



Lesbian, gay, and heterosexual adoptive parents' experiences in preschool environments



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ABSTRACT

Little research has examined the school experiences of lesbian/gay (LG) parent families or adoptive parent families. The current exploratory study examined the experiences of 79 lesbian, 75 gay male, and 112 heterosexual adoptive parents of preschool-age children with respect to their (a) level of disclosure regarding their LG parent and adoptive family status at their children's schools; (b) perceived challenges in navigating the preschool environment and advocating on behalf of their children and families; and (c) recommendations to teachers and schools about how to create affirming school environments with respect to family structure, adoption, and race/ethnicity. Findings revealed that the majority of parents were open about their LG and adoptive family status, and had not encountered challenges related to family diversity. Those parents who did experience challenges tended to describe implicit forms of marginalization, such as insensitive language and school assignments. Recommendations for teachers included discussing and reading books about diverse families, tailoring assignments to meet the needs of diverse families, and offering school community-building activities and events to help bridge differences across families.

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Families in the US are becoming increasingly diverse and complex (Brodzinsky & Pertman, 2011). For example, lesbian and gay (LG) couples and individuals are increasingly becoming parents, particularly through adoption (Gates, Badgett, Macomber, & Chambers, 2007), although the overall number of adoptions by heterosexual couples and individuals continues to exceed the number of LG adoptions (Gates et al., 2007). Further, at least 40% of adoptions in the US are transracial (i.e., parents adopt children who are of a different race than they are), adding further complexity to both heterosexual and LG adoptive families (United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2013). Finally, closed adoptions, where no contact or information is shared between adoptive and birth families, are becoming less common (Siegel & Smith, 2012). Today, most adoptions performed in the US are characterized by some level of openness between the adoptive parents and the birth parents, before and/or after the adoption (Siegel & Smith, 2012).

Despite such increases in family diversity and complexity, society – as well as the systems within society, such as the legal, health care, and school systems – have continued to prize the heteronormative nuclear biological family ideal, thus potentially marginalizing LG parent families and adoptive parent families.

Indeed, the standard North American family (SNAF) of two heterosexual married individuals who are parenting biologically-related children continues to dominate societal consciousness as an “ideological code” (Smith, 1993), which can lead to the denigration and erasure of families that deviate from this idealized family form. Schools in particular have been slow to acknowledge and adapt to the growing diversity and complexity of families. Despite the increasing heterogeneity of the families that they serve, school practices and policies continue to be biased toward the experiences of Caucasian, heterosexual, two-parent, biologically-related families, thereby upholding and perpetuating the heteronormative nuclear standard of family life (Byard, Kosciw, & Bartkiewicz, 2013; Smith, 1993).

LG parent families are vulnerable to both explicit and implicit forms of marginalization within the school context (Byard et al., 2013). For example, teachers or school personnel may inappropriately question LG parents about their relationship or family life, or exclude LG parents from participating in school activities (Kosciw & Diaz, 2008). At a more subtle level, LG parent families may be implicitly marginalized via their absence from school curricula (which tends to focus on the experiences of heterosexual people and families) and school paperwork (e.g., which tends to assume and allow representation of heterosexual parent families only; Byard et al., 2013). Adoptive families, like LG parent families, also deviate from the biological heterosexual nuclear family

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standard, and thus may be explicitly or implicitly marginalized by schools (Brodzinsky & Pertman, 2011). For example, they may encounter questions, conversations, and assignments at their children's schools that reflect an assumption of biological relatedness between parents and children, as well as, on occasion, blatant manifestations of stigma (e.g., in the form of comments such as "I had no idea he was adopted! He looks like he could be your real child!").

Little research has examined LG parents' experiences with their children's schools, and research on their experiences within early childhood educational settings is particularly sparse. Further, we know little about the school experiences of adoptive families, and how their school experiences may be shaped by adoption- or race-related factors. The current study examines the experiences of lesbian, gay, and heterosexual adoptive parents of preschool-age children with respect to their (a) level of disclosure regarding their LG parent and adoptive family status to schools; (b) perceived challenges in navigating the preschool setting; and (c) recommendations to teachers and schools regarding how to create affirming and inclusive school environments. This study is informed by an ecological perspective in its focus on the role of intersecting contexts on development (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). While the family is the principal context in which child development takes place, another highly salient context is the school. When children are young, they are not only influenced by their school environment, but also, indirectly, by the parent-school relationship (Beveridge, 2005). Early interactions between parents and early educational settings are of great significance, in that they set the stage for parents' expectations about and involvement in their children's school lives (Casper & Schultz, 1999). Parents' perspectives of exclusion or mistreatment in early childhood settings are especially important to attend to, as they may have implications for parents' school connection and involvement throughout their children's lives (Galindo & Sheldon, 2012; Kosciw & Diaz, 2008).

LG parents and early childhood settings

Research on LG parents' experiences in schools is limited, and has tended to focus on LG parents of school-age children. Speaking to issues of explicit exclusion, the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) surveyed 588 LGBT parents from across the US, most of whom were women and had a child in elementary school, and found that about one in six parents reported feeling that school personnel failed to acknowledge their type of family (15%) or felt that they could not fully participate in their child's school community because they were LGBT (16%) (Kosciw & Diaz, 2008). For example, parents described situations in which their child was not allowed to make two Mother's Day gifts or to display a family collage with the other students' work because it showed two lesbian mothers. Notably, a greater percent of parents (26%) reported mistreatment by other parents (e.g., being whispered about or ignored), raising an issue that is deserving of further exploration.

Gartrell et al. (1999) in a rare study of lesbian parents of young children, interviewed 84 lesbian mothers of toddlers and found that 8% of lesbian mothers reported difficulty finding good child care because they were lesbians, and 4% had changed day care facilities because of homophobic teachers or staff. By the time the children in the sample were five years old and enrolled in preschool or kindergarten, 18% of families reported having experienced homophobia by teachers or peers (Gartrell, Deck, Rodas, Peyser, & Banks, 2005). Thus, similar to the GLSEN survey, a relatively low incidence of sexuality-related discrimination was reported. Notably, the respondents in the GLSEN survey were primarily from the Northeast and West Coast, and Gartrell et al.'s sample was primarily located in very progressive areas of the country (e.g., San Francisco).

Thus, these findings raise questions about the role of geographic context in shaping the school experiences of LG parents, and suggest the need to explore the school-related experiences of LG parent families living in a wide range of social and geographic contexts.

On a more subtle level, several studies have documented LG parents' perceptions of marginalization in the school curriculum. In the GLSEN (2008) study, only 29% of parents reported that their children's school curriculum included representations of LGBT people, history, or events, and, when these topics were included, such representations were sometimes negative (Kosciw & Diaz, 2008). Concerns about curriculum were also identified in a study of 15 lesbian-mother families with children of varying ages (Mercier & Harold, 2003). The lesbian mothers in this study voiced general concern about curricular content – not only related to the inclusion and representation of LGBT parent families, but also related to race, ethnicity, and culture. Such concerns were particularly salient among Caucasian lesbian mothers of children of color.

Research examining the attitudes of early childhood educators provides a different perspective on the challenges that LG parents encounter. Studies show that some teachers are uncertain about or uncomfortable with broaching issues of sexual diversity and family structure in the classroom (Maney & Cain, 1997; Robinson, 2002). One study of early childhood teachers and administrators found that participants were the least comfortable in discussing sexuality in comparison to other forms of diversity (Robinson, 2002). Most teachers expressed that they would incorporate LGBT issues in the curriculum only if they knew there were children from such families in their classroom. These teachers, then, were operating under the perhaps incorrect assumption that all LG parent families would elect to identify their family structure to teachers.

Thus, early childhood teachers' reluctance to discuss sexual and family diversity issues may be fueled by the perception that such issues are not relevant in their classrooms in the absence of (visible) LG parent families. Reluctance to discuss sexual and family diversity may also stem from religious beliefs (Kintner-Duffy, Vardell, Lower, & Cassidy, 2012; Maney & Cain, 1997; Robinson, 2002), lack of exposure to LG parents (Casper & Schultz, 1999; Kintner-Duffy et al., 2012), and concerns about resistance from parents and school officials (Martino & Cumming-Potvin, 2011). Notably, once teachers have received preparation for working with LG parent families, they report greater comfort addressing LGBT issues in their classroom (Kintner-Duffy et al., 2012). In the absence of such preparation, teachers may explicitly or implicitly create an environment where LG parent families feel excluded or mistreated.

Adoptive parents and early childhood settings

Like LG parent families, adoptive families are also vulnerable to explicit and implicit forms of marginalization related to their family structure within the school setting. Further, many children who are adopted are a different race than their parents, which introduces another form of difference to their families that may not be acknowledged or understood. Adoptive families may face marginalization related to their multiracial family status, and adopted children of color may face stigma related to their race specifically (Brodzinsky & Pertman, 2011; Goldberg, 2009).

There is little research on how adoptive parents – and LG adoptive parents specifically – experience their children's school environments, particularly within early childhood settings. Speaking to issues of explicit marginalization, a study of LG and heterosexual adoptive parents of young children found that although low levels of adoption-related stigma by teachers and school officials were reported overall, heterosexual adoptive parents reported higher levels of adoption-related stigma than LG parents (Goldberg & Smith, 2014). The authors suggested that, in

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