnography conceives of the enterprise as, “a task undertaken all too often by an unacculturated stranger who is guided by whatever the uneasy mix of poetry and politics gives to his or her efforts to comprehend an alien culture” (Vidich & Lyman, 2003, p. 92). These efforts built an assumed pact between ethnographer and reader, whereby the ethnographer provided a holistic account that was true, demonstrated narrative cohesiveness, and provided a view into the experiences and identities of the subjects being researched (Britzman, 2000).

This study instead follows the advice of Chang (2005), Eisenhart (2001), and Harding (1994) and builds on the work of Britzman (2000) and Talburt (1999). It takes a poststructuralist, queer approach to the ethnography of communication and literacy (despite the tensions between those terms) that changes several aspects of the traditional ethnographic study. For example, it uses queer theory to re-conceptualize the work of ethnography and create an approach to language and literacy research that resists fixed, foundational views of the subject. The present study does not aim to represent an all-knowing interpretation of the lives of the participants. In addition, because the present study assumes that people position themselves fluidly in ways that are context-specific, the project requires investigation into these multiple spaces. Thus, the project is a multiple-site ethnography that assumes “The premise of discontinuity forms the starting point from which to theorize contact, conflict, and contradiction” between groups of
people (Gupta & Ferguson, 1992, p. 6). It highlights interruptions and disconnections by juxtaposing representations, stories, and experiences of lesbian-headed families and their children within and across multiple field sites.

Multi-Site Ethnography

Marcus (1995) describes multi-site ethnography as a mode of research that examines “the circulation of cultural meanings, objects, and identities in diffuse time-space” that may be used when “an object of study…cannot be accounted for ethnographically by remaining focused on a single site of intensive investigation” (p. 96). By traversing multiple locations, fieldwork in such projects rejects a “dualistic ‘them-us’ frame” and instead explores interpretations and translations “along unexpected and even dissonant fractures of social location” (Marcus, 1995, p. 100) which produce additional comparative dimensions for study. Multi-site ethnographies draw on a formulation of a topic or emergent object of study – in this case children with lesbian mothers and their navigation of heteronormativity - rather than a geographic space (Hannerz, 2003). Sites are then connected because of their relationships to one another and to the topic at hand rather than limiting a focus to the relationships within sites (i.e., children spend time in both homes and schools but heteronormativity varies in those different spaces). Linkages between the sites make a multi-site ethnography different than a comparative study of multiple locations, although comparisons may also be built in to multi-site research.

Within the research design, site selections are based on particular opportunities to make comparisons regarding the topic of study, with sites often added gradually as
insights develop\textsuperscript{14} within the earlier sites (Hannerz, 2003). Studies should not be multi-site for their own sake, Marcus (1995) warns, but should come about from empirically following the particular cultural process of interest into various locations in which it circulates. For example, if I had followed my families only to various fast food restaurants, I could have collected data in multiple sites, but it is unlikely those sites would have varied enough to understand a range of everyday experiences related to heteronormativity that I wanted to see. The ethnographic product from multi-site work attuned to these processes of interest is a map of a particular, topically-focused terrain rather than a complete, holistic representation of each location. The ethnography is able to juxtapose phenomena that have been kept apart conventionally, conceptually, or historically (Marcus, 1995). Such an approach “stimulates accounts of cultures composed in a landscape for which there is as yet no developed theoretical conception or descriptive model” (Marcus, 1995, p. 102).

\textit{Employing Multi-Site Ethnography in this Project}

A multi-site ethnography is vital to this study. First of all, in direct contradiction to the work of traditional ethnographers (e.g., Hymes, 1974; Gumperz, 1968/2001), those participating in this study do not necessarily consider themselves to be a part of a single, cohesive group. While some families are friends, one or two families have never interacted with any of the other families participating in the research, nor have I known them to interact with other LGBT parent-headed families. Because my research is not limited by a single site but instead investigates multiple children in multiple families

\textsuperscript{14} Indeed, this is how I came to add the summer book clubs as a research site in addition to homes and schools. See below for further discussion of the site selection for this study.
across multiple sites, particular *people* become the unit of analysis rather than a bounded, pre-determined space or community. In this way, I follow Marcus’ technique of “Follow the People” (1995), to define this multi-site work\(^\text{15}\). This means that a researcher stays with the movements of a particular group of participants, those who “contribute most to turning the combination of sites into coherent fields” (Hannerz, 2003, p. 210). This technique traces a social system by connecting ethnographic descriptions of participants to their different experiences in various locations. In my research, the system described is heteronormativity; the object of study that connects these people within the multiple sites across space and time is their experiences as queer families navigating this system. Finally, employing a multi-site design also has political implications: moving beyond natural conceptions of stable cultures divided spatially into different territories breaks historic divisions of “ourselves” and “others” and allows for attention to difference within common, shared, and connected spaces (Gupta & Ferguson, 1992).

I understand an ethnographic project in general, and a multi-site project in particular (Marcus, 1995), to be an interpretive move that actively constructs the field while interpreting that construction (Weems, 1999). For this research project, the field created encompasses the experience(s) of facing heteronormativity, specifically as a young child from a lesbian-headed family, and including the uses of oral and written language that take place in these experiences. Employing such a methodology for my project, then, means that the study is not just an opportunity to report the literacy

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\(^{15}\) Given my focus on children’s discursive productions of family, the study also contains an element of Marcus’ “Follow the Metaphor” technique, where “the circulation of signs, symbols, and metaphors” (1995, p. 108) guide the study design, but I choose to foreground the people who are using those signs and symbols in different locations over the signs and symbols themselves.
practices I observe, but to trace what it is about those practices themselves and their relation to me and to other contexts that make them noticeable and observable. By focusing on a wide variety of social relationships (parents, children, teachers) within various institutional arrangements (homes, schools, community sites), I am extrapolating from traditional ethnography of communication work that required an analysis of language meanings in context. I am also following Talburt’s recommendation that queer projects “shift ethnography’s purposes from representation of gay and lesbian subjects and experiences to analysis of practices as they are constructed in social and institutional locations” (p. 526). Examining practices, she suggests, will enable educational researchers to “theorize the roles of knowledge/ignorance, silence/voice, and invisibility/visibility in constructing the selves, experiences, and practices of gay and lesbian subjects in social and institutional contexts” (Talburt, 1999, p. 529).

Methods of Data Collection and Analysis

With these various theories, approaches, and methods in mind, I designed a queer, multi-site ethnography that worked with five participating lesbian-headed families. I made contact with four of the five participating families through personal connections in the community, specifically through a city-wide social group for LGBT families. I met the fifth family through connections at a colleague’s church. The five participating families were selected through the purposeful sampling strategy of maximum variation sampling (Patton, 1990). While my participating parents were all white women who identified as lesbians, the families were diverse in terms of children’s ages, children’s

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16 The reader should refer to Chapter 1 and Chart 1a for more detail.
genders, children’s race(s), overall family structure and method of origin, geographic location, religious affiliation, and the type of school attended by the children (urban, suburban, rural, both public and religious). While all (residential) members of families were included in the study, school data was only collected for the children in elementary schools. For the family who had four children in elementary school, I selected two focal children who had teachers interested in the study and spent time with only those two children in classrooms, although I saw all four children during lunch and on the playground. These focal children were selected because of pragmatic reasons regarding classroom access while still attempting to maximize the sample variation (Patton, 1990).

Data Collection

The data collection period lasted for fourteen months and was divided into three phases. In the first phase I met with each family and spent time with them in their homes and occasional community sites they traveled to as a family. I also accompanied the children to their schools. This phase took place in the second half of the school year (winter and spring) so that I could observe the children in classrooms they had already been a part of for several months. I spent my time in the first phase in a series of five overlapping three-week segments, one for each family17 as shown in Figure 3:

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17 Although this model was the plan from which I operated, making arrangements with five families, five schools, and seven different classroom teachers was complicated. My participants’ flexibility and generosity helped it come to fruition surprisingly consistently, but I was committed to having family and teacher needs take priority over the research, making the actual structure of days and hours in the field not quite as firm and tidy as the plan may suggest.
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Figure 3 – Phase 1 Data Collection Timeline Arrangements

This arrangement allowed me to have one or two introductory meetings with the family in the first week to make initial observations and to allow time for us to get to know one another. In the second of the three weeks, the data collection was more intensive; I met with participants at least three times - sometimes more frequently - for several hours each. Those sessions involved time spent in both schools and homes. The third week with a family was less intense. This week allowed for one or two visits where I could make more targeted observations to follow up on events I had either missed or observed but not understood. The third week spent with one family was also the first week of the next family, for a total of eleven weeks. I made additional visits when the family invited me to join them for particular family or community events such as birthday
dinners or a child’s school play. This phase of data collection resulted in a total of thirty-four separate sessions in the field, varying in length from two to nine hours each.

Phase two of data collection took place over the summer. During this phase I spent a visit or two with children and families in their homes and occasionally at recreation and community events they participated in together as family units. In addition to these visits, the second phase of data collection was also the time where I formed and hosted an out-of-school book club for several of the children in the study. The methods of those sessions are described in additional detail, below.

The focus of the third phase of data collection was to observe children as they joined new classroom communities at the start of the school year. Scheduling issues prevented me from visiting classrooms at the very beginning of the year, but I managed to continue home visits. I scheduled school visits throughout the fall and winter as it was convenient for the new classroom teachers. I observed an average of three days at each school during this phase. Overall, the third phase of data collection resulted in nineteen sessions in the field, varying in length between three and six hours each.

*Positioning in the Field – Homes and Schools*

Although I took on various roles in the different families and classrooms, within the families’ homes I was positioned as either a family friend or a friend of the child(ren)’s. Because I was interested in learning about and valuing the choices and experiences of children with lesbian mothers, I made choices in the field to align closely with the children. For example, I framed my study in ways that would encourage children to be the experts on their own lives. I initially explained to children that I was in
school (22nd grade, according to their calculations!) and that this project was part of my “homework.” They knew that I had been a teacher and that I now wanted them to teach me. I explained my goal was to learn about their lives as children and as members of their families, since sometimes adults forget those perspectives. They knew I wanted to remind other teachers of children’s experiences to help them become better teachers. The children took up this position quickly and excitedly. As one of my participants summed it up for her brother, “You. Me. Her teacher. Got it?” A few mothers chose to discuss the study with their child(ren) in ways that focused on my interest in children with lesbian mothers, but most preferred that I described my study generally, in terms of my interest in children’s literacy. They did not want their children to feel pressured to explain the study’s connection to their families when I accompanied them to school. Because much of my time in the homes was spent playing with the children, most children eventually positioned me as a friend and playmate; they were my friends and teachers.

This arrangement created some dissonance when I visited schools. While the participating children frequently reminded me to wear uniforms, raise my hand, sit a certain way on the floor, and follow other child-specific expectations, I felt political, ethical, and emotional concerns with taking on a “least adult role” (Lappalainen, 2002). For example, because my ultimate commitments were to the children and families in my study, I was prepared to intervene at least subtly in any homophobia I noticed, especially
among children\textsuperscript{18}; I wanted my participants to feel there was an adult advocate with them in their schools without drawing any additional negative attention their way. However, I also wanted the teachers to feel comfortable with my presence in their classrooms. Such anxiety was heightened given the nature of the research questions, my own sexual orientation\textsuperscript{19}, memories of being closeted as a teacher, the families’ ambivalent and indirect framing of the research, and the number of different teachers with whom I had to negotiate access. This recognition led me to highlight my teaching background when communicating with teachers and offer my assistance in their classrooms. While I was a teacher’s helper in several classrooms, I chose to position myself more directly with children at other times. For example, I generally avoided adult-only spaces within schools, ate lunch with participants, and consistently went outside for recess and other outdoor activities. Since my relationships with the children began in and were concentrated in their homes, children didn’t seem surprised to see me switch to this playmate position. In fact, when they introduced me in their classrooms, they introduced me as a friend (of theirs or their mothers’) whom they were teaching about what it was like to be a kid. In this way, I was solidly “between children and teachers” (Lappalainen, 2002) while researching in schools, although the details of that position were constantly in flux.

\textsuperscript{18}Interestingly, I must admit that this turned out not always to be the case. In a few instances, especially when I didn’t know the students involved and when the children in my study were not present, I said nothing. On the other hand, there were times when I did intervene, and those too caused me to feel self-conscious and uncomfortable. Both, however, demonstrate the ways that I was navigating the same heteronormativity that my participants were. Like them, I too made similar, complicated choices as I decided how to live as my queer self within these schools. This negotiation is the type of queer both/and move I describe below.

Data Sources – Homes and Schools

During fieldwork, I collected qualitative data through extensive participant observation. Sometimes the participant observation bordered on informal interviews, especially when the families and I talked together over meals in their homes. Making audio recordings in homes simply felt too invasive. Therefore, I concentrated on experiencing the relations within the family (Wright, 1998) when I was visiting participants at home, although I occasionally would jot notes in a small notebook. After leaving a home, I would either sit in my car and jot additional notes or record my recollections into a voice recorder while I drove. I usually typed up my brief notes into more elaborate field notes immediately, but always within twenty-four hours. The voice recordings I would transcribe and elaborate with additional field notes. I added reflexive notes about my experiences in the field as I typed up the field notes.

Because of the tensions discussed above, I also chose not to make audio recordings while in school settings. Instead, I took extensive notes in notebooks that I kept with me all day. When children asked about this notebook, I connected it to the reading and writing work they did in their own classrooms and explained I was writing down what I was learning from them. I also typed and elaborated these notes, using a multi-column format to add detail, contextual information, reflexive notes, and initial codes.

I also collected documents from both school and home sites. These varied across sites, depending on the number and type of documents available and what the classroom teachers and families were willing to share. They included assignment descriptions,
forms from school, and samples of student work. I also provided a small journal to the children for them to write down anything they wanted to remember to tell me about on my next visit, including how they were feeling about their participation in the research, but those were not used consistently by the children and are not a source of data I draw on in my analysis.

Creating an Additional Research Site – Book Club

I decided to create another setting for this research after the first phase of the study. Such a decision follows theories of site adjustment in multi-site research (Hannerz, 2003). I had spent time with the children and their mothers in their homes for several months and had visited each focal child’s school multiple times. The data I collected during these observations were beginning to demonstrate the discrepancy of children’s language and literacy practices regarding family in these different settings. Therefore, I asked a group of my participants, specifically all the elementary school-aged girls, to join me for a summer book club. When I extended official invitations, most girls did not know that all the families I was working with were lesbian-headed households. The invitation kept a broad focus on difference while emphasizing social connections and fun.

The decision to invite only girls to participate in book club was more serendipitous than planned. The five families of the larger study have a total of 15 children, but my focus was on the 10 children in elementary school. Just by coincidence, there was a wide gender disparity: seven of these ten were girls; only three were boys20.

20 All the children I worked with in this study identified either as a boy or as a girl.
Although I worked with Ethan and Jonathan at school (the third boy, Aaron, was attending a different school than his siblings), our relationships never flourished the ways that my relationships with their sisters did. Ethan was the oldest child in the study by a year or two, and I knew he would be spending a large part of the summer out of town. That would have left Jonathan as the only boy in the group, and since book club was meant to be a comfortable and fun space, putting him in that situation did not feel fair. Therefore, to maintain the goals of the book club, I opted instead to invite all the elementary aged girls\textsuperscript{21} in the study to participate. All seven girls attended at least one book club session: Moriah, Chloe, Jadyn, and Julia attended all three; Mary attended the first and third; Isabella attended only the first; and Mallory attended only the second.

Book Club met three times over two weeks during the summer between one and a half and three hours per session. We met in a recently renovated reading lab space owned and operated by my university but not located on campus. These rooms were kid-friendly in size and design, with beanbag chairs and other furniture we could rearrange as necessary. There were walls of children’s books the girls could peruse. The location was fully in keeping with the idea that book club was a space that was neither home nor school.

We read one book each session. These books were selected so that each book club session would have a different central theme: families and family diversity for the first, international/interracial adoption for the second, and experiences at school for the

\textsuperscript{21}This decision also located us loosely in the long tradition of women’s reading groups (e.g., Royster, 2000; Sicherman, 1989) and to a newer body of research encouraging reading for queer youth outside of heteronormative schooling practices (Blackburn, 2002; Blackburn, 2005; Clark and Blackburn, 2009; Quinlivan and Town, 1999).
third. I had a loose sense of the structure we would follow, but was ready to follow the preferences and requests of the girls as long as we read and discussed that meeting’s book.

The three book club sessions were audio recorded and transcribed. I wrote brief field notes at the end of each session as a reminder about relevant parts of the discussion. I also collected writing and drawing samples that the children created during the book club sessions.

Data Analysis

I analyzed the data, including field notes from home and school observations, transcripts from the book club sessions, and documents from all sites, using topical or thematic analysis to determine trends and themes over time. Because of my research questions, I paid particular attention to data that indexed social positioning manifest through language, including references to family, literacy, and/or other relational identities. This was a recursive process in which initial codes arising from a grounded approach to the data were then refined through an examination of confirming and disconfirming evidence. Specifically, at the end of each phase of research, I gathered together the data I had collected, read and re-read it, coded it with descriptive codes, and looked for emerging themes and patterns (Erickson, 1986). I used writing as a type of inquiry (Colyar, 2009) to consider what I had learned from this reading, re-reading, and

22 In many ways, this was already a second level of analysis, since the production of field notes and transcriptions are not neutral activities but require interpretation. In fact, my initial coding procedures often felt simplistic and redundant until I realized that I had already “automatically” grouped observational data thematically in my post-field reports. Even while in the field I had already been analyzing! Once I made that initial level of analysis more explicit, it was easier to build on that and continue with the development of more abstract, theoretical codes.
initial coding, sometimes through brief narratives and sometimes through charts or other visual/spatial representations. In these writings, I also considered what lingering questions remained.

Charts became a particularly helpful tool for fostering new insights as I considered data within families and across sites (e.g., all my experiences with the Smith-Kendalls), as well as within sites and across families (e.g., all my experiences in schools). In this way, I tried to read the data in multiple ways, not collapsing differences but searching for both patterns and tensions. Such charts also helped me see places where my data was thin and where I needed to follow up with more targeted fieldwork, particularly in regards to gathering certain data from particular families. Assume, for example, I had documented examples of advocacy in four of the five families but not in the fifth. By “seeing” that absence on the chart, I could re-examine my data to see if it was something I had missed. Furthermore, I could consider whether that absence might be an effect of my data collection procedures (i.e., the times I visited that family, the position I took with them, etc.); whether I might understand the idea of “advocacy” differently within that family and, if so, why; or whether examples of advocacy were not present within this family and why that might be.

The analysis process was also recursive in that I tested emerging themes and patterns from one phase of data collection against further experience in the field in subsequent phases of the research. I searched for both confirming and disconfirming evidence of these initial interpretations in order to refine my understandings. I also read the data for silences within and among sites. This, for example, is what prompted the
addition of the book club. I also kept a running list of “memorable moments” from my observations in the field as a way to both “get my arms around” my data and spark additional insights. Often, these memorable moments helped me add codes to explore within the larger corpus. I reduced my data after the third phase of collection was completed by returning to my research questions, focusing more directly on the data that involved my participants and their self authoring, and consolidating various related codes.

Advantages and Constraints in Employing a Queer(ed) Ethnographic Methodology

How the Approach Was Useful

A queer approach to this project was particularly helpful for understanding the complicated and contradictory identifications of children with lesbian parent(s) with/to the LGBT community. As mentioned in Chapter 1, children of LGBT parents may be “culturally queer” even if they are “erotically straight” (Garner, 2004). As young children, they are often assumed to be straight or asexual, yet they suffer from homophobic harassment, and frequently have to “come out” about their families, in ways similar to LGBT people themselves (COLAGE, nd). Queer theory was a resource for theorizing these liminal relationships to queer culture, relationships, and practices. It helped me think about the degree to which and the ways in which children’s identities as individuals and their identities as parts of queer family units mutually constituted each other (also see Chapter 2). The fluidity and complexity allowed by a queer, poststructuralist approach provided methodological directions and analytic tools for addressing these issues.
This queer frame helped me take account of the diversity both within and among LGBT families. My data suggest it is difficult to support any single, specific, overarching claim about children with lesbian mothers when their families are so different from one another. Rather than ignoring this diversity, a poststructuralist approach supported the recognition and interpretation of these differences and the intersections and interplay of those identities with the families’ queer lives. This framework did not assume commonalities or replicate particular identity categories. Rather, it disrupted the notion of a natural world to study and helped me trace multiple, fluid positionings. For example, while the children from the five families in this study each have lesbian mothers, this fact can not stand as the sole marker of their identities. In addition to being children with lesbian mothers, they are also black, white, Asian, biracial, girls, boys, tomboys, girly girls, disabled, able-bodied, adopted, middle class, Seventh Day Adventist, mainline Christian, Buddhist, animal lovers, soccer players, softball players, Chinese speakers, dancers, and so forth. They are also at times smart, funny, shy, popular, imaginative, blunt, mature, slow, anxious, cuddly, hyper, and loyal, among other things. This multiplicity of identities and positionalities constantly circulated in the research settings and in the data collected from them. Poststructuralism, because it works against a modernist view of the subject, allowed, and even highlighted such embodied, multiple, layered, simultaneous identities that we all perform (e.g., Davies, 1989; Ellsworth, 1997; Lather, 1991; Yon, 2000).

And finally, this methodology was helpful for both highlighting the construction of sexuality and passing when it needed to – both queer moves in a sort of “both/and”
way. Most often the same normative, disciplinary forces that silence queer life also silence queer research, especially when performed by queer researchers, and especially where young children are concerned (Tobin, 1997). The resulting, unfortunate contradiction is that where queer work is most useful and most needed is exactly where it is discouraged or forbidden. Establishing access at a school site in which to do queer literacy work (and/or literacy work with queer people) was itself a queer process, a messy negotiation that was emblematic of the multiple, heteronormatively-constrained realities members of queer communities navigate on a regular basis. A queer(ed) methodological approach for literacy research needed to have the capacity for a double(d) move (Lather, 2007) that enabled existence in queer contexts and in hetero(normative) contexts. Both aspects of such a method as well as the tension and play between the two were all still essentially queer. For example, while an image of a stone butch lesbian woman who performs many characteristics of masculinity may be visibly queer because she breaks so many expectations of “woman” and “femininity,” it is also the case that the image of a femme lesbian woman who performs many characteristics of femininity is queer precisely because her seemingly straight presentation allows queerness, in a kind of “gotcha” moment, to adhere to those places where it is not expected. Sometimes it is in this surprise, stealth move that queerness circulates in some of its most powerful ways. To follow the femme lesbian woman from the above example more bluntly, no matter what she looks like, she’s still a dyke. Such a strategic approach to dressing up or dressing down the visibly queer aspects of the research (and the researcher!)

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23 Honeychurch (1996) refers to a similar tension of disruption and accommodation as learning to “queer the pitch without pitching the queer” (np, emphasis in original).
acknowledged the lived realities of heteronormativity and homophobia not only in the lives of the participants but also in the life of the researcher and the research project itself. Such a capacity was essential to enacting this ethnography.

*How the Approach Was Risky*

Employing this methodology was not without attendant dangers. First of all, the energy spent learning about the relations within multiple, new sites threatened to take away from the depth of understanding a study of a single site could produce. I had to remind myself of the increased breadth of my findings that this decision allowed. Furthermore, because the goals and relationships of the research project took on different contours in different sites, assumptions about who I was and what the research was about shaped the data I collected in the various locations. I hope the comparative nature of the work and thick descriptions of the data will help make those differences visible and available for interrogation. In addition, because I was the only constant presence between the various sites, it was occasionally tempting to take on too much interpretive power and make authoritative claims about “the truth” of what I saw. Again, I have to hope the juxtaposition of voices and sites helps keep multiple identities in flux. Finally, a poststructuralist, multi-site approach required special attention to authoring in ethnographic work since textual practices are specific rhetorical decisions that constitute the lens through which readers encounter representations of my participants. These were not neutral decisions; choices and interpretations made in relation to the topic of study impacted the ways that participants and data were understood. When writing about people’s identities and social positions, especially across sites, there can be a tendency to
highlight the questions of the study at the expense of other interpretations\textsuperscript{24}. Given the topic-centered nature of multi-site ethnography and the choices I made within such a design, my participants are framed primarily as members of lesbian-headed families through my research even though I tried to keep complexities in constant circulation.

Ethical and Political Bases of This Research

This queer(ed) ethnographic methodology tries, in part, to break the assumed, positivist chain leading from validity to truth, correspondence, distance from the self, and eventually to assumptions of an objective world to study (Eisner and Peshkin, 1990, cited in Talburt, 2004). Therefore, I did not engage traditional constructs of validity such as member checks and triangulation as traditionally understood. I did, however, seek multiplicity and multivocality throughout the study (Britzman, 2000; Talburt, 2004).

First of all, I conducted research with multiple, diverse, and differently located families. Secondly, I collected data with these families across multiple sites, some heavily influenced by their own design (i.e., families), some of a more institutional nature (i.e., schools), and some designed by me (i.e., book club). Third, I engaged iterative, recursive phases in the research process. Fourth, I invited additional interpretations through peer debriefing, reviewing findings and written drafts with teachers and researchers in addition to an adult child with LGBT parents who is also a lesbian mother. These colleagues shared additional interpretations and posed challenges to my own thinking. Finally, the entire study was contextualized in a theoretical frame that encouraged attention to multiplicity, heteroglossia (Bakhtin, 1986), and the role of the social. Furthermore, I

\textsuperscript{24} As King explained about his work, “My participants were turned gay by my writing” (1999, p. 476).
have tried to make myself visible within this research by explaining what led me to these questions, describing my role within the community of my research, and reflecting on the ways that myself-as-researcher negotiated similar heteronormative pressures as the participants I studied.

I know that none of these actions or approaches automatically makes the research project or its associated stories innocent. While I have attempted to be reflexive about my position in the field and my role within the research, there is no way to be “reflexive enough” (Pillow, 2003). As a researcher and author, I must take responsibility for the representations I have created within these pages, partial and perspectival though they certainly are. Still, I have tried to make this a project that gives back to the participants and creates change, even if in small ways. I do not believe in extracting data from a community, especially one as historically maligned by science and legal powers as the queer community, without offering anything in return. Sometimes, these attempts at reciprocity were small: I gave rides to and from school, I stapled homework packets for teachers, I peeled potatoes and cut apple slices for shared dinners, I chaperoned field trips, I babysat during parent-teacher conferences. A few were slightly more involved, such as inviting all the families to my home for a book club reunion at the children’s request. To me these actions felt like natural parts of experiencing family and school life in these homes and classrooms; in the field, I was part of the life of the family, therefore I contributed in ways I was asked to or that I sensed were helpful. At a broader level, I hope that the work of the research – privileging children’s diverse experiences, providing complex representations that counter historical silences, and illustrating the ways
classrooms could be more inclusive of diverse families – makes the world a little more comfortable and welcoming for these families, for other families, and for families yet to be created. In the next three chapters I report on the data I collected and the findings that arose from the analysis of that data.
Chapter 4 – Lesbian-Headed Families Speak, Read, and Write Themselves into Being

A few years ago, my partner at the time and I drove to Cincinnati. One of her brothers, Tim, was recently engaged to a woman named Laura, and Laura’s family was throwing the couple an engagement party where their two families could meet. At the time of the party, Emma and I had been dating and living together for several years and we frequently attended each other’s family events. Arriving in the city, we met up with Emma’s parents, her other siblings, and their families at Tim’s soon-to-be-in-laws’. Laura’s family welcomed the eight of us inside, and the introductions began. My partner’s mother took the lead in introducing her family to Laura’s relatives as everyone began giving hugs and shaking hands. “This is Ben, Tim’s dad. That’s John, his oldest brother, and his girlfriend, Kathleen. That’s Mark, Tim’s younger brother, and his wife, Rachel. That’s Emma, Tim’s sister. And that’s Caitlin.”

Several members of Laura’s family were understandably confused by the lack of relationship supplied in my introduction and tried to follow up with me individually. I remember Laura’s grandmother coming up to me, extending her hand, and asking cheerfully, “Now you are…?” Knowing I was a guest at this event, and already feeling self conscious after the initial introductions, Emma’s mother’s shame and silence about my relationship with her daughter had already spread to me. I knew the silence she had communicated was a silence I was being exhorted to take up as well, and I quickly found myself obediently taking up the label I had been assigned. “Caitlin,” I answered as I shook the old woman’s hand. After a brief pause, she tried again. “Are you Tim’s
“sister?” she asked. “No,” I simply replied, as nicely as I could. She gave me an odd look, said “But…um…,” quietly to herself, and then walked off, confused if not frustrated or a little angry. The feelings were mutual.

Neither Emma’s mother nor I was lying to anyone. Indeed, my name is “Caitlin” and I was not Tim’s sister, especially not his biological sister as I knew this woman meant. There was nothing inherently inaccurate in taking on the labels and descriptions assigned to me. But while it might not be a sin of commission, especially in the context of this party and its accompanying power relations, it certainly was a sin of omission. While all other family members were given labels and connections to others, I was entirely left out of the web of relationships. I had received Emma’s mother’s request for silence loud and clear. My lesbian relationship couldn’t be named and didn’t count. In their minds, I was an isolated individual; they were a family.

Lesbian-Headed Families and the Symbolic Material of Kinship

The participants in this study, unlike my experience with Emma’s mother, regularly used language within their homes and families to name and describe their connections to various members of their families whether or not legal or biological ties supported those connections. Specifically, they drew on spoken and written language to incorporate and validate queer people and queer relationships, including but not limited to their kinship with one another. In this chapter, I detail the discursive productions of family performed by lesbian mothers and their children in their homes and other settings where they spent time as families. First, I describe talk within lesbian-families homes. Next, I turn my attention to literacy practices the families participate in within their
homes. Finally, I detail uses of spoken and written language within the family as the family moved together into religious institutions and other public arenas, both predominately queer and predominately straight.

I argue that their participation in social practices around spoken and written language “redirect[ed familiar symbols such as blood, choice, and love] toward the task of demarcating different categories of family” (Weston, 1991, p. 3). Such queer redirections mark the places where traditional kinship has been constructed in heteronormative ways; they help us think beyond those limitations to consider what other queer-inclusive forms of family and their associated names, labels, and descriptions are possible. In other words, through finding and creating language to communicate about their queer kin, the discursive productions of lesbian-headed families contest heteronormative notions of kinship and help us think beyond them, thereby expanding and redrawing our ideas of who is allowed to count as family25. Together, these language and literacy practices established queer concepts and contexts of family into and through which children were socialized and that were then available for them to draw on as they moved into schools.

25 Clearly, lesbian-headed families are not the only kin groups that challenge traditional notions of family. Within this country and around the world, anthropologists, sociologists, and historians have highlighted communities that exist well beyond the mythic two (straight) parents with 2.5 children (see Coontz, 1992 and Stacey, 1996 for two reviews of American family history from the perspective of the end of the 20th century). However, I agree with Stacey that studying LGBT-headed families “crystallizes the general process of family diversification and change that characterize [what she describes as] the postmodern family condition” (1996, p. 108) since they challenge foundational assumptions of heterosexual procreation. In fact, Stacey argues, “Fully intentional childbearing outside of heterosexual unions represents one of the only new, truly original, and decidedly controversial genres of family formation and structure to have emerged in the West during many centuries,” with lesbian-headed families a “variation on this cultural theme” (1996, p. 110). These new family formations, she suggests, require new definitions for the most fundamental familial categories. The development of these new definitions and discursive patterns are what I explore in this chapter.
Talk in Lesbian-Headed Families’ Homes

Taken together, the data gathered within the contexts of participants’ homes and families demonstrated that my participants have ways of discursively producing and performing family that counter the heteronormativity of the larger society. For example, their oral language practices construct diverse and alternative meanings of kinship and relations that are not bound by biology or heterosexuality but instead incorporate and validate queerness.

Establishing Words to Describe the People and Practices of Lesbian-Headed Families

Terms of Address

One of the most common and significant ways that these families discursively produce family in ways that disrupt heteronormativity is their use of language and labels for one another. Since the traditional, heterosexually-based labels of mother and father do not apply to the parents in these families, they must invent other terms of reference that mark these queer familial ties. For the two families who gave birth to biological children within the context of their lesbian relationships, they chose to keep the traditional term “mom” or “Mommy” for one mother and invent or borrow a different but related term for another mother. For example, in the Jensen family, Mary and Noel referred to their moms as Mommy and Eema, the Hebrew word for mother, a reflection on their religion’s roots in Judaic scripture. These labels are interesting because the more traditional term “Mommy” refers to Katherine, who, as the mother who gave birth to the girls and stays at home to raise them full time, fulfills a traditional mother role. Linda’s name, the Hebrew term Eema, also makes sense because it is Linda and her extended
family who have long standing roots in the religious tradition of Seventh Day Adventism that the family practices. In this way, the flexibility required by having a family with two mothers also allowed for the use of a kin term that could express the family’s religious affiliations.

The two mothers in the Smith-Kendall family also used Mommy and another name. In their family, Johanna is called Mommy and Jayne is MyMy. Since each of the mothers gave birth to one of the daughters, the more traditional “Mommy” in this case doesn’t index biology per se, but may relate to the fact that Johanna was the first to give birth and therefore first to become a mother in the traditional meaning of the word. According to Jayne, “MyMy” comes from the Croatian word for mother, Majka (pronounced “My-ka”). She learned this word from her Ph.D. mentor and members of the lab group she worked with in graduate school who were Croatian. It provided Jayne and Johanna another term for mother, but also a term that would not readily be identified as mother. Using language in this way kept the partnership of the mothers more discreet, thereby creating a kind of “linguistic closet” (Benkov, 1994) that protected the family from having to explicitly declare the family as being made up of two mothers. As Jayne explains:

We modified it [Majka] to Mayka with same pronunciation [“My-kah”] thinking that it would be a different enough name but would still mean Mom. We were still a little closeted then about having two blatantly Mom names. Julia called me Ka for a while and one day while with Johanna's family [she] popped out with
MyMy and Johanna’s sister-in-law was really fond of it so it stuck. (email communication, 10/30/09)

Here, Jayne and Johanna also draw on familiar discourses to help them come up with their kinship terms, specifically discourses from peers (to come up with Majka) and extended family (to have MyMy “stick”). The way they selected a name indicates they did not feel there was an automatic or predetermined set of terms from which to choose; the creation of their family and the terms used to name it was up to them (a feeling shared by families discussed by Benkov, 1994). Interestingly, choosing Jayne’s term of address is not just Jayne’s choice as an individual but a process the couple shares together: it is Jayne’s colleagues that supply the first term, their daughter who modifies it, and Johanna’s family member that helps them settle on MyMy.

When talking to me over the summer, their oldest daughter Julia knew she deserved some credit for creating this name: “I gave her [Jayne] that name when I was maybe, like, one.” She continued, “she wanted us to call her Mayka…or…um…first I called her Mayka. Then I kinda put Mom with it. Mayka. And Mom. So MyMy” (field notes, 8/5/08). Here, Julia claims some responsibility in creating new terminology for her queer family. What Julia leaves out that Jayne highlights, however, is that the decision of names was understood by the two moms not only as a practical matter (what will our daughters call me?) but as a strategy for managing their lesbian-headed family in a world that might not be friendly to them. As Jayne recounts, even though she and Johanna were out as lesbians in many parts of their lives, they “were still a little closeted then about having two blatantly Mom names.” Choosing a name that was not an obvious or
traditional kinship term identified Jayne as a mother within the family but still helped
disguise the fact that both women filled the role of mother for the girls.

In the two families who adopted children, when neither mother had biological ties
to the children, both families used the label “Mommy” or “Momma” plus the mothers’
first names. The Winston girls called their mothers Momma Sal and Momma Hil, using a
shortened form of their first names, Sally and Hillary. While this was the original
linguistic arrangement, after the mothers split up and Hillary moved out, Sally (as the
custodial parent) became known simply as “Mommy” with Momma Hil increasingly
referred to as their “other mom.” At the time of the study, the girls called Sally’s new
partner by her first name.

The children of the McKinney-Robbins family also used “Mommy” or “Momma”
to refer to both of their adoptive mothers, distinguishing between the two by using their
first names. They called their mothers Momma (or sometimes Mommy) Denise and
Momma ‘Lee, short for her full name, Maelee (the linguistic elision makes it unclear if
the children thought they were saying Momma ‘Lee or Mom Maelee).

Since the Davis children were born to a mother and father in a straight
relationship, they actually did use the typical labels of mom and dad for their original,
biological parents. When their mother, after her divorce, partnered for a time with
Cynthia, the children called her CeCe, a diminutive form of her first name without any
attached label of “mother.” When the children referred to Cynthia, however, or needed to
explain their relationship to her, they used the term “stepmom” or “stepmother,” granting
her parental status and acknowledging the kinship her partnered relationship with their
mother created for them as children. This was true even after Cynthia and their mother’s relationship dissolved and she had moved out. On the other hand, they referred to their mother’s new girlfriend by her first name and did not, at the time of this study, acknowledge her as a mother or stepmother.

Terms for mothers created by these families demonstrated connections to specific features of family formation. While children in these families called (the first) biological mother(s) by the more traditional term of “mommy” or “mother” without any other modifying term, they worked with those around them to create other, original terms for their other mothers (i.e., partners of (the first) biological mother(s)). Adoptive families in this sample tended to treat labels for mothers more equally. Specifically, in the two families that adopted children both mothers were called “Mommy” or “Momma” and their first name. In the event of significant family change, such as living with and seeing one mother more frequently than another, these kin terms were subject to change, with “Mommy” becoming the default term. When a partner came into the picture after the birth of children, as with Suzy’s partner, that woman was understood and described as a (step)mother but was named only with her first name. Overall, although the families developed different naming practices for mothers for different reasons, all the families had to find ways to stretch, modify, and revise more traditional kinship terms that usually relate to biology and heterosexual relationships. These linguistic practices enlarged the term “mother” to be inclusive of homosexual relationships, including naming women as mothers who were not biological or legally-adoptive parents but were mothers to children via their caretaking role and/or their partnered relationship with the child’s other mother.
While families drew (implicitly as well as explicitly) on traditional notions of motherhood to assign parental terms, they also drew on religious discourses, input from family and friends, their own histories and cultures, and improvisations to create alternative, non-heteronormative kinship terminology for their family.

*Last Names*

Last names are another linguistic tool for indicating close kin relationships that the families actively employed, sometimes despite biological or legal ties. Ethan and Isabella, for example, both share the last name Davis. This is their father’s last name, a result of the traditional patrilineal naming patterns that exist in most heterosexual marriages. Although this clearly indicates that the children are related to each other and to their father, it does create some distance from their mom, Suzy, whose last name is no longer that of her ex-husband\(^\text{26}\). In fact, Isabella and Ethan’s three parents all have different last names; they have the same last name as their father, but not the same as their mother or as Suzy’s ex-partner, their stepmother. The children’s last names unite them with each other and to some members of their family, but not to everyone. In this case, because of their birth into a heterosexual couple they are linguistically connected to the straight family members and not to either of their lesbian mothers.

Conversely, Sally Winston legally adopted both her daughters, Mallory and Lila, and consequently all three have the same last name. Therefore, although Sally does not

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\(^{26}\) After her divorce, Suzy purposefully chose to return to her maiden name to be more independent from her ex-husband. Just as sharing a last name can indicate close kinship, differentiating by last name can serve to create distance between people.
physically resemble her internationally-adopted daughters, they are linguistically marked as belonging to the same family through their common last name.

Being a multi-racial family via adoption also influenced name choices for the McKinney-Robbins family. When Maelee McKinney and Denise Robbins adopted their children, they knew that Ohio’s laws would not allow second parent adoptions of non(heterosexually)married couples. Therefore, each of the children could only be legally adopted by one of the two women. They decided that they would each be adoptive parents: Maelee would adopt three of the children and Denise would adopt three. These restrictions meant their legal bonds as parents only apply to some of their children, so Denise and Maelee wanted a tool that would cross the differences in biology, race, and adoptive status to indicate that their children were all family to one another and to both of them. Therefore, they decided to give all the children both of their last names, McKinney-Robbins. Their daughter, Moriah, explicitly recognized the reasoning behind this decision. As she said to me, “Know why we’re called McKinney-Robbins? Because Mommy…Mommy Denise’s name is Denise Robbins and Momma Lee’s name is Maelee McKinney. So, so, that’s why…Mommy wants us to have both of their names” (field notes, 8/8/08). In this way, like with the Davis children, the linguistic label of kinship functioned to unite the children to one another. Like the Winstons, a shared last name also connected the children to their parent(s), even in the face of racial differences and non-biological ties.

27 A constitutional amendment in the state of Ohio passed in 2004 limits marriage to one man and one woman. Therefore, by stipulating that only married couples can jointly adopt, the law limits that ability to heterosexual couples.
At first, the Smith-Kendall family chose to follow conventions that related last names to biological ties. They originally gave each of their daughters the last name of her respective biological mother. For the first several years of their lives, Jadyn was Jadyn Kendall and Julia was Julia Smith. As Julia explained to me about her last name, “First mine was Smith and [Jadyn’s] was Kendall. And then they [moms Johanna and Jayne] got it hyphenated” (field notes, 8/8/08). The family’s change to the shared hyphenated name of Smith-Kendall for the girls didn’t occur until Julia was getting ready to start school. At that time Johanna and Jayne legally changed their daughters’ last names to their common hyphenated forms in order “to create a sense of family” (field notes, 4/8/08).

Specifically, they were concerned about having to repeatedly explain to teachers and school administrators why one child had one last name and one had the other even though they are siblings. While their original naming strategy had worked to emphasize traditional notions of biological relatedness, it failed to counteract the assumption of heterosexual relationships. For Johanna and Jayne, then, the choice to give their daughters the same last name made up of both of their own last names was explicitly understood as a strategy for them as a lesbian-headed family. Jayne expressed her belief that LGBT families often had to work twice as hard as straight people at performing family, so even though they had been concerned about being so clearly visible as lesbians, they decided they couldn’t afford to risk not being seen and respected as kin to each other, so they used language to accomplish this.
Members of the Jensen family also changed their last names to be linguistically connected to each other, but in this case they changed the mothers’ last names rather than the children’s. Katherine changed her last name to be the same as Linda’s when they committed to each other as a couple before they had children. Therefore, when Katherine gave birth to the girls, all four members of their family had the same last name of Jensen. This was a careful and strategic decision for Katherine and Linda as a couple considering children. Since Katherine would be the biological mother of the children, they decided they would all take Linda’s last name. These choices created a kind of balance: Katherine (and her extended family) was responsible for the genetic marker of kinship with her daughters, while Linda (and her extended family) was responsible for the discursive and public marker of relatedness.

Overall, most families disregarded strict adherence to traditional heteronormative naming practices, especially when the families were bringing children directly into a lesbian relationship. Instead, these mothers felt a degree of freedom and control in choosing their children’s last names. Participants believed surnames were important because they contributed to the children’s sense of self and their sense of familial connections. Families tended to carefully think out and explicitly choose last names in order to mark one another as kin. Such choices were so meaningful that one family even recognized a degree of fluidity in choosing these names as their beliefs and needs changed over time. Sometimes a shared last name became a discursive marker that connected families across racial and ethnic differences. Taking a shared surname could also be a way of allowing a non-biological mother a connection to her children above and
beyond her partner’s genetic connection. Using hyphenated last names was a way to connect children to both mothers in spite of particular biological or legal adoptive ties\textsuperscript{28}. Finally, even when families used traditional heterosexually- and patrilineally-based naming practices, the siblings still shared a last name even if they were not linguistically connected to either of their lesbian mothers. Although the families’ specific choices varied, the families in the study all used last names to discursively produce their family connections both for themselves and for public presentation to others.

*Words to Describe Family Creation Outside of Heterosexual Reproduction*

These examples of discursive production of family all deal with members of the family and what they should be called, the *who* of the family. Other methods of discursively producing family by these lesbian-headed households related to methods of family origin, the *how* of how their families came to be. With current laws about international adoption, child welfare systems, and modern reproductive technologies, children are brought into families in a wide variety of ways that are not a direct result of the child’s parents or caretakers biologically reproducing. Therefore, besides direct terms of address, these families also created and used terms that apply to the various queer kin

\textsuperscript{28} Many heterosexual couples are also becoming more creative about their use of naming practices for themselves and their children. Women do not automatically take a man’s last name at marriage; couples hyphenate their own last names and/or those of their children to demonstrate equal status as parents or in a relationship; couples combine their names or the letters of their names to create new last names for themselves or their children. In some ways those actions are similar to the choices the families in this study have made. What is frequently (yet not always) true within straight couples, however, is that a biological or adoptive connection already exists between each of the two parents and the child. Names are additional ways or more egalitarian or more creative ways to mark that tie. This is different within lesbian couples, however, because in none of these families are both mothers biologically and/or legally related to their children. Their choice of last names does not buttress a connection that already exists via the blood ties of traditional kinship, but actually creates or stands in for that tie, often in an attempt to be intelligible as a family to others.
and kin-like relations outside of those of the nuclear family that applied to their own situation of family creation.

Terms used frequently by both children and parents describe these various other figures and categories. For example, children in the McKinney-Robbins family know that in addition to their two mothers, they also have a “tummy mom” that gave birth to them (field notes 5/7/08). The children know their tummy moms by first name and communicate with them casually on occasion. The role of a “tummy dad” or biological father was not emphasized²⁹, perhaps because the children do not have ongoing relationships with their birth fathers.

The role of genitors was also mentioned by the children who were conceived through assisted insemination. Jadyn and Julia Smith-Kendall and Mary Jensen, all conceived via sperm donation, knew that their donors (sometimes also referred to as a “donor dad” or, less frequently, “birth dad”) played a role in helping their mothers get pregnant and have babies. They also knew that they can’t see or know him now, but that they have some information about him in forms that their mothers received from the sperm bank. Additional terms and labels index further information about the relationship of the donor to the family. For example, in the case of the Jensens, Katherine and Linda purposely chose a California sperm bank because California law allows for the option of what is known as a “‘yes’ donor.” This designation means that the donor can choose for their identifying information to be released to their offspring when the child turns

²⁹ Some adopted children did mention a birth dad when opportunities arose for describing their birth and parentage in greater depth (field notes, 8/5/08; see Chapter 6).
eighteen. At that point, the child has the option of contacting the donor if she chooses. These various features of the donor and his relationship with the family are discussed by the families when the children show interest. According to her moms, Mary was really interested in her donor a few years ago right before she started kindergarten. They got out all the information they had about him from their files, reading through the information and talking about it all together, and explaining that she may be able to contact him when she turns eighteen. Since that experience Mary hasn’t asked to talk about her donor with her moms (field notes, 3/11/08), although she did discuss him at the Book Club in a later part of the study (see Chapter 6).

For all these families, heterosexual reproduction was peripheral to or absent from the children’s definitions of family creation. Because genetics was separate from kinship in their conceptions of family, genitor and genatrix were not prerequisites for filling the role of parent. Instead, queer families taught their children the biological facts of their conception through language they developed to reflect these different situations. They did not speak of people who contributed genetic material to children’s physical creation as missing parents but rather in non-kin (or non-traditional kin) terms such as “tummy moms” and “donor dads.” Parents were people who loved them and cared for them, not necessarily people who supplied their genetic material.

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30 Katherine was particularly insistent on having a “yes” donor for her children because her sister was adopted through a closed adoption process. Katherine’s sister, therefore, can never know her birth parents, and Katherine saw that restriction as having a negative impact on her sister’s life that she didn’t want her own children to experience.
Discursive productions of queer family and relationships were developed by children as well as parents. In some situations, children used terms common in LGBT communities, such as when Mary labeled a family emotionally close to her own as “chosen family” while talking with me. The McKinley-Robbins children also used this label. This term is used in gay communities to index relationships, usually with other LGBT people, who are considered kin in spite of not being biologically related (Weston, 1991).

In other cases, children drew on discourses and vocabulary available to them, including messages from wider society, to create new descriptions of their queer family, bring words from other contexts into the family, or to employ standard terms in new ways. These novel uses often took their mothers by surprise. For example, Suzy Powell recounted a story about a day when her children Ethan and Isabella, and Ethan’s best friend, Max were all in the car on their way to a social gathering of LGBT families. While driving, Suzy overheard fifth-grader Ethan tell Max, “This is a party where you might not want to use the word ‘gay wad’ because it might hurt people’s feelings.” Suzy had never heard Ethan use that word before. When she feigned ignorance and asked him what that word meant, he said that he wasn’t sure but since one person could be gay, a group of gay people would be a gay wad. Such a definition may have been for Suzy’s benefit, since it doesn’t seem to fit with Ethan’s understanding of the word as offensive. His friend didn’t ask for an explanation, so this may be a term Ethan heard among his
peers that he brought into his family setting because he had a peer accompanying him on a family trip.

In another instance, Sally Winston overheard her daughters playing together and laughing hysterically in another room. Through giggles, she heard her oldest daughter Mallory say to her sister, “We look like a bunch of lesbians!” Lila answered, “That’s just what I was thinking!” When Sally poked her head around the corner to see what they were talking about, she saw that they had both pulled their hair down in front of their faces. She asked them what it was about that action that made them look like lesbians, but Mallory replied, “I don’t know. It just looked funny. I don’t even really know what lesbian is” (field notes, 5/5/08). While it’s hard to know just what motivated this game, this interaction demonstrates that language relating to queer identities such as “lesbian” is available to the girls, even if they claim to not be completely sure of its meaning. It is possible that, as with Ethan’s answer above, a claim of ignorance about the word may have been for her mother’s benefit since in both cases children are actively using the words they say they don’t know and in contexts that seem to make sense to other children.

Mary Jensen also drew on language she’d heard about her family to improvise new words and meanings of her own. The very first time I visited her home, Mary taught me and another friend of hers who also had lesbian mothers about how gay and lesbian people are subject to unequal treatment in the United States, especially in relation to laws

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31 In all the homes I did hear “two moms” used most often as a gloss for “lesbian” or “lesbian-headed household.” The Powell family used the words “gay” and “lesbian” most frequently. I heard those terms used only rarely in homes otherwise. The tension between “two moms” and “lesbians” also arises in data presented in Chapter 6.
about marriage (field notes, 3/10/08). After I told her I wanted to know about what life was like in her family, she first told me that it was “kind of easy” to have two moms, and that the only challenging thing about it was that the “taxes aren’t fair.” She explained that for people who “are married but who aren’t ‘whole married’” they have to pay more taxes. In Mary’s view, even though people like her moms were married “it’s like they have to pay as much as people who aren’t even married because it’s against the law.”

Upon hearing this analysis, Mary’s friend admitted she didn’t know about those rules, but she agreed with Mary’s assertion that such a situation wasn’t fair. Her friend even wondered whether perpetuating this type of inequity might even be “breaking the law.”

Mary’s mom, Katherine, overheard part of our conversation, and confirmed that although she and Linda had talked with their daughter about marriage rules for same-sex couples, the term “whole married” was Mary’s creation and a surprise to her.

In these three cases, children were not simply sponges for or parrots of language and ideas about LGBT people and families circulating around them. Instead, the children were active participants in improvising and creating new words and meanings, including deploying terms in new contexts, especially when communicating with other children. Their comfort with and need for words such as “gay wad,” “lesbian,” and “whole married” were signs of the queer family contexts of which they are a part. Children were attuned to these words. They both utilized and disputed words they heard used around them (i.e., lesbian and gay wad, respectively). They also created terms where the words they know failed. These uses of language indicate that children recognized their need for words that communicated the realities of the people and situations they knew. Their
social worlds provided many of those words already, although sometimes in ways that carried negative connotations. Children understood the connotations of such words had to be revised before they could be used within the queer sphere of the family.

*Families’ Discursive Productions of Heteronormativity and Other Identities*

While a great deal of these families’ language incorporated and validated queer people and relationships, participants’ discursive practices did not always relate to the queer parts of their lives. In addition to using terms that enabled them to denote particular family members and their queer relationships, participants occasionally made use of other discourses within their homes. In other words, even in the queer environments of their families, there were times when children discussed other identities and heteronormative relationships while queerness took a back seat. Specifically, children used language for two other reasons that diverge from the data previously presented: first, to contextualize themselves and their families in relation to other, multiple categories of identity including racial/ethnic\(^{32}\) and religious identities, and secondly to tell stories that perpetuate heteronormative ideas. I address these two categories of disconfirming evidence below.

Sometimes participants’ discursive productions highlighted their racial or ethnic identities but not at the exclusion of queer aspects of family. For example, Moriah McKinney-Robbins, who is African-American and lives with two white mothers, frequently brought up her own racial identity in conversations with her parents. For example, her mothers reported that once when she was about three years old she looked

\(^{32}\) I understand these to be overlapping, yet not identical categories.
around and announced to them, “Well, I got me some white moms!” (field notes, 5/7/08). Moriah’s use of language in this way indexed the multiracial nature of her family, highlighting the racial differences she knew to be true, while it also reiterated and reinforced the parental-child relationship that existed alongside this difference. Such indexing of multiple identities is what Weston (1991) also found in her work. As she notes, “In practice, notions of family bring sexual identity into relationship with other types of identifications, including race and class” (p. 56).

Mallory Winston also used language to explicitly label her ethnic and racial history. For example, she sometimes reminded her mother that “I’m a Chinese person” (field notes, 5/5/08), an identity she shares with her sister but not with her custodial mother. Here, Mallory not only asserted her racial and ethnic identity separately and apart from her identity as a member of a lesbian-headed family, but may have felt the need to remind her mother of this very fact because her mother does not share this particular aspect of her identity33. Such an example is a reminder of the complicate and multiple ways people may identify even if they also identify as members of the same family.

Mary Jensen indexed her family’s religious background when she remarked that a girl whose family had disapproved of the Jensens while at a bookstore was “a Christian too” (field notes, 6/26/08). Rather than react negatively to this other family’s

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33 Mallory also used images and not just words to assert her racial identity separate from her mother. Early in the study she created a large painting that her mother prominently displayed on the refrigerator in their kitchen. The painting consisted of a taller figure with short, blonde hair (meant to be Sally) in the middle of the page, surrounded on either side by shorter figures, each with long, dark hair (meant to be Mallory and Lila). One of the girls had big glasses painted on her face just like Mallory’s glasses. This portrait, while leaving out the girls’ other mom, was a representation of the family that lived in their house, complete with physical, ethnic differences.
disapproval, Mary chose to emphasize their common religion, defining her family as not significantly different from this girl’s and therefore not deserving of any condemnation. In all three of these situations, children used language to index the realities of their immediate, queer family even as those balanced against and interacted with a wider variety of connections and relationships that extended outside their immediate family and household.

On occasion, family members’ discursive productions moved beyond avoiding queerness and actually reflected heteronormative ideas. For example, one night after dinner Jadyn Smith-Kendall invited her sister, her moms, and me up to her bedroom. She directed us all to sit on the floor while she put on a show using her Webkinz toys. The first characters in her story were a female cat and a male dog who kissed a lot and then “fell in romance” with each other (field notes, 2/23/08). Jadyn repeatedly narrated, “I’m so in romance! Mmwah, mmwah, mmwah!” making loud kissing noises. She used other Webkinz to represent the mother of one animal and the father of the other. These two characters then started kissing, but Jadyn became confused over the pronouns she was using and paused to be sure she was correct in reporting which were boys and which were girls so that she maintained straight couples. Her sister Julia also chimed in to clarify the gender of particular characters. When Jadyn’s moms were ready for her to wrap up the story, they said, “Ok, if they’re in romance, are they just going to get married? Can we just get them married so we can move on?” While her own family was built around the

34 Webkinz are small stuffed animals sold with online codes that allow the owner to access an online virtual Webkinz world. Wohlwend, Husbye, Vander Zanden, and Kuby (2010) describe this aspect of Webkinz as an early social networking site for young children. The toys were extremely popular among Jadyn and her peers.
lesbian relationship of her two mothers, Jadyn depicted strictly heterosexual romantic encounters in her playful account. She clearly marked characters as boys and girls, and these distinctions indicated who should “fall in romance” with whom. Furthermore, the dog and cat characters in Jadyn’s story each had a mother and a father who were also heterosexual. Her mothers took up and contributed to this trope by inserting the idea of marriage into her narrative. In this interaction, marriage was portrayed as the end point of this heterosexual romance tale, a particularly interesting choice given their official exclusion from a legal union of their own. In other words, Jadyn and her mothers created a narrative together that followed popular discourses yet excluded their own experiences of family, romance, and marriage. Certainly, this playful story of affection and passion makes sense given Jadyn’s own burgeoning interest in boys and the larger popular discourse of her peers. Nevertheless, discursive productions of family in this particular case silenced queer relationships and reinforced heteronormative ideas, highlighting one aspect of Jadyn’s life at the expense of another part of her life and the life of her parents.

Narratives of Queer Kinship across Heteronormative, Biological Boundaries

In traditional conceptions of family, biological or legal ties are generally understood to be the foundation of love and connection between family members. In queer families, however, discursively produced connections can create the kind of intimacy between kin that is usually assumed to be part of being biologically related to a child. Therefore, using names, labels, and terms of address to affirm relationships outside of biological, heterosexual notions of family are discursive productions of family
that push against traditional, heteronormative assumptions of kinship. I share two such instances of language use from the Smith-Kendall family.

On my first day visiting her home, Jadyn Smith-Kendall gave me a full tour of her house while we chatted about her and her family. In the basement, there was a large photograph of a group of ten or fifteen people framed but sitting on the floor leaning against the wall. The people were dressed informally, but were posed in several rows all looking at and smiling for the camera. I recognized Johanna, one of Jadyn’s moms, in the photo, but didn’t know anyone else. From the look of Johanna, the style of the photograph, and the clothes the people were wearing, I estimated the picture to be approximately 15 or 20 years old. When I asked Jadyn if she knew the people in the picture, she replied, “Yeah, that’s my mom [Johanna] and that’s my aunt…” and continued to name the different people in her extended family on Johanna’s side. Then she said, “I’m not in the picture because I wasn’t even born yet! In fact, my mom didn’t even know my other mom yet!” (field notes, 2/23/08).

Such a statement revealed a great deal about how Jadyn understood her family and reflected that understanding to others. First of all, it is significant that even though Jayne carried and gave birth to her, she considered Johanna’s extended family to be her extended family. Furthermore, in a sort of origin myth, Jadyn expressed her belief that both her moms had to be together for the family that she knows to come into existence. While there is nothing biologically speaking that would have required Jayne and Johanna to meet in order to physically create Jadyn, her family – as it has been discursively produced around her and as she is now affirming in her own talk – requires the members
of her family as she knows them to be, regardless of biological nuts and bolts. In addition, Jadyn projected herself into this picture of extended family even though she wasn’t a part of it yet. To her, the construction of her family is a narrative with a direction that inevitably assembled her mothers, her sister, and herself. Jadyn ignored heteronormative and biological limitations, and instead understood the existence of her family as predicated on love and connection, therefore requiring both her moms to be partnered together in order to bring their children into the world.

Several months later, in another visit to the Smith-Kendall home, the sense of family that crosses typical heteronormative, biologically-based connections expressed by Jadyn was affirmed by Johanna. On this evening, Jayne, Julia, Jadyn and I had just finished dinner when Johanna arrived home after working late in preparation for an important meeting the next day. Jayne brought her some food, and we all stayed at the table with her, chatting and visiting, while she ate. The girls updated her on their day at school and showed her some of the papers and assignments they had brought home, including professional school pictures they had ordered weeks earlier that had just arrived. These photos were traditionally posed shots of each individual child with options for a variety of digital visual additions. Families could order not just the printed pictures but a variety of items imprinted with the photographs including bookmarks, tags designed to hang on doorknobs, and mugs, among other options. Jadyn was upset that her moms had only ordered the “regular” pictures and not any of these other items. She complained to Johanna that she wanted them because “every other kid” at school would be allowed to purchase them and she would be left out. Johanna ended the conversation
by wrapping Jadyn up in a big hug and saying, “Well, you’re not every other kid. You’re mine!” She gave her a kiss, released her from the embrace, and the conversation turned to other things (field notes, 4/8/08).

Here, Johanna asserted herself as a mother and explicitly claimed Jadyn as her daughter. In spite of the lack of biological or legal adoptive ties between them, Johanna discursively marked Jadyn as connected specifically to her in a way different than “every other kid.” The fact that there are no biological or legal adoptive ties between them had no impact on the ways they understood their kinship ties and responsibilities nor on the ways those relations were discursively produced.

Reading and Writing Kinship in Lesbian-Family Homes

Literacy practices (see Chapter 2) were a significant site of negotiation and interruption of heteronormativity in all five of the families I worked with. Through reading and writing, parents and children asserted their connections to one another and to a larger community of gay families. In this section I detail literacy practices that took place within the space of home and family in ways that defined the family for themselves before I turn to literacy activities that took place within the family unit but in more public spaces, both predominantly queer and predominantly straight in the next section.

Experiences with Inclusive Children’s Literature

All the families mentioned having LGBT-inclusive children’s books in the home either at the time of the study or earlier when the children were younger. For example, Mary and her moms mentioned owning and reading Todd Parr’s The Family Book (2003) and Heather Has Two Mommies (Newman, 1989), although at the time of the study her
moms reported that Mary was less interested in these books than in others she owned. Katherine explained that they used to read The Family Book all the time, but that eventually Mary had seemed to get a little bit tired of it. Katherine, while respecting Mary’s changing tastes, realized that she remained committed to reading the book with her daughter. Katherine recognized her desire to represent lesbian-headed families to her daughter via print. As she said, “Sometimes, I think I wanted to read it more than she did! [I would say to her.] ‘Here, can’t we read this one?!’”

Nevertheless, Mary responded positively to my suggestion that we read this book in our summer book club, even reciting pages of the text she had memorized (field notes, 6/26/08). Interestingly, the words she recited described families in ways that connected directly to her own experiences. She remembered, “Some families eat the same things [and some eat different things],” “Some families look alike” and then “Some families live apart.” In Mary’s family, she and her Eema are vegetarian for religious reasons, but her Mommy and sister eat meat. In addition, her Eema had been managing a work site a few hours from their home. This meant she stayed in that city during the week and came home on the weekends. Finally, Mary remembered, “All families are sad when someone dies.” Mary and Katherine had already told me that they had to put the family dog to sleep (“Give her the sleep shot,” according to Mary) because the dog had been old and sick, and that grief was still very present for Mary. Reading books about diverse
families, including LGBT families, allowed Mary to see many different characteristics of her family represented in texts.\textsuperscript{35}

The McKinley-Robbins family also owned books that were LGBT-inclusive in addition to books about children of color, multiracial families, and adoptive families. At the end of the study Patricia Polacco’s (2009) book \textit{In Our Mothers’ House}, a story about two white lesbian moms and their multiracial family created through adoption, had just been published. Because their daughter Moriah had heard about the book from her teacher and was excited to read it, I gave a copy to their family. Denise and Maelee reported that it quickly became a favorite read-aloud book in their house.

\textit{Creating Books about Families with Lesbian Mothers}

Members of both the Smith-Kendall and Jensen families had created elaborate book-length representations of their families. They read these books together as families within the intimate space of home. These books – baby books and memory books for the Smith-Kendalls and a scrapbook of photos and poems for the Jensens – were texts created by the families, for the families. They represented their own understanding of their kinship relations, complete with language and terms that matched those the family used. These books were always handled gently and carefully by members of both families and reading them together as a family or with visitors was a special event.

Jadyn showed me her baby book after dinner on one of my first visits over to their house. She took great care and delight in seeing the pictures and showing them to me.

\textsuperscript{35} The Jensen family was also deeply committed to having their religious and ethical beliefs reflected in books their children read. While the girls read some books about diverse families and some children’s trade books with popular characters (such as Clifford and Arthur), much of their reading material was Biblically-based.
With the help of her older sister, Julia, she named each person in each picture. Many of those pictured were extended family members, some of whom I’d either met or heard about. Others were women the girls knew by their first names or occasionally as “Aunt” so-and-so; these women were around Jayne and Johanna’s age and looked to be their lesbian friends. The girls also had their own “school memory books” where they could attach photos, write information about themselves, and store different artifacts (the pages doubled as folders) for each grade in school. They liked reading about what they had enjoyed about school at different ages and what activities they used to do. Jadyn’s book had an entry about how she liked making Mother’s Day cards. She read it, then said, remembering, “Oh yeah, I make Mother’s Day cards every year. I always make two! I never make Father’s Day cards.” In this way, her memory book not only served as a place to record and store information, but also a site that could be re-interpreted, re-remembered, and re-narrated at different times with new audiences.

Julia’s baby book featured Winnie the Pooh characters. It was a sort of diary to record memories, milestones, and other information about Johanna’s pregnancy and Julia’s birth and first few years of life. Each time there was a blank line that said “father” or “dad,” someone had crossed it out and written “Mayka,” the name the girls originally called Jayne before it was shortened to MyMy. All the pronouns in the book that referred to fathers had also been changed from masculine to feminine, again to accurately represent this family. By making these linguistic changes, the family intervened in the production of the text in order to make it more accurately reflect their family. Rather than being content to read the text as it had been written, Jayne and Johanna wrote on top
of - and superceded - the heteronormative discourse of family originally presented in the text. In so doing, they “talked back” to the constructions of family that the text assumed. Jayne and Johanna did not only fill in blanks with information, as the genre of a baby book demands, but they also used literacy to actively re-inscribe their own concept of what a family is. They did not answer the original address of the text, but instead answered from their own specific location (Bakhtin, 1986). They “took up” the practices of these memory books in a way that reflected their construction of family while expanding the construction of family originally anticipated by the text (Besnier, 1993; Street, 1984). Through these actions they created a text for their children that reflected their children’s family and taught them the power and possibility of intervening in heteronormative conceptions via literacy.

The homemade book at the Jensen’s was a book of poetry that Linda’s mother made for Mary and Noel that they read at home with their moms on special occasions. This book was a sort of scrapbook filled with pictures and poems that their grandmother composed. There were different pages dedicated to different members of the family, including the extended family, with other poems and pages about other topics such as animals or holidays. Some poems were about the Jensen family, some poems were about Mary in particular, and some poems were about stories that happened to Mary’s grandmother, the author of the poems, during her childhood. The book was an ongoing creation, so as Mary’s grandmother wrote more poems she added them to the book. A few pages had pictures, including pictures of Linda's brother and her father - Mary’s uncle and grandfather - that did not yet have accompanying poems. Linda told me
Mary’s grandmother is currently composing them. The poetry was personal and full of positive emotions. The poems employed the language of the family that they used with themselves and were written from Mary’s perspective, terms like “Mommy” and “Eema.”

The book explicitly and directly celebrated the Jensens as a family. For example, one page included a family photo of both moms and girls when Noel was born. The caption Mary’s grandmother wrote reads, “A Happy Family!” She also labeled each of the people in the photo: Eema, Mommy, Mary, and Noel. Through this book, Mary’s sense of family, including her own definitions of family and her language practices to refer to family members, was taken up, re-presented in writing, and therefore reaffirmed rather than disrupted. Her grandmother had included her nuclear family of mothers and sister along side her extended family (specifically her maternal grandmother, grandfather, and uncle) within the pages of the text. The fact that Linda’s mother was the book’s author demonstrated her support of her daughter’s lesbian-headed family and joined in their disruption of more exclusive, heteronormative senses of kinship.

Homemade books in the Smith-Kendall and Jensen families provided a space where lesbian-headed families in general and these specific families in particular were visible, validated, and affirmed36. Pronouns, terms of address, family photos, and stories of family memories discursively connected these family members to one another.

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36 Children love to read about themselves and their families, so families of all types often have these kinds of memory books that they enjoy reading together. What makes books like this different for the families in this study as compared to many straight families is that these books were some of the few that represented lesbian-headed families in general and the only ones that used family-specific naming practices. They took extra energy to make the heteronormative text match their own lives. Furthermore, books made by extended family members can remind mothers that they have the support of their own family or origin. Given the experiences of lesbian mothers whose parents refuse to acknowledge their partners and threaten to take custody of their children (e.g., Sullivan, 2004; Weston, 1991; Wright, 1998), this support is an experience that would not be taken for granted by many LGBT people.
Families assured they could make such connections even if that meant the physical text had to be altered to better reflect their particular reality. In addition, reading these texts together became important rituals in their own right, actions which further solidified the representations of family within the pages they read. In other words, the books served as commonplace texts (Sumara, 1996), ones that accrued new meanings and strengthened older memories for these families with each reading.

Coming Out While Getting Out - Family Talk and Literacy in Public Contexts

Sometimes speaking, reading, and writing that family members engaged in together took place (or were taken) outside the home, and therefore began to have a public dimension as tools that mediated the family’s image and social positioning in the larger world. Outside of the immediate family and home contexts, family members engaged in a range of actions and rituals involving spoken and written language in a variety of community spaces. Such public language therefore served to reaffirm and make visible these families’ non-heteronormative status for themselves, for others within the LGBT community, and occasionally for the public at large.

Literacy Practices in Predominately Queer Public Events

Some public literacy practices took place within community spaces that were predominately queer. Here, I describe those contexts and the practices of written language that the children and parents made use of within them.

Rainbow Families and Gay Pride
Four of the five families are active in a social group for LGBT-headed families called Rainbow Families37 organized through the Stonewall Community Center. This group, where I first met many of the participants, supports an active email list-serve through which parents regularly communicate with one another and share parenting frustrations and suggestions. The list-serve also advertises the group’s monthly in-person social gatherings for parents and children to meet, mingle, and have fun together. Every year the group also sponsors an entry in the city’s annual Gay Pride celebration. The most highly anticipated LGBT ritual of the year, Gay Pride celebrations are held in cities all around the world, usually during the beginning of the summer, as a way to commemorate the 1969 Stonewall Riots in New York City where patrons of a gay bar fought back against arrests, harassment, and police brutality. In the city where the families lived, the festivities involved a parade as well as dances, sporting events, fundraisers, religious ceremonies, and a festival with food, music, and displays from local LGBT-related organizations and businesses. In recent years the organizers also added a children’s play area where many of my participating families spent much of their afternoon.

When families from Rainbow Families participated in Gay Pride, which most did provided the day fit with their summer activities schedule, they usually marched in the parade and then enjoyed the festival. “Marching” consisted of riding in the group van, riding a bike or hot wheels toy, being pushed in a stroller or pulled in a wagon, or occasionally, actually walking. Marching families employed a variety of literacy

37 This is a pseudonym.
practices and other semiotic signals to show that they were a) families and b) connected to the LGBT community. For example, family members often wore rainbow clothing (sometimes even in matching outfits) in addition to buttons, stickers, “temporary tattoos,” or other markers expressing pro-gay and pro-gay-equality sentiments. Families also carried and displayed homemade signs and banners advertising their status as gay parents or children of gay parents and expressing love for their families (see Figure 4). In these ways, literacy was an important tool not only to define their families, but also to assert the queerness of those families and connect that queerness to other LGBT people and issues at Pride. In other words, their use of literacy practices in this setting made them visible as families and as queer families.

Legislative Advocacy at Lobby Day

Other uses of literacy to increase visibility of queer families and their concerns involved the state government Lobby Day for LGBT rights, which is hosted annually by a nonprofit LGBT advocacy group. During this event, participants listened to speakers, shared successful advocacy ideas, and met with their local legislators to discuss and advocate for upcoming legislation. Both the Powell family and the Winston family participated regularly in this event. During the time of the study, I attended Lobby day with Suzy Powell, her daughter Isabella, Sally Winston, and her youngest daughter, Lila. At the beginning of the event, speakers passed out a wide variety of information and statistics about the proposed legislation that participants would be discussing with their legislators. Other volunteers passed out surveys that asked participants for information about themselves, their families, and their experiences as LGBT people that they could
use in their future lobbying for equal rights. Suzy and Isabella talked together about some of these tasks and worked together to fill out the surveys. Isabella was also interested in the buttons the sponsor of the event handed out to participants. The buttons said “It’s Time!,” referring to the need for the proposed equal rights legislation, and advertised a website that provided more information about the anticipated law. The buttons also displayed the logo of the group, three equal signs to symbolize equality for LGBT people. Isabella collected as many extra buttons as she could find to give out to the children in her class when she returned to school the next day. She also wanted to be sure I had one for myself and one to take home to my partner.

At Lobby Day, Isabella and Suzy participated in reading and writing activities as a family in a predominantly queer public forum. In this setting, written language was used as a tool for both literal and figurative visibility (the buttons and the collected survey information, respectively). The buttons helped to mark the participants as supporters of a law that would provide equal rights to LGBT people in the areas of employment and housing. The surveys provided an opportunity to make the experiences of LGBT people (and, in Suzy and Isabella’s case, LGBT-headed families), available to legislators who may not know LGBT people personally and who may not be familiar with the legal discrimination and difficulties LGBT people and families face. Through attendance at Lobby Day, Isabella and her mother participated in uses of literacy to advocate for themselves and their family. These experiences even inspired Isabella to write about issues of LGBT rights for several classroom assignments immediately following her participation in Lobby Day (see Chapter 5).
Family Equality Council Activities

The Jensen family also participated in activities where literacy was used explicitly for advocacy in predominantly queer public contexts. During the initial months of this study, a national non-profit organization supporting LGBT-headed families, the Family Equality Council (FEC), sponsored a “Family Poetry Contest.” They asked individuals and families to submit poems that addressed the theme “Love is…” The organization collected the submissions and created a book that they published online. The book, entitled *Heartsongs: A Collection of Poetry Written by LGBTQA [Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning, Ally] Families*, was envisioned as a tool that could be used to speak back to restrictive, heteronormative ideals of family. As the opening letter from FEC’s Executive Director reads:

> We hope that you enjoy "Heartsongs" and that you spread its message far and wide. This book can be used as a tool to talk about our families to friends, teachers, neighbors and family members. Share it with the people who impact your life. It is through the collective impact of these simple, small actions that we accomplish great change. (Family Equality Council, nd, p. 2)

The organization, then, suggests that writing these poems and sharing them with others will create change for LGBT-headed families. As has been true in other groups’ fights for civil rights, literacy here is seen as an opportunity for advocacy that can be used to influence others.

The letter from the director also states:
Poetry is a powerful vehicle for communicating truth. These poems, as you will discover, convey an important truth about our families. That truth, and the heartsong of this collection, is this: though our families are unique in many ways, our differences pale in comparison to that which we share in common with all families - our families are built on love. (Family Equality Council, nd, p. 2)

In this formulation, encapsulating LGBT-headed families’ experiences in poetry will demonstrate the ways that love is central to these families’ experiences. This central emotion of love, they argue, is not unique to these families, but is actually the same, universal love common to all families. The letter suggests LGBT families may have “differences” and be “unique,” but those features are much less significant than what is the same. The book of poems, then, makes the idea of family more inclusive by demonstrating how much LGBT-headed families have in common with all families; they’re not different, scary, or inferior to other formations of kinship. In other words, the concept of family doesn’t have to change much to incorporate those with LGBT parent(s); a family with LGBT parents is essentially the same as other families, and that sameness is expressed in the poems. In giving voice to the realities of their families and expressing their experiences in poetry, the argument suggests, readers will be convinced of the common humanity of these families and will in turn extend friendship, support, or even equal legal and civil rights.
The Jensen family’s submission, which they worked on together, also emphasizes the balance of difference and similarity that the collection’s opening letter suggests. Their untitled poem reads:

Love comes in different sizes, shapes and colors.

Love comes from God.

Lots of different people have it:

Like two moms,
Like two dads,

Like my family, of course!

*By Mary, Noel, Katherine and Linda* (Family Equality Council, p. 8)

In this poem, the Jensen family referenced their religious beliefs in addition to mentioning the possibility of families having two moms or two dads. It is important to note that the language of “two moms” and “two dads” (rather than “lesbian” and “gay”) is language that the Jensens use regularly in their house. The poem began by focusing on diversity inherent in families, but then consolidated that diversity as all coming from a solitary God, in keeping with their Adventist tradition. By listing different family formations – “two moms,” “two dads,” and “my family” – as some of the families that have love, they not only explicitly referred to the love of LGBT-headed families, but they also included their own, specific family as one full of love. The composition they created as a family and shared with a larger public allowed them to frame their experience of family for themselves, uniting the queer and religious components of their lives, and
affirming the love they share, all while adding their voices to a larger, community effort of advocacy.

Literacy became an important component of and tool for advocacy within these families’ experiences in public, predominantly queer contexts. Whether families’ signs and stickers at Pride, the Powell’s survey work at Lobby Day, or the Jensen’s poetry submission, children from lesbian-headed households in this study observed the use of and participated in literacy practices in predominantly queer contexts that reflected and affirmed their queer family. These opportunities to participate in queer-affirmative literacy activities with their mother(s) demonstrated literacy’s potential as a resource to make their families visible, communicate pride, advocate for themselves, and combat the heteronormativity of others.

_Negotiating Language and Labeling in Primarily Straight Community Settings_

In these examples, families participated in activities with other LGBT families or within the larger LGBT community. At other times, however, families participated in activities where they were one of the only (if not literally the only) LGBT family present. In these wider, primarily straight community contexts, families found and made ways to express the particulars of their families through language and literacy, but much less directly and much more cautiously than in queer-friendly situations. The explicitness of these connections varied depending on the context and the amount of safety assumed within that activity.

One particularly interesting family experience within a wider community context was when the Smith-Kendall family took their goats to show at the local fair. The
tradition of the fair, whose slogan is “The Biggest Little Fair in the World,” began 153 years ago as an activity sponsored by an independent agricultural society with directors from three surrounding counties. Activities included a wide range of livestock, horse, and other animal showings; a Junior Fair in cooperation with youth in local 4-H chapters; arts and crafts exhibits and competitions; farm machinery displays; motorcross racing, bus demolition, and tractor pulls; nature workshops; cooking contests; rides; concerts; and vendor booths.

The fair seemed to cater to a particular population. For example, attendees at the fair were almost all white, and many talked about being from the various small, rural communities within an hour or so of the fairgrounds. There was a vendor that sold t-shirts and other merchandise emblazoned with the “Stars and Bars” symbol of the Confederacy. The fair was held just a few months before a presidential election, and while there were numerous volunteers from the Republican candidate’s campaign giving out signs and stickers and literature, there were no visible signs of the Democratic candidate, an African-American man\(^\text{38}\). The Smith-Kendalls did not know of any other LGBT families at the fair, and I didn’t notice any same-sex couples during my observations.

Family networks were central to people at the fair, especially those involved in the animal exhibitions. These kin groups were almost always multigenerational and, based on the language and labels I heard around me, frequently involved extended families of aunts, uncles, and cousins. I did not observe anyone there alone. Those at the

\(^{38}\) I had a button supporting the Democratic candidate on the bag I carried with me, and I removed it for the day, feeling as if it might draw undesired negative attention to me and the family I would be with.
fair relied on each other to get all the information they needed and the many required animal-care tasks completed. This interdependence translated to the use of plural language and pronouns. For example, I overheard one woman say to someone near her, as they walked between two different barns, “We’re doing horses, too, so if you don’t see any McClains, come get us for goats” (field notes, 9/16/08). Her language here reveals the way membership in kinship groups helped structure the experience of being at the fair.

This presence of family was true for the Smith-Kendalls as well. Jayne, as a native of the area where she and her family currently live, had been involved with the fair for most of her life. Her parents also have a farm where Jayne’s nephew worked. He, Jadyn, and Julia were each showing goats from their family farms in their respective age categories. Jayne’s parents also attended the fair the day I attended. Although Johanna grew up in a city and was not familiar with farming, she had embraced farming and the goats as part of their family life and, according to Jayne, she got more and more comfortable and involved in the activities each year. The day I accompanied the Smith-Kendalls to the fair, Johanna’s parents also attended. The girls’ four grandparents sat together in the bleachers and talked while Jayne, Johanna, Julia, and Jadyn prepared their animals for the show ring. The family operated comfortably in this heteronormative environment, with all family members even using the terms they use for each other (i.e., MyMy) frequently and easily. For example, at one point Jayne’s mother (“Mawmaw”) turned to Jadyn and said, “Jadyn, go find Mommy and MyMy and tell them the camera battery is going dead” (field notes, 9/16/08).
Nevertheless, this wasn’t a space that all members of the family occupied in equally comfortable ways. While Jayne’s generations of family connections and years of agricultural experience gave her some confidence and privilege in navigating the fair, Johanna’s relative newcomer status made her more cautious about her actions and her words. Although Johanna referred to Jayne as MyMy when with the girls, in interactions with strangers her language became indirect. At one point, while the girls and their moms were working at different tasks in the goat pens, another participant came up and asked Johanna a question about the procedures and schedules for an upcoming goat showing. Johanna’s reaction, after a brief hesitation, was to say, “Jayne will know,” as she gestured down a row of stalls in Jayne’s direction. When the person followed up with another question, Johanna responded, “I don’t know. It’s our first year [showing in the fair].” With this answer, Johanna used the plural pronoun “our” to speak about how the family was participating in the activity together, but she also used Jayne’s first name with this stranger instead of labeling their relationship in any way. This was in contrast to Jayne’s language use. Jayne, when approached by another person a few minutes later, introduced the members of her family, saying, “This is my partner, Johanna” (field notes, 9/16/08). Although this person was an old acquaintance and not a total stranger, Jayne’s language was still much more direct than Johanna’s, naming their committed, romantic relationship in a specific way. In this case, language was used by an adult in the family to explicitly label non-heterosexual family relationships even when the family was participating in larger community events.
Mary Jensen also used language and literacy to name her queer family members in direct and explicit ways when participating in activities in primarily straight communities. The summer before this project, Mary went with the Jensen’s good family friends, another lesbian mom and her young children, on a trip to a nearby bookstore. The back of this store is dedicated to children’s books and had many tables and chairs for children to sit in and read. Workshops and demonstrations of kid-friendly activities are also held in this space. On the day Mary visited the store, employees invited children to make cards for their dads for Father’s Day. The cards were Xeroxed pieces of white paper with an outline of a necktie in the middle. Around the top edges of the paper were the words “Happy Father’s Day.” Mary decorated one of the cards not for her father (because she does not have one) but for the sperm donor that helped her moms get pregnant. When she was done decorating the necktie, her moms’ friend added the words “Donor DAD!” to the side of the card (see Figure 5) at Mary’s request. In this way, Mary was able to participate in the activity presented, but in such a way that the “symbolic material of kinship” Weston (1991) references was redeployed to better represent her family. The term “Donor Dad” is how the Jensen’s commonly refer to the girls’ donor (field notes, 3/11/08), so the language was accurate for their kinship arrangements. In having “Donor DAD!” added to the card, Mary used literacy to make a statement about her family and give name and cultural recognition to a different type of father figure than the normative expectation, even when participating in an activity beyond the bounds of her home and immediate family.

39 Katherine and Linda referred to these people as friends or family friends, but Mary occasionally referred to them as “chosen family.”
In both these situations, members from lesbian-headed families made choices about how to represent themselves and their family members through language and literacy in public, predominantly straight community settings in order to communicate effectively about their families with others in ways they were comfortable expressing themselves. Johanna, as a relative newcomer to the context of the fair, chose language that would not directly reveal her lesbian relationship, whereas Jayne, who has spent several decades attending the fair, chose to be more explicit. Similarly, Mary, while conscious of her and her family’s vulnerability in certain heteronormative communities (see Chapter 6), still chose to adjust the standard written text of the Father’s Day card to better represent her own family. While she chose to intervene in the normative definitions provided by the activity in this way, she only did so with the help of a “chosen family” member who she knew well from more family-oriented contexts. Having access to this supportive adult gave her the resources she needed to assert her own definitions of fatherhood even when in a public, predominantly straight setting. In both cases, language and literacy are used in context-dependent ways that may assert queer kinship, but always with an eye to safety provided by familiarity with the context and/or the presence of others who will be supportive.

Negotiating Language and Labeling in Religious Settings

Decisions about if and how to represent family members in spoken and written language occurred frequently among my participating families at church meetings, services, and other worship activities. For example, when Mary was in preschool, the Jensens attended a church event where children made cut-out paper doll representations
of their family, complete with written descriptions of each member (see Figure 6).

Mary’s project links four different figures together: Mommy, Noel, Mary, and Eema.

The labels say:

Mommy: My Mommy takes care of me. Her favorite color is red. She loves me. She likes to sing.

Noel: Noel is my baby sister. She likes her food. She likes to play with me.

Mary: Mary likes God. She loves all the people. She loves all the creatures. Her favorite color is pink. She likes to go to the swimming pool.

Eema: My Eema fixes things. She loves to scuba dive. She likes to play lion with me.

In this religious- and family-based literacy practice, Mary named and described her family from her own perspective, using the language and labels for her mothers that she uses at home. She seamlessly mixed descriptions of her two mothers with references to God, love, play, and comfort. Together, these people and characteristics constitute Mary’s own vision of her family. Such descriptions demonstrate how having two moms is significant but, as with the discursive connections to other identities described above, never the sum total of a child’s understanding of family. The mothers are real and significant, but they are contextualized in a world of emotions and activities and beliefs that also shape the family. The family’s participation in a community activity involving a
particular kind of literacy practice is the vehicle that made these complex understandings public and visible to others.

Isabella and Ethan Davis also had the chance to reflect their own understandings of their family by making two Mothers’ Day Cards for their two moms at their church’s Sunday school. One card was for Suzy and one was for their stepmom CeCe who was previously Suzy’s partner. Each said, “My moms are blessings.” Therefore, not only did Isabella and Ethan have the opportunity to make two cards for their two moms while at their church, but they also used the plural “moms” on each card, again using written language to publically reference the fact that there are two mothers in their family.

The McKinney-Robbins family attended the same church as Suzy and her children. It was known for being open and affirming to diverse families, including LGBT-headed families, but even there the McKinney-Robbins family occasionally encountered conflict when they tried to be sure their family was fully and accurately represented, especially in terms of racial differences. One such scenario occurred around the church’s annual Christmas play. Another family with lesbian moms had volunteered to direct a play for children from the congregation to participate in for several years in a row. These women would find and purchase the script of a musical each year and then teach that to children in rehearsals in the weeks leading up to Christmas. The year of this study the play was about Treasure; citizens around Bethlehem hear about a “treasure” and want to find it, so they think about what they will buy with the treasure if they find it. In the end the “treasure” turns out to be the spiritual treasure of Jesus rather than a monetary reward. Denise and Maelee were satisfied with the message of the play, but they were
concerned about what they felt were racial and ethnic stereotypes that were being perpetuated through several of the play’s characters.

As Denise explained, her first “warning” had been the opening lines of the play. A female angel character was supposed to say the lines in a ditzy, giggly way. According to Denise, the character said something like, “Everyone calls me giggles, but I just don’t know why” in a hyperfeminized tone complete with giggles. Denise didn’t like the “message” that sent about women and asked me “Where’s our [church’s] feminist teaching?!” (field notes 12/14/08). Beyond that, there were two characters called Heckle and Shekel who were two of “Herrod’s Henchmen” from the play. Denise was uncomfortable with the implied anti-Semitism of using the name “shekel” for a negative character, but she also remembered two black, talking crows from old cartoons that she recalled being negative stereotypes of black people and she was alert to the history of racialized interpretations of such foolish characters.

Finally, the characters of the three Magi of the Christmas story were portrayed in the play as Rastafarians. The McKinney-Robbins children and two other African-American/biracial siblings adopted by white parents were the only children of color in the play. The Magi characters were set to be played by white children with dreadlock wigs, which was Maelee’s main concern about the whole play and Denise’s breaking point given the other concerns she had. They had a long talk about their concerns with the women directing the play. Maelee and Denise suggested alternative ways to portray the characters, and eventually they worked with the other women to change specific lines of dialogue in addition to the overall concept of the Rastafarian characters. The song the
Magi characters sang was still performed, complete with the reggae beat, but without the overt Rastafarian references leading up to it. The end result was a song that seemed to be more generically jazzy, and therefore less specifically Caribbean and less specifically racialized.

In this literacy event of reading, studying, practicing, and performing a play, Denise and Maelee were concerned about the social messages that would be communicated to their church community that were not in keeping with their congregation’s beliefs (As Denise said to me, “Where are our [church’s] feminist teachings?!”). Further, they were concerned about the positioning of their own children, as children of color, in a production that was going to perpetuate negative racial and ethnic stereotypes. Given these concerns, they intervened in the established text, literally rewriting the script in order to change its attached social messages. Although the women working on the play were also lesbian mothers, their family was not ethnically and racially diverse as the McKinney-Robbins family was. Perhaps it was this form of family privilege that kept them from sharing the same concerns as Denise and Maelee. In any event, Denise and Maelee stood up for what they felt were the values of their church and for the needs of their children. They did not forbid their children from participating, nor did they boycott the event. Instead, they used their literacy skills to re-craft components they found to be problematic, educated the women directing the play about the issues that concerned them, and created a new text that their children helped perform.

Similar rewriting in religious contexts occurred in the Winston family. Although Sally was raised Catholic, she no longer identifies as Christian. Nevertheless, her
daughter Mallory started attending a Presbyterian church with friends one evening a week just before the time of the study. Although Sally had some reservations about her daughter’s exposure to this religion, Mallory enjoyed it and got “free babysitting and a meal” (field notes, 2/27/08) while Sally got to spend time alone with her younger daughter, Lila. At the first church meeting Mallory attended, the teachers asked the kids to make family trees. Sally recounted how she had to change the form that was sent home so Mallory could say that she had two moms. Sally also had to make room on the form for Mallory to explain how “her one mom and her grandpa were from China and her other mom and Grandmas were from Scotland and Kentucky.” Sally remembered being a little worried because Mallory had to get up and talk about her tree, but Sally says it seemed like she did it with no trouble.

Summary – Naming, Reading, Writing, Speaking Families at Home and in Communities

Because of historic and heteronormative expectations of kinship, LGBT families are not always readily visible or honored as family units. Part of acting as a family, however, is using the language of family. The participating families in this study all used language to speak, read, and write about themselves specifically as families within their homes and within the wider community. Although they drew on traditional terminology and practices, families reassigned these labels to encompass the realities of queer kinship structures. Their families were made up of traditional biological and adoptive ties, but also ties to mothers’ (ex)partners, extended family, chosen family, and other types of relationships such as “tummy moms” or “donor dads.” Terms of address for these family members and children’s last names could not be taken for granted; each individual family
developed or chose their own. The use of these labels reinforced familial connections, even those that crossed biological or racial lines. Taken together, the language used by family members both created and reinforced the kinship ties they experienced; their oral language and literacy practices were discursive performances of family that drew on some traditional concepts of kinship but expanded, eluded, and pushed against them to incorporate non-heterosexual family structures.

Both written language and spoken language could create and reinforce families, Families read books with their children that reflected diverse family structures. Sometimes those books were commercial children’s literature. Other times they were texts created by the families themselves. Creating such texts sometimes involved actively rewriting portions of other texts, including adjusting pronouns and other family labels to better reflect lesbian-headed households. In other cases it meant producing texts that reflected these families as families in direct and affirming ways.

Participating in language and literacy practices as a family unit was not always confined to the space of the home. Families frequently employed specific forms of written and spoken language while in other community settings, both predominantly queer and predominantly straight, to represent themselves as family, and sometimes specifically as a family with lesbian mothers. Because these spoken and written texts had a life outside of the family unit, they helped to mediate or shape the families’ visibility in a particular context. In queer spaces, these experiences with literacy were meant to create visibility and be tools of advocacy, such as signs at the Gay Pride parade, badges and surveys at Lobby Day, or the book of family poetry sent to legislators around the country.
Other times, when settings were not necessarily welcoming of LGBT-headed families, participants chose whether or not their language and literacy would make them visible as members of the LGBT community. The relative amount of comfort and safety they felt in these settings influenced these choices. Some participants remained committed to reflecting the values and the make up of their family accurately (such as when Denise and Maelee rewrote the script for the church play, Mary added “Donor DAD!” to her card, or Isabella and Ethan made cards that read “My moms are blessings”), while others valued the flexibility that language allowed for keeping some family information private (such as Johanna’s answer to questions asked of her at the fair).

In every case, these lesbian-headed families made conscious and unconscious choices about the multiple ways they represented themselves as kin through spoken and written language. The language and literacy practices these families participated in together as a family unit shaped the ways of talking and thinking about families that the children in these families experienced. Specifically, they demonstrated that language and literacy could be used to accurately reflect the queer aspects of families and communicate those realities to others. They showed that written and spoken language could be tools for expressing love, connection, and pride within the family, within the queer community, and to the larger world. In the next section, I explore the talking, reading, and writing about families that children from these families were asked to participate in after they moved out of their immediate families and into schools and classrooms that assume traditional heteronormative constructions of kinship.
Chapter 5 - Mapping the Home-School Divide Faced by Children of Lesbian Mothers

On my first day as a visitor at Julia and Jadyn Smith-Kendall’s liberal, religiously-affiliated Montessori school\textsuperscript{40}, I went to the bathroom to wash my hands before lunch. This was a regular routine during the school day, so other students were in the bathroom washing their hands as well. When I entered, several girls including students from Julia and Jadyn’s class and an older female student were talking. I heard the older student say to one of the other girls “Sounds like she has a crush on you” in a calm, matter-of-fact way. The younger girl who received this message did not act so calm. She said to her friend, in a mixture of shock, confusion, and worry, “Someone has a crush on me…and it’s a girl!” She repeats this same statement to several of the other students around her, putting a deep, dramatic emphasis on the word “girl.” (field notes, 4/21/08)

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Jonathan McKinney-Robbins is looking through his book boxes for books to read. It is silent reading time in his first grade classroom at this diverse, urban, public school, and he knows he needs to pick out a few books from these leveled reader sets and then settle down on the carpet. He selects a book called \textit{My Family} from the classroom’s leveled reading series and reads the following text: This is my father. / This is my mother.

\textsuperscript{40}I am not able to provide more information about this school without compromising participants’ confidentiality.
Ethan Davis developed a bad skin rash towards the end of his fifth grade year that involved several doctor’s appointments to ensure it was healing. Since Ethan’s father, mother, and stepmother (his mother’s ex-partner) all worked during the day, the doctor’s visits had to be compatible with their schedules, which sometimes required Ethan to be picked up from school before the official dismissal. On Friday, the day of his first appointment, the secretary in the school’s main office used the intercom to buzz into his classroom and announced that Ethan needed to pack up his things and come down to the office because “his mother is here to take him to the doctor.” I walked with Ethan down to the office, where his mother Suzy was waiting for him. Suzy told me she was taking him to this appointment and her ex, Ethan’s stepmother, would take him to the next one. On Monday, Ethan and I were again in his classroom when the intercom buzzed into the room. “Ms. Burns?” the secretary in the office asked. “Yes?” Ethan’s teacher called out. The voice over the intercom simply said, “Please let Ethan know his ride is here.” (field notes, 5/16/08 and 5/19/08).

Whether through peer talk as in the first anecdote, curricular messages as in the second anecdote, or the silences of teachers and administrators as demonstrated in the third, children from all types of families get the clear and constant message that heterosexuality is the normal, preferred, and perhaps even the only option around which
to organize one’s own feelings and family. This type of denigration and silence around queer issues and relationships was completely common in the elementary schools and classrooms that the children with lesbian mothers in this study attended. Although their various schools were wildly diverse in terms of district, structure, geographic location, and educational philosophy, heteronormativity reigned in every setting. This was true even though all the families I worked with were open and public about their family make up, and even though some teachers and some students made occasional efforts to insert queer issues into the school day. Children from lesbian-headed families reacted to this silence in a wide variety of ways, frequently using the particular features of the specific situational context to guide their responses. Sometimes they interrupted the silence, other times they chose to respond in heteronormative ways themselves, while still other times they spoke only indirectly in truthful but guarded and cautious ways. Together, the data demonstrate how these children actively made strategic use of language and literacy to position themselves socially in desirable ways within their classrooms.

Outline of the Chapter

In this chapter I argue that children, including children from lesbian-headed families, encounter heteronormative messages in their daily experiences in elementary schools. I explore the ways that heteronormativity was communicated and encouraged within these schools and the range of responses that children from lesbian-headed families had to those messages. I begin by tracing the circulation of heteronormative messages, communicated orally and in writing, that set the stage for the educational experiences of the children in my study. First, I detail some of the heteronormative
messages expressed by students in peer talk, contradicting the myth that children at these ages do not know about or communicate with one another about (homo)sexuality. Next, I look at the presence of heteronormativity in a variety of curricular materials. Then, I share some instances of heteronormativity as conveyed by teachers and other adults at schools. Finally, I analyze the various ways the children in this study talked, read, and wrote in schools given these exclusionary messages. I suggest that while the specific features of their responses varied, overall they recognized differences between their families and others, and used language and literacy in sophisticated and strategic ways to share information about their families on their own terms. Sometimes this involved taking on a queer perspective and disrupting heteronormativity through talk about their lesbian moms and their involvement in the queer community. Sometimes it involved rejecting this queer perspective by representing their families as normative, actively supporting the heteronormative assumptions of those around them, or making heteronormative claims themselves. Yet, in several instances the messages children communicated through their language and literacy choices were more subtle, involving an intricate calculus of the situation at hand. In these situations, children did not misrepresent their families but downplayed or “covered” (Yoshino, 2006) the perceived stigma of their queerness, using less explicit, more ambiguous language and drawing attention to their similarities with others. I argue that these strategies, overtly supporting neither a queer nor a heteronormative subjectivity, created a sort of balance or middle ground for children that allowed them to refer obliquely to their families in ways that felt safe while still participating with their peers in the activities at hand.
Heteronormative Messages in Elementary Schools

While certain right wing think-tanks and media figures may argue otherwise, data from this study demonstrate that ideas about sexuality are not brought into schools by LGBT people or families but are already present, even in elementary schools. While many think of sexuality as an identity that is or should be kept private, and therefore out of public places like schools, Weston (1991) argues that “Because sexuality brings people into relationship, its implications can never be contained within the parameters of [individual] identity or some ideally privatized sphere” (p. 68). Like other social identity categories such as race, class, and gender, sexuality is a common, constitutive organizing principle upon which curriculum and education are built. And, as with other types of identities, it is the normative experiences, the privileged part(s) of the binaries, the categories of greater social privilege – namely white, straight, male, middle class perspectives – that are most common, most visible, and most valued in schools.

Student and Peer Talk

As we saw with queer notions in Chapter 4, heteronormative notions are also discursively produced. In the case of school they are often discursively produced by children themselves. Practices as common as calling a teacher “Mrs.,” talking about visiting your grandmother and grandfather, and reading a fairy tale such as Snow White or Sleeping Beauty are not simply neutral acts, but linguistic moves that index and reinforce heteronormative families and relationships. In these moments, as well as in whispered peer talk, “off-task” chatter, playground jokes, and imaginary dramatic play, heteronormative messages circulate widely among children in elementary schools.
Below, I present a few instances of student talk that referenced and supported heteronormativity that I observed during my fieldwork.

“You May Kiss the Bride”

Mary Jensen attended a diverse, public school located within her suburban neighborhood for the first few months of her second grade year. Her teacher at that school was Oliver Jackson, a young African-American man in his fourth year of teaching. In spite of Mr. Jackson’s efforts, the classroom was dominated by the students, especially a (certain) small group of boys. These students ignored Mr. Jackson’s incentives and his scoldings, sometimes following directions for a bit after receiving his attention, but quickly going back to entertaining their peers. Darius was the student at the heart of much of this peer interaction. One morning before lunch, the students were working independently at their seats while Mr. Jackson worked with individual students at the back of the room. Students sat in rows facing the board, alternating seats by gender—girl, boy, girl, boy. I watched as Darius approached two students. First, he cupped his palms around the heads of one boy and one girl who were sitting next to each other. Darius pushed their heads toward each other several times saying, “You may kiss the bride!” Then, he turned to another pair, Mary and the male student she was sitting next to. Again, he repeated moving their heads toward each other and announcing, “You may kiss the bride!”

Other boys picked up this game, copying Darius and involving other students. One boy, Tyler, increased the humor and social risk of the game by directing two boys sitting behind each other in two different rows to kiss by moving their heads together in
the same way. Tyler was clear about the forbidden and disparaging meanings of this new twist. He said to the two boys, “You want to know what it means?” After a pause, he answered, emphatically, “You don’t want to know!” Intrigued at this description, I asked him, in as friendly and unthreatening a way as I could, to elaborate. Initially, he simply repeated his warning, “You don’t want to know!” I assured him I did, actually, want to know, so he finally leaned in toward my ear and whispered, conspiratorially, “Gay wad!41” Later, Tyler told some male students, “Say ‘I want to marry _____’” at which point he would add different students’ names in the blank for them to repeat. The first two times he listed two girl’s names for the boys to say, but the third time he said Darius’ name. Darius, immediately disgusted, responded, “Ugh! That’s so gay!”

In these games, jokes, and conversations, Mary’s (male) peers constructed and supported a very specific form of sexuality — the attractions, behaviors, and religious rituals of heterosexuality. The students clearly knew the actions and scripts that accompanied this social norm. For example, Darius’ play indexing these rituals was so popular that others noticed and were able to join in easily. Heterosexuality, in these instances, was constructed directly in opposition to homosexuality or any same-sex attraction. While the heterosexual references earned Darius and Tyler laughter and peer admiration, same-sex romance was constructed as forbidden, unspeakable, undesirable, and worthy of derision. In both cases, male students demonstrated power over their classmates, physically and verbally controlling the pretend romance and demonstrations.

41 I followed up and asked Tyler, “What does that mean?” Suddenly, all his playfulness and bravado disappeared. He responded, honestly, “I don’t really know,” before shrugging and walking away. For Tyler, power was a result of the policing role of maintaining heterosexuality as a norm and homosexuality as taboo, not in the actual content of the slur which he didn’t even really understand.
of physical attraction in which their male- and female-identified peers must engage.

Darius himself posed the only objection to being a part of these games -through his expression of disgust and the derogatory slur\textsuperscript{42}, “That’s so gay!” - as a way to protest his verbally-constructed connection to a male student in a romantic sense. In these ways, Mary’s classmates exerted the power of heterosexual male privilege through their language and behavior to create heterosexual romance scenarios as funny and homosexual romance scenarios as unspeakable and a way to defame others. And all this happened during instructional time in a second grade classroom while a child with lesbian mothers was present.

\textit{Constructing Families in Play}

In Julia and Jadyn Smith-Kendall’s liberal, religiously-affiliated Montessori school, students had many opportunities for extended student-directed work time. While students were generally focused on their tasks, occasional discussions with peers were not discouraged. One of those discussions occurred when a group of girls were writing their own stories for a language arts assignment. Sarah dedicated the story she was writing to “mom…because it’s almost mother’s day.” April then dedicated hers to “mommy and daddy.” After discussing these familial dedications, the girls’ attention turned to a set of oddly shaped erasers sitting on the table between them. Using the erasers as characters, they proceeded to create a whole romance narrative that focused on the formation of families. One of the girls created a male character and said, “I’m everyone’s girlfriend.” Their various erasers then decided to “marry” and “kiss.” After

\textsuperscript{42} Technically of course, while Darius’ comment was said as a slur, complete with an initial expression of disgust, he was accurate in that two men marrying could be described as gay!
the eraser kissed, one of the girls confirmed, “There, we’re married!” They did this twice, meaning that there were two different wives for the male eraser character. The girls didn’t seem to like this situation, and they agreed that one of those characters should be changed to become a daughter, maintaining the characters’ gender and completing the normative kinship arrangement.

Sometimes students played these narratives of heterosexual love and romance out in real life with themselves as the characters. Sometimes they still took the form of imaginary play. For example, several boys and girls in this class, including both Julia and Jadyn, devised an elaborate game of “house” that they played while they worked, got ready for lunch, and got ready to go home for the day. In this game, students took on roles of mother, father, children, and an uncle. Male students took on male roles, female students took on female roles, and family formations followed traditional heteronormative patterns. Often these portrayals followed traditional stereotypes. For example, when one of the girls playing the role of a child was messing around, a boy who was playing the role of “daddy” said he was going to “have a quality talk with her” in an authoritarian, paternal tone.

Other times, students positioned themselves in similar narratives. Once, a student named Alexandra ran over to Nick – a boy in the class marginalized because of his behavior and his weak academic abilities – and announced to him, “Harper loves you! She does!” Harper was standing right behind Alexandra at the time and didn’t look upset.

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43 The similarities between this story and the narrative Jadyn performed at her house for me and her family (see Chapter 4) are strong. While the data don’t suggest which context is the definite source of these stories, such heteronormative romance tales clearly travel back and forth between Jadyn’s home and school lives.
that this information had been shared. Alexandra then acted out kissing and hugging Harper in front of Nick. Harper laughed. Alexandra, still excited about being able to share this news, told another child, Annmarie, who was doing her class work nearby. At that point Harper told Annmarie that Alexandra’s gossip was not true and the two girls made Annmarie publicly announce which one of them she believed. The next day, the rumor about Harper and Nick seemed to have been forgotten, but several boys and girls continued these themes of romance and families.

In these scenarios, like in Mary’s classroom, children were intimately familiar with the heterosexual labels, roles, and relationships of wider society. Mothers, fathers, boyfriends, and girlfriends were the natural and expected characters that populated their imaginary play. When the characters were somehow out of the expected balance, such as in the eraser story when a male character ended up with two wives, children quickly stepped in and rearranged the details to create a more acceptable combination. Opposite-sex attraction was interesting in that it gave the teller some social power or prestige, but the fact that a girl or boy would have romantic feelings for a peer of the opposite sex was nothing remarkable. Unlike Mary’s classroom, however, these arrangements were not defined against any explicitly named homosexual other. Instead, there were not even any other alternatives presented, there was just heteronormativity presented as common sense and then silence.

*The Super Hot Vampire Loving Club*

One day, when I arrived at Ethan Davis’ predominantly white, public, suburban classroom, I saw nearly every girl in his class wearing paper buttons that read “SHVLC.”
When I asked what the abbreviation was for, the girls told me it stood for Super Hot Vampire Loving Club. It turned out that the girls had planned, via email and talking after school, that this day would be declared Team Edward Day in honor of Edward, the male vampire hero of Stephenie Myers’s Twilight saga (e.g., Myers, 2005). The buttons, in addition to the stickers, pictures, self-decorated or stenciled shirts, and other accessories they attached to themselves, were all tokens of their support of, love for, and admiration of Edward. Yet, it wasn’t actually Edward-the-book-character but rather Edward-the-movie-image that garnered their attention. All the images were of Robert Pattinson, the actor who had just been recently cast to portray the character Edward in the film adaptations of the books. The pictures, most in color, were from the movie’s press materials, printed from the web or torn from magazines and taped or pinned to their clothing. Some showed “Edward” by himself while others displayed Edward and the female protagonist, Bella, in an embrace. The girls preferred the ones of Edward alone. As one girl said bitterly, “I don’t like Bella. I think I should be in the picture!” The girls had added personal written messages such as “I ♥ Edward” next to or on top of many of the images. One student had made a bracelet with beads that spelled out E-D-W-A-R-D, while another had painted one character on each of her fingernails to read “I♥E-D-W-A-R-D-!”

The girls actively shared these activities with the two white female teachers who team-taught both sections of the sixth grade. After giving the teachers SHVLC buttons, one student showed the younger of the two teachers a picture of Pattinson from a glossy teen magazine. The picture featured Pattinson in an open shirt, highlighting his
abdominal muscles. The student was clearly impressed with his physicality, and the teacher was too, although she distanced herself from this attraction by making a joke about how she realized she could be his mother, and therefore shouldn’t be looking at him with such desire. The older teacher, who had also seen the photo, shared a similar self-reproach saying to her, “You?! I could be his grandmother!” Another student encouraged the teachers to read Twilight, and both said they would over the upcoming holiday break. This promise received much support from the female students who assured them they would like the books because “they are so good.”

While the girls received support from their female teachers, many boys in the class, including Ethan, were extremely upset by the displays around Team Edward Day. The girls had actually planned Team Edward Day in response to the boys’ creation of the VAC, the Vampire Annihilation Club, which was itself a response from the boys to the girls’ constant fawning over Twilight and Edward. The VAC worked on devising ways that they could kill Edward, although the SHVLC girls were increasingly frustrated that the boys didn’t “get it” – they couldn’t kill Edward because he was a vampire and actually already dead. Serious debates ensued around this paradox. Some female students offered evidence from the book about Edward’s strength and ability to be resilient to attacks - citing the author’s description of his granite-like skin, for example - but the boys continued to create weapons they felt would be successful in eliminating him. The VAC members even planned to write their story about eliminating the vampires into a book as a type of counternarrative. As they drew these battle lines, the boys carefully observed the girls to see who qualified as a SHVLC and who, because of
their lack of Edward paraphernalia, could be classified as “a neutral” and therefore either exempt from the conflict or perhaps become an ally for their side. The teachers understood this gendered struggle as a product of the boys’ jealousy and a way of vying to recapture some of the girls’ attention that had been captured by Edward and the books. As one teacher teased the male students, in the end it is Edward, and not them, who “gets the girl.”

In these various vampire-related events, heterosexual desire was at the forefront of students’ engagement and motivation. The girls in particular were very clear: their love of Edward was based on the physical appearance of Pattinson, the actor. They explained that they liked the book better after the movie specifically because they got to see Edward, which they enjoyed, since he is “soooo cute!” It was the movie that fueled this desire since the movie enabled them to see “what [the characters] look like.” When I asked specifically, “Is what he looks like important?” the girls’ answer was first a brief, dumbfounded silence and then a resounding “YES!” In other words, they understood that heterosexual desire fueled their engagement with the visual form of the actor and therefore with the character and storyline he portrayed. When I asked what would happen if some people didn’t think what he looked like was important or didn’t think he was cute, they were again silent for a moment, trying hard to imagine such a possibility. Finally, one girl said, “Well…” pausing, and shrugging, “um, too bad for them!” before erupting in giggles at the outrageous suggestion.

There were, in fact, several girls who did not wear buttons or images, who referred to themselves as the “neutrals,” and were left out of (or perhaps chose to be left
out of) the SHVLC events. Interestingly, while all the SHVLC girls were white, of the five girls who did not participate three were of Asian descent, one was biracial, and one was white but had special needs and was not as involved in the social world of the classroom as other students. In many ways, then, the girls who were most active in the SHVLC activities were the ones who were most popular and most powerful in the social world of the class. This sense of being an insider or an outsider was obvious to girls in the class. For example, when I asked one of the “neutrals” why she wasn’t participating, she expressed feeling distant from the whole event. She said, “I just don’t like the Twilight series. He’s [Edward’s] not the best person in the world!” When I told her that I wasn’t very into the series either, she let out a big sigh of relief and said, “Thank you!,” glad to have found someone who understood and affirmed her opinion.

Overall, the Team Edward Day activities visibly and actively valorized heterosexuality. They provided an opportunity to consolidate groups by gender based on assumptions of shared common attractions and socializing around these. Like in the play of Julia and Jadyn’s classmates, homosexuality in this classroom is not actively denigrated, but heterosexual relations and desires are so taken for granted that any other feelings are an impossibility that, especially for girls, would shut you out of the social world of the classroom and even earn you pity (“too bad for them”). The female students and their female teachers are “naturally” united, through heterosexually-based notions of womanhood, in their desire for this male celebrity. It is assumed that the boys desire the

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44 The boys in the class were much less diverse. There was one Asian American boy in the class, Ethan’s best friend, and he was an active member of the VAC. In general, being involved in these games and debates did not seem to have as much social meaning for boys as it did for girls.
girls in the class, and therefore would be jealous of the object of their affections when they place their attention elsewhere. This also assumes the boys have no sexual or romantic interest in Edward or in other attractive men. These heteronormatively gendered groups were framed as antagonistic, literally fighting for the attentions of the other in their talk and stories. Those who had different feelings were marginalized or silenced, left out of the social activities led by the majority. This valorized heteronormativity is especially problematic since it seems to overlap with other categories of social privilege such as race. Therefore, qualifying as a girl in this class, especially a popular girl, is achieved through possession of a set of intersecting identities including whiteness, heterosexuality, and ability. It is this very arrangement of privilege that is both proven and reinforced by participation in the SHVLC.

In addition, all of this heterosexually-based activity stemmed from and centered on reading. Therefore, in addition to navigating the layers of heteronormative social identity described above, children also needed to be readers. At the very least they had to know the plots, the characters, and the arc of the entire saga’s storyline to participate effectively in these peer-based activities. To that end, children in this class spent hours of their free reading time engrossed in the Twilight novels, some of which were several hundred pages long, in order to be able to form and share their opinions. Besides reading and discussing the series itself, children enacted a variety of other diverse literacy practices in activities that spun off from the Twilight commotion. For example, students read other vampire texts, emblazoned their fingernails with Edward’s name, drafted plans for various vampire-killing weapons, and created signs of support for Edward. They sent
emails to each other to make their plans and scoured websites and magazines for the best pictures and new details about the upcoming movie. Again, participation in these associated literacy practices solidified a student’s status as an insider or outsider in relation to the SHVLC and the VAC. In this case it wasn’t school in general but literacy in particular that helped send and maintain heteronormative boundaries within classrooms.

Summary – Peer Talk

The events of Team Edward Day from Ethan’s school, the peer storytelling and play of Julia and Jadyn’s school, and the “you may kiss the bride” games and “that’s so gay” talk of Mary’s school all illustrate that classroom contexts, even at the elementary school level, are replete with messages from children about the appropriateness of heterosexuality and the impossibility and undesirability of any type of queer feelings. These are the very classrooms in which children with LGBT family members are being asked to learn. Even if these stories and play align with children from gay families’ own sexual orientation, there is very little information that counteracts this perspective and validates their families. These messages from peers contribute to the heteronormative ideas that circulate in schools, which children with lesbian mothers must navigate as they move from their homes into schools.

Curricular Materials, Teacher Talk, and the Construction of Heteronormativity

Official communication channels at these elementary schools, such as curricular materials and talk by adults, also communicated normative messages about sexuality to students.
Curricular Materials

Nearly all the curricular materials I saw being used in all my observations in all the classrooms and schools during this study represented only heterosexual people, relations, and feelings. This included textbooks, teacher’s guides, children’s literature trade books, and posters, signs, and other classroom displays.

Language Arts

The only exceptions to this blanket rule of silence related to three inclusive texts. Ethan’s sixth-grade classroom contained a copy of James Howe’s book *The Misfits* (2001), which contains a gay character, and a health textbook that did not include the words “gay,” “lesbian,” “sexuality,” or “sexual orientation,” but did mention dating in gender-neutral language and defined family as “two or more people related by blood, adoption, marriage, or the desire to support one another” (emphasis added). Moriah McKinney-Robbins’s third-grade teacher announced to her class the publication of a forthcoming book by Patricia Polacco (2009), *In Our Mothers’ House*, about an interracial family with lesbian mothers.

All other curricular materials I observed in the seven schools I visited taught children about a world that, from all available perspectives, was exclusively heterosexual. Take for example, the book read by Jonathan McKinney-Robbins mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. This text, called *My Family*, mentioned a mother, father, sister, brother, dog, cat, and the narrator who was a young, white boy. If Jonathan were writing a book that accurately could be called “My Family,” on the other hand, it would contain a vastly different cast of characters: two white mothers, one mom’s grown biological son,
five adoptive black and biracial siblings, and himself. Another book in his classroom, a Literacy Collaborative text from New PM Story Books was called *The Photo Book* and had a similar theme:

> Here is the photo book. / Mom is in the book. / Dad is in the book. / James [a son] is in the book. Here is James. / Kate [a daughter] is in the book. Here is Kate. / Nick [a son] is in the book. Here is Nick. / Here is Teddy Bear. Teddy Bear is in the book too.

These texts and many others children in this study encountered on a regular basis in schools represented monoracial, heteronormative kinship arrangements and left out families like the McKinney-Robbins and my other participants.

Sometimes it was difficult for students from lesbian-headed families to negotiate these normative arrangements represented in curricular materials, especially when their teachers didn’t realize how they might bring other perspectives. For example, Mallory and her first-grade reading group were discussing *Henry and Mudge* (Rylant, 1996). In the book, Henry asked his mom and dad if he could have a brother so he could have a playmate, although eventually he decides he wants a dog. Mallory’s teacher, trying to help the group remember what they had read about the day before, asked students to recall what Henry wanted before he wanted a dog. At first, Mallory didn’t remember. Her teacher tried again, “What did he want from his parents?” Mallory shared that Henry had no brothers or sisters, but her teacher continued, “So what did he want his parents to do?”
In this conversation, Mallory’s teacher was prompting her to remember that Henry had asked his mom and dad to have a baby. What her teacher failed to realize is that her assumption was based on mothers and fathers having biological children through heterosexual relations. Mallory’s family of two moms with two adopted children was formed without recourse to either of these features. Although at some level children from all families might see the adults around them as responsible for making such changes or additions to their family, this didn’t seem to be the perspective of Mallory’s teacher. Therefore, the assumptions of the book Mallory was reading and of her teacher’s questions did not accord with the model of family she knows, and may be part of the reason she has difficulty answering her teacher’s question in the way her teacher expects. If the book had represented an alternative model of family or family formation, Mallory would have been more able to draw on what she knows.

Other language arts activities in other classrooms also referenced particular and assumedly heterosexual family members on a regular basis. For example, in some classrooms children worked on daily grammar exercises, adjusting the capitalization and punctuation in sentences such as “mom and me ate ice cream.” Teachers suggested example spelling and vocabulary sentences that referred to “my mom and dad.” In one classroom, a letter was written on chart paper and displayed on the wall with all the parts of the letter labeled so children could use this as a guide when writing their own letters. The letter began, “Dear Mom,…” While each of these examples may seem insignificant, they add up to represent a very limited number of family relationships and arrangements. Coupled with the lack of queer-inclusive children’s literature present in schools they
suggest elementary language arts classrooms are spaces that use spoken and written language to reaffirm (hetero)normative family relationships and exclude all others.

Science

The normativity of heterosexual, mother-father family relationships also showed up in other curricular materials, especially in science lessons that focused on animals. For example, a student in Mary Jensen’s first-grade class was reading a nonfiction book about penguins illustrated with photographs. The student pointed to two particular penguins and reported to her classmates, “That has to be the mama. That has to be the papa.”

Teachers also used this kind of personification when discussing animals. For example, Mallory Winston’s kindergarten teacher led a lesson about the life cycle of frogs. After several interactive mini-lessons using various texts and manipulatives, she walked the class through the list of frog facts list they had made previously. Then, she read aloud a nonfiction story about the frog life cycle. The book made reference to frogs mating to create fertilized eggs in scientific language. The teacher read “males,” as was written in the book, then added a list of synonyms to explain: “dads…those are the boys.” After she read “mates” (the plural noun), she added “those are the girls.” Clearly this is biological fact – males and females of a species combine to reproduce – but what was striking was the way the teacher translated scientific facts about animals to the social human world in heteronormative terms. Instead of male and female frogs creating fertilized eggs, the class followed the teacher’s lead and talked about mommy and daddy frogs and their baby frogs. The class switched back to the heteronormative constructions
with which they were most familiar, but which marginalize or exclude the families of Mallory and others.

*Messages from Adults*

Linguistic messages from teachers, administration, and other adults in schools were somewhat more varied than curricular messages and peer talk. Some teachers, especially those who had more personal experience with and comfort talking about LGBT issues made an effort to make queer people and relationships visible in their classrooms. For example, Moriah McKinney-Robbins’ third-grade teacher, Ms. Liz, was particularly comfortable in bringing Moriah’s interracial, lesbian-headed family into the classroom. She routinely used “moms” in the plural when talking to Moriah, and she referred to her mothers as Momma Denise and Momma ‘Lee, the names that Moriah used for them. She also made a special announcement to the class about a book that she’d heard about called *In Our Mothers’ House* (Polacco, 2009), a story about a lesbian couple that adopts children of color into their families, which I mentioned earlier. Ms. Liz was especially excited to point out to Moriah that the African-American girl on the cover of the book looked like her. Interestingly, Ms. Liz was very public with the staff at her school about the fact that her sister is a lesbian. This personal connection, as well as professional connections with other progressive educators and her experience teaching in a school with many LGBT-headed families, helped Ms. Liz understand the importance of actively teaching against homophobia. She encouraged her fellow staff members to learn more about these LGBT-related issues and even helped arrange related professional development sessions at the school.
Mallory’s kindergarten teacher, Mrs. Anderson, also used the same language that Mallory used to talk about her two moms. Discussion of Mallory’s moms came up often during this year because her moms had recently split up, and she was dealing with the grief of that loss. Mrs. Anderson recognized this sadness in Mallory and, after talking with Mallory’s mom Sally about how Mallory “missed her other mom,” referred Mallory to a grief group run by the school psychologist. Talk about Mallory’s moms also came up in the classroom around Mother’s Day. Mrs. Anderson felt that she and the students in the class were very “matter-of-fact” about how Mallory had two moms. Mrs. Anderson allowed Mallory to paint a second picture for her second mother as a present for Mother’s Day after the other kids had finished their single paintings. After the holiday, Mrs. Anderson asked Mallory if she was going to mail her gifts “to Momma Hil.” Personal connections also seem to contribute to Mrs. Anderson’s relative comfort with lesbian-headed families. First of all, Mrs. Anderson has a gay stepson. He and his partner had considered having children, so she’d had some experience thinking about LGBT kinship in the context of her personal life. In addition, Mallory was not Mrs. Anderson’s first student with two moms. Nancy mentioned that she’d taught a first grader whose moms had a “strong lesbian relationship” and that Mallory was the third student of a “gay or lesbian couple” she’d had in her classroom. Therefore, Mrs. Anderson may have been more comfortable or more prepared for the kinds of issues that she would need to help Mallory navigate.

45 I did not ask Mrs. Anderson about her experience teaching other children experiencing divorce and loss, but she would likely have also drawn on those experiences to understand and assist Mallory. Given that she has a stepson, it may be that she has negotiated divorce within her own family. If so, those experiences may also have been a resource upon which she drew.
Other teachers were kind to their students with two moms, but were much less direct about making their language about families more queer-inclusive. Teachers such as Mallory’s first-grade teacher frequently used generic terms for family members, such as when she asked students on a cold morning, “Did your grown up scrape off the ice [from the car windshield]?” When Mallory presented photos of her family members in a class project, her teacher approved of Mallory including “all the people you love.” Such language does make space for alternative types of kinship to be included and may work best to address a wide variety of family forms, including Mallory’s, yet does not explicitly name non-heterosexual people or relationships. Other teachers, including Mary’s first-grade teacher, all of Julia and Jadyn’s teachers, and Isabella’s fourth-grade teacher, were comfortable talking with me about their student’s LGBT-headed families, evidenced by things like using “mom” or “mothers” in the plural when we spoke, especially after I told them more about the focus of the study, but I didn’t see any inclusion of this information in their teaching or in their interactions in front of their students. Instead, the context of adult conversation seemed to influence what kinds of talk seemed appropriate to them. As we will see below, these contextually-based decisions were similar to some of the less direct choices children with lesbian moms from the study occasionally made when navigating talk about their own families.

Even when individual classroom teachers of children with LGBT parents worked to make their classrooms more inclusive, other teachers and administrators remained unaware of their heteronormative language choices. Letters from schools were regularly addressed to “Mom and Dad.” Teachers on cafeteria, recess, and library duty regularly
assumed particular family arrangements when speaking to kids from other classes they might not know personally. For example, a child with a thermos that had broken might be told, “Tell mom not to pack that one anymore.” Perhaps the starkest example of these heteronormative assumptions is Ethan’s story that opens this chapter. The first time he was called down to the office, it was because his “mother” was there to pick him up. The next day, the person there to get him was not named his “stepmother” but simply his “ride.” Ethan’s queer family – the fact that this “ride” was his mother’s ex-partner whom Ethan considers his second mother – was completely erased in this announcement.

Rather than see him and speak of him as a child with a lesbian mother and stepmother, the school had decided and announced to his class that Ethan was a child with a mother and a “ride.”

Children of Lesbian Mothers Navigate the Heteronormativity of Schools

Schools are places that enforce normative notions of sexuality and gender (Kosciw, Diaz, and Greytak, 2008; Human Rights Watch, 2001; Ray and Gregory, 2001; and data from this study presented above). Given that children with lesbian mothers learn ways of speaking, reading, and writing to represent their queer families in the contexts of their homes, we can ask if or how they make use of those practices in these schools. In other words, examining the language and literacy work that children with queer parents do within school contexts to position themselves in particular ways and make their families visible (or not) highlights the heteronormativity of schooling and illuminates ways to make classrooms more queer-inclusive. Data from this study suggest
that while children navigated heteronormativity at school in a wide variety of ways, three points out of this larger set of options became apparent: 1) Some children, in some instances, outwardly resist heteronormative dynamics and instead assert an overtly queer subjectivity. 2) Some children, in some instances, resist a queer subjectivity and instead actually engage in heteronormative practices themselves. 3) Some children, in some instances, engage both heteronormativity and queer subjectivity to varying degrees. This usually meant downplaying queer issues, addressing them only in oblique, subtle, or ambivalent ways and usually only when others had already carved out a space for these disruptions (see Figure 7). In all cases, children’s navigations of heteronormativity became evident in the language and literacy they used to communicate the queer aspects of their families and in how explicit and direct those specific language choices were. In the discussion below I share examples of all three types of engagement, illustrating the variety of ways that children with lesbian mothers talked, read, and wrote about their own queer families in (heteronormative) school settings.

**Resisting Heteronormativity and Asserting Queer Subjectivity**

*Isabella*

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46 I recognize that children with lesbian mothers exist in complicated and contradictory identifications with/to the LGBT community (see Chapter 1). Therefore, although there was a range of ways that my participants chose to talk about their queer families, I mean to imply no hierarchy regarding these different decisions. All are viable, logical, appropriate, and possible ways of navigating what the data indicate can be negative or threatening spaces. Following Abigail Garner (2004), I believe that acknowledging the variety of response children with lesbian moms may have to different situations in their schools is a way of recognizing the complexity of these decisions and honoring children’s choices as methods to keep themselves safe. Further, it is important to note that ways of navigating heteronormativity were only loosely guided by child or by topic. In other words, children made a wide variety of choices at different times and in different situations. Also, there was not one topic or one situation where all children reacted in the same way; responses to particular situations varied from child to child and from situation to situation.
Isabella Davis, who attended third and fourth grade at a mostly white, upper-middle class, suburban public school during the time of the study, was the most vocal of all the participants about her queer family. She talked about her lesbian mother frequently and proudly in a variety of different contexts: with teachers at school, with peers in Girl Scouts, and even with other customers in line at a copy shop while she was on an errand with her mom. Isabella was aware of being open about her family. For example, when I first discussed my research with Isabella’s family to see if they were interested in participating and having me spend time at their home and school, her mother Suzy assured me that Isabella would be totally comfortable. Isabella seconded this, saying with a smile, “Yep, I tell everybody!” (field notes, 2/24/08). When I visited Isabella at school, she had already told her teacher that I was there to “test [her] about being a lesbian kid” (field notes, 3/17/08).

This openness translated to school assignments. At the beginning of the school year, for example, Isabella’s teacher asked all students in the class to make a “nameplate” with their name on it which they were also to decorate with information about themselves. These nameplates were displayed prominently on the door of the classroom. Isabella’s nameplate consisted of her name in bubble letters as well as a drawing of her family: 3 larger, “adult” figures representing her mom, her dad, and her mother’s ex-partner Cynthia; 2 smaller, “child” figures representing her and Ethan; and an animal representing their dog. Even in this public display and even when Cynthia no longer lived at her house, Isabella resisted the heteronormative practice of drawing (just) a mom and a dad and instead included all the members of her family as she defined it.
Isabella also was eager to bring experiences as part of the LGBT community into
the classroom. For example, Isabella and Suzy have made it a tradition to attend the
state-wide Lobby Day for LGBT rights (as described in Chapter 1), which is hosted
annually by a nonprofit LGBT advocacy group. On the day prior to the 2008 Lobby Day,
I noticed Isabella writing the name and logo of the host organization on her desk. It
remained there for several days. After attending Lobby Day, Isabella wrote an essay for
her teacher about her experiences. She also collected buttons advertising the host
organization for her classmates and passed them out during a show-and-tell session the
next day at school. Several of her classmates continued to wear the buttons on their
clothes or backpacks several days later. And finally, when assigned to find a current
event in the media, Isabella selected an article about the newly-passed local county
nondiscrimination policy that, in Isabella’s words, “would let gay and lesbian people do
what they want” (field notes, 4/1/08). She wrote a summary of the article, took it into
school, and shared it during her designated time. By asserting her own queer connections
to her family and to LGBT communities through her literacy practices, Isabella kept
discussions and knowledge of LGBT people and issues, specifically as they related to her
own family, in circulation within the otherwise heteronormative space of the classroom.

*Mallory*

Mallory Winston attended kindergarten and first grade at one of the more diverse
public schools in her upper-middle class suburb during the study. While she was in
kindergarten Mallory made her most explicit assertions of her family’s queer subjectivity
around the preparation and celebration of Mother’s Day. Although I did not hear her
speak frequently about having two moms in school, Mallory was vocal and assertive about having two moms as the class made presents and cards for their mothers. Mallory, with her teacher’s encouragement, decided to make two sets of all the different gifts the class was creating. Although Mrs. Anderson denied this, Mallory said that several students teased her for making twice as many gifts, and they complained to the teacher that it wasn’t fair she got to make two sets of the crafts since the kids considered the crafts to be fun activities. Mallory, in her own defense, responded defiantly to her peers, “Well, I have two moms!” (field notes, 5/6/08). Later, the students had time to paint a special picture that they could give to their mother. At the end of the painting session, Mrs. Anderson gave Mallory the option of creating a second painting for Momma Hil, although she would have to miss another fun activity that the class would be doing in order to have time to do the painting. Mallory chose to paint the second picture, emphasizing that she should have two sets of presents for her two moms.

Finally, Mallory also asserted her family structure after Mother’s Day when students shared the reactions their mothers had to the presents they made. Mallory waited patiently for her turn to talk, raising her hand each time the teacher looked for someone to call on. When she got a turn to share, she immediately told the class, “First, I called my other mom” before continuing on to share what she did with her custodial mother, Sally (field notes, 5/9/08). Rather than editing her words or sharing only part of her Mothers’ Day celebration, Mallory used opportunities prompted by Mother’s Day to break heteronormative assumptions and assert the queer structure of her family within the classroom.
This amount of effort and honesty seemed to be difficult for her. By the end of that same day, I heard Mallory say quietly to a boy sitting next to her on the carpet, “Well, I have two moms, one lives in…” before she became sad and shut down, her voice just fading out. As she stopped talking, she put her head, sadly, on the carpet and covers her ears with her arms and hands. As she prepared to begin first grade a few months later, Mallory became significantly more reserved in what personal information she wanted to share with people. Rather than assert a queer subjectivity, Mallory at this point preferred to engage in, or at least support, heteronormative notions of family. She told her mother that she didn’t want to tell kids in her first grade class that she had two moms, and her mom supported her decision. She said Mallory could tell her classmates whatever she felt ok with, but she also encouraged Mallory to think through ways of talking about her family no matter what she finally decided to say. Mallory decided she would say she has one mom and that she doesn’t have a dad.

Interestingly, in first grade Mallory also continued to use spoken and written language to publicly discuss her queer family. The most salient of these moments happened during her “Very Important Person” (VIP) week. The VIP week gave each child the chance to share with their class information about themselves and their family. There were structured expectations regarding what the VIP student should share each day, beginning with his or her family tree followed by a family time line illustrated with photographs, a meaningful object, and so on. During Mallory’s VIP week, she was direct and matter-of-fact about several parts of her life, including her adoption from China and her multiracial family. She responded to a peer’s question about who was holding her in
a particular photograph by saying “That’s my other mom.” She explained that Chen was her “other mom’s last name. . . she got divorced in our family,” and she described her mother Sally’s new girlfriend as “my friend, Amanda.” When a student pointed to a photo of Mallory’s extended family and asked, “Who is your dad? In that picture?” Mallory again responded directly, “I don’t have a dad, actually." 

In both kindergarten and first grade, Mallory took advantage of school activities about family to speak and write honestly about her multiracial, divorced, lesbian family. She insisted on making two sets of gifts for Mothers’ Day even when children teased her. She shared pictures and answered questions about her two mothers and her mother’s new girlfriend and answered questions about her noncustodial mother and about having a father directly and honestly. Even though peers, curricular materials, and talk from adults frequently reinforced heteronormative messages, Mallory and Isabella’s talking and writing about their own families interrupted these silences and asserted queer subjectivities even within the confines of school.

**Engaging in Heteronormativity and Resisting Queer Subjectivity**

Sometimes children with lesbian mothers represented their families as if they were (hetero)normative, or chose to agree with and support the heteronormative opinions of others while they were in school. This is true even for some children who also asserted queer subjectivities in their classrooms at other moments in time. In this section,  

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47 Interestingly, even during Mallory’s honest, public accounting of her family, some silences around issues of lesbian-headed families persisted. After Mallory’s response about not having a dad, the same student, trying to make sense of this information, immediately asked “Did he die?” Neither Mallory nor her teacher responded to this query and another student was called on to ask the next question.
I describe examples of my participants’ use of language and literacy to actively and directly engage in and support heteronormative practices in classrooms and schools.

**Moriah**

In contrast to Isabella, who drew both of her moms and her dad on her nameplate, when Moriah McKinney-Robbins had the opportunity to participate in a similar get-to-know-your-classmates activity at the beginning of her third grade year, she filled her page with words and drawings relating to friends, food, caring for the earth, and pets. She also wrote “family” and included a drawing of two adults - one with long hair and one with short hair – and two children, with no race evident for any of the figures. This is a normative picture of family, invoking picket fences, station wagons, 1.2 kids, and of course two, straight and gender-conforming parents. Moriah’s family, on the other hand, is made up of two white mothers, her one mother’s grown biological son, and six adopted black and biracial children. She did not include these non-normative features, including size and racial make up of the family in addition to sexuality in her representation.

Perhaps Moriah didn’t have the time or space or artistic ability or interest to represent all these different features. But no matter the reason, the result is a representation of family that resorts to the normative nuclear model with no connection to her own lived experience as a stand in for the complexities that she knows and lives out daily. By portraying her family in a normative way, Moriah was, in these instances of self-positioning through literacy, resisting a queer subjectivity and reinforcing heteronormativity.

**Mallory**
Although Mallory Winston had many moments in school where she asserted her family’s non-normative status (described above), she also had several moments where she portrayed families in much more (hetero)normative ways. Mallory’s mom, Sally, told me a story of one of those moments that happened just before the study began. Sally recounted how Mallory had come home from kindergarten one day with some information to share. Mallory told Sally that she had learned from a classmate that “Girls can only marry boys and boys can only marry girls” and that, perhaps most importantly, Mallory agreed48 with her peer’s assessment (field notes, 2/27/08). Sally tried to point out to Mallory how her own family experiences indicated this conclusion was not accurate. Sally told her daughter, “Uh, no. You have two moms.” Mallory, convinced not by her mother but by the power of this peer relationship, replied, “Yeah-huh, Brogan [her classmate] said so!” In this move, Mallory rejected her mother’s queer formulations of family and sided with her classmate’s interpretation, even though it meant rejecting her own family make up.

Another instance occurred in a class discussion when Mallory was in first grade. It was the end of her VIP week (discussed above), where she had been sharing information about her life with the class. During this week, Mallory brought a Chinese lap harp she had received from a family member in to show the class. It was also a way for Mallory to share a part of her ethnic heritage with her (mostly white) classmates who were all seated in front of her. First, Mallory described the different parts of the harp and

48 The McKinney-Robbins mothers recently mentioned to me that a similar situation had happened with their son, Aaron. He insisted that two guys could not kiss each other. His mothers reviewed the litany of queer couples Aaron knows, including themselves, who kiss regularly.
explained how it made sounds. Then, her teacher asked her why the pick for the harp was so big. Mallory answered, “For louder sound, if you are playing and your mom and dad want to hear it” (field notes, 10/20/08). Like Moriah’s drawing in her get-to-know-your-classmates activity, the theoretical family that Mallory invoked in this comment is vastly different from her own. Mallory herself has two moms, not a mom and a dad, but, without prompting, she adjusted her language to describe a normative, presumably straight, two-parent model when speaking to her classmates. With this linguistic choice, Mallory performed a sort of queer code switching, communicating in the vocabulary of the normative majority. She kept the focus on smooth communication with her classmates and downplayed the “differences” in her own family. She used language in ways that met her needs in that situation, yet excluded her own lived experiences of family.

Chloe

Chloe McKinney-Robbins is a first grader who lives with her two moms, Denise and Maelee, and five brothers and sisters - all between the ages of nine and five - who were adopted. Chloe is multiracial with light skin; her siblings are all Black or biracial and her mothers are white and involved with antiracist work in their church and community. Chloe was interested in all things girly and traditionally feminine. She wore pink and purple, had been known to wear a set of fairy wings around the house, and played with my long hair every time I visited her house, styling it in ways that she thought were fashionable.
Because Chloe is still young and because her moms have a lot of kids to keep dressed and fed and cleaned, they did not allow her to grow her hair long. This decision was also affected by racial politics as much as it is by time and convenience, since Chloe’s moms were highly aware of race and the racialized politics of beauty and hair. In fact, Denise and I discussed hair politics the night we were introduced, well before my study began (field notes, 9/22/07). Chloe already received many compliments from strangers about her beauty, much of it centering on her light coloring (field notes, 5/7/08), and the other children knew that many people assumed she was white (field notes, 5/7/08, 8/8/08). Since Chloe has what might be called “good hair” and her sisters have thicker, more textured hair, her moms were hesitant to let her grow her hair out too long and play into those racialized standards of beauty.

During one winter, Chloe’s moms took her to get her hair cut. At school afterwards she complained about having to undergo this intrusion to her teacher. Although her teacher, a white woman with long, straight hair, tried to be supportive of Chloe’s new look by saying that she was thinking of getting a haircut herself, Chloe was still resistant. In response, as if educating her teacher on the proper ways to be, she said to her teacher, “Ms. Nicole, girls don’t really have short hair” (field notes 12/13/08). After the teacher recounted this story to Denise, Denise reminded Chloe how both of her moms are girls and, in fact, both have short hair49. She went on to remind her of many other women and girls she knows who have short hair, but Chloe was unconvinced and

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49 As Denise recounted to me later, for a minute she thought to herself, “Who is raising these children? Wolves???”
still insisted that long hair was a proper marker for femininity. Denise recognized that her family broke many heteronormative ideals and tried to point that out to her daughter, but Chloe resisted this queer perspective and maintained an allegiance to particular ideas around normatively gendered behavior.

Moriah’s picture of a normative family, Mallory’s argument with her mother about marriage restrictions, and Chloe’s claim that girls only have long hair are all examples of children with lesbian mothers actually engaging in and supporting heteronormative practices within their schools and classrooms. Although none of these children, nor any children in my study supported heteronormative assumptions at all times while in school, these data indicate the complicated and sometimes conflicting experiences that children from lesbian-headed families may have as they move from their queer homes to their heteronormative school environments. Such instances help us remember that children with lesbian mothers are not automatically standard-bearers for the “gay agenda.” Indeed, they too are influenced by heteronormative assumptions, especially when they are at best the vast majority of messages about love and family that they ever hear in schools.

Just as talk and text can be used as resources to speak publicly and directly about one’s queer family or experiences, so too can they be used as resources to mask, silence, or revise these same stories. Language, in this view, is not automatically conditioned for a particular stance on heteronormativity, but instead is a resource that is employed in

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50 Although this is a data story more about norms around gender than norms around sexuality, I understand both heteronormativity and queerness to relate the support or disruption of the heterosexual matrix. In this way, norms around gender and sexuality are intimately related to each other in that they work together to maintain the overall system of compulsory heterosexuality (Rich, 1980).
highly contextual ways to achieve a variety of communicative aims. While children in earlier examples wrote notes on their desk about LGBT equality, read and discussed articles about nondiscrimination policies, and created time lines that reflected all the members of their queer family, children in these examples used spoken and written language to portray normative models of family, support normative conceptions about (straight) marriage, and argue for the proper physical markers of femininity. These actions mark opposite ends of the continuum of behavior I observed from children with lesbian mothers at schools, but children also took up other positions along that continuum through their actions and reactions regarding heteronormativity in schools. Such examples of this type of “middle ground” are discussed next.

Creating Middle Ground between Queer and Heteronormative Subjectivities

While the examples above demonstrate children’s clear and direct use of language and literacy to create queer or heteronormative subjectivities, children with lesbian mothers did not always make one of those two explicit choices when speaking, reading, and writing about themselves and their families in schools. In several instances the messages children communicated through their language and literacy choices were more subtle, based on their understanding of the situation at hand. In these situations, children did not misrepresent their families but downplayed or “covered” (Yoshino, 2006) the perceived stigma of their queerness. To do this they addressed queer issues in oblique, subtle, or ambivalent ways and sometimes only when others had already carved out a space that made even such tentative identifications possible. In these moments, participants asserted subjectivities that were neither only heteronormative nor completely
queer but rather a type of hybrid moment that allowed them to claim some queer space with minimal social risk. As Garner (2004) explains, when children choose not to be fully open about their families, “it is rarely because they are ashamed, but because they want to protect themselves and their families from the unknown” (p. 99). Examining these “middle ground” choices suggest contextual features of different social situations to which some children were responding. These choices demonstrated that children with lesbian moms actively modify information they share about their families (at least occasionally) in order to position themselves in safe, comfortable, or socially desirable ways. Below, I explain the idea of covering in greater depth before sharing the examples from children’s spoken and written language choices that illustrate their use of that tool in constructing this type of middle ground.

*Covering as a Tool for Downplaying Queerness*

In *Covering: The Hidden Assault on Our Civil Rights*, Yoshino (2006) builds on anthropological studies about the social management of stigma, specifically the work of Erving Goffman, and applies these ideas to a range of disfavored identity groups including gay people. As Yoshino (2006) illustrates, sexual minorities have been asked historically to convert (change) or pass (hide) their gay identity in order to assimilate successfully into the mainstream. At first, one was not allowed to be gay; those who were known or suspected to be so endured a range of religious, medical, and psychological treatments to change the person from gay “back to” straight. Later, while one was permitted to be gay, that information had to be hidden, perhaps by heterosexual marriages or other arrangements. This state of being was acceptable as long as such
desires were never disclosed to the public. More recently, Yoshino argues, the demand to pass is giving way to a demand to cover. Covering, according to Yoshino, is a way of “ton[ing] down a disfavored identity to fit into the mainstream” even when that identity is not a secret (p. ix). For example, one can now be gay, and such information can even be known by others, but the gay person is warned not to “flaunt” it.

Yoshino clearly emphasizes that a move to cover by those with stigmatized identities is a response to a complex set of circumstances. In other words, in a sort of chicken-and-egg scenario, covering can be a coerced response to a prejudicial society as well as a strategic move in the face of danger. For example, if a lesbian employee does not display pictures of her partner on her desk while other people have pictures of their spouses, that could be a commentary on the homophobic office culture as much as it could be her own decision to not bring negative attention to herself and potentially alienate her colleagues, which in turn may be the sign of a homophobic office culture. While Yoshino explores the implications of the demand to cover within civil rights legislation and the legal system, I argue that it can be an explanatory framework for understanding instances where children with lesbian mothers downplay their queer family in the context of heteronormative schools. Some of these examples are detailed below.

Jadyn

At the beginning of this study, Jadyn Smith-Kendall and her older sister, Julia, were in the same multiage classroom (first-third grade) at a private, religiously-affiliated Montessori school. The girls knew I was a graduate student at the university where their mother worked. They knew my research involved learning about their lives, especially
their reading and writing, but because their mothers had asked that I not share the specific focus of my project with them, they didn’t know I was working specifically with lesbian-headed families for this study.

One day while I was observing at her school, Jadyn was rotating through a variety of language arts tasks during her work time. She decided to write in her journal and went to select a writing prompt from the pre-printed cards in the box. She finally settled on one that read “Family Time – When I’m with my family, we like to…”. I sat near her and let her work. The following excerpt is taken from my field notes:

Jadyn gets into [the journal prompt] slowly, first writing the prompt, then putting the card back, stretching, chatting with me. Adelaide [another child from class] is hanging out with us, although she is tired and not wanting to work. The three of us talk and Jadyn tells Adelaide how she and I play a lot together when I go to her house. Adelaide brings up nieces and nephews, and we have the following exchange:

A: Do you [Caitlin] have nieces and nephews?
C: No…I, um…No. My brother doesn’t have kids yet.
A: Is he married?
C: No.
A: Are you married?
C: No. I’m not allowed to get married in Ohio [referencing Ohio’s constitutional amendment banning gay marriage].
J: [Looks up from her work and, knowing that I was living at the time with my female partner, adds, somewhat pointedly] No, you only have a roommate, right?

C: Well, I have a partner, that’s what I like to say.

A: [Looks at me for several seconds then slowly says] Is your partner, um, a man or a woman?

C: A woman.

A: [Very excited] My aunt had a partner who was a woman! And they kind of got married kind of, in another place. But they got divorced.

C: Yeah, that happens to all kinds of people.

J: I kind of have two moms, mostly.

The conversation continues about Jadyn going home and using her mom’s art kit to draw pictures. (field notes, 4/22/08)

Although I feel self-conscious about my own role in this conversation, I argue that Jadyn’s two comments, “No, you only have a roommate, right?” and “I kind of have two moms, mostly” are examples of covering, times that she only ambivalently interrupted heteronormativity. Such instances demonstrate Jadyn’s willingness to talk about her family in different ways as the context for her comments changes. I consider this an ambivalent interruption of heteronormativity because before Jadyn knew Adelaide’s feelings about gay and lesbian people, Jadyn downplayed my queer identity, covering in this case by substituting the neutral “roommate” for the more accurate and romantically-
linked “partner.” Her use of “only” is another indicator that she was aware of the move towards safer, socially-sanctioned ground that this substitution created. However, after Adelaide made the connection between my word “partner” and lesbianism, and responded by sharing family information of her own, Jadyn felt less of a need to cover and decided to share information about her own queer family. Yet even this was downplayed, the full impact of her admission hedged with her words “kind of” and “mostly.” By sharing information about her family structure, Jadyn broke unspoken heteronormative assumptions about families, especially about families as represented in schools, but she did so cautiously and only after a peer and I shared information about the queer-identified members of our own families.

Moriah

At the beginning of third grade, Moriah McKinney-Robbins and her classmates composed individual “Where I’m From” poems, modeled after George Ella Lyon’s work of the same name[^51], for a writing assignment in their language arts class. This type of poem specifically requires writers to express details about their family and home lives, although exactly what they share is up to them. One writing website details the basic structure of the poem, which matches up nearly exactly with what Moriah wrote as outlined in Figure 8.

In her poem, which was displayed along side the get-to-know-your-classmates activity, Moriah mentions being from “foster care” in the line referencing her “place of birth and family ancestry,” and from “the brothers and sisters” to describe family

[^51]: For more information, see Lyon’s website, [http://www.georgeellalyon.com/where.html](http://www.georgeellalyon.com/where.html)
member, stories, and details. She also writes “McKinney-Robbins family” when asked to provide the “family name,” but the only two people she mentions by first name are “Aaron and Denise,” one of her brothers and one of her mothers. Interestingly, by pairing a male and female name together in her poem without any other information, Moriah leaves open the possibility of interpreting these names in any number of ways, including as her (opposite-sex) parents. References to details about her two mothers are significantly more oblique, including her hyphenated last name (see Chapter 4), and “teachers and nurses,” her two mothers’ respective occupations.

In the case of the “Where I’m From” poem, Moriah used literacy to position her family and herself publicly while responding to these writing assignments. By writing about her family in particular ways she never misrepresented her home life, but she made certain, selective information public while choosing to leave out other information. Indeed, that is what all writers must do, but because the choices in this case revolved around a stigmatized identity (or perhaps identities, in the case of Moriah’s family), we can understand her choices as a type of covering. Choices she made in the poem highlighted her own birth story and beginnings in foster care in addition to other, more generic experiences (games, soccer, movies) she has shared with her whole family. Those are, no doubt, important aspects of her life that she wants to communicate, yet some of the information left out of this assignment included other, less normative features of her family, particularly its interracial make up and the lesbian relationship of her mothers. By discussing her family in ways that are technically accurate yet generally guarded or left open to readers’ interpretation, Moriah made choices that downplayed
non-normative aspects of her family. She found a way to discuss where she was from while drawing attention away from particular information she might have been less willing to share.

Mary

A similar covering move was made by Mary Jensen. The Jensens are very involved in their church – Linda’s family has been part of the denomination for five generations. Because of this deep dedication to their faith, they chose to send Mary to the school that their church runs even though the church is not known for being particularly inclusive of gay and lesbian people and it is nearly twenty miles across town. The first day I spent with Mary in her school she was in first grade. We had played together at her house the day before, and she knew she was “helping me with my homework” by teaching me what it was like to be a kid. After Mary arrived to school that morning, she put her coat and backpack in their designated places and sat down at her desk. She arranged her pencils on her desk top before taking out a book about Arthur the aardvark – her favorite! – for silent reading. I pulled a chair up next to her desk and sat with her, my note pad and pen on my lap. Before she began reading, she turned to me and whispered softly, “I know one thing you’re going to learn today: that I’m a lot like other kids.”

Mary’s statement about being like other children, given the distinctly different ways she had communicated with me in other settings, sheds light on her understanding of heteronormative expectations of schools. While playing at her house the day before, Mary had talked to me about her queer family in great depth and detail. She said that having two moms is “kind of easy” except that because her moms were “married
but…aren’t whole married, they have to pay more taxes” (field notes, 3/10/08; see Chapter 4). Less than twenty four hours later, however, she stressed how similar she was to other children.

Her construction of sameness, because of its hedges and qualifications, still obliquely acknowledges a queer subjectivity. It is in this way we can understand her comment as an instance of covering. By saying “I’m a lot like other kids,” Mary simultaneously pointed to her similarities with her peers (i.e., “like other kids”) and, at the same time, marked her difference from them. She recognized she’s “a lot” like other kids and not, in fact, just “like” or “completely like” or the “same as” other kids.

Summary – Covering Queerness in Schools

Jadyn’s, Moriah’s, and Mary’s examples suggest that children understand talking about their families in school is not the same as talking about their families at home. Their hesitant, indirect, and ambiguous uses of language and literacy index the complicated decisions they must make in the course of a regular school day just to talk with peers or complete assignments. While covering is a strategic and valid choice for children lesbian mothers to draw upon as they navigate the world of school, such

52 At future observations Mary talked about her family with me - even using “Eema” to refer to her mother - when we were on our own, and outside of the classroom such as on a field trip or playing together at recess. Within the confines of the classroom and the academic day, however, there was no such talk as she chose to focus on her similarities with others.

53 Much of the curricula that my participants experienced at school required either choice and/or personal contribution of material. Therefore, besides just listening to how kids talk about their families, other important sites for negotiations of heteronormativity are moments when students choose topics of study in general and topics for writing assignments most specifically. I have chosen not to include “not discussing” or “not referencing family at all” as a type of covering, yet general “not choosing” or “avoidance” would be another possible area to explore. For example, if children have a choice of writing topics and they choose to write about soccer, might that be attributable to them wanting to avoid discussing their family? Or might they just want to write about soccer? I do not have sufficient data to explore this question within this study, but if even some children’s decisions are avoidance of this type it would increase the kinds of covering children do on a regular basis.
instances still point out places where heteronormativity may be impinging on these children’s academic and creative lives.

In many ways, children with LGBT parents, given their assumed heterosexuality and the extended amounts of time they spend in heteronormative schools, are the bellwethers of the demand to cover. Examining children’s covering reminds us that queer visibility in schools is not just about parents; being visible requires more than a single, simple answer to whether the family is out in the context of the school or not. Instead, these examples demonstrate that children constantly engage in ongoing, negotiated social positioning, managing information about their family’s queerness even if their family make up is already known publicly.

For children, then, covering is a quintessential queer move, one that both allows for agency and bends to dominant, normative views. It is a dynamic, complex set of moves that mirrors these children’s liminal and shifting positions between queer and heteronormative worlds. This range permits children to be savvy about positioning themselves within their multiple social worlds54, and allows them the opportunity to assume agency in shaping their subjectivities in various beneficial ways. The irony is that the power of these various subjectivities are possible even when some more socially-sanctioned options may encourage children to dismiss their own realities or disassociate from those they love most in the world.

Summary – Children’s Navigations of Heteronormativity

54 Abigail Garner (2004) writes about a child attending summer camp who made up an elaborate story about his relationship to his two dads to get around revealing that they were gay. She writes, “One of the dads said that the story his son made up made them realize, ‘That’s what he needs to do right now to feel safe. Smart kid.’” (p. 96). Such a response values the “savvy” quality of children’s covering I describe here.
As these data indicate, there is not one, uniform lesbian-headed household nor a single, consistent experience of schooling for children with lesbian moms. Instead, while young children of lesbian-headed families all meet heteronormative ideas and practices in schools, they face, negotiate, interrupt, mediate, and concede to these experiences in a wide variety of ways. As the data show, moves along this entire continuum are possible. Sometimes these different responses may be related to significant events in the family and family dynamics, such as Isabelle’s experience of her mother coming out as a proud lesbian later in life leading Isabella to be vocal and involved, or Mallory’s grief over her mothers’ separation leading to her teacher’s sensitivity around issues like Mother’s Day. Other times, larger social dynamics such as racial or religious politics may influence the kinds of reactions that children feel are possible. Such factors might have some bearing on some choices such as Mary’s sense of what is allowed at her religiously-affiliated school and Chloe’s views about physical markers of femininity. And finally there is the influence of the child’s social world and the ways peer-sanctioned norms balance, support, or conflict with children’s lived experiences of family. These seem to be the type of influences Jadyn is negotiating in her conversation with me and Adelaide and that Mary tries to express with her claim of being like other kids. Claiming these subjectivities requires constant and ever-changing negotiations of the self in the face of conscious and unconscious social pressures.

Summary – Young Children Facing the Heteronormative Home-School Divide

This chapter has illustrated how discourses of (hetero)sexuality are present in elementary school contexts through student play, curricular messages, and adults’ talk,
although not necessarily in forms that most teachers and students recognize explicitly or are prepared to mediate. Heteronormative messages circulate freely through these various channels even during instructional time and even in classrooms with children from lesbian-headed families present. Sometimes, the discourse explicitly denigrated queer sexuality, such as when the boys in Mary’s classroom used the terms “gay” and “gay wad” in pejorative ways. In most classrooms of this study, however, the majority of communication about queer issues was through silence rather than denigration. Whether in children’s stories and imaginary play, responses to the Twilight books, the characters in available children’s trade books, or descriptions of animal families in science class, heterosexuality was almost always portrayed as normal, natural, assumed, expected, and generally the only available option through which people created identities and families. While this certainly shapes the experiences of children who may (come to) identify as LGBT themselves, it also sends a clear message to children with lesbian mothers: because your parents are not heterosexual, your family is therefore not normal or natural.

This chapter has also given attention to the voices and diverse experiences of children from lesbian-headed families whose curricular work and classroom contributions have the possibility to interrupt the general silence around marginalized sexualities that permeates their schools. Together, these data highlight the agency these children take in managing their responses to normative notions of sexuality. It investigated how, in response to this silence, children sometimes asserted but sometimes covered their relationships to queerness. There were even times when children supported heteronormative ideas and practices. Such instances indicate how even these young
students recognize school as a heteronormative space and point to tools they are using to navigate the distance between what they have experienced in their homes and what they learn about in school.

Much of this home and school “gap” has to do with the role, power, and purpose of both spoken and written language. Specifically, Chapter 4 demonstrated that talk and texts in children’s families could be used to accurately reflect the queer aspects of families and communicate those realities to others. In their homes, children learned that written and spoken language could be tools for expressing love, connection, and pride within the family, within the queer community, and to the larger world. In schools, however, children with lesbian mothers learned that their language is not always understood or welcome, other children use similar words with negative meanings, reading and supporting books with heterosexual messages is a way to be socially included, books don’t include them, their writing should serve other purposes, and communicating directly about their families should be done carefully since it is not always safe or socially desirable. Thus, while these two chapters focused on the different spaces of homes and schools, such contexts are best understood as discursive locations where uses of speaking, reading, and writing assume different, and often conflicting, forms and functions. While most children may learn to read and write in schools, children with lesbian mothers also learn to safely and successfully navigate heteronormativity through their language and literacy practices. In the next chapter I describe the kinds of reading and discussions that were possible in a hybrid space
between these two poles of home and school, a summer book club I conducted for a subset of child participants of the study.
When we select a story to read to a group of children, when we choose texts for a curriculum, we are extending this process of identifying what parts of the world, what relationships, creatures and events are worthy of their notice.

–Madeline Grumet

My study has thus far investigated children’s use of language and literacy to describe their queer families in two distinct discursive locations: homes, including activities performed as a family unit, and elementary schools. While there were some overlaps in children’s discursive productions, what was striking about my data are the differences between these two contexts.

In homes, children used specific terms for their mothers and read books that reflected their family arrangement, as detailed in Chapter 4. They named figures such as “tummy moms” and “donor dads” and reiterated notions of family that broke away from traditional, heteronormative understandings of being related. They discussed the injustice of their mothers not being “whole married” and participated in writing activities that advocated for changes in these laws.

In schools, on the other hand, these same children rarely mentioned their two moms, let alone used their names for their mothers and they almost never heard those names used by teachers or other school personnel as described in Chapter 5. They heard anti-gay jokes and read books that contained only heterosexual characters. While they
advocated for the chance to make two cards for Mothers’ Day, at other times they supported their peers who defined families in heteronormative ways. Most of their peer play – from games of house to comparing crushes on movie stars – was structured around and reinforced heterosexual relationships. Overall, much of what was central, affirmed, and even taken-for-granted in the safe, intimate spaces of these families’ homes was absent or denigrated in the public, institutional spaces of their children’s schools.

Thus, for these children, school allowed for peer interaction but very rarely provided opportunities for children to speak about their queer families in relation to their own reading and learning. Conversely, these children could connect their families with literacy in their homes and in spaces where they traveled with their families, yet those spaces were never without adult family members and seldom with peers. While I respected children’s abilities to shape their subjectivities in socially savvy ways, covering over the information that they can’t or don’t want to share in order to position themselves as more than “just” kids with two moms, I also wished that the pride and advocacy from their home literacy practices could find a place in other settings. I wondered how young people might engage in a context that combined elements of both homes and schools, a setting where these children could participate in ways that might bridge or fill in the divide I had observed. I decided to organize an out-of-school book club to be such a space.

This chapter explores the girls’ discussions about their families in this peer setting. I argue that children’s conversations in the book club indicated they created overtly queer discursive productions of family within this new environment of peers from
similar backgrounds. Together, they drew on language and experiences from their homes, sharing with other children in vastly different ways than they ever had in school. Across the three book club sessions, different themes emerged in our reading and interactions with one another and around the respective texts at hand. In our first meeting, we read *The Family Book* by Todd Parr (2003) and talked about family diversity in general. The girls shared details about their families (including queer ones) and learned how other girls’ ideas of family were both similar to and different from their own. In the second session, we read *Felicia’s Favorite Story* by Leslea Newman (2002) and discussed complexities of families. While I had planned to talk about (international) adoption and interracial families via that story, the girls added emotional complexities of family to the agenda through their comments and contributions. In the third and final session, we read *Asha’s Mums* by Rosamund Elwin and Michele Paulse (2000). Our attention turned to vulnerabilities faced when moving from a queer family into the world of school. The girls drew on the social bonds and trust they had formed with one another to share stories of mistreatment, offer one another encouragement and advice, and create opportunities to be agents and advocates, not simply victims of others’ prejudice.

Book club was a space for the children in my study that was not as safe or intimate as their own family, but yet where participants were understanding and supportive of their family. It was a space of mostly peers, not family members, but they were peers who shared the experience of living in a family with lesbian mothers. It contained literary reading like school but in a more relaxed, intimate environment and centered on a topic that heretofore had been discussed mainly in homes. In particular, it
was a space where children made use of their experiences as children with lesbian mothers and applied them confidently in their reading of the word and the world (Freire & Macedo, 1987).

Session One: Testing Queer Discursive Productions of Family in a Context of Peers

In the first book club session, children got to know about one other and about their respective families. Specifically, through responses to and connections with the text we read, children voiced their own experiences with and ideas of queer kinship. First, although they began cautiously, they eventually used language from home to describe a variety of their family features, including queer ones, within the context of this peer space. From there, they took time to understand and negotiate definitions of the different terms and names that they commonly used within their respective homes to communicate about their queer families. Finally, they considered queer understandings of kinship in relation to more traditional, heteronormative ideas. Together, they wrestled with some of the implications that developed from thinking of kinship in queer ways. I examine instances of these different components below.

Learning to Apply Language from Home to Talk about (Queer) Families with Peers

Cautious First Connections

The girls’ initial discursive productions of family were few and quite guarded, despite several different get-to-know-you activities that opened our first gathering. At the outset of this first meeting within this new peer space they only shared information about themselves in oblique and cautious ways. For example, in the beginning of the
meeting, when I mentioned that they all had different families, Moriah and Jadyn both confirmed this fact, but only in generic terms:

CR: I was thinking we could read some books that had different kinds of families in them because you guys all have different kinds of families. And I thought we could…

Moriah: We all have different families.

CR: Right. So I thought we could talk about it a little with the books we read.

Jadyn: Waaaaay different families!

CR: Well, exactly. But it might be interesting to see what we have different and what we have in common.

Transcript Excerpt 1

In many ways, the statements by Moriah and Jadyn began to crack open the topic of family diversity and laid the foundation for all the talk that was to come later. Yet even these initial few comments from the girls do important discursive work. For example, by using the inclusive pronoun “we,” Moriah shared that her family was “different” but in a way that still highlighted how ordinary this fact was. Her family was one within this larger sphere of difference. By rephrasing my statement to say “We all have different families,” Moriah emphasized her family’s difference not as something that would set her apart from her peers but as a commonality she shared with others. Her statement also showed sensitivity to her peers. At this point in the book club Moriah didn’t know much (if anything) about the other girls, but her discourse made room for children from a
variety of families to be included in the group. Those differences became a commonality through her remark. Jadyn’s comment also indicated her consciousness of her family’s difference, while still protecting their privacy. It doesn’t make any specific information about her family public and therefore downplays what it is particularly that makes them different, i.e., having lesbian mothers. She contributed to the discussion but in a way that avoided revealing her queer family and emphasized a general sense of difference. Therefore, while the girls’ initial comments opened up some spaces about families and connections around difference, they did so in surface-level and nonspecific ways. These comments only obliquely referred to their families’ queerness, leaving it unstated, just as they often did in schools.

After this discussion, we began to read The Family Book (2003), a brightly illustrated and engaging book that catalogues a wide variety of family traits and structures with a different family arrangement listed on each page. As we read together, the book provided some additional language that the girls took up and used in their self- and family-identifications. Their responses remained tentative and guarded. For example, in their opening conversations and for the first few pages of the book, they initially only referred to normative family members and relationships including mom, dad, aunt, brother, sister, and pets. In addition, after reading aloud the two facing pages of the book that read “Some families have a stepmom or stepdad and stepsisters or stepbrothers” and “Some families adopt children,” the following talk ensued:

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55 Such behavior is similar to some of the “covered” talk (Yoshino, 2006) I noticed children use when with their peers at school (see Chapter 5), and therefore strengthens the claim that children were initially covering in this space as well.
Isabella: I have a stepmom

Moriah: Adopted. Yay!

CR: Yay!

Jadyn: Oh yeah, the duck adopted the penguin!

Isabella: It’s a duck with a penguin!

Moriah: Can I see?

CR: Yep, this is the “some families adopt children”

Moriah: Ooh, I was adopted.

CR: Mm-hmmm.

Chloe: Ahhhhh!

Transcript Excerpt 2

Isabella’s initial claim, “I have a stepmom” was the first time a child had made and shared a connection between her family and the book in this discursive location. It is interesting to note that Isabella was not only the oldest girl in the group (a fact the girls had already discussed by this point), but by this moment in the session she had already talked about her father, a family member that none of the other girls could claim in the same way. These two features granted her significant social privilege among the girls at book club. Although after we read this page of the book, she added “stepmom” to the list of family members she had made public to the group, she still did so in a way that did not reveal any type of queer relationship. Without additional information, the other girls

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56 Isabella was born to a mother and a father in an opposite-sex marriage. All the other girls at book club were born directly to or adopted directly by lesbian mothers and therefore did not have fathers in a parenting role.
could have assumed a normative arrangement whereby her stepmother had married her father. The truth is that Isabella’s stepmother had partnered with her mother not her father. Within the context of book club, Isabella’s connection between the text and her family, still downplayed, or covered (Yoshino, 2006; see Chapter 5), its queerness. Her identification with the text seemed direct and explicit, but what she left out suggested she was still cautious about what was safe to say within the unknown of this new space.

Other girls were also guarded about what they shared. For example, Moriah at first gave support to the general concept of adoption in a way that did not directly identify her as an adopted child by saying, “Adopted. Yay!” Only after my echo of support (“Yay!”) and the other girls’ fascination with the book’s illustrations did Moriah study the book more closely and then directly identify herself as adopted. I responded to this in a generally neutral way as Chloe, Moriah’s sister who is also adopted, said, ambiguously, “Ahhhhh!” With this expression, Chloe did not make a similar statement of identity, nor did Moriah speak for her. Overall, information about families, if shared at all, was shared hesitantly and cautiously at this point in the reading and without reference to any queer kinship. The girls were playing it safe in this new peer group.

Uncovering the Queer Similarities

When I turned the page and read, “Some families have two moms or two dads,” hesitancy quickly gave way to a flood of direct discursive productions about their queer families. In a rush of words, one after the other, the girls responded:

Jadyn: [singsong] We have two moms!

Moriah: I have two moms.
Isabella: I have two moms.

Julia: So do I.

Chloe: I do, too!

CR: Look at that.

Isabella: Everybody here has two moms…except her! [pointing to me]

CR: That’s true! Oh, I feel so left out! Awww…I wish I could be cool.

Isabella: Everyone’s [xxxxx]

Moriah: No…Actually, it’s not that cool to have two moms.

CR: No, it’s not?

Isabella: Actually, it IS cool! I get three houses now!

Moriah: [simultaneously with Isabella] Actually, it IS. It IS. But everybody’s different. Wait, you all have two moms except her [CR]?

Jadyn: Yeah.

Transcript Excerpt 3

This discussion marks the first time in this context that children claimed and shared the fact that they are all children with lesbian mothers. It was, in fact, the first mention of any type of non-heterosexual relationship in book club at all. While the children knew they were teaching me what it was like to be a child in their family, they did not all know that having lesbian parents was a connection they shared with the other children in my “homework project.” The very second Parr’s book made this type of kinship a visible, viable possibility, the children were all quick to self-identify. The speed of their
responses made it seem they had been sitting on this information, waiting for this moment to explode with identification. The words spilled out, and the girls declarations dovetailing one into the next. Unlike Moriah and Chloe in the previous excerpt, Jadyn even spoke for both herself and her sister, although Julia also added her individual claim a few lines later (“So do I.”). With these claims, discursive productions of family at book club had taken a queer turn.

_The Family Book_ provided the impetus for the girls to share these parts of their queer families aloud. It also served as a spring board for sharing the different feelings the girls had about having two moms. Moriah’s comments and the range of feelings she expressed in them (“No…Actually it’s not that cool to have two moms” and her next turn “Actually, it IS. It IS. But everybody’s different.”) could, I think, be read in a few different ways. First of all, mirroring some of the earlier talk in the Book Club, she might be cautious to downplay information that was not always safe to share. Even though everyone in the group had said they had two moms, it took Moriah a moment for this to sink in. She even double checked with everyone a few turns later, asking, “Wait, you all have two moms?” Another interpretation could be that Moriah was purposely making room for a wide variety of opinions and perspectives. After I said it was cool, she suggested it might not be cool. This addition expanded the possibilities with which group members could identify. Although her change of opinion could have resulted from Isabella’s argument (i.e., she thought it wasn’t cool but decided to say it was, after she heard Isabella make that claim), the fact that they spoke at the same time makes this unlikely. Instead, Moriah’s comment, “But everybody’s different,” highlighted this
diversity of families and of opinions about those families, and suggested she was making room for dissonance and disagreement. Such an interpretation is in keeping with another inclusive comment she made earlier, “We all have different families.” Both comments locate the girls’ families in larger, common contexts of difference without solidifying the details of the distinctions in ways that would exclude others.

While children’s discursive productions of family started off in tentative and guarded ways that kept queerness quiet, once Parr’s book broke the silence it created the space for girls to discuss their mothers openly. The girls used the words of The Family Book to spur their disclosure through identification with the text, uncovering their previously-guarded, common connection to queer kinship. Information sharing moved from “mom,” “dad,” siblings and pets to stepmothers and adoption and eventually having “two moms,” all within a larger, more general, focus on difference. By the end of the book, when I asked the girls what pages they felt had described their families, the girls all said the “two mommies” page while Moriah and Chloe also added “the different colors part.” Reading together in book club provided an opportunity for the girls to explore the connections between their families and others, testing what could be said in what ways, as they established the safety of the discursive sphere of which they were a part.

**Negotiating Definitions of Home Kinship Terms**

After establishing that they all had two mothers, the girls continued to share their own experiences with queer kinship. Specifically, they negotiated definitions of the different terms and names that they commonly used at home to communicate about their queer families. In other words, with a level of trust and intimacy established through
their queer kinship connection and the ability to draw on their home lives, the girls moved on to more complex communication. Instead of thinking only about what they could say, they were able to reflect on and compare the full range of how they say and communicate certain terms and ideas. Consequently, their talk became direct, complex, and full of detail. For example, although their familial connection had originally rested on having “two moms,” that picture was quickly disrupted by Isabella:

CR: You have two moms [Moriah]. Do you have two moms [Julia and Jadyn]?

Julia: [overlapping with Jadyn] Yes.

Jadyn: Yes.

CR: You have two moms [Isabella]?

Isabella: Ooh whoo!

CR: And anybody else?

Isabella: My dad.

CR: And a dad. And you [Mary] have…

Moriah: You have two moms and a dad? Oh my God!

Isabella: Yep, three parents.

CR: Three parents!

[Laughter]

Transcript Excerpt 4

When I invited Isabella to add to her list of who she recognized as parents, she took the opportunity to add her dad to the two mothers she had previously identified. I tried to
open the floor to others, but Isabella’s announcement drew surprise and attention from Moriah. Facing her own limits about parents and families, the idea of three parents made Moriah exclaim “Oh my God!” In this supportive peer environment, however, Moriah’s surprise existed beside Isabella’s self-definitions of family, without either one being silenced. Isabella responded matter-of-factly, “Yep, three parents,” I mirrored this in support, and the girls laughed and moved on in their discussion.

Who’s a Dad?

The most sustained, dialogic talk about families occurred around a discussion of fathers. In other public settings, when asked directly about a father, I had heard the girls explain that they didn’t have a dad (e.g., field notes 6/23/08, 10/20/08). In Book Club, however, with their similarly-situated peers, the discussion was longer\(^{57}\), more involved, and more specific to the various situated realities of the different families. It also incorporated language that was common in their homes. The first part of the conversation, after Isabella claimed a dad, focused on explicitly labeling and defining different conceptions of fathers:

Mary: I have a birth dad.

CR: Yeah, ok.

Mary: But I don’t get to see him.

Julia: Yeah, we have a birth dad, but we never do…

CR: So that’s the same…

\(^{57}\) For clarity of analysis, I present the talk below divided into several different subsections, but readers should note that this entire conversation was one long continuous discussion without any natural break until the end of Transcript Excerpt 9.
Moriah: I have three moms and one dad.

Jadyn: It’s a donor. It’s a donor.

Mary: Yeah, it’s a donor dad.

Chloe: Who’s a dad?

Mary: You don’t get to live with him. And you never get to see him, even if your parents [[want you to xxxx]]. And I don’t get to see him until I’m 18.

CR: I think that’s maybe the same…

Isabella: [overlapping with Mary, to Chloe] You don’t know what a dad is?!!

Chloe: [Laughing] I do!

Moriah: No, my birth dad.

Isabella: She doesn’t know what a dad is!

Jadyn: It’s like a MOM, but it’s a BOY!

Isabella: It’s a boy. I said she doesn’t know what a dad is!

Chloe: I do too!

CR: She does. I think you were misunderstanding her.

Isabella: But she said, “What’s a dad?”

Transcript Excerpt 5

Mary is the first to add greater specificity to the conversation by claiming not just a dad, but a “birth dad.” Her use of this label shifted the focus from a father as a full parental figure who might be counted as equal to her moms, as in Isabella’s case, to a reproductive
role that assists in creating a birth. “Birth dad” is not the term I’d heard Mary use before to describe her donor, but Julia also took it up before Jadyn clarified even further: “It’s a donor.” Mary quickly adopted this new label as well, the one I’d heard her use in other contexts (see Chapter 4), saying, “Yeah, it’s a donor dad.” In the midst of this, Moriah also claimed her own birth father, first clarifying, “I have three moms and one dad.” She had redefined the number of parents she decided to claim, counting both her birth parents as well as her adoptive mothers. The differences between these two kinds of “birth dads” - donors and biological fathers in cases of adoption - were left unexplored at this point, but the girls returned to and addressed these distinctions more explicitly later in the conversation.

Chloe inquired more about the several different kinds of fathers the girls had just named by asking explicitly, “Who’s a dad?” Mary took this as a sincere request for more information and explained some of the features of her dad, a sperm donor. Isabella joked around with Chloe, the youngest participant in book club, laughing at her for not knowing what a dad is, but such teasing wasn’t taken up by the other girls. The only one of the participants with a dad in a parenting role, Isabella insisted on keeping up her incredulous joking, perhaps failing to remember that the other girls’ experiences were not the same as her own. By the end of this excerpt, the girls had introduced a range of vocabulary for understanding various kin and non-kin relationships that make up the role of “father” in their families. But there was still little shared understanding, and many questions remained.
Did You Cut One of Your Moms in Half?

The children’s negotiation of names and labels for a wide variety of family members continued. While fathers were still a part of the conversation, the girls also negotiated the similarities and differences between terms such as “tummy mom,” “half mom,” “birth mom,” and “Godmother.”

CR: And you guys have tummy moms, too, right?
Mary: Her sister has 7 names!
Moriah: I have three moms. Three and a half moms…
Isabella: Oh, did you cut one of your moms in half?!?

[Laughter]

Moriah: [laughing] No! No wait, I have two and a half moms.
Isabella: So you cut another one of your moms in half?!?
CR: Do you want to explain it to Isabella?
Isabella: Oh yeah, she has a Godmother.
CR: Well, maybe. Let’s ask Moriah.
Moriah: I have a birth mom!
Isabella: I know she has xxx
CR: Are you listening to Moriah explain it?
Chloe: [to Isabella] You’re weird!
Moriah: I have three moms. And…one dad. But I wish I had a dad that xxxxx
CR: Yeah.
Moriah: Sethy [her adult brother] would like xxx dad.
Jadyn: See, every family’s different!
CR: Isn’t that crazy!
Isabella: I have three parents!
Jadyn: I only have a donor.
Isabella: My cousin’s my Godparent.
Moriah: Are we the only people that were adopted?
CR: Mallory was, but she’s not here right now. So, she’ll be here later.
Moriah: She’ll be here today?
CR: No, but the next book club or the one after. Because I wanted to make sure you know that there were other kids who were adopted here.

Transcript Excerpt 6

In this segment, I introduced the term “tummy moms” that I learned at Moriah and Chloe’s house. Although the term wasn’t taken up by the girls, it did spark a conversation about other types of mothers that built on and complemented previous talk about types of fathers. Moriah grappled with jointly classifying these multiple types of mothers, initially naming her two adoptive mothers and her birth mother together as three mothers before she quickly changed that to add the concept of a “half mother,” a mother who may have an important role yet not the same role as her other two custodial mothers. She settled briefly on “two and a half moms” where the two “whole” moms were her
adoptive mothers and her “half mom” was her birth mother. In her next turn, she returned to the idea of “three moms. And…one dad.” At this point, especially because of the social power Isabella held in the group, it seemed as if she and Moriah were playing a bit of an I-have-more-parents-than-you game. However, given Moriah’s challenge to Isabella about her three parents in Transcript Excerpt 4, it could also be that Moriah was simply working out for herself the ways in which she might also have more than two parents.

Isabella made more jokes about these newly named figures, asking if the “half” mom was physically half a mother. The girls recognized this as a joke and all laughed, although it did prompt Moriah to continue refining her calculations. After making her joke, Isabella continued to assert herself as knowledgeable, stating confidently, “Oh yeah, she has a Godmother” as a way of explaining the idea of a “half” mom. This, we learned later, was another familial relationship that was familiar to Isabella, when she shared, “My cousin’s my Godparent.” I tried to return the floor to Moriah in an attempt to re-center her as the expert on her own family, and Moriah eventually named the “half mom” as her birth mom. Chloe’s mild put-down to Isabella (“You’re weird”) may also have been an attempt to get Isabella to respect her sister Moriah’s explanations. While Moriah was not actually referring to a Godmother in her calculations, Isabella’s contributions introduced yet another kin term and way of thinking about, calculating, and labeling family members. Even though the girls all had two mothers, a variety of other kinship terms and definitions required negotiation to fully understand the aspects of family they now felt safe to share in this context.
Isabella repeatedly asserted her familial relationships into the conversation, but the other girls continued to keep a variety of difference (including their own diverse family structures) involved in these negotiations as well. For example, Jadyn returned to a more general discussion of family diversity by stating inclusively, “See, every family’s different!” She later reminded the group that she “only has a donor,” again referring to earlier talk amongst the girls. Moriah then asked explicitly about who in the book club was adopted and I told her that Mallory was too\textsuperscript{58}. Moriah’s question and my response kept adoptive families in the discussion along with the negotiated talk about donors and biological parents.

What’s a Donor?

The idea of a donor was commonplace for children who had been conceived through assisted insemination (AI), but complicated for a child like Isabella who was born in an opposite-sex marriage or Moriah and Chloe who had been adopted. Just as Moriah sought out other participants whose families were formed like hers was, the girls whose families were formed via AI also openly discussed and compared their experiences with one another:

Mary: Does he have green eyes?

Jadyn: I don’t know…

Mary: We got a form…

Jadyn: [exasperated] I’ve never met him!

\textsuperscript{58} Although I felt somewhat uncomfortable making part of Mallory’s family life public without her knowledge or consent, I weighed that decision against the cost of Moriah and Chloe’s sense of isolation within the group and decided to share.
Mary: Me either, but we got a form about him.

Julia: Yeah.

Jadyn: Yeah, every donor has to sign a form.

For the other children, however, this conversation and specifically the term “donor” remained confusing, so more questions and discussion ensued to clarify:

Moriah: What’s a donor?

Isabella: A donor is someone who doans people!

Chloe: I’m going to have a dinner!

Jadyn: You know how a boy has a sperm, and…

Moriah: You said dinner! It’s like, “I didn’t have any dinner!”

Isabella: I have a dinner dad!


Jadyn: [Laughing] A dinner dad!

CR: It sounds like Jadyn was going to explain it. You want to explain it?

Jadyn: Um, it’s this guy who wants to give…their sperm to…another lady. And they have to sign a form telling them about…their allergies.

Julia: Allergies…

Jadyn: They have allergies. They have blue eyes, green eyes…

Mary: Green eyes!

Jadyn: And they have brown hair or something like that.
Mary: Do they like to wrestle?

Jadyn: I’m just making this up…ok?

CR: No, no, these are good examples.

Jadyn: And, um, like…they have a mom and a dad or they have a step dad or something…

Transcript Excerpt 7

The children whose families didn’t include the kinship arrangements being defined and discussed made jokes about their emerging understandings, similar to the conversation about “half mothers” above, but the children who did have these figures in their family arrangements took their discussion and definition of the terms very seriously. Here, Jadyn, Julia, and Mary – all children born from AI – co-constructed a definition of “donor” for the other girls. Their definition covered the basic information about a man who shared his sperm, but the connection to pregnancy was not yet stated explicitly. Instead, in an indication of how personal this information is, the girls started to give examples of the facts they knew through their donors’ “forms” about their physical traits and background. Moriah seemed to realize she was missing some crucial information and asked for additional clarification about the definition of the term. This prompted Jadyn to begin again, more fully communicating the donor’s role in creating a pregnancy:

Moriah: Wait, I didn’t hear the first part. What she said. The first part.

Jadyn: Um, it’s a donor. A donor is…it’s kind of hard to explain…

CR: You’re doing ok.
Jadyn: But…it’s this guy that wants to give their sperm to another…girl, and…

CR: Julia, you want to jump in or what? You’re looking impatient!

But Jadyn’s doing great. [laughing]

Jadyn: And…they…I don’t think they tell…but you never get to meet them.

Julia: You don’t HAVE to.

Jadyn: You don’t have to. But my moms chose not to.

Julia: You sign a form that you don’t need to.

Jadyn: And I’ve never met him.

CR: So, does that make sense?

Jadyn: And I think he has brown eyes because…my whole family except my other mom has brown eyes.

CR: That could be.

In Transcript Excerpts 7 and 8, the definitions offered by Mary, Julia, and Jadyn became more and more personal as their conversations continued. It was clear that these were not simply abstract definitions of distant concepts, but deeply meaningful pieces of information about their families and their own lives. For example, when Jadyn explained that her mothers chose an anonymous donor, she added information about the biological characteristics that she had deduced about his physical characteristics: “And I think he has brown eyes because…my whole family except my other mom has brown eyes.” The
definition of a donor in the abstract had become a definition of Jadyn’s particular donor, the man whose genetic material makes up half of her own biology.

Finally, I tried to summarize all the different terms and labels we’d been discussing, comparing the various experiences of different family formations and modes of creation:

CR: So, so you guys had a tummy mommy and a dad. And your mom got pregnant and you grew in her belly. [Isabella and Jadyn continue to talk] Right? Jadyn and Julia’s moms…and Mary’s Mom and Eema wanted to have a baby the two of them, but they needed to have a man’s sperm so they could have a baby inside them. So the donor is the man who gives the sperm so they can grow the baby inside them.

Mary: Me and Noel have the same donor.

CR: Does that make sense?

Moriah: Yeah.

CR: Ok.

Jadyn: A big, giant egg!

Mary: Me and Noel have the same donor.

Jadyn: Yeah, we have the same donor.

Mary: Yeah, me and Noel have the same donor, too. But she’s not here. She’s with my mom.

CR: Right. She’s too little.
Jadyn: She’s too little to read!

Transcript Excerpt 9

After my attempt to articulate some of the concepts more explicitly, Mary expanded on the definition yet again, this time to add siblings and the role her donor played in helping to create both children in her family. She emphasized that she and her sister had the same donor. This was also true for Jadyn and Julia, which Jadyn shared with the group. Finally, Jadyn wrapped up this segment of conversation by reminding us of the ostensible purpose for the group: to read books together. Her move to return to the “book” part of “book club” indicated that all of these discussions and negotiations, for her, were consciously contextualized in a space of reading; she was not just a child with two mothers and a donor, she was a reader with two mothers and a donor. These identities were interconnected through book club. After her comment, we returned to the text.

How do You Spell Family?

Sometimes definitions had to be negotiated not just for individual kin roles but for descriptions and conceptions of family more broadly. As our book club conversations continued, the girls became more explicit about their understandings of family, naming kinship’s presence across biological ties. For example, Jadyn used language to affirm Moriah and Chloe’s relationship as sisters even though they are not related biologically:

Jadyn: Are you guys sisters?

Moriah: She has the same…You [Caitlin] are going to hear me a lot in here [the mic].

CR: That’s good.
Jadyn: You’re the same, ok? You have the same kind of family. Because you’re sisters. We do too! [lots of giggles] Because we all like goats and we have a dog and we have two xxxx and we have two xxx.

After Moriah and Chloe had each described their family, Jadyn noticed the identical descriptions, leading her to ask if the girls were sisters. Although Moriah began to answer, she got distracted by the microphone recording our session. It was Jadyn who drew on her own definition of and experience with a sister to answer her own question, telling Moriah and Chloe, “You’re the same, ok? You have the same kind of family. Because you’re sisters.” Here, Jadyn defined family not as biological relatedness but as inclusion within the same community of kin who share interests and other things in common. Such a conception of family matched how Jadyn’s mothers talk in their home (see Chapter 4), but it was also an important linguistic and social move because Moriah and Chloe are not only adopted, but Moriah is African-American with darker skin and Chloe is bi-racial with very light skin. Jadyn constructed a definition of family to the group where you could be “the same” and “sisters” even in the face of such visible biological differences, such as Moriah and Chloe’s, or even less visible ones, such as Jadyn and her sister Julia being carried by different mothers. These non-normative kin bonds were influenced by having lesbian mothers, but were also a product of other family features such as adoption.

When the girls discussed words and names for various family members, they again highlighted definitions of queer kinship that existed separately from legal and
biological ties. They also explored the need for new, queer-inclusive language and the creativity that could be used when defining kinship in these innovative ways. For example, while the girls drew pictures of their families, they had the following discussion:

Julia: My mom, Jayne, was thinking about getting her head shaved. I have no idea why, but she…

Moriah: Jayne?

XXXX: Her mom.

Julia: MyMy. She thought about it.

Jadyn: We call her MyMy.

Julia: I gave her that name when I was maybe, like, one.

XXXX: Who?

Julia: My mom. I gave her MyMy.

Moriah: You gave her that name? You?

CR: You say Momma Maelee and…

Moriah: Momma Denise.

CR: And you say Mom and MyMy. And Mary, you say Mommy and…

Mary: Eema. And that’s Mom in another language, but I don’t know remember which.

CR: Hebrew, right?

Mary: Maybe.
Moriah: And we sometimes say Momma ‘Lee.

CR: Momma ‘Lee? Yeah. You shorten it…

Moriah: But we sometimes say Momma ‘Leeta! [copying an earlier joke by Jadyn’s]

CR: And, Isabella, you say…

Julia: Because Mycha…

Isabella: CeCe.

CR: Mom and CeCe. Right.

Julia: Mycha is mom in a different language…and she wanted us to call her Mycha…

XXXX: How do you spell family?

CR: That’s what it was. Then it became MyMy

Chloe: Can I have something on this?

Julia: …or…um…first I called her Mycha. Then I kinda put Mom with it. Mycha. And Mom. So MyMy.

Jadyn: How do you spell family? I love…my family…

Chloe: [while writing] F-A-M….I-L-Y

In this conversation, Julia recognized that those outside her family would not recognize the term MyMy that she uses for her mom, so she began by using Jayne, her mother’s first name. Unlike school and other public places, however, she moved from Jayne to MyMy, sharing the term, explaining it with help from her sister, and telling the story of
its origin. This opened up the conversation for other girls to share the names that they used when addressing their mothers, comparing their language practices with those of others in the group. Having the space for such a conversation moved these language practices from the home to a more public context of peers, solidifying the intimacy of the group and the social connections they shared. Furthermore, while Jadyn asked how to literally spell the word family, her question came at a time when the girls had already been answering this question figuratively through their discussions and negotiations about queer kinship.

Talking about the ways that they understood and referred to queer kinship relations in the contexts of their families was not just a theoretical exercise for the girls. Although their particular practices varied, they did not question the need for such practices and they seemed to readily understand the various terms and decisions different families used. They understood the need to redefine terms to fit specific circumstances. So comfortable were they with these labels that children began to take up the correct names for other girls’ mothers within their own talk. For example, Jadyn used Moriah and Chloe’s name for one of their mothers in a singsong way she had begun earlier and that became quite popular within the group:

Moriah: That’s the same as my mom…our mom. Mommy Denise’s older than Momma ‘Lee, but Momma ‘Lee’s taller than Mommy Denise.

CR: That’s just like that, exactly.

Jadyn: [singing] Momma ‘Leeta!!!
In another moment, Isabella and Chloe both used Julia and Jadyn’s term “MyMy” appropriately:

Julia: She’ll say, “I’m going to tell MyMy. I’m going to tell MyMy.”

Isabella: But MyMy’s not here right now!

[laughter]

Chloe: MyMy’s not here! Everybody, listen up!

Transcript Excerpt 12

In these instances, the labels that respectfully and accurately named the girls’ lesbian mothers were no longer limited only to home contexts, but were able to circulate in a safe, intimate peer space. After the terms were shared and explained, the girls understood such practices even from others’ families and used them appropriately within the group. They validated each others’ sense of family by taking up and normalizing their various queer language practices.

Summary – Negotiating Definitions

While many of the various terms the children explored in this session had been used in children’s homes by themselves and their mothers, I had very rarely heard any of them used outside the home and certainly not in schools. In book club, the girls established the safety and connections to share a wide range of information about their families, even when these were not self-evident or unproblematic terms. Together, they wrestled with questions about how many parents you could have, who those parents could be, and how you would count and sort people who were different kinds of kin to
you. Oftentimes, it was the children’s own questions to each other that kept the conversation going. Sometimes they found those various ideas “hard to explain,” but generally they persevered, making connections with children whose families had been formed in ways similar to theirs and learning from children whose families had taken shape in different ways.

*Grappling Together with the Implications of Queer Kinship*

Once the girls had mapped out and negotiated their own different uses of language to discuss their queer families, they compared their own understandings of kinship with more traditional, heteronormative ideas they had become familiar with in other settings. Wrestling with the implications that arose from thinking of kinship in queer ways created difficult or painful conversations, yet the girls worked together to make sense of what they knew and made reference to several different factors they could draw on for support.

*Then Why Could My Moms Get Married?*

Writing and drawing about her family during this book club session made Mary remember a time she and her moms had written a poem about their family for a national LGBT family organization to share with law makers (see Chapter 4). Talk about this act of advocacy brought up a discussion about the inequalities facing LGBT people and their families in this country:

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59 Book Club took place during the summer of 2008, during the Bush administration and before the repeal of Proposition 8 in California, making gay marriage legal in California at this time.
Mary: When I did the poem...when you do it...it could help...it can help change the laws for two moms...or two dads to marry each other.

CR: Right.

Julia: Yeah, but the president right now didn’t like two moms...the idea.

Moriah: Yeah, my mom and my....my mom and my mom can’t get married. They’re not. They’re two moms.

XXXX: There’s this guy named Mitchell...

Moriah: But before that, before you were allowed to.

Jadyn: Do you have two moms?

CR: Right now you can only...you can get married if, um...

Isabella: ...You’re in Canada.

CR: ...you’re in Canada, or if you’re in California. Or if you’re in Massachusetts. But not in Ohio right now.

Isabella: I think about Texas, too.

CR: Not yet.

Jadyn: Then why could my moms get married?

Moriah: You said Texas, too?

Julia: Because that would be four!

Isabella: [into the mic] Hi! Hi! Hi! It’s working!

CR: You can get married...
Jadyn: [also into the mic] I’m growing!

CR: Please don’t do that. Um. You can get…you can just get married on your own. Like you can, you can make a promise to somebody in a church or in…but you can’t do it with the laws like Mary was saying.

Transcript Excerpt 13

The girls were able to draw on their own lived experiences and on the language they had for understanding and communicating those experiences. Yet even in the safe camaraderie of book club, talking about queer kinship in relation to a larger, more heteronormative world, we stumbled together into a risky and emotionally dangerous moment. Once Mary acknowledged that two moms or two dads could not marry each other because of current laws, a discussion ensued about where such unions were legal.

While Julia and Moriah were clear that their mothers could not get married, they each ran into limits of language to express this restriction. Julia shared how the president didn’t like “two moms…the idea.” Moriah also hesitated, saying, “my mom and my…” and then later, “They’re not. They’re two moms.” I also showed similar hesitations as I struggled between wanting to affirm their families and wanting to speak with them honestly about such inequality. But it was Jadyn who seemed to hit the strongest limit in her own thinking when, after hearing about how it was not legal for her mothers to marry in the state where they live, could not reconcile this with what she knew to be true: her mothers were fully committed life partners, and therefore “married.” Threatened with such a change in how she imagined those closest to her (and likely herself as well), she
steered away from any further discussion of the topic, and she and Isabella played with
the microphone instead of continuing the conversation\(^{60}\). Their own sense of kinship
had run into more heteronormative ideas, and those realities, even when faced with a
group of similarly-situated peers, was painful and difficult.

Encountering Those Who Don’t Like “People Like That”

Mary shared another example of an encounter with those who took a more limited
and conservative view of families, but this time the discussion ended on a slightly more
positive note. Earlier in the session Mary had obliquely mentioned a situation that
happened to her while she was with her family at a Barnes and Noble book store. Jadyn
later asked Mary to share it:

Jadyn: Can you tell me about the Barnes and Noble?

Mary: Ok! I could tell all of you if you guys wanted to.

CR: Sure.

Jadyn: I want to!

CR: Thanks for asking. What was the Barnes and Noble story that
happened?

Mary: Well, there was this babysitter girl who babysits. She’s really
good with kids and I really liked her a lot. And then…but she
went to a school where…

Jadyn: What does this have to do with Barnes and Nobles?

\(^{60}\) In fact, this discussion set off several minutes of name-calling and bickering amongst the girls, especially
among the two pairs of sisters.
It happened at Barnes and Noble. So, listen. She’ll help you understand.

And it was at Barnes and Noble. And, um. She had a little brother.

And she goes to a school…she went to a school where they taught kids not to like…people like that. And, um…

People that…like two moms.

Yeah, it was a Christian school, too.

This…this lady that Mary really liked and wanted to babysit her that she met at Barnes and Noble…that lady…um, was…

She was a kid, actually! And…She was still in school.

Ok. Like a babysitter lady. Ok. Like a middle-schooler or high-schooler.

She had been taught that it wasn’t ok to have two moms…

…And that lesbians and gay people weren’t ok…

Yeah.
CR: …And so, then, Mary couldn’t…she couldn’t come over and babysit Mary because Mary has two moms and that made Mary really sad.

Moriah: Who, her?

CR: Yeah.

Julia: That’s kinda mean…If I went to a school like that my parents would take me out immediately.

Transcript Excerpt 14

This story about the discrimination Mary had faced as a child in a lesbian household emphasized the ways that queer families collide with the heteronormativity of others. By sharing the experience of vulnerability within the larger community, she gained sympathy and support from her peers. A response from a knowledgeable and empathetic peer reframed the bigotry Mary experienced as something “mean” that another person did, confirming that the situation was not the fault of Mary or her mothers. Julia’s comment placed the blame for the situation on the person acting homophobic rather than on Mary, the person experiencing the homophobia. This reframing not only comforted Mary but all the children in the group who are vulnerable to such experiences. In this sense, Julia’s response to Mary’s story suggested a narrative that allowed Mary and the other girls to envision their families as powerful and capable of agency in the face of such treatment. It also reaffirmed Julia’s distance from such narrow-minded people in her everyday life (“If I went to a school like that…”). These conversations suggest children’s understandings of kinship come head-to-head with heteronormative understandings.
Talking with peers at book club was a way for the girls to share their fears and negative experiences while rehearsing and sharing a sense of agency and self-advocacy.

_A Head Start on What Other People Have_

The girls also worked hard to reconcile their ideas of family with opinions of the larger world when I asked them to whom, if anyone, they would recommend _The Family Book_. Their recommendations indicated the deep and personal connections they made with the text. Several girls used their own associations to the text as a guide for judging others’ reactions. For example, Chloe, a beginning reader herself, wanted her mom to read the book “because she’s a great reader.” Moriah said that her friends should read this book “Because they might have two moms like me. And they might be adopted.” Mary suggested that “little kids” read the book because she really liked reading it when she was little. Other girls, however, thought the book could benefit others who have had life experiences different from their own, because reading Parr’s book would be a way for them to learn about the experiences of others. Julia, for example, recommended it at first to “kids that are curious,” They would like it, she reasoned, because the book “kind of gives you a head start on what other people have.” She saw the book as a tool to see into and understand the lives of many kinds of diverse families. Their two different types of recommendations for who should read the book relied on both the book’s didactic purpose (“because they might have two moms;” give a “head start”) as well as the aesthetic or emotional enjoyment it could provide (“I liked it when I was little”).

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61 Julia also went on to say, “You might have someone else…. And they have the same thing…,” which described not only Julia’s association to the book, but the exact role this book played within book club: the girls all had “someone else” – a parent they weren’t always able to acknowledge or speak about – and the book helped them name and discuss these relationships so they could realize kids around them “have the same thing.”
Recommending the book to anyone outside of book club, no matter what the basis of the recommendation, required a consideration of how far into the heteronormative world the book’s appeal could stretch. Through their recommendations, they began to consider the potential for reading queer-inclusive texts with other people, including peers, in other settings of their lives.

Seeing Potential for Queer Families in Schools

Isabella extended the idea of the book as a tool for others’ learning farther into the public sphere, testing the girls’ limits of parts of their lives where reading this book might be possible. Specifically, Isabella said, “And I’d also recommend it to schools,” and shared a brief story about how her teacher the year before had read the book *Heather Has Two Mommies* (Newman, 1989) to her class after Isabella had shared stories of her involvement in advocacy work with an LGBT-rights organization (see Chapter 4). I posed Isabella’s suggestion to the group: “Ok, so you think that teachers should read this book and it would be good to read in schools?” Although I hadn’t seen LGBT-inclusive children’s literature in any of the girls’ classrooms, and hadn’t heard of any being read except for Isabella’s example, the girls loudly cheered their support for this idea. After their collective experiences reading and talking in book club, they all agreed that teachers should read this book and that it would be good to read in schools. Rather than having queer and heteronormative versions of kinship conflict, they saw potential for confluence in this case. Their experiences discussing ideas of queer kinship with supportive peers helped them see possibilities for moving these conceptions of family into more
heteronormative worlds, openly contextualizing families like theirs into straight spaces like school.

The power of the social connections forged in book club was a strong influence as children considered what kinds of reconciliation of these two views of family were possible. As book club ended, I reminded the girls that they could keep a list of things that happened when we weren’t hanging out together they wanted to share with me or the group. Mary said:

Mary: I think….I…Callie was sort of a bully to me. But she wasn’t bully to other kids because everybody else in the school had…didn’t have two moms or two dads.

CR: Yeah, you were the only one. That’s hard.

Mary: Yeah. So, I think that might have been the reason that she bullied.

CR: But you have other friends that have two moms, right?

Jadyn: Here they do!

CR: Well, that’s true!

Jadyn: Everybody does here!

Transcript Excerpt 15

Two aspects of this excerpt are significant here. First of all, Mary’s comment indicated that writing down run-ins she’d had with a classmate who bullied her and sharing her thoughts with me and the group was a way of diminishing the isolation she felt because “everybody else” at her school had straight parents. Secondly, I tried to
strengthen this sense of connectedness for Mary by asking about other friends she had in her community who might be experiencing similar treatment. But it was Jadyn who reminded Mary and the group of the bond they had created with each other. Jadyn was quick to point out that they need not look far to find the kinds of empathy, support, and community that Mary was looking for. Indeed, those factors had been built by the girls in book club. By participating in this group and, more particularly, through the reading and discussion around *The Family Book*, “everybody” present had found a new type of supportive peer group that could counteract the isolation and bullying represented in Mary’s story. Reading and writing and talking about families, therefore, was different in book club than in school for this very reason: here, nobody was a bully because everybody was a friend with two moms. This friendly space provided an opportunity for the girls not only to introduce aspects of their families to their peers, but also to grapple with implications of those ideas of family as they met up with realities in the larger, heteronormative world.

**Summary – First Book Club Session**

The girls began the session by approaching each other and sharing information about themselves and their families cautiously. They were unsure of what could be said and what would be understood by those around them. They behaved at first as they did in other peer groups such as school where they were used to being the only ones with lesbian mothers, downplaying the queer relationships in their families. Yet, the book we read and the discussions we had made different facts visible and safe to share. Through these interactions, the girls built new webs of peer support they were unable to create in
other environments. This new-found encouragement allowed them to move from testing what they could say to negotiating among the range of labels they used and understood. They compared experiences with a variety of family features including race and mode of family creation, exploring complexities and definitions of family beyond their initial connection as children with lesbian mothers. In this clarifying and challenging of experiences, the girls even took up other children’s language practices and used them accurately. They considered the implications of conflicts between queer kinship relations and heteronormativity. They shared experiences of vulnerability and difficulty within this new peer group, which in turn strengthened the social cohesion of the group and provided an opportunity to frame themselves as agents and advocates, united in the face of these experiences with prejudice. By bringing talk about family to a peer context outside the world of the home, they created connections with the text and among themselves, explored their similarities and differences, and drew on their new-found friendships to strengthen their sense of safety and advocacy in other, less friendly spaces.

Session Two: Negotiating Tensions and Complexities among Individual Experiences of Family

In the second book club session, a variety of tensions and complexities surfaced as children discussed themselves and their families. Specifically, through responses to and connections with the text we read, children took up the topics of (international) adoption and interracial families in ways that focused more on themselves as individuals than on their commonalities as children with lesbian mothers. While there were still moments where children found similarities among themselves and other members of the
group in their discussions of families, there were many more instances where a focus on their individuality highlighted their differences. Sometimes these differences were validated and accepted by the girls, but other times they were marked by tension and disagreement. Such interactions characterized this session, upsetting some of the participants and generally straining the bonds that had been created so powerfully in the first meeting, leaving us questioning what type of space we had created. I examine instances of these different types of interactions below.

Finding Additional Similarities

When the girls and I gathered again for the second book club, they hadn’t yet met Mallory, who hadn’t been able to attend the first meeting, but they did know that they were a group of children with lesbian mothers. They reaffirmed this similarity explicitly early in the session. When I asked the girls to help Mallory know what we talked about last time, Jadyn said, “We talked about different families!” Moriah, remembering the feeling of being connected and included but not the exact details, announced:

Moriah: Everybody’s adopted except you [CR].

[Pause]

Jadyn: No, not adopted!

Moriah: I mean…you have two moms.

Jadyn: Yes.

CR: Well, we don’t know about Mallory yet.

Moriah: I’m adopted!

Jadyn: Do you have two moms?
Mallory: Yep.

Moriah: This is a two mom club!

Although at first Moriah added the complexity of adoption to the conversation, in the end she and the other girls clearly reaffirmed this space as one meant for children with two moms, a space in which they could all be included.

Reading *Felicia’s Favorite Story* (Newman, 2002), about the adoption of a little girl from Guatemala by two lesbians in the United States, also provided situations around which the girls connected and highlighted their similarities with one another. For example, when Mamma ‘Nessa, one of Felicia’s mothers, was introduced into the story, Moriah connected the naming practices of the mothers in the book to her terms for her own moms: “Like we call Momma ‘Lee and Mommy Denise.” Julia and Jadyn joined this conversation, and the girls discussed their own names in more depth:

Jadyn: What’s your mom’s real name?

Moriah: Denise. And Maelee. Know why we’re called McKinney-Robbins? Because Mommy…Mommy Denise’s name is Denise Robbins and Mamma ‘Lee’s name is Maelee McKinney. So, so, that’s why…Mommy wants us to have both of their names.

CR: And you guys [Jadyn and Julia] have hyphenated names just like you guys [Moriah and Chloe] do. So they are McKinney-Robbins and you guys are Smith-Kendalls.
Julia: First mine was Smith and her’s [Jadyn’s] was Kendall. And they, they got it hyphenated.

Transcript Excerpt 17

The girls discovered that both of their families chose to give their children hyphenated names. Moriah and Julia shared the histories of their respective hyphenated last names and referred to their mothers’ intentionality when choosing and creating how their children would be addressed.

The girls created connections separate from the text through their own conversations about their families. For example, when Mallory introduced herself to the group, she talked about how her two mothers had recently “broke apart.” Jadyn asked if that meant her mothers were “divorced,” and Moriah shared with Mallory that one of her mothers “was divorced at some point.” Furthermore, she offered “And Seth [her older brother, the son her mother raised with her previous partner] had two moms. Now he still has two moms.” Not only did Moriah trace similarities between her family and the experiences that Mallory was sharing, but she also suggested that maternal bonds could survive even through such a change in family structure.

Endorsing Individual Differences

As children told stories of themselves as individuals during this book club session, their focus on individuality highlighted their differences. Sometimes these differences were validated and accepted by the girls, such as when we read “Your baby was born in Guatemala…,” in Felicia’s Favorite Story, and the girls took up race and nationality in a more direct way:
CR: Because kids…

Jadyn: I was born at Ohio State!

CR: Because kids who were born all over can be adopted.

Moriah: I’m African-American

Jadyn: Cool.

Mallory: I’m…I’m born from China.

CR: Exactly. We can find that on the map [I had brought with me for the activity after the book].

Julia: One of my friends was from China, is from China.

Transcript Excerpt 18

Identifying racial and ethnic backgrounds adds another layer of identity to Moriah and Mallory’s self definitions, but it does not mark them as separate from the group. Instead, as racial and ethnic identities became more salient through the details of the story we were reading together, the girls became more descriptive about their own identities and more strongly connected even in the face of complexities and differences. Jadyn and Julia, although privileged as white children62, were clear about accepting and connecting with these newly shared details of their friends in the group. This sense of affirmation and inclusion was reinforced later in the conversation as well, when we were using maps to locate places of importance in the book and in our own lives. Mallory suggested that we locate China and, when I asked why, Jadyn responded using the same phrase Mallory

62 By suggesting that Julia and Jadyn are privileged as white children, I refer not so much to the social privilege that their whiteness would bring in a variety of social situations, but specifically to the fact that in this discussion white is constructed as a norm that they do not have to identify. In other words, they are privileged because children of color, occupying the marked half of the racialized binary, claim (or are assigned) such racialized identities while Julia and Jadyn’s “neutral” or assumed whiteness goes unmarked.
had used earlier: “Because she’s born from it?” When Mallory and I both confirmed this, Jadyn responds, “That’s cool!” and again verbally affirmed Mallory’s layers of identity and history she brought to and shared with the group.

**Fighting about Individual Differences**

**Family Features and Family Formations**

Many times in this session, discussions of children’s differences were marked by tension and disagreement. Sometimes these conversations involved challenges and negative emotions pertaining to aspects of other girls’ family features and family formations. For example, when Mallory first described her family to the group, as mentioned above, she said:

Mallory: My family is like…mad.

CR: It’s mad?

Mallory: I don’t like my family.

CR: No, not right now?

Mallory: ‘Cause I don’t get to see my other mom.

CR: I know. That is really sad.

Chloe: Where’s your other mom?

Mallory: My other mom lives in Wisconsin. They fight. And they broke apart. And now I can’t see my other mom again. Well…I did get to see her a couple weeks ago.

Jadyn: [searching…] Do you still get to see her? Are they divorced?

Moriah: My mom was divorced at some point.
Mallory: Yeah.

Jadyn: But you...um...

Moriah: And Sethy had two moms. Now he **still** has two moms.

CR: Now he almost has 3, right?

Jadyn: Well, you...

Chloe: Sethy, our big brother, is older than Mommy Denise....[

Moriah: No he’s not! He’s not older than Mommy Denise.

Jadyn: [Still searching...] So, um...well...you, you can still see your other mom, can’t you?

Transcript Excerpt 19

Mallory’s talk about her experience within the emotional life of her family disclosed sensitive and emotional information with the group that stemmed from changes her family had undergone. Here, the pain of separation from a parent was much more significant than that parent’s gender, but the lack of legal status of gay marriage and/or divorce left Mallory to find her own words (“broke apart”) for the changes her family had gone through. In this discursive production of family, Mallory foregrounded the fact that not all parts of family are pleasant or comforting and that sometimes parents split apart and move away from their children. While Moriah made connections with Mallory though this story, it disturbed or at least challenged some of the girls, especially Jadyn, who tried hard to figure out what Mallory meant when she said she “can’t see my other mom again.” Jadyn tried to understand this difference between her family and Mallory’s
family and, using a traditional understanding of coupling and uncoupling, asked Mallory if her moms were divorced. Even after Mallory said yes, her mothers were divorced, Jadyn again challenged Mallory’s claim that she couldn’t see her other mom. Although Moriah connected to and empathized with Mallory’s situation, Jadyn was unable to make peace with these facts so easily. It was clearly important for Jadyn to understand the specific arrangements of when Mallory could see her other mother, yet that focus missed Mallory’s grief about her family change and the distance from her mother. Mallory and Jadyn both experienced tension in this conversation because of their different experiences of family, and both ended up visibly upset.

It was easy for the girls to misunderstand or dismiss the input of others based on the specifics of their own families. For example, early on in the session the girls launched back into a conversation about the various family members and methods of family origin we’d talked about the previous meeting:

CR: So we have some kids here who are adopted and some kids here who…and some kids who have two moms and then Isabella has two moms and a dad and all kinds of other stuff, so…

Moriah: I have three moms!

CR: You have three moms? Oh yeah, you have three moms in some ways, right.

Chloe: Why did she say that?

Moriah: And I have one dad.

CR: Chloe wants to know why you say you have three moms.
Moriah: Because my birth mom.

Chloe: [dawning on her] Ah! Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

Moriah: And our birth dads. So we have a dad.

CR: Right. So you have a birth mom and a birth dad and then you have two moms that you live with now.

Jadyn: Your dad is kind of like a donor, probably.

Chloe: [loudly, surprised] A donor?!?! What’s a donor?

CR: Yeah, and you guys….Do you remember that? We talked about it…

Jadyn: [somewhat exasperated] We talked about that last time.

Julia: Jadyn, do you want me to talk about it?

Jadyn: Yes! I don’t want to explain it again!

CR: Ok.

Jadyn: It’s hard to explain. Even though I’m good at explaining everything.

[laughter]

Julia: No, not really, but…It is someone who gives their sperm because they get paid money for it…

Jadyn: And it has to be a boy!

Chloe: Who’s really going to say it?

CR: No, Jadyn wants Julia to say it this time because she doesn’t want to explain it again. So, Julia will tell you.
Jadyn: If you want me to, I can.

Julia: He...he...gives up his sperm like maybe to go through college, to help him to go college, to get paid for it. And...so...it’s just someone who gives up...it’s a boy who gives up their sperm so that someone else can have a baby.

CR: Does that make sense?

Mallory: [very quietly] Uggggg. This isn’t going to be fun at all...

Chloe experienced a few moments of misunderstanding here. First of all, Moriah claimed to have three mothers. Next, Jadyn assumed that Chloe and Moriah had fathers who are “kind of like a donor probably.” Chloe reacted with surprise to both of these comments and sought additional information from the girls (“Why did she say that?” and “What’s a donor?”). Although Moriah was able to explain away the initial misunderstanding, her question to Jadyn created additional moments of conflict. Jadyn, conceived through AI, voiced frustration that she had to explain the idea of a sperm donor again to the group. Julia, her sister, finally took up the explanation because Jadyn couldn’t summon up the energy. She said she “[didn’t] want to explain it again” because she found it “hard to explain.” After this extended interaction about donor dads and other modes of family formation, it was Mallory who objected to the ideas that others seemed eager to discuss, whispering to herself, “Ugggg. This isn’t going to be fun at all.” Perhaps because of the painful memories and emotions that discussing her family summoned up for her, Mallory was resistant to the entire gathering even though (or
the book represented aspects of her own family situation. At one point, I
heard her on the recording of the meeting say “Blech” and “la la la” softly to herself as
we were reading. While this type of sharing and comparing of their families had been
energizing to the girls at the first session, this time Chloe was surprised by some of the
ideas and terms, Jadyn showed signs of frustration at needing to recap, and Mallory was
completely bored and shut down by the entire conversation. Overall, the sense of
tension and frustration was strong.

Origin Stories and Personal Characteristics

Tensions also arose when the girls shared stories of their various individual
origins and characteristics instead of sharing family stories. Both Felicia’s Favorite
Story and my own comments encouraged such tales, yet they caused conflict within the
group. Siblings occasionally tried to contribute information to their sisters’ stories, but
the girls were clear that these stories were about them as individual people and therefore
they alone had ownership over their telling. For example, at one point when Julia was
discussing Jadyn’s birth, an event which she had some memory of, Jadyn interrupted her
angrily, saying, “I know! MY birth story!” Later, Julia had a similar response to her
sister, “Jadyn, you can tell about your birth.” When Moriah tried to share a story about
her infancy, including how she was born prematurely and ended up with severe injuries

63 I say “or because?” here because I had imagined an interracial family formed through international
adoption to lesbian mothers to affirm Mallory’s own experience of family. What I see now, however, is
that while Mallory does come from a family such as the one represented in Newman’s book, the most
salient aspect of her family at this point, as she had expressed earlier, is that her family was “mad” and that
they “broke apart.” This book, where the seemingly happy little girl is adopted into a home with two
mothers, may have highlighted the difference between Mallory’s family as it had been and her family as it
is now, therefore producing more grief and actually creating the opposite effect of what I had intended.
While I remain optimistic that Mallory got something positive out of her participation in book club, I do
regret any additional frustration or hurt my decisions may have caused her.

64 Mallory did participate in the discussion as we went forward, but only occasionally and always quietly.
while she was in foster care, Chloe tried several times to beat her sister to the punchline of the story, claiming, “I know! She fell off the bed and she broke her leg.” Moriah reclaimed her storytelling rights, responding, “Stop! I’m telling my story, Chloe!” Such sibling bickering continued for much of the session, straining the relationships within the book club.

Fighting over claims to personal, individual information also happened with the girls’ racial identifications. Specifically, after I read from Felicia’s Favorite Story that the main character was from Guatemala, Moriah self-identified as African-American and Mallory self-identified as being from China. Moriah then tried to explain to Chloe, me, and the rest of the group that Chloe’s “real” racial identification was different than her phenotypic appearance. She said:

Moriah: [to Chloe] You are African American.

Jadyn: I’m from Ohio State.

Moriah: You’re African….she’s African American. She is. She’s supposed to be mixed, but she’s white.

CR: That’s ok. That’s something that people can…

Chloe: She is too! Like her, she is, too.

CR: You can say for yourself.

Moriah: Because she had a black dad and a white mom.

CR: Mmm-h mmm.

Moriah: But she looks like she’s white, but she’s not.

Transcript Excerpt 21

240
Moriah took over as arbiter of her sister’s identity. With these claims, Moriah challenged both Chloe’s self-identification (which is usually bi-racial) and the idea that she and her sister should be seen as different because of their different skin colors. In other words, Moriah challenged what she presumed to be a mistaken identification by the other members of the group: even if we thought Chloe “looks like she’s white,” she should not, according to Moriah, be seen that way.

*Expectations of Book Club*

The girls presented challenges to me as well as to each other. Several assumptions I made about how the session would proceed and what would be helpful and interesting for them to talk about were taken up in ways that challenged my beliefs. For example, I tried to build off of Felicia’s story of international adoption in the book we read by inviting the children to talk about their origins in order to affirm their different experiences. Mallory had already shared that she had been born in China. Since the summer Olympics were starting that day in Beijing, I wanted to help the girls make the connections between Mallory’s birthplace and the Olympic festivities they might hear about or watch on television, but the girls did not make the connection I had planned:

CR: And what’s happening right now in China that’s really exciting?

Julia: There was an earthquake…

CR: There was a big earthquake. You’re right.

Moriah: xxxx

CR: No, that’s not…it was…That was pretty sad. Is there anything else that you know of?
Moriah: People died.

CR: Mallory’s shirt has a clue…

Mallory: Uh-huh. Some people died and a huge earthquake came!

CR: It did. That was really sad.

Moriah: Then what’s exciting?

CR: Is there anything happier that’s going on in China now? That’s on the news?

Mallory: Mmmmm…

CR: It’s on your shirt.

Mallory: The Olympics?

CR: The Olympics! That’s right!

Transcript Excerpt 22

To me, book club was supposed to be a positive space of affirmation and support, like it had felt in our first session. To this end, I tried to connect Mallory’s birthplace of China and the excitement of the Olympics, but the children took up my initial question in a very different way. In spite of my continued prompting, the girls chose to discuss the tragedy of the massive earthquake that had recently struck Sichuan province, killing over 70,000 people. I rejected this different interpretation and tried to steer away from talk of tragedy, eventually asking outright “Is there anything happier that’s going on in China now?” Even after Mallory made the connection to the Olympics, it immediately prompted another story from her about family tensions and frustrations she had been experiencing:
CR: Yeah, they start today.

Moriah: What?

CR: The Olymp-

Mallory: Know what the really, really annoying part is? It’s that this morning…

Moriah: What Olympics?

Mallory: It’s that this morning Lila [Mallory’s little sister] ripped apart all the Dali Lama tickets apart and she was trying to save them.

Transcript Excerpt 23

As our talk continued, Mallory continued to share details of this story while I persisted in providing clarifying information about the Olympics. My lecturing and Mallory’s narration eventually wove together, overlapping in ways that demonstrated my persistence to talk about what I thought would unite the group and still affirm Mallory and her lived experience. At the same time, ironically, she was already doing that, centering herself through a familiar narrative vocabulary of vulnerability and negative emotion that I failed to recognize as valid or appropriate in this context even though it was related to the ideas of family complexity that I had introduced. This disconnect between Mallory’s and my own expectations of this space and what felt familiar to us created tension as we each tried to hold to what we wanted to achieve.

Summary – Second Book Club Session

While the first book club session allowed for talk, exploration, and connection around features of the girls’ families, our second gathering was marked by discussions of
differences, changes, sadness, and vulnerability. Both the book we read and the talk that occurred around it drew attention to the complexities of families and highlighted the various agendas and particular situations each child in the group brought to the overall dynamic. A few of these were connections shared by several of the girls. Sometimes when stories pointed out differences those differences were affirmed. Usually, however, they were challenged, creating friction between participants and straining the social bonds developed in the first session.

Although the girls readily identified the book club as being a space for kids with different family structures, specifically for kids with two moms, their subsequent discussions showed they did not feel confined to this topic. Instead, they used the inclusive setting to discuss much more about their families than they had the previous meeting, including stories of vulnerabilities such as injury, change, and sadness. This expansion of topics became especially important because the focus on having two mothers set Mallory apart from the group in some ways. Although she identified as having two mothers, the pain of their recent separation and her distance from her noncustodial parent created a very different set of lived experiences than the girls whose mothers were still partnered. While Mallory participated in the group, it was mostly to share stories of pain and loss. When girls shared other experiences, she occasionally expressed frustration and displeasure (i.e., “Ugh. This isn’t going to be fun at all.”). Bringing a new person into the group highlighted different experiences of family and changed the dynamic of the group in unanticipated ways.
I had set out to have this book club session build on and expand the previous one by reading a book that introduced the complexities of international adoption and interracial families. The children made a variety of personal connections with the text as we read, but the stories that the book prompted indicated that the text may have dealt with these topics too neatly. While in Newman’s book the mothers tell their daughter a heart-warming story about how beautiful she is and how much she was loved and wanted by her mothers to create their happy family, the talk in the book club pushed against the facileness of such a tale. They, too, had pride in their origins and much love in their families, yet the stories were not that simple. They also had experiences of hurt, loss, and worry, and they both relied on and strengthened the intimate connections they had built in the book club space by sharing those stories.

Such honest conversations were not what I had envisioned, nor were they conversations with which I was comfortable. My work to keep the girls on task during the map activity and to keep our discussions more “focused” or “happy” belie my assumptions about the kind of space that we had created together. Immediately after this meeting and for a long while afterwards, I thought of this book club as a sort of failure. I had come away from it extremely drained emotionally, exactly the opposite of how I’d felt just the week before. I couldn’t understand what had gone so wrong.

With subsequent analysis, I now have a different perspective. This type of unexpected uptake and highlighting of differences, rather than indicating a “failure”, actually demonstrated the degree to which this was a child-centered context, one that was not overly-directed but that could be shaped by the participants as their needs for the
group changed. Such unexpected talk demonstrated that the book club was not only a space inclusive of children with two moms, or even children with diverse family structures, but of the various experiences, emotions, and difficulties that come with being in a family, even when they created conflict.

In addition, I recognize the social pressure that children of lesbian-headed families face to present their families as valid, fully-functional, and nearly perfect (Garner, 2004). The fact that they were able to open up and share some of the gloomier stories and negative reactions about their families and the families of others is an important opportunity for them and a sign that they recognized each other as people with whom these stories and reactions would be safe. In some ways, this session stretched the threads of the girls’ social bonds without breaking them; they were still connected, but with more individual space and breathing room. Overall, the conversations in the second book club session remind us that children, even children with lesbian mothers are not identical, nor do they share the same lived experiences or make the same meaning from them. While being in lesbian-headed families united them, individual differences existed within as well as among different families. They used the book club space to share these various experiences with one another. Through our reading and subsequent discussions, the girls continued to balance their group identity with their individual experiences. They recognized that having two moms didn’t mean your families were the same, nor did it mean your experiences of family all had to be positive ones. In a group of children with two moms it became acceptable to admit that.
Session Three: Rehearsing Reactions and Responses to Use in Heteronormative Schools

In the third book club session, the discussions shifted from complexities and vulnerabilities they faced within the home and family sphere, as they had in Session Two, to the issues encountered when engaging in the world outside of the home, including school. In this session, the girls’ interactions allowed them to rehearse reactions in preparation for facing homophobia and social isolation outside of the group. Specifically, their exchanges highlighted and reinforced the out-of-school peer connections they had developed, and created a space to compare and respond to the types of mistreatment (bullying, in particular) they had each experienced at school. Stories describing the vulnerability and frustrations of children with lesbian mothers created opportunities to offer and receive support. By drawing on their peers’ encouragement and Asha’s Mums, the girls positioned themselves as agents and advocates in relation to these stories, able to assist themselves and others, rather than as powerless victims of others’ mistreatment.

Such comfort built gradually within the frame of this meeting. First, the girls solidified their bonds of trust and friendship, sharing stories of vulnerability with each other. Secondly, they focused specifically on bullying. They addressed the issue directly, explored its meanings and consequences in their various school contexts, and used these stories as opportunities to offer supports and be advocates for one another. Thirdly, the girls reflected, via our interactive read-aloud, on how bullying can happen through institutions as well individual people. Finally, we engaged in a dramatic inquiry where the girls scripted their own responses to bullying. Overall, this session created an opportunity to interact with supportive peers to share and rehearse strategies for
navigating homophobia at school in order to protect themselves against the social
isolation they admitted sometimes feeling.

Solidifying Bonds of Friendship and Sharing Vulnerabilities

Before the girls started talking directly about their experiences with bullying, they
reinforced their bonds of trust and friendship that had been established through the prior
book club sessions. For example, as each child arrived and entered the meeting space,
the other girls greeted her enthusiastically. They chatted together informally, sharing
stories about the pictures they were drawing, things they liked to do, things they had done
recently, and updates on their family members. Far from the awkward, forced get-to-
know-you games of the first session, the girls spontaneously began a game where they
traced their various connections, remembering the situations when they had first met each
other. The talk flowed easily among them. As the girls talked, they shared some of
their favorite activities and talents with each other. Acting in plays came up frequently;
Mary, Moriah, and Isabella had all recently participated in school or community shows.
Jadyn asked the group if they wanted to put on a play for their parents. Mary was
thrilled but nervous. She communicated these feelings to the other girls, explaining that
“I just get embarrassed easily sometimes.” Drawing on the friendships they had formed,

65 This stage of interaction may have been particularly significant given the contentious tone and bickering
that occurred during parts of the second session.
66 Although the girls didn’t all know each other at the beginning of the Book Club, Moriah and Chloe
attended the same church as Isabella, so they knew of each other. Isabella and Mallory’s mothers were
friends, so they had met before. Also, one time I had been attending a community event with Isabella and
Mallory’s families and we had happened to run into Julia and Jadyn with one of their moms. Although the
girls didn’t know each other at that point, after spending time together at Book Club, that brief chance
encounter took a more prominent position in their narrative of their friendship development. In fact, in this
“the first time I met you was…” game, that moment featured prominently especially in Jadyn’s accounts of
meeting Isabella.
67 I had a dramatic inquiry activity planned for that day after we read Asha’s Mums (Elwin & Paulse, 2000),
but the coincidence was serendipitous. I had not yet announced it or introduced it to the girls at that point.
Jadyn, replied, “Well, now you know us so you don’t need to get embarrassed!” Such sharing and discussion highlighted and solidified their networks of social ties.

Mary also shared other stories of vulnerability in ways that allowed the girls to come to her aid, reinforcing their friendships. When I took some of the girls to the bathroom in another part of the building, Jadyn, Julia, and Mary stayed behind and continued to talk. The subject of handwriting came up, prompting an extended conversation between the three girls:

Mary: I’m the worst in my class.

Julia: At writing?

Mary: Yeah, especially handwriting. And Callie [a girl in her class who she mentioned was a bully in the first book club session] would always tease me for how I draw, but I draw just fine. She would say I worse than I do, than I really do.

Jadyn: Come here.

Mary: She would make it look like I draw worse than I really do.

Jadyn: Ok, you write your alphabet right here and let’s see. Ok?

Julia: Trust me, we won’t make fun of you. Mine is way worse than yours, I promise.

Jadyn: See, watch. Ok.

Mary: Of course, we haven’t all been in school for a long, long time.

Jadyn: I’m really bad, ok?

Mary: Ok.
Jadyn: So trust me on this. Write a b c d e f g h i j k l m n o p q r s t u v w x y and z.

Mary: No…

Julia: You don’t have to, just write what you want.

Jadyn: Write your name. Right here.

Mary: [She whispers letters as she writes M-A-R-Y]

Jadyn: Nice.

Mary: That’s how I would always do it, in school.

Transcript Excerpt 24

When Mary admitted to struggling with handwriting and being teased by a classmate, Jadyn immediately sprang into action, setting up a scenario through which she could validate Mary’s abilities and demonstrate how she and her sister allied with and support Mary. While this was a risky demonstration for Mary, Julia and Jadyn both insisted they were not setting her up to make fun of her. Although Mary protested, eventually she provided a demonstration of her writing as they had requested. Jadyn immediately affirmed her effort, saying “Nice.” After this compliment, Mary pointed out how unfair the criticism of her classmate must be since the writing she had done, which earned her compliments from her book club peers, is the same writing that Callie criticized. Mary saw Julia and Jadyn as friends whose opinions could negate those of the girl at her school who treated her poorly.

Jadyn and Julia both produced writing samples of their own so Mary could see that they were not just flattering her. Further discussion ensued to satisfy Mary that her
writing was not inferior to theirs. Mary was unconvinced, observing, “I think mine’s worse than yours because I have more zig zags in the letters. See?” Julia, several years older than Mary, acknowledged the truth of this observation without ridiculing Mary’s effort, saying, “Well, it takes time. It takes practice.” Thus, the discussions of handwriting, like Jadyn’s reminder that Mary should feel comfortable around them, and like the girls’ greetings and informal talk at the beginning of the meeting, was a reminder of the friendships and trust that existed among this peer group.

Being Bullied and Becoming an Advocate

As the session continued, the participants discussed their various experiences of bullying. Bullying, for the girls, meant teasing and harassment suffered from a peer because of a particular personal characteristic. These behaviors could be verbal, physical, social (such as being excluded from an activity), or a combination of these. Bullying often happened outside of adults’ view, such as while students were on the playground, in the lunch room, on a field trip, or waiting for the bus. This treatment was often associated with one particular person rather than many people or classmates in general and, in this case, all the book club participants reported that those who bullied them were girls. The reasons that the girls felt they were bullied varied widely and included having two mothers.

“It’s Not Right to Have Two Moms”

Mary’s show of handwriting skill eventually led to a discussion of the vulnerability she felt at school because of her classmate Callie’s teasing. First Jadyn and then Mary defined the problem as one of “bullying” rather than one of handwriting skill:
Mary: You want to see how Callie would say I write a horse and see how I really make a horse? She says that I make a horse like this [scribbles].

Julia: Hmm.

Jadyn: You’re way better than that. She’s probably that [i.e., that bad].

Mary: No, actually…

Jadyn: Is she a bully at your school?

Mary: Yeah, she’s a bully. She bullies me because I have two moms, probably.

Transcript Excerpt 25

Jadyn, perhaps sensing the gulf between Mary’s skill and her classmate’s harassment, gave a label to this girl’s behavior by asking Mary directly if Callie was a bully. Mary not only identified Callie as a bully, but traced the probable source of the bullying to Mary’s lesbian-headed family rather than her writing abilities. Through their conversation with Mary about her handwriting, Jadyn and Julia positioned themselves as advocates for their new friend, affirming her and rejecting what they viewed as unfounded opinions of a homophobic bully. They positioned Mary as a person who is able to seek out support and resources rather than as a victim to her homophobic classmate. In book club, such shows of support and discussions of hurtful experiences

68 Besides a brief comment from Mary in the first session, this is the first time that “bullying” came up in book club, and interestingly, its arrival into the girls’ conversations happened in unmediated peer-to-peer talk when I was out of the room, and after the trust-building and affirmation of their writing activity. Mary’s mention of bullying in the first session also came at the end of the meeting time, after much time spent together.
took place between peers from similar family backgrounds, an experience that none of these girls had in school.

Overall, Mary was the most sure of all the girls that the bullying stemmed from the fact that she had lesbian mothers. She told the group:

She [Callie] also said to me, um, like when school was over already and we were waiting, she said, “It’s not nice…It’s mean to have two moms.”

She said, “Want to hear a secret?” And I said, “Sure.” And she said, “It’s not…it’s not right to have two moms” like that kind of comment.

Mary reported her classmate’s judgment about her queer family. She remembered that having two moms, in Callie’s view, was “mean,” “not nice,” and “not right.” She also remembered this pronouncement was communicated in the context of the more friendly social interaction of secret sharing. Instead of offering friendship, her classmate used an invitation for closeness to chastise Mary and those she loves. Further, this interaction solidified the expectation that having two mothers is or should be secret.

Given the pain of this situation, Mary narrated some of her thoughts about the bullying in ways that kept her connected to her mothers as a source of support. For example, at another point during the meeting Mary said: “Yeah, I don’t really know if…we don’t really know what she’s bullying us for, but we think she might be bullying us for that…me for that.” Here, Mary confessed her general sense that having two mothers, especially at her religiously-affiliated school, made her different and open to criticism. Her shift from the singular “I” to the plural “we” and “us” as the party being bullied compensates for that kind of isolation by positioning herself as part of a family.
unit who can offer her support. In Mary’s language, the school bully was attacking not just her but them all. While the bully framed Mary’s mothers as a problem, Mary talks about them as part of the solution. They make her vulnerable to such teasing, but they also provide her with support, encouragement, and a sense of connection. Talking about bullying in book club moved the experiences from the family sphere to a context of supportive peers, creating additional connections and support for Mary.

“He Has a White Mom and India’s Not Teasing Him”

Other girls shared stories of bullying that recognized a wide variety of marginalized personal characteristics including their learning disabilities, their gender, their race, and their age in addition to having lesbian mothers that made them feel vulnerable to bullies at school. Moriah, for example, recognized that bullying from her peers had been based, at least in part, on race and racialized standards of beauty:

Moriah: India’s a bully to me.

CR: Who’s a bully to you?

Moriah: India.

CR: India? Why do you think she’s a bully to you?

Moriah: Because she called me a bad word.

CR: Oh.

Chloe: What’d she call you?

Moriah: And she called me “big lip” and she called me the B-word.

Other times, Moriah felt that both race and family structure were implicated in the ways she was treated by peers:
Moriah: A different boy named Jonathan…he has a white mom and

India’s not teasing him!

CR: So it’s weird, right? Not everybody who’s different gets teased, just some people? It’s just mean.

Jadyn: It’s probably people that you don’t like.

Moriah: [People say?] “Is that your grandma?”

Transcript Excerpt 26

Just as Moriah lived in a family where intersections of race and other characteristics such as age, gender, and sexuality were all salient, the bullying she experienced at school also addressed the nexus of these features. For Moriah, India’s teasing could have been about her mother’s (or mothers’) race or age in addition to her own physical appearance. Even though other children in her class had interracial families, those children didn’t seem to prompt the same kind of negative attention from this particular girl as Moriah and her family69 did.

Opportunities for Advocacy

The girls’ discussions of bullying at book club provided an opportunity to come to the aid of other girls. In this way, the girls positioned themselves not only as victims, but as people with experiences they shared to help others. Through the discussion of bullying they interwove such moments of intervention, echoing lessons learned from their mothers when facing these behaviors. For example, when Mary said that the girl who

69 Interestingly, Moriah’s sister, Chloe, who attended the same school as Moriah, did not share any bullying experiences of her own in this conversation. Because of her significantly lighter skin tone and more traditionally European-looking facial features it could have been that she did not experience the same type of vulnerability around issues of race or having white parents that Moriah experienced.
bullied her had teased and even punched her because of a disagreement about their teacher’s directions, Jadyn rushed to take up Mary’s side. When Mary reported that this same girl had held her under water one time on a field trip to a pool, Moriah and Chloe quickly shared their outrage, saying, “That’s not safe!” and “Because you can choke if you’re in the water.” When Moriah shared that a classmate made fun of her lips as described above, Chloe immediately replied, “You don’t have big lips.”

At another time, when Jadyn recounted an instance of bullying, Julia quickly stepped in as her advocate and coach:

Jadyn: [Summer bullies me] just because I had short hair in preschool.

Julia: I’d tell her, “Jadyn, just walk away xxxxxxx and sometimes if it really badly, like if she said, “You have short hair! You look like a boy! Are you a girl?” I’d say, “You know what, Summer? One day you might like short hair better than long hair. You better…”

Jadyn: And she does have short hair.

CR: Ohhhhhh. See, you were right!

Julia: I said, “Someday you’ll like short hair better than long, so you better not say anything.”

Jadyn: She has like this short of hair!

CR: Yeah, right by her chin?

Julia: She has short hair like Jadyn now.
Jadyn: And she used to have this long of hair and now she has this short.

Transcript Excerpt 27

Jadyn was excited to share that what her sister Julia had predicted – that Summer’s own hairstyle and preferences may change over time – actually came true. In this excerpt, Jadyn was transformed from bullying victim to a trailblazer in hair styles that the bully eventually copied. Julia was positioned as the wise older sister, one who trusted all along that the negative judgment of her sister was unfounded and would be short lived.

As with the remarks about Mary’s handwriting by Julia and Jadyn, in these cases the girls were quick to come to each others’ aid. When their peers shared stories of vulnerability or pain, they clearly objected to the injurious behavior, supporting their new friends and actively disapproving of whoever had so thoughtlessly harmed them. None of the girls challenged anyone else’s stories even though none shared the same experiences with bullying classmates; no one suggested that others’ claims were made up or that the reasons they felt they were bullied didn’t make sense. Therefore, listening to the stories of their peers may have been as much an act of validation as the supportive comments they shared.

In contrast to the ways that the girls frequently positioned themselves as advocates for their peers, on only a few occasions were adult interventions mentioned in this discussion. At one point Julia reported that when Jadyn came home from school with scrapes and bruises the perpetrator “got sent to the principal’s office for a week. And then she was expelled.” Another girl couldn’t go out for recess and instead was required
to eat lunch in the office for a week. Moriah followed this comment by sharing that “When India called me a B-word, she almost got written up.” Mary’s linguistic switch from “I” to “we,” discussed earlier, is another example of positioning adults as resources when facing bullying, but the majority of the conversation focused on peer-peer interactions. When we read that session’s book, however - about a child treated unfairly at school because she was the child of lesbians - the girls were quick to suggest their parents would be resources for them were they ever to face a similar situation. While they saw their parents and a few other adults at schools as sources of support, the girls’ talk about their experiences fostered a level of peer support from their fellow book club participants in the face of school bullying.

**Understanding Their Lives through Connections to a Character**

Reading *Asha’s Mums* (Elwin & Paulse, 2000) together was an opportunity for the girls to hear about a fictional character’s struggles in getting her classmates and teacher to recognize her lesbian-headed family. Asha is excited to attend a class field trip, but her teacher refuses to accept the permission slip signed by both her mothers. The teacher threatens that Asha won’t be allowed to go on the trip if the form is not filled out “properly.” During the read-aloud the girls made many connections between their own lives and the story, highlighting how realistic they found the story to be. As we read, they positioned themselves alternately as empathetic to protagonist Asha’s struggles and as vocal advocates for both Asha and themselves, were they ever to find themselves in similar situations. Thinking about Asha’s case shifted the girls’ talk about bullying from individuals to the adult-established policies of institutions like schools. The text
prompted the girls to consider how bullying could happen through these larger systems and what they might do to respond. For example, as soon as the story’s conflict began, the girls were shocked at how Asha was treated. Whereas other children may have empathized with Asha in a more general way, the girls’ responses were specifically about the fact that she had two mothers. Their most righteous surprise and indignation were reserved for the actions of the teacher who insisted that Asha “can’t have two mums.”

When the teacher said Asha couldn’t go on a class field trip if her permission slip wasn’t filled out properly (i.e., without two mother’s names), one of the girls in book club demanded, “Who said that?” When I confirmed it had been the teacher, Mary asked in utter surprise, “The teacher’s even teasing her?”

Julia and Jadyn were quick to define their own teachers differently from what Asha was experiencing:

    CR: Yeah. Well, it just sounds like she’s confused.
    Julia: No, my teachers completely understand about it. I mean, like…
    Jadyn: My teachers don’t…say anything.
    Julia: We’re the only kids with two moms, but they understand completely.
    CR: Wow.
    Jadyn: Yeah. In preschool there was another kid…with two moms…and it wasn’t really a big problem.
Jadyn and Julia understood Asha’s fictional situation in relation to their own. Julia was especially vocal in insisting that the fact she and her sister were the only students in their current classroom with two mothers didn’t change their teachers’ understanding of or compassion towards their family. She framed her experiences in school as positive ones where she and her sister were not victims of others’ prejudice and where they had support from those around them. Even while defending her teachers, Jadyn’s claims suggest she feels a sense of difference from other children’s families because of her lesbian mothers. She defines her teachers’ support in negative terms, claiming things at school are good because they “don’t…say anything.” This silence, according to Jadyn, meant that having two mothers “wasn’t really a big problem,” which of course means it might have been a small problem. These responses situate her somewhere between Asha’s experiences and Julia’s claims, and make evident the kinds of silences that sometimes pass for tolerance in schools.

Girls in book club also empathized with Asha being the only child in her class with two mothers. In fact, the sense of being the “only one” was common among the girls:

Moriah: I’m the only one in my classroom that has two moms.

CR: Yeah?

Julia: I’m the only one…we’re the only ones in our whole school.

Mary: I’m the only one in my whole school!

Jadyn: No, we’re not the only ones in our whole school.
Julia: That have two moms!\footnote{70}{Later in the conversation, Julia clarified that the other boy Jadyn was thinking of had divorced parents, but did not have two moms.}

Jadyn: Nuh-uh.

Mary: I’m the only one in my whole school.

Transcript Excerpt 29

Here, reading about Asha being misunderstood prompted several girls’ own stories of isolation. Remembering their own experiences, the girls were relieved to hear that Asha’s best friend still played with her at recess time, even after her friend knew about her two mothers and the trouble Asha was having with the teacher. As Julia said, sympathetically, “At least her best friend understands.” In the face of silence and frustration in school, such connections with peers who “understood” were important to the girls. These were the kinds of relationships they had been fostering in book club.

The girls continued to position themselves with Asha, but often in ways that highlighted agency and support they assumed they would receive from their families:

CR: When I got home, I gave my mom Alice the form and the note.

“The trip is only two days away! I can’t go if the form isn’t filled out right! All the kids are going to go without me!” Mom Alice gave me a big hug and a kiss and said, “Don’t worry about it, Asha. The form is filled out right. We’ll go see your teacher and talk with her.” I felt better because I knew they would. Before I went to sleep that night I thought about the fun that Rita and Diane and the other kids would have at the science
center. Would I be going with them too? If I don’t get to go, I’m never going back to school again, I promised.

Julia: I wouldn’t either, period!

Moriah: [[They should be home schooled!]]

Mary: My parents would take me to a new school, probably.

Julia: Yeah, my parents…as soon as they figured out that happened, they’d say I’m out and I’m going to a new school.

Jadyn: They wouldn’t care if they got their money back.

Transcript Excerpt 30

Again, the girls responded directly to the situation provided in the book. When Asha’s mothers comforted their daughter and agreed to serve as her advocate with the school, the girls in book club were able to imagine living similar experiences. Julia at first identified with Asha and said she wouldn’t go back to school, but in her next comment spoke to what she imagined her mothers would do on her behalf (i.e., take her out of that school and put her in a new one). Money and other material consequences would be no obstacle for their parents, they reasoned, when trying to get their daughters to a different, assumedly more tolerant school. In other words, the girls empathized with Asha and could imagine themselves in similar situations, but their responses envisioned themselves surrounded with resources and support that to protect them in the face of institutional ignorance. The children felt privileged and protected in some ways even when they felt vulnerable to this kind of possible treatment from a teacher or school. For Asha and for the book club participants, home was defined as safe in relation to a more threatening
school. For example, Asha felt safer at home and thought about not going back to school, Julia validated this idea, and Moriah even suggested making a school that could take place in the safety of home. Together, they recognized the location of institutional schooling to be a place where these kinds of frustrations could happen and home as a safe place that could make it better. Book club was where they could talk about both of those spaces with one another.

In addition, I note the switch to “parents” here by Mary and Julia. It may be that these girls used the word “parents” to emphasize their mothers’ unity, the expectation that they would act in agreement as a single entity to get their daughters into new schools. Jadyn used “they” in a similar way. However, the girls were referring to public actions taken in the public context of school. In fact, “parents” showed up many times in the transcripts of this session – about school – when it had been used only rarely prior to this meeting. The data suggest that as the girls talked about this more public space, they used the language they would use in that public space. In this case, if they were being taken out of one school and put into a more understanding one, they wouldn’t talk about their mothers or about their Eema or MyMy, but about their “parents.”

The girls’ connections with Asha remained strong as she and her mothers navigated the conflict with those at her school. The children were so closely aligned with this character that by the end of the story, when Asha was educating her classmates about the love in her family, Julia and Jadyn actually answered a question out loud that was posed to Asha by one of the characters:
CR: And so this is Asha’s response [to her classmate] when someone says that it’s bad [i.e., having two mothers living together]: “It’s not bad. My mommy said we’re a family because we live together and love each other,” I said. “But how come you have two,” Judy asked?

Jadyn: Because they love each other!

Julia: They love each other!

CR: There you go! Before I could answer, Terrance said to Miss Samuels, “Is it wrong to have two mommies?” “Well....” Miss Samuels began, but Diane yelled, “It’s not wrong if they’re nice to you and if you like them!”

Moriah: [softly] I have two mommies.

Transcript Excerpt 31

Julia and Jadyn have fully placed themselves in the story along side of Asha. Their identification with her and her family’s situation is so strong that they are able to provide answers to questions she is asked, as if the questions had been directed to them and not the fictional character. Sharing these answers, they position themselves as knowledgeable and willing to advocate for Asha and for themselves. Moriah’s response, although not as direct as that of the Smith-Kendall girls, also indicated that the book created an opportunity for her to identify with the text, finding space for her family’s reality along side of Asha’s. While the book club participants had all already acknowledged their two mothers in this setting weeks earlier, Moriah continued to test
out this disclosure in new fictional, projected contexts. Their alliance with the protagonist allowed this kind of projection into the story and encouraged the girls to share their feelings about similar situations they might face.

The situation described in the book therefore became the bridge to move children’s responses from the book club to other settings such as school. The literary world presented by the book created a hypothetical yet realistic situation where the girls could practice responding to similar real-life situations that they may face as children with lesbian mothers. By adding their own responses and sharing their own family identifications here, Moriah, Jadyn, and Julia were all rehearsing the sharing of their family information with their peers at school, just as Asha was doing in the text. In these moments, they were able to try out possible responses of their own while also observing and learning from the responses of others around them, including the responses of the characters in the story.

Scripting Their Own Responses to Bullying

The girls’ connections had become more and more personal as the session continued. I had hoped to extend the connecting and rehearsing the girls had been doing during the read-aloud into an additional imaginary scenario the girls could develop on their own that would build on the world created by the text. I thought the girls could take on various roles and try out different responses that they might give when facing bullies or others at school who didn’t understand their families. Practicing advocacy in the group context was an explicit goal. I framed the activity by saying:
Since you guys wanted to do some acting out of stuff, do you want to do some things like acting out if you had trouble in school like Asha, what you would say? Like the advice that you would do? So we could play like somebody is a kid who has two moms and somebody is a kid who might be mean and we could figure out what to do?

This invitation met with a good deal of debate and negotiation. It became evident that while one or two of the girls were interested in performing the skit about bullying, others were clearly uncomfortable delving any deeper into such scenarios. Jadyn was most interested in the show about “what we would do to the bully,” positioning the whole group as active and powerful in facing such a threat. Chloe opted out of the acting altogether, although she claimed it was because her stomach hurt.

**Negotiating Participation to Remain Emotionally Safe**

Julia, somewhat reluctantly, said “I can be the bully,” but it was Mary, who had been most vocal about experiencing harassment for having two moms, who was the most cautious. She refused roles as either bully or victim, instead opting to be an uninvolved bystander: “I want to be one of the other kids in the class.” This reluctance made more sense when it became clear Mary had significantly fused the fictional scene we were constructing with her own lived experiences. For example, as negotiations about the story line continued, Jadyn stated that she wanted to play the “friend of the bully.” Mary, drawing on knowledge of her own classmates, responded to Jadyn saying, “Ruby was the friend of the bully, so you could be like Ruby, I guess.” Several seconds later, as other girls continue to draft the script of the scene, Mary again returned to the hurt this
classmate had caused her and said, wistfully: “At first, in the school year though, Ruby was like all around the kids and she was taking turns with each kid and I got to play with her a little bit. She liked imagining too.” Although participating in this fictional scene could have allowed Mary to re-imagine and rehearse her responses to painful experiences like the ones she’d endured with her classmates, there was very little (if indeed any) distance between the imaginary play and the real people and situations she’d encountered in her real life. In other words, Mary did not trust that the scene wouldn’t create the same feelings of isolation and hurt she’d lived through; the dramatic play was simply too much real life and not enough play. When negotiating her participation in this scene, she made choices that allowed for her emotional safety.

Other girls also were careful to keep some distance between themselves and the scene we were creating. For example, before beginning to act in character, Julia paused and announced to the group:

Julia: But in real life – I want to make this clear – in real life I would not think this.

CR: Yeah, right, right, right. This is all pretend. This is why we get to do pretend.

Transcript Excerpt 32

She was going to be enacting the role of the bully, but she needed everyone to be fully aware that it would be a performance and not a representation of her own thoughts or feelings. After this caveat had been announced, it seemed as if they were ready to enact
the scene, but then suddenly realized that no one had volunteered to be the bully’s “victim”:

CR: Do you want me to be the kid being teased?
Julia: No, no. No, Jadyn, you’re the kid being teased.

[overlapping]
Mary: You can be the one who, who says the line.
Jadyn: My friend.
Julia: Jadyn, because you won’t feel that bad, will you? You won’t feel that bad.
Jadyn: No.

Transcript Excerpt 33

Sensing their discomfort, I finally volunteered, but Julia assigned the role to her little sister. This relationship (older sister making fun of younger sister) removed the sting of the bully’s words. Even so, Julia took the extra step of checking in explicitly with Jadyn to assure that she wouldn’t be offended by any words said during the skit. Furthermore, Jadyn would have Mary there as her friend to offer help, so the situation would be two-against-one in favor of the child with two mothers.

The children’s need to set up these various protections indicated the seriousness of the work we were doing together. As with our reading of *Asha’s Mums*, fictional scenes were not purely imaginary situations, but ones that the girls either had experienced or knew they might experience in real life. They understood these scenes as being about their own lives. Practicing responses in the supportive setting of book club provided
tools and resources for the future, but delving into the topic was threatening. The work required caveats and supports to ensure that no one felt hurt as they played. Performances were marked more explicitly as performances than other, less serious types of play would have required, indicating the girls’ awareness of the sensitive nature of the topic.

Responding to the Role Play

When the girls enacted the scene they had prepared, they began with highly stylized voices for the bully and the innocent victim:

Julia: [in a gruff voice] Are you the kid with two moms?
Jadyn: [in a small voice] Yes.
Julia: You’re…that’s wrong! You’re not supposed to have two moms!
[some whisper]
Julia: You’re not supposed to have two moms! Why do you have two moms?
Jadyn: Because they love each other.
Julia: That’s a wrong idea. [Breaking into some giggles] You’re not supposed to have two…

Transcript Excerpt 34

In this scene, the reason for the bullying was stated clearly, but Julia was left searching for words with which to bully “the kid with two moms.” Jadyn’s eventual response was the answer that Jadyn and Julia had voiced for Asha during the reading. This strategy was recontextualized as the answer to the bully in this new scene: a child has two moms
because the moms love each other. Julia, as the bully, was able to condemn a child having two moms by saying it was “wrong” and a “wrong idea,” but she struggled to find other expressions and criticisms as she tried to continue her harassment of Jadyn.

Eventually, I interrupted to offer some encouragement and suggestions:

CR: That’s good, that’s good! Mary, how can you help out as a friend? What can you say?

Mary: [to Julia] Why did you say that?

CR: Ohh.

Julia: Because. It’s wrong to have two moms. You’re not supposed to have two moms.

Mary: So why do you think that?

CR: [quietly] Ohh.

Julia: [giggles]

CR: That’s a good question!

Mary: [in a silly voice] I’m gonna tell!

[more giggles]

Julia: [coaching the scene] You run off to get a teacher, you run off to get a teacher!

CR: And Jadyn, what can you say?

Jadyn: You’re the teacher! You’re the teacher, Moriah!

Moriah: No, I don’t want to…
Julia: No, Caitlin’s the teacher! Get ready. Run to Caitlin, run to Caitlin.

[fake crying]

CR: Ok, and while I’m coming over, Jadyn, what are you going to try to say back to her first before I get there?

Jadyn: [exaggerated, baby voice] You made me mad! I’m gonna call my mommy!

CR: Ok, [as the teacher character] what happened here, kids?

Jadyn: She bullied me because I have two moms!

CR: [Julia runs off] Oh, there she goes, running away! Running away!

[laughter]

Moriah: Yeah, that’s a great plan.

CR: It’s ok, your families are great! Yay! Applause, applause.

Transcript Excerpt 35

Mary rehearsed tactics she could use to diffuse bullying and advocate for herself in real life. For example, she put the burden of explanation onto the bully by asking questions about the bully’s own judgments and thoughts.

Mary’s approach illustrated how calling upon people to account for their normative assumptions could interrupt naturalized power dynamics. Her use of questions was a tactic that hadn’t been brought up in the read-aloud or earlier conversation. They
almost stopped the play as we all paused to consider them. Julia, as the bully, had no response besides giggling.

Mary then changed tactics, invoking an adult’s help by deciding she was going to “tell.” The girls decided to have a teacher intervene, although I encouraged Jadyn to try to formulate her own response before I allowed the “teacher” to resolve the conflict. With this opportunity, Jadyn was able to clearly explain what had caused the bullying and to consider her mothers as a source of support. Eventually, Julia chose to have the bully flee the scene of her mean deeds. Moriah fully supported these actions. Seeking some closure, I tried to end the scene with some affirming words. Julia confirmed this ending, asking, “We’re out of the play now, alright?” again reminding us of her eagerness to get out of the bullying role that was so antithetical to her own identification.

As we discussed the scene, Jadyn remained hypothetical about having such an experience, but Mary once again related it to her real life:

Jadyn: But I would be angry if somebody xx.
Mary: Somebody did say that about my moms before. Callie.
CR: Yeah? And did it make you mad?
Mary: Yeah.
CR: Yeah. It should. It should.
Jadyn: [baby voice] You make me mad!
CR: Did you have a baby voice like Jadyn when it made you mad?
[jiggles]
CR: I didn’t think so!
Transcript Excerpt 36

The girls, led by Mary and Jadyn, had the opportunity to continue comparing and contrasting their personal experiences of bullying, their reactions to those situations, and the emotions they created. In the end, however, these emotions were too strong for Mary and a few of the other girls. They avoided any additional discussion about families, opting instead to play at other activities. When I asked if they would perform this skit for their mothers when they arrived to pick them up, there was not a lot of support for reliving the scene they had created. Finally, Mary said, “Yeah, let’s just do a fun play because I don’t really feel comfortable doing that.” This seemed to be a relief to the other girls. They used the rest of the session to craft an entirely different kind of story, which they performed for their mothers before they left book club.

Summary – Book Club Session Three

In the third book club session, the girls moved from discussing difficulties within their families to difficulties they faced outside in the public world at least in part because of their inclusion in queer families. Specifically, we discussed the world of school and how the children mediated information about themselves and their families while navigating relationships with their teachers and peers. This talk all took place within a framework of strong social relationships that continued to be reinforced as the girls shared additional information about their lives. In this session, the girls first
demonstrated that they had the skills and resources to support each other in more general and generic issues, such as when Jadyn and Julia encouraged Mary’s handwriting abilities. Through discussions about school experiences and *Asha’s Mums*, these skills were then applied to advocating for each other around the issue of school bullying, particularly as it related to having lesbian mothers.

The girls found they did not share a single, monolithic experience of bullying, but rather different identities were picked on depending on the child’s set of personal characteristics and her specific school context. While they may have been bullied for reasons of age, race, gender, and/or family make up, all the girls were able to empathize with the book character’s struggle to make her lesbian-headed family known and accepted at school. In both the discussions and the read-aloud, they were able to offer responses and make suggestions, teaching their peers about their experiences and positioning themselves as agents and advocates rather than simply victims. Furthermore, since *Asha’s Mums* presented a scenario to which they could all relate, it allowed for direct and powerful responses and served as a bridge for uniting their reactions to (and on behalf of) the character with their own realities as children with lesbian mothers.

While the book had already provided a certain narrative structure for Asha and for us as readers to follow, the imaginary scene we created as a group was significantly more flexible and under our control. Although it was a space in which the girls could try on new roles and formulate new responses to a situation they might face in their own lives, the inquiry proved to be more threatening than originally anticipated. A few of the girls chose not to participate while others were especially clear to make their own positions
separate from the roles they would be enacting. Although they played out the scene and reflected about the feelings that result from such bullying, they chose not to perform this scene again for their parents. Instead, they created a new play based on a different and less emotionally threatening premise that did not directly involve families or bullying; this was the play they chose to present to their mothers. Taken together, the activities and discussions during this meeting session demonstrated how difficult relationships at school can be for these students, but they also indicated the personal and social resources that children are able to draw on to protect themselves and others from heteronormative expectations, homophobia, and other forms of harassment. Friendships at book club and reading about a child in a similar situation countered isolation and became new contexts for discussing these scenarios and rehearsing a range of possible ways to respond.

The Power of Reading, Writing, and Speaking about Queer Families with Peers

Data from these sessions indicate that, in many ways, Book Club was a type of hybrid space between homes and schools, a space of peers outside of the immediate intimacy of home and family where the girls were still able to talk like they might inside the family, complete with “MyMy” and “donor dads.” In fact, the progression of the book club themes was also a response to these different locations: the books and our discussions began with homes and families, moved to other complexities about families, and ended with the more public world of school. Once children recognized they were surrounded by supportive peers who also came from lesbian-headed families, they shared and compared their own lived experiences with one another. In fact, this aspect of Book
Club highlighted absences and silences from other settings and made explicit the kinds of possible conversations and understandings that hadn’t happened in other peer contexts.

The blend of connections and disconnections between the children and between the spaces were important. In some moments, children came together and consolidated a shared, solidified identity as children from lesbian-headed households. At other times, they still had to negotiate across differences in individual experiences, race, family formation, and other identities. For example, words and labels could to be made public, taught to others, negotiated, and even taken up by others. Family complexities of many kinds, whether structural or emotional, were safely explored among empathetic listeners. Individual stories and differences could be told and exist against a backdrop of trust and common experiences. Limits of what could be talked about publicly and what could be safely known by the participants were pushed as new questions were asked, new stories were told, and new knowledge was constructed. Connecting with one another gave children a chance to break the heteronormative silences they were accustomed to in school and deal with differences in productive ways.

Through the book club, we created a discursive location where that which is normally silenced for children with their peers was exactly what was pointed to, called out, visible, valued, spoken, and available for discussion. In other words, we changed and expanded – in fact *queered* – what we read, how we read, and who we read with in order to change reading itself into a process that could access more of the queer and otherwise marginalized or ignored voices that the participants had experience with and access to. Book club created a space to interpret queer-inclusive texts not just within
their families but with similarly-situated peers who shared the experience of having two mothers. In book club, the reading mattered. The texts we read made visible families and situations that the girls could relate to and opened those ideas up for exploration in a way that just gathering the girls together without these tools simply did not do. While having queer families represented within the texts was crucial, such representations were taken up and mediated by the children. In other words, the inclusion of queer families in books catalyzed children’s own connections to the texts and contributions to the discussions. They represented themselves as capable and connected, creating powerful sites of validation and transformation. Book club redefined reading as a process that could be both peer-oriented and inclusive of queer lives and issues, a combination that reflected the girls’ positioning within multiple worlds, yet one that none of them were accustomed to in either their homes or in their schools.

In book club, children with lesbian mothers moved beyond reading as translators, “working continuously to convert each part of the world made by an author into people, places, and ways of being that are already familiar” (Enciso, 2001, p. 172). They were a community of experts about their own lives, free to draw on their own racial, cultural, gender, and familial locations to negotiate and interpret the texts at hand, in a space where those locations and interpretations were generally affirmed and valued, with some conflict. The setting allowed children to position themselves not as isolated or exoticized individuals with lesbian mothers, but as a group of children who shared this characteristic. Once their familial connection was affirmed, children moved beyond it, comparing and contrasting more nuanced and even negative components of their lives.
that were not common to all the participants. While their shared experience of having
lesbian mothers was the frame, the details of their lives made up the picture inside.

The reading also mattered because the inclusion of queer lives in texts and
discussions proved that these lives can be visible and shared in communities of peers.
The presence of queer people and families in texts helps to validate not just their
importance but their very existence. Reading such books in public spaces outside of
queer homes matters because “in our culture what is private is closely aligned with what
is secret […]. Public announcements, however, transform what was secret to what is now
disclosed” (Sumara, 1996, p. 139). Such a transformation from private to public changes
the knowledge and resources available to an interpretive community. Because private
meanings are not public, they do not

become part of the economy of knowledge; it remains excluded from
participation in the private sector. It is only when private meaning is
disclosed publicly that it functions as a material extension of the self, one
that is able to become concretely used in the continual generation of
knowledge. (Sumara, 1996, p. 139)

By reading and discussing these books together as a community of peers, the girls in
Book Club made their own experiences as children in lesbian-headed families part of the
knowledge economy of our group. Through reading and talking together about topics
that didn’t usually get talked about outside of homes, the girls didn’t need to censor their
responses and instead took up a wider-than-usual range of possible locations these books
announced for us (Sumara, 1996). By voicing and exploring these various locations, the
book club created a relational space in which, as Sumara (1996) writes, “the reader’s world becomes re-woven” (p. 80), altering the reader and her future interactions with the world.

Therefore, reading in book club was rewarding, but risky. It asked the girls to be public about things they were used to keeping private, to share their vulnerabilities, to relate the book to their own lives, and to contribute their resources to the group. It was an opportunity to imagine situational possibilities through which children could question what exists (Sumara, 1996). Imagining what could be also draws more attention to the negative aspects of what already is. Such was the situation in the role-playing work during session three. But overall, the reward was worth it. In this new social situation, the girls engaged in more inclusive and queer conversations around books and about families than they ever had been a part of in schools. Through the book club, the girls and I created a social context outside of their homes where they could allow their full range of diverse words, lives, emotions, and experiences of family to inform their interpretations of texts.
Chapter 7 – Conclusions and Implications

*It is not so much the components (i.e. texts, teachers, students, etc.) that we should try to know; it is the relations among these.*

–Dennis Sumara

This has been a study of children from lesbian-headed families. Like children from all families, these children had to navigate different settings and relationships as they ventured into schools and peer activities outside the immediate confines of home life with their parent(s) and sibling(s). Yet children in this study, because they were born or adopted into families with one or more LGBT parent, have been aware of society’s heteronormative expectations of people and families from a very young age. The restrictions as well as the social and political implications of such a system were layered on top of the experiences they shared with other children. They had to negotiate heteronormative realities as they came to understand that not everyone thinks it is acceptable for families to be like theirs. They had to learn to exist in a society where their very existence challenged basic assumptions about families and relatedness (Weston, 1991), and just spending time with their parents conjured specters of child abuse and other deviance in the minds of some.

These children, along with millions like them around the country, are being raised by lesbian mothers and are finding ways to thrive in spite of society’s prejudices. That in itself is quite an accomplishment, but unsurprising given the psychological research that
has examined child development outcomes in families with lesbian mothers (Patterson, 1992; 1995).

This study gives a new dimension to the outcomes-based research by focusing on some of the mechanisms through which these young children from lesbian-headed households are able to develop and flourish. Chief among these mechanisms are attention to and monitoring of their discursive productions of family and other self-authoring practices as they participate in the different settings of their everyday lives that may or may not be queer friendly. Furthermore, these children are guided by sensitivity to multiplicity and fluidity and possess an awareness of the contextualized nature of talk and literacy. They use that information to understand heteronormative assumptions in these settings and shape knowledge about their families appropriately. In other words, even young children do a great deal of sophisticated discursive work to position themselves in social situations that are shaped to various degrees by heteronormativity.

These are new findings. Such careful, contextualized decision-making about and around language use has been documented within LGBT communities (Weston, 1991; Yoshino, 2006) and even by parents within LGBT-headed families (Benkov, 1994; Casper & Schultz, 1999) but not in children with LGBT parents. The reason for this prior lack of attention remains unclear. Perhaps it is the assumption that these children aren’t actually LGBT so they wouldn’t need to be concerned about such decisions. Perhaps it is a side-effect of thinking about children in developmentally-appropriate ways that downplay the possibilities of agency. Perhaps it is a desire to draw attention away from a situation that might be considered burdensome by some, given political motivation by
some LGBT and ally researchers to show how children from LGBT-headed households are exactly the same as other children. Whatever the reason, the complex linguistic work of children in this regard has never been fully acknowledged or appreciated as a skill they bring to their learning and their lives. This multi-site ethnography that foregrounds children as a unit of analysis and respects their liminal position between gay and straight worlds makes these skills visible.

In this chapter I summarize briefly the different models of speaking, reading, and writing about families that children of lesbian mothers learned at home and at school. I examine the gap between the two settings through the theoretical frame of this study in order to reconceptualize children’s navigation between these practices as one of continuity as well as discontinuity. I argue that such fluid positioning, which traveling between these settings requires, can be understood as queer and is enabled by children’s liminal situation between multiple worlds. I consider implications of this perspective for teachers and parents before addressing implications of this study for theory and research.

Recognizing the Divide between Home and Schools

The children demonstrate this discursive awareness when they wanted to make their queer families visible and when they decided to hide or cover (Yoshino, 2006). My data suggest that children have parental models of the former as well as some of the latter. At home, children participated with their parents in language that represented their family and literacy practices that demonstrated the ways queerness can be included in and affirmed by text. For example, families created naming practices that crossed

71 I thank COLAGEr and lesbian mother Hope Berry Manley for reminding me that children learn strategies for dealing with heteronormativity and homophobia from their queer parents.
legal and biological ties to incorporate mothers and children into one kin group. These families used this language to claim one another as relatives; mothers referred to their children and children to their mothers regardless of blood or legal relatedness. Those formal and biological distinctions were known but not referenced when talking about or living as family in everyday situations. Furthermore, they used words specific to their families’ method of origin such as “tummy mom” or “donor dad” in ways that complemented rather than replaced the children’s lesbian mothers. These language practices existed comfortably with references to other family or personal characteristics, including race, ethnicity, and religion.

In addition, language was a way to represent themselves to others. Families created signs for the Pride parades and poems to share with legislators. Children also learned that if texts did not represent themselves or their families they could be changed. References to “dads” were crossed out of memory books and forms, replaced with more appropriate terms, and scripts from the church’s Christmas play were revised to eliminate gendered and racial stereotypes.

Children also learned options for using spoken and written language in the larger world, conditioned as it is by heteronormativity. For example, they observed their parents negotiate their visibility within a traditionally conservative church community, and they heard their mothers use different language to refer to each other when speaking with others at the local fair. They read books about LGBT-headed families and also children’s literature and religious stories highlighting straight families and relationships. They drew on these multiple, strategic approaches to visibility as well as their own senses
of social situations when deciding what information about their families to make public at school.

At school, children were surrounded by books and words and stories that reflected a world of only straight people. The children in this study could use words and texts to affirm their families in ways similar to their queer-inclusive use in homes, but those were not the ways these tools were used by others. Therefore, children only rarely made the choice to discuss their queer families, like Isabella’s reports about her involvement in Lobby Day and Mallory’s request to make Mothers’ Day cards for both of her mothers. They sometimes discussed their lesbian-headed families when they were asked to, such as in Mallory’s VIP week report. Much more frequently they downplayed or covered their families’ queerness. Because their day-to-day curricular work and play with their peers involved countless instances to engage with heteronormative ideas of love and family, children in this study found and created ways to exist in these spaces that worked for them, even if those changed from day to day or event to event. Sometimes that meant avoiding the topic altogether by focusing on other family members in a writing assignment, using the term “parents” instead of “mothers,” or drawing “a family” instead of your family during an activity. It meant using “mom” instead of MyMy or Eema or Mommy Denise nearly all the time. In these settings, children learned that their families were often left out of the labels and texts they heard and saw around them. They also learned that spoken and written language could be used in certain, strategic ways to blend in.
Reconsidering the “Divide” Between Home and School as Queer

There is a significant gap in the ways that queer people and relationships are represented discursively (or not) in oral language and texts in these two settings of homes and schools. The gap children with lesbian mothers must negotiate consists of nearly opposite uses of language within families and within peer groups where queerness is concerned. Here, however, I want to ask just how “different” these differences are. It seems helpful to notice that even when the content of the discursive and literacy practices are dissimilar, the process or the ways of using cultural tools at a more abstract level remains constant. The three-part theoretical frame of this study becomes particularly useful for making these distinctions. For example, consider the following chart:

<table>
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<th>Literacy Practices in Homes</th>
<th>Literacy Practices in Schools</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Queer-inclusive?</td>
<td>Yes, frequently</td>
<td>No, only seldomly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Fellow participants?</td>
<td>Family</td>
<td>Peers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. In cooperation and connection with others?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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Figure 9 – Similarities and Differences in Two Contexts of Literacy

The three questions posed of the contexts here grow out of the theoretical frame of this study. The first question asks, “Are the literacy practices in a particular setting queer-inclusive?” It draws on queer theory by highlighting sexuality and the multiple, non-normative possibilities for defining selves and families. The second question asks “Who are the other participants in literacy practices in a particular setting?” It draws on NLS theories by acknowledging that literacy practices in different contexts with different
participants changes the meanings of and associations with literacy. And finally, the third question asks, “Do people engage in literacy practices within a particular setting in cooperation and connection with others?” It draws on Bakhtin’s notion of addressivity and answerability in the self-other dialectic and highlights available sociocultural tools. This question helps me investigate if and how heteronormativity might disrupt those connections as well as if and how the connections disrupt heteronormativity.

My research suggests that if one asked only one or both of the first questions, the analysis that followed would set up homes and schools in binary opposition. Indeed, because of the important differences in contexts and messages about literacy for children in this study, that is an important first step and therefore is how part of this dissertation has been set up and written. It is by asking the third question, however, that a commonality begins to emerge that is perhaps equally important for considering the experiences of children with lesbian mothers as they create and interpret texts in the various settings of their lives. The common answer to the third question is a reminder that in both homes and schools, children from lesbian-headed families are responsive to their contexts. They are participating appropriately in contextualized literacy practices as they understand them in cooperation with people around them. At home, that may mean naming “chosen family” relatives who were present at a child’s birth as the family reads the child’s baby book. It might mean discussing an article in the newspaper about a new county-wide non-discrimination policy that includes protections for LGBT people. At school, it might mean participating in one of the many factions supporting or opposing the main characters in a heterosexual vampire romance series. It might mean putting
your brother’s name next to the name of one of your mothers in a poem about your family rather than listing two female names for your parents. In all of these cases, the children are being addressed by those around them in particular ways, and they are answering that address in ways that continue rather than disrupt the chain of utterances within a given setting.

It may be that self-authoring in such constrained, highly contextualized ways means that children are simply allowing heteronormativity to dictate their decisions. One might argue that the costs of covering queerness to fit expectations of others are too high. It does, after all require children to sacrifice much of who they are and conceal much of what and whom they know. In this view, children from queer families are so skilled at being cultural chameleons that their ability to create relational identities within these different contexts is taken advantage of by heteronormative assumptions that circulate in larger society. While this is a concern of mine, given that schools seem to be places that drastically limit the discursive productions children feel comfortable making, I also want to offer other perspectives. Learning to find comfort in a variety of settings fits with these children’s liminal positioning between different cultural situations. Their senses of self, at this point in their lives, are perhaps both gay and straight, and certainly queer. They straddle the line between gay and straight worlds. They have a foot in both realities, which means they stand firmly in neither space yet have facility with both. Even if they (will) identify as straight, they have been queered by their upbringing.

Their queerness, therefore, is rooted in the fluidity of their situations, in the tensions between being culturally queer and (perhaps) erotically straight (Garner, 2004).
It is this fluidity and sense of both/and upon which they draw to author themselves in their various contexts. In other words, I argue that rather than create binary oppositions of gay/straight or home/school, it may be more productive to consider that even when children with lesbian mothers cover the details of their queer families or participate in heteronormative practices, they are only able to engage in those activities because of their fluid, queer identities. This queerness is what gives them the flexibility to exist in either space; the fact that they can and do exist within both spaces is queer. Queer theory reminds us that it is not the fact of sameness or difference that is the point, but rather the shifting landscape of the categories that compose “same” and “different” in the first place. The ways that children with lesbian mothers take up multiple positions and move into, out of, and around heteronormativity illustrate their queer sensibility.

Implications of This Perspective

Viewing the contextualized, discursive work of children with lesbian mothers in this way offers significant implications for practice. Specifically, parents, teachers, and other adults who want to expand the range of self-authoring that children feel comfortable sharing in different situations can make use of the skills children from lesbian-headed families have in taking up the appropriate, socially-sanctioned practices of those around them. In other words, if children respond to their various settings with such sensitivity, then modifying a context will affect what they consider possible to express. My data suggest that when people, especially adults, make queer-inclusive texts and labels available in particular contexts, the children in this study are quick to take
them up in their own literacy practices and discursive productions of family. The most significant example of this from the data is the book club.

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Figure 10 – Similarities and Differences in Three Contexts of Literacy

Because children drew upon the resources available in the context of book club, they were able to overcome their initial hesitation with reading queer-inclusive texts within a setting of peers. Specifically, introducing texts that included lesbian-headed families in book club allowed such family structures to be a common resource in our discussions that children took up in their own self-authoring. Once the relationships were available via the texts, book club participants self-identified as having two mothers, which gave queer issues a place in the mix of social relations within the group. Children built on this information, drawing upon it and expanding on it to continue the conversation. What was made public became available for use by others, which then spurred the public sharing of additional information, which continued the cycle. The girls shared and responded to one another in ways that expanded the breadth and depth of their dialogue. This allowed them to be addressed in and answerable from a place of greater specificity than they commonly experienced in schools, one closer to their own fluid and “unique position[s] in the world” (Holquist, 1990).
Claiming this specificity was a way to author a self in COLAGEr- or queerspawn-specific ways. In their families, their discursive productions of family and their self-authoring practices were queer-affirming. At school, their discursive productions of family and self-authoring practices were influenced heavily by heteronormativity. It was in book club that they were able to break this binary and have the opportunity to respond to texts and to one another specifically as children with lesbian mothers. This queerspawn-specific site meant bringing together queer-inclusivity and a larger world of peers. They were neither reduced to being only children of lesbian mothers, nor discouraged from claiming that identity. They did not have to choose only one world from which to operate and leave out other aspects of themselves. Instead, it was an opportunity to embrace fluidity and multiplicity and draw on the multiple communities of which they were a part. There was still diversity to negotiate because of their different intersecting identities and particular lived experiences, yet they were all children who shared an awareness of heteronormativity and its effects within their everyday lives.

**Different Differences and Similar Differences – COLAGErs as a Unique Population**

When thinking about such implications, it is important to acknowledge the ways that children of lesbian mothers may have experiences similar to and distinct from other populations. Because of these differences, children with lesbian mothers, diverse as they are, occupy a unique position among youth and families. I argue that researchers and practitioners may learn from the connections these children have with other groups of children and families, but that their distinct needs, the foundation for the queerspawn-specific experiences described above, must still be taken into account. I outline the
similarities and differences of children with lesbian mothers (and LGBT families in general) as compared with LGBT people, other types of diverse families, and children of other marginalized populations, specifically children of color. I recognize that these groups are neither monolithic nor separate, nor directly opposed to each other. I explore comparisons here in order to more clearly articulate the gap of knowledge, resources, attention paid to this population that the results of this study imply.

Consider, for example, a comparison between children with lesbian mothers and the situations of LGBT people72. Members of these groups must all navigate a heteronormative and often homophobic world. Their families also often encompass non-normative kin arrangements. Therefore, work that is anti-heteronormative and, more specifically, anti-homophobic would improve the conditions of both groups. For children with lesbian mothers, however, negotiating heteronormative differences and accompanying non-normative status begins early in life. Although some LGBT people report having felt queer from a very young age, many come to their queer identities between early adolescence and young adulthood or even later. From their earliest days, children with queer parents, especially those born directly into LGBT-headed families, negotiate a world not made for them or their closest kin. This makes discussion of queer people and relationships immediately relevant for children of all ages. It is not a topic that can wait until children reach middle or high school.

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72 I recognize that some LGBT people are themselves from LGBT-headed families. These children are often referred to as Second Generation or Second Gen’ers. They have formed their own community within both the LGBT and the COLAGEr world(s) to explore their specific experiences and challenges.
When we compare children with lesbian mothers to the experiences of other diverse families, we again see similarities but also differences. Such families may include step families, adoptive families, interracial families, families where children are being raised by grandparents or other extended kin, and so forth. Certainly none of these families fit a stereotypical, normative image, yet I argue that the responsibility placed on the children when discussing these families is different. First of all, mixed-race, step, and/or single-parent families are simply more common than LGBT-headed families. Children from these families are not usually isolated in their experiences, especially children who have experienced divorce. These numbers add to their sense of normalcy even if they are not “the norm.” They are also usually supported by legal arrangements73, such as statutory marriage, divorce, custody agreements, and so forth. Society has made language for discussing these arrangements publicly available for parents, children, and teachers to use, so experiences can be communicated. Secondly, diverse family formations are also found in families with LGBT parents, some of whom have been discussed in this research. These are not separate, but rather intersecting types of identities. Therefore, diverse families with straight parents still benefit from straight privilege. In other words, straight stepparents and interracial families may challenge particular notions of traditional, biologically-based kinship as queer families do, but they do so in a way that avoids associations of deviant sexuality that accompany LGBT-headed families, associations that are viewed by many as inappropriate for children74.

73 I do recognize that the legal support for interracial marriages is a relatively recent phenomenon in some states.
74 It is this connection to an “inappropriate,” “unnatural,” or “immoral” “lifestyle” of deviant sexuality that people protest when they ban books such as And Tango Makes Three (see the American Library
Even if children feel various levels of comfort discussing the complexities of their diverse families in certain settings, they do so outside the histories of sexual inversion, perversion, and recruitment that shape public discourse about queers’ lives. Families with straight parents, even those in diverse family formations, are required to find non-normative ways to discuss kinship, but by communicating these relationships they are not forced to reference non-normative sexuality. Contextualizing LGBT families as part of a larger concept of family diversity could be an effective tool for researchers and practitioners in certain situations, yet the particular stigma of queer sexuality, especially in relation to children, must be acknowledged.

Finally, children with lesbian mothers can be compared to children of color. I do not find it productive to compare race and sexuality directly as if they were two instantiations of a single social force. I understand them to be different types of identities and associated oppressions with different histories and different consequences. Contrasting oppressions is of limited use because it solidifies complex identities and re-establishes false binaries. Queer scholars of color have pointed out the shortcomings of this approach (e.g., Anzaldúa, 1987; Johnson & Henderson, 2005). Still, taking into account the complexities and intersectionality, two particular differences separate children of these two groups. First of all, children of color’s discussions of themselves and their families would refer to racial identities they claim as individuals. This is in contrast to children with lesbian mothers who would discuss an identity that they claim
relationally through their mothers. Secondly, children of color embody their identity in physical ways. While they may choose to downplay this identity through their behaviors, they have no option to completely conceal it. Children with lesbian mothers, in contrast, constantly negotiate their family’s level of visibility. My point here is not to argue which identity is “easier,” but to suggest that children of lesbian mothers have both the privilege and the responsibility of negotiating identities and relationships that have the potential to go unstated and unnoticed, a privilege and responsibility that is not the same for children of color.

*Suggestions for Practice with COLAGErs in Other Settings*

Looking again at the data suggests that although the book club was an especially powerful setting for reading, writing, and talking about children’s queer families, contextual changes do not have to be so drastic to encourage children to feel safe expressing additional information about their families, if they so choose. In fact, the children in this study made small adjustments *within* both home and school settings in addition to their larger changes between the two. These changes correlated to features of their specific, immediate settings. We can understand these as immediate or “micro contexts.” In other words, when children understood a specific situation or set of relationships to be queer friendly, they responded and spoke more openly about queer parts of their lives than when such affirmation was not or had yet to be received. This was true even within larger environments such as school or in out in public where one may not have otherwise expected as much discussion.

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Micro Contexts at School

The strongest example of such a change is Jadyn’s discussion with me and her classmate during school. Initially, Jadyn was unwilling to discuss anything queer in that setting. She did not mention her mothers, and she tried to change my use of the word “partner” to the more neutral “roommate.” It was only after her classmate asked about my sexual orientation, I answered honestly, and she responded in an affirming way by talking about her own lesbian relatives, that Jadyn shared that she had two mothers. The beginning and end of the conversation took place in the same classroom, but the information that created the micro context of our interaction changed as we talked and created new understandings. That small change was enough to move Jadyn from hesitancy and covering to a still hedged but honest claim “I kind of have two moms, mostly.”

I observed similar adjustments with other students as well. For example, Suzy reported that Isabella became more vocal about her mothers at school after her teacher read Heather Has Two Mommies (Newman, 1990) to her whole class the year before the study. I never heard Mary refer to her mothers or her Eema at school with her peers, but when she and I would play together at recess she used the label several times. Another time I accompanied her class on a field trip. While we were at the museum, Mary dropped back to the edge of the group and waited a few seconds before she told me a fact relating to the display we were looking at. At the end she added, “My Eema taught me that!” Mary did not feel comfortable discussing her mothers in the classroom proper. In liminal spaces such as playgrounds or field trips with a supportive adult who knew her
family, however, she expanded the language she used and the information she shared. A similar situation happened while I visited Moriah’s classroom and I helped her with her work. As we read a book together about Rosa Parks and the Montgomery Bus Boycott, Moriah reflected on how her life would be different if Jim Crow laws still existed. Although I hadn’t heard her speak much about her mothers in other school settings, working with me in this context she thought about her interracial, lesbian-headed family75 and said, “My moms couldn’t be my moms! I’d be crying!”

*Micro Contexts in Public Settings*

Outside of school, the presence of a supportive adult and other situation-specific features were also likely to influence children’s discursive productions. For example, when Mary made her Happy Father’s Day Donor Dad! card at Barnes and Noble, she could have felt it was a heteronormative, unsupportive space in which to discuss a queer family publicly. In this case, however, Mary was with a member of her chosen family who is herself a lesbian mother. In the micro context of this queer, supportive relationship, Mary responded to that immediate social setting and took up the card activity in a way that reflected her queer family. Other components of the situation may also have led to Mary’s confidence in making these decisions, including the presence of her sister, her family friend’s children, and the optional nature of the activity. Because of these features and the support of a queer parent figure, Mary had control over and the specifics of this activity and encouragement in engaging with it as she chose. Together,

75 This was the same day that her teacher had announced to the class that a popular children’s author had written a book about a white, lesbian couple who adopts children, including an African-American daughter approximately Moriah’s age. Therefore, it might not only have been the specific setting that enabled this conversation, but the support she felt from her teacher. Later that day her teacher specifically asked her about her “moms.”
they created a micro context within this larger, public venue for her queer-inclusive literacy practice.

*Implications for Teachers and Parents*

This finding about children’s flexible and highly contextualized discursive work contradicts the approach of many teachers who say nothing, often motivated by good intentions, in order to keep the information about a child’s family private or to protect the child from social pressure. It seems that just as children adjust to and take up new information, so too do they adjust to the expectations of silence around particular topics. Children of lesbian mothers do a great deal of work, which often goes unnoticed, to position themselves in particular ways. As adults, parents and teachers need to take responsibility for providing scaffolding in these situations, alleviating negative aspects of settings that we can to make easier for them to just be. While it is important to let the child take the lead about her individual situation, the first step we can take is introducing information about LGBT-headed families and people as a general social resource in classrooms. Doing so creates a less heteronormative environment and encourages children to communicate about their families more.

Surely, the institutional power of schools and other macro structures to standardize and sanitize literacy and regulate what is appropriate will always influence what children (and their parents and teachers!) feel is possible to speak of and read and write about. Although specific discursive sites may be connected to larger, even global

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76 Such a finding may also apply to a variety of diverse family structures and other relational identities that are not frequently recognized or validated in classrooms, but see the caveats about such comparisons, above.
discourses, they are not simply reproduced wholesale; features present in “outside structures” are present in and enacted by individuals (Yon, 2000). As Bakhtin argues (1986; Holquist, 1990), there is always a balance between a “culture” and individual agency. There is no automatic, one-to-one correspondence between an action and a reaction, but changing individual behavior is possible and can alter the dynamics of the group or context as a whole. This means teachers can work to alter the dynamics of heteronormativity that operate within their classrooms.

More specifically, the ways that children in this study created and used micro contexts and liminal spaces suggest particularly feasible modifications for teachers. For example, teachers can be attentive to the audience to whom students’ writings about their family will be shown. For example, is this a private journal entry? A letter for the teacher? A final creative essay that will be posted in the hallway? By being explicit about who will see what writing assignments and other school work, children can choose discursive moves with which they are most comfortable. In addition, providing choices about assignments, peer work groups, and even work spaces can give control and agency to children who may feel comfortable discussing details of their home life with only certain people. Explicitly acknowledging and inviting the child to discuss her lesbian-headed family can also be done in these more private spaces, especially as the teacher and student are just getting to know each other, but talk about LGBT people and families in general should not remain marginalized. And of course, not every mention of LGBT issues has to be directly connected to the child with lesbian parents.
Data from this study lend some support to the idea posed by Welle, Clatts, and Barnard (2005) that a connection exists between autonomous notions of literacy and sexuality. Their work suggests that when what counts as (literacy) learning expands, a greater diversity of people and identities can be included in such learning. This was true in children’s homes. There they learned particular lessons about literacy – that reading and writing could be used as tools for advocacy, that texts could be re-written to be more inclusive, etc. – that combined queer issues with particular literacy practices, ones that may not be shared by their teachers or classmates. Following the ideas of Welle and her colleagues, I also argue that similar benefits are gained by children with lesbian mothers when the spaces of learning are expanded; the less an activity feels like a traditional heteronormative school, the more choice a child has in her immediate work environment, and the more she is surrounded by others she knows to be supportive of her family, the more likely she is to share comfortably. Teachers can expand their pedagogies to encompass a variety of literacies within different types of learning spaces (such as field trips). Building curricular connections and conduits between the classroom and the outside world, allows information about LGBT people to enter more easily. Books were a starting point in this study both in and out of schools, but newspaper articles, discussions of popular culture, and children’s own stories also opened up occasional queer-inclusive conversations. The goal is to create a transformative and queer-inclusive third space (e.g., Moje, et al., 2004) that takes into account the home and community discourses of all children including the specific experiences of children from LGBT families.
Queer parents can also play a role in creating more queer-inclusive classrooms for their children. First, parents can share details about the family’s home language and literacy practices with their children’s teachers and schools if at all possible. This requires being out as LGBT, which certainly not every family has the luxury to do, nor will every teacher be willing to take up this information in their teaching. But teachers who have more specific information to draw on can weave queer people and issues into the fabric of the classroom more easily when they know what terms to use or what family members are important to the child. Parents should also realize that their children discuss specific information about their families much more frequently when they feel that doing so will be valued and validated, so seeing school work that never mentions a child’s queer family may be a sign that the child is not comfortable. The goal is to value children’s choices while still working to create an environment that is queer-inclusive. In this way, children can make their choices from a wide range of options rather than just a few that are overly limited by heteronormative assumptions. Finally, it is important to supplement a child’s school-based peer life with interaction among other children from LGBT families when possible, specifically in settings where they get to share and compare their experiences. Such settings, like the book club or gatherings of local or national LGBT family groups, counter the isolation some children feel as a child of lesbian mothers. They also allow children to move beyond this aspect of their lives to discuss other important experiences and identities in greater depth and specificity with their peers.
Implications for Theory and Research

This study suggests that researching children’s discursive productions and literacy practices through New Literacy Studies and queer theory is a productive combination. Queer theory challenges NLS to break down context-bound studies of literacy. It encourages research over various configurations of space, time, and communities. It keeps a focus on boundaries and ruptures rather than on a cohesive single list of the literacy practices people use. It also takes account of the ways language can shape, direct, and speak back to the power that circulates in particular contexts and communities, sometimes in ways that empower people, other times in ways that silence them. It stresses that reading is complicated and reminds us that children learn to read the social situation while they learn to read the text. This is true for all children, but children from this study are particularly attuned to reading heteronormativity in ways other children do not have to be.

This study also suggests that heteronormativity is not one thing that either is “there” or isn’t “there.” It argues that heteronormativity is instead constructed through a series of moment-to-moment negotiations, including silences, among people and discourses in interaction with one another. Such ongoing construction may be exhausting, but it also provides innumerable opportunities for change, however slight. It also means that the idea of a gay space versus a straight space is not clear cut, as the hybrid setting of book club most aptly demonstrates. The research also calls other binaries into question, including public/private, home/school, queer/normative, family/individual, in addition to gay/straight. The liminal positioning of children with
LGBT parents and their fluid movements between identities, communities, and settings interrupts such binaries.

In terms of research, this study demonstrates the necessity of examining multiple contexts, especially when trying to account for an identity category that is liminal, shifting, frequently silenced, and only loosely organized geographically. I would have missed significant information and opportunities for comparison had I centered this study in only one of the three larger settings I investigated. By contrasting these various locations, I could “see” silences that would have likely gone unnoticed without another site to highlight the differences. Multiple sites are especially useful for disrupting monolithic representations of participants because they allow a researcher to craft layer upon layer of understanding. Such an approach also highlights participants’ agency because it draws attention to disruptions and variability of people’s identities and actions within and among sites.

This research encourages multi-site ethnography for queer work in particular, but also for literacy work more generally. Literacy researchers can attend to the ways that children are socialized with and through texts in various settings, not with an eye to a single account or catalogue of the practices observed, but to trace where social forces enable and constrain literacy in particular contexts. The study also suggests the rich data that can be gathered when researchers are positioned close to children and give attention to their areas of expertise. Had the children seen me as a teacher or authority figure rather than a playmate who was interested in their sense of their lives, the data collected would likely have been significantly altered. Instead, the children and their mothers
welcomed me into their lives. I tried to show my appreciation for that invitation by honoring the participants’ many choices and by giving back to the families who shared their time and their perspectives so generously.

*Anticipating a World that Welcomes LGBT Families*

In this study, I argue that although we must respect the choices children make as they navigate the different settings of their lives, we also know that these are not absolute choices because adjusting the contexts changes what choices children make and what information they share. Children’s processes of self-authoring, as is true for all of us, are contextualized and based on conscious and unconscious social pressures. These pressures are particularly strong for children with lesbian mothers, where the mere mention of their family members invokes deviant sexuality and challenges the supposed separation between queers and children. Because these children notice and generally follow contextual expectations about mentioning queer topics, adults in general and teachers specifically have the opportunity if not the responsibility to begin introducing queer and queer-friendly texts and language into their classrooms. Such an invitation should not force but instead invite and support children from queer families if they choose to do the same. In fact, this type of transformation would be a way for children from all families to explore variability rather than rigidity (Yon, 2000). With such a change, children from lesbian-headed families could draw on the wealth of experience they have with oral and written language in the contexts of their homes that too frequently must be dropped at their front door. More inclusive contexts for literacy and learning provide resources and options for children with lesbian mothers to author
themselves and discuss their families in ways that honor their realities and reflect their complex and fluid positions in the world. Perhaps then the children in this study could spend less energy reading the social situations surrounding texts for signs of fear, exclusion, or impending danger and more energy reading and responding to the texts themselves, bringing all of who they are to their varied, shifting interpretations.
References


Appendix A: Figures

Figure 1 – Names and Characteristics of Participating Families

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Figure 9 – Similarities and Differences in Two Contexts of Literacy

Figure 10 – Similarities and Differences in Three Contexts of Literacy
Figure 1 – Names and Characteristics of Participating Families

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family</th>
<th>Parents</th>
<th>Terms of Address</th>
<th>Children</th>
<th>Formation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Birth – Katherine and registered sperm donor</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Adoption – local county services</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Adoption – local county services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Powell</td>
<td>Suzy Powell, Joe Davis, Cynthia Strug, Marilyn Porter</td>
<td>Mom, Dad, Stepmom, CeCe, Marilyn</td>
<td>Ethan Davis – 11, Isabella Davis – 9</td>
<td>Birth – Suzy and Joe, Birth – Suzy and Joe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Winston</td>
<td>Sally Winston, Amanda Butler, Hillary Chen</td>
<td>Mommy, Amanda, Momma Hil</td>
<td>Mallory Winston – 7, Lila Winston - 5</td>
<td>Adoption – international, Adoption – international</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Dotted lines separate parents living with the children from parents living in a residence other than the children’s primary residence.
** Highlighting indicates new relationships that are still (perhaps) evolving into that of full parent. Children have different and changing feelings on whether they consider these adults parents even though they may play some traditional parenting functions in the family.
Figure 1 – Names and Characteristics of Participating Families, continued

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family</th>
<th>Community Setting</th>
<th>Religious Affiliation</th>
<th>School(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jensen</td>
<td>Majority white, middle class suburb</td>
<td>Seventh-Day Adventist</td>
<td>Private, Seventh-Day Adventist (\text{Public, suburban (briefly)})</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McKinney-</td>
<td>Diverse, middle class city neighborhood</td>
<td>United Church of Christ</td>
<td>Public, city</td>
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<tr>
<td>Robbins</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Powell</td>
<td>Majority white, upper middle class, historical suburb</td>
<td>United Church of Christ</td>
<td>Public, suburban</td>
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<tr>
<td>Smith-</td>
<td>White, rural area with recent suburban development</td>
<td>Presbyterian</td>
<td>Private, Montessori (religiously-affiliated) (\text{Public, suburban})</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kendall</td>
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<tr>
<td>Winston</td>
<td>Majority white, upper middle class, historical suburb</td>
<td>Non-Religious, Buddhist</td>
<td>Public, suburban (\text{Chinese language/heritage school})</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 2 – Combining Queer Theory and Qualitative Methods

Attention to Language, specifically

Queer Theory

Attention to Social Practices, generally

Qualitative Methods

My Work
Figure 3 – Phase 1 Data Collection Timeline Arrangement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
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<th>10</th>
<th>11</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Family A</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Family B</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Family C</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>Family D</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>Family E</strong></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Figure 4 – A sign drawn by a Rainbow Families child and displayed in the Gay Pride parade
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Figure 6 – Writing about families in religious contexts: Mary’s family paper dolls
Figure 7 - A sample of the variety of ways children from lesbian-headed families navigated heteronormativity within schools. Names in bold are on the chart in more than one category.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Resist Heteronormativity – Assert Queer Subjectivity</th>
<th>Engage in Heteronormativity and Queer Subjectivity to Varying Degrees</th>
<th>Engage in Heteronormativity – Resist Queer Subjectivity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Isabella:**  
- Is frequently vocal and open, telling me, “Yep, I tell everybody [about my mom being a lesbian]!”  
- Draws her family for display on the classroom door and includes her father, her mother, her mother’s ex-partner, her brother, herself, and her dog.  
- Chooses an article about the recently-passed local county nondiscrimination policy for her current events show-and-tell assignment.  
- Attends Lobby Day with her mother to advocate state legislators for LGBT rights. She writes an essay about the experience and distributes buttons to her classmates.  
**Mallory:**  
- Is assertive about her two mothers when students are planning for Mother’s Day.  
- Says, to teasing, “Well, I have two moms!”  
- Chooses to paint a 2\textsuperscript{nd} painting for her 2\textsuperscript{nd} mother (even though she misses a fun activity to do so), emphasizing she should have two sets of presents for her two moms.  
- Tells the class, after Mother’s Day, “First, I called my other mom.”  
- Says, “I don’t have a dad, actually.”  
| **Jadyn:**  
- Responds to another classmate’s acknowledgement of a lesbian aunt by saying, “I kind of have two moms, mostly.”  
**Mary:**  
- Assures me when I arrive at her school for the first time, “I know one thing you’re going to learn today: that I’m a lot like other kids!”  
**Moriah:**  
- Portrays family as two adults – one with long hair and one with short hair – and two children, with no race evident for any of the figures, in significant contrast to her own family structure.  
**Mallory:**  
- Reports that her classmate has insisted that “Girls can only marry boys” and she agrees with him.  
- Is reminded by her mother that such a statement isn’t true because Mallory herself has two mothers.  
- Resists her mother’s queer formulations and sides with peer’s interpretation even though it means rejecting her own family make up.  
**Chloe:**  
- Complains about her recent haircut by insisting to her teacher that “Girls don’t really have short hair.”  
- Is reminded by one of her mothers that both of her moms and many other women and girls she knows have short hair, but she is unconvinced. |
| **“Where I’m From” Template**  
(http://www.swva.net/fred1st/wif.htm) | **Moriah’s “Where I’m From” Poem** |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I am from [specific ordinary item], from [product name] and [another blank].</td>
<td>I am from soft pillows, from McDonald’s and oreos and skittles.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am from the [home description, adjective, adjective, sensory detail].</td>
<td>I am from the city.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am from the [plant/flower], the [plant/flower].</td>
<td>I am from the rose and the daisy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am from [family tradition] and [family trait], From [name of family member] and [family name] and [family name].</td>
<td>I am from games and soccer From Aaron and Denise McKinney-Robbins family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am from the [description of family tendency] and [another one]. From [something you were told as a child] and [another]. I’m from [place of birth and family ancestry], [two food items representing your family].</td>
<td>I am from friends and movies From teachers and nurses, I was from foster care. From rice and shrimp</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From the [specific family story about a specific person and detail], the [another detail], and the [another detail about another family member].</td>
<td>I am from the tears, the brothers and sisters, the sad times and the happy times. I am from the pumpkin patch.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am from [location of family pictures/mementos indicating their worth].</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 9 – Similarities and Differences in Two Contexts of Literacy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Literacy Practices in Homes</th>
<th>Literacy Practices in Schools</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Queer-inclusive?</td>
<td>Yes, frequently</td>
<td>No, only seldomly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Fellow participants?</td>
<td>Family</td>
<td>Peers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. In cooperation and</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>connection with others?</td>
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</table>
Figure 10 – Similarities and Differences in Three Contexts of Literacy

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<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Queer-inclusive?</td>
<td>Yes, frequently</td>
<td>No, only seldomly</td>
<td>Yes, frequently</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Fellow participants?</td>
<td>Family</td>
<td>Peers</td>
<td>Peers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. In cooperation and connection with others?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>