

**The Invisibility of Lesbian Mother-Families in the South Australian
Premier's Reading Challenge**

Authors:

(1) Dr Damien W. Riggs

School of Social and Policy Studies,

Flinders University, GPO Box 2100

Adelaide 5001

Email: damien.riggs@flinders.edu.au

(2) Dr Scott Hanson Easey

Discipline of Public Health

University of Adelaide,

Adelaide, 5005

Email: scott.hanson-easey@adelaide.edu.au

This is an Author's Accepted Manuscript of an article published in Bookbird,

Copyright John Hopkins University Press, DOI: 10.1353/bkb.2014.0024

Abstract:

This paper presents an analysis of a selection of books from the 2011 South Australian Premier's Reading Challenge in order to examine how lesbian-mother families are represented. The findings suggest that no books in the subsection of 'families and relationships' feature lesbian mother-families, and across the 4000 books included in the Challenge only one such book was identified. The paper concludes by discussing the implications of these findings for the inclusion of lesbian mothers and their children in educational spaces.

Introduction

Arguably, one of the defining features of scientific, experimental research is the null hypothesis. The null hypothesis suggests that any change observed as part of an experiment is the product of chance, and thus is not a result of the experiment itself. Of course scientists typically want to refute the null hypothesis and show that their findings are the product of their experiment. In the social sciences, where true experiments are somewhat less common, we still work with the notion of a null hypothesis. In the social sciences, we are often interested in finding out if there is a relationship between a set of variables, or for qualitative researchers, if there is a relationship between being a member of a group and having a shared set of experiences. So, for example, we might interview a group of lesbian mothers (as we did for the research that informs the broader project from which this paper is derived), and while we would expect to hear a lot of different stories and experiences, we might also expect to hear a lot of similar themes (as was the case in our interview data, see Riggs and Willing). If indeed we do hear a number of key themes repeating themselves across our interviews, then we have in essence refuted the null hypothesis (which would suggest no similarities amongst lesbian mothers).

At this point the reader might be wondering what if anything the above focus on the null hypothesis has to do with a paper on children's literature. Our reason for

opening with this line of thought is to introduce a potentially novel way of thinking about social change (or the lack of it) in regards to gender and sexuality in the context of children's literature. To explain: the project that this paper is drawn from sought to examine the educational experiences of South Australian lesbian mother-families. At the time the data were collected, South Australia was the only remaining Australian state or territory that did not provide full protection to such families. This was despite the fact that South Australia was the first Australian state to legalise homosexuality in the mid 1970s. This contradiction suggested to us that much could be gained from exploring the experiences of this population of lesbian mothers. For the project, we have to date surveyed a sample of South Australian lesbian mothers about their family's experiences within the education system (Riggs), spoken to a sub-sample of those who completed the survey focusing on how they negotiate educational contexts (Riggs and Willing), run and assessed a workshop aimed at increasing the capacity for educators to work with lesbian mother-families (Riggs and Due), and finally undertaken an audit of the books included in the families and relationships section of the 2011 South Australian *Premier's Reading Challenge*. It is this last aspect of the data that is the focus of this paper.

As its title would suggest, the South Australian *Premier's Reading Challenge* (PRC) is a government-organised annual undertaking in which South Australian students are encouraged to read twelve books of their own choosing from the extensive list of books covered by the PRC. Students from reception (that is, the first formal year of school, which Australian children enter when they are 5 years old) to year nine are able to participate, and students who complete the PRC each year receive a medal to acknowledge their completion. Most South Australian schools (both public and private) actively encourage involvement, and school libraries typically utilise a coding system to indicate which books are included in the PRC list. In addition to maintaining a list of all of the books included in the PRC, each year a list of the most popular books is made available on the website www.premiersreadingchallenge.sa.edu.au. Furthermore, books included on the PRC are also cited as recommended texts by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment, and Reporting Authority (ACARA).

To return to the null hypothesis, then, our expectation prior to auditing the books included in the families and relationships subsection of the PRC was that while it would be likely that we would find a significant proportion of books focusing exclusively on heterosexual nuclear families, we nonetheless expected that we would also find at least some books featuring lesbian mother-families, amongst other family groupings typically lumped under the banner of 'diversity'. Much to our disappointment, however, we were not able to reject the null hypothesis. Of the 500 books that were included under the subsection of families and relationships, not one included representation of lesbian mother-families, despite there now being a relatively large body of both storybooks and young adult fiction that feature such families. We did identify a small number of books that included representation of other 'diverse families' (for example, *Family Forest* by Kim Kane and Lucia Masciullo), but these were overwhelmed by the predominance of heterosexual nuclear families represented (especially in the books for children in years three and above), and by the predominance of highly normative images of mothers and fathers (especially in the books for children in reception to year two).

Of course it could be argued that this outcome is unsurprising. But at the same time, we had legitimate reasons to expect that our findings would refute the null hypothesis of there being no representations, and that we would find at least some books featuring lesbian mother-families. We acknowledge that at the time of data collection there was no legislative recognition for lesbian mother-families in South Australia. However, this does not mean that there were not representations of lesbian mothers in the media, that lesbian mothers and their families do not have a presence in the school system, and that South Australian educators do not acknowledge their presence. Yet despite these reasons as to why our expectation of refuting the null hypothesis was plausible, the outcome would suggest that we were perhaps somewhat too optimistic.

So where does that leave us for this paper? In the analysis that follows, we outline broadly what representations of family we *did* find in the families and

relationships subsection of the PRC. While this might seem an appropriate topic to write about (despite it not being the focus of our project), the reader might question why we are still framing this paper in terms of lesbian mother-families. Our answer for this is simple, and it is the reason why there are entire journals devoted to publishing non-significant findings (i.e., those that fail to refute the null hypothesis): there is typically a good reason for expecting to find change or differences when we undertake research. When our hypotheses are not confirmed, it is often valuable to reflect on why this is the case. And in terms of the South Australian education system and lesbian mothers, it is vital that we continue to reflect upon why this family form remains largely invisible. Indeed, illuminating what is not present - what is hidden behind normative layers of representation - can provide an impetus for important changes to be made to the representational order as it stands. Before outlining what we did find in our analysis of the PRC, we first briefly outline previous research on the topic of children's storybooks and non-heterosexual parents.

Previous Research

Previous research on children's storybooks and inclusion suggests that such books frame for children the world around them, and provide them with a lens through which to interpret their experiences (Clyde and Lobban). For those children who are not part of a lesbian mother-family, the invisibility of lesbian mother-families within the books they read can translate into many things. It can legitimate exclusion if the child is taught by their parents or other adults to see lesbianism as something negative (Chapman). It can fail to prime them to be able to 'see' difference, thus contributing to the exclusion and marginalisation of lesbian mother-families (amongst others). For children who may later identify as lesbian or otherwise not heterosexual, it gives them the message that they do not exist (Stafford). And of course for children raised in lesbian mother-families, the lack of representation of their families may only compound their experience of social exclusion.

In terms of children's literature that *does* include representations of lesbian-mother families, Jeff Sapp (2010) suggests that there has been something of a shift away from the explicit (though often very simplistic and didactic) inclusion of lesbian mothers and gay fathers in books published in the 1980s and 90s, to the present where lesbian or gay characters often play a secondary role, one in which they blend into the background. While it could be argued that this represents the taken-for-granted status of non-heterosexual people as part of the accepted weave of the fabric of western societies, we would not readily accept such an interpretation. Rather, we read this practice of rendering of non-heterosexual sexualities as part of the background is a product of neoliberal assimilation. Virginia Wolf highlights this issue of the foregrounding versus backgrounding of homosexuality well when she says:

To some extent I find these books' failure to make homosexuality an issue refreshing. It is pleasant simply to be presented with female couples and with a man who fulfils some of the stereotypes about gay men and not to have their being gay the focus of the books... Whenever an issue takes over, no matter what it is, it tends to seem a problem rather than just the way things are... On the other hand, if these parents are not identified as gay, then readers are not being educated about the gay family. I think the labels are necessary if reading is to challenge the reader's homophobia (53-54).

Christine Jenkins makes a similar point from her review of sixty young adult books featuring lesbian or gay characters published between 1969 and 1992. She suggests that what appears in these books are categories and stereotypes, not identities. While, as Virginia Wolf notes, a sole focus on identities can reify, rather than address, problems of exclusion, at the same time the failure to depict lesbian or gay characters as anything other than a category or a type (and thus as just a plot narrative) can also fail to do anything to provide the reader with a broader context in which to situate lesbians or gay men. To return to our point above, then, the backgrounding of lesbian and gay characters serves to reinforce the 'we are all the same' logic that drives the neo-liberal assimilationist agenda. And it is this point that gives us some insight as to why our findings do not refute the null hypothesis: why would books featuring lesbian mother-families be

included in the PRC if, by the logic of 'we are all the same', any other book featuring any other family form will do? As our following examination of the books that *were* included highlights, however, this type of exclusion through assimilatory inclusion logic does relatively little if anything to shift the centre, but rather repeats the same old norms and stereotypes.

Analysis

For the purposes of the research reported here, we decided to focus solely on books listed under the families and relationships subsection of the PRC. Furthermore, we limited our sample to the books that were aimed at children in reception to year five. This decision was made on the basis of the fact that our aim in undertaking the audit was to determine the degree of coverage of lesbian mother-families in books that pertain to our sample of lesbian mother-families. Given that our sample was comprised of families with relatively young children (i.e., in grade five or below, see Riggs), we felt it appropriate to focus on the books that this population would be accessing.

We were of course cognisant of the fact that there may well have been other books outside of this selection that featured families and relationships, but given that the full PRC list contains over 4000 books, it was not possible to read all of the titles. To ensure that we were not misrepresenting the PRC, we decided to undertake a search of the entire PRC for any known titles featuring lesbian mothers (taken from lists provided by both Day and Sapp). Across the entire PRC only one title was identified that featured lesbian mothers (Todd Parr's *The Family Book*). This book attempts to highlight family diversity, and includes one page that says 'some families have two mums' and also 'some families have two dads'. This book, however, is classified as nonfiction in the PRC and thus does not appear in the family and relationships list and is therefore not included in our sample.

Of the subsample we examined, the majority were aimed at children in reception to year two (228 titles), with the remaining titles aimed at readers in years three

to five (58). Across all of these 286 books, almost half (48.6%) of the storylines featured heterosexual nuclear families. It is important, we believe, to note the preponderance of these books featuring heterosexual families on the list of the most read books for the PRC in 2011. While it could be argued that such books are the most read because they are the most available (and not that children prefer books featuring heterosexual nuclear families *per se*), the question nonetheless must be asked as to why these books are so widely available and so well received. Obviously the top books lists should reflect those that are most read, but if this is a product of only certain titles being most widely available (i.e., those featuring heterosexual nuclear families), then this is an issue that requires ongoing attention. Of the remaining books, 33 (11.54%) included storylines where there was only a mother present, and 10 (3.50%) included storylines where only a father was present. The remainder of the sample were constituted by storylines in which there was no family represented (67, 23.43%), or where the focus of the story was upon non-human families (27, 9.44%), as well as a small number of other non-normative families (e.g., children living with aunts, uncles, grandparents, or in blended heterosexual families, 3.49%).

Representations of Mothers

In many of the books where a mother was present, women were depicted as active gatekeepers to children's experiences. For example, *A Lion in the Meadow* by Margaret Mahy tells the story of a young boy who insists that there is a lion in the meadow, only to be told "nonsense, little boy" by his mother. Of course the emphasis upon gatekeeping was not the only stereotype about mothers that many of the books relied upon. Other stereotypical depictions of women involved mothers: being overly affectionate and/or controlling, sewing costumes, being 'nice', being good cooks who are frequently in the kitchen, undertaking activities solely inside the house, being accommodating, being interested in their daughters looking stereotypically like girls and their boys acting stereotypically like boys, being strict and matronly, holding and feeding babies, washing clothes, and being forgiving (for examples of these see *My Cat Maisie* by Pamela Allen, *Ella Kazoo will not Brush her Hair* by Lee Fox and Cathy

Wilcox, and *Can we Lick the Spoon Now* by Carol Goess and Tamsin Ainslie). In making this summary of the majority of the books featuring only mothers, we of course do not seek to dismiss the fact that mothers *do* continue to do the majority of all child-rearing, the majority of all housework, and that children may well experience their mothers in some of the ways described above. Our concern, however, is that the mothers represented in these ways were *only* represented in these ways.

There were only three books that were clear exceptions to the rule of stereotyped images outlined above. In these three books mothers were represented as both people (with interests and activities of their own) and as parents. The first of these, *Midge, Mum and the Neighbours* by Phil Cummings and Ritva Voitila features the story of a young single mother who is frowned upon for having fun and playing with her child. The second book - *The Wishing Cupboard* by Libby Hathorn and Elizabeth Stanley - follows the story of a child whose mother has gone to Vietnam to bring back her cousin to live with the family. In the third book - *Mum goes to Work* by Libby Gleeson - the story tells of children at a childcare centre and the work their mothers do while their children are in care. While somewhat breaking the gender norm of mothers as primary caregivers, it could also be argued that *Mum goes to Work* reinforces this norm to some extent by providing no stories of stay-at-home fathers (that is, the children are in care because their mothers can't care for them at home).

For children of heterosexual parents, we would argue, the stereotypical images of mothers that appeared in the majority of books may only serve to reinforce the cultural expectation that mothers should be selfless in the care of their children. The expectation that mothers should be selfless was often implied in books that described mothers as controlling, refusing, or as strict disciplinarians (and where these negative attributes depicted mothers as failing to be selfless). Interestingly, in two particular books where mothers were represented in these ways, it was in response to non-gender normative behaviours by children. For example, in *Yuk* by Kes Gray and Nick Sharratt a female child is cajoled to choose a dress for her role in a wedding ("If you don't wear a dress to Auntie Sue and

Clive's wedding, I'll be sad, Nanny will be sad, Grampy will be sad, Clive will be sad, everyone in the world will be sad, exaggerated Daisy's mum"). Ultimately, the child refuses to wear a dress that conforms to the mother's expectations, yet while this engenders a space for the child's own unique gender expression, the refusal to wear a dress is reliant upon the contrast between the controlling mother and the child. In another book - *Crusher is Coming* by Bob Graham - a young boy has a play date planned with a tough looking boy named 'Crusher'. He pleads with his mother not to embarrass him, but we are repeatedly presented with images of her failing to do so (for example, by giving him a kiss despite the boy asking her not to do so). Interestingly, the narrative of the book presents 'Crusher' as gentle and kind and happy to play with the boy's younger sister (i.e., the complete opposite of his tough boy appearance), but the narrative is nonetheless reliant upon the image of the mother who is negatively depicted as unresponsive to her son's requests.

Considering what the representations of mothers summarised above might mean for children raised by lesbian mothers, it could be argued that the mother-only books included in the sample possibly allow for the mothers in these books to be read as single lesbian mothers. Nonetheless, the stereotypes outlined above do very little to present a diverse range of images of motherhood that encompass the many different ways in which women can mother. Furthermore, for children raised in two mother households, the stereotypical images of motherhood depicted, while possibly still resembling the actions of some stay-at-home lesbian mothers (as Sullivan suggests in her research on lesbian mother-families), nonetheless fail to provide representations of mothers who work outside the house or who engage as mothers in a diverse range of ways.

Representations of Fathers

As mentioned previously, a minority of the books included representations of only fathers. Of these, 8 of the 10 books featured gender normative images of fathers, including the depiction of them as: engaged primarily in paid work, located outside of the house, being disorganised, messy, clueless, inventive,

explorers, having food they are never seen making, knowing the answers, unable to express emotions, being sporty, handy, and brave. For example, in *Every Second Friday* by Kiri Lightfoot, the narrative states that when “my brother and I pack our bags and go and stay at [dad’s] house... we always get – magnificently muddy, worryingly wet and mind-blowingly messy”.

Compared to the images of mothers outlined above, the images of fathers that appear in the books examined sit as polar opposites, with fathers primarily depicted as agentic workers who are fun to be with (see, for example, *Great Ocean Walk* by Jiri Tibur Novak). Like the representations of mothers, there were a number of books that included stereotypically negative images of fathers, such as images of them as clueless and messy. In contrast to the negative images of mothers, however, fathers who were messy or clueless were able to rectify the issues associated with this by the end of the book. In other words, where a plot narrative focused on the problems arising from having a messy father, this was resolved in the conclusion of the book, such as in *Down the Back of the Chair* by Margaret Mahy and Polly Dunbar, which tells the story of a father who loses the keys to the car but in the process of looking for them finds happiness and dreams with his children. In comparison, when mothers were represented in negative ways, this remained so at the conclusion of the book – the narrative did not ‘redeem’ controlling, refusing, strict or matronly mothers.

The types of images of fathers outlined above have negative implications for child readers. For children with fathers who can be read in similarly stereotypical ways, there is the message that change is possible. For some fathers this may well be the case, but for many others this may not be so. Depicting fathers as capable of addressing negative attributions but mothers as unable to do so holds potentially negative implications for all parents. For children living in father-only households specifically, the over-emphasis upon emotionally distant and absent working fathers may well serve to normalise such approaches to fathering, which not only perpetuates this type of image of fathering, but also fails to acknowledge that being parented in this way may not be ideal for all children. And in terms of lesbian-mother families, the stereotypical images of

fathers reported here (and their difference from the images of mothers) only serves to reinforce dominant cultural discourses in which mother-only families are depicted as lacking (Clarke). In other words, by depicting fathers as agentic and capable (in comparison to mothers who are depicted as responsive and available but not necessarily agentic or capable), children raised in lesbian mother-families are provided with images by these books in which only men are active subjects.

Conclusion

Our findings presented above suggest that not only are lesbian mother-families not represented in the 2011 PRC, but that those families that *are* represented include highly gender normative images of mothers and fathers. As indicated above, this presents a number of issues for lesbian mother-families, not the least of which being their relative invisibility in the PRC. Certainly as Norma Klein notes, if children's storybooks serve an escapist function, then what does it mean that there are no lesbian vistas in which children *of any parents* can escape into? This lack of lesbian vistas has implications not simply for children with lesbian mothers, but also for children who may in the future identify as lesbian. But beyond the invisibility of lesbian vistas, the issue of normalisation is perhaps equally as troubling. If all that children see are images that either locate ('good') mothers within the home (and immediately responsive to their children's needs) or other ('bad') mothers as gatekeepers of children's lives, then what are the implications of this for all children? And of course if normalising images of mothers are all there are available (and none of these include lesbian mothers), then how does this implicitly endorse homophobia or the exclusion of lesbian mother-families?

Of course, the problems we have identified with the PRC are not limited to the impact upon children and parents. As Jeff Sapp notes, the lack of literature in the PRC on lesbian mother-families (amongst others) may only serve to reinforce the inability of educators to engage with such family forms:

[Previous research reported by the author highlighted] the palpable discomfort that teachers demonstrated when gay and lesbian themed children's books were introduced as a topic in a graduate education course. During the course, titled 'Literature for Children and Adolescents', teachers expressed their great anxiety over using any storyline with gay and lesbian themes. Statements such as 'Having books like these floating around in libraries is not something you want as a hazard for parents who prefer to teach their kids conservatively' reveal educators' unease about having gay and lesbian themed books in their classroom. It stands to reason that if educators are anxious then children may pick up on this anxiety as well (39)

With multiple demands competing for the attention of Australian educators, anything that fails to support them in actively engendering inclusive environments must be viewed with concern. We would view the PRC as one place in which, due to its highly normative forms of representation, teachers are implicitly excused from covering topics they might find 'discomforting'. Rather than being complicit with making available any excuses to shy away from inclusive practices, education systems must not only provide opportunities for educators to become skilled in teaching about a diverse range of families, but educators must also be provided with the resources with which to do so and the broader context in which this is possible. A PRC list that is more inclusive and representative would be an important component of such a context.

Future research could certainly do well to undertake a comparison of the PRC as it appears in other Australian states, which may well differ in their content. Certainly the Australian state of Victoria has recently initiated a 'safe schools' programme aimed at supporting non-heterosexual and non-gender normative people, and this may well translate into other areas of the Victorian education system (including the Victorian PRC). Future research may also undertake an even closer examination of the holdings of individual titles in school libraries. Our approach to accessing titles from the PRC was to borrow books from public libraries. However it would be useful if future research examined which particular titles from the PRC are held in which South Australian primary schools and which titles predominate in this regard.

To conclude, and to return to our opening words, there is much to be gained – even in the social sciences – from examining why any researcher’s findings do not refute the null hypothesis, and why it seemed plausible in the first place that it would be refuted. While, as we noted earlier, South Australia has lagged behind in recognising lesbian mother-families, this did not seem enough to mitigate against finding representations of lesbian mothers in the South Australian Premier’s Reading Challenge. The fact that we didn’t find any such representations in the families and relationships section of the 2011 PRC, and that the only book we could find in the entire PRC was classified as non-fiction (and only included one page in one book featuring a two mother family), might well be not all that surprising, but it nonetheless warrants concern. For us, part of that concern is not necessarily that the lack of inclusion represents homophobia at work, but we would certainly suggest that it represents an equally insidious form of exclusion, namely that of neo-liberal assimilation. That it hasn’t occurred to anyone that at least some books featuring a more diverse range of families *should* be included in the PRC as part of the families and relationships section is indeed notable. Our hope is that the insights afforded by this paper will indeed lead to change in regards to future iterations of the PRC.

Acknowledgments

We begin by acknowledging the sovereignty of the Kaurna people, the First Nations people upon whose land we live and work in Adelaide, South Australia. Thanks must go to the two anonymous reviewers for their excellent and supportive feedback on a previous version of this paper. The research reported in this paper was supported by a Faculty Establishment Grant.

References

Chapman, S.K. *The Power of Children’s Literature: Gay and Lesbian Themes in a Diverse Childhood Curriculum*. GLSEN, 1999. Web. 12 July 2013.

- Clarke, Victoria. (2008). "Man not Included? A Critical Psychology Analysis of Lesbian Families and Male Influences in Child Rearing." *Journal of GLBT Family Studies* 3 (2008): 309-349. Print.
- Clyde, Laurel A., and Marjorie Lobban. *Out of the Closet and Into the Classroom: Homosexuality in Books for Young People*. Port Melbourne: ALIA Press, 1992. Print.
- Day, Frances A. *Lesbian and Gay Voices: An Annotated Bibliography and Guide to Literature for Children and Young Adults*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2000. Print.
- Jenkins, Christine A. "Young Adult Novels with Gay/Lesbian Characters and Themes, 1969-1992: A Historical Reading of Content, Gender, and Narrative Distance." *Over the Rainbow: Queer Children's and Young Adult Literature*. Ed. Michelle A. Abate and Kenneth Kidd. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011. 147-163. Print.
- Klein, Norma. "Growing Up Human: The Case for Sexuality in Children's Books." *Children's Literature in Education* 8 (1977): 80-84. Print.
- Parr, Todd. *The Family Book*. New York: Little Brown, 2002. Print.
- Riggs, Damien W. "The Educational Experiences of Lesbian-Mother Families: A South Australian Study." *LES Online* 2 (2010): 3-13. Web. 13 March 2012.
- Riggs, Damien W., and Clemence Due. "Moving Beyond Homonormativity in Teacher Training. A South Australian Workshop." *Sex Education* (2013).
- Riggs, Damien W. and Indigo Willing. "'They're all Just Little Bits, Aren't They?': South Australian Lesbian Mothers' Experiences of Marginalisation in Primary Schools." *Journal of Australian Studies* (2013).
- Sapp, Jeff. "A Review of Gay and Lesbian Themed Early Childhood Children's Literature." *Australian Journal of Early Childhood* 35 (2010): 32-40. Web. 12 July 2013.
- Stafford, Annika. "Beyond Normalization: An Analysis of Heteronormativity in Children's Picture Books." *Who's Your Daddy? And Other Writings on Queer Parenting*. Ed. Rachel Epstein. Toronto: Sumach, 2009. 169-178. Print.
- Sullivan, Maureen. "Rozzie and Harriet? Gender and Family Patterns and Lesbian Coparents." *Gender and Society* 10 (1996): 747-767. Print.

Wolf, Virginia L. "The Gay Family in Literature for Young People." *Children's Literature in Education* 20 (1989): 51-58. Print.