'A damn sight more sensitivity': Gender and parent-school engagement during post-separation family transitions

This paper considers the importance parents place on engaging with children's schools following the dissolution of parental intimate partner relationships. These periods of family transition typically involve many changes to everyday life, and can be complicated by tensions, disputes and competing agendas between parties. During such times, school staff may be unaware of family circumstances, uncomfortable about being privy to what many consider private matters, or unsure of their responsibilities based on the information available to them. For parents, however, the link between home and school can be a critical aspect of maintaining community connections and supporting children's learning and wellbeing during a time of personal and family upheaval. Here we draw on in-depth interviews with four Australian parents, whose experiences highlight how gendered <u>norms and assumptions</u> that underpin everyday school <u>activities and practices</u> can create <u>exclusions and additional demands</u> for families in need <u>of sensitivity, safety and support</u>.

Keywords: parent-school engagement, parental relationship dissolution, family transitions, heteronormativity, family violence, coercion of organisational networks

Background: parent engagement and family transitions in context

The dissolution of parental intimate partner relationships and subsequent post-separation family transitions are generally challenging times in the lives of parents and children, when 'almost every routine and dynamic of the family requires reorganization and change' (Sokol, Stevenson & Braver, 2017, 18). During such times, the relationship between home and school can be an important source of continuity, community connection and support for parents and children (Colpin, et al, 2004; Potter, 2010). However, schools are not necessarily equipped for responding to the challenges associated with these circumstances (Daly, 2009; Cox & Desforges, 2018) even more so in cases where more complex issues such as custody disputes and family violence[1] are factors in parental separations (Cooper, et al, 2012; Eriksson, et al, 2013a, 2013b; Davies & Berger, 2019). In this paper, we draw on in-depth interviews with four parents – two fathers and two mothers – who shared their experiences of school engagement during their own period of

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[1] Here, as in other publications arising from this study, we use the term 'family violence' in line with guidance from the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners (RACGP). The term encompasses a range of other terms such as domestic violence, intimate partner abuse and child abuse, and includes 'any violence or abuse that is occurring within a family' (RACGP, 2014, 2). Family violence may include some, or all, of the following: physical abuse, emotional abuse, child sexual abuse, adult sexual abuse, economic abuse, social abuse, or neglect, all of which 'involve an abuse of power' (RACGP, 2014, 3).

separation and/or divorce[2]. Informed by these parents' experiences, we consider how gendered, heteronormative assumptions and practices feature in schools' responses to and engagement with parents during these times of personal and family transition. We argue that the issues these parents raise, highlight the need for schools to ensure that interactions between home and school are sensitive to family circumstances and their potential impacts on children's learning, participation and wellbeing.

The paper is set against the backdrop of global trends in recent decades toward the introduction of parent-engagement policies designed to bring schools and parents into dialogue and partnership, leading to 'widespread acknowledgement among educators and policymakers that parents and schools have a shared responsibility for children's school experience and educational outcomes' (REMOVED FOR PEER REVIEW). While these policy developments have led to some changes in the cultures of both parenting and teaching, they have also taken place within and contribute to a 'utopian vision of parent engagement policy discourse' (50) that rests on idealised, normative versions of parents and families (Kainz & Aikens, 2007; REMOVED FOR PEER REVIEW). Indeed, even the broad category of 'parents' constructs an undifferentiated, homogenous group, such that 'the category of 'the parent' presented as such, in broad and apparently neutral terms, hides a wide range of behaviours, privileges, and disadvantages' (Vincent, 2017, 552). As others have argued, the normative ideals through which the category of parents is constructed are informed by hegemonic views of the predominantly white, middle class teaching profession in Anglophone countries (Crozier, 2001; Reay, 2008; Crozier & Davies, 2006).

Parents unable or unwilling to engage with schools according to these normative values and expectations may be 'pathologized, or they are shamed, blamed or judged for their actions or inactions in relation to their children and their schooling' (Pushor & Amendt, 2018, 207). This has particular implications for families experiencing the dissolution of parental relationships, given the contention by some researchers that many schools 'remain organized around the assumption that the nuclear family is the norm' (Cox & Desforges, 2018, 90). Maintaining such normative discourses ultimately 'obscures diversity in viewpoints, family structure, and resources for

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[2] This study was approved by and conducted in accordance with the requirements of the Human Research Ethics Committee of [University], [Approval Number].

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expected home/school relations' (Kainz & Aikens, 2007, 302), and can create significant challenges for parents navigating transitions that place them outside the idealised discursive norms of 'good', 'responsible', or 'engaged' parenting. These notions, it should be added, have a tendency to 'lay down relatively narrow parameters for 'good' parent behaviour in the eyes of teachers, and parents can overstep these boundaries by displaying either too much or too little interest' (Vincent, 2017, 547).

For mothers in particular, there is often considerable tension around balancing idealised norms of 'intensive mothering' (Hays, 1996; O'Brien, 2006; Vincent, 2017) with the everyday realities of parenting, and its intersections with work, family and social life. While fathers are not immune from these kinds pressures, and can themselves be subject to social stigmas when they are seen to be failing in their parental responsibilities (Mandell, 2002; Sillence, 2020), research suggests nonetheless that traditional views of the gendered division of labour both in working-class and middle-class families tend to place social expectations and idealised norms of parenting disproportionately on mothers (Braun, Vincent & Ball, 2010; Dudley-Marling, 2010; Vincent, 2017). Social expectations can be particularly fraught for mothers navigating the ways that their changed relationship status may result in factors that cause others to call their competence as parents into question. As Garrett observes, 'Although pregnancy, birth, new motherhood, divorce and lone motherhood are common enough female experiences…they are still subject to strong taboos' (Garrett, 2016, 237). Bearing in mind that 'particular public ferocity is retained for women who 'fail' their mothering responsibilities' (Vincent, 2017, 547), factors such as reduced income, limited availability to attend school activities and events, having to disclose sensitive personal or private family information, or to advocate on behalf of children whose behaviour, learning or wellbeing are negatively impacted by changed family circumstances, can all play a part in mothers' concerns about being positioned by schools as an inadequate mother or a 'problem parent' (see Potter, 2010; Vincent, 2017; REMOVED FOR PEER REVIEW).

It is worth noting too that for many people, parents' personal relationships and family circumstances are considered private matters outside the remit of schools (Cox & Desforges, 2018). Parents, for example, may have differing views about the extent to which school and homelife can or should intersect, reflecting social class and cultural values that are not necessarily congruent with those of policy makers and schools (Fennimore, 2016, 2017). Parents may also be

unaware of available services, such as counselling and other supports, or they may be uncomfortable making requests to access these. Similarly, educators may be unclear about the extent to which they can or should be informed about their students' home and family circumstances (Davies & Berger, 2019; Cox & Desforges, 2018). Some teachers, however, contend that having an awareness of student's personal circumstances enables them to be alert to students' needs, to better understand and manage classroom behaviours, and to avoid inadvertent insensitivity (see Davies & Berger, 2019; Cox & Desforges, 2018). However, a general lack of clarity on such matters, together with what some have argued is often a lack of consistent school policy around engaging with families during these times of upheaval and transition (Colpin, et al, 2004; Daly, 2009; Cooper, et. al., 2012; Cox & Desforges, 2018), can mean that even when parents do inform schools about a change of relationship status and family circumstances they may find their encounters with school staff unsatisfactory in a number of respects.

We turn in the following sections to a consideration of key issues that parents we interviewed on this topic raised as having an impact on their interactions and relationships with schools during the period of family transition. While a detailed discussion of the theoretical and frameworks for the larger program of research will not be undertaken here, we note that our work is grounded in sociological and cultural studies in this field. Informed in particular by the work of Michel de Certeau (1984), we understand the relationships between schools and parents to be characterised by institutional strategies designed to keep parents 'in their place' – that is, at a distance from the institutional operations of power. Drawing on the work of Jacques Donzelot (1979, 2008) and Nikolas Rose (1999a, 1999b), we also understand schooling to be an important means of governance through the family, as well as a technology for the governance of selves and the responsibilization of the family. Elsewhere (REMOVED FOR PEER REVIEW) we have provided an extended discussion of these conceptual frameworks in our analysis of research with parents, and the analysis undertaken here takes these concepts, together with feminist research concerned with the gendered dynamics of parent-school relationships, as a starting point. In the following sections, we provide a brief overview of the study, followed by analyses that inform our contention that effective parent-school engagement during post-separation family transitions requires that schools ensure that their staff are both knowledgeable about and sensitive to a range

of potential challenges faced by parents and children in such circumstances. We close with recommendations for school policy and practice, and implications for future research.

Notes about the study

Interview data analysed in this paper is drawn from a larger, ongoing program of research that is broadly focused on the relationships between parents and schools, and how these might be better understood and improved. Recent foci of this body of work includes individual and focus group interviews with parents, interviews with teacher educators, teachers and other school staff, and surveys and interviews with primary and secondary school principals. The four interviews discussed here represent a new direction in this body of work, focusing more specifically on learning from the experiences of parents and families during periods of post-separation family transitions, including those for whom family violence has been a factor.

Recruitment for the study is ongoing at the time of writing, and has taken place in collaboration with parent representative organisations in Australia[3]. Approval was received from the relevant university Human Research Ethics Committee, following which collaborating organisations circulated an advertisement with a secure link to further information about the study and how to participate. These were distributed in a variety of forums, including newsletters, websites and social media. Prospective participants could then access the study information privately, without having to contact the recruiting organisation from whom they had received the advertisement and link. As is often the case in research of this sort, some participants who indicated an interest in participating in the study had also been referred by word of mouth by participants or others familiar with the research.

Significant ethical considerations for this research pertain to participant confidentiality and wellbeing. Due to the sensitive and personal nature of participants' experiences, our team is mindful of the importance of ensuring participant confidentiality and anonymity. For this reason, prospective participants were able to access project information and indicate their interest in participating without providing identifying information to the study team. For example,

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[3] [To be provided upon manuscript acceptance.]

participants were asked only to provide a preferred telephone contact number and suggested days and times for the interviews, and all interviews were conducted by telephone. Only a first name or pseudonym was requested from participants, allowing anonymous participation, and their verbal rather than written consent was provided at the time of interview. Pseudonyms to be used in transcripts and publications were discussed with participants, ensuring that the study team's choice of pseudonyms for participants or their children had no connection to other family names or nicknames that might in any way be used to identify them. In these ways, we sought to ensure their privacy could be maintained.

Concerns regarding participant safety and wellbeing also present important ethical considerations. These were addressed by, firstly, ensuring participant confidentiality and anonymity in the ways described above. This was particularly important for participants whose personal or family circumstances involved potential risks to their safety, in which case they were offered the opportunity to review not only their interview transcripts, but also publication manuscripts prior to submission. Bearing in mind the sensitive nature of the topic, and the potential for participants to experience distress in recounting what most people find challenging and painful periods in the lives of their families, participants were encouraged to have a trusted person over the age of 18 attend the interview with them should they feel they would benefit from that support. Interviewers checked regularly with participants during the interview to make sure they were not feeling upset, and a number of helpline and support services numbers were provided should they feel the need to seek additional support following completion of the interviews.

'A damn sight more sensitivity': heteronormative assumptions and barriers to parental engagement

Parents in our study raised several issues pertaining to the importance of sensitivity on the part of school staff, both in relation to the ways in which they communicate with students and their parents, and to the ways that perceived insensitivities could further complicate what for families may already be awkward or difficult situations. The fathers we spoke to, Martin and Harry[4], raised

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[4] Pseudonyms are used for all names of individuals, schools and cities/towns.

concerns about the ways that normative gendered assumptions about family configurations could have an emotional impact on their children, as well as on themselves. Martin, who is himself a teacher and is also the primary carer for his two primary school age children, gave the example of celebratory occasions that fail to take diversity of family configurations into account. When asked what advice he would give to schools about engaging with parents in the period following separation or divorce, he replied:

> Martin: …sensitivity, um basically around Mother's Day, Father's Day. Just you know, they'll always come home with a card saying To Mum and Dad, from Mum and Dad, or you know it was one of those sorts of 'I love you' things 'because Mum and Dad love each other'. Dolls, Cinderella stories kids are fed, which is fine but yeah, it's that sort of um, it's not so much the [Political Correctness] of let's not address Mum, let's not address Dad, all this sort of stuff. But I notice that at our school we get a lot of, they'll tell people, the kids, they'll tell people, just be careful when it's Father's Day because a lot of kids don't have their fathers rah-rah-rah, but there's never that warning for Mother's Day.

Martin's account highlights the discomfort that can be felt when occasions such as Mother's Day and Father's Day are marked in ways that conscript children into perpetuating homogenising, heteronormative storylines that are inconsistent with their own familial structures and relationships (Robinson, 2013; Davis, 2016; Rodríguez-Mena, 2020). As Rodríguez-Mena points out from within the context of schools in Spain, 'The homogeneity with which the family is depicted can be reflected in the didactic materials, activities, contents and communications aimed at families in posters, brochures and symbolic elements of the school' (2020, 131). For Martin's children, the school's perpetuation of ideals that assume heteronormative nuclear families takes place as part of classroom activities typically associated with fostering children's creativity and expression of emotions, identity and belonging as part of a family unit. As Martin notes, there may be some effort on the part of schools to acknowledge the likelihood of exclusions for those children whose families do not conform to idealised nuclear family structures. However, the persistence of such activities at school irrespective of exclusions and the pain they may cause to some children and their parents speaks to 'the power inherent to social norms, and how even in sites of resistance such norms still shape what is made intelligible' (Bartholomaeus & Riggs, 2017). Such practices have been critiqued by scholars such as Kerry Robinson, who argues that:

> These normative practices instil a sense of loss in children, who become more aware of the potential consequences of their non-normative family structure as a result. This is not just a problem faced by same-sex couples that encounter the additional force of heteronormativity; single parent families also have to endure the normative discourses that legitimate the nuclear family and exclude others (Robinson, 2013, 79).

Martin acknowledges that these practices on the part of school take place alongside everyday popular culture such as toys and children's stories that he sees as also being complicit in constructing what Davis refers to as 'the expected mom-dad parenting paradigm in families' (2016, 165). Martin also recognises familiar tropes of absent fathers, and the ways that these make their way into the cultural politics of schools and classrooms.

> Martin: …so…that lightbulb only goes off with me because I'm in the role of, I'm a single father, primary carer, but generally it's known that, you know, Dad's the one who's taken off or Dad's the one who's leaving home. But yeah, my advice would be sensitivity at those times but without having to highlight it…it's just um yeah, just acknowledging that there are kids with dads, some with, some without, there are [kids with] mums, some with, some without, some have two.

While Martin locates his own situation within a broader constellation of diverse family structures, he is also sensitive to being positioned within what he sees as the widely recognizable, pejorative storyline regarding fathers who have left or abandoned their children. His concerns speak to the ways that the 'norm of genetic relatedness and a focus on co-habitation remain a dominant way of thinking about families' (Bartholomaeus & Riggs, 2017). These constructions of familial norms, and negative views of parents who fall outside them, are evident in many school settings. In the case of fathers, some research has identified a 'propensity for staff to engage in parental blame' (Wood & Brownhill, 2018, 172), with fathers' perceived failings seen by teachers (including male teachers) as the source or cause of any perceived deficits in children's social, emotional and/or behavioural skills (Wood & Brownhill, 2018).

Similar concerns were raised by Harry, also a father of two, who pointed to the ways that one's status as a single parent requires a different level of effort in order to maintain positive and productive home-school relationships. While Harry's experience of participating in school-based events such as Father's Day breakfasts provided him with opportunities to connect with other dads, to build relationships with school staff, and to feel part of the school community, he also recognises

that moral judgements and social stigmas can create barriers to school engagement for some fathers:

> Harry: I think especially if it might be overtly perceived that one parent has done the wrong thing. Now that's not the case for myself, but if word had got around the school environment that dad has had an affair or you know dad's got problems with drugs, I appreciate there's a shame now that makes it difficult for, you know, that parent that's been ostracised, to actually get in and forge relationships.

For Harry, who now lives in a different city from his children and makes fortnightly interstate trips in order to spend regular time with his children, keeping informed about his children's education and maintaining regular involvement with their schooling is an important part of his role as a parent. He, too, notes that normative assumptions about family structures can mean that separated parents may miss out on important information and events simply because the modes of home-school communication may fail to account for families where parents are no longer living together, sharing information, or on amicable terms. Thus, when asked what advice he would give to schools about engaging with parents during periods of relationship dissolution, he replied:

> Harry: I would like to get a notion that there is a damn sight more sensitivity. I think schools should be especially aware of operating in a traditional model where mum does the care because that's not always the case and if, if there's information shared with one parent, then it should instinctively be shared with another parent.

Harry's comments point to symbolic and pragmatic concerns, in which a 'traditional model' of family life involves assumptions of heteronormative two-parent households and gendered divisions of labour. These assumptions, as Harry understands them, lead to situations where the parent assumed to be in the role of care provider is given unequal access to information and preferential treatment over the parent assumed to not be providing care. Already concerned about the potential for being shamed when seen as being either outside such norms or contributing to their dissolution through perceived personal transgressions and moral failings, Harry's lament is not only about the practical implications of unequal treatment. Rather, it is a lament that is also concerned with whether parents discursively positioned in this way are able to overcome the barriers of ostracization sufficiently to forge meaningful relationships within their school communities.

'I don't think they did anything beneficial': School engagement and mothers' care, emotional and unpaid labour

Parents in our study described a range of ways in which they endeavoured to maintain productive relationships with their children's schools during post-separation family transitions, including taking an active part in school-based activities and events, requesting regular meetings with teachers and other school staff to discuss children's wellbeing, and keeping schools informed about updates to parenting agreements and court orders of relevance to the school's responsibilities and duty of care. A notable difference in the interviews with mothers by comparison with the interviews with fathers, however, was the extent to which the investment of emotional and unpaid labour was seen as necessary by the mothers in order to keep informed about their children's school requirements, learning and support needs. While the fathers we spoke to made requests for information, organised and attended meetings with teachers and school counsellors, and endeavoured to attend school events for fathers or that involved their children, the mothers we spoke to had very different experiences. For one mother, whose work and complex family circumstances made it difficult to be actively involved in her children's schools, accessing information about her children's progress and wellbeing proved largely unsuccessful. For the other mother, only extensive involvement and investment of time and labour was seen as ensuring her inclusion and access to information.

This is consistent with a significant body of literature (see, for example, Gillies, 2006; O'Brien, 2006, 2007; Hutchison, 2012) concerned with the ways in which mothers' day to day emotional care for their children, often seen as an invisible form of emotional labour, intersects with 'the invisible labour done by women in support of their children's education' (Hutchison, 2012, 195). While such labour can impose burdens on mothers, particularly those who lack resources and supports, supporting children's learning and participating in school-based activities is not necessarily experienced in negative terms. For example, Karen, a mother of two young children in the early years of primary school, describes becoming more actively involved in her sons' school shortly after separating from her husband as a meaningful way of socialising and engaging with her school community:

Karen: I've become a lot more engaged with the school, and I'm now the [Parents' and Citizen's Association] treasurer…I think that, also has come about because those meetings happen to come about on a night that I don't have my kids, and so I was seeking something to do to fill up my time…And it just happened to coincidentally be the night that P&C meetings are held, so to start off it just gave me an avenue of getting out of an empty house and I guess getting more involved in the school community and meeting more people. So I think I've actually become a lot more involved in the school than I would have done previously.

Interviewer: That's really interesting…are you also involved in things that go on at school during the day, or…are you at work, or…

Karen: Yes and no…I'm quite flexible with my working hours, and because I don't have my kids every second weekend, I can do things at weekends sometimes, so I can be at school during school hours. I do reading group within my son's class every week, go on excursions and stuff like that. And from a P&C point of view, it's not a huge amount of stuff during the day, but it can be from time to time.

Karen's involvement in multiple aspects of school life supports both operational structures of the school as well as the learning of her children and their classmates. Each of these involves a regular, significant commitment of time, and requires her availability and willingness to adjust her own schedule in order to contribute in these ways. The extent to which Karen voluntarily gives up personal time – during the day, evenings and weekends – in order to benefit her children and the school community, and the benefits she feels she also gains from these activities, illustrates O'Brien's contention that 'women themselves see emotional care work, including schooling work, as significant, valuable and inalienable' (O'Brien, 2006, 138).

Despite the value Karen places on her school engagement, however, she also highlighted numerous examples in which normative assumptions of family structures created exclusions and disappointments that might otherwise have been avoided. For example, she described struggling with failures on the part of the school to modify routine communication practices in ways that take account of the circumstances of children moving between two households. Thus, while information relevant to the whole school was likely to be available on the school website or online newsletters, information pertinent only to students in a particular year level or class was sent home just once via the child. For families with shared care arrangements, in which each parent might have care of their children on different nights of the school week, this could mean missing out on

important information that in turn had negative implications for even very young children. Karen's son Evan, for instance, was in his first year of formal schooling when his parents first separated:

> Karen: I think that during the separation process, things like homework and stuff that Evan's getting penalised, or kept in at lunchtime if he hasn't done homework on a 'dad day', when the teacher's well aware that we're going through this process…and also, which for me makes it really tricky for Evan, because it's not his fault when it happened, because he's so little. It'd be different if he was in high school or something.

These were not isolated incidents, but rather routine frustrations that Karen considered one of the biggest challenges to maintaining positive relationships between home and school. She resented that what might have been an easily remediable solution – that is, providing the same information to both parents – had caused her very young and emotionally vulnerable child to be regularly penalised by the teacher and ridiculed by classmates when homework that had been sent home on a 'dad day' hadn't been completed, or made its way back to Karen to supervise, hence was unable to be submitted on time. Similarly, Karen recounted special classroom activities and events that had been missed, or not properly prepared for, because the information simply hadn't been provided to both parents. When asked about whether she would hear about other kinds of significant calendar events, such as school photos, she replied:

> Karen: Not hear about it. So, miss out on that. Last year I had a different teacher who was a lot more supportive, and she would, she'd go out of her way to photocopy an extra form because she knew I wouldn't get it. But I don't have that this year. There's one form that goes home with Evan and if it's on the [night of the week the children are with their father] I often won't get them…So I think one reason that I've become more involved in the school community, because for me communication is a big issue at the school, and if I'm not involved in the school community I don't know that stuff's happening.

All four parents we interviewed raised issues about uneven and inequitable communication practices presenting challenges in terms of their engagement with their children's schooling. However, consistent with research showing that the 'coordination and supervision of 'children's educational activities often demands a significant portion of mothers' waking hours' (Dudley-Marling, 2001, 183), Karen's account highlights how her extensive unpaid labour is crucial to her being able to provide the emotional care and learning support upon which her young children's

experience of schooling relies. While the efforts of individual teachers could make a difference, there was no guarantee that such efforts would be made consistently, or that they would continue to be made as children progressed from one school year to the next. Bearing in mind the extent to which she maintains an active presence in her school community, her response to questions about whether there were things the school had done during her family's post-separation transition that had been beneficial, she replied:

> Karen: I don't think they did anything beneficial. As in, I don't think we were treated any different to anyone else. So, I don't think they did anything out of the ordinary.

Even though Karen is generally positive about her day-to-day engagement with her children's school, her inclusion in information that directly affects her children's participation, learning and wellbeing at school is almost entirely reliant on her regular presence, ongoing involvement, and contributions of unpaid labour.

While Karen's relationship dissolution involved protracted legal proceedings, Bernadette's situation was additionally complicated by a history of family violence, court issued Protection Orders[5], and a bitter and volatile custody dispute during which she endured continual harassment, stalking and threats by her former partner. Elsewhere, we have written about Bernadette's experience in a detailed case study that considers how 'gender politics and organisational strategies for keeping parents 'in their place' can significantly contribute to systemic failures and school cultures that reinscribe the effects of family violence' (REMOVED FOR PEER REVIEW). Whereas Karen's availability to maintain a visible presence through regular participation and contribution of unpaid labour at the school facilitated her sense of belonging in the school community and gave her better access to information that she might otherwise have missed out on, Bernadette's full-time employment as a career public servant – further complicated by the depletion of her workplace leave entitlements due to the amount of time required for meetings with her legal counsel, attendance at court, days off to support children with complex trauma and

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[5] The term 'Protection Orders' is used here, as in other publications arising from this study, reflecting the nomenclature in the state in which the research obtained university ethics approval. The use of this term should not be taken as an indication of the location of participants prior to, during or after the events described in this article.

attending to her own mental health during this period – made school involvement, volunteering or other forms of unpaid labour impossible.

When Bernadette's eldest daughter, Kate, who was in the beginning years of secondary school when her parents separated, was abruptly taken by her father from school one afternoon and withheld from her mother and sisters for two months following the court issued Protection Orders against him, Bernadette encountered repeated barriers to working productively with Kate's school. Despite numerous requests for meetings with the school principal and counsellor, and multiple requests for information as to how Kate was faring in terms of learning and wellbeing, Bernadette found that her former partner's version of events and his agenda of withholding Kate from the rest of her family was given priority by the school.

> Bernadette: …when I dealt with the school, especially through all this, I was very articulate, I didn't leave out any details, I wasn't aggressive with anyone, I didn't shout at anyone, I didn't throw accusations at them. I dealt with them as I would in a professional environment, and I still felt like I was just brushed off as this ranting stupid woman. And then, on the flip side, you've got this person who is known to be abusive, who has been proven by the court system to have made threats against us that were significant enough to issue a [Protection Order], and just the treatment was like back to front. And…I just felt like, is this a sexist issue? I don't understand. Why are you dismissing me? It was almost like 'Oh she's just a woman, she's just hormonal' – it just felt like that.

Experiences such as these – in which men with histories of family violence and coercive control use unfounded allegations and misrepresentations of circumstances to manipulate institutions and formal processes for the purpose of controlling and punishing their former partners – are well documented in the literature on family violence as examples of 'paper abuse' and 'procedural stalking' (Cattaneo, et al., 2011; Miller & Smolter, 2011; Schandorph Løkkegaard & Elklit, 2017). However, we have proposed that the term 'coercion of organisational networks' (REMOVED FOR PEER REVIEW) be used to more accurately refer to such conduct that takes place in the context of schools. As Bernadette's account highlights, her former partner's ability to take control of the narrative to influence a range of interconnected stakeholders within the school, including office staff, school counsellors, principals, year coordinators, liaison officers, etc., positioned Bernadette within misogynist discourses and cultures of 'mother blame' (Peters, 2012, 121) that prevented her from being taken seriously by anyone in the school's organisational network. The school's

repeated refusals to engage in any meaningful way with Bernadette's requests for information and support effectively conscripted school stakeholders into operationalising her former partner's abusive agenda.

Excluded from information, treated with unexplained hostility and routinely dismissed or ignored, Bernadette recalled how poor communication processes and a lack of policy and procedures for dealing with situations such as hers, combined with the gendered indifference of deliberately obstructive, mostly male gatekeepers, to keep her at a distance.

> Bernadette: Honestly I think the most challenging aspect was having no direct contact. I didn't have someone that I could just call and say 'Hey, this is happening' or 'Hey what's going on here?' or 'How's Katie going?' I didn't have that. It was just, it was a mess. It was just ring the office every day for three weeks and leave a voicemail until one of them eventually calls you back and bumbles through a phone call because they've got no information.

In the absence of information or support from the school, Bernadette had little option but to wait until the family court eventually ordered that her daughter be returned to her care. Even then, the school showed little interest in fulfilling its duty of care toward Kate, whose experience had left her additionally traumatised, showing signs of an eating disorder and self-harming whilst at school. In Karen's situation, the replication of gender norms around mothers' school involvement had enabled her to find community connections and meaningful, if unrewarded, ways of engaging with her children's school during a protracted custody case. For Bernadette, however, the effectiveness of her former partner's coercion of organisational networks within the school rendered her attempts at meaningful engagement unsuccessful. This in turn had long-term ramifications for the mental health and wellbeing of Bernadette and all three of her children, ultimately leading her to relocate her family to a new school in another state.

Conclusions and implications for practice

Here we have considered the ways that assumptions of heteronormative family structures and gendered norms of parental care and engagement with children's schooling can contribute to exclusions and increased demands placed on families during times when they are most in need of sensitivity, safety and support. While recognizing that schools may not be aware of or adequately prepared for addressing complexities associated with the dissolution of parental intimate partner

relationships and post-separation family transitions, the interviews discussed here highlight the importance of better understandings of how children and their parents might be best supported during such periods. In particular, we see implications for practice as including, firstly, ensuring that everyday classroom and school-based activities and events are designed in ways that enable children and parents – irrespective of their family structures and circumstances – to participate without having to navigate *by default* exclusionary assumptions, language and practices. A second implication pertains to the need for schools to ensure that their communication policies and practices take adequate account of the diversity of family structures. While this is achievable in a variety of ways, ensuring that parents have access to all information that potentially affects their child's participation, learning and wellbeing should not involve parents having to continually request updates, meetings and reports, nor should it require their unpaid labour as the de facto currency for accessing information that affects their child at school. A third implication pertains to what we consider to be an urgent need for professional development that enables educators, principals and other school personnel to gain better understandings of the roles and obligations of schools in supporting parents and children during periods of parental relationship dissolution and post-separation family transitions. In particular, better preparing educators and school staff about issues such as family violence, the range of behaviours it entails, the trauma it inflicts, and the ongoing risks that it poses to parents and children, enables them to safeguard against becoming complicit in its perpetuation. We contend that the stakes are too high for these matters to remain largely invisible in the policies, protocols and practices of schools. As we have argued, our study highlights the importance of schools ensuring that interactions between home and school are sensitive to a broad and complex range of family circumstances and their potential impacts on children's learning, participation and wellbeing.

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