

Teachers' Views of Students with Gay or Lesbian Parents

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Eighty-three female and 24 male teachers responded to an anonymous questionnaire exploring four aspects of teachers' views of students who have gay or lesbian parents: (1) exposure to and general knowledge about homosexuality, (2) attitudes towards gays and lesbians, (3) interactions with gay or lesbian parents, including school practices and policies, and (4) beliefs about problems experienced by students with gay and lesbian parents. Most teachers knew some gay males and lesbians, had limited education and knowledge about homosexuality, and possessed moderately tolerant attitudes towards gays and lesbians. They believed that students with gay or lesbian parents had more problems in social interaction but were more mature, tolerant, and self-reliant than other students. Open-ended questions about gay and lesbian parents and their children revealed a wide range of answers, ranging from very supportive to noticeably hostile.

KEY WORDS: gay; lesbian; attitudes; schools; parents; teachers.

The topic of homosexuality, including teachers' views related to this issue, has rarely been studied in school settings. Available research and writing is consistent with the conclusion of Uribe and Harbeck (1991) that "the educational system in the United States [is] blind-folded and mute on the subject of adolescent, educator and parental homosexuality" (p. 11). Often homosexuality is never mentioned in classrooms or addressed anywhere in the curriculum (Anderson, 1994; Casper *et al.*, 1996; Fontaine, 1997; Harris, 1997; Uribe and Harbeck, 1991). Some authors have suggested that textbooks typically either ignore gays and lesbians or present misleading images of them, and that teachers may not be prepared to counteract

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or supplement this information (Anderson, 1994; Kielwasser and Wolf, 1993/94; Malinsky, 1997; Telljohann and Price, 1993).

The focus of the present study is not on adolescent or educator homosexuality, although evidence exists that gay, lesbian, and bisexual teenagers have an increased risk of depression, substance abuse, victimization, and suicide (Baumrind, 1995; Elia, 1993/94; Gochros and Bidwell, 1996; Harbeck, 1993/94; O'Connor, 1993/94; Patterson, 1995a; Reynolds and Koski, 1993/94; Rofes, 1989; Telljohann and Price, 1993; Uribe, 1993/94) and that an unknown number of gay and lesbian teachers do not disclose their sexual orientation to others for fear of losing their jobs (Adams and Emery, 1994; Anderson, 1994; Bliss and Harris, 1998; Casper *et al.*, 1996; Danjmeijer, 1992/93; Griffin, 1991; Harbeck, 1993/1994; Olson, 1987; Pollak, 1994; Woods and Harbeck, 1991). Instead, this paper attempts to cast some light on the issue of how parental homosexuality is perceived by teachers. Although, there has been a substantial amount of research on children of gay and lesbian parents (American Psychological Association, 1995; Cramer, 1986; Golombok and Tasker, 1996; Golombok *et al.*, 1983; Gottman, 1990; Harris and Turner, 1985/86; Kirkpatrick *et al.*, 1981; Lewis, 1980; Patterson, 1992, 1995b, 1996; Strickland, 1995; Turner *et al.*, 1990), little research to date has considered how the homosexuality of a student's parent might affect a teacher's reactions to the student and to the parent.

Most of the research on gay and lesbian parents has found no or minimal differences between their parenting and that of heterosexual parents or between their children and the children of heterosexual parents (Golombok *et al.*, 1983; Harris and Turner, 1985/96; Kirkpatrick *et al.*, 1981; Lewin, 1996; Strickland, 1995; Turner *et al.*, 1990). In a 1992 review and a 1996 speech, Patterson concluded that lesbians did not differ from heterosexual mothers in either their mental health or their child rearing practices. Friedman and Downey (1994) reached similar conclusions from their review:

The literature on children of lesbian mothers indicates no adverse effects of a homosexual orientation, as evidenced by psychiatric symptoms, peer relationships, and overall functioning of the offspring No evidence has emerged . . . to indicate an adverse effect of sexual orientation on the quality of fathering (p. 927).

Baumrind (1995) indicated that "studies to date show few differences among children of gay, lesbian, and heterosexual couples" (p. 134). Golombok and Tasker (1996) reported that children raised by lesbians were not significantly more likely to identify as homosexual in adulthood than were children raised by heterosexual parents. Flaks *et al.* (1995) concluded from their review that "in every area evaluated, the research revealed no significant differences between the children of lesbian and heterosexual parents" (p. 106). Their own data revealed no significant differences in children raised by lesbian and heterosexual parents and only one significant difference between the two groups of parents: lesbian parents scored higher in parenting skills than heterosexual parents. Similarly, a publication by

three American Psychological Association committees concluded that, "Not a single study has found children of gay or lesbian parents to be disadvantaged in any significant respect relative to children of heterosexual parents" (APA, 1995, p. 8). However, because of the small and possibly unrepresentative samples in the studies, further research is warranted (APA, 1995; Baumrind, 1995).

The extent to which teachers are familiar with the above literature on gay and lesbian parents is unknown, as is the extent of their knowledge about homosexuality or their personal acquaintance with gay and lesbian individuals. Research that is available suggests that many teachers express a willingness to take a nonjudgmental position and a desire to gain an understanding of issues relating to sexual orientation, although they are less apt to initiate open discussions or create a safe environment for gay and lesbian students and parents (Harris, 1997; Sears, 1991). Education students may be even less knowledgeable: Sears (1991) reported that "eight of ten prospective teachers harbored negative feelings toward lesbians and gay men with one fifth of them rated as being 'high grade homophobic'" (p. 39). It has been suggested that the more comfortable teachers are with using terms like "gay" and "lesbian," the more comfortable they will be in initiating discussions on issues relating to sexual orientation (Casper *et al.*, 1992; Casper *et al.*, 1996; Elia, 1993/1994) and perhaps in talking with gay and lesbian parents. There is some evidence that teachers make assumptions about their students based on their knowledge of the parents' backgrounds and on labels attributed to the students (Casper *et al.*, 1992; Field *et al.*, 1992; Langer and Abelson, 1974), so it is plausible that teachers may relate differently to or have different views of students whose parents they know or believe to be gay or lesbian (Casper *et al.*, 1992).

The present study is primarily a descriptive and exploratory one designed to consider several aspects of teachers' views of students who have gay or lesbian parents. For that reason, both quantitative and qualitative data were collected. Two characteristics of teachers were examined first: (1) their exposure to and general knowledge about homosexuality and (2) their attitudes towards gays and lesbians. The next questions focused on their perceptions of their interactions, if any, with gay or lesbian parents, including parent-teacher conferences, their willingness to discuss a parent's sexual orientation with others, and their school's practices and policies about gay or lesbian parents. Other questions dealt with their beliefs about problems experienced by students with gay and lesbian parents and about these students' personality characteristics. The final page provided opportunities for open-ended comments and any additional thoughts concerning students whose parents are gay or lesbian.

The study also included an experimental manipulation: A random half of the respondents were sent a letter in which the senior author was identified as a lesbian mother. The purpose of this manipulation was to see whether the response rate and the actual responses would vary depending on whether the participant knew the sexual orientation of the senior author. One prediction was that fewer people would respond if the author was identified as a lesbian, since highly prejudiced individuals

might not wish to contribute to research done by a homosexual parent. Another was that the tendency for people to please the researcher would lead respondents to make more positive comments about gay and lesbian parents if they knew that the senior author was a lesbian (Crowne and Marlowe, 1960; Zuckerman *et al.*, 1995).

Although the study was primarily exploratory, previous research and discussion led to several other predictions. First (Casper *et al.*, 1996), we predicted that teachers would have had little or no professional exposure to or training in issues relevant to sexual orientation and that their knowledge about homosexuality would be incomplete (Harris *et al.*, 1995; Harris and Vanderhoof, 1995). Second, we expected teachers to show somewhat negative attitudes towards gays and lesbians, and that male teachers would exhibit more negative attitudes toward gay men than would female teachers (Herek and Capitano, 1996; Kite and Whitley, 1996). Finally, in spite of the research showing almost no differences between children with a gay or lesbian parent and those with two heterosexual parents (APA, 1995; Flaks *et al.*, 1995; Friedman and Downey, 1994; Golombok *et al.*, 1983; Kirkpatrick *et al.*, 1981; Patterson, 1992, 1996), we expected that teachers would indicate concerns about students with gay and lesbian parents and would expect these students to have a number of problems (Minton, 1995).

Because of the lack of relevant data, no other predictions about biological sex differences and no predictions about ethnic differences or differences between teachers in the two school districts were made. However, comparisons between these groups were performed in order to see whether such differences existed and whether they should be considered in subsequent analyses.

METHOD

Participants

Participants in the study were 24 male (22%) and 83 female (78%) public school teachers from two different school districts in New Mexico; 77 were from Santa Fe and 30 from Albuquerque. Their mean age was 42 years ($SD = 9.42$), with a range from 22 to 65. The majority of the respondents indicated that they were Anglo American (62%), with an additional 28% calling themselves Hispanic. Five percent came from other ethnic backgrounds, and 5 did not report their ethnicity. The biological sex of the Anglo and Hispanic respondents was not significantly related to their ethnicity, $\chi^2(1, N = 96) = 2.70, p > .05$. A majority (61%) of the respondents reported being married, 21% were single, 18% were divorced, and 1% did not indicate marital status. The great majority of the respondents (93%) indicated that they were heterosexual, with 7% being gay or bisexual.

The participants had been teaching for a mean of 14 years ($SD = 8.78$), with a range from 1 to 38 years of experience. Forty-three percent taught at the high school level, with 35% teaching elementary school, 18% teaching middle or junior high

school, and the rest teaching other or combined grade levels. Because respondents were not asked to identify their school, in order to ensure anonymity, it was not possible to ascertain how many schools were represented in the sample. However, elementary, middle/junior high, and high school teachers from each district were participants. Thirty-six percent had taught students with a parent known to be gay or lesbian, and only 6% were sure that they had no students with gay or lesbian parents.

Procedure

After permission of the university Institutional Review Board and the Albuquerque Public Schools Research Review Committee had been obtained, the first step of the procedure was randomly selecting schools to be invited to participate. In each city, seven middle or junior high schools and ten elementary schools were randomly selected. Both high schools in Santa Fe and a randomly chosen five of the ten high schools in Albuquerque were approached. For each school selected, the principal or other responsible school administrator was contacted to ask permission to conduct the study with the teachers in their school. Of the 41 schools identified, administrators at 13 (6 elementary schools, 4 middle schools, and 3 high schools) gave permission for us to proceed. Questionnaires, each accompanied by a cover letter and a stamped return envelope, were then delivered to each school to be placed in the individual mailboxes of the teachers.

Instruments

Cover Letter. Two versions of the cover letter were used. Each letter identified the senior author as a graduate student, explained the purpose of the study, provided names and addresses to contact for further identification, and indicated that responding to the questionnaire implied permission for the researchers to analyze and use their responses. One version of the questionnaire contained an additional sentence, accurately stating "As a lesbian parent, I have a special interest in this project." The two cover letters were randomly ordered, so that approximately half of the questionnaires distributed were accompanied by each version. Most of the questionnaires were marked to identify which version of the cover letter accompanied them; however, due to an oversight, the markings were omitted on some of the questionnaires.

Questionnaire. The questionnaire was a seven page structured instrument designed to explore issues related to teachers' exposure to issues related to homosexuality, relationships with gay and lesbian parents, and beliefs about students with gay or lesbian parents. The first section requested demographic information regarding age, biological sex, race, marital status, teaching experience, and the school district in which they taught.

Other items explored the respondents' exposure to, attitudes toward, and knowledge about homosexuality. Exposure was measured by questions concerning their acquaintance with gay and lesbian parents, friends, and family members; other items dealt with their professional education about homosexuality. Attitudes towards homosexuals were assessed primarily by Herek's (1988) Attitudes Towards Lesbians (ATL) and Attitudes Towards Gay Men (ATGM) scales. Each scale contains 10 items measuring negative attitudes towards the respective groups and is reported to have satisfactory internal consistency (ATL $\alpha = .77$, ATGM $\alpha = .89$ according to Herek, 1988). In addition, a series of 18 author-constructed questions measured opinions concerning issues related to homosexuality on Likert-type scales ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). As these items had not been used before, no information on their reliability or validity was available. Knowledge about homosexuality was measured by a 20-item true/false test (Harris *et al.*, 1995; Harris and Vanderhoof, 1995). Previous research provided some evidence for the validity of the scale by showing that higher knowledge scores were associated with more education, more positive attitudes towards gays and lesbians, and being less conservative (Harris *et al.*, 1995; Harris and Vanderhoof, 1995). Internal consistency (Cronbach's α) with adult populations was .70 (Harris *et al.*, 1995) and .74 (Harris and Vanderhoof, 1995).

Another set of items dealt with relationships with gay and lesbian parents. Questions were asked about gay and lesbian parents' participation in parent-teacher conferences, about issues of discrimination, and about the role played by these parents' partners. Other items concerned their school system's policy for dealing with gay and lesbian parents, the respondent's willingness to disclose the information that a parent is gay or lesbian to others, and to discuss issues of gay or lesbian parenting with the school principal. An open-ended question asked for anything else they had to share regarding interactions or future interactions with gay or lesbian parents.

A subsequent set of items explored respondents' beliefs about students with gay or lesbian parents. Teachers were asked to rate students with gay or lesbian parents compared with other students using 5-point Likert-type scales ranging from 1 ("much less than other students") to 5 ("much more than other students"). A first set of ratings concerned eight areas in which students often have problems (school work, social interaction, participation, discipline, attendance, trust, emotional stability, and conduct) and a second set included nine personality characteristics (happy, adjusted, mature, self-reliant, outgoing, friendly, aggressive, secure, and tolerant). In addition, an open-ended question permitted respondents to discuss special needs and/or special problems these students might have.

The last section of the questionnaire was headed "Final Observations." It first asked respondents how comfortable they were in filling out the questionnaire and how comfortable they would have been had it not been anonymous. It then asked whether they had learned anything about themselves and, if so, if they would mind sharing those thoughts.

RESULTS

Preliminary analyses revealed no statistically significant differences in demographic characteristics (biological sex, ethnicity, and age) or on any other variables between respondents from Albuquerque and Santa Fe. Therefore, respondents from the two cities were combined in further analyses. Quantitative results will be discussed first, followed by qualitative responses to open-ended questions.

Cover Letter and Response Rate

A total of 724 questionnaires and cover letters were originally distributed, with each school receiving an equal number of the two versions of the cover letter. Two schools returned a total of 103 questionnaires that were never distributed, thus creating an unequal distribution of the two versions: 307 identifying the senior author as a lesbian parent and 314 not identifying her as such.

Of the 107 questionnaires returned (a return rate of 17% of those originally distributed), 50 were accompanied by the cover letter indicating that the senior author was a lesbian, 16 were accompanied by a neutral cover letter, and the other 41 were not coded in a way to permit identification of the cover letter. A chi-square goodness of fit test, including only the 66 questionnaires that were coded, revealed that the respondents receiving the "lesbian parent" cover letter were significantly more likely to return the questionnaire than respondents receiving the "parent" version, $\chi^2(1, N = 66) = 18.29, p < .001$. Cover letter (for the marked questionnaires) was not significantly related to biological sex, $\chi^2(1, N = 66) = 0.26, p > .05$, or to Anglo/Hispanic ethnicity, $\chi^2(1, N = 66) = 0.13, p > .05$.

Exposure, Attitudes, and Knowledge about Homosexuality

Exposure. Data summarizing the respondents' exposure to gays and lesbians are presented in Table I. The majority knew at least three gay males and at least three lesbians, and a bare majority knew a gay or lesbian parent outside of the classroom.

A majority (60%) of teachers said that they had read professional literature on homosexuality, and a majority of women (63%) but not of men (37%) indicated that they would be willing to attend a workshop on sexual orientation, a statistically significant difference. However, most of the teachers had not had a single hour of education dealing with sexual orientation before receiving their degree, most had not attended a workshop on sexual orientation, and most had not read material dealing with gay and lesbian parents.

ATL/ATGM Scales. Analyses of the internal consistency reliabilities of Herek's (1988) Attitudes Towards Gay Men (ATGM) and Attitudes Towards

Table I. Participants' Exposure to Homosexuals and Homosexuality

| | All Participants <i>N</i> = 107 | Males <i>N</i> = 24 | Females <i>N</i> = 83 | χ^2 |
|---|------------------------------------|------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------|
| Have students with gay/lesbian parents | | | | 1.42 |
| No | 6% | 4% | 6% | |
| Yes | 36% | 46% | 34% | |
| Transsexual | 1% | 0% | 1% | |
| Don't know | 57% | 50% | 59% | |
| If yes, number of students with gay/lesbian parents | | | | 4.48 |
| 0 | 5% | 0% | 0% | |
| 1 | 26% | 27% | 26% | |
| 2 | 40% | 46% | 39% | |
| 3-5 | 19% | 9% | 23% | |
| 6 or more | 9% | 18% | 7% | |
| Outside of teaching, know students with G/L parents | | | | 2.41 |
| Yes | 51% | 44% | 54% | |
| No | 31% | 44% | 26% | |
| Don't know | 18% | 13% | 20% | |
| Number of close friends, family who are gay males | | | | 5.15 |
| 0 | 21% | 22% | 20% | |
| 1-2 | 32% | 27% | 33% | |
| 3-4 | 18% | 18% | 18% | |
| 5-7 | 14% | 14% | 14% | |
| 8 or more | 16% | 18% | 15% | |
| Number of close friends, family who are lesbians | | | | 6.39 |
| 0 | 23% | 26% | 23% | |
| 1-2 | 36% | 48% | 33% | |
| 3-4 | 18% | 4% | 21% | |
| 5-7 | 10% | 9% | 10% | |
| 8 or more | 14% | 13% | 14% | |
| Total number of gay men known | | | | 7.83 |
| 0 | 11% | 25% | 8% | |
| 1-2 | 18% | 10% | 20% | |
| 3-4 | 20% | 15% | 21% | |
| 5-7 | 10% | 10% | 10% | |
| 8 or more | 40% | 40% | 41% | |
| Total number of lesbians known | | | | 8.77 |
| 0 | 19% | 29% | 17% | |
| 1-2 | 23% | 29% | 22% | |
| 3-4 | 13% | 5% | 15% | |
| 5-7 | 14% | 10% | 15% | |
| 8 or more | 31% | 29% | 32% | |
| Have attended workshop on sexual orientation | | | | 0.00 |
| Yes | 21% | 21% | 21% | |
| No | 79% | 79% | 79% | |
| Would attend workshop on sexual orientation | | | | 6.23 ^b |
| Yes | 63% | 40% | 71% | |
| No | 37% | 60% | 29% | |

(Continued)

Table I. (Continued)

| | All Participants N = 107 | Males N = 24 | Females N = 83 | χ^2 |
|---|-----------------------------|-----------------|-------------------|----------|
| Have read professional material on homosexuality | | | | 0.05 |
| Yes | 60% | 58% | 61% | |
| No | 40% | 42% | 39% | |
| Have read material on gay/lesbian parents | | | | 0.25 |
| Yes | 25% | 29% | 24% | |
| No | 75% | 71% | 76% | |
| Before degree, hours of education dealing with sexual orientation | | | | 4.51 |
| 0 | 84% | 83% | 85% | |
| 1-2 | 3% | 0% | 4% | |
| 3 | 7% | 17% | 5% | |
| 4 or more | 6% | 0% | 7% | |

^a $p < .05$.^b $p < .01$.

Lesbians (ATL) scales revealed an alpha of .84 for ATGM and .81 for ATL for respondents in the present study. The correlation between the two measures was .81. Separate independent samples *t*-tests were run for both biological sex and ethnicity in place of factorial analyses of variance, due to the very low number of Hispanic respondents for these scales (fewer than five per cell). An independent samples *t*-test revealed that males ($M = 30.65$, $SD = 14.58$) showed significantly higher levels of prejudice than females ($M = 23.55$, $SD = 9.61$) on the ATGM scale, $t(88) = 2.18$, $ES = .62$, $p < .05$. The difference between males ($M = 23.88$, $SD = 13.56$) and females ($M = 19.32$, $SD = 9.31$) on the ATL scale was not statistically significant, $t(82) = 1.31$, $p > .05$. Separate independent samples *t*-tests revealed no statistically significant differences between Anglo and Hispanic respondents. Nor were the ATL or ATGM scales significantly correlated with either age or years of teaching experience, largest $r = -.13$, $p > .05$.

Opinion Items. The mean scores of males and females to the individual items dealing with opinions about homosexuality are presented in Table II, along with the standard deviations and the results of single sample *t*-tests comparing the responses to the neutral point of 4, representing neither agreement nor disagreement. As can be seen from the table, even when using the Bonferroni procedure to control for Type I error rate, respondents tended to disagree with the statements that homosexual relations are not as strong as heterosexual relationships, that children with lesbian or gay parents are less emotionally stable, that they would prefer not to deal with gay or lesbian parents, that they would encourage students to keep their parents' homosexuality a secret, that they or the parent would feel anxious if a parent disclosed his or her homosexuality to them, and that it is important for a parent to disclose his or her homosexuality. Respondents agreed that they felt competent to deal with gay or lesbian parents, that they felt comfortable discussing a "homosexual lifestyle" with either their peers or a homosexual, that

Table II. Means and Standard Deviations of Males and Females on Opinion Items

| Item | Males | <i>N</i> | Females | <i>N</i> | t_{neut}^a | t_{gen}^b |
|--|----------------|----------|----------------|----------|---------------------|--------------------|
| 1. Homosexual relations are not as strong as heterosexual relationships | 1.75 (1.07) | 20 | 1.94 (1.45) | 78 | 15.12 ^c | -.64 |
| 2. Children with a lesbian mother are less emotionally stable than children with a heterosexual mother | 2.71 (1.65) | 21 | 2.44 (1.65) | 87 | 9.12 ^c | .69 |
| 3. Children with a gay father are less emotionally stable than children with a heterosexual father | 2.86 (1.71) | 21 | 2.62 (1.50) | 77 | 8.14 ^c | .56 |
| 4. I feel competent to deal with gay male parents | 5.35 (2.12) | 23 | 5.73 (1.70) | 82 | -9.42 ^c | -.80 |
| 5. I feel competent to deal with lesbian parents | 5.39 (2.13) | 23 | 5.72 (1.74) | 82 | -9.26 ^c | -.68 |
| 6. I prefer not to deal with gay male parents | 2.33 (1.93) | 24 | 1.83 (1.66) | 82 | 12.24 ^c | 1.16 |
| 7. I prefer not to deal with lesbian parents | 2.21 (1.91) | 24 | 1.78 (1.60) | 82 | 13.10 ^c | 1.00 |
| 8. I feel I need more training in working with gay/lesbian parents | 3.25 (1.78) | 23 | 3.67 (2.11) | 82 | 1.83 | -.34 |
| 9. I feel comfortable discussing a homosexual lifestyle with my peers | 4.63 (2.12) | 24 | 5.22 (1.93) | 82 | -5.65 ^c | -1.23 |
| 10. I feel comfortable discussing a homosexual lifestyle with my students | 4.13 (2.19) | 24 | 3.68 (2.19) | 81 | 1.02 | .88 |
| 11. I feel comfortable discussing a homosexual lifestyle with a homosexual | 4.79 (2.30) | 24 | 5.08 (2.02) | 79 | -4.93 ^c | -.54 |
| 12. I feel a homosexual lifestyle is an acceptable lifestyle for others | 5.21 (2.25) | 24 | 5.81 (1.67) | 82 | -9.44 ^c | -1.21 |
| 13. I feel a homosexual lifestyle is an acceptable lifestyle for my children | 4.23 (2.41) | 22 | 4.44 (2.22) | 73 | -1.68 | -.37 |
| 14. I would encourage students to keep their parents' homosexuality a secret | 3.86 (0.85) | 21 | 3.00 (1.80) | 78 | 4.87 ^c | 3.11 ^d |
| 15. If I were interviewed by a gay/lesbian parent, I would make them feel secure in sending their child to my school | 5.87 (1.25) | 23 | 6.29 (1.28) | 80 | -17.41 ^c | -1.40 |
| 16. I would feel anxious if a parent disclosed his/her homosexuality to me | 2.63 (1.74) | 24 | 2.33 (1.67) | 79 | 9.65 ^c | .74 |
| 17. The parent that disclosed his/her homosexuality to me would feel anxious | 3.65 (1.87) | 20 | 2.40 (1.69) | 73 | 7.17 ^c | 2.71 ^d |
| 18. It is important that a parent disclose his/her homosexuality to a teacher | 2.04 (1.29) | 22 | 2.44 (1.83) | 80 | 9.63 ^c | -1.14 |

Note. Items were scored from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

^aSingle-sample *t*-test against the neutral point of 4.00.

^bIndependent-samples *t*-test for gender difference.

^c*p* < .001.

^d*p* < .01.

**p* < .05.

homosexuality is an acceptable "lifestyle" for others, and that they would make gay or lesbian parents comfortable in sending their child to their school.

Table II also presents the results of independent samples *t*-tests comparing the mean scores of males and females on the opinion items. As can be seen from the table, males were more likely than females to feel that students should be encouraged to keep their parents' homosexuality a secret ($ES = .51$) and that parents who disclosed their homosexuality to a teacher would feel anxious ($ES = .70$, both $ps < .01$); these results would not be significant by the Bonferroni procedure.

Paired samples *t*-tests revealed that participants felt significantly more comfortable discussing a "homosexual lifestyle" with a peer ($M = 5.10$, $SD = 1.99$), $t(104) = 7.04$, $p < .001$, or another homosexual ($M = 5.01$, $SD = 2.08$), $t(102) = 5.53$, $p < .001$ than with a student ($M = 3.78$, $SD = 2.12$). In addition, participants believed that a "homosexual lifestyle" was more acceptable for someone else's children ($M = 5.74$, $SD = 1.74$) than for their own children ($M = 4.39$, $SD = 2.26$), $t(94) = 7.10$, $p < .001$.

Knowledge Scale. Items on the knowledge scale (Harris *et al.*, 1995; Harris and Vanderhoof, 1995) were coded with 1 point for a correct response and 0 points for an incorrect or missing response. The mean score for the entire sample was 13.08, $SD = 4.49$, out of a possible 20 points. The internal consistency reliability for the scale was .86.

Independent samples *t*-tests revealed that males and females did not differ significantly in their overall scores, but Anglo respondents ($M = 14.30$, $SD = 4.75$) scored significantly higher than did Hispanics ($M = 12.30$, $SD = 4.55$), $t(95) = 2.33$, $ES = .45$, $p < .05$. Knowledge score was not significantly correlated with age, years of teaching, or the ATL and ATGM scales, largest $r = -.20$, $p > .05$.

Relationships with Parents

Parent-Teacher Conferences. The great majority of the respondents (92%) held parent-teacher conferences. They reported that 81% of mothers and 26% of fathers attended such conferences. Thirty-eight percent of the respondents had had at least one mother known to be a lesbian attend a parent-teacher conference, and they reported that lesbian mothers attended 87% of such conferences. Twenty-one percent of the respondents had had at least one gay father attend a parent-teacher conference, and they reported that gay fathers attended 82% of such conferences, a significantly higher percentage than that for all fathers, $t(12) = 5.39$, $p < .001$. Those who had not had a known lesbian mother estimated that such mothers would attend 73% of parent-teacher conferences; those who had not had a known gay father estimated that 68% of such fathers would attend conferences.

When asked if the gay or lesbian parent who attended conferences had a life partner, 22% said "yes" and 25% said that they had met the partner. Ninety-two

Table III. Willingness to Disclose a Parent's Sexual Orientation to Others

| Disclosure to | <i>t</i> ^{a,b} | |
|---------------|-------------------------|--------------------|
| Principal | 2.90 | 2.69 ^c |
| Faculty | 2.08 | 8.01 ^d |
| Students | 1.78 | 11.44 ^d |
| Friends | 1.31 | 22.65 ^d |
| Other parents | 1.25 | 25.28 ^d |

Note: Items were scored from 1 ("strongly disagree" = would not disclose) to 7 ("strongly agree" = would disclose).

^aSingle-sample *t*-test against the neutral point of 4.00.

^bDegrees of freedom range from 95 to 97.

^c $p < .05$.

^d $p < .001$.

percent of the respondents indicated that they would treat the life partner of a gay or lesbian parent as a co-parent.

Disclosure to Others. Table III presents the mean scores of questions about the respondents' willingness to disclose a parent's sexual orientation to others. Single sample *t*-tests against the neutral point of 4.0 revealed that teachers tended to strongly disagree with the statement that "If not otherwise advised, I would share the fact that my student had a gay/lesbian parent with" . . . faculty, students, friends, and other parents, significant even when using the Bonferroni critical value procedure to control the Type I error rate. They were neutral on the issue of whether they would disclose a parent's homosexuality to the principal.

Responses to subsequent questions revealed a tendency for participants to agree ($M = 4.64$, $SD = 2.10$) that they would feel comfortable approaching the issue of gay/lesbian parenting with their principal, as indicated by a comparison with the neutral point of 4.00, $t(99) = 3.05$, $p < .01$. However, they disagreed that, if they were gay or lesbian, they would feel free to disclose this information to their principal ($M = 3.26$, $SD = 2.21$), $t(93) = -3.27$, $p < .01$.

School Policies and Practices. Almost all (96%) of the respondents indicated either that their school system had no policy about gay and lesbian parents or that they were unaware of any such policy. Only one participant had ever had an administrator initiate a discussion on sexual orientation.

The teachers tended to agree with the statements that their school system does not show discrimination toward gay male parents ($M = 4.57$, $SD = 1.92$), $t(74) = 2.58$, $p < .05$, or lesbian parents, ($M = 4.57$, $SD = 1.91$), $t(74) = 2.59$, $p < .05$. However, they were much more likely to agree that their school system does not discriminate against single heterosexual female parents, ($M = 5.74$, $SD = 1.55$), $t(79) = 10.04$, $p < .001$, or single heterosexual male parents, ($M = 5.69$, $SD = 1.61$), $t(79) = 9.38$, $p < .001$.

Beliefs about Children with Gay or Lesbian Parents

Problems. When asked to compare students with gay or lesbian parents against other students in terms of eight potential problem areas, respondents identified only one area with a statistically significant difference. A single sample *t*-test, comparing the mean rating with the neutral point of 3.00, revealed that participants tended to feel that students with gay or lesbian parents ($M = 3.27$, $SD = 0.81$) had more problems with social interaction than students with heterosexual parents, $t(70) = 2.79$, $p < .01$.

Personality Characteristics. Respondents' ratings of personality characteristics of students suggested that students with gay or lesbian parents were seen as more mature, ($M = 3.28$, $SD = 0.71$), $t(68) = 3.24$, $p < .01$, more self-reliant, ($M = 3.22$, $SD = 0.64$), $t(68) = 2.28$, $p < .05$, and more tolerant ($M = 3.32$, $SD = 0.93$), $t(69) = 2.85$, $p < .01$, than students with heterosexual parents.

Comfort

When asked how comfortable they had felt while filling out the questionnaire, respondents gave a mean of 5.79, $SD = 1.65$, on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (not comfortable) to 7 (very comfortable). This score was significantly higher than the anticipated comfort level ($M = 5.25$, $SD = 2.12$) if the instrument had not been anonymous, $t(103) = -2.92$, $p < .01$. This difference was due to those participants who were aware that the first author was a lesbian parent ($M = 5.61$, $SD = 1.81$ when anonymous; $M = 4.82$, $SD = 2.31$ if it had not been anonymous), $t(47) = -2.51$, $p < .01$; anonymity did not matter significantly for respondents who did not know that she was a lesbian. However, an independent samples *t*-test revealed that respondents who read that the first author was a lesbian parent did not differ significantly in their comfort level ($M = 5.61$, $SD = 1.81$) from those who read only that she was a parent ($M = 6.06$, $SD = 1.12$), $t(63) = -1.18$, $p > .05$.

Qualitative Data (Open-Ended Questions)

Interactions and Future Interactions with Gays and Lesbians: Responses to an open-ended question about anything else to share about interactions or future interactions with gay/lesbian parents fell into five basic categories, with few exceptions. The first, Ignoring ($N = 13$), reflected feelings that sexual orientation was not an issue, and that discussion of it should take place only when there was a problem. Sexual orientation was felt to be a private matter until respondents were approached by either children or parents. One respondent stated that it "didn't have anything to do with class work or students' performance."

The second category, Accepting ($N = 12$), reflected feelings that everyone should be treated the same, that students should come first regardless of parents' sexual orientation, and that gay/lesbian parents were just parents whose children might even be "better students and well adjusted to society." One participant mentioned that sensitivity training had increased comfort with these issues. Another stated that, "We all have life differences of choice and non-choice, so why should they be treated any different than me Society needs to be resilient!"

The third category, Intolerant ($N = 7$), included participants who indicated a lack of tolerance for or interest in the subject of homosexuality, including beliefs that children should not be brought into such a "lifestyle." Comments ranged from, "I don't want hetero/homo sexuality thrown in my face anymore. Leave me alone. If you're a good parent, that's what counts," through "I would rather not have anything to do with this population," to "To me, this is another justification for a form of deviancy. This 'lifestyle' is fundamentally flawed and increases the likelihood of more dysfunctional people being fathered by an apathetic society."

The fourth category, Important ($N = 6$), includes participants who felt that knowing about a parent's homosexuality was important to allow them to know the child better and to permit them to ask for input in handling situations that might be perceived as threatening or difficult. One respondent, a lesbian parent herself, stated that, "I hope to make them feel as safe and as comfortable as I have felt as a lesbian parent in teacher conferences, and for me to let them know that their orientation does not affect me negatively—on the contrary, I'd be very pleased if they disclosed this to possibly create mutual sharing and concern."

The final category, Ignorant ($N = 5$), involved participants who felt that they didn't understand homosexuality, wanted to learn more, and needed training. One respondent wrote:

I'd like more help in educating my students with sexual preference issues that they could relate to. Most of my students think that homosexuality is wrong and they also think it is a matter of choice, which I disagree with. Lots of *education* needs to occur.

Special Needs and Problems. A minority of the respondents indicated that children with gay or lesbian parents have special needs (28%) or special problems (31%). Although two open-ended questions asked about these special needs and problems, the responses to these questions revealed overlapping themes, and thus will be discussed together.

A first concern, expressed by 44 respondents (41%), involved the reactions of peers and others. One participant wrote:

They are afraid: afraid for their friends for fear of rejection; afraid of friends to find out because of the homophobia that exists—knowing this would not be accepted by most of their friends; losing friends; being excluded.

Other participants felt that students need coping skills in order to handle teasing, criticism, joking, insults, and discrimination. They thought students need to know

that there was an authority figure who would be there to curb the cruelties and embarrassments. In addition, they felt students need to know how to broach the subject with their peers and be able to answer questions about their parent's homosexuality. Respondents also believed that it is important that these students learn to overcome their fears and be able to invite friends into their house.

A second concern, mentioned by 14 respondents (13%), involved the students' relationships with their parents. Respondents felt that students with gay and lesbian parents could have feelings of anger toward their parents, because of their sexuality or because of their divorce. One teacher reported that a student had an angry parent who tended to keep the student from having peer relationships. Another reported that a student had requested counseling in order to deal with the home situation. Some respondents mentioned that parents need to help the student understand the situation, and one stated that "parents need to be of both genders [biological sexes] in order for the child/children to have a *better chance* (sic) of being balanced."

A third concern, expressed by 12 participants (11%), was the importance of students receiving the support they need to help them cope with situations that might arise from the sexual orientation of their parents. Counseling, support groups, and assistance from teachers were suggested as some possibilities.

A final concern, mentioned by 7 teachers (7%), addressed the issues of the students' ability to deal with their own sexuality and the questioning of their own sexual orientation. Some participants felt that students needed some form of role modeling: "They are in a situation where they need to overcome the modeling of an abnormal life style."

What Participants Learned about Themselves. In response to a final question asking if they had learned anything about themselves after filling out the questionnaire, 21% reported that they had. The answers were quite varied. Three respondents indicated a greater awareness of their biases, and several wrote about the need for equality and the questioning of prejudiced feelings. One was fearful of what the people in her district would think "if I were vocal regarding my sexuality," one became even more aware of the importance of making the child comfortable, one stated that it is "hard to be open with parents when we cannot be open in our system," and one felt that "In our society it is not just being tolerant, it is knowing/learning and accepting."

Other comments raised issues of concern to us. Following are several quotes we felt best to report in their entirety.

"I don't want it known in my professional circle that I have positive feelings towards gay and lesbian parents."

"I am aware of my closed mindedness and unwillingness to accept sexually perverse lifestyles. I further believe that AIDS is nature's message and means of correcting a mistake or abnormal conduct."

"I am not prepared to deal with this population."

"I don't really feel sexual orientation of a particular parent should be addressed

at school. I think this could be detrimental to a child in the society in which we live.”

“I wonder how I might interact with men-hating lesbians. I also wonder how students with gay parents deal with the ridicule they might overhear or receive from parents.”

Unsolicited Comments. The following comments were written in the margins of the instrument or, in two cases, in letters sent to the researchers. Some participants felt that homosexuality was a personal matter and should not be addressed in the schools. Another stated that “who I share my life with and sleep with is my business.” Several mentioned that they did not know any gay or lesbian parents of students, and one stated that “In twenty years of teaching, no parent has ever self-disclosed.”

Other comments were noticeably more negative. One participant felt quite strongly that a homosexual lifestyle “was a breakdown in morals,” that homosexuals “are not born that way,” that “some of these sexual deviates promote pornography, rape etc.,” and that “homosexuality is against God’s law—there is no procreation—breaking the divine law leads to AIDS.” One of the two letters received suggests that the researcher might be having a problem and searching to solve this problem by doing the research. The writer thought that the researcher must be insecure and suggested “search within yourself then maybe you’ll find peace.” The second letter suggests that the researcher’s lifestyle is “abhorrence to God” and that it “slaps God in the face (as does all sin).” This writer stated that “Obviously, I am not going to help you with this research because it would be promoting a lifestyle which is sinful.”

DISCUSSION

Methodological Limitations

Before discussing the substance of the findings, some methodological limitations should be addressed. Most of these concerns have to do with the nature of the sample. First, the respondents come from only two cities in a single state and thus may not be representative of the larger populations of Americans. Second, the limited return rate is a major problem. Only a minority of the questionnaires were returned. Unfortunately, the method of distribution at the schools did not permit us to assure that all teachers were given the questionnaires and return envelopes. It is possible that not all the questionnaires were put in mailboxes, that not all teachers had mailboxes, and that not all teachers picked up the mail from their boxes. The length of the instrument, the sensitive nature of the content, and the reflective questions at the end might have contributed to the low return rate as well.

A second issue is that the psychometric properties of the instruments are not ideal. Although the ATGM/ATL scales have been widely used, are moderately

internally consistent, and have been shown to correlate with other measures, we know of only two other studies that have used the knowledge scale and none that have used the opinion items. There are no data on the reliability and validity of the author-constructed items, and they should be viewed as exploratory. It would be desirable in future research to gather data on their test-retest reliability and on their relationship to behavior in the school setting.

Although the instrument dealt with personal opinions on what might be a sensitive topic, the fact that it was anonymous and the frank nature of the responses suggested that participants were being honest in expressing their opinions. Many of the other items, such as the information about the schools and the items on the knowledge questionnaire, were factual ones. These factors imply that response bias and social desirability did not have a major influence upon the answers, as they sometimes do with self-report instruments (Zuckerman *et al.*, 1995; Johanson *et al.*, 1993). Minor inconsistencies in the responses may reflect inadequate information, differences in the individuals who chose to respond to certain questions, or carelessness. It must be recognized, however, that respondents' perceptions may not always accurately mirror their behaviors.

Findings Related to Hypotheses and Research Questions

Researcher's Sexual Orientation. Contrary to prediction, questionnaires in which the senior author was identified as a lesbian were more likely to be returned than those in which she was not. Presumably, people who chose to return the instrument were more interested in the issue and perhaps more knowledgeable and more positive towards lesbians and gays than those who did not. Also contrary to prediction, there was no evidence to suggest that the respondents made more favorable comments about gays and lesbians when the senior author was identified as a lesbian. The fact that a substantial minority of the sample had some close friends and family members who are gay or lesbian may suggest an atypical degree of interest and knowledge; however, no definitive normative data are available as a basis for comparison. The percentage of respondents identifying themselves as gay or bisexual (7%) is consistent with estimates of the percentage of gays in the American population (Wright, 1997), suggesting that the sample is not atypical.

Exposure to and Knowledge about Homosexuality. The data from this study suggest that, as predicted, teachers' overall exposure to the issue of homosexuality is very limited. Most respondents acknowledged having had some contact with gay or lesbian friends, family, or colleagues, but only a minority had taught any students whose parents they had known to be gay or lesbian. This implies that, for many of the respondents, their beliefs about children with a gay or lesbian parent are not based on personal experience, although they are consistent with the results of other research.

The participants' knowledge of homosexuality was also limited, with a mean of 65% correct on a true/false scale, noticeably lower than the mean of 82% correct for a sample of health care workers (Harris *et al.*, 1995), slightly lower than the mean of 72% correct for a sample of college students (Harris and Vanderhoof, 1995), and slightly higher than the mean of 63% correct for a sample of high school students (Harris and Vanderhoof, 1995).

The only significant difference between Hispanic and Anglo respondents in the study was found on the knowledge test: Hispanic teachers were somewhat less knowledgeable about homosexuality than Anglo respondents. The small effect size (.45), however, suggests that this difference is not an important one. Age and teaching experience were not significantly related to knowledge or attitudes about gays and lesbians.

This minimal exposure and knowledge could be due to a number of factors, including a lack of coursework and training in issues dealing with homosexuality. Only 15% of the respondents had ever attended a workshop on homosexuality, and the average duration of those workshops attended was only three hours. Not one respondent had any education dealing with issues of gay parenting and the roles teachers can play in supporting children with gay or lesbian parents. However, the fact that a majority of the respondents indicated that they would attend a workshop dealing with homosexuality, if it were offered, suggests that the respondents were interested in expanding their limited exposure to such issues. The provision of such training would be consistent with the recommendations of others who have studied the school climate for gays and lesbians (Anderson, 1994).

It should be noted that male respondents were less willing to attend such workshops than females; this might reflect a lesser interest in the topic, a lesser desire for attending workshops, or a tendency to be more negative toward homosexuals than females (Ellis and Vasseur, 1993; Kite and Whitley, 1996).

The lack of exposure to issues of homosexuality apparently extended beyond the individuals in the study to the schools in which they were situated. Most respondents did not feel that their school had a clear policy for dealing with gay and lesbian parents and did not feel that the administrators at their school would be apt to initiate such discussions. This lack of policy may be one reason that respondents reported feeling uncomfortable about approaching their principals with such issues. The attitudes of administrators can also be seen in the ways in which administrators responded to our request for permission to survey their teachers. Reactions ranged from enthusiasm and support to a refusal to consider such research based on a belief that the community was not ready to deal with the issue. Fontaine (1997) reported that few schools had policies for dealing with discrimination against sexual minority students, so it is not surprising that even fewer have policies concerning gay and lesbian parents. Nor is it clear whether such policies would be desirable or a hindrance in achieving the goal of providing the best atmosphere for all children and their families.

Attitudes towards Gays and Lesbians. Although there was substantial variability in teachers' opinions and attitudes, the results of this study were consistent with our predictions, as well as with those of a number of other studies, in showing the existence of negative attitudes towards gays and lesbians, particularly towards gay males, as well as of supportive ones. However, the absolute level of prejudice was less than in other studies, suggesting that these teachers were not a highly prejudiced group. The mean scores on the ATGM and ATL scales were somewhat lower (i.e., less negative) than scores on these tests for a sample of primarily heterosexual health professionals (Harris *et al.*, 1995) and substantially lower than the means reported for samples of college students (Herek, 1988). As we predicted, and as Kite and Whitley have found in their meta-analyses (Kite and Whitley, 1996; Whitley and Kite, 1995; but see Oliver and Hyde, 1993), male respondents had significantly more negative attitudes towards gay men than did females, whereas the biological sex difference towards lesbians was not statistically significant (Ellis and Vasseur, 1993). The moderate effect size of the difference in attitudes towards gay men (.62) suggests that this biological sex difference may have some practical significance.

Negative attitudes from some respondents appeared not only on the scores on the ATGM and ATL scales but most dramatically in the open-ended comments. Although many respondents were supportive of gay and lesbian parents and their children, others expressed more hostile opinions, many of which were explicitly tied to religious views. However, it is possible that the phrase "homosexual lifestyle" in the instrument may have caused the respondents to reply more negatively than an alternative term would have. Moreover, there was no evidence from their comments to suggest that respondents let their views directly influence their interactions with the parents of their students.

Interactions with Gay and Lesbian Parents. The percentage of respondents who had knowingly had a lesbian (38%) or gay male (21%) parent attend a parent-teacher conference seems low, given the hundreds of students whom teachers presumably get to know over the years and the proportion of gay and lesbians in the population (Wright, 1997). It seems likely that a number of gay and lesbian parents do not choose to disclose their sexual orientation to their children's teachers. Apparently, concern about the effects of disclosure is not unrealistic, as our respondents felt unwillingness to disclose a gay or lesbian parent's sexual orientation to others and were more confident that their school would not discriminate against single heterosexual parents than that it would not discriminate against single gay or lesbian parents. Respondents who had encountered gay and lesbian parents at parent-teacher conferences indicated that lesbian mothers were equally likely and gay fathers more likely to attend such conferences than their heterosexual counterparts. These gay and lesbian parents often acknowledged their partners as co-parents, and the teachers indicated that they would treat the partners as such.

Beliefs about Students with Gay or Lesbian Parents. Although we had expected teachers to be especially concerned about students with gay or lesbian

parents, the data from this study suggested that these teachers viewed such students as similar to other children in their personality traits and incidence of problems, consistent with the extant research (APA, 1995; Flaks *et al.*, 1995; Friedman and Downey, 1994; Golombok *et al.*, 1983; Kirkpatrick *et al.*, 1981; Patterson, 1992, 1996). The teachers believed that students with gay and lesbian parents experience more problems than students with heterosexual parents in only one of eight areas: social interaction. Consistent with this belief, responses to open-ended questions revealed a concern that peers and others might react negatively to disclosure of a parent's homosexuality and that students might need coping skills and extra resources to deal with actual and feared adverse reactions from peers. The respondents also expressed concerns about students' relationships with their parents, including possible anger toward them. However, the teachers we surveyed indicated that students with gay and lesbian parents had a number of positive characteristics, believing that such students tend to be more mature, more self-reliant, and more tolerant than students with heterosexual parents. Thus, it appears that these students have, for the most part, adjusted well to their parent's sexual identity and that what they need is acceptance and support from the rest of the school community.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

In general, the results suggest that teachers may not be well educated on issues related to homosexuality, and that school administrators may be reluctant to address such topics. Teachers showed a range of opinions in their personal attitudes towards gay and lesbians, including some which were highly negative. In contrast, the teachers reported generally favorable interactions with gay and lesbian parents and positive beliefs about the capabilities of their students with gay or lesbian parents. However, there was some concern about how having a gay or lesbian parent might affect students' social interactions and acceptance by peers. Education about gays and lesbians and the creation of a school climate in which different types of families and different sexual orientations could be discussed and acknowledged would be a positive step towards ensuring that children with gay or lesbian parents are given the opportunity to develop their full potential.

Neither this study nor the relevant literature suggests that children with gay or lesbian parents have more emotional or behavior problems than students with heterosexual parents. Their greatest problem is feeling open about their home life and having a safe place to be able to express themselves. School should be one of those places. It would seem from this research that a valuable activity for school administrators would be to provide workshops that deal with sexual orientation in all forms as it pertains to students, teachers, and parents. The very fact that a school provides such workshops and encourages its teachers to attend them might create a freer atmosphere in which to discuss differing family units and provide

support to students from nontraditional families. A positive point to be made is that a majority of the teachers surveyed (and 63% of the women) would be willing to attend such workshops if offered.

Implications for further research could include the following: First, some research could refine and extend the methodology of the present study by further exploration and validation of the author-constructed measures, extension to different samples and populations, and supplementing the questionnaire approach with intensive qualitative interviews. Second, research could be done with gay and lesbian parents and their children to determine how their school experiences have been affected by teachers' attitudes. Third, research could be done on school policies toward gay and lesbian parents, as well as students, to identify what the needs for such policies are and what kinds of policies are most effective in facilitating the education of students. Fourth, educational workshops and programs on issues of sexual identity could be developed for teachers and administrators, and research studies evaluating the effects of such programs could be conducted. Changes in knowledge, attitudes, and classroom behaviors could all be expected from effective programs.

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