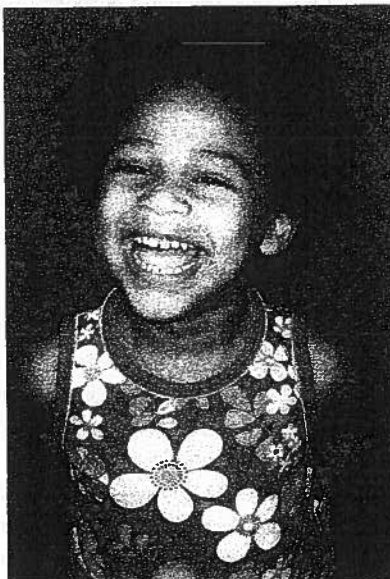


The Inclusion of Sexual Diversity in Early Childhood Curriculum

by Ryan Campbell

The 2006 Canadian census revealed that ours is a country with an increasingly diverse population (Statistics Canada, 2006). The 2001 census revealed that the current face of the Canadian family stands in stark contrast to the nuclear stereotype that was traditionally accepted as a societal norm (Statistics Canada, 2001). In light of this reality it is clear that educators can no longer ignore the diversity that is an integral component of the Canadian experience. As such, the planning and implementation of early childhood curriculum that is sensitive to all aspects of diversity remains one of our most important challenges. This is especially true for educators who are ultimately called upon to address issues of sexual diversity in support of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, transsexual and queer (LGBTQ) parents who are raising a significant number of children in this country (Ambert, 2001).

Unfortunately, despite many educators' commitment to providing an equitable and bias-free environment, the notion of sexual diversity continues to yield a general sense of discomfort. In extreme circumstances it is met with overt resistance. Arguably, it is the one facet of anti-bias education that is



routinely neglected in most early childhood programs. The reasons for this vary. For instance, a blatant disregard in many early childhood programs for issues important to LGBTQ parents and their children may be a direct manifestation of ongoing homophobia that continues to construct gays and lesbians as inferior to their heterosexual counterparts. Still, others would contend that the general inattention sexual diversity receives in early childhood education is due to a lack of available resources. This includes professional development initiatives aimed at equipping educators with the necessary tools to nurture sexual

diversity in a meaningful and respectful manner. A third crucial issue is the discrepancy between personal beliefs and professional ethics and practice for people whose cultural or religious beliefs do not advocate acceptance of gender diversity. For some, coming to the realization that it is possible to practice inclusion without invalidating personal beliefs is challenging.

Despite the obstacles, educators have an obligation to support LGBTQ families. The following recommendations may serve to help educators implement early childhood curriculum that is sensitive to the issues that LGBTQ families face. While this list is by no means exhaustive, it does offer a framework for celebrating gay and lesbian families without positioning them as exceptional.

1. Recognize and address personal prejudices and fears.

The challenge to integrate experiences that support sexual diversity into early childhood curriculum becomes especially difficult for educators who, themselves, harbor personal prejudices or negative beliefs against LGBTQ individuals. In fact, Boyd's research contends that educators often feel torn between their personal beliefs and their commitment as educators to issues of diversity (Boyd 1999, as cited by Wilson, 2001). Ultimately, it is essential that these prejudices and fears are immediately recognized and confronted so that attempts can be made to overcome them in support of same-sex families. This is especially important for

professionals who commit to the practice of early childhood education and, by extension, to the health and well-being of all families.

2. Educate yourself and model a sense of openness to sexual diversity.

It is unrealistic to expect educators to be experts on every issue of social relevance. As such, commitment to professional development in this field is imperative. This is especially true for those who routinely work to support families from diverse backgrounds. Still, it is not enough that educators merely plan to support sexual diversity in the classroom. Because children are as sensitive to subtle cues as they are to overt messages, educators must make it their mission to model an ongoing sense of openness and respect for all types of families. Ways of communicating a sense of respect for LGBTIQ families and making them feel welcome include: posting positive space stickers on doors, displaying photographs of same-sex families engaged in everyday activities throughout the room, and providing materials and books for the children to explore that portray gays and lesbians in a non-stereotypical fashion.

3. Take advantage of daily teachable moments.

Teachable moments include those spontaneous occurrences during which children are especially responsive to taking in new information. For example, the child who inquires about two men displaying public affection toward one another invites an opportunity for a discussion about what it means to be gay. Educators have an

obligation to address these inquiries immediately and with sensitivity both out of respect for the child's natural curiosity and because this expression of interest indicates that a prime opportunity for learning has surfaced.

4. Maintain open communication with children and respond to questions at a developmentally appropriate level.

Children as a group are purposeful and inquisitive. As such, they frequently seek adult input to clarify the array of curiosities that surface as a result of their interactions with the world around them. Questions pertaining to sexual diversity continuously challenge educators to address these inquiries in a manner that aligns with a child's individual level of understanding. According to Lynn Ponton (2002), it is not necessary to talk about sex when discussing sexual orientation. In her opinion, "it is more important that children understand that an intimate, loving relationship is sometimes shared between two men or two women in the same way men and women who are heterosexual care for one another" (p. 4). For preschool-aged children (i.e. 3 to 5 years), this message is conveyed through the use of simple, concrete answers that provide basic information. School-aged children, on the other hand, have a tendency to view novel ideas in relation to their own lives. Additional questions may therefore be required to help educators ascertain the origins of the child's initial curiosity and to help guide a discussion about sexual orientation that is developmentally appropriate and relates to their specific interests. Regardless of the age of the child, however, Ponton (2002) argues that when questions pertaining to

sexual diversity are openly answered from an early age and in a way that is appropriate to the child's level of understanding, children will ultimately come to learn tolerance and respect for differences, and feel reassured about any personal worries they may have.

5. Include opportunities for the exploration of gay and lesbian issues as part of an ongoing commitment to sexual diversity in early education.

Sometimes daily teachable moments are not a sufficient means by which to ensure that issues pertaining to gay and lesbian families are adequately addressed. As such, educators should make a concerted effort to integrate gay-positive experiences into the curriculum whenever possible. For example, a story like *King and King* by Linda De Haan and Stern Nijland (2002) could be used to introduce a unit on fairy tales for younger children. For older children, however, an appreciation for the contributions of gays and lesbians to society might be instilled during an exploration of scientific inventors or a discussion of various literary authors.

6. Use caution when exposing children to various forms of mainstream media.

In contemporary Canadian society, television has become an increasingly influential agent of socialization during a child's formative years. In fact, the average Canadian child watches approximately 20 to 30 hours of television a week (Hogarth, 1996). This is especially problematic as popular television programs rarely offer a perspective

on families that encompasses the diverse family forms that currently characterize Canadian society. To this end, TV families tend to be of the stereotypical, nuclear structure, offering children in LGBTTQ families little to relate to. For these children, this poses serious potential risks to the development of their sense of self if he/she is routinely exposed to these exclusionary media messages. In addition, the absence of gay and lesbian families on television serves to sustain the status quo, encouraging all children to accept the heterosexual, nuclear stereotype as a societal norm.

7. Use children’s literature that reflects pro-social values and attitudes to encourage dialogue.

Children’s literature is often one of the best ways in which to give rise to classroom discussions that address issues relevant to the experiences of the children in the program, as well as the world outside the classroom. In addition, quality works can prove useful in helping answer some of the more difficult questions children ask in relation to sexual diversity. For example, when asked by a preschooler what gay meant, a quote taken from *Daddy’s Roommate* by Michael Willhoite (1991) served as the genesis for a discussion about the meaning of the term: “Being gay is just one more kind of love. And love is the best kind of happiness” (p.34). Keep in mind that the some of the best selections for children that support sexual diversity are those that make attempts to integrate gay and lesbian characters into the plot without striving to preach to readers. Some recommended titles include: *And Tango Makes Three* (Parnell and



Richardson, 2005), 1, 2, 3: *A Family Counting Book* (Combs, 2000), *King & King & Family* (De Haan, Nijland, 2004), *The Family Book* (Parr, 2004) and *The Boy Who Cried Fabulous* (Newman, 2007). For additional resources, see Building Bridges at www.childcareontario.org.

8. Examine materials available to children for stereotypes/biases. Where possible, create materials for children to explore that promote openness and respect to sexual diversity.

The majority of materials marketed to today’s children continue to reflect dominant ideologies that position heterosexuality as the preferred norm. Fortunately, educators can counter this tendency by creating their own materials that recognize and celebrate same-sex families. Inclusion of these images in the materials children explore is an important measure in helping nurture the self-identity of children reared in non-traditional households. According to Derman-Sparks (1989), inclusion of materials that

are reflective of all family types is important because “what is in the environment alerts children to what the teacher considers important or not important” (p. 11). Moreover, “children are as vulnerable to omissions as they are inaccuracies and stereotypes” (Derman-Sparks, 1989, p.11). To this end, neglecting to represent same-sex families could have a detrimental impact on the emotional well-being of children cared for in these environments. In light of this, educators can use real-life images depicting gay and lesbian families engaged in everyday experiences to create an array of materials appropriate for any age group. This might include a selection of everything from magnetic puzzles, matching games and posters to bingo games, puppets and picture files to inspire storytelling.

9. Avoid tokenism or the “tourist” approach.

Bisson (1998) strongly argues against using a holiday or special calendar event to introduce a particular group of people. In addition, these occasions should not be the only time the group is discussed. The danger with these tendencies, according to Bisson (1998) is that they ultimately lead to stereotyping (p. 379). For example, educators should not wait until Gay Pride month in June to integrate experiences into their curriculum that are supportive of Canada’s gay and lesbian population. Instead, regular opportunities should be provided throughout the calendar year that acquaints children with various aspects of gay culture in a meaningful and respectful manner.

For instance, the rainbow (a symbol that has become synonymous with gay pride) can be introduced in response to an array of interests expressed by children. As an extension of this interest, educators can plan and implement an art experience that affords children the opportunity to create and display their own rainbow flags. Children could also be encouraged to create the colours of the rainbow using primary-coloured paints or reproduce the sequence of colours in the rainbow using peg boards as a means to sustain their interest in this natural phenomenon.

10. Encourage gay/lesbian parents to participate in your school/child care program.

Lynn Wilson (2001) asserts that “developing partnerships with families is an integral part of the role of an early childhood educator. To work effectively with children, teachers must [also] work effectively with their families” (p. 72). One of the best ways to achieve this feat is to communicate a sense of appreciation and respect for same-sex families by encouraging gay and lesbian parents to participate in their children’s program through volunteering, becoming members of the boards, and holding special events for all parents. Regardless of the strategy employed, however, it is imperative that educators strive to celebrate same sex families without positioning them as “exceptional.” In addition to sustaining a healthy working relationship with these particular families, educators who make attempts to communicate a sense of openness and respect

will also nurture the social-emotional wellbeing of the children.

Conclusion

Although sexual diversity continues to be regarded as a taboo subject in most early education programs, the changing Canadian demographic is a clear indicator that the presence of same-sex families in this country can no longer be ignored. In fact, early childhood educators play a pivotal role in ensuring that LGBTTQ parents and their children are celebrated and respected as an integral part of broader Canadian society. Ultimately, educators committed to diversity that is inclusive of sexuality will support the social emotional well being of the children who grow up in same-sex families, as well as those children who may one day identify as gay or lesbian themselves. In addition, thoughtful attention to the inclusion of gay-positive curriculum holds the promise of producing a future generation of adults who embrace homosexuality as a fact of life.

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