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## Lesbian, Gay, and Heterosexual Adoptive Parents' Perceptions of Inclusivity and Receptiveness in Early Childhood Education Settings

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### ABSTRACT

Little research has examined the experiences of lesbian/gay (LG) parent families or adoptive parent families in early childhood education settings. This study uses interview data to examine the perceptions and experiences of 45 lesbian, gay, and heterosexual couples (90 individuals) with 10 adopted children with respect to their (1) openness with schools and teachers regarding their child's adoptive status, racial background, and LG-parent family status and (2) perceptions of school inclusivity and responsiveness with respect to adoption, race, and family structure. The majority of parents explicitly disclosed their adoptive and LG-parent family status with teachers, but few discussed children's racial background with teachers. Many parents viewed their children's schools and teachers as explicitly inclusive of all types of families, providing specific examples of teacher practices that they appreciated. Some parents viewed schools as tolerant but not explicitly inclusive; reactions to this approach varied, with some parents appreciating not being "singled out," and others feeling overlooked. Finally, some parents viewed schools as marginalizing toward their family's adoptive, LG-parent family, and multiracial status. Lesbian mothers tended to report less positive impressions of schools than gay fathers. Findings have implications for schools and teachers seeking to create an inclusive environment for diverse families.

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Adoption; gay; kindergarten; lesbian; race; teachers

Families in today's society are becoming increasingly diverse and complex (Brodzinsky & Pertman, 2011). The household norm of two heterosexual parents with biological children has been replaced by a much more diverse array of family arrangements, in part because of changing social and political landscapes (Lofquist, Lugaila, O'Connell, & Feliz, 2012). In the United States, couples who are lesbian and gay (LG) are increasingly becoming parents, particularly through adoption (Gates, Badgett, Macomber, & Chambers, 2007), and, among U.S. families, couples who are LG are at least four times as likely as heterosexual couples to have adopted children (Gates, 2013). Further, adoptive families are often racially diverse. At least 40% of adoptions in the United States are transracial (i.e., parents adopt children who are of a different race; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2013), and couples who are LG are more likely than heterosexual couples to adopt transracially, making these families vulnerable to multiple forms of marginalization (Brodzinsky & Pertman, 2011). Finally, adoptions in the United States are increasingly characterized by openness between adoptive and birth parents (Brodzinsky & Pertman, 2011), adding another layer of complexity to family dynamics that is not well understood by society.

Despite such increases in family diversity and complexity, society has continued to prize the standard North American family (SNAF) of two married persons who are heterosexual and are parenting biologically related children (Smith, 1993), which can lead to the marginalization of families that deviate from this family form (Berkowitz, 2009). Societal systems (e.g., schools) have been slow to acknowledge and adapt to the experiences and needs of contemporary families. As schools reflect the larger society in which they are situated, they tend to enact and “perpetuate [the] ideological and political imperatives of the group in power” (Jeltova & Fish, 2005, p. 21)—namely, the heterosexual nuclear family standard (Berkowitz, 2009; Smith, 1993). In turn, LG families who are adoptive and multiracial may find that school practices, policies, curricula, and forms are biased toward the experiences of families who are White, heterosexual, two-parent, and biologically related. These families may face explicit marginalization (e.g., being told that only one parent can attend a Mother’s Day activity) and implicit marginalization (e.g., classrooms contain books exclusively focused on heterosexual parent, biological families), which may warrant confrontation.

Little research has examined the school experiences of parents who are LG, including their perceptions of school inclusiveness of and responsiveness to LG-parent families. Likewise, little work has addressed the school experiences of adoptive families. The current qualitative study examines the experiences of adoptive parents who are LG and heterosexual of young children with respect to their (1) openness regarding their child’s race, adoptive status, and family structure and (2) perceptions of schools’ inclusiveness of the unique aspects of their family.

This study is informed by an ecological perspective in its focus on the role of intersecting contexts of development (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). Although the family is the principal context in which early child development takes place, another salient context is the school; starting in kindergarten, children spend an average of 6 to 8 hours/day in the classroom (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). At the early school stage, children develop cognitive, physical, and social skills that will set them up for the future (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). They also develop an understanding of what is “normal,” and attitudes about various sources of difference, via classroom interactions (Turner-Vorbeck, 2005).

An ecological perspective stresses not only the family and school contexts, but also the significance of effective family-school linkages in promoting child development (Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Fine & Carlson, 1992). Indeed, young children are influenced by the parent-school relationship as well as the school context. Parents’ interactions with early educational settings are important, as they set the stage for parents’ expectations about and involvement in schools (Casper & Schultz, 1999). For example, parents’ perceptions of whether and how their families are acknowledged versus marginalized in schools shape parents’ school involvement throughout their children’s lives (Galindo & Sheldon, 2012). In turn, understanding parents’ experiences in terms of school inclusiveness can inform education development and reform (Jeltova & Fish, 2005).

This study is also informed by queer theory, which interrogates the notion of what it means to be normal; that is, it “troubles” heterosexual/homosexual binaries and practices (DePalma & Atkinson, 2009). When a family deviates from the standard nuclear American family (e.g., in the case of adoptive or LG-parent headed families), its members must take steps (e.g., announcing themselves, engaging in acts of resistance) to establish themselves as a “real” family to outsiders. In so doing, they complicate social norms of what it means to be a family (Berkowitz, 2009). Parents who are LG and adoptive challenge heteronormative processes and ideas of biological connectedness and racial homogeneity, thereby unmasking assumptions of what a “real” family looks like.

## **The significance of school inclusiveness**

Research has demonstrated the importance of addressing diversity in the early childhood education and elementary school years, to be inclusive of the diversity that exists in the lives of children and to “counteract the prejudice and discrimination that abounds in society, which begins in the early years of life” (Robinson, 2002, p. 415). Teachers and administrators can have a profound influence on children’s ideas about diversity, “through the discourses that they make available to children, and

those that they silence, through their daily practices, pedagogies and curricula” (Robinson, 2002, p. 416; see also Bernstein, Zimmerman, Werner-Wilson, & Vosburg, 2000).

Children who are adopted, of color, and/or have parents who are LG are especially vulnerable to marginalization in the school setting. In turn, it is important to understand parents’ perceptions of what schools are doing with respect to cultivating an environment that is supportive and/or reflective of their families. As scholars have noted, the failure by schools to validate basic aspects of children’s family structure and identity can negatively affect children’s developing self-concept (Cochran-Smith, 1995; Robinson, 2002). Schools that are welcoming and inclusive of diverse families can support children’s identity development and enhance family-school rapport.

### ***LG parents and schools***

LG-parent families are vulnerable to marginalization related to their family structure in the school setting. This marginalization may happen explicitly, whereby teachers or personnel purposefully exclude parents who are LG and their children from activities, events, or conversations (Goldberg, 2014). Marginalization also may be implicit, through exclusionary language and visuals in school curricula and activities (Larrabee & Kim, 2010). The limited research on the experiences of parents who are LG in schools suggests that parents report relatively low rates of explicit exclusion at school. The Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) surveyed 588 lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT) parents, most of whom were women and had a child in elementary school, and found that about one in six parents reported feeling that schools did not acknowledge their type of family (15%) or that they could not fully participate in the school community because they were LGBT (16%; Kosciw & Diaz, 2008). Similarly, Gartrell, Deck, Rodas, Peyser, and Banks (2005) studied 84 lesbian mothers of 5-year-olds and found that 18% of families reported experiencing homophobia expressed by teachers or peers.

Reported rates of implicit marginalization (e.g., exclusion in the school curriculum) tend to be higher. In the GLSEN (Kosciw & Diza, 2008) study, only 29% of parents reported that their children’s school curriculum included representations of LGBT people, history, or events. Similarly, a study of 15 families with lesbian mothers found that mothers voiced concerns about curricular content, including the representation of LG-parent families and racial diversity (Mercier & Harold, 2003).

Research suggests numerous barriers to meaningful inclusion of LG-parent families in early childhood and school settings, including the absence of school policies and resources for such inclusion and lack of teacher awareness of and expertise in deploying classroom activities that fully integrate LGBT identities and families (Jeltova & Fish, 2005; Larrabee & Kim, 2010). Teachers and schools also may believe that sexual diversity is an “age-inappropriate” topic for, or irrelevant to, young children (Duke & McCarthy, 2009), particularly when they think they do not have any LG-parent families in their classroom (Robinson, 2002). Such beliefs are contrary to research showing that young children internalize dominant ideas in society about gender roles and heterosexuality (Blaise, 2009). Teachers’ avoidance of sexual and family structure diversity may have harmful effects. In the absence of teachers who acknowledge, and materials that reflect, their families, children of LG parents may develop low self-worth, or be teased by peers who may have little context for understanding diverse family structures (Lindsay et al., 2006).

### ***Adoptive parents and schools***

Like LG-parent families, adoptive families are vulnerable to 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 that may not be acknowledged or understood. Thus, children who are adopted may face stigma related to their multiracial family structure or their racial/ethnic background specifically (Brodzinsky & Pertman, 2011).

Little work has examined how adoptive parents (LG or heterosexual) experience their children’s schools. A study of 196 adoptive parents who were LG and heterosexual of young children found

that although low levels of adoption-related stigma by teachers were reported overall, adoptive parents who are heterosexual reported higher levels than parents who were LG (Goldberg & Smith, 2014). In that adoptive parents who are LG face discrimination based on sexuality and adoption, they may be more likely to encounter sexuality-related stigma or to attribute instances of stigma to their sexuality.

Nowak-Fabrykowski, Helinski, and Buchstein (2009) surveyed 23 foster parents who were heterosexual and found that most described instances of implicit marginalization—that is, they reported that their children’s classrooms did not have materials related to adoption and felt that teachers should make an effort to assign lessons about adoption (e.g., during Adoption Month). Similarly, in a study of children who are adopted referred to mental health services, parents often reported that school curricula were generally insensitive toward topics related to family (e.g., about where children “come from”), which had sometimes created stress for the children (Barratt, 2011). Finally, in a study of 11 White parents with adopted Chinese daughters (age 2–9), Tan and Nakkula (2004) found that parents often felt that schools could be more racially/culturally sensitive. To promote a better learning environment for their children, some parents became active in the classroom (e.g., they gave lectures on Chinese culture), thus challenging and actively shaping classroom practices.

As with sexual diversity, teachers may fail to discuss family or racial diversity because they believe that young children are too young to understand these issues, an assumption that has been challenged (e.g., there is evidence that kindergarten-age children do think about and/or experience racism in their daily lives; Aukrust & Rydland, 2009). Teachers also may fail to discuss adoption because they are unaware of students in their classroom who are adopted; even when they are aware, they may not adapt their practices. One survey found that more than one half of early childhood educators were aware of children in their classrooms who were adopted; among these, only 34% had made adjustments in teaching practices, typically in relation to assignments related to families (Taymans et al., 2008). When teachers avoid curricular inclusion of adoption, this can create feelings of isolation for children who are adopted and may damage the parent-teacher relationship (Barratt, 2011).

Similar to adoption, when race is not addressed in early childhood settings, there is a risk of racism and harm to students. Children develop attitudes toward race at an early age. Once those attitudes are in place, it can be very difficult to uproot any stereotypes that may have taken hold (Aukrust & Ryland, 2009). Even when well-intentioned teachers take a “color-blind” approach, or avoid talking about race because of personal discomfort, they may contribute to institutional racism through their silence because young children internalize racism from the larger society. Such internalized racism must be explicitly challenged if racial stereotyping is to be prevented in school-age children (Bernstein et al., 2000).

### ***Parents’ openness with schools about various aspects of family diversity***

Aware of the ways in which their families may be overlooked or explicitly marginalized in the school setting, parents who are LG and adoptive may openly communicate about various aspects of their families with schools, as a means of (1) announcing their existence and (2) requesting inclusive treatment in school forms, curricula, volunteer opportunities, and parent organizations.

Older studies found that parents who are LG often remained closeted out of fear that they or their children would not be treated with respect by schools (Casper & Schultz, 1999). More recent studies have found that most parents reported being “out” to their children’s teachers; nevertheless, little is known about how they explain their level of outness (Kosciw & Diaz, 2008; Mercier & Harold, 2003). In GLSEN’s survey of parents who were LGBT, two thirds of parents spoke to teachers about being an parent who is LGBT (Kosciw & Diaz, 2008). A study of adoptive parents of preschoolers found that 90% of parents who were LG had disclosed their sexual orientation to teachers (Goldberg, 2014).

Little work has examined adoptive parents’ openness about their adoptive status. One exception is the study by Goldberg (2014), which found that 90% of parents who were LG and 83% of parents who were heterosexual had disclosed their child’s adoptive status to their children’s preschools.

As adopted children are often (1) a different race/ethnicity than their parents, and (2) of color, the extent to which, and why, adoptive parents openly and explicitly discuss their children's racial/ethnic background with teachers and schools is of interest. Such discussions might aid parents and teachers in ensuring that the school environment is racially, ethnically, and culturally inclusive (Tan & Nakkula, 2004). Indeed, evidence indicates that adoptive parents who are heterosexual and LG tend to value racial diversity and multiculturalism when choosing schools, especially when they have children of color (Goldberg & Smith, 2014; Mercier & Harold, 2003). On the other hand, some adoptive parents of children of color may feel that (1) their children's obvious phenotypic difference from their own clearly marks them as adopted, eliminating the need for explicit disclosure of their adoptive status; and/or (2) their children's skin tone or color is unambiguous, eliminating the need for disclosure or discussion of their racial/ethnic background.

## Research Questions

Based upon the limited work on the experiences with schools of parents who are LG and adoptive, particularly during the early school years, this study seeks to answer these research questions:

- (1) To what extent, and why, do parents choose to disclose, or not disclose, their adoptive family status, their child's racial background, and their sexual orientation to schools?
- (2) To what extent, and how, do parents feel that schools are inclusive/sensitive regarding their adoptive family status, their child's racial background, and their sexual orientation?

## Method

### Description of the sample

Data come from 90 parents in 45 couples (15 lesbian, 15 gay male, and 15 heterosexual parent families) who participated in individual, in-depth interviews about their perceptions and experiences of their children's kindergartens. ANOVA revealed that the average family income for families differed significantly,  $F(2, 41) = 5.310$ ,  $p = .009$ , such that gay couples had higher annual family incomes ( $M = \$184,000$ ,  $SD = \$97,614$ ) than lesbian couples ( $M = \$104,200$ ,  $SD = \$40,722$ ;  $p = .046$ ). Heterosexual couples ( $M = \$111,166$ ,  $SD = \$55,201$ ) did not differ from couples who were LG with regard to income. Participants were highly educated: 30% had a bachelor's degree, 30% had a master's degree, 18% had a doctorate, 15% had an associate's degree/some college, and 7% had a high school diploma/Graduate Equivalency Diploma (GED). ANOVA revealed that education did not differ by family type.

The average age of children was 5.900 years ( $SD = 1.500$ ); ANOVA showed that age did not differ by family type. Most children were adopted via private domestic adoption (60%); the others were adopted via international (20%) and public domestic (20%) adoption. Fifty-four percent of couples adopted boys, 42% adopted girls, and 4% adopted siblings (boy and girl). A chi-squared test revealed no differences in child gender by family type.

Parents were mostly White (86%). A chi-squared test revealed that parent race differed by family type,  $\chi^2(2, n = 84) = 6.360$ ,  $p = .040$ : 100% of lesbian parents, 82% of gay parents, and 93% of heterosexual parents were White; the rest were parents of color. Lesbian parents were more likely to be White than gay parents ( $p = .021$ ). Thirty-four couples (11 lesbian, 12 gay, 11 heterosexual; 76%) adopted a child of color. Namely, 29% of children were biracial/multiracial, 21% were Latino, 9% were Black, 15% were Asian, and 2% were Native American. The remaining 24% of children were White. Regarding parent-child racial match, in 71% of cases, the parent was White and the child was of color. In 21% of cases, parent and child were White. In 7% of cases, both were of color. In 1% of cases, the parent was of color and the child was White. Distributions of adoption type, child race, and racial match did not differ by family type.



Seventy-six percent of children were in preschool or kindergarten, 11% were in 1st grade, and the remaining 13% of children were in 2nd through 5th grade. Forty-four percent of parents reported that their children attended public schools and 56% reported that their children attended private schools. Neither school type nor grade differed significantly by family type.

Thirty-five percent of the sample resided in the Northeast region of the United States, 27% lived on the West Coast, 20% lived in the Midwest, 16% lived in the South, and 2% resided in Canada. Just over one half of the sample (57%) lived in metropolitan areas (i.e., a core urban area of 50,000 or more population); the remainder lived in nonmetro communities (i.e., fewer than 50,000 residents; United States Census Bureau, 2013). Neither geographic region nor urbanicity differed by family type.

### **Recruitment and participant selection**

Inclusion criteria for the larger study from which this sample was drawn were (1) couples must be adopting their first child and (2) both partners must be becoming parents for the first time. Couples were recruited during the preadoptive period. More than 30 adoption agencies throughout the United States 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 principal investigator (PI). U.S. Census data were used to identify states with a high percentage of same-sex couples (Gates & Ost, 2004); effort was made to contact agencies in those states. Couples who were heterosexual and same sex were recruited, and effort was made to match couples roughly on geography and income. Because some couples may not be “out” to agencies, national LGBT organizations disseminated study information.

Couples who participated in the original study of the transition to adoptive parenthood were recontacted 5 years postadoption to participate in a follow up. Both partners in each couple were asked to complete in-depth questionnaires; then, a subsample was invited to be interviewed about experiences with their children’s schools (see Goldberg & Smith, 2014, for information about the larger sample). In identifying invitees, effort was made to ensure diversity (e.g., in parent sexual orientation, adoption type, child race). Data are drawn from these 5-year postadoption interviews.

### **Procedure**

Participants took part in a 1-hour telephone interview with the PI or a graduate student. The following interview questions were used in our analysis: (1) Tell me about the schools [child] has attended. (2) Are you open with [child’s] teachers, school, etc. about their adoption? Racial background? Your sexual orientation? Explain: Why are you (not) open? What types of responses do you get when you broach these facts about your family? (3) Do you feel [child’s] teachers have been sensitive, respectful, and inclusive with respect to your status as an adoptive/multiracial/LG-parent family? Can you please give examples of how they have, or have not been, sensitive, etc.? If they have not been sensitive, etc., how did you deal with this? What was the outcome? (4) Do you feel that different aspects of your family are acknowledged in school curricula? Explain. (5) Have you talked with [child’s] teacher or school about ways to better incorporate adoptive/LG/multiracial families into the curriculum? If so, what was the outcome?

### **Data analysis**

Participants’ responses were transcribed and examined using thematic analysis (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Our analysis was informed by an ecological perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1986) and queer theory (Berkowitz, 2009; DePalma & Atkinson, 2009). We attended to aspects of the parent-school and child-school relationship, in the broader context of the family’s educational experiences. We also examined how parents navigated their family’s minority statuses (regarding adoption, race, sexuality) in the context of their children’s schools. We also attended to possible intersections (e.g., among parent gender, sexual orientation, and child race) in our analysis.

To develop themes, we used a process of analytic triangulation, by which each of the four authors independently coded the data. This process ensures that multiple interpretations are considered, enhancing the credibility of the analysis (Patton, 2002). The four coders, who constitute a diverse group (e.g., with regard to sexual orientation and parenting statuses), discussed our social positioning and the possible influence of our biases throughout coding. We engaged in an iterative process of coding that involved a continual back and forth between the data and our analysis. Once we had formed clearly articulated codes, we applied focused coding, using the most significant codes to sort the data. These focused codes, which can be understood as being more conceptual and selective, became the basis for the “themes” developed in our analysis.

We engaged in check coding (Miles & Huberman, 1994) to help us clarify our categories and definitions and to provide a reliability check. That is, we independently coded the data and examined our level of agreement upon codes. Early on, intercoder agreement ranged from 80% to 85% (number of agreements/number of agreements/disagreements). We discussed coding disagreements at weekly meetings and used these discussions to refine our scheme. Intercoder agreement using our final scheme ranged from 90% to 100%, indicating good reliability. The final scheme was established once we had verified agreement among all the independently coded data.

Of note is that although both partners were interviewed, our analysis led us to examine their data as a unit, rather than to assess differences between the partners. We observed few discrepancies in parents’ reports; parents tend to be unified in their approach to handling public institutions such as schools (Grolnick & Slowiaczek, 1994). Indeed, parental differences were not the focus of the interviews: We asked parents to focus on schools, rather than on each other.

## Results

In response to our first research question, we note themes related to parent disclosure of information about their families (i.e., to what extent they directly shared information about their child’s adoptive status, race, or family structure at the beginning of or throughout the school year). Then, in response to our second question, we discuss parents’ experiences with school inclusivity. Table 1 contains themes for all major codes.

### **Disclosure practices: Adoption, race, and sexual orientation**

Parents’ disclosure practices regarding their children’s adoptive status, racial background, and family structure (two mother/two father status) are described first. Parents engaged strategies of proactive disclosure, reactive disclosure, implicit disclosure, and nondisclosure with regard to all three domains (see Table 1). Among parents who were LG, parents who engaged in explicit disclosure (proactive or reactive) about adoption were somewhat more likely to engage in explicit disclosure (proactive or reactive) about family structure,  $r = .250$ ,  $p = .097$ , but not race,  $r = .004$ ,  $p = .980$ . Explicit disclosure about adoption and explicit disclosure about race were not strongly associated in the full sample,  $r = .080$ ,  $p = .580$ .

### **Talking to teachers about children’s adoptive status**

Many parents described engaging in *proactive disclosure* of their children’s adoptive status with teachers. That is, 27 couples (eight lesbian, 10 gay, nine heterosexual; 60% of the sample) emphasized that they wanted to take a proactive role in disclosing their child’s adoptive status. Some parents elaborated upon their reasons for taking a proactive approach: (1) they were in an open adoption (i.e., had contact with their child’s birth parents), and wanted to reduce confusion and ensure that the teacher knew and used appropriate adoption language such as “birth mom” ( $n = 5$ ); (2) they operated under a philosophy of openness in general and did not want to “hide anything” from the school ( $n = 4$ ); (3) they wanted teachers to be able to respond sensitively if the child was teased about adoption ( $n = 4$ ); (4) in case the child brought it up ( $n = 3$ ); (5) to ensure teachers would be aware



**Table 1.** Couples' reports of self-disclosure and teacher inclusion of adoption, race, and sexual orientation/family structure, by family type.

Theme	Lesbian	Gay	Heterosexual	Total <i>N</i>	Total %
Adoption disclosure ( <i>N</i> = 45)					
Proactive	8	10	9	27	60
Reactive	4	2	3	9	20
Implicit	1	1	1	2	7
Nondisclosure	2	2	2	7	13
Race disclosure ( <i>N</i> = 34)					
Proactive	3	4	3	10	29
Reactive	1	0	2	3	9
Implicit	7	7	4	18	53
Nondisclosure	0	1	2	3	9
Sexual orientation/family structure disclosure ( <i>N</i> = 30)					
Proactive	8	11	—	19	63
Reactive	3	1	—	4	13
Implicit	3	2	—	5	17
Nondisclosure	1	1	—	2	7
Adoption—Teaching ( <i>N</i> = 45)					
Explicit inclusion	3	7	3	13	29
Universalizing	7	4	6	17	38
Marginalizing	5	4	6	15	33
Race—Teaching ( <i>N</i> = 34)					
Explicit inclusion	4	5	9	18	53
Universalizing	2	5	1	8	23.5
Marginalizing	5	2	1	8	23.5
Sexual orientation/family structure—Teaching ( <i>N</i> = 30)					
Explicit inclusion	3	8	—	11	37
Universalizing	8	5	—	13	43
Marginalizing	4	2	—	6	20

and sensitive (i.e., not ask questions that would cause discomfort; modify class activities as needed;  $n = 3$ ); (6) because it was “no big deal” and obvious (e.g., due to racial differences between parent/child;  $n = 2$ ); and (7) to ensure the school social worker would be aware of any adoption-related issues ( $n = 1$ ).

Nine couples (four lesbian, two gay, three heterosexual; 20%) described a strategy of reactive disclosure: they had disclosed their child's adoptive status in reaction to an event that had occurred. Situations that prompted disclosure of their adoptive status included (1) school forms that did not allow them to accurately describe their family ( $n = 2$ ); (2) Mother's Day was approaching, leading a couple who was gay to inform the teacher that their son “has a relationship with his birth mother” and could do a card for her; and (3) peer teasing, prompting a lesbian couple to talk to the teacher about their child's adoptive status and donate books about adoption to the school.

A few couples ( $n = 3$ ; one lesbian, one gay, one heterosexual; 7%) reported implicit disclosure; that is, they did not explicitly disclose their child's adoptive status to schools or teachers because they felt it was “obvious,” because of their status as two moms/dads, and/or the fact that their child was of a different race than both parents. Sam, a gay father, said, “We haven't brought up that we're an adoptive family, but we're two dads, so I think they . . . maybe assume?”

Six couples (two lesbian, two gay, two heterosexual; 13%) described nondisclosure: they had not shared their child's adoptive status with their child's school or teachers. Five couples explained that they did not regard adoption as “relevant” or a “big deal” (i.e., it was not seen as a big part of their child's/family's identity). “It's never been an issue. . . . We don't really focus on it at home . . . so we don't talk about it with them,” said Marisa, a heterosexual mother. One lesbian couple did not disclose because of concerns about bias:

What if the teacher has pre-conceived ideas about it? The [school forms] did not ask if they're adopted, and at the orientation, I thought, should we say something? Then I thought, let's not. If anything comes up, we'll address it then.

### **Talking to teachers about child's race**

Few parents described a strategy of proactive disclosure or discussion regarding race, whereby they discussed their child's racial/ethnic background with teachers at the beginning of or throughout the school year. Of the 34 couples who adopted a child of color, only 10 (three lesbian, four gay, three heterosexual; 29% of parents of children of color) described proactive disclosure, for which some provided explanations. Three couples discussed their children's race/ethnicity with teachers because they wanted to ensure that their children (1) saw themselves reflected in the material covered at school and (2) were being exposed to positive lessons about their racial/ethnic background; they also "brought in books about brown kids and transracial adoption." These parents emphasized that the disclosure of race was not necessary because the child's race was visibly apparent. Rather, they wanted a proactive discussion of their child's specific racial background and/or how to approach race in the classroom. Then, in two cases, parents were primarily concerned with clarifying that they had adopted transracially and were a multiracial family (which was not visibly apparent), to "reduce any confusion later on."

Three couples (one lesbian, two heterosexual; 9%) described reactive disclosure, whereby a lack of understanding about their child or family prompted them to speak up about their child's racial/ethnic background. One heterosexual couple described how their son had experienced health issues in part because of his difficulties acclimating to a different climate, which they attributed to him being Vietnamese. Because "teachers weren't aware that . . . there was a physical difference in his body," they shared details about his background. One heterosexual couple explained that they only disclosed to teachers that their son was Latino because people "see him and ask where he gets his dark eyes." Thus, these parents disclosed to avoid these kinds of inquiries in the future.

Eighteen couples (seven lesbian, seven gay, four heterosexual; 53%) described implicit disclosure, where they did not discuss their child's racial background but affirmed that it was "obvious," such that it seemed unnecessary to comment on or explain to teachers. Some also noted that their child's race had not been raised as an issue at school ("they haven't done anything that would lead me to believe that they disrespected it,"  $n = 6$ ), further invalidating the need for discussion; and a few ( $n = 2$ ) noted that their children's school was racially diverse, rendering explanations of children's racial backgrounds unnecessary (i.e., teachers were assumed to be familiar with and sensitive to a racially diverse student body).

Three couples (one gay, two heterosexual; 9%) described nondisclosure, where they did not discuss their child's background with schools, or see disclosure as necessary, as their child was biracial and/or light-skinned, and not typically identified as racially different from them, which in turn was not seen as problematic ( $n = 3$ ).

### **Talking to teachers about parent sexual orientation/family structure**

Many parents (19 couples: eight lesbian, 11 gay; 63%) engaged in proactive disclosure about their family structure, such that they directly addressed the two-mom/two-dad nature of their family structure with schools or teachers. Like adoption, some couples ( $n = 8$ ) disclosed simply because they wished to be honest about the nature of their family structure; being honest, they felt, was "easier" than not disclosing such details. Jake explained: "I got it out there as early as I could so that it's not something I'm stressing out over." Other couples ( $n = 7$ ) disclosed as a means of trying to proactively avoid homophobia directed at their child. Bianca explained that her daughter "was going to talk about her mommies, that we are both parents, that [she] was adopted." In one case, proactive disclosure was initiated because one partner was "not on the legal paperwork; we needed to make sure the principal understood that I'm their mother as well."

More than two thirds of the families who described engaging in proactive disclosure specifically mentioned that they were met with neutral or positive responses. "The counselor said it was becoming more common, which was the perfect thing to say," said Leigh. "We were treated as a non-issue. . . . It was kind of unremarkable, which I think is the best way to handle this," said Travis. When teachers were surprised, they typically adjusted quickly: "They kind of looked like deer in headlights in the beginning" but "after the initial conversation . . . they've been very good."

A few couples ( $n = 4$ ; three lesbian, one gay; 13%) described reactive disclosure, whereby they disclosed their sexual orientation in reaction to an event or situation at school—typically involving school forms or peer issues. One couple disclosed their two-dad family status because “the school form listed me as the stepfather.” One lesbian couple felt the need to correct the school’s misconceptions about their family structure when they received a bill addressed to “Mr. and Mrs.” One lesbian couple stated that they spoke to the school (and donated books about diverse families) after their son was confronted with questions and comments from peers about his family structure (e.g., “You can’t have two moms”; “Why don’t you have a dad?”).

Five couples described implicit disclosure (three lesbian, two gay; 17%); that is, they felt that their family structure was “obvious” and thus “we didn’t have to say anything about it.” As Allison stated, “I mean, we are both there. They must know that [child] has two moms.” Everett asserted, “When we registered [child] for school, I think it was pretty evident that it was a same-sex parent [family]. . . . It’s just something we never discussed.” Believing that school personnel would pick up on their family structure implicitly, they felt that disclosure was unnecessary.

Finally, two couples (one lesbian, one gay; 7%) reported nondisclosure of their sexual orientation. These two couples noted that they did not want to “draw attention to” their families; they preferred to “not make it a whole deal.” One of these couples noted that only one parent dropped off the child at school, and so it was not “necessary to get into it.”

### ***Teachers’ practices: Adoption, race, family structure***

Teachers were described as varying significantly in their consideration of adoption, race, and family structure in their classrooms and curricula—through their own initiative and in response to parents’ disclosures. Some teachers were described as explicitly incorporating diverse families into the classroom, others were described as emphasizing universalizing principles as opposed to diversity, and still others were described as marginalizing diverse families (see Table 1). Of note is that teachers who were described by parents as emphasizing and incorporating adoption also tended to be described as taking the same approach toward race,  $\chi^2(4, n = 65) = 10.600, p = .031$ , such that 67% of teachers who emphasized adoption were also likely to emphasize race. Notably, although, teachers who reportedly emphasized adoption did not tend to take the same approach toward family structure,  $\chi^2(2, n = 57) = 3.141, p = .208$ , and teachers who reportedly emphasized race did not tend to emphasize family structure,  $\chi^2(2, n = 41) = .045, p = .978$ .

### ***Parents’ perceptions of teachers’ consideration of adoption***

All parents ( $n = 45$  couples) provided responses about their perceptions of the school’s consideration of adoption/adoptive families. Themes (by family type) appear in Table 1.

### ***Explicit consideration and incorporation of adoption and adoptive families***

Some parents described ways in which their children’s schools explicitly acknowledged adoption and/or adoptive families in the curriculum and/or classroom (13 couples: three lesbian, seven gay, three heterosexual; 29% of the sample). Often, this came in the form of books. Namely, some parents highlighted how their children’s classrooms had books featuring adoption, with several stating that they themselves had donated books, which the teachers then read. In addition, modifications to traditional classroom activities were noted by some parents, such that the altered activities were made to be sensitive to adoptive families (“the teacher didn’t do the family tree out of respect for us”). Kevin, a gay father, explained,

They’re not doing a family tree project, which is cool; they’re doing a “me bag,” where [they get a bag] and fill it with things that represent them, and they tell their story by pulling out the objects from the bag and talking about it. So the kid is encouraged to put things in, and the parents are encouraged too, so it’s a collaborative project.

Matt, a gay father, “explained to the teachers that we celebrate ‘Gotcha Day’ and asked if we could do something. The teachers said that would be perfect . . . and [let] us and [child] explain his story.”

Several parents noted that teachers were active in creating not only classrooms that were inclusive of adoption, but also environments where children had the freedom to share, or not share, information about their adoption. Miranda, a lesbian, explained how she had been present in her daughter’s classroom:

when another student . . . said that he celebrates his adoption day, and the teacher said, “Does anybody else celebrate that?” and [daughter] raised her hand, and the teacher said “Would you like to explain it, or do you want your mom to explain it?” and [daughter] said “Neither.”

The teacher was described as taking this in stride, illustrating how she created space for, and also respected boundaries around, conversations about adoption.

### ***Adoption: Emphasis on universalizing principles in regard to families***

Most parents described how the approach to adoption in the classrooms was not one of explicit integration and discussion, but rather one that emphasized commonalities (as opposed to differences) across families and children. According to these parents (17 couples: seven lesbian, four gay, six heterosexual; 38% of the sample), adoption was rarely mentioned or acknowledged in the context of family diversity. Heather, a lesbian, noted, “The teachers seem sensitive enough not to say anything insensitive about adoption and alternative family units, but they do nothing specific to include adoption in curriculum.” In a few cases, parents noted that teachers “talked to children about how families come in different forms but don’t talk about adoption specifically. There are no books specifically on adoption.” Thus, although teachers were careful not to say anything insensitive, they were also not proactive in including adoptive families in class discussions and projects. Stated Tanya, a heterosexual mother, “It’s not overlooked, but it’s not singled out.”

In several cases, parents positively interpreted the lack of acknowledgment of their status as adoptive families as affirmation that teachers viewed them and their children as “normal” and “just like everyone else”: “It’s like they don’t even notice. Like, to them, it’s completely normal, completely natural,” said Stacy, a lesbian. In a few cases, they simply didn’t mind the lack of explicit inclusion: “I have not [seen anything about adoption]. I don’t see anything like that [but] it doesn’t really bother me,” said Taylor, a heterosexual father. Thus, some parents valued feeling “normal,” even if it meant that their specific family structure was not addressed in the curricula.

In a few cases, lack of attention to adoption was seen as problematic. Alia, a lesbian, felt that the fact that there was “not much talk about it” was a

big oversight, because there’s tons of kids in that school who are . . . living in all kinds of family arrangements that are not two parents who conceived and gave birth to them. So there is a general acceptance of a fluidity of family arrangements but not a lot of proactive stuff.

Thus, lack of attention to adoption reflected a larger problem of not acknowledging the diversity of family structures present in their children’s schools.

### ***Implicit or explicit marginalization of adoption: “Teachers don’t get it”***

Some parents ( $n = 15$  couples; five lesbian, four gay, six heterosexual; 33%) described explicit and implicit forms of marginalization of their child’s adoptive status in the classroom. In large part, these parents acknowledged that teachers were not prejudiced, but simply ignorant (“they don’t totally understand”), which manifested in their approach to curricula (e.g., assignments/activities were rendered awkward or difficult). Rachel, a heterosexual mother, described how the teacher “asked for homework involving a baby picture of the child and the child’s birth weight and height,” which they did not have: “that assignment was not sensitive to adoption.” Caroline, a lesbian, said her daughter’s teacher had “[just] assigned a project [involving] a picture of the ‘day they were born.’ . . . They could make that more inclusive by saying the day the child was born or adopted.”

Other examples of problematic approaches to curricular inclusion were noted. For example, Becky, a heterosexual mother, noted that her son's "school was supposed to provide books on adoption as part of his IEP [individualized education program], but didn't." When Becky sent books in, the teachers improperly used an adoption book about pet adoption, and the discussion wound up being about animals, not adoption. In conclusion, Becky noted, "the 'accept everything and love everybody' approach is not enough." Becky and others recognized that total avoidance of adoption, and poorly informed attempts at addressing it, were inadequate in promoting an accurate, positive understanding of adoption within the school community.

Instances of insensitivity by teachers were noted as well. Letty, a lesbian, stated that her daughter Bea's teacher showed "a willingness to learn about adoption," but had "moments of ignorance," such as when she asked Bea, "What is adoption day?" and asked Letty, "Do you celebrate [adoption] day instead of her birthday?" A few couples confronted teachers' assumptions that adoption involved "the rescuing of children" and parents were "saints" for adopting.

In a few cases, parents in this category described how they had donated books or resources to schools and were met with neutral to negative responses. Kristin, a lesbian, had "offered the school resources to teach about adoptive and LGBT families"; "the teacher was open-minded" but "didn't put it on the curriculum." Mindy, a lesbian, noted a lack of follow-up after she donated books on diverse families: "Maybe I should say, 'How are those books going over?'" Thus, parents who responded to school insensitivity by donating resources tended to feel that the teachers did not do enough to include these materials.

### ***Parents' perceptions of teachers' consideration of race/ethnicity***

Themes related to schools' treatment of race/ethnicity were analyzed for the 34 couples in the sample who adopted a child of color (11 lesbian, 12 gay, 11 heterosexual); see [Table 1](#).

### ***Explicit consideration and incorporation of racial/ethnic diversity***

Some parents (18 couples: four lesbian, five gay, nine heterosexual; 53% of parents of a child of color) described ways in which their children's schools acknowledged and incorporated racial/ethnic diversity in the curriculum and classroom. Parents highlighted books with multiracial and multicultural families, and racial/ethnic minority characters (sometimes in "lead roles") in describing the racial, ethnic, and cultural inclusivity of their children's schools. They also pointed to the use of materials (e.g., art projects) that depicted racially diverse communities, the celebration of holidays and events ("they celebrate Black History Month, Jewish holidays, etc."), and the curricular inclusion of racially and culturally diverse historical figures (Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr.).

Many parents gave specific examples of how racial, ethnic, and cultural issues were infused meaningfully into the curriculum. Nick, a gay father, shared, "They said, 'For the next 6–8 weeks we're going to be studying Gandhi and Frida Kahlo.' They are really big on diversity and family structures." Henry, a gay father, said,

They incorporate it in discussions and in art. They have diversity discussions, like, "What's your background?" and "What's your nationality?" One time they colored flags so [a child] was able to say things like, "I have Nicaraguan heritage. I also have Polish heritage because my Daddy's Polish. My Papa is Irish."

### ***Emphasis on universalizing principles in regard to race/ethnicity***

Some parents ( $n = 8$  couples: two lesbian, five gay, one heterosexual; 23.5%) described their children's schools' philosophy as one that promoted inclusion and diversity in general, focusing on similarities across groups, such that "inclusion and diversity 'go hand and hand.'" According to these parents, racial/ethnic differences in general or among students were not highlighted; diversity in general was (often superficially) emphasized as being positive. Frank, a gay father, interpreted the philosophy of his daughter's school like this: "They are trying to teach them that diversity is a good thing, and that there is

nothing to fear.” Observed Bill, a gay father, “Race has come up a couple of times in a positive way, like Black History Month . . . but I think that’s it.” Cheryl, a lesbian, said that she did not know details on what the school was teaching about race/ethnicity, but assumed it was “all positive messages.” These parents tended to lack specifics, but generally sensed that racial diversity was positively depicted, but not frequently or explicitly discussed.

### ***Race/ethnicity: Implicit or explicit marginalization***

In some cases ( $n = 8$  couples; five lesbian, two gay, one heterosexual; 23.5%), race was rendered invisible in children’s schools or classrooms, whereby there was no discussion of race or racial diversity, either explicitly or implicitly (e.g., in general discussions about diversity). In one case, Corey, a gay father, stated that the school was “very strict on not pointing out differences. They won’t even mention race.”

Several participants noted the absence of racial diversity or multiculturalism from their children’s school curricula and classroom materials specifically, noting, for example, that “all of the books in the school show White children; there are no children or parents of color. The implicit message is, ‘You’ve got two parents, you’re the birth child, your skin matches their skin.’” Richard, a gay father, was frustrated that his daughter’s curriculum “doesn’t address diverse families; most of the books and worksheets show heterosexual White families.” These parents, then, felt distanced from the school because of its racial insensitivity and lack of inclusivity.

A few parents described instances of explicit marginalization by teachers. Thus, teachers were described as not simply ignoring race but in some cases denigrating their children’s racial background. Dwight, gay father, felt that teachers drew too much attention to his daughter’s hair. Dwight noted that she had been chosen for a part in the school play based on her physical features, prompting him to talk to her about how to assert herself: “I’m like, ‘No . . . you don’t have to let them touch you, you can say ‘don’t touch me’ or ‘don’t touch my hair.’”

Several parents in this category noted that they had provided their children’s school with some materials (e.g., books) to address the lack of racial/ethnic inclusivity; schools, in turn, were described as responding positively or neutrally to their input. James, a gay father, explained, “We bought a bunch of kids books that either featured interracial families or families with same-sex parents, and I know they made those available for the kids to just look at.”

### ***Parents’ perceptions of teachers’ consideration of sexual orientation/family***

Themes related to teachers’ and schools’ treatment of family structure/family diversity were analyzed for the 30 same-sex couples in the sample (15 lesbian, 15 gay); see [Table 1](#).

### ***Explicit affirmation and inclusion of sexual orientation/family diversity***

Some parents ( $n = 11$  couples; three lesbian, eight gay; 37% of LG parents) described ways that their children’s teachers had been inclusive, respectful, and affirming of their family structure. Paige noted that her child’s teacher had been “conscientious from [the] first conference onward. She wanted to be sure that she knew what [child] called each of us.” In a few cases, parents were aware that teachers talked about their family structure “really freely” in the classroom, “answering questions from kids” about what it meant to have two moms/two dads, and “going out of their way so [child] doesn’t feel odd . . . making efforts to bring up diverse families, including gay couples.” Others felt that openness was communicated indirectly, such as via teachers’ use of non-heteronormative language (“the teacher says, ‘take this note home to your mommy or daddy or whoever cares for you and loves you’”) and school forms (e.g., which did not assume a mother/father parental unit).

Inclusive books and curricula were described as important ways that teachers and schools communicated their acceptance and inclusiveness. Regarding books, several parents explained that the school had books on topics related to same-sex parent families. Miranda explained that “the



teacher read a book about how we're alike and different . . . how some families have different types of parents." Regarding curricula, several parents stated that their children's teachers had engaged them in a conversation about how to sensitively handle Mother's Day/Father's Day. Hillary noted that "on Mother's Day, the teachers were mindful that she has two moms, so she made two great cards." Ryan said that his son's teacher "checked with us beforehand to see if there would be a female figure that was appropriate [to make something for]." The inclusion of LGBT history was noted by several couples, wherein, for example, the school "had a lesson on [the history and importance] of the rainbow flag," and "famous, influential gay people" were discussed, sending an "important message of inclusion" and legitimacy regarding people who are LGBT and their families.

Parents mentioned a number of ways in which their children's teachers had been explicitly affirming to them, including: introducing them to other same-sex parents at the school, coming out themselves to the child, and hanging pictures of same-sex families in the classroom. In a few cases, parents mentioned that they had donated books about LGBT parent families to the school (e.g., *The Family Book*, *Tango Makes Three*), which teachers made use of in their classrooms (e.g., displaying them or reading them to the children), thereby taking advantage of the resources that parents provided to make their classrooms more inclusive.

### ***Emphasis on universalizing principles in regard to family structure***

Some couples ( $n = 13$ ; eight lesbian, five gay; 43%) described their children's schools as implicitly, as opposed to explicitly, inclusive. Their children's schools and teachers "promote[d] diversity and inclusion in general," but did not typically "name any specifics." The overall message, then, was that "there are different types of families." As Heather put it, "The teachers seem sensitive enough not to say anything insensitive about same-sex families and alternative family units, but there is nothing specific to include diverse families in the curriculum."

These parents did not observe any problems at school (e.g., with regard to how teachers treated their children). They noted that their children were able to draw pictures of their families, talk about their families, and so on, with no negative consequence. At the same time, there was no explicit attention brought to the diversity of families represented in the classroom. The lack of explicit attention was sometimes regarded positively (i.e., their child or family was not being "singled out," which was seen as evidence of acceptance). Mark stated, "There's a bulletin board where each family could post a picture of themselves. We put one up, and there were no issues. It has been nothing more than what we would expect for any other family."

One perceived problem with this message of "general family diversity" was that, though sincere, it may be "overly simplistic." As Stacy noted, "I think that the people involved really believe in [the message of family diversity] but I think that as kids older it tends to kind of read like lip-service to [the important issues]." In a few cases, the "benign neglect" of their differences was mildly unsettling. Sara noted that the school seemed "welcoming in general, but doesn't go out of their way. I can't say that they have done anything overwhelmingly supportive . . . but I can't say that they've done anything [negative]." She paused, wondering if the "bar was set too low."

Some participants described having brought in books on different types of families, and others brought in more extensive resources (e.g., information about how to teach about families who are LGBT). These participants described neutral to positive responses to their offerings. Allison, for example, stated that they,

eventually bought the books we recommended . . . but those books should've already been there. It's one thing for some organization to roll along, and then once there's gay people who they know about, they're willing to accommodate them, [but it's another] to be welcoming ahead of time.

She concluded by saying, "I think that's a problem. Our kids in that school are not the only kids who have queer people in their lives who they love."

### **Family structure: Implicit/explicit marginalization**

Six couples (four lesbian, two gay; 20%) described ways in which schools had implicitly or explicitly marginalized their families. They tended to describe teachers' oversights and exclusions as reflecting ignorance or "lack of education" about LG-parent families, as opposed to being rooted in hateful beliefs. Greta noted, "They are clumsy [in dealing with us]," but also felt that her child's teacher "meant well." Lynda stated, "I just don't think they're super educated about it. They don't know the language to use."

Several of these parents had offered input or donated materials to the school, but with little effect. Two couples, for example, noted that they had spoken to their children's schools about heteronormative paperwork and assignments, and, as Sophie noted, "nothing has been changed or anything based on our feedback." Likewise, Letty stated that she had "given the school a book with same-sex parents," but joked, "if the teachers use it, it'll end up on the six o'clock news," referring to a possible homophobic reaction that could occur in her community if her daughter's school actually discussed same-sex parenting.

A few parents observed evidence of problematic stereotypes on the part of teachers related to parenting by same-sex couples or by men specifically. For example, one gay couple stated that their son had pulled down another child's pants. That child's mother interpreted it as related to the fact that their son had gay parents. The couple was upset that the teachers were ill prepared to handle the situation and to correct the stigmas that were fueling the parent's reaction.

## **Discussion**

This study addresses several interrelated, understudied topics that are relevant to early childhood professionals and teachers, who are increasingly likely to encounter diverse families. Teachers may be more sensitive in their treatment of children who were adopted, have diverse racial/ethnic backgrounds, and have parents who are LG, if they are aware that children in their classrooms hold these identities. In turn, understanding when and why parents share information about these identities to teachers is important. Findings revealed that parents are more likely to feel compelled to explicitly disclose their child's adoptive origins and LG-parent family structure than they are to provide details about their child's racial/ethnic background. This is likely in part because the latter seems to represent a more straightforward and unambiguous aspect of their child's physical appearance, and are also likely to be more familiar to teachers; indeed, the former elements of diversity hold more potential to be dealt with insensitively (e.g., because of heteronormative ideals that treat parent families who are biogenetically heterosexual as the norm; Berkowitz, 2009). Parents who are open about their child's adoption may choose not to discuss their child's racial background because they regard it as something that schools do not "need" to know, except, perhaps, when they are highly race conscious or are concerned about racial stigma (Hughes & Chen, 1997).

Parents generally shared information about their children's background and family structure proactively, out of a desire to be open and honest, to minimize the chances of teacher insensitivity and peer mistreatment, and to increase the likelihood that their child's personal and family circumstances would be sensitively handled in the classroom. These adoptive and LG-parent headed families took steps to establish themselves as a "real" families to the school, thereby challenging social norms about what a family looks like and "queering" the family (Berkowitz, 2009). Few couples overall reported disclosing information about their child/family in reaction to a negative experience at school; of interest is whether this changes over time, as the peer context becomes more salient (and heteronormative; Bronfenbrenner, 1986). Some parents described implicit disclosure, whereby they did not feel that it was necessary or appropriate to have formal conversations about their children's or family's differences. At the same time, they made no effort to conceal them, possibly reflecting their trust in teachers to appropriately handle conversations around family and individual diversity. A minority of parents deliberately did not disclose aspects of difference; they tended to explain that it was "not a big deal" (i.e., to them, to their family, to their child), or that it did not seem relevant to share (i.e., it was not the school's "business"). Indeed, parents who

deliberately did not disclose about their families may have wanted a “typical” classroom environment for their child (i.e., one in which they would be treated like everyone else and not “singled out” for their differences) (Turner-Vorbeck, 2005). Taken together, these findings point to the ways in which parents’ own beliefs about the significance of adoption, race, and family structure (e.g., with regard to their child’s or family’s identity) may shape general openness and specific conversations about these topics, within and outside of the family (Tan & Nakkula, 2004). Future work should explore parents’ race-, adoption-, and family-related beliefs and ideals (e.g., how much do parents want to “blend in” with dominant families?) in relation to openness, and how disclosure practices affect their children (Bronfenbrenner, 1986).

Some interesting differences emerged across domain (adoption, race, family structure) and among groups (lesbian, gay, heterosexual). Parents tended to view teachers as integrating race into the classroom/curricula (53%) more than family structure (37%) or adoption (29%). This, coupled with the fact that parents were the least likely to discuss children’s race with teachers, suggests that parents are generally less concerned about racially negative experiences than marginalization of adoption or LG-parent families. Indeed, families in the United States are becoming increasingly racially diverse, and racial diversity in families is increasingly normalized (Berkowitz, 2009; Brodzinsky & Pertman, 2011). As a result, mixed-race families may not need to announce themselves to outsiders in the same way that adoptive families and LG-parent families do, and issues of racial diversity may be more likely than adoption or LG parenting to be integrated into the curriculum, leading parents to be less concerned about racial insensitivities than other types of discrimination. Given that in most communities, children are more likely to have other children of color in their classroom than other adopted children or children from LG-parent families, parents may be more vigilant around—and more likely to proactively disclose about—issues of adoption and same-sex parenting, given their awareness that teachers may lack familiarity with these domains.

Parents’ experiences with adoption-, race-, and family structure-related inclusion in their children’s schools hold many informative lessons for schools; indeed, creating a welcoming environment for all families can increase collaboration between teachers and parents toward the goal of providing the best education for children. Across all domains, many parents appreciated when books, activities, and lessons were adapted to explicitly acknowledge people and families who were adoptive, of color, and LGBT, and their narratives contained many examples of successful practice. Of note is that lesbian mothers, in general, tended to report less positive impressions of schools than gay fathers (especially regarding the integration of family structure), which may in part reflect their lower incomes, whereby they may have less access to the most costly (and perhaps most social justice-oriented) schools (Goldberg & Smith, 2014). Affordable schools that address diversity issues are needed, particularly for households headed by lesbian parents.

Notably, some parents described schools as implicitly, as opposed to explicitly, inclusive (e.g., adoptive families were not mentioned, but family diversity “in general” was appreciated). Parents described mixed responses to this approach. Some appreciated that their families were accepted but not singled out; others felt unsettled by the lack of explicit inclusion, as well as the lack of “specifics.” Relevant here is the perspective of DePalma and Atkinson (2009), who, in discussing schools’ treatment of LG-parent families, point out that it is not enough to communicate a message of tolerance, because schools and teachers that “tolerate” diverse family structures tend to operate from a perspective wherein the heterosexual, biologically related nuclear family is viewed as normative and all other family structures are regarded as deviant. To truly be welcoming and inclusive, teachers working for equality must (1) have public support and recognition of the local and federal government and educational bodies, (2) be supported by their coworkers/the school administration, (3) be given the flexibility to be creative in how they teach material, and (4) be provided with appropriate resources and training (DePalma & Atkinson, 2009).

Across all domains, and consistent with some prior work on adoptive parents (Goldberg, 2014; Tan & Nakkula, 2004), parents described donating books and sometimes talking to teachers (i.e.,

“queering” classroom practices; DePalma & Atkinson, 2009), in an effort to help create a more inclusive learning environment for their children. In some cases, parents felt that their efforts to confront insensitive classroom practices were not successful, namely, they reported neutral to negative responses. Schools that silence diverse families are implicitly upholding the centrality of the standard North American family (SNAF), ensuring limited access to resources and programs for families that fall outside of this norm (Larrabee & Kim, 2010). In other cases, teachers were described as actively incorporating the books that parents donated. Such teachers were considered to be explicitly considerate of diversity issues, inasmuch as (1) teachers may very well be open to and welcoming of such resources, but do not possess the same knowledge that parents have of the best books available; and (2) classrooms often have limited budgets, and teachers may lack the resources to be as inclusive as they would like, thus underscoring the role of school administration in providing the necessary resources to promote family diversity (DePalma & Atkinson, 2009).

Indeed, efforts on the part of parents to purchase and donate books about family diversity are certainly laudable and speak to a high level of parent engagement, yet the onus should be on schools to provide such resources (Banks et al., 2001), such that they move beyond passively tolerating diverse family structures to proactively including them in curricula and class discussion. As one parent pointed out, it is one thing to be accommodating in response to parent feedback, and quite another to be inclusive of diverse families and identities without parental prompting.

Regarding practical applications of the findings, we contend that teacher education and training programs should meaningfully integrate issues related to adoption, race, and sexual orientation into their curriculum; this will help teachers to develop sound, sensitive practices for meeting the needs of diverse families (Turner-Vorbeck, 2005). This is especially relevant given our finding that parents’ perceptions of teacher inclusion of adoption issues did not correlate with perceptions of teacher inclusion of LG-parent families; thus, teacher expertise in incorporating one diversity topic does not always translate into incorporation of others. Likewise, teachers should be taught skills for effectively integrating conversations around race, adoption, and family structure into the curriculum in order to counter discrimination and teach appreciation of diversity (Bernstein et al., 2000; Blaise, 2009). Indeed, consistent with prior work, parents’ narratives suggest that teacher insensitivity was typically rooted in ignorance, as opposed to stigmatizing views; in turn, teacher education may play a significant role in facilitating change (Cochran-Smith, 1995). Given that teachers’ recognition of diverse families is strongly influenced by the structure of their own families (Larrabee & Kim, 2010), teachers should attend to their own biases in terms of the topics they choose to elevate in the classroom. At the broadest level, schools should seek to operate from within social justice frameworks that identify obstacles to change (Jeltova & Fish, 2005) and help children, faculty, and administration to understand their positions within larger systems of oppression and privilege (Cochran-Smith, 1995; Garber & Grotevant, 2015). These frameworks should undergird the school’s curriculum, resources, and policy statements (e.g., pertaining to discrimination; see Jeltova & Fish, 2005), starting in preschool/kindergarten.

### **Limitations**

There are several limitations to this current study. First, we relied on parents’ perspectives; teachers’ and children’s voices are absent. The absence of teachers’ perspectives is a particular limitation, as teachers may represent a better source of information about what is happening in schools than parents, who only have limited insight into the teaching, books, and materials in their children’s classroom (Allexsaht-Snider, 1995). Future work might explore teachers’ perspectives regarding challenges and successes in integrating diverse families into the classroom, and children’s views pertaining to inclusion/exclusion of their families at school.

Second, we studied an educated, relatively affluent sample of adoptive parents. Many families were likely in a position that allowed them to be selective about where to live and/or where to send their children to school (i.e., their socioeconomic status may have enabled them to seek out and situate

themselves in contexts that were relatively affirming of diverse families). Studies of parent families that are adoptive and LG that represent a more diverse range of socioeconomic statuses might detect lower rates of disclosure surrounding their children's and family's minority statuses, and might also find reports of poorer school treatment in this regard. Fourth, we did not explicitly ask parents if they were the only (or one of a few) LG parents, or adoptive parents, at their child's school. Parents who live in areas where there are many other LG/adoptive parent families may not feel the need to disclose their family structure, given that their minority status is less of an "issue."

Fourth, parents' perceptions of teachers' practices regarding diverse families may vary systematically according to demographic factors that we did not explore. For example, parents' perceptions of teachers' approaches might vary depending on their children's characteristics, including their age, grade, or gender. Future studies can address this.

Despite these limitations, this study generates insights that will aid school administrators, teachers, and those interested in education reform in creating higher-quality practices, safer environments, and more inclusive learning spaces for today's diverse families. Given the prominence of schools in the lives of children and their parents, it is vital that these spaces are accepting. Increased collaboration between families, teachers, and school administrators can help create a more welcoming environment for children and parents, where diversity is welcomed and relevant resources and supports are readily available.

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