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

that LG parents face potential discrimination based on their sexual orientation as well as their adoptive status, they may be more likely to experience stigma related to their sexual orientation – or at least attribute instances of stigma to their sexual orientation – compared to their adoptive family status.

Speaking to issues of implicit exclusion, Nowak-Fabrykowski, Helinski, and Buchstein (2009) surveyed 23 heterosexual foster parents and found that the majority of respondents reported their children's teachers and classrooms did not have any materials related to adoption, and felt that teachers should make more of an effort to assign lessons about adoption (e.g., during Adoption Month). Thus, respondents demonstrated a general sense that schools could be doing more than they were to incorporate the experiences and needs of adopted individuals and their families into their materials and curricula. Likewise, in a study of 11 Caucasian parents with adopted Chinese daughters (who ranged in age from 2 to 9 years old), Tan and Nakkula (2004) found that parents often felt that their children's schools could be more culturally sensitive.

The absence of research on adoptive families' experiences in schools is concerning, given that societal stigma related to adoption is still pervasive (Goldberg, Kinkler, & Hines, 2011), and may trickle down into the attitudes and practices of school personnel, who may fail to understand or attend to the multiple dimensions of difference that are experienced by adopted children (Mattix & Crawford, 2011). Teachers may also neglect to discuss racial or family diversity in the classroom because they believe that young children are too young to understand these issues (Robinson & Ferfolja, 2002), an assumption that has been challenged by empirical research (Boutte, Lopez-Robertson, & Powers-Costello, 2011). Even when teachers are aware of the presence of adoptive families, they may not adapt their practices to be more inclusive of them. One survey found that more than half of early childhood educators were aware of adopted children in their classrooms, but, among these, only 34% had made adjustments in their teaching practices, typically in relation to assignments related to families (Taymans et al., 2008).

Beyond failure to acknowledge and discuss adoptive families as one of many different kinds of diverse families, teachers may also fail to recognize that the adopted children in their classrooms may have personal histories marked by disruption and instability (e.g., abuse, neglect, multiple living arrangements; Dumaret, Duyme, & Tomkiewicz, 1997; Goldberg & Smith, 2013). In turn, children with such histories may have unique learning, emotional, and behavioral needs and challenges (Howard, Smith, & Ryan, 2004; Nickman et al., 2005). Speaking to this issue, children who are adopted – and, in particular, those who are adopted at older ages, via foster care and from abroad – tend to be overrepresented among children receiving special education services (Meese, 1999; Nickman et al., 2005). Thus, schools should anticipate the possibility that adoptive families and children may present with unique needs, and should be prepared to effectively and compassionately address such needs.

Parents' strategies for minimizing exclusion and marginalization

Aware of their vulnerability in the school setting, LG parents and adoptive parents may explicitly address their family structure with their children's schools, thereby communicating their stance as active and involved parents who will not accept discriminatory treatment. In Casper and Schultz's (1999) study of LG parents of children who ranged widely in age, some parents described a proactive approach to their children's schools, whereby they introduced themselves, informed the school of their status as an LG parent family, and advocated for their children from the beginning of the school year. Others chose to come out to their children's teachers more implicitly (e.g., via school forms), whereas others did not disclose their sexual orientation or family configuration at all, in part due to a perceived lack of tolerance. More recent studies of lesbian mothers in the US have found that most parents reported being "out" to their children's teachers (Kosciw & Diaz, 2008; Mercier & Harold, 2003). In GLSEN's survey of LGBT parents, for example, two-thirds of parents reported that they had spoken with teachers about being an LGBT parent (Kosciw & Diaz, 2008). Yet figuring out how to come out, and how out to be, continues to be a challenge for some parents (Mercier & Harold, 2003), especially in rural or less progressive areas (Lindsay et al., 2006) and among parents with less education (Nixon, 2011).

High rates of volunteering have been observed in some surveys of LGBT parents of children in kindergarten through 12th grade (Kosciw & Diaz, 2008; Mercier & Harold, 2003), which may in part reflect a proactive or reactive strategy aimed at minimizing the likelihood of sexuality-related stigma perpetrated against their families (Mercier & Harold, 2003). That is, LG parents may volunteer at their children's schools not simply because they are invested in their children's education, but because they believe that by making themselves visible, they make it more difficult to discriminate against them, help to increase the school's comfort with LG parent families, and ultimately contribute to a safer environment for their children (Mercier & Harold, 2003). They may also explicitly seek out gay-friendly schools to decrease the likelihood of mistreatment: Goldberg and Smith (2014) found that LG parents strongly considered the gay-friendliness of prospective schools in selecting early childhood settings for their children. The extent to which LG parents are able to select schools that meet their ideals is, of course, mediated by geographic and financial resources (i.e., whether such schools are accessible and affordable).

Little research has examined adoptive parents' openness about their adoptive status, or their efforts to advocate on behalf of their children in the school system. One exception is Tan and Nakkula's (2004) study of Caucasian parents with adopted Chinese daughters. The authors asked parents about their attitudes and practices related to racial/cultural socialization and found that parents utilized a number of strategies to help their daughters learn about their Chinese heritage, including advocating for culturally sensitive schools. This study highlights the fact that for parents who adopt a child from a different culture or race, the racial/cultural sensitivity and inclusiveness of the school may take on heightened importance. Further support for this comes from several studies that have found that heterosexual (Goldberg & Smith, 2014) and LG (Mercier & Harold, 2003) adoptive parents tend to value racial diversity and multiculturalism in selecting schools for their children, particularly when they adopted children of color. Thus, adopting children of color may add further complexity to parents' experiences intersecting with schools, by heightening their sensitivity to issues of racial inclusion and diversity, as well their awareness of implicit and explicit racial bias. Further, Caucasian parents who adopt children of color may not simply experience a heightened awareness of race, but may also find that the visible differences between themselves and their children "mark" them as adoptive, and, thus, as deviant from the hegemonic nuclear family ideal (Smith, 1993). In turn, they likely experience a lesser degree of privacy and control over disclosure of their adoptive family status (Jacobson, 2009).

Research questions

Based upon the limited work on LG and adoptive parents' experiences intersecting with schools, particularly in early childhood, this study seeks to answer several research questions:

1. To what extent do LG and heterosexual adoptive parents disclose key aspects of their family structure (i.e., parent sexual orientation, adoptive family status) to teachers and schools? Further, how do parents explain their decision not to disclose such details?

2. What challenges do LG and heterosexual adoptive parents report with regard to teachers and schools, related to their family structure (i.e., parent sexual orientation, adoptive status, child race)?

3. To what extent do patterns of disclosure and reported challenges appear to be shaped by parent sexual orientation, adoptive status, child race, and geographic location?

4. What suggestions do LG and heterosexual adoptive parents have for schools? That is, how could schools improve their treatment of diverse families, according to parents?

Method

Description of the sample

Data come from 266 parents in 142 families. In 36 lesbian-parent families, both partners participated, and in seven lesbian-parent families, one partner participated (n = 79 parents). In 36 gay-male-parent families, both partners participated, and in three gay-male-parent families, one partner participated (n = 75 parents). In 52 heterosexual-parent families, both partners participated, and in eight heterosexual-parent families, one partner participated (in all cases it was the mother; n = 112 parents). Thus, a total of 79 lesbian, 75 gay male, and 112 heterosexual parents were surveyed about their perceptions and experiences of their children's preschools.

The current sample was drawn from a slightly larger sample of parents with adopted children under 5.5 years of age. Prior publications using this sample have largely focused on parents' experiences transitioning to parenthood, with attention to their well-being (Goldberg & Smith, 2011) and parental roles (Goldberg, Moyer, & Kinkler, 2013); one paper examined parents' preschool selection process (Goldberg & Smith, 2014). Participants were included if their child was in preschool (92% of the larger sample).

ANOVA revealed that the average family incomes for lesbian, gay, and heterosexual parent families differed significantly, $F(2, 140)$ = 5.33, p = .005, such that gay-male couples (M = $196,577, Mdn = $150,000, SD = $132,641) had a significantly higher annual combined income than lesbian couples (M = $123,268, Mdn = $105,000, SD = $63,795), p = .001, and heterosexual couples (M = $137,666, Mdn = $120,000, SD = $85,410), p = .01. The sample as a whole is more affluent compared to national estimates for same-sex and heterosexual adoptive families, which indicate that the average household incomes for same-sex couples and heterosexual married couples with adopted children are $102,474 and $81,900, respectively (Gates et al., 2007). The sample as a whole was well-educated, M = 4.50 (SD = 1.00), where 4 = bachelor's degree and 5 = master's degree. Hierarchical linear modeling (HLM, in which parents were nested within couples) revealed no differences in education level by family type.

The average age of the children was 3.41 years (SD = .99); ANOVA showed that age did not differ by family type. Most had been adopted via private domestic adoption (67%); the remainder were adopted internationally (22%) and via public domestic adoption (foster care) (11%). Fifty-six percent of couples adopted boys, and 44% adopted girls. The adoptive parents in the sample were mostly Caucasian (89%); 4% were Hispanic/Latino/Latin American, 3% were biracial/multiracial, 2% were African American/Black, and 2% were Asian. Their children were mostly of color. Namely, 36% of children were Caucasian, 23% were biracial/multiracial, 19% were Hispanic/Latino/Latin American, 11% were African American/Black,

and 11% were Asian. Regarding parent–child racial match, in 55% of cases, the parent was Caucasian whereas the child was of color. In 35% of cases, both the parent and the child were Caucasian. In 7% of cases, the parent and the child were both of color and of the same race. In 2% of cases, the parent and the child were both of color but of different races. In 1% of cases, the parent was of color whereas the child was Caucasian. Chi squares showed that the distributions of adoption type, child gender, parent race, child race, and parent–child racial match did not differ by family type.

The types of preschool environments that children were enrolled in varied. Twenty percent of the sample reported that their children attended public preschools (e.g., YMCA-based programs), and 80% reported that their children attended private preschools. Within the latter group, 33% were described as private day care based programs, 22% were Montessori schools, 7% were religiously oriented or affiliated preschools (e.g., Catholic), and the remainder were given a wide range of descriptors (e.g., Waldorf; French Immersion; country day school; university-based). Hours in school differed by family type, F(2, 140) = 6.54, p = .002, such that the children of gay fathers were in preschool for significantly more hours per week (M = 32.21, SD = 11.44) than the children of lesbian mothers (M = 22.62, SD = 12.07), p = .001, and the children of heterosexual parents (M = 23.89, SD = 12.34), p = .002. Regarding geographic location, 46% of the sample resided on the East Coast, 27% lived on the West Coast, 16% lived in the Midwest, and 11% lived in the South. Just over half of the sample (51%) lived in metropolitan areas (a core urban area of 50,000 or more population); the remainder (49%) lived in non-metro communities (US Census, 2013). Chi-square analyses showed that children of color were more likely to reside in metro areas than Caucasian children, χ^2 (1, 140) = 3.21, p = .04: 54% of children of color lived in metro areas, compared to 44% of Caucasian children.

Recruitment

Inclusion criteria for the larger study from which this sample was drawn were: (a) couples must be adopting their first child; and (b) both partners must be becoming parents for the first time. Couples were recruited during the pre-adoptive period (i.e., while they were waiting for a child). Over 30 adoption agencies throughout the US were asked to provide study information to all clients who had not yet adopted, typically in the form of a brochure inviting them to participate in a study of the transition to adoptive parenthood. Interested couples were asked to contact the researcher for more information. U.S. census data were used to identify states with a high percentage of same-sex couples (Gates & Ost, 2004) and effort was made to contact agencies in those states. Both heterosexual and same-sex couples were recruited through agencies, in an effort to match couples roughly on geographic status and financial resources. Because some couples may not be "out" to agencies, national LGBT organizations also assisted in disseminating study information. For example, the Human Rights Campaign (HRC) posted a description of the study on their Family-Net listserv, which is sent to 15,000 people per month.

Couples who participated in the original study of the transition to adoptive parenthood were recontacted three years after they had adopted and asked to participate in a follow-up. Both members of each couple were asked to complete an in-depth questionnaire packet that focused on their experiences with their children's schools. Questionnaires included closed- and open-ended items that addressed parents' school experiences. Members of same-sex couples were mailed questionnaires with additional questions that addressed unique aspects of their experience as sexual-minority parents. Data are drawn from this three-year post-placement assessment.

Procedure

Participants responded to a series of open-ended questions, in written form, regarding their experiences navigating their children's schools. The following open-ended questions were included in the survey packet and used in the analysis: (1) Have you talked to your child's school/teachers about your child being adopted? (2) If you have not talked to your child's school/teachers about your child being adopted, why not? (3) Have you talked to your child's school/teachers about the fact that your child has two dads/two moms? (*LG parents only*) (4) If you have not talked to your child's school/teachers about your child having two dads/two moms, why not? (*LG parents only*) (5) What challenges do you face in advocating for your child, dealing with teachers, etc.? (6) If you have had any negative experiences with your child's teachers related to your status as an adoptive family, please explain/give examples. (7) If you have had any negative experiences with your child's teachers related to your status as a two-mother/two-father family, please explain/give examples. (*LG parents only*) (8) Please describe any ways in which you have struggled in educating teachers and school personnel about your families/your child, and managing ongoing relationships with your children's teachers/school personnel. (9) Please list any suggestions you have for schools or teachers, in terms of making your families feel more welcome (with respect to your child's race, adoptive status, etc.).

Data analysis

Participants' responses to the above questions were examined via qualitative analysis. The author approached the analysis using a content analysis method, which is a standard method for examining responses to open-ended questions, and represents a process of identifying, coding, and categorizing the primary patterns or themes in the data (Patton, 2002). This process of exploring and classifying qualitative data represents an organized, systematic, and replicable practice of condensing words of text into a smaller number of content categories (Krippendorff, 1980), with the goal of creating a coding system to organize the data (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

The coding process proceeded as follows: After reading transcripts of each person's data multiple times, the author then initiated the coding process with open coding, which involves carefully examining the participant responses and highlighting relevant passages within them (Charmaz, 2006). This led to the specification and refinement of emerging categories or codes. For example, a heterosexual woman who had adopted an African American child stated, "We live in a very white area. We tried to get into a preschool that was more racially diverse, but we didn't end up getting off of the wait list." Several preliminary codes were assigned to this passage of text, namely: "racially homogenous community," "racially homogenous preschool," and "efforts to change schools." Next, focused coding was pursued, which uses initial codes that frequently reappear in order to sort the data. For example, "lack of racial diversity in one's geographic area" was identified as a race-related challenge which recurred in a number of participant responses. This process of organizing and sorting is more conceptual in nature than initial coding (Charmaz, 2006), and the categories that emerge are those that best synthesize the data. The author then applied the coding scheme to the data, which allowed for the identification of more descriptive coding categories and generation of themes for which there was the most substantiation in the data. Categories were examined across family type (LG and heterosexual parent families) to identify similarities and contrasts in the nature and meaning of various coding categories (Patton, 2002). Attention was also paid to whether and to what extent themes varied according to other characteristics of the sample (e.g., child

race, adoption type, and geography). Themes that varied by parent sexual orientation, child race, adoption type, or geographic location are discussed only when differences in themes clearly emerged along these dimensions. In turn, if these dimensions are not discussed, they did not emerge as salient in distinguishing participant responses or differentiating patterns in the data. The coding scheme was continually applied to the data and revisions were made until all relevant data were accounted for with the codes.

At this stage, the author enlisted a research assistant to independently code a random selection of transcripts (one-fifth of the responses generated by heterosexual, lesbian, and gay participants), in an effort to verify the usefulness and soundness of the emerging scheme (Patton, 2002). This process of check coding is useful in helping to clarify categories and definitions and to provide a reliability check (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Initial intercoder agreement ranged from 80 to 85% across coding categories (reliability = no. of agreement/no. of agreements + disagreements). Discussion of coding disagreements led to several refinements in the scheme and clarification of the coding definitions. The author then applied the revised scheme to all responses, and the secondary coder coded a random selection (one-fifth) of the transcripts. Intercoder agreement of the final scheme ranged from 90 to 95% across coding categories, providing evidence of the utility of the scheme for describing the data. The findings are organized around the final scheme, which appears in Table 1. The number of individuals who endorsed each theme, within each group, is specified. When both members of a couple endorsed a particular theme, this is specified. Pseudonyms are used for all participants.

Results

The findings are discussed in three major sections. First, participants' disclosure practices regarding their families are discussed, followed by perceived challenges in the school setting, and finally, participants' suggestions to schools and teachers (see Table 1).

Disclosure of lesbian/gay parent status to teachers and school personnel

Most LG parents reported that they had discussed or at least mentioned the fact that their child had LG parents to their children's schools. Namely, 89% of lesbian parents (*n* = 70) and 91% of gay male parents (*n* = 68) reported that they had talked to their children's teachers about their status as a two-mom/two-dad family. In some cases, broaching the topic of their family structure had been part of the school selection process: that is, several participants noted that mentioning this during the process of looking for a preschool "helped to weed out" certain schools. Those who had not talked to their children's teachers about their status as a two-mom/two-dad family provided the following reasons: It is obvious (e.g., because we show(ed) up together), and therefore unnecessary (three lesbian women, four gay men); and my own internalized homophobia/hesitancy to raise the issue (one lesbian). Notably, all eight of these participants resided in non-metro areas, and four of them lived in the South, hinting at ways in which their geographic location and immediate communities may have shaped their relative openness regarding their family structure. Indeed, Carrie, a lesbian who had adopted her Caucasian son through private domestic adoption, spoke directly to the challenges that she and her partner had faced in finding an explicitly inclusive school in the South: "Here in the South, our greatest challenge was finding a preschool that was *not* based in a particular religious philosophy. We had limited options." Finally, five lesbians and three gay men

Table 1
Final coding scheme.

	Lesbians ($n = 79$)	Gay men ($n = 75$)	Heterosexual parents ($n = 112$)
Disclosure-LG status			
Disclosed	70(89%)	68(91%)	n/a
Did not disclose	9(11%)	7(9%)	n/a
Disclosure-adoptive status			
Disclosed	73(92%)	67(89%)	93 (83%)
Did not disclose	6(8%)	8(11%)	19 (17%)
No need	2	4	5
Hasn't come up	1	2	3
It is obvious	–	2	2
No Explanation	3	–	9
Challenges re: LG status			
No Challenges	59(75%)	67(89%)	n/a
Challenges	20(25%)	8(11%)	n/a
Teacher inexperience with LG	6	2	n/a
Heterosexist language	7	–	n/a
Discomfort with LG	4	3	n/a
Homophobic incidents	3	2	n/a
Other Parents	3	1	n/a
Challenges re: adoptive Status			
No challenges	63(80%)	72(96%)	83 (74%)
Challenges	16(20%)	3(4%)	29 (26%)
Teacher inexperience re: adoption	4	3	5
Adoption-insensitive language	3	–	5
Curriculum issues re: adoption	1	–	4
Inattention to adoption, child behavior	6	–	12
Over focusing on adoption, child behavior	2	–	7
Uncertainty re: sharing of adoption info	2	–	5
Challenges re: race			
No challenges	72(92%)	72(96%)	105 (94%)
Challenges	6(8%)	3(4%)	7 (6%)
Teacher inexperience re: race	3	2	1
Lack of racial diversity	3	1	6
Suggestions to schools			
Discussion of family diversity			
LG parent families	6	3	–
Adoptive families	1	1	5
Books on diverse families			
LG parent families	5	3	–
Adoption	2	–	1
Children of color	–	–	2
Inclusive, non-heteronormative language	4	2	–
Curriculum			
Inclusive class projects	4	–	–
Mother's Day/Father's Day	4	1	–
Racially diverse school	2	–	2
School events	3	–	3

provided no explanation as to why they had not explicitly come out to their children's teachers.

Disclosure of adoptive status to teachers and school personnel

Most parents stated that they had discussed or at least mentioned the fact that their child was adopted to their children's teachers and schools. Namely, 92% of lesbian parents ($n = 73$), 89% of gay male parents ($n = 67$), and 83% of heterosexual parents ($n = 93$) reported that they had told their children's teachers and schools about their children's adoption. In some cases, parents noted that these were "formal conversations" (e.g., initiated during the school application process or early in the school year), whereas others suggested that they had pursued a more casual approach of simply "mentioning it when it seemed relevant." As Rachel, a lesbian who had adopted her multiracial daughter via private domestic adoption, explained: "I've talked openly about adoption and the fact that May has a birth mom when appropriate in conversation but I didn't have a specific talk with the teacher or school."

Those who had not talked to their children's teachers about their adoptive family status provided various explanations for this. Namely, we haven't felt the need; it doesn't seem relevant/necessary was the reasoning provided by 11 participants (one

lesbian couple, four gay men, one heterosexual couple, two heterosexual women, one heterosexual man). Tina, a heterosexual woman who had adopted her biracial son via foster care, declared: "I don't see that it's the school's business that he's adopted and I don't intend on telling them unless it's necessary." Six participants (one gay male couple, one lesbian woman, one heterosexual couple, one heterosexual woman) explained their lack of disclosure by noting that their child's adoption *hadn't come* up. Notably, all but one of these participants had adopted inracially; thus, the lack of obvious racial distinction between themselves and their children had presumably led to the invisibility of their child's adoptive status, which parents had not made an effort to correct. In direct contrast, four participants (two gay men, two heterosexual women) explained their non-disclosure of their child's adoptive status by indicating that it is obvious (*our child is a different race than us) and thus not needed.* Cheryl, who had adopted her biracial son via private domestic open adoption, explained, "Because he is of a different race from us, it is obvious [that he is adopted] when we are all together." Thus, both racial invisibility and visibility were deployed to account for parents' non-disclosure. Finally, three lesbian parents and nine heterosexual parents provided no explanation as to why they had not discussed their family's adoptive status.

Challenges in dealing with teachers

Participants reported a range of family-diversity-related challenges in dealing with teachers and advocating for their children. Specifically, they named challenges related to their status as LG and adoptive parents, as well as racial diversity and sensitivity.

Challenges related to LG parent status

Most LG participants (namely, 75% of lesbians and 89% of gay men) stated that they had not encountered any challenges related to their sexual orientation. In some cases, they simply noted the absence of challenges (e.g., "we have had no difficulties"; "we continue to be fortunate in our school experience, and haven't had many problems") whereas in other cases they commented explicitly on the inclusive and accepting nature of their school ("no other preschool we looked at felt as supportive and inclusive as this one"; "the school has been very accepting; they pride themselves on their diversity"). In a few cases, parents attributed their positive experience to geography ("we live in LGBT nirvana when it comes to parenting"), and in a few cases, they invoked the fact that their child was enrolled in a private preschool as a means of explanation ("as long as we can afford to send Jake to a private school I'm confident we'll have few issues; if we go public I'm much less confident").

Challenges related to their status as a two-mother, two-father family were named by 25% of lesbians ($n = 20$) and 11% of gay men ($n = 8$), with some participants mentioning multiple challenges. Specifically, eight participants (six lesbian women, one gay male couple) indicated that their children's teachers' lack of experience with LG parents was a challenge. Several mentioned that they were the first LG parents at their children's schools, which required them to do a "lot of education." Dave, a gay father who had adopted his multiracial daughter via private domestic adoption, shared, "We have been the first gay family at each of Lucy's schools, and we have had to initiate conversations about sensitivity." Other parents explicitly mentioned challenges related to heterosexist language at school. Namely, heterosexist language on school forms (e.g., mother/father) and in the classroom (e.g., teachers only referring to "moms and dads") was highlighted by seven participants (two lesbian couples, three lesbian women). Zara, a lesbian who had adopted a Caucasian boy via foster care, stated, "I was disappointed that the school district forms were not inclusive and use mother and father on paperwork."

Seven participants (four lesbians, three gay men) highlighted teachers' apparent lack of comfort with or understanding of their family structure as a challenge, which was often evident in teachers' confused or awkward responses to parents' names or naming practices. One lesbian, for example, noted that the fact that she and her partner had different last names seemed to cause confusion and "raised questions." Two gay men noted that their children's teachers were "confused" about their own and their partner's designations as Daddy and Papa, respectfully. Notably, all of the seven participants who described teachers' apparent discomfort resided in non-metro areas, suggesting that parents in less urban settings may encounter greater unfamiliarity and discomfort with their family structure in the school environment specifically. Further, all but one of these (Caucasian) participants had adopted a child of color, suggesting that perhaps it was not simply their LG parent status, but also their status as a multiracial family, that prompted such awkwardness and confusion on behalf of schools, teachers, and staff.

Few examples of explicitly heterosexist or homophobic treatment were described by participants. One lesbian described "homophobic bullying" by teachers and school district officials (she did not provide details); one lesbian described being prevented from volunteering at her child's school, which she attributed to her sexuality; one lesbian noted that her child was only allowed to make one candle for Mother's Day; and one gay man recounted that a teacher had "jokingly referred to us as pedophiles." In addition, one gay man described "wondering" about whether his daughter's teachers "engage with her more because they may wonder about her not having a mother, although no one has expressed that to us directly."

Although not directly related to teachers, it is notable that four parents (three lesbians, one gay man), all of whom had adopted children of color, identified other parents as a challenge, such that the other parents at their children's schools had not seemed accepting of them. For example, Rachel, who had adopted her African American daughter via foster care, noted how her "biggest challenge" was a "lack of desire of our daughter's friends' parents to have their children play at our house. Many kids come from very religious/new immigrant groups. Parents don't seem to want to mix with us." Rachel also added that the school had "very few, if any" LG parent families, suggesting that she attributed other parents' reluctance to socialize with her family to her sexual orientation. However, the fact that she – and the other three participants in this category – had also adopted transracially suggests that perhaps the multiracial nature of their family represented another reason for other parents' apparent avoidance of them.

Challenges related to adoption

Most parents (80% of lesbians, 96% of gay men, and 74% of heterosexual participants) stated that they had not had any challenges related to adoption. In many cases, parents simply noted the absence of challenges, whereas in a few cases, parents explicitly commented upon the inclusive nature of their children's schools, particularly where adoption, race, and ethnicity were concerned ("We have felt very accepted and it is very inclusive in general. The teacher incorporated Chinese New Year activities and books"). Several parents pointed out the presence of other adoptive families at their children's schools as a means of explaining the school's inclusivity with regard to adoption ("We have had no problems. We are not the only adoptive family there, and the staff and other families are very receptive").

Challenges related to their status as an adoptive family were named by 20% of lesbian parents ($n = 16$), 4% of gay male parents ($n = 3$), and 26% of heterosexual parents ($n = 29$). In some cases, participants mentioned multiple adoption-related challenges. Such challenges often reflected a lack of education about or understanding of adoption issues on the part of teachers and personnel. Namely, 12 participants (four lesbians, three gay men, one heterosexual couple, three heterosexual women) noted that their children's teachers had demonstrated insensitivity and/or ignorance about adoption issues, such that they were "not adoption savvy." As Mimi, a lesbian who had adopted her African American son via private domestic adoption, stated, "We will need to do some education about how adoption is not rescuing a child. We've already gotten one comment from a teacher that shows that common misconception." Likewise, Anna, a heterosexual mother who had adopted her Caucasian son via foster care, shared that, from the perspective of the school, her child was "expected to be 'thankful' about being adopted." Lack of sensitivity to issues related to open adoption specifically was highlighted by five of these parents (three lesbian women, one gay man, one heterosexual woman). As Erik, a gay man who had adopted his Caucasian son via private domestic adoption, stated, "The biggest hurdle is explaining our fully open adoption and relationship with his birth family." Mary, a heterosexual woman who had adopted her biracial son via private domestic adoption, shared her perception that open adoption is "unfamiliar and uncomfortable" for many people; thus, "helping [teachers] to understand open adoption and our open relationship with birth parents is a challenge."

Adoption-insensitive language was highlighted as a problem by eight participants (one lesbian couple, one lesbian woman, one heterosexual couple, one heterosexual woman, and two heterosexual men). One heterosexual father explained that his child's teacher had referred to him as his son's "adoptive father." Similarly, three lesbians noted that their teachers used terms like "real parents" or "real mother" to describe their children's birth parents. Julie, the lesbian mother of a biracial son adopted via public domestic adoption, explained, "Terminology [is a problem]; there is ignorance when talking about birth parents—they use 'mom' or 'real parents.'"

Curriculum issues related to adoption were identified as posing challenges by five participants (one lesbian, one heterosexual couple, two heterosexual women). Namely, teachers' lack of education about fetal alcohol syndrome (one heterosexual woman); the refusal by school officials to do a free adoption training that the participant recommended to them (one heterosexual woman); the teacher's assignment of a family tree exercise (one lesbian woman); and the teacher's request to bring in newborn photos of the child (one heterosexual couple) were named as challenges. Speaking to this last issue, Raymond, a heterosexual father who had adopted his multiracial daughter via private domestic adoption, shared:

> When our child turned three, they asked us to bring pictures from when she was born, one year, and two years old. When they showed the first pic, one teacher asked me to talk about the day she was born, but I wasn't there. The pic I had was when she was three weeks old. I explained that was the day we got her.

Notably, all of the participants who identified curricular issues resided in rural/non-metro areas. Thus, such issues may be pronounced for adoptive families living in non-urban environments, which may be less diverse and varied in terms of family structure.

Teachers' lack of understanding of how adoption affects children's emotional and behavioral functioning was highlighted as a challenge by 16 participants (two lesbian couples, five heterosexual couples, two heterosexual women), all but one of whom had adopted via international or public domestic adoption. Six of these participants (two heterosexual couples, one lesbian couple) emphasized their perception that their children's behavioral problems were related to the losses that they had experienced—a reality which teachers "did not get." Indeed, several of them noted that teachers' ignorance regarding this issue was reflected in their use of behavioral techniques that were inappropriate for an adopted child (e.g., a teacher's use of isolation as a means of punishment was viewed as "problematic," given the child's abandonment issues). Likewise, four lesbian parents (two couples) voiced their perception that their children's teachers did not grasp the significance of their children's early disrupted placements or abuse history on their behavior. Lila, the lesbian mother of a biracial boy adopted via public domestic adoption, noted that her son suffered post-traumatic stress disorder due to his early negative life experiences, but his teachers "just see him as [exhibiting] bad behavior." She went on to say: "Little attention has been given to [his] unique history and the impact of that history on learning and socialization." Candice, a lesbian who had adopted her multiracial son via public domestic adoption, noted that a "huge challenge" was getting teachers to "understand that his emotional adjustment and ADHD is not just because he is a boy." The high number of couples (as opposed to individual partners) represented in this category suggests that teachers' lack of understanding regarding the impact of adoption on child functioning was a prominent and mutually shared concern for some parents—and one that they likely discussed with their partners at home.

While the above participants felt that their children's teachers were not sufficiently aware of the role that adoption had played in their children's current socialization and behavior, others felt that their children's teachers over focused on their children's adoption as the root cause of all problems. Namely, nine participants (one lesbian couple, three heterosexual couples, one heterosexual woman) noted that their children's teachers were quick to bring up adoption when their child exhibited behavioral or developmental challenges. That is, teachers seemed to believe that all of their children's problems stemmed from the fact that they were adopted, abused, neglected, or exposed to drugs in utero. Leanne, a heterosexual mother who had adopted her Caucasian son via private domestic adoption, explained: "I feel that once his old preschool found out he was adopted, all of sudden they started having problems with him. He got kicked out. Learning that some teachers associate behavior with being adopted [when] they have nothing to do with each other has been a real eye opener." Vanessa, a heterosexual mother who had adopted her Latino son via private domestic adoption, shared how her son had "behaved terribly" on his first day of preschool (i.e., had a huge tantrum). When she came to pick him up, the teachers all asked whether his biological mom had used drugs, wondering if he had a behavior problem as a result. I understand the reason for this question, but it was jarring that they immediately wanted to label him with a behavior problem because of being adopted. I told them I wasn't aware of any drug issues, which wasn't totally true because his birth mom had used drugs before she found out she was pregnant. But I wasn't going to tell them that and give them fuel to label my son. I felt that it was too early to come up with some sort of diagnosis of him as a "problem" because he was adopted.

Like the previous theme, concerns regarding teachers' over focusing on adoption as the root cause of all problems tended to be reported by both partners within a couple. Again, the high degree of consistency within couples suggests that this was a salient concern for these participants, and likely one that they talked and deliberated about with their partners.

Perhaps because they anticipated the possibility of the above challenges, seven participants (two lesbians, two heterosexual couples, one heterosexual woman), all of whom had adopted via public adoption or from abroad, described struggling with uncertainty about how much to share with their children's teachers. They were trying to find a balance between letting teachers know about their children's background without leading them to form biased judgments about their child based upon their adoptive status and history. Lenny, a heterosexual father of an African American boy adopted via foster care, shared that his biggest struggle was "finding ways to let the school know about his history/issues without prejudicing them before they get to know him." Anna, a heterosexual mother who adopted her Caucasian son via foster care, described feeling "stuck" about what to share about her son's history, having been warned by a caseworker "never to tell anyone he was adopted, and to never mention he was adopted from foster care."

Challenges related to race

Challenges related specifically to race were named by 8% of lesbians ($n = 6$), 4% of gay men ($n = 3$), and 6% of heterosexual participants ($n = 7$). Six participants (three lesbian women, two gay men, one heterosexual woman), all of whom had adopted children of color, indicated that their children's teachers' lack of education about and experience with racial diversity had posed a challenge. For example, Louise, a lesbian who had adopted her African American son via private domestic adoption, noted that her child's teachers had said that they were "color-blind" and that "children don't see or notice skin color," which, to her, indicated problematic assumptions surrounding race and a clear need for "lots of learning." Robbie, a gay father of an African American boy adopted via

public domestic adoption, noted that they had changed preschools due to racial/cultural insensitivities: "The first school was disappointing in the lead staff's knowledge and awareness around race and culture issues, so we switched to another school. The teachers at the first school were great, but the administration was not where we wanted them regarding the issues that are important to us."

In addition, 10 participants (three lesbian women, four heterosexual women, two heterosexual men, one gay man), all of whom had adopted children of color, cited a lack of racial diversity at their children's school as a challenge, with one heterosexual woman noting that her daughter was beginning to notice that she "looked different," thus prompting her to begin the process of looking for more "mixed schools." Mark, a heterosexual father of an African American boy adopted via private domestic adoption, explained, "Our child would be more comfortable, I think, if there were more children of African descent, but the school can't really control that. Moving is on the table." Notably, all of the participants who described a lack of racial diversity at their children's schools resided in non-metro areas in the US, highlighting how participants' community context may have shaped their access to diverse communities.

The fact that so few participants noted challenges with racial diversity may in part be related to choices that families made prior to enrolling their children in schools. For example, nine participants (eight lesbians, including one couple; one gay man), all of whom had adopted children of color, stated that they had prioritized racial diversity in the school selection process above other valued school qualities. For example, Julie, a lesbian who had adopted her biracial son via public adoption, acknowledged weighing the school's racial diversity more heavily than its academic rigor. She stated: "It is hard to find racial diversity and strong academics at the same [school]. The more diverse schools have lower income families and lower test scores, whereas the high scoring [schools have] predominantly white, upper class families." Celia, a lesbian who had adopted her African American daughter via private domestic adoption, and who described her daughter's school as "very diverse," noted that it was "extraordinarily difficult to find a school that was racially/ethnically diverse and affordable. It meant deprioritizing really important things like organic whole foods and arts exposure."

In addition, five participants (two lesbian couples, one heterosexual woman) with children of color noted that they had moved prior to their children starting preschool, in part to access greater racial and ethnic diversity in their neighborhoods and schools. Additionally, two participants (one lesbian, one heterosexual woman) stated that they had specifically requested – and been granted – teachers of the same racial/ethnic background as their children. Heidi, a heterosexual woman who had adopted her daughter via international adoption, stated:

We requested that our Latina daughter be placed in the only classroom with a Latina teacher and our request was taken seriously and it was honored by a school administration that rarely allows parents to influence their placement decisions. We feel that they understood our reasons for asking that our daughter have a role model that looks like her and they agreed it was valid.

Suggestions to teachers and schools

In addition to describing school-related challenges, some participants also provided suggestions for schools. Namely, 13% of gay men ($n = 10$), 35% of lesbians ($n = 28$), and 18% of heterosexual participants ($n = 20$) provided feedback and suggestions for school personnel, with some providing multiple suggestions. These suggestions fell into several major themes, all of which addressed various aspects of inclusion and diversity. Namely, their suggestions centered upon classroom discussion of diversity; inclusion of books on diversity; inclusive language; curricular inclusion of LG

and adoption issues; increasing the diversity of the school population; and school events aimed at creating community and educating about diversity.

Some participants called for greater discussion of family diversity in the preschool classroom. Specifically, discussion of two-mom and two-dad families was emphasized by nine participants (six lesbian women, three gay men). Gary, the gay father of a Latino boy adopted via public domestic adoption, for example, called for "more inclusion of family diversity, like more 'two moms' or 'two dads' stories and games, giving more of a sense of normalcy to that." Likewise, more discussion of adoptive families was called for by seven participants (one lesbian woman, one gay man, five heterosexual women). Diane, the lesbian mother of a Caucasian girl who was adopted via private domestic adoption, asserted, "Discuss adoption as a positive in class. Don't whisper the word adoption–be proud of it!" Likewise, Kellie, a heterosexual woman who had adopted her biracial son via private domestic adoption, emphasized the importance of "discussing adoption and foster care as routes to family building."

Related to the recommendation for more discussion of diverse family structures, some parents urged teachers and schools to incorporate more books on diverse families. Specifically, eight participants (one lesbian couple, three lesbian women, three gay men) noted that schools should have more books on two-mom and two-dad families. In addition, three participants (two lesbian women, one heterosexual woman) suggested that schools include more books on adoption specifically, especially open adoption; and two participants, both heterosexual women, indicated a need for more books featuring children of color. Several of these participants noted that they felt that it should not be "on them" to provide such books; rather, it should be up to the schools to ensure that inclusive materials are present in the classroom. Charlotte, a lesbian who had adopted her Latino son via public domestic adoption, said, "I feel that adoptive education is on the adoptive families. Same with same-sex family education. We have to suggest [and] donate adoption and gay family books to the school library. The administration is open to suggestions, but we have to make them." Vivian, a heterosexual woman who had adopted her Caucasian son via private domestic adoption, noted that while she was happy to donate books and educate teachers, she "[didn't] have the energy to be a 24-hour PSA spokesperson for adoption!"

Explicit suggestions regarding language use were made by six participants (four lesbian women, two gay men), who requested that teachers and schools use non-heteronormative language that is accepting and inclusive (i.e., "don't always say 'moms and dads'"). Three of these participants also explicitly requested that forms be made inclusive of all families, including two-mother and two-father families, and one also suggested that children should be allowed to define their own families, and teachers should use their language.

Nine participants had suggestions regarding the curriculum, including "dos" and "don'ts." Namely, four lesbian women suggested that all class projects be inclusive of all types of families, and four lesbian women and one gay man provided suggestions pertaining to the celebration of Mother's Day and Father's Day. These suggestions included the recommendation to "ask how child celebrates holidays, such as Mother's Day and Father's Day. children are usually permitted to make only one item, which makes the child feel that his/her family is excluded and therefore abnormal and weird" and "make Grandmother cards on Mother's Day, and Daddy and Papa cards on Father's Day." In addition, two heterosexual women noted that family tree exercises should be voluntary and/or adapted to be inclusive of adoptive families.

Four participants (two lesbian women, two heterosexual women) suggested that schools should be doing more to create a racially diverse school. Delia, a heterosexual woman who had

adopted her daughter from China, emphasized that schools "should work to have a racially diverse student body and faculty. It's important." Gloria, a lesbian who had adopted her African American son via private domestic adoption, suggested that schools "reach out to families of color and expand the color/diversity of the school."

Finally, some participants suggested *events* designed to educate and create community among parents. Namely, three heterosexual women suggested that schools should host adoption and culture-related events for parents and families, in order to bring greater awareness of these issues into the broader school community; and three lesbian women suggested community-building events (such as potlucks) that involved both parents and children so that, as one woman stated, "we can get to know each other and not avoid each other."

Notably, most participants did not have specific suggestions to schools; these tended to be the same participants who did not volunteer any major challenges at their children's schools. "We have had no issues, so we have no suggestions," was a commonly expressed sentiment.

Discussion

The current study represents one of the few investigations to explore the preschool experiences and challenges of LG and adoptive parents. The findings provide insights into the types of reformative steps that school administrators and teachers can make toward ensuring that their schools and classrooms are inclusive and affirming environments for all types of families.

Most parents described an open and proactive approach with regard to discussing the details of their family structure with their children's schools. First, most LG participants had addressed the fact that their child had two mothers or fathers with their children's schools. This finding is somewhat consistent with prior research indicating a greater overall trend toward openness and disclosure by LG parents with regard to their children's schools (Kosciw & Diaz, 2008; Mercier & Harold, 2003); it is also consistent with and perhaps reflects larger societal trends toward greater legal and social affirmation of LG parent families (Byard et al., 2013). Participants who had not disclosed their LG parent status to their children's teachers tended to state that it was "unnecessary" to do so; or, they did not explain their nondisclosure. It is possible that a reluctance to engage in potentially uncomfortable conversations with their children's teachers underlies these parents' non-disclosure, even if they did not speak to this issue. It is notable that all of the non-disclosing parents lived in non-metro areas, and half lived in the Southern part of the US. This, combined with prior work suggesting that LG parents in conservative and rural areas may be less likely to disclose their sexuality (Casper & Schultz, 1999; Lindsay et al., 2006), points to the salience of geographic and social context in shaping LG parents' openness about their sexuality.

Most LG and heterosexual participants had at least broached the topic of their child's adoption with their child's teacher. Among those who not to disclose, some participants – almost all of whom had adopted inracially – explained that the subject of their child's adoption had not come up or seemed unnecessary to share. Other participants – who had adopted transracially – noted that their child's adoptive status was "obvious" in explaining their nondisclosure. Thus, both apparent similarity to, and deviance from, the heterosexual biologically-related family ideal, were constructed as eliminating the need to speak about their child's adoption (Jacobson, 2009). Parents' resistance to directly broaching the topic of their child's adoption might also stem from underlying anxiety regarding how their children's teachers might react to this information, and the conversation(s) that might ensue. For parents who adopted inracially, for example, innocent remarks regarding

adoption ("he looks just like you; no one would know you weren't his real parent") may be feared or anticipated, and thus avoided (Stroud, Stroud, & Staley, 1997). As we saw, parents sometimes reported biased treatment by teachers, who seemed to attribute all behavioral issues to their children's adoptive status. Thus, some parents may have stayed silent about their children's adoption so as not to bias their teachers against their children.

Most LG parents did not report challenges related to their family structure. This may, in part, reflect the fact that many LG parents prioritize gay-friendliness in choosing a school (Goldberg & Smith, 2014; Kosciw & Diaz, 2008). By extension, it may reflect the impact of financial resources on parents' school choice and selection, whereby the sample's relatively high incomes enabled them to select progressive and seemingly gay-friendly schools where their families would be less vulnerable to marginalization and exclusion (Lindsay et al., 2006).

Parents who did report challenges largely described implicit forms of marginalization; few explicit examples of homophobia were cited. For example, some parents cited teachers' lack of experience with LG parents as a challenge; such inexperience was particularly salient among LG parents living in non-metro areas, which again highlights the role of geographic context in LG parents' school experiences, and echoes patterns documented in some prior qualitative research with lesbian parent families (Casper & Schultz, 1999; Lindsay et al., 2006). As Lindsay et al. (2006) observed, in their study of 20 lesbian parent families in Australia, "families who live in a generally more open minded, inner city suburb that is both cosmopolitan and diverse ha[ve] a better chance of having positive experiences within the school setting" (p. 1035).

Schools' lack of experience and unfamiliarity with LG parents was sometimes reflected in the language used by teachers and schools (e.g., in the classrooms, and in paperwork; Byard et al., 2013). This is consistent with prior research on LG parents of school-age children (Kosciw & Diaz, 2008), suggesting that teacher preparation surrounding LGBT family issues should include, and begin with, early childhood educators (Kintner-Duffy et al., 2012). By helping early childhood educators to become more comfortable and inclusive with regard to LG parent families, stronger relationships between LG parents and their children's schools may be fostered (Byard et al., 2013). Other parents' lack of comfort with LG parents was described as a challenge by a few participants, echoing prior research on LGBT parents of school-age children (Kosciw & Diaz, 2008), and indicating the potential need for school community-building activities to begin early, in order to prevent parent avoidance or fear of other parents. Notably, all of the LG parents who described challenges with other parents were Caucasian and had adopted children of color, suggesting that school efforts to bridge differences across family structure should be sensitive to the ways in which multiracial families may be viewed by some parents as strange or unfamiliar.

Likewise, most of the challenges that parents named related to adoption concerned more implicit manifestations of adoption, as opposed to explicit anti-adoption bias, reflecting the subtle ways in which adoption stigma continues to permeate the attitudes and practices of members of society (Goldberg et al., 2011). Insensitivity to the role of adoption in children's development or behavioral presentation, as well as inappropriate or exaggerated attribution of their children's challenges to adoption, were both described. This raises the question of how teachers should approach children's adoptive status, given that parents may be sensitive to both under appreciation of, and over focusing on, the role of adoption in children's lives. It is important that teachers seek to avoid inadvertent discrimination against adopted children. They should be careful to recognize their own biases or stereotypes regarding adoption (including open adoption and transracial adoption), and should seek to correct such assumptions through education (e.g., reading

the empirical research on adoption; attending adoption webinars or conferences). Teachers should also seek to sensitively obtain as much detail regarding the adoption as the family feels comfortable sharing. If teachers approach the family with an attitude of non-judgmental empathy, parents will likely be more open to disclosing adoption information, and less concerned about the implications of doing so (i.e., they will be less concerned that information about their child's adoptive history will be used against them or their child).

At the same time that teachers should guard against assumptions regarding adoption and its effects on children, they should recognize that, in some cases, children may exhibit temporary stress reactions related to their adoptive experience, which may manifest as behavioral problems (Taymans et al., 2008). Further, they should not overlook the potential significance of early or multiple transitions in caregiving environments, or abuse/neglect, in children's development (Howard et al., 2004). As we saw, the parents of children adopted via foster care or from abroad were especially likely to feel that teachers did not understand the role of pre-adoption adversity in their children's behavior. Teacher training on these issues is warranted, particularly at the early childhood level, when the effects of such adversity may be most likely to manifest.

Some parents highlighted how teachers' language and practices communicated insensitivity to and devaluing of adoption family relationships. As Meese (2012) points out, teachers' choice of words convey their attitudes and beliefs (e.g., about what is considered a "real" family or parent). In turn, teachers should ideally take care to use positive and sensitive adoption language, so as not to give the impression that, for example, only biological parents are "real" parents. Instead of referring to the child's parents as their adoptive parents, or suggesting that they are "like" family members, for example, teachers should refer to them as the child's parents and never give the impression that these relationships are less authentic or meaningful than biological family ties. In fact, it is usually appropriate to simply refer to the adoptive parents as mom/dad/parents; it is rarely relevant to add the qualifier "adoptive" (Mitchell, 2007).

Especially notable in this study was parents' emphasis on teachers' ignorance of open adoption. As open adoption becomes more common (Siegel & Smith, 2012), teachers will increasingly be challenged to gain education about the nuances of open adoption, and to develop a respectful stance in relation to all members of the adoption triad (adoptive parents, adopted children, and birth parents). At the same time, teachers must be careful to acknowledge the spectrum of adoption arrangements; that is, they should be aware of and communicate understanding of both closed and open adoption arrangements, so as not to alienate families that may not have access to, or may have chosen not to contact, birth family members.

Some parents identified a lack of racial diversity and sensitivity in their children's schools as a challenge. These parents had all adopted children of color, echoing prior work showing that concerns related to the racial diversity of the school tend to be heightened among lesbian and heterosexual parents who adopt children of color (Goldberg & Smith, 2014; Mercier & Harold, 2003). Further of note is that most of these parents resided in non-metro areas. Parents who live in non-urban settings may have to work harder to ensure that their children are exposed to other children whose racial backgrounds mirror their own (Goldberg, 2009). Insomuch as some parents hinted at the possibility of switching schools in the future, research should examine how parents' choices regarding schooling may shift over time, particularly as their children develop greater racial consciousness. Indeed, some of the parents who did not report race-related challenges at their children's schools noted that they had recently relocated, at least in part to access more racially diverse schools and communities. Their decision to move – which was inevitably facilitated by access to social and financial resources – appeared to facilitate a more positive experience with regard to the racial diversity, inclusion, and sensitivity of the school.

One of the most useful findings in this study concerns parents' recommendations to teachers about how to create more inclusive school communities. Parents emphasized the importance of incorporating discussions of family diversity into the curriculum, and the use of inclusive books in the classroom. Books in particular may be a valuable way for preschool-aged children to learn about diverse families—although to be effective, they should ideally be read and taught alongside broader classroom discussions about diversity. As Mattix and Crawford (2011) note, "quality literature provides a sociocultural context in which social issues can be examined and a means by which to explore the worlds of self and others" (pp. 319–320). Further, such books can help to dispel prejudice and build community, by providing children with "enthralling stories" that help them to imagine the lives of others (Mattix & Crawford, 2011, p. 320). Several parents also pointed out that they were somewhat resentful of having to be the "spokesperson" for all things adoption. They wished that school personnel would take responsibility for ensuring that classrooms were equipped with materials that were responsive to adoptive, multiracial, and LG-parent families, so that they did not have to work so hard on behalf of their child. In this way, schools can relieve some of the burden that LG and adoptive parents carry, with respect to proactively advocating on behalf of their children in order to avoid marginalization.

Some participants also suggested adaptation of activities and assignments to be more inclusive of diverse families. Mother's Day and Father's Day assignments can create anxiety for LG parents (as well as single parents), but can be modified in such a way that accommodates diverse families. Schools might choose to celebrate Parents Day, on a date that falls in between Mother's Day and Father's Day, and children should always be allowed to make cards/gifts for as many parents or important adults as they choose. Likewise, assignments such as bringing in a baby picture may heighten anxiety for children who were adopted. Such assignments can easily be adapted (e.g., children can be encouraged to bring in a favorite picture, regardless of how old they were at the time; Meese, 2012). Likewise, educators can seek to teach children about the varieties of family structures by offering children alternatives to the traditional family tree assignment (e.g., The Rooted Family Tree, where the roots represent the birth family, the child is the trunk, and the foster, adoptive, and/or step family members fill in the branches; Mitchell, 2007).

Some parents recommended that schools make a concerted effort to reach out to families of color, as they believed that this might help create a more diverse school community, ultimately helping their own families to feel less alone. While seeking to increase the racial and cultural diversity of early childhood settings is a valuable goal, empirical studies have found that simplistic attempts to do so (i.e., in the absence of racial and cultural competence on the part of school personnel) may be unsuccessful in creating a school climate that values inclusion and diversity (Sanders & Downer, 2012). Thus, alongside efforts to increase racial/ethnic diversity, changes may also need to be made with regard to the curriculum, teacher attitudes, and school goals (Falconer & Byrnes, 2003; Sanders & Downer, 2012). Comprehensive diversity training programs that aim to increase awareness of diversity issues, heighten dialogue about such issues, and teach skills in competently interfacing with diverse families, may be helpful in changing the school climate (DeLisa & Lindenthal, 2012; Plummer, 1998).

Finally, several participants highlighted the importance of creating a sense of community among parents via activities such as potlucks and other events. They hoped that by providing opportunities for connection, schools could help their fellow parents

to feel more at ease with them as adoptive and LG parent families. Schools may indirectly benefit themselves by creating such opportunities: Prior research has found that when parents feel connected to other parents at their children's school, this enhances their school engagement and involvement (Durand, 2011).

Limitations

This study has several notable limitations. First, the sample was largely well-educated, financially well-off, and mostly Caucasian. LG parents with less education may be less "out" to schools (Nixon, 2011) and may encounter unique difficulties in terms of advocating for their children. Second, the sample was not nationally representative. Because of the biases associated with self-selection, the findings cannot be viewed as representative of any particular group. Third, the study examined only the perspectives of adoptive parents, not teachers or children; that is, there was no triangulation of the data from multiple informants, which limits the richness and depth of the findings (Patton, 2002). Future work might, for example, examine parents' perspectives alongside early childhood educators' perspectives on interacting with LG and adoptive parents (Kintner-Duffy et al., 2012).

Fourth, we focused on parents' experiences in the preschool setting at only one point in time. Future work is needed that examines LG and adoptive parents' interactions with schools over time. Such research can help to establish how, for example, parents' experiences in the preschool setting set the stage for later school experiences, including their school involvement. Fifth, because parents responded to open-ended questionnaires in written form, the length and detail of participants' responses varied. In turn, the data were likely not as in-depth as data obtained in the context of open-ended interviews. At the same time, content analysis of open-ended survey data can be an important means of generating ideas and hypotheses to be followed up in future research (Porter, van Teijlingen, Chi Ying Yip, & Bhattacharya, 2007). Sixth, many of the questions parents were asked (e.g., about school-related challenges) were fairly general. A benefit of this approach is that such questions are likely to end up reflecting parents' concerns, rather than simply reflecting the researcher's concerns and hypotheses (Creswell, 2008). Yet, a drawback of asking general questions is that the themes that emerge may underrepresent certain phenomena. For example, we did not ask explicitly about mistreatment by other parents. Thus, it is perhaps not surprising that only a handful of parents described this, compared to 26% of the parents in the GLSEN survey, who were asked directly about this topic (Kosciw & Diaz, 2008). Finally, the ethnicities of the children in the study varied widely, making it difficult to identify patterns within subgroups. Thus, while we note patterns that were evident among parents of adopted children of color, it was difficult to go further than this due to the small number of children of any particular ethnicity (e.g., in a given theme, there might be only two children who shared the same ethnicity).

Conclusions

This study builds on the little existing research on the school-related perceptions and experiences of LG parents (Kosciw & Diaz, 2008) and adoptive parents (Nowak-Fabrykowski et al., 2009). The findings suggest that most parents were open about their family structure with their children's schools, and few reported sexuality-, adoption-, or race-related challenges at their children's schools. However, some parents did report challenges, and their experiences highlight the need for all early childhood educators to receive preparation for working with diverse families (Kintner-Duffy et al.,

2012; Robinson, 2002). Further, the findings point to a number of practical strategies that schools can implement to ensure affirming treatment of LG and adoptive parent families as well as curricular inclusion of LG and adoptive family experiences. At the very least, early childhood educators are encouraged to (a) seek professional training on diverse families (e.g., attend workshops and read books on diverse families); (b) use inclusive language in the classroom and on school forms (e.g., refer to "parents"; have room on school forms for Parent 1, and Parent 2—and possibly Parent 3 and Parent 4, to accommodate more complex families); (c) provide examples of LG and adoptive families when referencing families in the classroom; (d) use books and classroom materials that are inclusive of diverse families; and (e) celebrate events (e.g., adoption month) that can provide a platform for educating children, their parents, and school personnel about diverse families. In turn, future work can examine the effectiveness of such interventions, from the perspectives of teachers, parents, and children.

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