"It's just my life": being an 'ordinary' LGBTQI+ parent in a heteronormative world

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Introduction

In this chapter we draw on a set of interviews with LGBTQI+ parents in which they

talk about their relationships with their children's schools. We focus on a subset of

these parents, who wanted their families to be treated as 'just a family like any

other', and consider how they manage this in a context in which heteronormative

parenting is taken for granted. We discuss the various strategies these parents used

to come out to their children's schools and to other parents, how they supported

their children in managing their teachers' and peers' knowledge of their LGBTQI+

status, and how being LGBTQI+ intersects with other aspects of parenting children

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and young people during their school years. We explain how this group of parents sought to blend into their local parent communities, and discuss problems arising from the heteronormativity of schools and society, and how the parents overcame or otherwise dealt with these.

We understand heteronormativity to involve an institutional and group assumption that everyone is heterosexual (and cisgender, though we will not discuss that here). Butler (1990) argues that society structures gender identities and performances through a presumption of heterosexuality, something that they refer to as the 'heterosexual matrix', in which gender and sexuality are inextricably intertwined. They argue that, specifically,

> For bodies to cohere and make sense there must be a stable sex
> expressed through a stable gender (masculine expresses male,
> feminine expresses female) that is oppositionally and hierarchically
> defined through the compulsory practice of heterosexuality. (151)

What Butler means here is that there is an underpinning assumption that applies to all bodies, genders and desires: that they are heterosexual, that that this is the 'natural' way to be. This means that heterosexual ways of living are treated as taken-for-granted and normal, so that anything that stands outside of this is not just different, but deviant. This idea encompasses not just compulsory heterosexuality, but also particular ways of living one's heterosexuality, so that there is, for example, an expectation in many cultures that adults will form an exclusive partnership with one and only one person of the opposite binary gender, and aim to have children with them. These particular ways of living out (heterosexual) lives are collectively referred to as 'heteronormativity' and underpin not just assumptions about social

life but also such things as national legal, tax, and medical systems, which are structured around the heteronormative family to different extents in different jurisdictions (Browne, 2011; Neary, 2016; Ryan-Flood, 2009). This puts heterosexual monogamous relationships at the heart of the social, despite evident diversity (Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2010).

In the last decades, however, there have been significant formal changes to the ways in which civil society operates with respect to LGBTQI+ citizens (though in some states these are, at time of writing, experiencing considerable social and governmental pushback). In particular, the spread of legislation enabling gay marriage, in the affluent global North and West at least (Brown, 2012), could be seen as introducing a new set of norms which encompass many, but not all, LGBTQI+ people. Some writers (Duggan, 2002; Garwood, 2016; Santos, 2013; Stryker, 2008; Ashford, 2011) argue that new legal labels and processes enabling, for example, LGBTQI+ couples to legitimately claim the right to use terms such as 'husband', 'wife' and 'parent' are symptomatic of a new, homonormative, legal discourse focused around stable, monogamous, mainly lesbian and gay couples. They suggest that such 'concessions' reflect an assumption that one can be included in heteronormative civil society only if one lives in ways that are modelled on and parallel its forms.

Duggan (2002) argues that homonormative discourse is a political and theoretical form

> That does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privileged,

depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption (179).

She and others (Croce, 2015; Garwood, 2016; Stryker, 2008) argue that homonormativity is allied to liberal or even neoconservative tendencies in wider society, through which 'gay or lesbian, cisgender, middle-class, white, western, able-bodied, monogamous, family-oriented, married' (Garwood, 2016: : 9) people are accorded heteronormative privilege in return for giving up the struggle for radical social change. Brown (2012), however, notes that these inclusive developments have taken place because of cumulative changes to everyday practice in which even queer theorists are complicit, suggesting that, while the costs of change have certainly be borne by many trans people and LGBTQI+ people of colour, we should not ignore either the importance of these new freedoms of the emotional power that comes from being recognized, while being alive to negative consequences. Similarly, Weeks (2007) argues that, although such things as same-sex marriage and access to reproductive rights absorb LGBTQI+ relationships into heteronormativity and normalise particular forms of couple relationship while marginalizing others, without this inclusion even more people are marginalised with respect to parenting rights, recognition as next of kin and other central aspects of ordinary citizenship. The value of these rights and the possibilities they bring, including, for example, access to fostering and adoption for gay men (and benefits to the children they parent) (Stacey, 2006) should not be disregarded. As Weeks (2007: : 9) points out, we should 'never underestimate the importance of being ordinary'.

We argue that the parents discussed in this paper valued ordinariness in this way, going to some lengths to not be seen as different when interacting with staff,

students, and other parents at their children's schools. Taylor (2009) describes this 'ordinariness strategy' as one in which LGBTQI+ parents focus on mundane aspects of family life in order to make themselves recognizable as similar to heterosexual families (Clarke, 2008; Croce, 2015), dissipating any suggestion of the 'wrong' kind of difference, and associating themselves with the apparent heteronormativity of parenthood (Richardson, 2004; Ryan-Flood, 2009). While such strategies have been useful for attaining civil rights, they are often salient in how LGBTQI+ parented families operate in their relationships with schools, particularly in establishing recognition as 'good parents' (Taylor, 2009).

We have found the Sociology of Nothing (Scott, 2018) useful in thinking about this particular group of parents. Scott argues that it is important to investigate the unmarked as well as the marked in social life, and to consider social forms such as non-identity, non-participation and non-presence as important and worthy of study. She notes that

> In social life…nothing is not just a passively endured condition, but a
> reflexively managed mode of experience. Choosing not to do
> something, disengaging from a group or finding nothing to relate to in
> a dominant cultural script, can all be considered demonstrations of
> individual agency, suggesting a critically distant interpretation of one's
> situation. (4)

In our research, it was clear that one group of parents had chosen to disengage from, and indeed to resist, a cultural script that positioned their families as different. Their desire to be seen as a family like any other led to conscious activity to present

themselves in this way, rather than as different from others in the school community.

Scott (2018) suggests that non-identity is an important dimension of nothing. This, she argues, can involve either the active repudiation of a role or identity, or through 'more passive acts of omission: processes of attrition, lack or deficiency, indexing something that is not there but might have been' (7). Our families, however, did not really fit either characterization but instead sought to treat their LGBTQI+ identities as present but unimportant. In some ways this reflects the ways in which heterosexual people rarely want or need to 'mobilise [their heterosexuality] as a political identity or need to come out as non-LGBTQ' (8). We argue that this specific group of parents took this heterosexual norm as a pattern for their own lives and actively practiced making nothing of their LGBTQI+ status. They used a variety of strategies to discount its importance and instead present their families as normative. This form of homonormativity treats the sexual orientation of the parents as an unmarked nothing, as irrelevant to their status as parents of these children.

Methods

This chapter is based on interviews with LGBTQI+ parents as part of a wider study of the relationship between LGBQI+ parented families and schools (Carlile and Paechter, 2018). We conducted 23 interviews during 2016-17 with 26 LGBTQI+ parents and carers, mainly in England and Wales, although two lived elsewhere in Europe. Locations varied from suburbs of major cities to small villages. Most people were interviewed alone, even when part of a couple parenting together, though in two cases we interviewed both parents at the same time. One couple was

interviewed twice, before and after they had left London for a more rural location, and in three cases parents and children were interviewed together. Sixteen interviews were conducted face-to-face, five via Skype, one via instant messaging, and one via email. The face-to-face and Skype interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis. This range of approaches allowed us to have a wider geographical reach than might otherwise have been the case, and in also in some cases to give an additional level of confidentiality to respondents. All participants were given full information about the study and signed consent forms for the research. Both audio recordings and written transcriptions were stored in a secure file on Goldsmiths university servers, and all participants, partners, children and schools have been given pseudonyms.

The families were recruited via a combination of convenience and snowball sampling. We set up a Facebook page early in the project, for general discussion of LGBTQI+ parenting and school issues, being upfront from the start about the fact that we were conducting research. Some respondents were recruited through this. Others came from contacts made at Rainbow Families camps, and others via personal contacts or names passed on by respondents. We deliberately sought a wide range of LGBTQI+ parent, so that, although our respondent sample is relatively small, it reflects a variety of identity positions, family structures and approaches. However, all but one of our respondents was white (though not all white parents had white children) and most could be described as middle-class. Family composition and origin ranged from single parenting by a lesbian with an unknown donor, to children who had a male and female couple involved in their upbringing, though not to an equal extent. In all cases except three we interviewed the parents who were

the main or equally shared carers for the children. This obviously means that we only have the perspective of these parents, and their co-parents are invisible. However, the evidence from both the non-resident parents and the equal co-parents whom we interviewed suggests that, with regard to schools, non-resident LGBTQI+ parents are similarly situated to heterosexual/cisgender parents in this position, for example, with regard to access (or lack of it) to their children's progress, invitations to parents' evenings and so on (Brown et al., 2010).

Most of our adult respondents were cisgender. However, two identified as trans men, four as women of trans history, one as genderqueer, one a non-binary and one as intersex. We did not ask about sexual orientation, other than that they fell into the broad LGBTQI+ category. However, one described herself as bisexual and one couple as polyamorous (though no-one else was involved in their child's parenting). One of the trans men was parenting (and interviewed) with his partner, a cis woman who identified as a lesbian (Platt and Bolland, 2017), and one of the women of trans history told us that she was now in a heterosexual relationship, though she had previously been married to (and conceived her children with) a woman.

Parenting arrangements were not always entirely clear-cut, and the descriptions here are simplifications to some extent. However, 14 respondents (10 families) were parenting birth, adopted, or fostered children as a couple. Eleven could be described as single parents, eight of whom were co-parenting to a varying extent (up to equally shared time) with their former partner: two of these had two children, one living solely or mainly with her, and one who lived mainly with her ex-partner. Three of the lesbian-parented families had involved male donors who saw

the children on a regular basis. Three families had only cis male parents (two couples, one parenting alone) and one child was parented by a single trans man. The ages of the children in our respondents' families ranged from two to adult, with the majority of compulsory school age.

Being just a family like any other

In this chapter we focus on a subset of respondents who emphasized that it was important to them that they should be seen and treated by their children's schools as ordinary parents with ordinary families (Santos, 2013; Taylor, 2009; Weeks, 2007). Although they were out to their children's schools, they didn't seek or expect to be treated any differently from the other parents, and some expressed some surprise or puzzlement when we asked about this. In this sense, they treated their LGBTQI+ status as nothing. Simon, for example, told us that

> I don't think I have had any [experiences with the school] as *gay*
>
> parent.

Similarly, Rachael found even a question about any benefits of being a LGBTQI+ parent as difficult to answer, seeing it as irrelevant to her situation:

> I don't…I find it quite hard to answer the question…It's just my life. It
>
> doesn't have any benefits.

These parents, unlike some of the others we interviewed, were keen to emphasise their 'normality' as families, and, while they valued diversity in the school community, did not see themselves as more than incidental examples of less common family structures. Their LGBTQI+ status was seen as simply another factor in their and their children's lives, and they didn't want, for example, to act as highly

visible role models or examples. Kevin, a primary school head teacher who, with his husband, was the foster carer of a teenage boy, was explicit that, not only did he not want to be involved in such activities, but that he was also unsupportive of them in general, seeing them as emphasizing difference rather than integration:

> I've never been a great flag waver. The fostering service want to wheel
>
> you out at every event now, because they've got gay fostering parents.
>
> The NUT [National Union of Teachers] want me to go on the flipping
>
> bus at Pride in Brighton and it's not about that for me. If we want to
>
> integrate it's just…it's not highlighting the differences.

Kevin was resistant to and disidentified with overt visibility as a gay parent, and did not want to mobilise this as a political identity. However, being visible and being out are not the same thing. For the parents discussed here, coming out at an early stage to school communities was an explicit strategy for relative invisibility. They wanted the issue of their sexual orientation to have been dealt with, so that it could be ignored, treated as nothing, from then on (Cloughessy et al., 2017). This distinguished this group both from those whose aim was to be highly visible, as an example to children and young people of other ways they might live, and from those who aimed for complete invisibility. For example, Gray told us that they had 'made a choice to be out and fighting for people's rights', while Sylvie said that

> I value being visibly queer and I feel there is a benefit to that. I've been
>
> visibly queer in both schools. So although I don't spend a lot of time in
>
> secondary school, parents see me and my ex around, the
>
> teachers…[…]…They see me as gender-nonconforming, so there is that

visibility, and I think that's really valuable for other kids, apart from my

kids, that they see those relationships.

In contrast, two women of trans history told of their fear that their children would

be bullied if anyone in the school community knew of their trans status. Patty had

not come out at all until her children were adults, while Adele was extremely careful

when visiting her son's school:

> I never go near the school without making my hair right, never in
>
> slobbing/androgynous clothing. I am always on edge and it is
>
> exhausting…I feel like I am walking a tightrope with a BIG drop.

The group we focus on in this chapter contrasted strongly with these two extremes,

focusing on being out to their children's schools but then expecting to be treated

just like any other parents, and mainly discussing other things than their sexuality

with the school, students and other parents. Like Rachael, quoted above, Harriet and

Catherine were resistant to our question about the advantages to their child of

having lesbian parents, suggesting that it was essentialist. When persuaded to reflect

on the question, they treated their lesbianism as a nothing in this context, focusing

instead on the importance of other things they valued about themselves. As Harriet

remarked:

> So he's got a very strong sense of injustice around gender which, I
>
> hope, I would have hoped that being raised by two *socialist* parents
>
> would do that anyway.

This group seemed to have a strong feeling that society had moved on to such an

extent that it was not just unnecessary but inappropriate to draw attention to their

LGBTQI+ status. While they wanted this to be accepted by their children's schools,

they didn't feel the need to emphasise it. In this sense they wanted to be unmarked, taken for granted.

Scott (2018) argues that 'nothing must be accomplished or 'done' whether or not we are aware of it. (4) This group of parents worked hard, at times, at least, to establish the non-marking of their family composition. They had an explicit set of strategies, focused mainly on treating their relationship status as something taken for granted and of lesser importance than their child's education, alongside making sure that people knew about them being LGBTQI+ at an early stage. They were extremely matter-of-fact about this, reflecting the findings of Cloughessey et al (2017), who report that 89% of the Australian lesbian families they studied mentioned their family composition at the first meeting with an early years' provider, and expected this information to be shared with other educators, children, and families. For our respondents, the idea seemed to be that if they got their sexual orientation out into the open immediately, then it was dealt with as an issue and everyone could get on with their lives. This was typically done not by explicitly announcing their LGBTQI+ status, but by deliberately dropping names and pronouns of both parents into conversations with staff and other parents. In this sense, these people had an active strategy of producing their unmarked status, which they hoped would allow a longer-term strategy of 'not-doing' anything different from other (heterosexual) families. They engaged in an initial form of identity display and expected this to be accepted, allowing them to do nothing more thereafter.

Rachael, for example was very clear about her approach, and saw it as partially self-protective:

> And I mean, naturally, just kind of mentioning my partner in a not…I
>
> don't go around going 'hello I'm a lesbian'. I go around saying, you
>
> know, 'oh my partner, she does this'. And I do it as soon as I can
>
> because I actually think, well, if people are homophobic then they can
>
> just decide to diss me now. I don't want to get to know people and
>
> then find they have dodgy views and all that sort of stuff.

This tactic of dropping the name of one's partner into conversations, referred to by Cloughessy et al (2017: : 10) as 'display tools' emphasized these people's desire for a visible invisibility: it treated same-gender partnerships as not significantly unusual enough for comment.

Being upfront about one's status by talking frequently about one's partner also had the effect of emphasizing a couple's collaborative approach to parenting (Dunne, 1997), even when one parent had given up work and so was more frequently seen at school. Jess, for example, always referred to her partner in conversations about their child:

> I made it clear that any conversation was 'Laura and I': 'Laura and I had
>
> a conversation last night and this is what we came up with'…It was
>
> never 'I'. I wanted to be as out as possible in the school.

Jess was also anxious to protect her foster daughter, whose difficult background was well known to other parents, and viewed her openness (as did some other parents) as proactively working against bullying, using humour to connect with other parents about herself and her partner being lesbians:

> It's not about me ramming it down people's throats. I just really want
>
> to be clear that Saika doesn't have to be subject to any form of

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> bullying, either by teachers or by pupils or by parents. I was really clear
>
> with other mums and grandparents who joined the PTA. I was, like,
>
> 'I'm joining the PTA because Saika is a looked-after kid, she's a Muslim,
>
> she's black, and now she's being raised by two lesbians, oh my god,
>
> isn't that funny?'

For Jess, parenting a vulnerable child, simple openness was not quite enough. While she wanted her relationship with her partner to be treated as unremarkable, in order to achieve this she took trouble to make it highly obvious at an early stage.

Other parents had an overt strategy of modelling visible ordinariness (Brown, 2012; Santos, 2013; Weeks, 2007). David and Peter, for example, took the view that they should behave in similar ways to heterosexual couples when visiting the school for parents' evenings and other events:

> I do go in acting and doing the same way as every heterosexual parent.
>
> I will hold his hand. I will touch his shoulder or put an arm around him
>
> or whatever. Because that's what people do and I want the kids to see
>
> that I am doing that and I am gay.

However, while David and Peter did think that they were important potential role models for any gay children they might encounter, what they were mostly trying to achieve was an out invisibility that allowed them to behave in ways they saw as exactly the same as any heterosexual couple, without it being noticed or remarked upon. They wanted their sexuality to be visible but unmarked. This was particularly clear from our interview with them after they had left London for a small rural town. Comparing their new home to London, where they felt that they were 'making a statement walking down the road', David felt that in many ways the relative lack of

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identity politics in their new locality allowed them to be accepted like any other couple:

> Like London is…there's so many different groups vying for popularity, I don't know, vying for identity and all that kind of stuff and they're very much in your face about it, whereas here, it's just, everyone's quietly getting on with their own lives, and if you're a nice person, you're pleasant and polite and whatever, people will talk to you, and your sexuality, your background, your culture, it's just not an issue, and that, for me, has been the most refreshing thing and the thing that's given me most relief.

Being able to act as a family like any other is here shown to be central to David and Peter's ability to settle into their new home with their children, and seen as a welcome contrast to the more overt sexuality politics of the capital. They actively sought an unremarked life for themselves and their children, and in this way embraced a homonormativity that they felt was easier to achieve in their rural town than in London (Ryan-Flood, 2009). This reflected Kristy's experience of transitioning to female in a rural village. Because she had remained in the area she was unavoidably visible locally as a woman of trans history, but felt that the local people 'just see people for who they are', in effect rendering this status as a nothing.

For most of this group of parents, being LGBTQI+ was, as Rachael put it, 'just my life'. As long as their children's school communities were welcoming of them and their families, they were content to leave campaigning about LGBTQI+ issues within the school to others. This meant that their interactions with their children's schools were generally about other matters (Holman and Oswald, 2011). What these were

varied, of course, from family to family, but included: children being fostered or adopted; children having disabilities; children's friendship problems; discomfort about the general atmosphere of the school, such as hearing another child being shouted at. Even where the children themselves did not have any particular difficulties that impacted on their education, parents, even if they intended to be more proactive about LGBTQI+ issues, often found that other things got in the way or took priority. This reflects Holman and Oswald's (2011) finding that sexual orientation is perceived as non-salient (as a nothing) when it is overridden by other, more urgent, matters. Parents might feel that they only have a limited number of opportunities to raise things with the school, and prioritise accordingly. Harriet, for example, found that she and Catherine usually had more immediately important issues to discuss with their son's school:

> I often would compile stuff from the internet, or lists from schools or things from schools and get ready to give it to them, over some day when I thought, here's another occasion they could have mentioned. They could have some better books in the library…And then it always turned out that something else got in the way, because, as we were going through primary education, there's so many things you want to write, so, like, you don't want to waste your points on something that isn't absolutely top of the list, so it was always more important to say, like, why aren't you doing your times tables, or…what about this and what about that? And I felt like there's only a number of things, you can only speak a number of times a year. So I don't think we've, we've barely ever said anything about it.

As LGBTQI+ families have become more accepted and less unusual, it appears that family composition is not the most urgent thing that parents have to talk to schools about, so it is not raised unless something like bullying brings it to the 'top of the list'.

Similarly, when choosing schools, not all parents thought that LGBTQI+ issues were the most important consideration. While inclusivity seemed to be a cause of great anxiety when the children were small, it became less so as they got older[ii]. There was also a tendency for parents to be satisfied with the situation at their child's current school but be worried about what would happen when they moved on. Particularly for parents for whom being LGBTQI+ felt like just something about their lives, other considerations, similar to those of heterosexual parents, might come into play. This included: proximity; inspection reports; local reputation; school size; special educational needs; whether their friends had children there; academic orientation; emphasis on the outdoors; and (depending on parental preference) whether the school seemed strict, friendly, relaxed or nurturing. For example, Sylvie and their (then) partner thought it was important that their children attend local schools, unless they found a reason not to do so, so they went to the primary and secondary school nearest to where they lived.

As was previously found by Taylor (2009), some parents thought that general diversity was important, partly to support their own inclusion and partly as something they valued, but it might not be the only, or even the overriding consideration. For example, Julian and Elizabeth's child went to the most diverse primary school in their city, but they suggested that other factors were also important:

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It wasn't just the diversity thing, it was their approach to learning as

well, that they are really, they are not driven by all their curriculum

requirement and it's very play based as much as it can be – to the

point where the school didn't actually have a very good reputation.

For other parents, however, it was things specific to their child that mattered

more. Jane and Paula needed a school that could appropriately support their son's

specific developmental needs, while for David and Peter the overriding issue was

that their older child would require a school that would be 'nurturing'.

Although, as discussed above, some parents had told the school that they

were LGBTQI+ in advance of their children joining, this was not always possible for

foster parents who took over a child's care very suddenly in the middle of a school

term, especially in cases where the child stayed at the same school. This could mean

not only that they were unable to be immediately explicit with the school about

their family arrangements, as they might otherwise wish to be, but also that they

were not given any relevant policies by the school in advance. In Helen's case, for

example, she and her partner started caring for their children half way through the

school term:

…and you haven't had all those introductions that you would have had,

particularly to secondary school…

I think perhaps, if we had had a meeting with the headteacher right

from the start, rather than you just turning up on day one and pick up

the kids. Yeah, that would have helped, and I think…I think it's partly

because we didn't want to make this big song and dance about being

lesbian carers. We just wanted to make the children's experiences, you

know, as regular as possible. So you know, I mean…I think, yeah, it

would have been more helpful to have some kind of welcome meeting.

And maybe then they might have said, 'Well, we've got these policies

around LGBTQ parents.'

Situations like this mean that opportunities to introduce oneself and inform the

school about one's identity or sexual orientation simply did not occur, leaving

parents with the 'dropping it in' strategy as their only way of outing themselves to

the school. This also means, as Helen points out, that schools do not have a clear

opportunity to indicate their acceptance of such parents and their strategies for

dealing with any issues that might arise. This points to what, in many ways is a

paradox about this 'visible but ordinary' approach: when LGBTQI+ parented families

are so normalized as to be almost invisible at school, it may be less likely that schools

will be alerted to take steps to provide greater inclusion, even at the basic level of

having a greater range of books in the library. Such families may therefore be

accepted within the school community but not be acknowledged to exist within the

curriculum (Holman and Oswald, 2011). In this sense, the nothingness of these

families' status becomes problematic: they are rendered invisible.

An example of this comes from Rachael's interview, and describes an

incident from when her son Calum was five:

I never really got to the bottom of it but the only time I've felt slightly

uncomfortable was back in year one they had to do a, erm, one of

those little circles of intimacy diagrams and he came home with this

circle of intimacy diagram and I looked at it and I went, ah hello, where

am I? I wasn't on it.

Carrie: Oh right.   You mean he had mummy and daddy?

Rachael: I think… I think it did have Colton somewhere quite far

out. But it was mummy and then some of his little friends and stuff.

Although the teacher concerned claimed to have taught this inclusively, neither

Rachael nor her partner was convinced by his explanation. However, she also

pointed out that, at that age, Calum would probably have needed explicit

encouragement to include both of his mothers, 'because there was obviously a

reason why Callum felt… I mean apart from anything else, he was five and everybody

else was probably writing mummy…' Similarly, Sylvie was disappointed with sex

education at their children's secondary school, describing it as 'put a condom on a

banana and what types of contraception there were.'

   This incident also reflects the obverse side of a minimal reaction from schools

when parents come out to them. While this might be read as indicating acceptance,

it could also suggest a lack of sophistication on the part of a school, which might see

the issue entirely in relation to potential bullying. Sylvie explained the limitations

that they and their ex had encountered:

So in our meeting with the headteacher, we said that we're lesbian

parents of this child, and we want to know what your approach to that

would be…The headteacher was quite positive but she said, we've

never had any parents before, but we'll deal with it in the same way

that we'd deal with any other bullying issues. I don't think it occurred

to her that it might take some positive action in the school, but she

was quite positive about dealing with bullying.

In the event, while there was a lot of anxiety about dealing with LGBTQI+ focused bullying, this seems only to have occurred in one (albeit serious) case. Additionally, one of David and Peter's children was bullied, but because he was adopted, not because he had two fathers. Where parents found schools to be wanting in relation to LGBTQI+ issues, it was mainly around lack of curriculum inclusion and the ubiquitous complaints about how their children's needs were handled on occasions such as Mothers' or Fathers' Day. Similarly, complaints about how they were included in wider school communities focused as much or more on other differences than their specific LGBTQI+ status. Simon, who had only recently adopted his son, found it hard to get involved in school gate relationships, but did not see his gay identity as the important issue. He suggested that his awkwardness was partly to the predominantly Muslim composition of the school, whereas he was 'gay and white and a single dad', who didn't fit in with their already tightly established community. Helen thought that their lack of fit stemmed from starting to foster young people already established at secondary school, where none of the other parents knew who they were:

> We never felt all that welcomed, actually, by parents. I think partly because we hadn't been there in the beginning. So you felt a bit awkward in the playground standing waiting for your kids, and also, people…because people knew the children's history, they weren't sure who we were, and were we family members, to begin with.

Others got on fine with playground communities most of the time, but even those who worked hard to be just a family like any other might find themselves banging up against heteronormative assumptions. Catherine and Harriet had a particularly

interesting example of this in relation to the other parents at their son's primary school. Here the status of their relationship as a nothing in the school context made it harder for other parents to interpret. Even their relatively homonormative family structure of two resident parents and a child sometimes came up against an assumed set of heterosexual norms that they couldn't fit. This meant that they were not included in some events:

> Almost all the mums, I suppose, all the mums I see don't work, or don't work full-time. There's an awful lot of them who don't, and have got a kind of mumsy clique, so that it separates into dads and mums. They don't know which of us to put into the mums' side. Which of us is the girl? Who is going to go on the girls' night out? Partly because we don't really fit into that thing anyway. So they don't ever ask us.

While minor in some ways, such subtle incomprehensions could still have an impact on parental community relationships.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have used the Sociology of Nothing to explore the strategies and experiences of a group of LGBTQI+ parents in relation to their children's school communities. We note that being visible and being out are not the same thing, and that that these parents, while outing themselves at an early stage, then strove for a taken-for-granted, out invisibility in the school context. In this sense, they treated their sexual orientation and family setup as a nothing, and expected others to do so. This is a form of homonormativity which, they felt, made it easier for their families to be seen as 'just a family like any other' by staff, students, and other parents.

This approach to LGBTQI+ parenting, however, also brought some disadvantages. In some cases it rendered their children's status as having LGBTQI+ parents invisible in school, which could mean that the school took less trouble to be inclusive in its curriculum and other provision. One child also told us that she didn't like her family being so normalised, as it meant that she no longer felt special for having LGBTQI+ parents. Treating homonormative parenting as more or less the same as heteronormative parenting but with same-gendered parents (Clarke, 2008; Farrr et al., 2017; Martino and Cumming-Potvin, 2011; Richardson, 2004; Tasker and Golombok, 1997; Taylor, 2009) can make it appear as though there is no need to make special provision for the children involved (for example around festivals such as Mothers' and Fathers' Days). It can mean that images of even homonormative LGBTQI+ families are absent from the school context, while making it even less likely that representations of non-normative families are available. It also potentially makes it harder for those families whose forms are not so normative, and which cannot therefore be treated as nothing, to be seen as fully part of school communities.

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[i] Matthew Carlile is a trans person who previously published under the name Anna Carlile. This note is included to support continuity of citation and to ensure that readers and indexing services can accurately connect his past and current academic work. Matthew is committed to maintaining the visibility of trans scholars in academia and appreciates the support of colleagues and readers in respecting and acknowledging this transition.

[ii] That said, secondary school was a less comfortable place for most of the children and young people we interviewed. They were also less likely to talk to their parents about any problems, as they didn't want to upset the family narrative of ordinariness and pride.