Jacqui Gabb

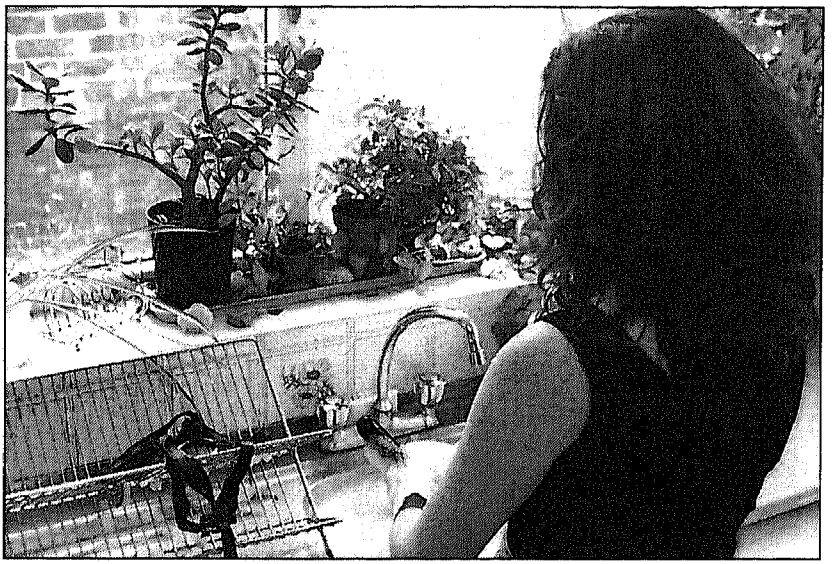
Imag(in)ing the Queer Lesbian Family

Motherhood and lesbian sexuality are antithetical to each other within Western culture. One consequence of this dichotomy is that lesbian mothers are constantly denied any fixity of identity. Always *being* in a state of flux, we are caught in a continual process of *becoming*. This paper reflects on this fluidity, suggesting that queer mothering challenges prevailing notions of "the family." Using illustrations taken from my own and others' lives, I will endeavour to reconcile the paradox of the lesbian family, by destabilising traditional categories of the sex-less mother and sexually-deviant lesbian. I begin by looking at "the family," reflecting upon some consequences of lesbian maternity's disruption of the reproductive narrative. I move on to consider, in more detail, how lesbian families articulate their difference. Drawing on specific examples, I illustrate how lesbian mothers and their children appropriate and queer the traditional language and terminology of "the family." I will then proceed into an analysis of how families typically represent themselves, looking at how "family snapshot" photography arguably sanitises lesbian sexuality. To conclude I suggest "visibility" as a strategy that may effectively reconcile queer / lesbian motherhood. Imag(in)ing ourselves in ways which simultaneously illustrate and/or signify our maternal and sexual identities. Implicit to this research is the belief that, generally speaking, lesbian mothers are good mothers, and thus I refute the need to continually defend our maternal capabilities and the ways in which we raise our children. I take for granted that we are like other mortals. We may occasionally lapse into moments of rage or shut ourselves away in selfish isolation, but nonetheless we still love our children unconditionally and care for them to the best of our abilities. I make no attempt to justify our existence but move the debate on to consider the diversity and transgressive potentialities of our lesbian maternal selves.

There is a growing canon of academic research into lesbian mothering (Lewin, 1993; Dunne, 1998) and "families of choice" (Weeks, 1991; Weston, 1991). Other research seeks to "prove" the normality of our children (Kirkpatrick, 1981; Patterson, 1997; Tasker and Golombok, 1997) and consider the domestic realities of our lesbian family lifestyles (Heaphy *et al.*, 1997; Dunne, 1999). However there is a real scarcity of academic research into sexuality within lesbian families. It is as though desire is presumed to disappear upon the arrival of a child. It does not. Our circumstances may radically change, and so might our energies or inclination, but desire is not absent within the family, it merely becomes encoded as a means to circumnavigate the ever-vigilant surveillance by (familial) others (Gabb, 1999). Using autoethnographic observation of my own "lesbian family" and informal interviews with other parents and their children, I have examined how our familial lives, loves and sexual identities impact upon each other.[1] This observation and the interviews are accompanied by fictive images of my own and others" families. These images are not documents of our lives, but are constructed to critique the traditional meanings bestowed upon snapshots, as candid representations of "normal" family life. They aim to illustrate the contingency of identity: the complexity of lesbian (m)other-ness. They are not used to interpret or illustrate the text, but add another dimension to it. Alongside the text, they attempt to imag(in)e the sexual and maternal identities of the "Queer Lesbian Family."

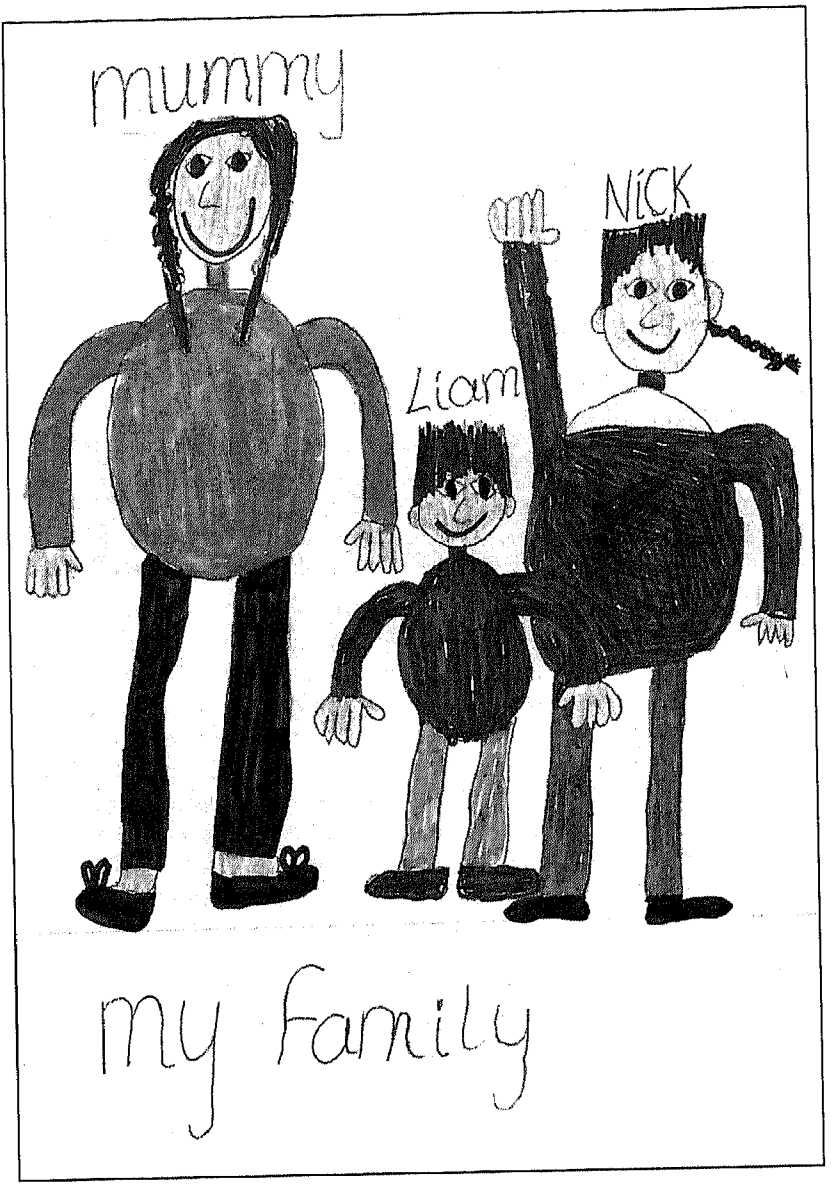
Queering the lesbian family

Lesbian sexuality and Queer may impact upon each other, they may even share certain component parts, but there is no necessary slippage between the two categories. Indeed the woman-identified-woman of traditional lesbian



sexuality (Rich, 1980), often stands in stark contrast to Queer's predication of a (homo)sexual identity. Lesbian queers identify themselves with gay men rather than finding solidarity with other women. They see "gender as a game, played with sign, symbols, whose meanings are constantly shifting and negotiable" (Whisman 1993: 56-7). The term, "lesbian mother," may in itself be queer, insofar as it challenges the heterosexual narrative, but this does not necessarily mean that individuals within this category recognise themselves in queer theory or feel at home within the queering of lesbian and gay activism. Lesbian mothers repeatedly express their identification with other (heterosexual) mothers as opposed to childless lesbian friends (Lewin 1993). Indeed outside the metropolitan areas which embrace lesbian identities (Griffin 1997, p67) there is little evidence that children figure at all within the agenda and lifestyle of often beleaguered smaller communities. So is it empirically possible to reconcile the paradox of the "queer family?" I intend to argue that the lesbian family *does* occupy the cutting edge of queer politics, radically challenging traditional categories of gender and destabilising the hetero-normative within society. In addition, this location on "the front line" is critical, as it not only affects queer politics, but also traditional family structures.

"The family," as a representation of "blood kinship," is still afforded great status within both straight society and the lesbian and gay community. Indeed the determinant that biology is essentially different to choice is so entrenched within our culture that it is almost impossible to displace (Weston, 1991: p31). It is extremely hard to counter the popular belief that "blood is thicker than water" within a society that is still based upon biological family inheritance. However if we are to seriously incorporate all familial (kinship) relations within the debate on "the family," then the excess of signification afforded to "blood



ties" must be acknowledged as a social and historical construction. It must become evident that the prestige bestowed upon the biological family serves an explicit ideological purpose: that biology is a symbol and not a substance (Butler, 1990). However living outside this biologically determined paradigm is not easy. It often resigns you, not only to a life of social exclusion, but also to one of linguistic absence. Even though marginality is not inherently negative, it may even be embraced as a positive expression of our repudiation of the

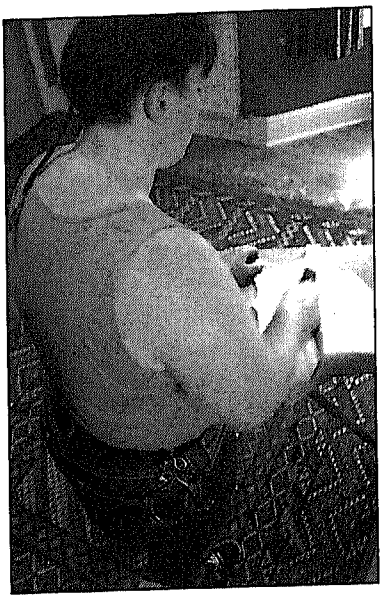
Western patriarchal state, it is arguably impossible to retrieve any positive reading from the linkage of language to the patrilinear narrative.

Articulating lesbian (m)other-ness

Lesbians and gay men have to sift the words and syntax of social discourse in order to find an appropriate language that may legitimise our familial relationships. Some of us may choose to describe ourselves as "alternative," claiming a social status for our relationship whilst also wanting to establish its difference. Or we may define ourselves as "normal," "just like any other" family (Arnup, 1995). The problem with both of these positions is that they serve to reinforce the legitimacy of "the family" as an institution and thereby reinstate a biological, procreative, imperative within family relationships. To be alternative, one must first have something that "naturally" exists: the nuclear family is thereby reasserted within the social order. Paradoxically, to claim that lesbians and gay men have a different, lesser role in relation to the family, is no more accurate than the assumption that straight people have a "natural" access to it. Any attempts to shore up such myths represent gay men and lesbians as non procreative, set apart from the rest of humanity, something which my own, and many other lesbians'," maternity flagrantly refutes.

There is an evident need to publicise the fact that lesbian families are neither normal, nor alternative, but *essentially different.* The gendered relations that exist within our lives construct a radical re-vision of what actually constitutes a family, and examples of this are evident all around us. When Liam, my seven year old son, describes his family, he lays claim to its difference. By stating that I am like a mummy and a daddy to him, he is not filling the gap left empty by the absent father / patriarch, so much as redefining what gendered roles mean in relation to his life. The paternal absence is transformed into a *negotiated presence* of gendered embodiment. His unexpected decision earlier this year, to claim "Father's Day" as my partners' own, further illustrates the inadequacy of language as a means to express the realities of lesbian family life. My partner apparently could not share "Mother's Day" because, he asserted, "she was not his mother." So he claimed the next available, legitimate, space for her. In his actions, Liam was not intentionally queering "the family," he simply expected there to be a recognised special day for his other parent. Who can argue with that! Hence rather than being lost within an unstable array of gender roles, Liam is in fact "writing the family" in relation to his own familial bodies. I wish to posit that such semantic (re)configuration is arguably symptomatic of lesbian (m)other-ness.

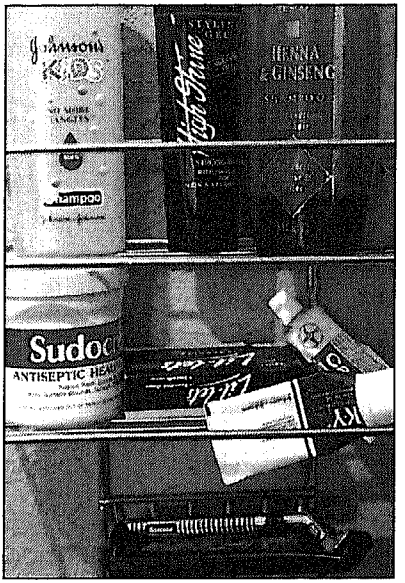
Without the binary of "the sexes," the "natural" (gendered) division of labour falls apart. The gendered roles within most lesbian families are typically negotiated, reviewed and reworked (Dunne, 1998; Oerton, 1997). However this does not imply that individuals merely duplicate the traditional categories of "mother" and "father," but that gendered demarcation and *embodiment* is forever displaced. For example, when Christine, a lesbian co-parent, was



denied access to the Intensive Care Unit where her (non-biological) baby had just been taken, her response was both pragmatic and insightful. Initially thwarted by the ward manager's dogma, that "the Unit was restricted to members of the immediate family," she intuitively located herself within this social discourse, within the only role that was available to her. Given that Margaret, her partner, was the (biological) mother, and that the gate-keeper did not entertain the possibility of a child having two mothers, she asserted herself as "the father." Though she obviously did not embody the materiality of this category, she instead invoked the familial roles that exist within social discourse to realise a "legitimate" identification. Her response not only gained her access, it also queered the naturalising discourses of "the family" and the gendered embodiments that are contained therein.

It is clearly evident that the process of "naming" ourselves holds the most significant of consequences. Within my own family, I have always been a mother to Liam, so whilst knowing my "first name," he prefers to call me "mummy." My partner, who joined our family when Liam was three years old, is referred to as Nick. Though this is her "first name," it has almost come to serve as a noun. She is "*a* Nick," neither mummy nor daddy, but a complementary individual within our family. Though she may take an equal part in the quality and quantity of childcare responsibilities, neither she nor Liam perceive her as *being* a "second mummy." In addition, Nick "names" herself within the masculine, her physical stature can identify her as butch, and yet she is *evidently* a woman. Her (m)other-ness thereby represents a dynamic source of dislocation and belonging, where her social status and sense of self remains forever in flux. The constant transformations which ensue arguably require lesbian parents like Nick to play out a (gender) *masquerade*. Negotiating social roles and private identities within ever shifting parameters, they literally queer "the family" and all our roles within it. The *artificiality* of the naturalising discourses that underpin the myth of traditional family life are made transparent.

Lesbian parents" adherence to existing language does not fail to challenge the orthodoxy of parental roles, nor does it leave intact the categories of "mummy" and "daddy" as unspoken "norms" (Bernstein and Stephenson, 1995). Nick's absence of a parental name does not negate her familial role, or affirm the naturalising discourses of maternity which conflate *being* a mother



with *having* a baby, instead it is a real response to the practicalities of circumstance and experience. After all, lesbian "life partners" (to use the terminology of *Friends*) may come and go, but *being* a "mummy" is for life! Thus to some extent my own and others' reticence at naming our partners as mothers is a defensive reaction to the transience of *all* adult relationships. It may also signify the predication of the mother / child dyad as determinant of familial relations (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995). It arguably repudiates the patrilinear narrative of "the family" and sets in place a model that does not read gendered parental roles as a consequence of the reproductive (heterosexual) narrative.

It is largely because of our "unnatural" status—our disruption of the reproductive narrative - that lesbian parents pose such a threat to heterosexual society. We signify the performativity (Butler, 1990) of all motherhood, and analogously by our evident (homo)*sexuality*, we sexualise all parenting. Such potency has made lesbian families extremely vulnerable to criticism and attack from the institutions that structure and contain family life. Lesbian parents face a constant challenge to their legitimacy through the British legal system. We are primarily only tolerated as "suitable" parents when we are "discreet," agreeing to suppress our (lesbian) sexuality both from our children and society at large (Brosnan, 1996, Lewin, 1993). Faced with this ever-present threat to custody, the opportunity to "disappear" has often felt the best means for survival (Rights of Women ,1986). With a brief exception during the campaign against Section 28,[2] the lesbian and gay community has tacitly accepted our invisibility as an inevitable consequence of living within a society that is determined by a heterosexual imperative. It did not become an issue until Queer came along, demanding the public celebration of all transgression, desire, and the visible representation of all our sexual identities (Cooper, 1996: 14).

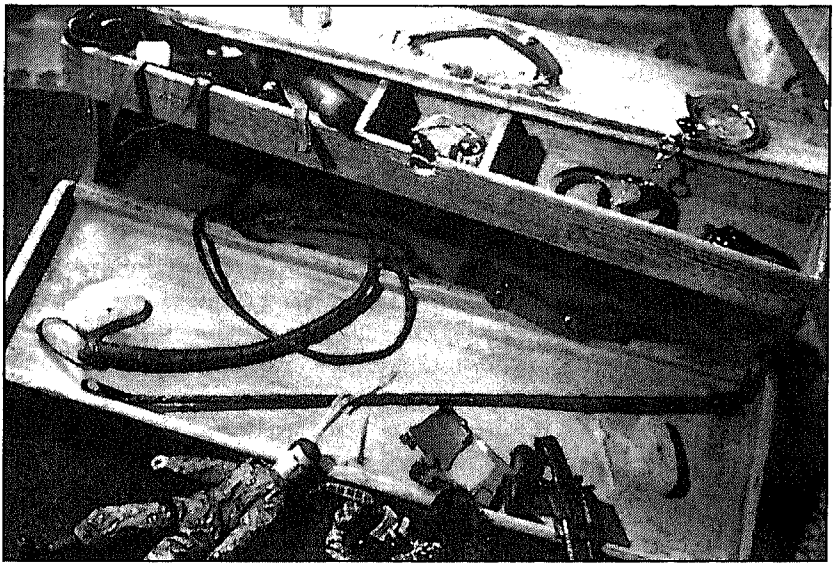
Imag(in)ing our-selves

Queer culture champions the body in all its vagaries, representing a visible physicality that is largely absent from traditional representations of family life. It often refuses the more earnest techniques that have been traditionally associated with feminist arts and media, relying instead upon the constructed "text" and/or parody. But whilst such public displays make visible certain dissident sexualities, they conversely serve to deny the existence of others.

Lesbian families have arguably always existed, but such lives are not readily apparent. Given the edict of our judicial system which states that we should be "discrete" to protect our children's innocence (Rights of Women, 1986), it is not surprising that we contain our private lives, primarily only making them visible within the sleeves of the family photograph album. And though these portfolios may be an implicitly transgressive document of social reality, their format, let alone dissemination, can hardly be described as a spectacular (queer) display. It would be hard to argue that traditional family snapshots represent the cutting edge of queer photography. Therefore my endeavour to queer the lesbian family may in practice need to start by locating a suitable means of representation. So is it possible to depict both our motherhood and lesbian sexuality within the family album or merely document our lives? (Cade, 1991: 115-119). Can we "queer the family album?"

Lesbian families and/or motherhood have been traditionally represented by pictures of devotion: the eternal mother, Madonna and child. Though such images may heighten the awareness of lesbian families they do little to actually represent us, in fact they arguably obscure our sexuality beneath the shroud of selfless maternal love. Images showing loving embraces, devoted smiles and wholesome values are great advertisements for "the family" (Ashburn, 1996), yet they deny our dangerous (queer) sexuality (Smith, 1991). Of course I do not wish to imply that lesbian families should be without love, nurturing and caring considerations, but these should not be at the expense of our sexual identities as lesbians. Lesbian mothers do not automatically stop being sexual just because they have given birth. To continue the cultural myth that mothers are the sexless, self-less others of their needy children, merely perpetuates a patriarchal logic that subordinates women through wifehood (Van Every, 1995). Women transform from sexual object to nurturing subject as we enter into motherhood, being always defined by the reproductive (heterosexual) narrative. Sex becomes *productive* rather than pleasurable, and our sexuality becomes obscured by the practicalities of parenting. Lesbian conception narratives refute this functionalist imperative. We offer new familial forms that are not reliant upon the binary logic of "the sexes." We challenge the gendered embodiment of parental roles everyday of our lives.

But can we (re)present ourselves outside the patriarchal framework of motherhood? Snapshot photography has traditionally been used to document family life (Williams, 1994). Though some feminist photographers have productively critiqued this form, subverting its claim to the normalcy and privacy of the nuclear family unit (Spence, 1995), this has not really impacted upon images of the lesbian family. Texts that visually illustrate our lives are typically "coffee-table" portfolios (Seyda and Herrera, 1998), lacking any of the critical rigour and/or sexual imagery of other lesbian photography collections (Boffin and Fraser, 1991; Bright and Posener, 1996). Lesbian families are still primarily represented within safe, sanitised, conventional poses, which replicate rather than challenge the nuclear family form. Though I do not wish to



deny the value of such texts, I do contend that there is now a pressing need to incorporate images that represent likeness and family lineage, alongside new forms that signify our desires and sexual identities. If we wish to queer the lesbian family then it must be made visible. Such a strategy may not be possible or desirable for all. The real fears and consideration of lesbian mothers caught up in custody disputes, problematic access agreements, and/or who cannot make public their sexuality and lifestyle for whatever reason, must be acknowledged and respected. Choice and visibility are always relative and personal, being deeply effected by social and cultural context.

However even "innocent" family snapshots that appear quite conservative to us, may be quite enlightening to others. Images that capture the love and mundanity of our lesbian family lifestyles become far more transgressive when placed alongside ones that depict the complexity of our maternal and sexual identities. This juxtaposition of images does not undermine the security of our home environments but instead challenges the *myth* of the a-sexual family. It represents lesbian families as simultaneously loving, nurturing *and* sexual environments. Analogously, the public dissemination of such representations, which defy traditional readings of sex-less family life, might actually serve to queer the snapshot form as well as making evident the sexual nature of "the family" (Fineman, 1995). In this light, the transgressive potentialities of such images may actually make the (queer) family album the most appropriate and arguably apposite place to start imag(in)ing the queer lesbian family.

Conclusion

Queer is a movement, an activism and an identity, but unless it wants to initiate its own self-destruction—imploding beneath the weight of its exclu-

sions—then it must be truly inclusive. Although queer declares a welcome to all individuals, it demands that we sign up, unreservedly, to its mandate. Lesbians are openly accepted, but only when they embrace the queer umbrella: *being* a lesbian is not quite enough to "qualify" you as queer, you must demonstrate your "*dangerous* sexuality" (Smith 1991). But what exactly constitutes a dangerous identity, and who decides on its criteria is unclear. If one accepts that lesbian parents embody a direct challenge to the hetero-normative, then surely lesbian parents "qualify" as dangerous and thereby our queer status is assured. Hence the problem may be less a matter of inclusion than visibility: we must be seen before we can be counted. This is not to impose a doctrine of public sexual expression, whereby the tyranny of "good mothering" is replaced by another (queer) orthodoxy. Instead it moves towards realising the often conflicting component parts of our lesbian family lives.

How, when, or even if, one's lesbian sexuality becomes revealed must remain at the discretion of the "mother" and her children. But I do contend that by revisiting the primary call of feminism - that "the personal is political"—we can begin to bring together the composite parts of our-selves. By reconfiguring the "family album," its contents and its form, we thereby open it out to a far wider audience. Our familial and sexual selves become one, and a discourse on queer lesbian motherhood implicitly begins. However if we are to imag(in)e the queer lesbian family in this way, then we need reassurance and support. We must feel that queer truly offers us a secure space that we may call our own, where our lives as parents are not denigrated as "unoriginal" (Turner, 1998), or dismissed as conspiratorial "breeders." Where the potentialities of our lives, and those of our children, are seen as progressive. It is this Queer space that has yet to be created: the Queer Lesbian Family is arguably already here.

[1]This is part of a broader empirical study that I am currently undertaking as part of a D.Phil. research project into lesbian families with children in Yorkshire, U.K.

[2]Section 28 of the British Local Government Act, May 1988, prohibited local authorities from "intentionally promot[ing] homosexuality," including the promotion, by teaching and publications, of homosexuality and 'the pretend family' within schools.

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