Chapter 4

Schools and Children in LGBTQ Families

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Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer families are historically new possibilities, and many education systems are unprepared to engage with members of these families. This chapter reviews the extant literature and finds that many of the approximately 7 million LGBTQ families across the United States do not feel supported by their child's school, although many parents are involved and volunteer at high rates. The chapter also considers strategies to best equip educators and administrators to support LGBTQ families at school, such as the use of inclusive policies and textbooks, encouragement of supportive organizations for LGBTQ people (e.g., Gay-Straight Alliance networks), and interventions to thwart harassment.

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Two institutions play the prime roles in the socialization of children: families and schools. They provide the contexts for the vast majority of daily interactions that shape childhood and adolescence. In early childhood, in particular, the links between these institutions are strong. Parents, in general, are likely to be very well informed about and engaged in their children's schools. Although the connections between family and school typically weaken as students grow older, most scholars agree that parents should continue to be involved in the education of their children (Stouffer, 1992). Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer (LGBTQ) families pose a contemporary challenge to these values for parental engagement in schooling. Historically, LGBTQ families are a new possibility, and educational systems are often unprepared to engage with parents in these families (Bower & Klecka, 2009). Yet there has been little empirical research on such families and their interactions with schools. In this chapter we consider what is known about LGBTQ families and schools and suggest some directions for this field of studies.

Not all families are treated equally in the United States; in many jurisdictions there is preferential treatment for heterosexual families in adoption policies, legal statuses, and benefits that emerge from marriage. LGBTQ parents do not have the privileges afforded to heterosexual parents: Same-sex marriages are legal in only a handful of states; child custody laws remain complex and sometimes treat sexual orientation as a relevant factor in determining custody cases; and adoption and foster care by lesbian and gay parents are illegal in some places in the United States (Patterson, 2009).

Public tensions regarding LGBTQ issues, including whether LGBTQ parents and their children even "count" as families, are beginning to play out in the area of education. All families must constantly negotiate how to interact with schools in ways that will be fulfilling for both parents and child, but LGBTQ parents must also be mindful of the potential discrimination that they or their child may face at school. Some lesbian and gay parents report that they are fearful of sending their children to school, where they may experience discrimination due to their family status (Berkowitz & Marsiglio, 2007; Richardson & Goldberg, 2010). Such concerns are compounded by other long-standing inequities in education (Jeltova & Fish, 2005): Lesbian and gay families that identify as multiracial (Berkowitz & Ryan, 2011) or whose children are adopted (James, 2002) may face multiple dilemmas navigating "nontraditional" family statuses with their children's schools. Further, children of lesbian and gay parents may be harassed at high levels compared with their heterosexual peers (Ray & Gregory, 2001) and may have diminished educational aspirations because of hostile school climates (Kosciw & Diaz, 2006). One study of high school students recruited through Gay-Straight Alliance clubs found that both heterosexual and LGBTQ students perceived their schools as less safe for students with LGBTQ parents (Russell, McGuire, Lee, Larriva, & Lamb, 2008). Thus, prejudice toward children with LGBTQ parents is perceived by other students in schools. And yet, despite compromised school experiences and concerns for safety, some recent studies have found that the academic performance of children of lesbian and gay parents is similar to that of students with heterosexual parents (Patterson, 2009; Rosenfeld, 2010).

This chapter reviews two decades of research to develop an understanding of the experiences of LGBTQ families in schooling from three vantage points: LGBTQ parents who have children in school; students with LGBTQ parents; and parents of LGBTQ students. We consider how families in each of these groups navigate their nontraditional family status in relation to the children's schools. The chapter ends with a discussion of the challenges of researching this population and a discussion of findings.

Advances in the Study of LGBTQ Parents

Empirical literature that addresses lesbian and gay parents and their experiences with schools has remained underdeveloped over the past decade. We first present basic demographic information about LGBTQ families and their children. We then turn to schooling and consider the experiences of LGBTQ parents as they interact with their children's schools; we also review and compare the experiences of their children at school. From both LGBTQ parents and their

children we learn about the risk for teasing and victimization at school, but also the particularly strong school involvement of parents. We then consider the small body of research that compares students with heterosexual parents and students with lesbian and gay parents in the realm of education: The psychosocial and academic outcomes are similar for the two groups of children, even though children of lesbian and gay parents experience more teasing and harassment. We then shift attention from specific experiences of parents and students to the small but growing body of scholarship that focuses on educational practices that may create supportive school climates for students with LGBTQ parents. Finally, we consider a small body of research on parents of LGBTQ children; this group of parents is understudied, but their experiences may parallel those of LGBTQ parents and their children in important ways.

Demographic Patterns of LGBTQ Families

Research has estimated there to be as many as 7 million lesbian and gay parents (married and unmarried) with dependent children in the United States (Patterson & Freil, 2000). According to the 2000 census, 33% of female and 22% of male same-sex couples reported at least one child under the age of 18 living in their home (Paige, 2005). Using more recent census data, Gates (2010c) reported that there were nearly 650,000 same-sex couples living in the United States in 2010 and that this number has been rising rapidly every year, increasing at three times the rate of population growth (Gates, 2010a). Gates reminds us that it is difficult to count numbers of LGBTQ families because of the limitations of the Census form for identifying LGBTQ couples, the complexity of reporting these same-sex relationships, and the fact that approximately 10% of self-identified same-sex couples are reluctant to identify as such on the Census (Gates, 2010b). Thus, the ways in which LGBTQ families define themselves barely align with federal government categories. And contrary to what most people might expect, the typical lesbian or gay parents raising children in the United States are people of color and live in the South (Smith & Gates, 2001; Walther & Poston, 2004). For example, lesbian/gay families in the South include large numbers of African Americans and adults parenting adopted or foster children who belonged to relatives or are the products of heterosexual marriages.

Lesbian and Gay Parents' Interactions With Schools

Research over the past few decades has indicated that neither these millions of lesbian and gay parents nor their children are fully supported at schools. A

recent study by the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) of nearly 600 lesbian and gay parents of mostly fifth-grade students (Kosciw & Diaz, 2008) found that parents generally reported few negative experiences from school personnel, but instead experienced moderate rates of negative experiences from other parents (26%) and other students (21%) at school. Another study of over 2,000 lesbian mothers reported similar rates of harassment and discrimination at their child's school from other parents: 17% (Morris, Balsam, & Rothblum, 2002). However, despite the experiences of harassment faced by both lesbian and gay parents and the children of those parents, the GLSEN study found that the presence of supportive adults at school was associated with higher student academic achievement for children with LGBTQ parents.

Early research pointed to negative experiences at school: Families had to remain continually aware that their nontraditional family status was not well represented in the school systems. In one Australian study, all of the lesbian and gay parents who were interviewed reported that they were concerned about disclosing their family status at school; their children were concerned that disclosure would affect peer relationships (Perlesz et al., 2006). Interviews with lesbian and gay parents confirmed that children had to face that their family status was sometimes represented as deviant within the school system (Casper, Schultz, & Wickens, 1992). A study of 117 prospective and current lesbian and gay parents from Australia (Ray & Gregory, 2001) found that more than two thirds of lesbian and gay parents with children in secondary school reported their children having felt different from other students. According to their parents, about 40% of these youth were not taught about issues concerning lesbian and gay parents in school, while 28% of the same youth were bullied or teased.

Perhaps because of concern for their children's school experiences, recent research indicates that lesbian and gay parents are highly involved in their children's schools. This was true of the lesbian and gay parents in the GLSEN study; they were more likely to have volunteered for the school than their heterosexual counterparts and were more likely to attend school events such as Back to School Night (Kosciw & Diaz, 2008). Another study found that lesbian and gay parents selected schools that were known for openness to diversity and multiculturalism, even when the selection process involved spending a great deal of time and energy collecting information about schools. The study also indicated that parents were proactive in communicating with school administrators, teachers, and peers of their children to promote acceptance of their lesbian or gay family. Further, lesbian and gay parents were intentionally more involved in their children's schools as a strategy to change attitudes about LGBTQ families and become closer to other marginalized families in

the school (Mercier & Harold, 2003). Thus, LGBTQ families appear to be proactive in addressing related family issues at school: Almost half of the parents in GLSEN's sample had reportedly discussed their family composition with school personnel, while two thirds had discussed it with a teacher. Finally, LGBTQ parents often consider strategies for protecting their children because of concerns about possible victimization at school. In a study of California high school students, the students reported less bullying and more safety at school when LGBTQ issues were included in the curriculum (California Safe Schools Coalition, 2006). Yet in the GLSEN study (Kosciw & Diaz, 2008), fewer than a third of lesbian and gay parents and students with lesbian and gay parents reported any curricula that included representations of LGBTQ people or history in the past year. Although 75% of lesbian and gay parents reported that their school had a policy for dealing with harassment, only 42% of those parents indicated that the policy specifically included sexual orientation and/or gender identity/expression (Kosciw & Diaz, 2008).

Children of Lesbian and Gay Parents and Their School Interactions

Despite lesbian and gay parents' proactive attempts to connect with teachers and school personnel, studies suggest that children of these parents often experience prejudice or discrimination at school because of their family status. The National Lesbian Family Study collected data on lesbian parents and their children beginning in 1986. This study has produced several relevant findings. For example, almost one fifth of mothers in lesbian-headed families reported that their children encountered homophobia at school (Gartrell et al., 2000). In a follow-up study comparing 27 children of lesbian mothers with 27 children of single heterosexual mothers, the lesbian mothers reported that over a third of their children were teased at school because of the sexual orientation of their parents (Tasker & Golombok, 1997). In the recent GLSEN study, children of lesbian and gay parents reported high rates of anti-LGBTQ comments by peers, but few reported that staff or teachers had intervened in response to these comments or slurs (e.g., "that's so gay"). Specifically, of children with lesbian or gay parents, half of the sample felt unsafe at school because of a personal characteristic, such as their perceived or actual sexual orientation. More compelling, nearly a fourth of the sample reported feeling unsafe because of their lesbian and gay family status. About 40% of the youth reported being verbally harassed because of their family status, and fewer than half (48%) reported incidents of harassment to school personnel (Kosciw & Diaz, 2008). These findings are consistent with another study of over 2,000 California high school students, which found that students perceived their schools to be unsafe

for students with LGBTQ parents (Russell et al., 2008). That study showed that LGBTQ students were more likely than heterosexual students to report that their school was unsafe for their schoolmates who had LGBTQ parents. These findings are alarming because it has been shown that victimization of any type destabilizes the learning environment for students and causes division among school staff and students (Jeltova & Fish, 2005).

A long-standing area of speculation is whether children of lesbian and gay couples fare as well as children of heterosexual couples on a range of developmental indicators of adjustment (Patterson, 2009). Given the experiences of prejudice endured by children in the former group, there may be cause for concern for their emotional well-being. However, using nationally representative data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, Patterson (2009) examined 44 adolescents parented by same-sex couples and found that children of same-sex couples were similar to those of heterosexual parents in terms of psychosocial development (Biblarz & Stacey, 2010). Moreover, students with same-sex parents were actually more connected at school, and they did not differ on measures of depression, anxiety, or self-esteem (Patterson, 2009). Another recent study that used Census data confirms these findings: Children of same-sex couples were found to make normal progress at school compared with their counterparts from most other family structures (e.g., heterosexual mother and father; Rosenfeld, 2010). Thus, despite more frequent experiences of prejudice, bullying, and harassment at school, there are no apparent differences in psychosocial and academic adjustment trajectories between children of lesbian and gay parents and children of heterosexual parents.

Our discussion thus far has focused primarily on lesbian- and gay-parent families; there is very little research on the experiences of bisexual or transgender parents and schools. An exception is the recent book *Border Sexualities, Border Families in Schools* (Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2010), which describes the experiences of bisexual and polyamorous families and their negotiations in school systems. Pallotta-Chiarolli reviews strategies that these families employ to keep from falling into the gaps in hetero-dominant schools. Several autobiographical reflections from bisexual mothers articulate their concern that homophobia is not tackled in the school system for nonheterosexual families. One bisexual mother worried that her son would be unable to cope with the "burden" of having two bisexual parents; this mother was dissatisfied with the scarcity of educational materials on LGBTQ families (Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2010, p. 107). Pallotta-Chiarolli ultimately calls for a number of educational strategies for including issues of bisexuality at school: validation of sexual diversity by teachers, diversity programs, and professional development for staff.

Educational Practices

Many educators are committed to providing education about diversity for their students; yet embracing diversity and addressing family differences at school can be a challenge (Emfinger, 2007). Although one of the national goals of the education system in the United States is to increase parental involvement, many LGBTQ parents do not feel that they can participate because many of their children's schools do not embrace them (Fox, 2007). Few teachers have training to learn to understand and support LGBTQ families at school (Fox, 2007); because these families remain invisible in many school systems, teachers may be surprised to realize they are not embracing all forms of diversity (Emfinger, 2007). This section reviews contemporary recommendations and programs that aim to create inclusive schools for LGBTQ families.

One way that schools can help lesbian and gay families feel more included is to provide course materials and textbooks that are inclusive of all families and that do not perpetuate negative stereotypes; this is especially relevant in early childhood, when family relations are a common and relevant topic in learning materials. Because heterosexuality is the norm, most schools do not deal with diverse family structures through curricula (Jeltova & Fish, 2005), thus excluding the experiences of LGBTQ families. Moreover, when LGBTQ people are included, they are rarely portrayed as typical people who live everyday lives (Emfinger, 2007). Few textbooks include LGBTQ issues: In one analysis, only a handful of textbooks mentioned LGBTQ families, and those that did included no pictures of LGBTQ families. When LGBTQ topics (such as families) were included, they were often portrayed in ways that reinforced negative stereotypes or that perpetuated heteronormativity (Macgillivray & Jennings, 2008).

Another way to facilitate the inclusion of LGBTQ families in schools is to train teachers on how to create inclusive learning environments. A growing body of literature has examined the inclusion of LGBTQ topics in the content of K–12 curricula; however, recent research indicates that almost half of teacher education programs fail to include topics of sexual orientation (Macgillivray & Jennings, 2008). Many LGBTQ parents feel excluded from schoolwide functions (e.g., Mother's Day celebrations), by the language used to describe family types (e.g., "Mom and Dad," "nontraditional"), and by other long-standing assumptions about families (e.g., that if a child is adopted she has lived with her family since birth; Fox, 2007). Thus, educators have urged schools and teachers to include issues of diversity in their lesson plans (Fox, 2007; Wolfe, 2006). One educator recommends using guest speakers with diverse experiences, children's literature on family diversity,

and educational programs and films that teach about diversity and bullying (Wolfe, 2006).

Finally, appropriate organizations and clubs at school are another way to support LGBTQ parents and children. Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs) are an example of a potential social support network for these families. GSAs at schools have been linked with more favorable outcomes related to school experience, decreased substance abuse, and improved psychological outcomes for LGBTQ students (Heck, Flentje, & Cochran, 2011; Toomey, Ryan, Diaz, & Russell, 2011). In addition, GSAs can highlight a school's efforts to be open and aware of LGBTQ issues (Jeltova & Fish, 2005). Although one study found that GSAs were a significant source of support for students with LGBTQ parents, only about a third reported that their school had a GSA or other similar club (Kosciw & Diaz, 2008).

Parents of LGBTQ Students in Schools

Although this article focuses on LGBTQ parents and their children, it is important to note another group of interest in studying LGBTQ families and schools: parents of LGBTQ students. A decade ago, a book written from the perspective of a parent of gay sons identified strategies that school personnel can employ to make school safer for LGBTQ youth: stopping derogatory remarks, allowing discussion on LGBTQ topics, being a role model, including LGBTQ issues in the curriculum, and teaching sensitivity in the use of language (Baker, 2000). Although there is now a growing research literature on the school experiences of LGBTQ youth, including the disparate rates of bullying at school and associated negative outcomes for mental health and achievement (Kosciw & Diaz, 2006), there has been little empirical attention to the role of the (typically heterosexual) parents of LGBTQ students. In one example of the latter, researchers are beginning to explore parent-adolescent relationships and how they affect LGBTQ young people's mental and behavioral health (Ryan, Huebner, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2009; Shilo & Savaya, 2011). Parents typically advocate for their children in school, yet no relevant literature investigates the strategies that heterosexual parents might use to support their LGBTQ children at school. There is little research on how parents with LGBTQ children navigate the school context; this is an important area for further inquiry.

Challenges in Research

In reviewing the existing literature on LGBTQ families and schooling, we note that the relevant scholarship is still in development. At a basic level,

LGBTQ-parent families challenge long-standing heterosexism and homophobia in education. At the same time, scholarship in this area faces a number of challenges. Depending on their circumstances, many LGBTQ-parent families are vulnerable and thus may not make themselves readily known. Further, only recently have scholars begun to include attention to LGBTQ-parent families; there are basic questions about how to identify such families or measure LGBTQ family status, both for parents and for children (Russell, Watson, & Muraco, 2011). Also, most of what we know about LGBTQ families and their interactions with schooling is based on studies for which adults or children self-select their participation; it is unclear how the current knowledge of LGBTQ-parent families and education may be distinct among those most likely to participate in these studies. It is also important to consider how teachers' practices and attitudes toward LGBTQ-parent families impact the ways that these families negotiate the school system.

Finally, little systematic investigation has been done to understand the experiences of heterosexual parents with LGBTQ children and their interactions with schools. Research with this population might enhance understandings of barriers as well as strategies and opportunities for challenging heterosexism and homophobia in education. Such research might also highlight the common experiences of LGBTQ parents and heterosexual parents of LGBTQ children, and could offer possibilities for building alliances among parents to advocate for safe and supportive school climates for all students.

Discussion: Promising Directions and Opportunities

The small body of relevant scholarship provides a complex image of the issues affecting LGBTQ families and schooling. Children of LGBTQ parents may experience prejudice or victimization because of their family status, and this is a matter of serious concern. And some LGBTQ parents report discrimination in interactions with their children's schools. Yet studies show that lesbian and gay parents are equally if not more engaged than heterosexual parents in their children's schools. And despite the discrimination they may face, studies consistently show that the children of lesbian and gay parents have typical development.

A number of topics need further study. First, the small body of existing research is based on lesbian and gay parents, and predominantly lesbian-mother families. Of 588 families who participated in the GLSEN study of LGBTQ parents with children in K–12 schooling, only 2% of parents identified as transgender, and only 5% as bisexual—too few for direct comparisons between their experiences and those of lesbian and gay parents (Kosciw & Diaz, 2008).

In-depth studies that consider the interactions of bisexual and transgender parents and their children's schooling would contribute deeper understanding of parent-school dynamics for all LGBTQ families.

Studies of LGBTQ-parent families, as well as studies of LGBTQ youth in schools, point to a number of important educational policies or strategies that promote safe school climates for all students: clear and inclusive nondiscrimination policies; intervention by school personnel to prevent harassment; the presence of GSAs; and inclusion of LGBTQ issues in the curriculum (see Russell, Kosciw, Horn, & Saewyc, 2010). Additional research is warranted on how these school strategies make a difference specifically for LGBTQ parents and their children. In Canada, grassroots models have developed from teachers' vested interest in providing safe, supportive, and inclusive learning environments for students (Solomon, 2004); these models are grounded in an understanding that homophobia is seeded in children's earliest experiences. Such teacher-initiated models are recommended for teachers in the United States.

Finally, a growing number of large-scale federal and regional surveys now include measures that make it possible to identify LGBTQ-parent families (Russell & Muraco, 2012). Although not designed specifically for the study of LGBTQ families and schooling, a number of these studies include education and schooling within their scope and offer possibilities for new studies of LGBTQ families and education. In addition to these data sources, the field of LGBTQ family studies is growing, and there are growing opportunities to bridge the scholarship on LGBTQ families with research on LGBTQ issues in education. Such work has the potential to greatly advance knowledge about not only LGBTQ and but all families as they navigate schooling with and for their children.

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LGBTQ Issues in Education: Advancing a Research Agenda

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