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Casper, Virginia; Cuffaro, Harriet K; Schultz, Steven; Silin, Jonathan G; Wic
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Toward a Most Thorough Understanding of the World: Sexual Orientation and Early Childhood Education

VIRGINIA CASPER
HARRIET K CUFFARO
STEVEN SCHULTZ
JONATHAN G SILIN
ELAINE WICKENS
Bank Street College of Education, New York City

Written collaboratively by five educators from the Bank Street College of Education, this article focuses on sexual orientation and early childhood education, an issue that is often overlooked. The authors describe research projects they have undertaken to explore elementary school teachers' thoughts and attitudes about sexual orientation in relation to children's sexuality and parents' sexual orientation. Building from there, they examine the connections between teachers' reflections of their own childhood experience and their current attitudes towards sexual orientation. They then move from exploring adult conceptions of family to examining those of children. Finally, the authors describe the process of transformation at Bank Street College as the institution struggles to include gay and lesbian lives in the early childhood and graduate school curriculum. Throughout the article, the authors continually connect their proactive stance for inclusion around sexual orientation with their larger vision of a more just and equitable society.

In 1989, an informal hallway conversation just outside the cafeteria at Bank Street College led to the formation of a lesbian and gay research group. It was not total happenstance that brought three of us (Virginia Casper, Steve Schultz, and Elaine Wickens) together in the hallway that day. Nor is it happenstance that two other faculty members (Harriet Cuffaro and Jonathan Silin) joined our group in 1994. Although there are many differences among us — we are women

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and men, straight and gay, parents and teachers, from working-class and middle-class families, from urban and rural environments — we have all chosen to work in a unique institution with a particular history and specific location in the educational landscape. Founded as the Bureau of Educational Experiments in 1916 by Lucy Sprague Mitchell, Bank Street College is part of the progressive tradition that sees schools as both a route to social change and a context in which to study the development of children (Antler, 1987; Biber, 1984; Shapiro & Nager 1995). It remains a small, informal, and non-hierarchical community by contemporary standards.

Perhaps we found ourselves working collaboratively at Bank Street because it is a place where hallway conversations such as ours are frequently intense and impassioned, where the tension between what is and what might be is not forgotten and where stories about children and questions from graduate students are placed in a political context. While it is now possible for faculty at Bank Street to be out as lesbian or gay in their classrooms, to advocate for curriculum about lesbian and gay families, and to participate openly in gay politics, this has not always been the case, nor is it true for everyone in every facet of the institution.

Brought together because of our belief that schools can help to create a more just society through fostering democratic processes and principles, we five also came together as friends and colleagues, some of us with shared histories going back to the 1960s. Although we had a common educational vocabulary, talking about sexual orientation presented new challenges. For example, one straight member of the group was uncomfortable with words such as 'dyke' that occurred easily in the talk of gay members. She did not even want to refer to the sexual orientation of lesbian and gay people because she felt that this might have a negative connotation for them, as if they would read it as an accusation. Gay members of the group pointed out that they see such labeling as defining their identity and as a source of pride. In turn, when we have discussed the interviews we have done with teachers, there have been moments when gay members of the group heard only homophobia in the responses of participants, whereas straight members identified different complexities of thinking and the possibility for dialogue contained therein.

The word "collaboration" comes from the Latin *collaborare*, to labor together. As contemporary educators, we are well versed in the literature on collaborative research and cooperative learning. We have also read the postmodern theorists on the significance of difference, the end of grand narratives, and the disappearance of the coherent subject. They remind us that no one is objective, and that an attempt to create a seamless narrative would belie the counterpoint of our ongoing conversations. However, when faced with the hard task of writing an engaging essay that reflects many voices, these postmodern reminders do not seem especially helpful. While we enjoy a common interest in qualitative methodologies — in-depth interviews, classroom ethnography, and textual analysis — each of us brings a unique perspective. By alternating between the first-person singular and first-person plural, we have sought to honor our differences and to

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recognize the mutual influence and shared understandings that have emerged over the last six years. Our knowledge of lesbian and gay issues in schools is constantly being constructed and reconstructed, which is a distinct outcome of our laboring together.

Within a month of coming together, the initial members of our group wrote a position paper identifying the need for research on improving communication between lesbian/gay parents and the schools. During the following year we conducted our first interviews with parents, teachers, and administrators as we sought to clarify how each group saw the others. This article briefly summarizes our research since that time and describes the changes in the visibility and salience of lesbian/gay issues that occurred throughout the college community as a result of our work (Casper, Schultz, & Wickens, 1992; Casper & Schultz, 1995; Wickens, 1993, 1994; Wickens & Schultz, 1994).

Our work brings together several new pieces of research that we have conducted in public and private schools in inner-city and rural settings among people from diverse ethnic, racial, religious, and class backgrounds. In the first section, Elaine Wickens describes how our research has grown out of concerns raised by our graduate students; in the second, Steven Schultz explores the ways that adult attitudes about sexual orientation are shaped by their early experience. In the third section, Virginia Casper makes us reconsider the role of experience in children's conception of family, and in the fourth Harriet Cuffaro returns to the adult perspective, now in terms of the issue of institutional change and the cumulative impact of our research on teacher education at Bank Street College. Jonathan Silin, who has coordinated the writing of this piece, concludes by highlighting our shared commitment to creating a more equitable society.

Parents' Questions and Teachers' Responses

Two projects of the lesbian and gay research group grew out of questions asked by graduate students. Since findings from the first project on lesbian and gay parents have been presented elsewhere (Casper et al., 1992; Wickens, 1993), in this section I (Elaine Wickens) focus on the second project, an exploration of how teachers might respond to parental concerns about the perceived sexual orientation of a six-year-old boy. While some of the teachers we interviewed saw homosexuality as "not normal," we also found that participants were ready to talk about the issue and that they recognized the need to work effectively with gay/lesbian parents and children.

When some of my colleagues first learned that I had become involved in anti-bias research centering on gay and lesbian issues, inevitably they asked me how and why I had begun this work. Simply put, I was in the right place at the right time to act. And for those who wanted to know more, to listen to where my memory took me, to share past times, there was this to tell.

I grew up in a small town in West Virginia in the 1930s, prior to desegregation. Political activism and concerns about social equity were a part of my childhood. My father supported the miners when they struck, and my older brother was an

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organizer for Henry Wallace during the 1948 Presidential campaign. I remember sitting on top of the mountain we called the Devil's Teatable, which overlooks the Kanawaha River. I used to look down on the polluted river and wish it could be cleaned up so that everyone would swim in it and the world would be sweet. That river seemed the only place that was free in a world of segregated pools, schools, movie houses and restaurants. I can also remember that sometime before I was in first grade, there was a man in our neighborhood who did odd jobs and delivered ice. People made fun of him, called him "sweet lips." In retrospect, I wonder if the jokesters were laughing at him because they thought he was gay, but they aren't around to ask. In high school, I took part in a walkout when the principal of our school told dialect jokes in the assembly. I did not plan to be part of the walkout, but I was there and chose to act.

I chose to act too when the president of Bank Street College called for a faculty group to plan a residence and day-care center for homeless families. The project was to be a collaboration between the College and the Salvation Army, an agency that had a policy barring the employment of lesbian and gay teachers. Bank Street's own hiring policy explicitly prohibits discrimination based on sexual orientation. Working with the Salvation Army, I argued, would clearly compromise our principles and policies. After much discussion, the College decided not to pursue this project.

One day in the midst of the heated college-wide debate about the Salvation Army, Penny, a former student who is now working as an elementary school teacher, stood in my office doorway. She asked, "What do you know about having two moms as parents in a classroom? My principal told me to get ready for a five-year-old boy with two moms who would be in my classroom in the fall." I told Penny that I had never thought about this situation before and would see what I could find out.

I met with Steve Schultz later that day to talk about Penny's question. I told him I was surprised that I had never thought about gay- and lesbian-headed families entering the school culture. After further conversations with Virginia Casper, the three of us decided to explore Penny's question in a more systematic manner by interviewing gay/lesbian parents, early childhood teachers, and administrators (Casper et al., 1992; Wickens, 1993). Our goal was to learn what lesbian and gay parents wanted the school to know about their families and what they in turn wanted to know about the school. With the gay and lesbian parents' permission, we also interviewed their children's teachers and school administrators to find out what school personnel wanted to know about gay- and lesbian-headed families and what they felt the families should know about the school.

Through these interviews, we learned to place the issue of gay and lesbian parents within the context of an inclusive, broadly defined multicultural education. Since young children's curriculum frequently focuses on the meaning of family, the inclusion of gay- and lesbian-headed families has special salience to the early childhood classroom. Most parents must make difficult decisions about the disclosure of personal information when their children first enter school,

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and these concerns are heightened for gay and lesbian parents. Our interviews provided important insights into the ways that specific educational settings invite or discourage disclosure of sexual orientation. They also revealed confusions amongst gender identity, gender role, and sexual orientation. Many school personnel shared questions: Would children growing up with two parents of the same sex have access to what they considered to be "appropriate gender role models"? Do girls need to have a male parent in order to recognize their own femininity? Do boys need a father in order to exhibit masculine behaviors? Do boys need a mother in order to recognize their own masculinity? Confusion about gender and sexual orientation led teachers to wonder whether children raised in gay or lesbian families would grow up to be gay or lesbian themselves. In general, most lesbian and gay parents did not have these concerns. They simply wanted both male and female adult — relatives, friends, and teachers — in their children's lives who represented diverse cultures, careers, and sexual orientations.

Two years after Penny appeared at my office door, another graduate student, Josephine, raised an even more provocative question. She was standing in the school yard early one morning when a mother of a six-year-old in her class approached her with a discomforting remark. She said, "I, we, think our son is gay. He dresses in my clothes all the time." Taken aback, Josephine responded, "He does play with girls a lot."

Josephine brought this incident to her conference group, which was composed of five other graduate students and myself, her advisor. Conference group is a place where students regularly bring events from their practice teaching for discussion and peer feedback. At the time, I naively assumed that Josephine was motivated by a desire to give a more complete response to these concerned parents, one that was accepting of the possibility that their child might be gay. This assumption framed my work with the group that day. It was two years later that Josephine told me she had only recently become more comfortable talking about lesbian and gay issues, and that at the time of her participation in the conference group she had actually disapproved of lesbian and gay lives. In this situation, I think that my own enthusiasm and research commitment had blinded me to the reality of Josephine's attitude. She had taught me an important lesson.

Just as Penny's question helped to initiate our research, Josephine's concern served to enlarge our perspective. Now we realized that teachers not only had to get ready to talk about gay- and lesbian-headed families, but also to address questions about children's sexual orientation. In order to learn how other teachers would respond in Josephine's situation, we interviewed thirteen informants. During 1993, my own life circumstances allowed me to conduct interviews in the rural southwest, as well as in New York City. I chose experienced teachers from diverse backgrounds — Anglos, Latinos, Native Americans — who had worked in either public or private early childhood (K-2) settings. The children in these settings reflected diverse racial, religious, and socioeconomic histories. I began each interview by describing the situation in which Josephine had found herself that morning in the school yard and asked the teachers how they would have

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responded to the mother's comment. I also asked whether they had found themselves in similar situations and, if so, what they had done. These simple questions led to interviews that lasted from thirty minutes to an hour. The interviews were tape recorded and transcribed. All members of the research group reviewed the transcripts and discussed their responses together.

We learned that several of the teachers had already been queried by parents of children as young as three and four years of age about their child's sexual orientation. When asked what they would say to parents of a six-year-old, half of them gave replies such as, "I guess I would say it's normal for children to experiment with different roles. I would try to put it in a range of normal behavior for that age."

Several of the teachers had never thought about the question, and one could not even imagine herself in Josephine's place. The interview itself caused other teachers to explore the issue of sexual orientation for the first time, and we were able to observe their thinking as it evolved. For example, at the beginning of one interview, a teacher who taught second grade in a public school announced that while she believed all children capable of learning, she also thought a child who might be gay belonged in a special education class. But at the end of the interview, just as I was leaving, she called after me, "Let me know what you find out. I might have to get ready for this." The teacher's initial assumption that anyone can learn expresses her hopefulness about all children, while her designation of a special education classroom indicates her view that being gay is a problem requiring expert management. As a teacher educator, my own hopefulness is buoyed by the teacher's final comment, an acknowledgment that she may need to learn more about sexual orientation and young children.

Our informants asked many questions themselves. What was really known about the origins of sexual orientation? At what age could a young child be said to be gay? The majority of teachers tended to agree with the teacher who said:

> The notion that a child is doing or being anything just doesn't make sense. There's no way of knowing that a six- or seven- or eight-[year-old child is gay]. I just don't think that anybody could possibly know that.

Is this kind of comment an indication of hidden homophobia? We don't know. It might also be read as a lack of information about sexuality in young children. In fact, there is little scholarly literature and even less easily accessible literature that examines the formation of sexual identity in an unbiased way (Chodorow, 1992; Green, 1987). Additionally, because many teachers understand early childhood as a time of rapid changes, experimentation, and play, they are reluctant to fit children into rigid categories.

Teachers frequently wanted additional information from parents who felt their child might be gay. They wanted to place the specific behaviors parents described into a larger context; for example, what else was going on at home? This effort to contextualize behavior, to avoid judgments based on a single incident of any kind, is common practice in early childhood education. It is a strategy teachers often employ when confronted by overwrought parents who

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are overly anxious about a child's behavior. Teachers, in turn, are practiced at giving multiple concrete examples of behaviors that concern them.

Teachers often wanted time to reflect on the situation being presented by parents and to search for unarticulated questions lying beneath the surface. What were parental attitudes toward homosexuality and the possibility that a child might be lesbian or gay? What did they do or say when they found their child dressing up in the clothing of the other gender? One teacher explained her response this way:

> I would ask the parent to say more about why this is a concern for them. I would try to help them with a lot of support to address these concerns. I would want to see if there is homophobia on the part of the parent. I suppose you could be truly concerned about your child and not be homophobic. . . . If the child has been dressing up in both parents' clothes all along or just playing dress-up in his or her own room, then I would try to help the parent see this as part of a continuing and very normal part of childhood.

The need to reassure parents that dressing up in clothing of the other gender was within the range of normal behavior reverberated throughout our conversations. Although most teachers used the idea of normal behavior with the best intentions to reassure parents, we found it could convey a hidden and less than positive message about homosexuality. If it is normal for a six-year-old boy to dress in clothing of the other gender then he is okay, he is not gay. But, if he continues with this behavior in later years, then when is he no longer okay? When is it no longer normal? Do we imply by our language that being gay is abnormal? Do we also confuse questions of dressing in clothing of the other gender with questions of sexual orientation?

Words such as "normal" are a reflection of many professionals' traditional reliance on the literature of child development, and this normative language is embedded in many accepted standards of practice (Bredekamp 1987). In recent years, however, this reliance has come increasingly into question, along with its implicit beliefs in normal development (Kessler & Swadener, 1992; Silin 1995).

When we began our research, we wondered if other educators would be interested in our work. When we presented our project at the 1993 conference of the National Association for the Education of Young Children, two hundred people attended the session. Queried as to whether they had been asked about a child's sexual orientation, half of the attendees raised their hands. We were especially impressed by how one teacher responded to a mother's concern that her son might be gay because he liked to wear jewelry. Her words capture the direct and unbiased manner that we feel best addresses the question of sexual orientation:

> First we talked about seven-year-olds and their general interest in dressing up, fantasy play, and fidgeting with little plastic junk like toys, rings, hair barrettes, etc. I told her Ben was right on target in that area. Then I mentioned that wearing jewelry didn't mean that he was gay, but that one in ten people is gay, so it was likely that three children in our class are gay! She was a bit shocked. But if Ben is gay she should start enjoying that fact ASAP!

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When I went back to West Virginia a few years after the schools had been integrated, I found children of different races pushing each other on the swings and riding on the backs of each others' bikes. I asked a teacher who had taught me many years earlier how this had come about. She said, "We knew [integration] was coming and we didn't want any child to get hurt." The tone of her voice reminds me of the informant who at the end of our interview said, "Let me know what you find out [in your research]." Respecting the complexities of social change, we think there's a tone of openness in this comment. For us as researcher-activists, it also sounds a note of obligation to talk together with teachers, teacher educators, and parents about sexual orientation as a matter of equity. In the following section we explore the roots of educators' own attitudes about sexual orientation in order to understand better how they may influence these conversations.

Gay and Lesbian Parents in the Classroom

In this section, I (Steven Schultz) examine some of my own experiences and those of the educators in our first study (Casper et al., 1992), in order to understand the ways individuals come to accept lesbian and gay parents in their schools.

One educator we interviewed, Ms. Frankel, a public school principal, made certain connections between her early experiences and her present-day attitudes:

> I think one has to work backwards from one's current philosophy, which isn't only an educational one but a political one. It seems to me that all my adult life I've been involved in areas where that is exactly what we were trying to do, be inclusive. I think the civil rights movement had a very big impact on me — its successes and its failures. I think probably my childhood, which included very strong feelings about unions, and also a pair of aunts who were Communists in the thirties, and who were closer to my age than to my mother's age, and whom I spent a great deal of time with, they taught me a lot about people being different, that that's the way life was, and that everybody deserved a break.[1]

The common features in Ms. Frankel's story, and in many others we collected, were the connections among feeling different, of translating that feeling into a broad respect for diversity in general, and the fact that the way people experience, think, and talk about the world changes over time.

For me, how I received the world and what I expressed in it was changed by my son the moment I became a parent, then changed again after I became ill, and again when my companion died from AIDS. All of these people and events affected me deeply. They turned the kaleidoscope through which I received the world, and they altered the range, pitch, or tone of my voice as they suggested new vocabulary to describe my new experiences. A slice of the world not pre-

[1] All quotes in this section are from interviews conducted as a part of a research study reported in Casper, Schultz, and Wickens (1992). In the interest of confidentiality, the names of participants have been changed.

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viously noticed can suddenly become visible. Mr. D'Angelo, a public school principal, describes how the work of his brother served as a catalyst for Mr. D'Angelo's own greater awareness, which may in turn have created a shift in his thinking about sexual orientation and gay people in general:

> I don't even remember thinking about [gay people], to be quite honest with you. No, I don't think I ever really thought about it. . . . I have a brother who's a lawyer who at one point was representing gay people. He had a very strong point of view with respect to their needs being incorporated into all aspects of our society and had a strong opinion about what was going on.

Perspectives can be personal and idiosyncratic, and at the same time be shaped by cultural and social dynamics. This conspires to make the deconstruction of one's view anything but a simple matter. Certainly self-reflexive analysis involves autobiography, remembering and connecting the stories of the people and events that make up one's life. Both Mr. D'Angelo and Ms. Frankel responded to questions related to their attitudes about diversity and their knowledge of gay people by citing autobiographical stories. These stories give substance to their more generally sketched beliefs, and they do so with a flavor that is unique to their authors' own lives. And once voiced, as many of our informants confided to us, they understood their *own* attitudes better than they did prior to the interview.

Philip Jackson, in his book *Untaught Lessons* (1992), writes that our early experiences and subsequent memories may affect our present-day selves in ways that often seem mysterious. The mystery comes in the difficulty and sometimes impossibility of putting our finger on the particular event or interaction behind our actions, thinking, and understandings. Jackson, for instance, affectionately remembers that his high school math teacher, Mrs. Henzi, had a definite and powerful influence on him, but he cannot identify why or how. Given the deep roots that influence how we see and interpret our experiences and, at the same time, the always-present possibility of change, we wanted to explore the stories teachers shared with us about how their attitudes towards lesbian and gay people were shaped: What did they recall? What connections did they make? Some of the educators who learned that they had children with lesbian, gay, or bisexual parents were also dealing with the issue of sexual orientation for the first time in their own lives, and were struggling to fit it into their current worldview.

Father Stephen, a school administrator, combines life experiences with his interpretations of church teachings. He asserts that he would be "against bias of any kind . . . on the basis of gender, religion, sex, or whatever," but his strong convictions and life experiences lead him to view homosexuality — and particularly lesbian and gay parents — as dangerous:

> What I view as an effort — and a continuing and increasingly strong effort — to have homosexuality accepted popularly as an equally viable lifestyle. I would not want to be part of such an effort. I think that so much of the problems of our time is the breakup and deterioration of the average normal family . . . I had an uncle who was rather severely retarded. But he became a carpenter, a sanitation worker. But he was able to survive because of being embedded in this family context, and

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> he did not wind up on the street. He did not wind up in an institution, but he was able to be supported. And I think a great deal of the problems today with homelessness stem from that deterioration of the family structure. And, I think that some of the advocates of homosexual equality with heterosexual equality would encourage a kind of diminution of the value of the heterosexual family.

Father Stephen's remarks make clear the powerful ways that personal experience is employed to attempt to justify a point of view. Yet this justification and the connections individuals make to explain them are sometimes not only personal, but also mysterious. Father Stephen's story is less an example of the clear connections between one's personal stories and current beliefs than it is of the lengths individuals may go to interpret a personal story to defend their attitudes. Except for the importance of family both in Father Stephen's story and in lesbians and gays having children, deeper, more explanatory connections seem absent. His story reminds us that the *ways* people interpret and use their own experiences are individualistic. Father Stephen's anecdote warns us that personal stories remembered and shared are not always as complete as the associations individuals make and feel about them. A close reading of his story suggests that the ideas of a group — in this case a religious one — can serve as powerful "regulators" of our beliefs, providing illogical justifications for them if logical ones are absent.

This varied use of experience is illustrated by the ways that Fred, a kindergarten teacher, and Sol, a first-grade teacher, interpreted somewhat similar experiences. Fred related his experiences of growing up without a father to the life of Dan, a child in his class who has lesbian parents:

> My father died when I was fifteen. You go through everything then. . . . It's only been in the last five years that I can sort it out, that it's become clear. That reflection I think comes with time. The same thing with the situation with Dan. [Dan's parents] can set up as much as he can handle, but there are some things that you're just not going to be able to foresee. With the father gone, the fact that he doesn't see his father anymore, it's a big break. I went through that. It causes a lot of pain and you have to deal with it, because it's not going to change. But the more I think about it, the more I think there's some[thing] unconscious that may play a part at some time, as in a need or something that's not even voiced. He is a bright boy, but he knows he's different.

Fred's perspective contrasts with that of Sol, a first-grade teacher whose father also died when he was a child. Both adults use their similar early experiences to interpret the needs of children with lesbian and gay parents in their classrooms, but they do so in markedly different ways. Sol commented:

> Where I'm coming from is that my father died when I was nine and a lot of the adult men really moved in to fill the gap. I appreciated it and even then I understood that my mother was alone and a lot of people were supporting us and it was important. [But] without being able to verbalize it, I understood from that age that this was really offensive. The assumption wasn't that I had lost a specific human being who could not be replaced, but that I had lost the man that has to be in a boy's life and I was offended by the whole idea of big brothers. So whether I was

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> gay or straight I would have this perspective that it is absurd to say you need a male or a female role model. You need at least one caring adult caretaker, period.

Stories that appear similar in nature or theme clearly are not experienced in the same way by the individuals who figure in them. And although it is the facts of the stories alone that make up our experiences, our previous life stories, our individual temperaments, our historical milieus, and the cultural, economic and social contexts in which we find ourselves are all influential in shaping the way we read the data of our life experiences. Fred and Sol offer examples of different ways in which similar data can be read, and of how they can then be used to interpret the events occurring in the lives of children in their classrooms.

Through examining some of the stated attitudes and stories of educators regarding lesbian and gay people, this section has attempted to show the effect of early events and interactions on individual attitudes and how they are frequently drawn upon to explain new twists and turns encountered in one's world. Yet, a note of caution is required here. Simply because points of view can draw from deeply personal events in one's life does not make all perspectives equally justifiable or true. And, in fact, it is this deeply personal element that can most powerfully warp our own ideas and attitudes. Without stepping back and looking at any charged issue with a more disciplined eye, the closeness of personal memories *can* have the potential to cloud our vision. It is with honest reflection on these raw materials of our own biography — a kind of checking in with the outside world like that encouraged in the discussions of the children in the following section — that we can best clarify and direct our own practice.

The Role of Experience in Children's Conception of Family

> Louis told Jake he couldn't have two mothers, that you need a dad to have a baby. Jake answered immediately, "I have two mothers. My mom went to a doctor and got some seed and that's how I got started."
>
> — Six-year-olds, New York City Public School

Although we were concentrating on listening to adults in our initial research, reports of children's comments, such as the one above relayed to us by a teacher (P. Stafford, personal communication, 1990), came to me (Virginia Casper) from parents, students, and colleagues.

Messages appeared regularly on our voice mail, and little scraps of paper with intriguing anecdotes began to pile up in our mail boxes. Inadvertently, our research served as an invitation to others to think about these issues with us, which helped us refocus our work with children.

The image of young children sharing and playing out their evolving concepts of family during the course of a school day is a familiar one to early childhood educators. As family forms are becoming more varied and more visible, children who have been raised by gay and lesbian parents join with other children to enlarge the already diverse family constellations talked about by children in classrooms. My growing awareness of what children know about families was shaped by my ongoing observations of young children as a teacher educator. As

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a parent I was acculturated to the assumptions children have about each other's families, but as a lesbian mother I was particularly attuned to the subtle comparisons that children make. I recall a walk home from school as a group of first and second graders analyzed the different meanings of "father," "daddy," and "papi." I knew such conversations were not rare and that children's direct and indirect experiences with a broad range of family forms were affecting their thinking about what constitutes a family.

Trained as a developmental psychologist, I became curious about what the literature had to say about children's conceptions of the family. Twenty-five years of research claims that children's experiences with family have a minimal impact on how they define a family and which groupings of people they determine to be examples of a family (Newman, Roberts, & Syre, 1993; Pederson & Gilby, 1986). The gold standard in this research is Piaget's (1928/1965) original study of a child's increasing ability to reason about kin and family relations. Piaget's premise was that without more mature cognitive structures, a young child's experience of being a brother, for example, did not bring that child closer to understanding the inherent reciprocity of that relationship. Using traditional methodology of standardized individual child assessments, the research following Piaget shows that neither family-related curricula (Watson & Amgott-Kwan, 1984) nor the very direct experience of living in a particular family form appears to have any effect on children's definition of a family or their validation of those situations as family (Brodzinsky, Schechter, & Brodinsky, 1986; Newman et al., 1993; Pederson & Gilby, 1986; Powell, Wilcher, Wedemeyer, & Claypool, 1981). Investigators of children's family concepts have failed to incorporate post-Piagetian research on the ability of young children to decenter, take the perspective of another, and utilize non-egocentric thinking (Borke, 1975; Hart & Goldin-Meadow, 1984; Shatz & Gelman, 1973). These abilities appear to surface more when children are presented with tasks that make "human sense" (Donaldson, 1978). And with notable exceptions (Newman et al., 1993; Bernstein, 1988), efforts to integrate children's affective expressions about family with their cognitive understandings have been minimal. Finally, while increased family diversity is almost always cited as a rationale for such work, only a handful of studies actually include diverse samples. It is these few studies alone, however, that suggest that experience does play a role. The experience of living in a divorced family, for example, makes children more likely to accept a single-parent family as an example of family (Camera, 1979; Moore, Bickhard, & Cooper, 1977; Wedemeyer, Bickard, & Cooper, 1989). While there have been studies that look at the effects of being raised by gay parents (Patterson, 1992), studies that look at the role of experience in children's conceptions of family do not include children from lesbian and gay families.

I was stunned by these data and perceived them to be counter-intuitive. As a teacher educator I found them at odds with my own observations of young children in group settings. As the idea of doing more structured observations began to gel, Steven Schultz and I looked to theory in order to ground our study. Given

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our commitment to ethnographic methodologies, we sought to generate or extend theory rather than test it (Casper, 1996). As we began to conceptualize a study, we utilized both Vygotsky (1934/1962) and Piaget (1928/1965). Piaget separated young children's early-absorption and direct use of adult language from their later, more conscious understanding of a concept based on their developing cognitive structures and direct experience. Thus, he believed that a young child's definition of family comes less from actual experience and more from direct adult transmission. Vygotsky never studied children's thinking about family to the same extent as Piaget. Nevertheless, his juxtaposition of spontaneous (everyday) and formal (scientific) concepts became a pivotal point for our thinking. Vygotsky emphasizes the interactive connection between what we know (spontaneous/everyday) but cannot yet express, and concepts we have learned (formal/scientific) but for which we do not yet have significant experience to bring richness of meaning.

In order to explore how children think about families as part of our ongoing collaborative exploration, a research team was established during the 1992–1993 academic year, consisting of two graduate faculty members (myself and Steven Schultz) and two classroom teachers from an urban, private, progressive school for children ages three to thirteen. A mini-grant allowed us to pilot an ethnographically based study. We decided to begin by observing and videotaping in five classrooms, including children from a first grade, two second grades, one fourth and one eighth grade.

In this school, daily classroom meetings that often open with questions to prompt a discussion are an ongoing part of the curriculum. As we began to listen to family-related discussions across this broad age span, the differences in issues between the younger versus the older children, combined with our own limited resources, directed us to focus on the younger children.

Rather than representing a group of people in the global sense, ethnographic work is known for its ability to represent what Robin Leavitt (1994) calls "a dramatic instance." In this vein, it is important to acknowledge some of the unique aspects of this school community. Children in the classes had known each other and their families for at least a few years, and some since the age of two. In each class we visited, many family structures were represented, and some children appeared to know of gay- and lesbian-headed families even if they were not actually represented in the group. Each class already included family study as a part of its naturally evolving curriculum. Teachers informed us when particular discussions would take place, and we also planned some sessions jointly in our collaborative meetings. While perhaps not "typical," we view this environment as rich in family-related experiences. Following are brief excerpts of discussions in three of the classrooms.

The Continent of Love

Michael, a K-1 classroom teacher, overheard some children in his class wonder aloud about marriage. A few children wanted to know if boys could marry boys.

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or girls could marry girls. The children arrived one morning to see that Michael had put these questions on the chart for discussion: Can a man marry a man? Can a woman marry a woman?

Early in the conversation, one child introduced the idea of love between members of the same sex, saying, "My cousin has two moms. They got divorced from their husbands. They started to love each other and asked each other, 'Do you want to live together?' They said yes." This child's comment reflects both her direct experience of her aunts and a repetition of a relative's account of their family story. This cogent statement was ignored and the rest of the children went on to discuss what is allowed and what is not. The children said such things as:

Sam: In some countries a man and a man, and a woman and a woman marry. But they can't here. It would be breaking the law. . . . My mom told me.

Emily: A law is like a big rule.

Tanya: This is not a country. It's a city.

Sam: Different parts of the world are called countries.

Rachel: This isn't one of them.

Here we see that children's main source of evidence tends to be what they see and what they've been told. What is reported is direct and raw. "I know," "I saw," or "My mom told me."

Mid-way through the conversation, Michael helped the children clarify concepts with two questions: What's the difference between living together and getting married? What's getting married?

The discussion jumped between the requisite objects and place for marriage and what constitutes love:

Sam: You don't have to like. . . . you have to *love* to get married. Loving means more than liking.

Emily: You have to wear fancy clothes. There's something called a wedding dress.

Tanya: I know another name for a country. It's a continent.

Gloria: I don't think the United States is a continent. A continent is something up in space.

The next week, Michael posed the following question to the group: What is a family? The group got right to the issue of babies: who can and can't have them, what you "need" to have children. In passing, the meaning of divorce also became clear: "It's when you don't like each other anymore." At this point the following exchange occurred:

Adam: You can have two dads or two moms.

Michael: How do you know?

Adam: I forgot the word.

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