

Special Needs of Students with Gay and Lesbian Parents in the Elementary School

Patricia Fioriello

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SPECIAL NEEDS OF STUDENTS WITH GAY AND LESBIAN
PARENTS IN THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirement for the Degree
Doctor of Education

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School of Organizational Management

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Abstract of the Dissertation

Examination of the Elementary School and Special Needs of Students with Gay and Lesbian Parents

by Patricia Fioriello, Ed.D.

University of La Verne: 1997

Purpose: The purpose of this study was to examine the way and extent to which the elementary school is meeting special needs of students of gay and lesbian parents, in regard to a school environment that provides support, protection, inclusive curriculum, principal and assistant principal involvement, and involvement of parents of these children in the life of the school.

Methodology: The study consisted of two types of research: a descriptive study and a qualitative case study. Questionnaires and semistructured interviews were conducted with elementary principals enrolled in the University of La Verne doctoral program and working in school districts throughout California. The survey instrument included five categories of the role of the elementary school with children of gay/lesbian parents: communication and disclosure; sensitivity to family/inclusion; curriculum; homosexual issues; and principal's perceptions.

Findings and conclusions: The study found that little was being done in the elementary school districts to provide a supportive, protective, or positive learning environment for children with gay and lesbian parents. Elementary teachers were generally not assisted by principals and assistant principals in developing a more inclusive curriculum. Elementary principals were not

addressing the question of gay and lesbian parents and their children in the school. Gay and lesbian parents had very limited involvement in the elementary school.

Recommendations: Use the findings to assist elementary schools and elementary principals and assistant principals in providing a more inclusive school environment for the children of gay and lesbian parents.

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DEDICATION

To Aracely, for believing in me . . .

CHAPTER I

THE PROBLEM

Introduction

Recently I saw for the first time a textbook that had gay parents in it, and I realized how radically it would have changed my life growing up--it would have wiped out the anxiety and suppression if I'd seen this book when I was ten. The fact that I didn't have any friends whose mothers were lesbian didn't mean it didn't exist. I'm sure it did even in Kentucky. You realize the drastic importance of having things public--talked about in school, for instance. It wouldn't just have changed the way I felt, but also the way a lot of other people felt. Twenty-one year old Ben Pratt. (Benkov 1994, 205)

At present, gays and lesbians continue to live a lifestyle with little hope for improvement in the near future. An increase of social acceptance by the general public has led some gays and lesbians to "come out of the closet." However, progress for gays and lesbians has hardly gone beyond the acknowledgment that gays and lesbians exist in this society. Consider the following true story taken from the book, Out in All Directions: A Treasury of Gay and Lesbian America.

Richard Creede and Raymond Paul had lived together for twenty years. In many ways they were like any other suburban couple: They owned a home and a car together, shared both a joint checking account and a dog. But when they went to purchase a family burial plot in the municipal cemetery in Hempstead, Long Island, they were told that two unrelated men could not be buried in a single plot with a shared headstone. Only after they sought legal counsel from Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund and agreed to sign an affidavit swearing that no one but themselves would occupy the grave, did the city relent. (Witt, Thomas, and Marcus 1995, 472)

The struggle for gays and lesbians to be accepted is far from over. Political and social attempts to attain equal rights for gays and lesbians have been a painstakingly slow and, at times, unsuccessful cause. "In 1993, there were 1,813 antigay incidents nationally, a 14 percent decrease from the 2,103 such incidents in 1992. It was the first annual drop in five years. However, in Los Angeles that same year, gay men supplanted African Americans as the primary target of hate crimes" (Witt, Thomas, and Marcus 1995, 469).

Across the country, conservative religious groups try to deny gays the right to love, marry, have children, and raise a family. Homosexuality continues to be viewed as a morally unfit way of life. A lesbian mother in Tallahassee, Florida, lost custody of her child to her ex-husband, a man who murdered his first wife. Florida's first District Court of Appeal removed two-year-old Cassey Ward from the mother's home, after the judge said he wanted to give Cassey a chance to live in "a nonlesbian world." The father, John Ward, pleaded guilty to second-degree murder of his first wife in 1974 and served eight years in prison (Lesbian Loses Custody Battle with Murder 1996). The American justice system in 1996 continues to support "traditional values" regardless of the quality of life for the individuals involved. In this case, the court felt it was more appropriate for a child to live with a convicted murderer than to live with her own mother, who committed no crime. It appears that educated leaders in this country are no different than many others who continue to view a person's nontraditional sexual orientation as a crime worse than taking another person's life.

Problem Statement

There is question if the educational system presently is addressing the cultural issues and needs of gays, lesbians, and their families. It is commonly

accepted that school is a place where children should feel safe and represented. Students rely on the education system to teach them and to relate their life experiences to the world of learning.

The following incident, as recent as the fall of 1996, summarizes the feeling of "countless gay teenagers who quit school to escape nonstop abuse that educators neither prevented nor halted." Ninth grader Jamie Nabozny's most vivid memory is of being attacked in a school restroom, knocked into a urinal, and urinated on. That wasn't the first at-school assault on Jaime or even the most violent one. It just stands out, he says, as the most humiliating" (Price 1996, A8). Jamie Nabozny is one of many gay youths who experienced abuse in high school for no other reason than the fact that he was gay.

Wickens (1993) indicates that when young children enter elementary school, they bring their home environment with them; it is all they are familiar with. The school helps the young student make the transition from home to the school years. The school supports "where they came from," and, in turn, the young child feels strong, confident, and ready to face the challenges of learning. Most will enter a school where the curriculum is, in fact, about family (25).

Unfortunately, not all children who enter school feel safe, represented, and included in the school experience. Children of gay and lesbian parents often feel lonely and isolated. However, they are not alone in numbers. Wickens (1993) states that eight million to ten million children have a gay or lesbian parent. Despite their increasing number and visibility, there is no published research on gay-headed families and their interactions with schools (Casper, Schultz, and Wickens 1992).

Children of gay and lesbian parents often are not included in the school experience. Raymer (1993) states that "school appears to be one of the most

nonsupportive places, yet the children (of gay parents) spend a large part of their time there. Social workers and other professionals should be aware of the lack of support in the school setting and help to educate school personnel and to develop support services in the school arena" (58).

Past studies concerning the children of gay and lesbian parents primarily examined the family and the effect of the home environment on the child. Limited research has examined the schools and the responsibility, if any, administrators are taking to include and represent these young children in the school experience.

The root of school implementation begins with the school administrator. Casper, Schultz, and Wickens (1992) reveal in their study that "this issue is not only one for parents and teachers. It should be reflected in the larger arena of the school, where administrators can encourage frank discussions that can support gay parenting by grappling with such questions as: How can the administration help both teachers and parents? What kinds of parent meetings can support the work of teachers in building a more inclusive curriculum? What administrative changes are necessary?" (132).

Being an educator and also participating in a doctoral program, the writer's discussions of this topic with colleagues and dissertation study groups have been numerous. Many administrators did not understand why children of gay and lesbian parents would have any special needs, nor did they think it was necessary to address this issue at their school. One elementary principal stated "What is there to address? How are these kids any different from any other child?" Sadly, one high school assistant principal stated that he would never talk about this issue at his school.

Wickens (1993) realizes that this phenomenon exists among educators. She reflectively revealed these comments about herself, "How could I not have thought about the educational implications for children in families headed by two lesbians? I am a former teacher of young children on the faculty of an educational institution. I am a curriculum developer and a political activist currently engaged in issues of sexual orientation and equity" (25).

Shelly Weiss, a lesbian mother, says her youngest son was shunned by a friend in his Brooklyn kindergarten whose parents didn't want him to associate with a gay family. Ms. Weiss stated, "I think that the schoolyard is often the spawning ground of the next generation of gay-bashers" (Kantrowitz 1992, 64). Schools, in general, are not supportive of families that are not representative of the school norm. Young children, when allowed to exhibit prejudicial behaviors, will grow up to believe these actions are acceptable.

There is rather general agreement upon the necessity of relating teaching and school activities to the ethics and cultural background of children. Wlodkowski and Ginsberg (1995) state, "To be effective in multicultural classrooms, teachers must relate teaching content to the cultural backgrounds of their students" (17). Olneck (1995) and Ogbu (1995) both support this comprehensive model of culturally responsive teaching which values and respects the cultural identity and integrity of the student. Statistical estimates indicate that eight to ten million children have a gay or lesbian parent (Wickens 1993). These numbers can be translated into a realistic setting. Imagine an elementary school with a student population of 600. With the above statistics, one full classroom of approximately thirty-five students will consist of children who have a gay or lesbian parent.

Elementary school personnel need to take a close look at their school and examine what they are doing to help these young children feel supported and included in school. Recognition of the importance of relating education to culture, of dealing with substantial numbers of this special group of children, and of the fact that little, if any, special attention appears to be given to these children creates cause for serious attention. It is important to know what is happening in schools to provide programs for the children of gay and lesbian parents. Knowing what is occurring in the schools should help to provide appropriate programs for these children. There is a need to identify practices that support and do not support the school experience of students with gay or lesbian parents.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the way and extent to which the elementary school is meeting special needs of students of gay and lesbian parents in regard to; a school environment that provides support, protection, inclusive curriculum, principal and assistant principal's involvement, and involvement of parents of these children in the life of the school.

Research Questions

The following research questions were examined during the study:

1. In what ways and to what extent are elementary school districts providing a supportive and protective environment for the children of gay and lesbian parents and their parents?
2. In what ways and to what extent are elementary school principals and assistant principals creating a positive learning environment for the children of gay and lesbian parents?

3. In what ways and to what extent are elementary school teachers assisted by principals and assistant principals in developing a more inclusive curriculum for children of gay and lesbian parents?

4. In what ways and to what extent do elementary school principals and assistant principals address the question of gay and lesbian parents and their children?

5. What involvement, in general, do gay and lesbian parents have in the elementary school?

Significance of Study

The significance of the study is supported by many researchers in the literature. Weiss (1979), among others, stated that gay and lesbian parents are confronted with challenges throughout their life. Their children are also faced with prejudice, isolation, and fear. The schools, an ally of most children, do not represent the needs of the student with a gay or lesbian parent. Elementary schools, in particular, are challenged with the role of introducing the young student to the world of education. The children of gay and lesbian parents enter the elementary school to find that their family is not represented in the curriculum, in the culture of the school, and that the climate of the school is not warm and accepting of their parent's lifestyle. This study is also significant because few, if any, have studied the interaction of gays and the schools. Data are limited on this topic.

The results of this study will provide educators with additional insight to what is happening in schools in the state of California with regard to the needs of children of gay and lesbian children. Schools will be provided with valuable information to assist in the development of improvement plans in this area.

Awareness and increased sensitivity should lead to implementation of a more inclusive curriculum and school culture. Results will help school administrators design staff development to assist teachers to deal with this topic both in the classroom and with the family. Increased awareness and sensitivity of educators regarding this topic will make a difference with gay and lesbian parents and their children.

Limitations of the Study

This study was conducted with the following limitations:

1. The use of a questionnaire with a sample of principals and assistant principals. These principals and assistant principals, all involved in a doctoral program leading to an Ed.D., may be more aware of the needs of students from an alternative family than principals who are not currently enrolled in an advanced educational program. The expectation is that administrators, especially doctoral students, will be more updated on current literature, and therefore more accepting and sensitive to the needs of special groups.

2. Isaac and Michael (1995) discuss the weaknesses of questionnaire studies, stating that "surveys only tap respondents who are accessible and cooperative" (137). Consideration must be given to the fact that a mailed questionnaire will elicit responses from individuals who want to be involved in the study.

3. The voluntary nature of the questionnaire may produce responses reflective of a certain type of person.

4. Randomly selected interviews of survey respondents may also present additional limitations.

5. The interviewees, in a face to face situation, may be embarrassed or otherwise reluctant to give an honest response that will portray their school in a negative way, especially concerning such a sensitive topic as homosexuality.

6. As an educator, principals know what the correct response should be, and therefore may give answers that they feel are politically correct. The specifically selected participants may be selected as a result of responses that are not reflective of their real feelings.

7. Principals and assistant principals may live and work in diverse regions of California. Where the principal is from and the level of exposure to different cultures, minorities, and religions may have an influence on responses to sensitive issues.

8. In face-to-face interviews personal bias of interviewee and/or interviewer may alter validity.

Delimitations of the Study

This study was conducted with the following delimitations:

1. The study was restricted to administrators in California school districts in the year of 1996.
2. The study examined only one type of school administrator, that being the school site principal and assistant principal.
3. The sample was composed only of elementary school principals and assistant principals in the University of La Verne Doctor of Education program.

Definition of Terms

The following are operational definitions of terms as used in this study.

Alternative family. A family that does not consist of the traditional family structure

Artificial insemination. Introduction of semen into the vagina or uterus without sexual contact

Coming out. The time during which a homosexual reveals his or her sexual orientation

D.I. Donor insemination; another name for artificial insemination

Disclosure. The act or process of revealing or uncovering

Domestic partnership. Providing some sort of legal status to non married couples of all types depending on the ordinance and the rights granted.

Elementary assistant principal. An assistant principal in a kindergarten through sixth grade institution of learning

Elementary principal. A principal in a kindergarten through sixth grade institution of learning

Elementary school. An kindergarten through sixth grade institution of learning

Elementary teacher. A teacher in a kindergarten through sixth grade institution of learning

Gay. A homosexual man

Gay bashers. Individuals who attack others because they are homosexual

Gay family. A family headed by two gay men

Gay parent. A father who is a gay man

Heterosexual. Individuals sexually oriented to persons of the opposite sex

Homophobia. Aversion to gay or homosexual people or their lifestyle or culture

Homosexual. Of, relating to, or having a sexual orientation to persons of the same sex

Homosexuality. Sexual orientation to persons of the same sex

Inclusion. The act of including or the state of being included, relating to the inclusion of the gay and lesbian lifestyle in mainstream America

Lesbian. A gay or homosexual woman

Lesbian baby boom. The current trend and increase in the number of babies of lesbians, many through artificial insemination while in a lesbian relationship

Lesbian family. A family headed by two women in a relationship

Lesbian parent. A lesbian who is a parent

Minority. For purposes of this study, minority is defined as children of other than white, heterosexual parents

Out of the closet. To reveal ones homosexuality

Summary

Research has shown that homosexuals in our society are treated unfairly. Parents, who happen to be gay or lesbian, are faced with the realities of trying to raise a child in a prejudiced world. The children of these parents are in the school system; and it is not evident if the children are receiving support, recognition, or representation. Educational leaders have a responsibility to give every child an equal education, which for others includes the family structure. Children learn best when they feel safe and acknowledged for who they are.

Organization of the Study

The report of this study on the role of the elementary school with students who have gay and lesbian parents was organized in a traditional way.

Chapter I consisted of an introduction to the problem that included a statement of the problem, the purpose of the problem, the research questions, the significance of the study, the definition of terms, and the limitations, and delimitations of the study.

Chapter II presents a review of the literature and research on homosexuality, gay and lesbian parents, the children of gay and lesbian parents, and the elementary school with regard to the children of gay and lesbian children. Chapter III presents the methodology used in this study. Included in the methodology of research are the kind of research, sample and population, instrumentation, validation of instruments, data collection procedures, and statistical analysis. Chapter IV presents an analysis of the collected data. Chapter V presents the key findings, conclusions, and recommendations for the future.