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Permissible Progress: Sexual(ities that) Progress in and beyond English Primary Schools

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Abstract

This paper examines what is permissible sexual progress in English primary schools by exploring the possibilities – but also the limitations – of the introduction of familial sexualities. In recent years, *Stonewall* (a prominent and politically mainstream Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual charity) have increasingly utilised 'the family' as a 'child-friendly' topic to encourage primary educators to broach same-sex relationships by incorporating their 'inclusive' range of Different Families resources into lessons. This strategic manoeuvre emerges in a socio-political and spatiotemporal context dominated by neoliberal sexual politics and follows 'moral panics' surrounding queer progressive politics inspired initiatives, most notably *No Outsiders* (2006-2009) which previously unsettled institutionalised discourses of 'childhood (sexual) innocence' in pursuing radical, but arguably necessary approaches for disrupting and undoing heteronormativity. In spite of this, *Stonewall's* Different Families, Same Love initiative is now the dominant approach for introducing lesbian and gay sexualities in English primary schools; yet, little is known about how primary-aged children respond to this intervention. Focusing on a leading exponent of *Stonewall's* initiative, I explore 4-9 year olds dis/engagements with gay and lesbian sexualities when introduced in a familial context. Reflecting on mixed ethnographic and focus group data, I question not only *which* gay and lesbian sexualities 'progress' in contemporary English primary schools, but also *how well.* To this end, recommendations are made for improving families curricula without losing sight of the limits of this approach.

Stonewall; sexuality; family; school; education; progress

Introduction

The repeal of Section 28 of the 1988 Local Government Act in England and Wales in 2003 and Scotland in 2000 has been widely celebrated as a turning point for 'sexualities equality' and inclusion in schools (DePalma and Atkinson, 2008). Section 28 prohibited UK Local Authorities from 'promoting' homosexuality as a 'pretended family relationship' (S.2A(1) Local Government Act 1986) and this created a climate of fear and uncertainly which hung over schools for decades (Epstein, 2000; Epstein and Johnson, 1998). The fact that legislation, such as the Adoption and Children Act 2002 and Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013 now supports schools in introducing children to

same-sex families could be taken as a sign of sexual progress. Indeed, *Stonewall's* Different Families, Same Love initiative, which utilises a diverse understanding of 'family' to introduce children to the idea of '2 mums' and '2 dads' is now widespread in English primary schools. While such developments are promising, it would be inappropriate to equate the introduction of same sex families with progress just because this was once prevented as this overlooks the effectiveness of this approach and the broader socio-political and spatiotemporal context in which such contested initiatives emerge.

In bringing this to the fore, this paper extends a previous study (Hall, 2018) scrutinising post-Section 28 'gender and sexualities education'[ii] for older primary school children by uniquely examining younger children's mixed reactions to *Stonewall's* dominant approach for introducing lesbian and gay sexualities at the outset of English primary education. *Stonewall* – a prominent and politically mainstream national Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Trans[iii] charity – launched Different Families (as it will now be known) in 2011 following 'moral panics' in 2008 surrounding the progressive left project *No Outsiders* (DePalma and Atkinson, 2009a) with *Stonewall* favouring the introduction of familial sexualities as a more 'child-friendly' approach. While this has popular appeal, in this paper I question what is permissible (sexual) progress in English primary schools by exploring the possibilities – but also the limitations – of using 'family' to present lesbian and gay sexualities as 'just like' heterosexual counterparts.

In considering permissible progress, I follow Monk (2011) in unravelling the politics of progress surrounding supposed 'inclusion' of sexual minorities – particularly through legal recognition of same-sex couples and their families – in a world that is now supposedly 'won' (Weeks, 2007; see Browne and Bakshi, 2013). In doing so, I draw on Monk's notion of *speakability* as constituted through the Foucauldian concept of 'conditions of possibility' (discursive frameworks of knowledge grounded in and made possible by a particular historical epoch; Foucault, 1980) to 'reveal the *conditionality* of what, on the surface, appears to be an inclusive progressive politics' (Monk, 2011: 201; italics in original). This approach is couched within a broader understanding of the sexual

politics of neoliberalism (Bell and Binnie, 2000; Duggan, 2003; Stychin, 2003) – 'a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them' (Duggan, 2003: 50) – and what Duggan hails as homonormativity: 'acceptance of the most assimilated, gender-appropriate, politically mainstream' (2003: 44). Foregrounding speakability and neoliberal sexual politics *in the socio-political context of English primary schools,* this paper links the active socio-political work these schools undertake with the state's mobilization of schools as socio-political institutions in taking an outward looking perspective that 'thinks through education' (Thiem, 2009) to provide a critical analysis of Stonewall's Different Families approach.

Before situating *Stonewall's* initiative in a broader socio-political and spatiotemporal context, I outline the research project from which this study emerges.

The Formation, Implementation and Reception of Gender and Sexualities Education in English Primary Schools

Data presented in this paper emerges from an 18-month study in two English primary schools which are considered by *Stonewall* to be leading exponents of their primary 'School Champions' programme (see Hall, 2018). In this paper, I focus on data from *Weirwold* (pseudonym), which is a co-educational, maintained community primary school located in a socially and ethnically diverse part of Greater London, UK. Community primary schools are the largest of five types of state-maintained schools which – at the time of research – account for 87% of all English primary schools (NFER, 2014). Maintained schools are funded by central government via their local authorities and are required to teach the National Curriculum. At the time of research, the school had one form entry with approximately 250 pupils on roll (ages 4-11), which - according to *Ofsted*[iv] – makes it an average-sized primary school.

Fieldwork relating to *Weirwold primary school* took place between February 2012 and May 2013 and consisted of ethnographic research (including four weeks of classroom

observations with detailed field notes taken during lessons and a field diary used for subsequent reflections), 11 semi-structured interviews with senior school management, teachers and *Stonewall* representatives, and 19 year-group-based focus groups with 92 children aged 5-11. Consent forms for focus groups were issued to every child in school and informed consent was gained from guardian(s) and children themselves (written and verbal). Typically, 3-7 consent forms were returned per class so every child wishing to participate were invited to do so. The sample reflected children of various parental viewpoints and backgrounds. Textual, visual, and critical discourse analysis of government legislation and guidance (including Parliamentary discourse); *Stonewall* resources and publications; school lesson plans and schemes of work; and children's classroom-based work completed the methodology. All data was thematically coded and analysed in NVivo.

This paper presents data generated through all these methods, but particularly from 11 year-group-based focus groups with 51 children aged 4-9 which took place in resource areas towards the end of each school visit (see Table 1). This allowed children to reflect on Different Families lessons and it allowed me to produce tailored focus group schedules, which included a hypothetical different families game as a participatory 'child-centred' method (see Hemming, 2008). This interactive game involved children making fictitious families from a range of playing cards and stimulated discussion (and non-verbal interaction) around intelligible and unintelligible families.

TABLE 1: SCHEDULE OF SCHOOL VISITS AND FOCUS GROUPS

February 2012	One-and-a-half-week ethnography prior to and during key topic week 3 focus groups with 6 boys and 9 girls from Year's 2-4
May 2012	One-week ethnography outside of key topic week 2 focus groups with 3 boys and 7 girls from Year 3
February 2013	One-and-a-half-week ethnography prior to and during key topic week 6 focus groups with 11 boys and 15 girls from Year's 1-4

May 2013	One day ethnography and feedback outside of key topic week

Situating Stonewall's Different Families approach in a socio-political and spatiotemporal context

In the context of Section 28, recognising same-sex families in English primary schools may well be taken as a sign of sexual 'progress'. This infamous and highly contested legislation followed two incidents in a London Education Authority in the late 1980s: a primary school headteacher who had taught pupils that the love between Romeo and Juliet could be known as heterosexual (the implication being that heterosexuality was not 'natural' and that there are other possibilities), and the availability of the book *Jenny Lives with Eric and Martin* (Bösche and Hansen, 1983) in a teacher's resource centre (Epstein and Johnson, 1998). The latter, more renowned incident is understood to have inspired the controversial wording of the act (Epstein, 2000). The book depicted a young girl raised by same-sex parents in a series of family-album style photographs. What was particularly troubling about these photographs was the ordinary, everyday depiction of same-sex family life which was regarded by many as a threat to idealised (heterosexual) nuclear families (Stacey, 1991). The fact that this book could have made its way into schools fuelled a 'moral panic' that eventually culminated in legislative disavowal of 'alternative families' (Epstein and Johnson, 1998).

The 'symbolic effect' of Section 28 created a climate of fear and uncertainly which hung over schools for decades (Epstein, 2000). This deterred teachers from discussing sexual diversity – and especially same-sex families – for fear of 'promoting' homosexuality while for others it endorsed homophobia (Epstein and Johnson, 1998). Section 28 was repealed in England in 2003, but its symbolic action was profound, not least for contemporary government legislation and guidance (Hall, 2018; Ellis, 2007; Monk, 2011). As Johnson and Vanderbeck (2014) have shown, a compromise with religious groups in the form of new statutory sex education guidance had to be reached to get a repeal of Section 28 through the House of Lords. This guidance, which remains

unchanged to date exemplifies the state's mobilization of schools as socio-political institutions through requiring them to reaffirm the importance of (heterosexual) marriage and traditional family life – in fact stating how 'there should be no direct promotion of sexual orientation' – in teaching about 'the significance of marriage and stable relationships as key building blocks of community and society' (§1.21 DfEE 0116/2000). This stance was strengthened in an amendment to the Education Act 1996 which states that when sex education is provided pupils must 'learn the nature of marriage and its importance for family life and the bringing up of children' while at the same time be 'protected from teaching and materials which are inappropriate having regard to the age and the religious and cultural background of the pupils concerned' (S.403(1A) Education Act 1996, as amended by S.148(4) Learning and Skills Act 2000).

This negotiated framework for sex education ensures the continuation of religious interests in governing knowledge about (homo)sexuality in schools through preserving the prestige of (heterosexual) marriage and traditional family life, and regulating 'dangerous' (homo)sexual knowledge (Epstein, 1999; Johnson and Vanderbeck, 2014). While the Adoption and Children Act 2002 and Civil Partnership Act 2004/ Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013 may now require UK schools to also recognise same-sex families and marriage, this does little more than compound a prevailing discourse on the desirability of monogamous childrearing nuclear relationships. Duggan (2003) and Stychin (2003) situate this apparent 'sexual progress' in the context of neoliberal economic and cultural globalisation, which deeply affects legal and political developments. Both show how neoliberal sexual equality politics – premised on governing sexuality within a climate of liberalisation – has undemocratically dominated US, UK and increasingly global gay political discourse since the 1990s by promoting – amongst other things – monogamous marriage as an unproblematic way for sexual minorities to receive citizenship rights and be 'included' in civil society. In this context, marriage is viewed as 'a strategy for privatizing gay politics and culture for the new neoliberal world order' (Duggan, 2003: 62) which advances – under the guise of progress for the gay and lesbian community – nothing more than the unmarked interests of prosperous white men. So, even though English primary schools may now play an active

socio-political role in introducing same-sex marriage and families, an apparent achievement in the context of Section 28 this only serves to forward vested interests of a homonormative neoliberal elite and privilege those willing and able to conform to heteronormative ideals.

Butler (2002) warns that emulation of a normative and idealised heterosexual nuclear family will always fail. As Youdell explains, 'representing gay life as 'just like' heterosexual life constitutes heterosexual life as the ideal [and] risks disavowing lives that do not look like this idealized hetero-monogamous nuclear family' (2011: 67). In other words, collusion reinforces (hetero)norms and – as Ryan-Flood (2009) adds – ignores the role of sexuality in LGBTQ+ families with same-sex marriage and families privileged at the expense of other, increasingly marginal sexualities[v]. Such scepticism is shared amongst other scholars who, like Youdell (2011) question whether popular gay and lesbian children's literature (e.g. *And Tango Makes Three* (Richardson and Parnell, 2005); *King and King* (De Haan and Nijland, 2002); *King and King and Family* (De Haan and Nijland, 2004)) may be contributing to heteronormativity (processes and practices through which heterosexuality is normalised; see Warner, 1993) by exclusively depicting lesbian and gay characters in legally and culturally sanctioned monogamous nuclear relationships (see DePalma and Atkinson, 2009a). Focusing on the couple and the family over the individual, and holding this up as a model of acceptability is believed to reinforce the patriarchal and heterosexist institution of marriage and the perceived superiority of heteronormative, child-centred family relationships (also see Donovan, 2008).

Recognition of 'alternative families' gained momentum in Britain after condemnation of 'pretended family relationships' in Section 28. Weeks et al. (2001) refer to this as a classic example of a 'reverse discourse' and this can be clearly seen in relation to *Stonewall's* endeavours; an organisation founded in 1989 in response to Section 28 (Stonewall, 2014). *Stonewall* campaigned for same-sex adoption and civil partnerships/ same-sex marriage with subsequent legislation informing *Stonewall's* primary school work. As *Stonewall's* Senior Education Officer recalled in 2012:

[W]e didn't have our education campaign when we were lobbying for Civil Partnerships [so] having that in place does give an awful lot of gravitas to the work we do now around Different Families. Now we have legal recognition for same-sex couples we can talk in primary schools about the fact that some children are brought up by parents who are in Civil Partnerships

Interview with Stonewall's Senior Education Officer (May 2012)

The Civil Partnership Act 2004 repositioned school responsibility towards *same-sex couples in civil partnerships* by placing an onus on schools to recognise *same-sex families*. This received greater prominence in 2013 with the introduction of the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act. *Stonewall* mobilise this legislation to inform and legitimise its Different Families initiative. Subsequent *Stonewall*-commissioned research, such as the 2010 Different Families Report – which influenced the publication of *Stonewall's* Including Different Families Education Guide – has since emerged through this discursive context and strengthened this 'child-friendly' approach. *Stonewall* now has a range of Different Families resources to complement these publications and these are widely used by English primary schools in actively reproducing prevailing, but contested socio-political understandings and processes.

While this policy context is significant, the emergence of *Stonewall's* Different Families initiative also needs to be situated in a wider context of 'moral panics' surrounding progressive left projects. As *Stonewall's* Senior Education Officer explains, the Different Families approach also came as a response to radical initiatives which, in unsettling institutionalised discourses of childhood (sexual) innocence 'haven't gone so well':

We spent about a year risk assessing the dangers of doing work in primary schools [because] other organisations have attempted to do other initiatives, some of which have gone well, some of which haven't gone so well. We spent a long time just thinking about what we want to talk about, what don't we want to talk about, how do we want to message it, how don't we want to message it. We then spent some time thinking about the kind of resources we wanted to make once we realised that it was really about different families. [O]ur main concern was to make sure that it is done in the most age appropriate and sensitive way and that's why we've done it in a way that could never be seen as offensive to everyone

Interview with Stonewall's Senior Education Officer (May 2012)

In this discussion, *No Outsiders*[vi] emerged as a key example of a primary school initiative which hasn't gone so well. *No Outsiders* (2006-2009) was an Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) funded Action Research project which brought together university-researchers, teachers, and practitioners to understand, challenge, and undo heteronormativity in English primary schools (see DePalma and Atkinson, 2009b). This queer progressive politics inspired project, which moved beyond liberal ideals of equality by foregrounding queer praxis (applying queer theorisations of gender and sexuality premised on bringing about radical social change) faced adverse reaction from *some* parents and school staff, particularly following sensationalist tabloid news media coverage (see Hall, 2015). In response to this backlash, *Stonewall's* Senior Education Officer describes how a more 'sensitive' and 'age appropriate' approach was taken with the creation of Different Families resources 'that could never be seen as offensive to everyone'.

In this context, not being 'offensive' and taking a more 'sensitive' and 'age-appropriate' approach can be taken as adopting what Nixon (2009) – building on Silverstein and Picano (1993) and Rofes (2000) – calls 'vanilla strategies': highly sanitised representations of safe and approved sexual practice and fantasy that are deemed acceptable in the teaching profession. The acceptability of these strategies, which are both popular and plain are premised on Western constructions of childhood (sexual) innocence and child development; discourses which are spatialised in English primary schools as 'cultural greenhouses' (Hall, 2015; 2018; Renold, 2005). *Stonewall's* sociospatial reference to 'the dangers of doing work in primary schools' bring these dominant, yet contested understandings of children as vulnerable and naïve to the fore, and emphasise how schools are not purified spaces that nurture 'innocent' children, but concentrated sites of contestation around issues of power and identity (Hall, 2015; DePalma and Atkinson, 2009a; Epstein and Johnson, 1998). Indeed, they are key arenas for the production and regulation of sexual discourses, practices and identities (also see Renold, 2005). The *No Outsiders* project exposed these deep-rooted processes and

assumptions about children's competence that encourage 'vanilla strategies' in English primary schools by testing the limits of speakability and permissible progress (Monk, 2011).

Critical examination of childhood and developmental discourses – as these inform the parameters of 'schooling sexualities' (Epstein and Johnson, 1998) – are the basis of Monk's (2011) exploration of the politics of progress surrounding 'anti-homophobic bullying': an increasingly utilised means for gender and sexualities education in English primary schools (see Hall, 2015; 2018). As Monk has shown, the imagined liberal subjects of anti-homophobic bullying discourse invoke problematic models of child development that implicitly rest on heteronormative assumptions about the child's sexual future. This is no truer than for use of relationships as an indicator of 'successful adulthood' in associated psychological reasoning which posits the inability to form 'stable' adult relationships (note statutory guidance on sex education following repeal of Section 28) as a disorder. For Monk, this:

> 'coheres with the widespread political support for the Civil Partnership Act 2004 (CPA) [which] was frequently premised, often explicitly, on the view that it would enable and support lesbian and gays to establish stable relationships. Indeed, some Conservative politicians […] explicitly linked their support for the CPA with expressions of regret that the attitudes underlying their earlier support of Section 28 may have prompted promiscuity amongst gay men' (2011: 192).

Several, interconnected implications follow this observation. First, citing Duggan (2004), Monk illustrates how denial of marriage rights has been understood as keeping sexual minorities in a state of permanent adolescence. That is to say, 'arrested development' (Epstein, 2000) follows denial of access to the unproblematic heteronormative institution of marriage (Donovan, 2008). Citing Stychin (2006), Monk also illustrates how responsibilities that come with rights offered through marriage have been understood as providing a disincentive for 'irresponsible' conduct, which is taken to include 'promiscuous sex, relationship breakdown at will, and the selfishness of living alone (or perhaps even living with friends and acquaintances' (Stychin, 2006: 30). In expressing

concern about citizenship/partnership entitlements taking centre stage in 'new gay politics', Stychin warns how:

> the disciplinary, normalising function of liberal law reform may constrain us by acting to limit the variety of ways of living – of styles of life – which sexual dissidents historically have developed. [L]egal recognition may limit our ability to recognise that we can construct our lives so as to defy the categorises which law traditionally has sought to impose upon us (2003: 4).

Stychin (2003) underscores the costs of assimilation that come with rights discourse – for those conforming and for those increasingly marginalised as sexual dissidents – concluding that 'rights and citizenship claims seem only to 'work' through 'replicating heterosexual articulations of the "good citizen"' (Stychin, 2003 citing Bell and Binnie, 2000: 30). In this analysis, Stychin (2003) also stresses the central role of the (traditional, middle-class nuclear) family as a societal model for producing responsible, active young citizens (also see Eng, 2010).

In effect, the seductive language of liberalism and rights (Stychin, 2003) together with the perceived inappropriateness of *No Outsiders* as an 'ideologically extreme' (Duggan, 2003) left project galvanised *Stonewall's* seemingly more appropriate, 'child-friendly' approach. While this 'vanilla strategy' (Nixon, 2009) may have wide appeal by being less threatening, it undermines queer progressive politics and more radical interventions premised on disrupting heteronormativity (DePalma and Atkinson, 2009a); the condition in which homophobia is produced (Ellis, 2007). Yet, despite the importance of radical (queer) initiatives even *Stonewall's* 'vanilla strategies' are regarded by some as contentious in the fraught, cultural microcosm of the English primary school as recent protests at a UK Birmingham primary school demonstrate (Parveen, 2019).

Despite numerous interventions in English primary schools, *Stonewall's* Different Families initiative is now the dominant approach for introducing gay and lesbian sexualities. This permissible progress has been achieved through lobbying for and then mobilising neoliberal government policy to inform and legitimise what – in the context of the English primary school – can count as 'age-appropriate'. The suitability of

Stonewall's approach has since been sanctioned by *Ofsted* following lobbying to include whether 'pupils have had any lessons about different types of families' (Ofsted, 2012: 3) as a key consideration in inspection guidance relating to schools' actions towards preventing and challenging homophobic bullying. This endorsement is significant given *Ofsted's* influence in schools in England and as *Stonewall's* Senior Education Officer revealed in a 2012 interview:

> we've been lobbying and working with Ofsted for many years on this [so] we're delighted that they've made sure that this is included.

In effect, approving this particular approach consolidates *Stonewall's* Different Families initiative as *the* way to introduce gay and lesbian sexualities in the increasingly desexualised cultural arena of the English primary school. *Stonewall*, which acts 'metonymically for the civilised, gay citizen' (Stychin, 2003: 40) becomes emblematic of Duggan's claim that:

> no longer representative of a broad-based progressive movement, many of the dominant national lesbian and gay civil rights organisations have become the lobbying, legal, and public relations firms for an increasingly narrow gay, moneyed elite. [T]he push for gay marriage […] has replaced the array of political, cultural, and economic issues that galvanized the national groups as they first emerged from a progressive social movements context several decades earlier (2003: 45).

Having situated *Stonewall's* Different Families initiative in a socio-political and spatiotemporal context, I now explore primary school children's dis/engagements with *Stonewall's* approach for introducing gay and lesbian sexualities. Reflecting on mixed ethnographic and focus group data, I question not only which gay and lesbian sexualities 'progress', but also how well.

1. "Loads of people have two mums and two dads": reconstituted families and the intelligibility of same-sex parents

Sociological and geographical literature on families recognise how this is not a homogenous or monolithic institution, but increasingly diverse with children raised in a variety of family forms and often in more than one household (see Stacey, 1991; Valentine, 2008). As such, the enduring power of 'the family' (often narrowly regarded as conventional, heterosexual nuclear families) has been problematised for the way this conceals a complex and diverse array of family forms which include lone-parents; cohabiting partners (with or without children); queer family arrangements; and reconstituted families (step-parent families) (Gillis, 1996). According to these commentators, it is time we abandoned the idol of 'the family' and begin validating a greater variety of families. This does not entail replacing family, but rather recognising *alternative families* or – as Weeks et al. (2001) prefer – 'families of choice'. While talk of family may appear to be at odds with queer critiques of hetero-patriarchal life, Valentine (2008) and others stress how family – defined in the broadest sense – remains a form of relationship that most people strive for and are attached to. Indeed, as Goss argues:

> The appropriation of the term *family* is not an assimilationist strategy of finding respectability in general society. *We are not degaying or delesbianizing ourselves by describing ourselves as family.* In fact, we are Queering the notion of family and creating families reflective of our life choices. Our expanded pluralist uses of family are politically destructive of the ethic of traditional family values (1997: 12).

This focus on 'choice' comes closer to Weeks et al's (2001) preferred 'families of choice' terminology which attempts to convey the disruptions that 'non-heterosexual' people (as Weeks et al. (2001) termed it then) cause to heteronormative/biological understandings of family through their use of reproductive technologies and the designation of non-biological parenting. Such disruptions may be less apparent in the more contemporary language of alternative or different families, which appear to have largely superseded the notion of 'families of choice'. I return to this point later.

Stonewall's Different Families initiative can also be situated within this academic context. *Stonewall's* resources aim to disrupt the idol of 'the family' by recognising a greater range of families, including those with '2 mums' and '2 dads'. These families are depicted in resources alongside more 'conventional' family arrangements and *Stonewall*

encourage primary educators to combine these resources with others when delivering a topic on families. In Weirwold primary school, the Different Families scheme of work was introduced in Nursery and continued in subsequent years as part of themed topic weeks. This took various forms and was delivered in different ways in a range of lessons, although *Stonewall's* Different Families posters were always the linchpin of this scheme of work (see Figure 1 – *online only*). As lesson plans illustrate, other resources and activities either follow-on or build towards *Stonewall's* posters. These include producing a family tree in Art and circle time discussion of Civil Partnerships/ Same-sex Marriage in Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE). Core text books were associated with each lesson plan and these included *And Tango Makes Three* (Richardson and Parnell, 2005); *King and King and Family* (De Haan and Nijland, 2004); *If I had a Hundred Mummies* (Carter, 2007); and *Spacegirl Pukes* (Watson and Carter, 2006). These were usually read and discussed as part of an initial Literacy lesson.

FIGURE 1 - ANNOTATED DIFFERENT FAMILIES POSTER AND CHILDREN'S OWN FAMILY TREES

Left to right: Stonewall's 'Different Families, Same Love' poster annotated in a Year 1 lesson and children's own family trees (February 2013).

Source: Weirwold primary school

As the first extract demonstrates, opening-up 'the family' and validating different families appear to allow children to comprehend families with '2 mums' and '2 dads', even if not initially understood as potentially same-sex:

JH	Who can tell me what this poster is about? (I hold up Stonewall's Different Families poster)
Ruth	Three children … and one mum, one dad (points to corresponding image)
Jeana	And that's a grandma and granddad and a brother and a sister
JH	Is that a family as well?
Jeana	Yeah
Robert	And that is a mum and a dad but the dad's a different colour
Jeana	And that's a mum and a mum
JH	A mum and a mum?
ALL	Yes
JH	Is that a family?
ALL	Yes
Ruth	And a dad and dad
JH	And is that a family?
ALL	Yeah
Salma	Some people have step mums, like Teo, he's going to get a step mum

***

JH	What have you learnt about families?
Muna	There are different kinds of families
JH	What do you all think about that?
ALL	Good!

JH	Why is that good?
Muna	Because it doesn't matter whoever looks after you because whoever looks after you still loves you

Focus Groups with Year 1 (February 2013)[vii]

Throughout these exchanges, children pluralise a notion of 'the family' beyond a singular, conventional heterosexual nuclear model. Children first recognise variance within heterosexual family arrangements, for instance children with grandparents or step-parents. This first disruption to the idealized, 'imagined family' (Gillis, 1996) opens up conceptual space in which '2 mums' and '2 dads' become intelligible. Recognising step-parents (reconstituted families) legitimises the possibility that some children have '2 mums' or '2 dads', as Salma points out and one child even made this relevant to his own situation as someone who is adopted:

> Tom suddenly starts telling me about his family; that he has a brother and a sister. He then says that he has two mums and two dads and that he is adopted.
>
> Weirwold field notes (Year 3, February 2012)

This exchange occurred during a family tree activity where children were encouraged to reflect on what constitutes 'family' for them. Tom went on to explain how he has two sets of parents: a biological mum and dad, and a mum and dad that adopted him. While *Stonewall's* intention of '2 mums' and '2 dads' as same-sex partners may have been appropriated here to make sense of reconstituted (heterosexual) families, children were – nevertheless – making this idea relevant and meaningful to their own situation or those of others. Far from being unusual, children with '2 mums' and '2 dads' was considered fairly common. With this in mind, a former Weirwold pupil who had same-sex parents[viii] was not regarded by classmates as being any different from other children who also have '2 mums' and '2 dads'. Indeed, as Mike reiterates in the next extract, 'loads of people have two mums and two dads':

JH	I've heard the name Luke mentioned today. Who can tell me about Luke's family?
Moira	I know, he had two mummies and one dad
JH	Ok, what do you think about that?
Mike	It is alright cos loads of people have two mums and two dads
Natasha	I've got two dads cos one of my dad's died and I've got one now

Focus Group with Year 3 (February 2012)

This exchange demonstrates how same-sex partners can be rendered intelligible when introduced in a familial context, given the wider applicability of '2 mums' and '2 dads' to reconstituted (heterosexual) families. As such, opening-up narrow conceptions of 'the family' by encouraging children to recognise diverse family arrangements appears to legitimise *some* lesbian and gay sexualities. While children in Years 1-3 may not have used the terms lesbian and gay in these initial exchanges, in a follow-up focus group a year later some of the same Year 3 children applied these terms when commenting on the possible relationship between '2 mums' and '2 dads'. As previously discussed, this focus group incorporated an activity which involved children making hypothetical families using a range of picture cards. Each child was invited in turn to make a family using any and as many of the picture cards as they wanted. In the extract that follows, some children volunteer to make families with '2 mums' and '2 dads', recognising these parents as potentially lesbian and gay:

JH	One at a time, I would like you to make a family

Umran	This is a woman ... (adds a man) ... and a child ... and they have a baby boy
	(Children agree that this could be a family)
Mike	The mum and the mum and the baby and the son
JH	What do you all think about this family?
Umran	It is possible
Natasha	The two women, I think they're lesbians … and they have two children
	[…]
Umran	No one's done a gay family ... like two men
JH	So what's this family, Umran?
Umran	There is two men, they're gay, and after they adopted that child
JH	Does everyone agree that this could be a family?
ALL	Yes
JH	What do you all think about this family compared to the others?
Hayley	He is much handsomer
ALL	(laugh)
Mike	I think it is ok
Umran	Yeah, I think it is ok because you can have family like that/
Natasha	And they've adopted two children … I think it is ok because some

> people … it doesn't matter if some people are gay or not, they can still have a family and they can be together for the rest of their lives
>
> Focus Group with Year 4 (February 2013)

In this example, the oldest children (8-9 years old) volunteer to make fictitious same-sex families following initial creation of a conventional, heterosexual nuclear family. Hierarchical ordering aside, this group of children sanction these family arrangements – albeit through the logic of adoption – commenting how 'it is possible' and 'ok'. Hayley even treats the potential gay relationship trivially by adding a humorous touch before Natasha adds how 'it doesn't matter if some people are gay'.

While responses in this section indicate an increasing level of awareness, they do not necessarily reveal how children *feel* about same-sex families/intimacy or how they might make sense of such families beyond adoption logic, which was often regarded as unfortunate in children's informal classroom discussions (Weirwold field diary, 2012-13). Elsewhere, I conceptualise responses, such as 'it doesn't matter if some people are gay' as performing 'acceptance'. I note how children often cite liberal discourses of equality in 'formal' micro-institutional space (i.e. classroom and assembly hall), sometimes rehearsing in the liminal research space of the focus group to be a 'good student'. Following Butler (1997), I distinguish this 'performative self' from a 'performative subject' – a 'good peer' – that simultaneously recuperates heteronormativity in 'informal' micro-institutional space (i.e. corridors, toilets, and the playground) in order to achieve viable subjecthood (see Hall, 2018).

While liberal acceptance of same-sex families with adopted children is performed by some children, as demonstrated in this section, elsewhere and on other occasions children felt compelled to reinstate heteronormativity. In the next section, I demonstrate how heteronormativity was more often recuperated in response to the subversion of the conventional, heterosexual nuclear family.

2. Recuperating heteronormativity by heterosexualising the relationship between '2 mums' and '2 dads'

Despite concerns about assimilation and collusion (e.g. DePalma and Atkinson, 2009b; Nixon, 2009; Rofes, 2000; Youdell, 2011), the previous section established that for *some* children a Different Families approach may allow *some* lesbian and gay sexualities to be rendered intelligible. However, children are not a homogeneous group and the legitimacy of different families was not 'accepted' by all. In the majority of focus groups, children reinstated heteronormativity and gendered expectations by rejecting the feasibility of lone-parents, and heterosexualising the relationship between '2 mums' and '2 dads'. As this first extract demonstrates, children felt compelled to recuperate heteronormativity and gendered norms, reinstating the superiority of an idealised heterosexual nuclear family in the face of lone-parent subversion:

Ramha	That's the dad … a baby girl/
Joseph	Can't forget a mum
Ramha	And that's the mum … and that's the girl
	(The children agree that this could be a family)
JH	Ok, Ayliah, can you make a family
Aayat	A baby boy … a boy … a girl and a mum
JH	Why have you put that there? (Joseph has added a dad)
Joseph	Because the dad keeps going to a different country

***

JH	Could this be a family (I make a family with a dad and children)
Matthew	A dad can look after babies … with a mum (adds a mum)
JH	So we can't have a family like this (I remove the mum)
Matthew	That (reintroduces the mum)
Gabi	Well you can if the mum died or if she went on holiday, but you can't have it like that forever

Focus groups with Year 2 (February 2013)

In these exchanges, efforts to legitimise lone-parent families (potentially queer subjects) are contested by some children who resist the desirability of singletons. In both instances, Joseph and Matthew coerce others into reinstating idealised heterosexual nuclear families and its biological underpinning through imposing heterosexual coupledom (see Wilkinson, 2014)[ix]. This exposes a dominant construction of family that is embedded in a particular understanding of the connection between sex, relationships, conception and reproduction; something which was also evident earlier in relation to Luke's same-sex family which – to make (heterosexual) sense – included the absent presence of a dad. This dominant, biological/heteronormative construction of family intensified when children speculated on the likely relationship between '2 mums' and '2 dads'. While some children suggested that these could be same-sex partners, more often children dismissed this possibility in favour of elaborate heterosexual explanations. As the following extract demonstrates, children overwhelmingly recuperated heteronormativity by heterosexualising the relationship between '2 mums' and '2 dads':

JH	Could this be a family (I make a family with two dads and two children)?
NUMEROUS	No!
JH	Why?
Gina	It could if these two are boyfriends
Matthew	They can't
JH	Why can't they Matthew?
Matthew	Because they're two dads … you need a mum
Gina	It could still be this one because they could be friends … or the mum went on holiday/
Gabi	Or both of the mums went on holiday and this guy didn't want to stay on his own so he went with this guy … he called his friend of the other wife and they just stayed together

[…]

JH	Could this be a family (I make a family with two mums and two children)?
Gina	They could be girlfriends
Matthew	It can be a family because they're not real because we need a dad and that would make a really good wife (swaps a mum for a dad) … now you make a family

JH	So who could these 2 mums have been?
Gabi	Child-minders
Joseph	That could be the sister/
Nadiv	And that could be the aunty
Aayat	That could be the mum and that could be the grandma
Ramha	This could be the uncle, this could be the dad
Joseph	These could be brothers

Focus group with Year 2 (February 2013)

This group did not volunteer to make families with '2 mums' or '2 dads', despite how these were introduced in class, so in both instances I made hypothetical families with '2 mums' and '2 dads' and presented these for comment. While Gina initially suggests that the '2 dads' could be 'boyfriends', after Matthew's repudiation Gina succumbs to masculine authority by acceding to the biological/heteronormative framing that Matthew introduces. Gabi, like others takes up this framing too in colluding with Matthew's silencing and delegitmisisation of families with same-sex parents. In other focus groups, gay and lesbian – terms endorsed in class – are used by some children in recognition of same-sex relationships. However, once again these identities are disavowed and those defending the legitimacy of same-sex families eventually accede to biological/heteronormative framings of 'family':

JH	Hura, can you make a family
Hura	This/
Salam	It is got to be a man and women!

Lucy	It could be gay ... it could be gay
Salam	It can't be a gay family (replaces one of the men with a woman)
JH	What have you just done ... you've swapped one of the/
Salam	Yeah ... man and a man can't have a baby
Lucy	Yeah, they've adopted the babies
Hura	It doesn't matter who you marry ... you might like a boy and you wanna marry that boy/
Usman	Urh! (Looks disgusted)
Hura	It doesn't matter ... and you might want to adopt some children
Usman	They're both male!
Lucy	Yeah, if they're male then they can find a lady and be like oh, I want to get married and then they can get a kid and then go GO AWAY, I HATE YOU, I WANT A DIVORCE (in a high pitched voice)

Focus group with Year 3 (February 2013)

In this example, Lucy suggests that the two dads could be gay and continues to endorse this possibility – despite Salam's insistence that a 'man and a man can't have a baby' – by suggesting that adoption (just one route to parenthood) is possible. However, in response to persistent acts of repudiation, Lucy – like others – eventually succumbs to masculine authority by undermining the integrity of 'gay dads' conceding that they deceived a woman into having a baby. This deference to masculine authority, which can also be simultaneously read as femininized avoidance of confrontation occurs again later

in the focus group when Lucy concedes that lesbian parents 'tricked' men into having babies.

In both instances, dominant biological/heteronormative constructions of 'family' founded on deep rooted connections between sex, relationships, conception and reproduction prevail over the legitimacy of same-sex adoption or other routes to parenthood, as more acutely conveyed in Week's et al's (2001) conceptions of 'families of choice'. While children's awareness of reconstituted families may have made the idea of '2 mums' and '2 dads' intelligible, data presented in this section highlights the importance of broaching the role of sexuality in LGBTQ+ families and endorsing the distinctiveness of how same-sex families are formed since children clearly lack this knowledge and understandably revert to heteronormative reproduction (Carlile and Paechter, 2018; Ryan-Flood, 2009; Taylor, 2009; Weeks et al., 2001). Yet, in the context of the English primary school where heterosexuality has an invisible, taken-for-granted presence, any talk of same-sex sexuality would be at odds with the supposed desexualised nature of schooling (also see Hall, 2015; 2018; Renold, 2005; DePalma and Atkinson, 2009a). As Taylor (2009) fears, homonormative family forms may well be incorporated into this taken-for-granted invisibility with schools mistakenly thinking that mere representation of same-sex families is enough.

Acknowledging the invisible structuring presence of (hetero)sexuality in English primary schools and normalising the distinctiveness of how same-sex families are formed (to include, but not limited to adoption)[x] needs to take place alongside an awareness of the enduring power of heteronormative 'logic' and the limits of introducing gay and lesbian sexualities in a familial context. This also drives individual and collective/dialogical speech-acts which surround children's negotiations and exchanges. For example, prior to Lucy's repudiation of lesbian mums, Usman and Haleem (another child in the focus group) make comments which expose the continuing desirability of a 'conventional' heterosexual nuclear family. While I highlight Usman and Haleem's comments here, it would be inadequate for Islamophobic readings to follow. Indeed, as Eng argues, 'the production of queer liberalism and the discourse of racialized immigrant homophobia are

two sides of the same liberal coin' (2010: 33)[xi]. As the next extract reveals, Usman and Haleem – like other boys who instigate the re-centring of heteronormative imaginings of families – wield heterosexually monogamous versions of reproduction to make distinctions between proper and improper families. As a result, conventional heterosexual nuclear families are positioned as both 'natural' and superior to inadequate imitations:

JH	Niyanthri, can you make a family?
Niyanthri	That one ... and this one ... they're gay couple/
Lucy	Lesbian
Niyanthri	And they have these babies
JH	What does everyone think about this family?
Haleem	It is silly ... it is not a good one, the best one was here (points to where his conventional heterosexual nuclear family had been)
Usman	It made sense
JH	Why?
Haleem	These two ... how can they have children ... it has to be a man and a woman to have children

[…]

JH	Usman, can you make a family
Usman	Mum and dad ... and children ... that's the aunty ... the uncle ... that's the gran and that's the granddad
JH	What does everyone think about this family?

Haleem — It is correct … it is good because it makes sense

Focus group with Year 3 (February 2013)

Such exchanges simultaneously illuminate the fragility of the acceptability of same-sex families in the face of the normative heterosexual model with normatively imagined heterosexual nuclear families erasing, discrediting or undermining lesbian and gay sexualities when introduced in a familial context. This could well be intensified in the social space of the primary school where some (heterosexual) families are more visible in – for example – the playground and as a result of school policies and everyday institutional practice which may – even inadvertently – uphold normative heterosexuality (Hall, 2018; Carlile and Paechter, 2018; Ryan-Flood, 2009). This includes the circulation and re-enforcement of (hetero)norms in everyday institutional language and the designation of children's primary parent in official school records, which tends to normalise school engagement with *a* mum (Carlile and Paechter, 2018). This is in addition to intensified heteronormative sex education following the repeal of Section 28 (again illustrating the state's mobilization of schools as socio-political sites; see Thiem, 2009) and children's own investments in reinstating normative (hetero)gender/sexuality in school corridors, playgrounds, and toilets (Hall, 2018). This often gives rise to a cultural arena saturated with heteronormative discourses and practices (also see DePalma and Atkinson, 2009a; Renold, 2005). As such, perhaps it should not be surprising that families with opposite-sex parents are regarded as 'correct' and 'the best' and making most sense[xii].

The ability of institutional heteronormativity and dominant biological/heteronormative constructions of family to preclude the intelligibility of Different Families can also be clearly seen in the final example when the popular, but highly criticised book *And Tango Makes Three* (Richardson and Parnell, 2005) is read to Reception children (4-5 years old) during a school assembly. This 'true story' of two male penguins that rear an abandoned chick in a New York zoo typifies many 'child friendly' books endorsed by *Stonewall* as

befitting for a primary school context. However, as the second child's response to this story indicates, institutional heteronormativity and dominant biological/heteronormative constructions of family gives rise to mis-readings of stories that emulate a normatively imagined heterosexual nuclear family:

> As Chris reads the story, he points out how lots of different families are going to the zoo to see animals that all have different families of their own (repeated throughout) and Chris notes how Roy and Silo are both boys. When Chris has finished reading the story, he reiterates how lovely it was because the two penguins did not think they could have a family.
>
> Chris then asks the children what they enjoyed about the story and one child replies 'the chick' before a second child states 'the chick and the mummy'. Chris reminds the children that in this story the chick did not have a mummy.
>
> Field notes (November 2012)

As Youdell (2011) argues, representations of gay life as 'just like' heterosexual life are part of a performative politics *and* a citational chain that reinscribes heteronormativity. The male penguins' incubation of the egg and rearing of the chick 'cites and inscribes the normative status of heterosexuality, monogamous adult coupling, homemaking and the rearing of young as the coveted prize of couplings entered into by enduring, self-evident, natural subjects' (2011: 66/7). While attempting to assert the legitimacy of homosexual emulation, even with much needed background work on the role of sexuality in LGBTQ+ families and the distinctiveness of how same-sex families are formed (Carlile and Paechter, 2018; Ryan-Flood, 2009; Taylor, 2009; Weeks et al., 2001) there are limits to introducing lesbian and gay sexualities in the context of families. Such approaches – unavoidably – constitute monogamous heterosexual nuclear family life as the ideal.

Conclusion

I began this paper by noting how – in the context of Section 28 – recognising Different Families in English primary schools may well be taken as a sign of 'progress'. As Epstein

(2000) and others have shown, the symbolic effect of Section 28 was profound and knowledge of same-sex families – at least until recently – had been erased from educational spaces. While 'vanilla strategies' (Nixon, 2009) can still be important in 'thinking through education' beyond the sector (Thiem, 2009), simply introducing Different Families without prior government-sanctioning of the distinctiveness of how same-sex families are formed can restrict children's understandings of 'family' beyond biological/heteronormative constructs. This means turning to the state to resolve issues of mobilizing schools as sites of social reproduction. This would also go some way to countering institutional heteronormativity which pervades the everyday spaces of schooling (Hall, 2018). That said, schools are not merely a container of prevailing socio-political understandings and processes, as stressed earlier and have an active role in their contested (re)production. This means that schools should also reflect upon and challenge how normative (hetero)gender/sexuality permeates school cultures and undermines equalities initiatives (see Delenty, 2019).

As stressed throughout, sexual progress in English primary schools is also not merely about improving families curricula, which has limits as an approach (Butler, 2002; Youdell, 2011). As outlined at the outset, it is crucial to always ask *which* sexualities are 'progressing' in and beyond English primary schools. *Stonewall's* Different Families initiative has become the dominant approach for introducing primary-aged children to lesbian and gay sexualities; yet, as I have shown, this approach emerges within a specific socio-political and spatiotemporal context where vested interests in monogamous nuclear relationships – stemming from problematic neoliberal sexual politics – prevail and where 'child friendly' is very much defined by what is supposedly not 'child friendly': namely, queer progressive politics inspired initiatives (i.e. No Outsiders). Yet, as many scholars argue, approaches informed by queer praxis, which move beyond liberal ideals of equalities and 'inclusion' are necessary to systematically disrupt and undo heteronormativity (Hall, 2018; DePalma and Atkinson, 2009b; Ellis, 2007). As such, this paper argues for adjustments to families curricula in English primary schools *alongside* seizing opportunities for queer educational praxis. This would include queering normative (hetero)gender/sexuality in everyday institutional practice and curricula as

well as incorporating discussions of same-sex intimacies beyond talk of Different Families.

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[ii] This is not a term used in law or statutory/non-statutory government guidance. Rather, I use this term to encapsulate schools work around (hetero)sexism, homophobia and 'sexualities equality' (DePalma and Atkinson, 2009b), and when referring to aspects of government legislation and guidance which, when grouped together, could be seen to be producing 'gender and sexualities education'.

[iii] When the Different Families initiative was introduced, Stonewall's focus was on sexuality. From 2015, Stonewall campaigned for Tran's rights.

[iv] Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills) is a UK inspectorate that reports to Parliament.

[v] Although as Weeks (2007) points out, without this inclusion even more people would be marginalised with regards to parental rights and ordinary citizenship (also see Carlile and Paechter, 2018).

[vi] While *No Outsiders* has been more recently associated with a Birmingham primary school following high-profile protests, here I am referring to the original *No Outsiders* project (DePalma and Atkinson, 2009a).

[vii] Culturally and ethnically sensitive pseudonyms are given to children to retain a sense of the diverse backgrounds (see Epstein, 1998).

[viii] Weirwold's Deputy Head Teacher verified this.

[ix] According to developmental literature, it could be argued that this is because young children are not able to extrapolate beyond their own circumstances (Shaffer and Kipp, 2010). However, given the diversity of children's own families, it is surprising how powerful a notion of 'imagined families' we live by – the image of the relationships we aspire to – remains (Gillis, 1996).

[x] I would suggest that adoption as unfortunate or less preferred needs addressing more systematically alongside the feasibility of other routes to parenthood.

[xi] As Eng (2010) demonstrates, discourses of progress in relation to LGBT inclusion rely on constituting a racialized – often Muslim – Other to European modernity ('over there' as well as 'over here' – as seen in recent 'Muslim LGBT education protests' at a Birmingham primary school, i.e. Cox, 2019; Preece, 2019). In recognition of neoliberal family paradoxes, especially state-amplified heteropatriarchal dependencies in immigrant communities Eng encourages us to 'rethink how race and sexuality are systematically dissociated in a putatively colorblind [sic] age [by developing] a more robust politics of intersectionality in the face of neoliberal practices and policies' (2010: 33).

[xii] Faith may also be an intersecting factor here in terms of 'what ought to be' (see Valentine and Waite, 2012).