

School Culture and Sexual Minority Teachers in the United States

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Abstract

Empirical research concerning school culture and sexual minority teachers (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) in the United States is inadequate at best. This article uses data from educational leadership candidates enrolled in a Southwestern metropolitan principal certification program to examine perceptions of the relative tolerance for real or perceived sexual minority teachers on their respective campuses. A total of 117 public school teachers representing 20 school districts enrolled in principal certification courses during the 2004-2005 academic year participated in the study. The research instrument consisted of four yes/no questions, eight 1-9 Likert-type scales, and demographic data. Standard statistics were used to report the results. Data supports 1) the prevalence of homophobic comments and prejudicial language previously reported by self-identified sexual minority teachers, 2) the assumption that some school cultures are more supportive of sexual minority teachers than others, and 3) the existence of a greater reluctance among men in recommending real or perceived sexual minority teachers for employment, when compared with women.

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The career choice as a public school teacher can be particularly challenging for at least some sexual minority (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) teachers. Sexual minority teachers from a wide variety of schools report experiencing homophobia, harassment, employment discrimination, and intolerance on a regular basis (Ferfolja, 1998; Bochenek & Brown, 2001; Irwin, 2002; Griffin & Ouellett, 2003; Koschoreck, 2003; Fraynd & Capper, 2003; Niesche, 2003; DeJean, 2004). However, empirical research into school culture from viewpoints other than self-identified sexual minority educators remains inadequate at best (Griffin & Ouellett, 2003; Fraynd & Capper, 2003; Koschoreck, 2003; Niesche, 2003). In fact, Koschoreck (2003) contends that a "queer methodology" has not yet developed to guide research into school culture and sexual minority teachers regardless of perspective. Consequently, this research investigates school culture and sexual minority teachers from the perspectives of K-12 public school teachers enrolled in an educational leadership certification program in a large metropolitan university.

Specifically, this research seeks to discover and understand the perceptions of educational leadership candidates from the Dallas-Fort Worth metropolitan area enrolled at the University of Texas at Arlington to determine: 1) the extent of sexual orientation harassment and prejudicial comments on campus regarding sexual minority teachers; 2) perceptions of the relative tolerance of their teaching colleagues in providing academic and emotional support for a real or perceived sexual minority colleague; 3) perceptions of the relative tolerance or intolerance of students, parents, and administrators on their campuses regarding real or perceived sexual minority teachers; and 4) relative comfort level of subjects as future administrators in recommending real or perceived sexual minority teacher applicants for employment on their campuses.

Perspectives

The undifferentiated perception that homosexuals prey on children has fueled a long history of public animosity towards sexual minority teachers and administrators (Blount, 2003; Eisenmenger, 2002;

Lugg, 2003). For most of the 20th century sexual minority teachers were even considered felons in most states. The mere suspicion of homosexuality was often reason enough for school boards across the country to terminate the employment of tenured and non-tenured teachers alike (Lugg, 2003). In some cases state legislators took an active role in ferreting out suspected homosexual teachers. For example, in Florida the hunt for teacher “perverts” led to a 1963 state legislative committee investigation of homosexuals in education. When finished, the committee presented the Florida Superintendent of Public Instruction with a list of homosexual teachers. Even though the truth may have been a victim in the quest for names, the Superintendent soon instituted procedures for permanently revoking the teaching licenses of teachers on the list (Lugg 2003; Blount, 2003). This political animus toward homosexuals as teachers continued during the 1970s as Christian Right activist Anita Bryant spearheaded a ballot initiative in Florida that repealed an ordinance granting gays and lesbians equal protection in housing and employment. The very effective campaign, called “Save Our Children,” served to pour fuel on the fire of an undifferentiated public fear of homosexual teachers molesting children. Repeal of similar equal protection laws in several states soon followed this successful campaign (Griffin & Ouellett, 2003; Lugg, 2003). Today, only about one-half of the states have legislation or executive orders prohibiting sexual orientation discrimination in public employment (Lambda Legal, 2005).

Sexual minority teachers do not qualify as either a suspect or quasi-suspect class, but are generally entitled to the same protections as any other identifiable group (*Romer v. Evans*, 1996; *Beall v. London City School District*, 2006). However, sexual minority educators should probably assume that they have little or no legal protection (Eisenmenger, 2002; Lugg, 2003; Bochenek & Brown, 2001). This perceived lack of protection may be a reflection of public opinion. In a 2005 nationwide Gallup poll, approximately 36% of the participants responded that homosexuals should not be hired as high school teachers, and 43% responded that homosexuals should not be hired as elementary teachers (Gallup, 2005a, 2005b). These poll numbers are not lost on at least some aspiring political leaders (Eisenmenger, 2002). For example, Republican U. S. Senate candidate Jim DeMint of South Carolina declared during a debate that openly gay or lesbian teachers should not be allowed to teach in public schools (Leave gay teachers, 2004). Later he added unwed pregnant teachers to his list of those individuals who do not reflect “...our values.” Mr. DeMint did retreat somewhat from his comment regarding unwed pregnant teachers, but remained firm in his conviction that gays or lesbians should not be allowed to teach. Mr. DeMint was elected to the United States Senate in 2004.

In fact, contrary to some of the queer literature advocating being “out” as an educator (see Koschoreck, 2003; McCarthy, 2003; DeJean, 2004 for examples), the salubrious effects of publicly outing oneself as lesbian or gay are clearly debatable (Ferfolja, 1998; Irwin, 2002). Fraynd & Capper (2003) cite eight reasons sexual minority public school administrators give for keeping their sexuality hidden. These reasons include: 1) the fact that sexual minority educators had been discriminated against in their district; 2) the prevalence of homophobic comments from other administrators; 3) the labeling non-lesbian/gay teachers and administrators as lesbian/gay by students and/or school staff; 4) a desire to avoid having their professional competencies judged on their sexuality; 5) a fear of public ridicule; 6) a fear of losing their jobs; 7) a fear of being unable to obtain employment in other school districts if their sexuality was known; and 8) a fear of being forced to leave education. A common thread among these reasons is fear. Fear of being found out, fear of public persecution, and fear of being unable to continue in education.

Similar fears are often expressed by sexual minority teachers (Sullivan, 1993; Ferfolja, 1998; Bochenek & Brown, 2001; Irwin, 2002; McCarthy, 2003; DeJean, 2004). For example, over 60% of gay and lesbian teachers in Australia reported experiencing homophobic comments from colleagues, students, and others on a regular basis (Irwin, 2002). Some evidence indicates that homophobic comments are viewed much more seriously, are more provocative and hurtful, and carry greater power to wound adolescents than other taunting and bullying which can be dismissed more easily (Plummer, 2001; Thurlow, 2001). Several recent studies indicate that sexual minority youth regularly subjected to homophobic taunts tend to have lower grade point averages, a greater likelihood of skipping school because of fear, a lesser likelihood of attending college, and a significantly higher rate of suicide ideation than their peers (Illingworth & Murphy, 2004; Lugg, 2003; Gay, Lesbian and Straight Network (GLSEN), 2003; Commonwealth of Massachusetts Department of Education, 2002; Garcia, Adams,

Friedman, & East, 2002). Limited research indicates that the homophobic comments of colleagues, parents, and students may have a similar negative impact on lesbian and gay educators (Sykes, 2004). For example, in a study of self-identified lesbian teachers in Australia, Ferfolja (1998) found that all of the respondents in her study reported homophobic harassment to have had negative and long-term effects on their teaching, their attitude toward teaching, and education as a profession. In a similar Australian study of gay and lesbian teachers, Irwin (2002) found all but 3 of the 71 respondents reported that homophobic comments and discrimination had a negative effect on them or on their work performance. The respondents reported increased anxiety and stress levels that often led to depression, loss of confidence, and/or physical illness due to ongoing sexual orientation bias from parents, students, teaching colleagues, and administrators in their schools. In addition, 16% reported previous suicide attempts, 42% had previously sought counseling, and 34% had sought medical treatment as a result of the ongoing sexual orientation harassment they experienced as educators.

Most educators would agree that professionalism requires that the homophobic language of students and teachers should not be tolerated in school (Sykes, 2004). However, Fraynd & Capper (2003) found that school leaders are hesitant to address gay/lesbian issues. Similarly, Sykes (2004) found that lesbian physical education teachers are sometimes reluctant to confront what many would consider the hurtful homophobic comments of students. In reality, educators may face a catch-22. A failure to confront homophobic language reinforces and perpetuates the hurtful language. Confronting homophobic language and supporting sexual minority colleagues may “label” the teacher or administrator as gay and/or create a community backlash (Fraynd & Capper, 2003; Applebaum, 2003; Smith, 2006). It may also be that sexual orientation discrimination is not viewed as negatively in society as other types of discrimination (Applebaum, 2003). For example, a Pennsylvania State University women’s basketball coach has recently been fined \$10,000 by the University for forcing a player she believed to be lesbian to quit the team (Smeltz, 2006). The coach has been allowed to retain her position. It seems unlikely that this would have been the case for a public university or secondary school coach who forced a player off of a team because of her race, ethnicity, or religion.

Foucault (1975) illustrates how the disciplinary power of society is used in schools to reinforce a heterosexual worldview that may further explain any reluctance on the part of public school teachers to confront homophobia or to disclose their sexualities. American school boards are designed to reflect and represent the values of the communities in which they serve by enacting disciplinary power over superintendents, principals, teachers, and the curriculum (Stader, 2007). A dominant heteronormative view permeates the public school culture, and to a great extent defines and perpetuates the definition of sexuality in many school districts (Sullivan, 1993; Fraynd & Capper, 2003; Niesche, 2003). Consequently, sexual minority teachers, as well as sexual minority administrators and students, feel pressured to assume the mantle of “normalcy” and conform to the heteronormative worldview of most school cultures (Sullivan, 1993; Ferfolja, 1998; Irwin, 2002; Lugg, 2003). As Sullivan (1993) implies, there is a significant difference between choosing not to discuss personal issues at school and being afraid of someone finding out. Catherine Lugg (2003) calls this phenomenon the “assimilationist imperative.” In other words, to remain in the profession, sexual minority teachers and administrators must “act heterosexual.” It is within the context of the assimilationist imperative that we undertake this research.

Methodology

Participants

Participants are 117 public school teachers enrolled in principal certification courses at the University of Texas at Arlington during the 2004-2005 academic year. Participants represent 20 school districts in the Dallas-Forth Worth metropolitan area. In particular, almost 40% of the participants represent the school districts of Fort Worth, Mansfield, and Arlington. Approximately 14% of the participants work primarily in relatively wealthy areas (less than 25% free/reduced lunch), while 33% work on Title I campuses (75% free or reduced lunch). The remaining 47% work on campuses with student populations ranging from 26%-70% free and reduced lunch.

Sixty-nine percent of the participants are female and 30% are male. Approximately 18% of the participants classified themselves as African American, 76% White, 14% as Hispanic, and less than 1% Asian/Pacific Islander. Forty percent listed elementary schools as their place of primary employment, 24% listed middle/junior high school as their primary place of employment, 26% listed high school or alternative schools as their primary place of employment, and 7% listed central office as their primary place of employment. Over half (62%) are classroom teachers, and 21% currently serve as campus administrators. The remaining participants serve in some other capacity such as counselor or central office supervisor. Participants range in age from 23 to 65 with a mean age of 37. Approximately one-third (30%) have 1-5 years experience in public education, another 30% 6-10 years, 21% have between 11-15 years, and 17% have more than 16 years experience in public schools. Participants range in age from 23-65 with a mean age of 37.3 (sd 9.3).

Research instrument

The research instrument consisted of four yes/no questions, eight 1-9 Likert-type scales, and demographic questions. For this study, real or perceived sexual minority was defined as adults in one's school who are assumed to be lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender. Harassment was defined as unwelcome and inappropriate slurs, jokes, graphic, or physical conduct relating to sexual orientation that creates an intimidating, hostile, abusive, or offensive school environment. After introducing the instrument and obtaining subjects' informed consent, the principal researcher left the room while the participants completed the survey. Volunteers were solicited from the participants to collect the survey forms. Participants completed the survey in less than ten minutes.

Results

The first part of the survey was designed to determine participants' knowledge of adult-adult sexual harassment in their schools based on real or perceived sexual orientation, participants' knowledge of prejudicial comments from principals, teachers, students, and parents regarding sexual minority teachers, and whether or not a student or adult had previously expressed concerns to them personally regarding the real or perceived sexual orientation of an adult in the school community.

Data indicate that approximately 21% (or 25) of the participants acknowledged witnessing or overhearing comments or actions that could meet the definition of sexual orientation harassment presented in this study. When asked how often these comments or actions had occurred, only 7 of the 25 (28%) indicated witnessing or overhearing comments on a weekly or ongoing basis. However, when asked if they had witnessed or overheard prejudicial comments regarding sexual orientation, over 60% acknowledged having heard such comments. Of those participants acknowledging witnessing or overhearing prejudicial or homophobic comments regarding sexual orientation, 40% heard these comments on either a weekly or daily basis. However, 90% had not personally heard complains from either students or parents regarding safety concerns because of the real or perceived sexual orientation of an adult on their campus. The survey results are summarized in Table 1:

Table 1: Knowledge of harassment and/or prejudicial comments

N=115	Harassment	Prejudicial Comments	Parent/Student Complaints
Yes	21%	64%	7%
No	75%	12%	91%
Don't Know	1%	23%	3%

The second part of the survey was designed as an indirect measure of school culture. Participants were first asked their perceptions of the level of academic and emotional support by faculty for real or perceived sexual minority teachers on their campuses. Academic support was defined as activities such as sharing lesson plans or other professional materials. Emotional support was defined as friendship/camaraderie. However, these concepts were left deliberately vague to encourage participants to construct their own views and definitions. A nine-point Likert-type rating scale was used with 1 representing very uncomfortable, 5 representing moderately comfortable and 9 very comfortable. Responses were grouped into the following categories: a) 1-3 very-to-moderately

uncomfortable, b) 4-6 moderately comfortable, and c) 7-9 very comfortable in providing academic/emotional support for sexual minority teachers.

Approximately 80% of the respondents reported at least a moderate faculty comfort level in providing academic and emotional support for sexual minority teachers in their schools. However, almost 20% of the respondents reported that their fellow faculty was uncomfortable providing academic and/or emotional support for sexual minority teachers in their schools. The results are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2: Perceived faculty support for sexual minority teachers

N=115	Very/Moderately Uncomfortable	Moderately Comfortable	Very Comfortable
Academic Support	17%	34%	49%
Emotional Support	19%	45%	36%

Participants were then asked to rate their perceptions of the relative tolerance of students, parents, and administrators on their campuses regarding real or perceived sexual minority teachers. Again a nine-point Likert-type scale was used with 1 representing very intolerant, 5 moderately tolerant, and 9 very tolerant. Ratings were again grouped into three categories representing very/moderately intolerant (1-3), moderately tolerant (4-6) and very tolerant (7-9) responses.

Approximately 80% of participants perceived students, parents, and administrators on their campuses to be at least moderately tolerant of real or perceived sexual minority teachers. No statistical difference was found by grade level or relative wealth. This data is summarized in Table 3.

Table 3: Perceptions of Tolerance

	Very/Moderately Intolerant	Moderately Tolerant	Very Tolerant
Students (N=116)	17%	35%	48%
Parents (N=108)	13%	43.5%	37%
Administrators (N=109)	7%	27%	62%

The measures of faculty support and relative tolerance of teachers, students, parents, and administrators were designed as indirect measures of school culture to test whether, as Illingworth & Murphy (2004) suggest, some school cultures may be more supportive of sexual minority teachers than others. Participants' perceptions of the relative tolerance of students, teachers, administrators, and parents for sexual minority teachers were tested for homogeneity of responses. In other words, is there a relationship between participants' perceptions of students, fellow teachers, administrators, and parents relative tolerance of sexual minority teachers in their schools? To test this question, a Spearman ρ correlation coefficient was calculated to determine the relationship between participants' perceptions of relative tolerance between the three groups. Alpha level was set at .05. Data indicate 1) a positive correlation ($\rho(106) = .818, p < .01$) between participant perceptions of student tolerance and parent tolerance, 2) a positive correlation ($\rho(107) = .557, p < .01$) between participants' perceptions of student tolerance and administrator tolerance, and 3) a positive correlation ($\rho(106) = .665, p < .01$) between participants' perceptions of administrator tolerance and parent tolerance. A significant linear relationship among the three variables was found.

The last part of the survey asked participants their relative comfort level as future administrators in recommending real or perceived sexual minority teacher applicants for employment in their schools. A nine-point Likert-type scale was used with 1 representing very uncomfortable recommending a real or perceived sexual minority teacher applicant, 5 a moderate comfort level in recommending employment, and 9 very comfortable in recommending employment. Ratings were grouped into three categories with 1-3 representing very uncomfortable, 4-6 representing moderately comfortable, and 7-

9 very comfortable in recommending a real or perceived sexual minority teacher applicant for employment in their school. Approximately 15% of the participants felt that they would be very uncomfortable recommending real or perceived sexual minority teacher applicants for employment in their future careers as administrators. Another 27% reported only a moderate comfort level, while the majority (58%) reported they would be very comfortable recommending a real or perceived sexual minority teacher applicant for employment.

Limited research indicates that men may be less tolerant of homosexuality than women (Stevenson, 1988, Lim, 2002). To determine the relative tolerance among men and women in this study, means were calculated for responses to the question regarding relative comfort levels recommending real or perceived sexual minority teacher applicants for employment. An independent-samples t-test comparing the mean scores of male and female participants found a significant difference between the means of the two groups ($t(3.4)$, $df=114$, $p<.001$). The mean of the female response to the question regarding relative comfort in recommending real or perceived sexual minority teaching applicants for employment was significantly higher ($m= 7.01$, $sd = 2.4$) than the mean of the males in the study ($m = 5.3$, $sd = 2.6$). Male participants were significantly less likely to feel comfortable recommending real or perceived sexual minority teacher candidates for employment in their schools than female participants. Effect size assesses the amount of total variance in the dependant variable (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007). In this case relative comfort level is predictable from the independent variable, in this case the sex of the participant. A medium effect size of .69 was calculated using Cohen's d for an independent-samples t-test. Participant means for relative comfort level in recommending real or perceived sexual minority teacher candidates were disaggregated by race ($F(8, 101) p > .05$), relative wealth ($F(8, 101) = .01$, $p > .05$), and grade level ($F(8, 105) = .86$, $p > .05$) were compared using a one-way ANOVA. (Because the Asian/Pacific Islander group represented less than one percent of the sample, this group was not included in the analysis). No significant difference was found among these factors.

It seems logical to assume participants' perceptions of relative tolerance on their campuses for sexual minority teachers would significantly influence participants' willingness to recommend real or perceived sexual minority teacher candidates for employment. To test this assumption, a Spearman ρ correlation coefficient was calculated. Alpha level was set at .05. Data indicated a) a significant positive correlation ($\rho(114)=.427$, $p<.01$) between willingness to recommend real or perceived sexual minority teacher candidates and perceptions of students' tolerance, b) a significant positive correlation ($\rho(106)=.437$, $p<.01$) between willingness to recommend a real or perceived sexual minority teacher candidate and perceptions of parent tolerance, and c) a significant positive correlation ($\rho(107)=.498$, $p<.01$) between willingness to recommend real or perceived sexual minority teacher candidates and perceptions of administrators' tolerance. Perceptions of the relative tolerance of students, parents, and administrators on participants' campuses were positively correlated with participants' willingness to recommend real or perceived sexual minority teacher candidates for employment in their schools.

Discussion

It is difficult to accurately define, measure, and compare relative frequency of homophobic comments. Measurement difficulty aside, the relative frequency of potentially harassing behavior and homophobic comments are an important point. Approximately 60% of the respondents in this study acknowledged overhearing homophobic comments from teachers, administrators, and/or parents. Of this number, 21% reported hearing these comments at least on a weekly basis, and 5% acknowledged hearing these comments on a daily basis. In other words, educational leadership candidates in this study reported hearing homophobic comments from adults in their schools at approximately the same rate as self-identified gay and lesbian teachers in Australia. Even more concerning, approximately 21% ($n=25$) of the respondents witnessed what they considered to be potentially sexually harassing behavior. The definition of the term harassment, taken from a local district policy manual, included conduct relating to sexual orientation that created an intimidating, hostile, abusive, or offensive school environment. Considering the relatively lofty threshold of this definition, the number of participants witnessing this type of behavior seems high.

School culture can be defined as a set of attitudes, beliefs, values, feelings, and opinions shared by and communicated to others by a significant number of individuals in a school (Rebore, 2003). In short, the normative power of school culture significantly impacts the beliefs and behaviors of teachers, administrators, and others on that campus. This research provides tentative evidence that the normative influence of school culture is particularly important for sexual minority teachers. Results indicated a strong and consistent linear relationship among perceptions of students, teachers, parents, and administrators regarding sexual minority teachers on their campuses. This study does little if anything to address whose (administrators', teachers', parents', or students') perceptions are most significant. However, one of the constant and strong themes of the literature is the responsibility of leadership for developing, fostering, and sustaining positive and collaborative school cultures that respect and promote the collaborative work of teachers (Lambert, 2003; Sergiovanni, 2006; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005). So, this research does indicate that if administrators are perceived to be tolerant, then so are teachers, students, parents, and others. Conversely, if administrators are perceived as intolerant, then so are the perceptions of the relative tolerance of teachers, parents, and students.

Historically, local school administrators and school boards may have been reluctant to hire teachers assumed to be homosexual (Lugg, 2003; Blount, 2003; Fraynd & Capper, 2003). To determine if some resistance may remain, participants were asked how comfortable they would be as future administrators in recommending real or perceived sexual minority teachers for employment on their current campuses. Results indicated some good news and some bad news. The good news is that 58% of the respondents believed that they would be very comfortable in recommending real or perceived sexual minority teaching candidates for employment. The bad news of course is that 15% were very uncomfortable and another 27% were only moderately comfortable. Again, the normative influence of school culture was found to have a significant linear relationship among candidates' relative comfort levels. On those campuses where students, parents, and administrators were perceived to be tolerant, participants were significantly more likely to feel comfortable in their future roles in recommending real or perceived sexual minority teacher applicants for employment on their campuses. Conversely, on those campuses where students, parents, and administrators are perceived to be intolerant or only moderately tolerant, participants were significantly less likely to feel comfortable in their future roles in recommending real or perceived sexual minority teacher applicants for employment on their campuses. Males, at least in this study, were significantly more likely to reject real or perceived sexual minority teaching candidates than females. However, these findings further support the assumption that school culture may have a particularly significant effect on sexual minority teachers and teacher applicants.

Limitations & Delimitations

This line of research presents several obstacles. First and foremost, studies of sexual minority teachers and students often create unease among the researchers in initiating and conducting studies, subjects in participating in these studies, and institutional review boards in approving detailed research studies in this area (Donelson & Rogers, 2004). Consequently, it is difficult to fully generate the type of data necessary for detailed study. Likewise, sexuality is often portrayed along a continuum with one end representing purely homosexual, the other purely heterosexual. Some individuals may be at neither extreme, but completely "out" for the entire world to see. Others may be at the extreme end of purely homosexual but prefer for a variety of reasons to assume the disguise of heterosexuality, unintentionally perpetuating schools' heteronormality (Fraynd & Capper, 2003; McCarthy, 2003). This ambiguity creates significant opportunities for participants to misjudge relative tolerance for sexual minority teachers on their campuses. Finally, limited research indicates that urban areas are more supportive of instruction about homosexuality in public schools than rural communities (Lindley & Reininger, 2001). Consequently, this sample may not be representative of more rural areas.

Conclusions

Limitations notwithstanding, this research: 1) supports the reports of self-identified lesbian and gay teachers that homophobic comments and prejudicial language are prevalent on many school campuses, 2) provides tentative support for the assumption that some school cultures are more

supportive of sexual minority teachers than others, 3) supports the conclusion that some reluctance to recommend perceived sexual minority teachers for employment remains, especially among men, and 4) provides tentative support for the conclusion that the assimilationist imperative remains alive and well at least in the minds of some educators. However, much more research is required before any stronger conclusions are possible.

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