



Preschool selection considerations and experiences of school mistreatment among lesbian, gay, and heterosexual adoptive parents

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ABSTRACT

The current study is the first to investigate the school selection considerations and school-related experiences of sexual-minority parents with young children. The sample consisted of 210 parents in 105 couples, including 35 lesbian couples, 30 gay male couples, and 40 heterosexual couples, all of whom had adopted a child three years earlier. We found that parents with less income were more likely to consider cost in choosing a preschool, and parents with less education were more likely to consider location. More educated parents tended to emphasize racial diversity and the presence of adoptive families, and, among sexual-minority parents, the presence of other lesbian/gay parents. Sexual-minority parents were more likely to consider racial diversity than heterosexual parents. In reporting on their experiences with schools, heterosexual parents were more likely to perceive mistreatment due to their adoptive status than sexual-minority parents, and sexual-minority parents living in less gay-friendly communities were more likely to perceive mistreatment due to their sexual orientation than sexual-minority parents living in more gay-friendly communities. Our findings have implications for early childhood educators and administrators seeking to create an inclusive learning community for all types of families.

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1. Introduction

Despite advances in securing equal rights for sexual minorities and their families, sexual-minority (i.e., lesbian, gay, and bisexual; LGB) parents and their children encounter explicit and implicit forms of marginalization, exclusion, and stigma embedded in various societal institutions, such as the legal system and the schools (Byard, Kosciw, & Bartkiewicz, 2013; Goldberg, 2010). Within the school context, sexual-minority parent families may encounter teachers, school staff, and other parents who possess ambivalent or unsupportive attitudes toward families like their own (Gartrell et al., 2000). Such attitudes may manifest in either lack of acknowledgment or explicit stigmatization of children with sexual-minority parents. On a more subtle level, marginalization of these families may be embedded in the curriculum (e.g., by focusing entirely on the experiences of heterosexual people and families) and school paperwork (e.g., by failing to allow for representation of diverse family forms; Byard et al., 2013). Sexual-minority parent families who are “different” in additional ways, beyond parents’ sexual orientation, may also be vulnerable to bias and exclusion in school settings. Many sexual-minority parent families are adoptive and/or multiracial (Gates, Badgett, Macomber, & Chambers,

2007), introducing other dimensions of difference that may meet challenges in the school setting.

Little research has examined sexual-minority parents’ experiences in school settings. The little research that exists has focused primarily on their experiences in elementary school settings (Kosciw & Diaz, 2008), as opposed to their experiences in early childhood settings, where they may have more contact with teachers and staff (Beveridge, 2005), and thus may be more attuned to insensitivities directed at them and/or their child(ren). Indeed, we know little about the family–school interface of sexual-minority parent families with young children, including their school selection process and potential experiences of exclusion and mistreatment within their children’s schools. Likewise, we know little about the school experiences of sexual-minority parents who have adopted their children, and how such experiences may be shaped by adoption- or race-related factors. The current exploratory study examines the experiences of lesbian, gay, and heterosexual adoptive parents of preschool-age children with respect to their (a) school-related selection considerations; and (b) perceived experiences of mistreatment at school.

1.1. School decision-making and selection in parents of preschool-age children

Research on the school-related concerns of sexual-minority parents of school-age children suggests that parents are often aware

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of the potential for homophobic bullying at school (Gartrell et al., 2000). Several studies further suggest that some sexual-minority parents purposefully seek out progressive and diverse schools and communities in an effort to decrease the stigma to which their children are exposed (Casper & Schultz, 1999; Kosciw & Diaz, 2008; Mercier & Harold, 2003). Such efforts may be particularly pronounced among sexual-minority parents of children of color (Kosciw & Diaz, 2008). Parents who adopt children of color face the possibility that their children might be mistreated (i.e., confront stereotypes and ignorance) on the basis of their race; in turn, White sexual-minority parents of children of color recognize that their children might be mistreated on the basis of both their race and family structure (Goldberg, 2009). White parents who adopt children of color also confront the possibility that the multiracial makeup of their families – the fact that children look “different” from them – may render their children vulnerable to intrusive questions about adoption (e.g., “where are you from?”; “who are your ‘real’ parents?”; Vaschenko, D’Aleo, & Pinderhughes, 2012).

Parents of preschool-age children play a greater role in selecting their children’s school environments than parents of school-age children. Whereas most children in elementary school attend their local public schools, most children in preschool attend private programs, although some public programs (which are funded by the city and/or state) are available (Magnuson & Waldfogel, 2005). In turn, parents – especially middle-class parents – typically play an active role in selecting preschool or day-care programs for their children (Cryer, Tietze, & Wessels, 2002). Research on heterosexual parents’ school selection process has found that parents tend to consider a range of factors in choosing schools and daycares for their young children, with frequently mentioned concerns including logistical/practical factors (e.g., cost, location), school quality considerations (e.g., the school curriculum or philosophy), and, more rarely, value-related considerations (i.e., the degree to which parents’ values match the schools’ values) (Galotti & Tinkelenberg, 2009; Glenn-Applegate, Pentimonti, & Justice, 2011). Working-class parents may be more likely to emphasize practical concerns such as cost and location in their selection process than middle-class parents, in part because of differing constraints on their choices (e.g., in terms of money, transportation, and time; Smrekar & Goldring, 1999); but also because of differing views of education (e.g., middle-class parents may be more likely to view education as a “calculated decision that matches the values and attributes of the family. . .and child. . .to the best-fitting school”; Goyette, 2008, p. 117; Wells & Crain, 1997). Likewise, middle-class parents may be more likely to emphasize school quality in their selection process (Peyton, Jacobs, O’Brien, & Roy, 2001), perhaps in part because, as Larner and Phillips (1994) note, parents with more education tend to view the role of early childhood education as a key context for learning and preparing for grade school, and as a starting point for children’s long-term educational success.

No known research has focused on whether and to what extent the above school selection considerations are endorsed by sexual-minority parents of young children. It is expected that, like parents of children with special needs (Glenn-Applegate et al., 2011) and parents of bilingual children (McClain, 2010), sexual-minority parents – as well as adoptive parents – may consider additional issues related to the inclusiveness of the school community. Understanding what factors sexual-minority parents consider in selecting early educational environments for their children is important, as it will provide crucial insight into the school-related concerns and values of sexual-minority parents, and can inform teaching and practice in early childhood education. Furthermore, knowledge of sexual-minority parents’ school-related considerations is of interest in that they may foreshadow what types of early childhood environments their children ultimately inhabit. Such knowledge is important, given that the early childhood educational environment impacts

children’s social, emotional, and cognitive development (Burger, 2010).

1.2. Sexual-minority parents’ school selection

Research on school selection among sexual-minority parents with elementary school-age children can lend some insight into the school selection considerations of sexual-minority parents of preschoolers. Key data on this topic come from the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN)’s 2008 survey of 588 LGBT parents, most of whom were women and had a child in elementary school (Kosciw & Diaz, 2008). Although most parents reported that their children attended public schools (78%), this percentage was significantly lower than the national percentage (89%). Of the parents who sent their children to private schools, these schools were less likely to be religiously-affiliated schools (7%) and more likely to be independent schools (16%) than national percentages. Regarding LGBT parents’ reasons for selecting their children’s schools, parents most often reported that they chose the local or neighborhood school (59%) and that they chose the school based on academic reputation (54%). Other common reasons cited were the diversity of the school population (31%), the school’s reputation for valuing diversity (22%), they knew other families at the school (29%), the sports/arts/music reputation of the school (29%), they knew that there were other children with LGBT parents there (17%), the school’s reputation for being welcoming of LGBT families (17%), the academic approach (e.g., Montessori) (13%), special education services (12%), and language programs (10%). Parents of children of color were more likely to choose schools based on the diversity of the school population (43%) than were parents with a White student (25%), regardless of the race/ethnicity of the parents (about 16% of the families represented had White parent(s) and a child of color, and 14% of the families represented were comprised of one White and one non-White parent; Kosciw & Diaz, 2008).

In addition to the GLSEN survey, several qualitative studies have examined the school-related experiences of lesbian parents; indeed, research on gay fathers’ school-related experiences is particularly sparse. Mercier and Harold (2003) interviewed 15 lesbian-parent families with children ranging from six months to 18 years. Similar to the GLSEN sample, the parents in this study often emphasized the importance of sending their children to schools that valued diversity, because they believed that “schools that value diversity of any type are more likely to respond well to lesbian-parent families” (p. 39). Consistent with this, Gartrell et al. (1999) interviewed 84 lesbian-parent families with toddlers about their plans for child care or preschool and found that 87% of mothers said that they planned to enroll their children in programs that included children and teachers of different social classes, genders, races, ethnicities, and cultures, out of a belief that “exposure to diversity was the most effective method of fortifying their children against homophobia” (p. 367). When the children in the study were five, 74% of the children’s schools were described as multicultural and 33% had lesbian/gay staff members; by extension, under one-fifth (18%) of children had reportedly experienced homophobia from peers or teachers (Gartrell et al., 2000). Of note is that Gartrell et al. sample was drawn from metropolitan areas (e.g., San Francisco), which may have facilitated access to multicultural, gay-friendly school environments.

Finally, a qualitative study of 20 lesbian-parent families in Australia found that parents who could afford to send their children to private school often did so, in part because they seemed to believe that these schools would be more likely to accept and be inclusive of their families (Lindsay et al., 2006). Thus, in sum, the existing research suggests that lesbian mothers value diversity,

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