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Preparing Educators for a Diverse World: Understanding Sexual Prejudice among Pre-Service Teachers

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Preparing Educators for a Diverse World: Understanding Sexual Prejudice among Pre-Service Teachers

Abstract

An important role of schooling in the U.S. is to prepare students for engagement in the diverse world. This means that education personnel must be aware of, acknowledge, and respect all dimensions of diversity, including gender and sexual diversity. Relatedly is the teacher's role in managing a safe and inclusive classroom climate for all students. Since school bullies frequently target gender and sexually diverse (GSD) students, K-12 teachers are required to manage their classroom culture so that bullying behavior toward all students, including GSD students, is stopped. GSD students who are bullied frequently miss school, earn lower grades, and may decide not to complete post-secondary education. The effects of bullying based upon actual or perceived gender or sexual difference can last a lifetime. Sexual prejudice of educational personnel may inhibit the development of safe learning environments for all students and the preparation of students for a future in diverse environments. This research investigates sexual prejudice among pre-service teachers in one teacher preparation program and relates sexual prejudice to teacher demographic characteristics.

Keywords

gender and sexual diversity, pre-service, in-service, sexual prejudice, multicultural teacher preparation, social justice allies

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Joelyn Katherine Foy & Sheryl Hodge

An important role of schooling in the U.S. is to prepare students for engagement in the diverse world. This means that education personnel must be aware of, acknowledge, and respect all dimensions of diversity, including gender and sexual diversity. Relatedly is the teacher's role in managing a safe and inclusive classroom climate for all students. Since school bullies frequently target gender and sexually diverse (GSD) students, K-12 teachers are required to manage their classroom culture so that bullying behavior toward all students, including GSD students, is stopped. GSD students who are bullied frequently miss school, earn lower grades, and may decide not to complete post-secondary education. The effects of bullying based upon actual or perceived gender or sexual difference can last a lifetime. Sexual prejudice of educational personnel may inhibit the development of safe learning environments for all students and the preparation of students for a future in diverse environments. This research investigates sexual prejudice among pre-service teachers in one teacher preparation program and relates sexual prejudice to teacher demographic characteristics.

Introduction

An important role of schooling in the U.S. is to prepare students to participate in global interactions, suggesting that students be sensitive to all dimensions of diversity (e.g., ability and disability, ethnic identity, gender [biological sex as well as gender identity and gender expression], geographic region, language, racial group, religion, sexual orientation, and socio-economic class) within nations (Banks, Banks, Cortés, Hahn, Merryfield, Moodley, Murphy-Shigematsu, Osler, Park, & Parker, 2005; Meyer, 2010). Teacher education programs, however, traditionally avoid discussion of sexual diversity (Lamb, 2013). The historical and social climate within teacher preparation programs appears to inhibit the inclusion of gender and sexual diversity education (Rasmussen, 2006). Evidence suggests that schools maintain a heteronormative perspective (Dean, 2011; Foucault, 1990; Himmelstein & Bruckner, 2011; Kumashiro, 2002) that impedes the development of sensitivity to these dimensions of diversity. To promote the development of diversity awareness, school personnel must, themselves, acknowledge and respect gender and sexual diversity.

Acknowledging gender diversity means understanding that the gender binary—that is, male versus female—is too limiting (Wilchins, 2004). Similarly, sexual diversity refers to the complexities of sexual orientation, sexual behavior, and sexual identity (Meyer, 2010). Sexual prejudice relates to an individual's attitudes and beliefs about sexuality (Herek & McLemore, 2013). Previous educational research indicated a relationship between the beliefs and attitudes of classroom teachers toward gender or sexually diverse students and teacher behavior in K-12 classrooms (Clark, 2010; Dowling, Rodger and Cummings, 2007; Riggs, Rosenthal, & Smith-Bonahue, 2011). Our assumption was that positive beliefs and attitudes among K-12 teachers would lead to positive actions on behalf of GSD students.

The purpose of this research was to discover the degree of sexual prejudice among pre-service teachers affiliated with one college of education and to question whether levels of sexual prejudice differed by demographic (gender, race/ethnicity, age, geography), educational (license, previous multicultural education, content area), or personal (political affiliation, religious affiliation, non-heterosexual friends/coworkers/family members, participant sexual orientation) characteristics. The discussions and conclusions presented in this paper suggest implications for professional teacher education programs and for educational researchers, as well as pre-service teachers, in-service teachers, administrators, other university faculty, parents, and citizens in a multicultural democracy.

Review of Literature

To understand sexual prejudice within school environments, we have to look first at the problem and the impact. The Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) 2009 National School Climate Survey found that 90% of survey respondents heard “gay” used negatively, and 72% heard other homophobic remarks frequently or often. Verbal harassment and physical assault were commonly reported among survey respondents, but school staff did not respond appropriately. Of those who were harassed or assaulted, 62% did not report the incident for fear that the harassment would worsen or that school staff would not take the report seriously. Of the 34% who reported being harassed or assaulted and who did report the incident, the school staff did nothing (GLSEN, 2010).

By singling out GSD students, the climate of the entire school environment is never questioned (Payne & Smith, 2013). Even bullying programs operate under the assumptions of individual bullies and individual victims, rather than questioning the school infrastructures that produce bullies and victims (Payne & Smith, 2012a). When teachers, staff, and administrators cannot stop homophobic bullying in their hallways, sexual minority youth lose their sense of belonging, skip school, make lower grades, and may consider suicide (Grant, Mottet, Tanis, Harrison, Herman, & Keisling, 2011; Kosciw, Greytak, Diaz, & Bartkiewicz, 2010; Robinson & Espelage, 2011). When parents put their children out on the street (Ray, 2006, p. 16), sexual minority youth may turn to prostitution, drop out of school, and not graduate (Grant et al., 2011). Students who are bullied because of their actual or perceived sexual identity are less likely to attend post-secondary institutions (GLSEN, 2010), thereby lowering their lifetime income (Day & Newberger, 2002; Julian & Kominski, 2011). Students who are bullied often suffer physical, emotional, and psychological effects of bullying throughout their lives (Maza & Krehely, 2010; Meyer, 2003; Toomey, Ryan, Diaz, Card & Russell, 2010). Lowered lifetime incomes and rising mental health costs affect families and communities.

Teachers and administrators need strategies and approaches that effectively end bullying based upon actual or perceived sexual orientation. If teacher education programs are not able to provide these strategies and approaches, teachers and administrators will continue to ignore or respond inappropriately (GLSEN, 2010). There are some promising approaches to multicultural teacher education that tackle these questions.

Kumashiro suggests four approaches within multicultural teacher education: education about the other, education for the other, education that critiques privileging and othering, and education that transforms individuals and society (Kumashiro, 2002). The fourth approach, education that transforms individuals and society, is most similar to Banks’ social action approach (2006, p. 61), Sleeter and Grant’s social reconstructionist approach (Sleeter and Grant, 2007), and Kincheloe and Steinberg’s critical multiculturalism (1997, p. 23). A critical approach activates

the “foundational principles of multicultural education and extends them to the area of greatest possible impact: critically reexamining power structures in society in order to positively transform students and society and challenge oppression and discrimination in all its forms through education” (Meyer, 2010, p. 16). Keeping in mind Kumashiro’s warnings against blaming the teacher instead of building a broader movement for educational reform (2012), it seems appropriate to start with understanding pre-service teachers’ beliefs and attitudes since teacher education programs traditionally avoid discussion of sexual diversity (Lamb, 2013).

The essential question driving the research reported in this paper was How can pre-service teachers’ preparation be improved to provide equal and equitable experiences for sexual minority youth in a multicultural society? The research question addressed in this paper was What are the beliefs and attitudes of K-12 pre-service teachers regarding sexual minorities? Sexual prejudice was operationalized as beliefs and attitudes toward lesbians and gay men.

Methodology

Participants and Setting

Undergraduate and graduate students in one teacher education program participated in this study where pre-service teachers could have been undergraduate or graduate students. Participants represented elementary (7%) and secondary levels (Social Studies, 7%; English, 14%; Biology, Chemistry, or Math, 12%; Music, 8%; FACS, 11%, and Agricultural Education, 9%). Approximately two-thirds of participants were female (69%). Participants were White, non-Hispanic (85%) and People of Color (14%). Participants’ gender and race characteristics mirrored the College of Education where 85% of students report being White, non-Hispanic and 70% being female (Office of Planning and Analysis, 2013). Participant ages ranged from less than 25 years old (69%) to 56 years old or greater (2%) with 17% being 26-35 years old, 4% being 36-45 years old, and 8% being 46-55 years old. Approximately half (51%) were earning a secondary license, while 33% were earning an elementary license and 16% earning some other type of credential. More than half (59%) identified as pre-service, 22% as in-service, and 19% as some other teacher status.

Instrumentation and Data Collection

A 40-item survey captured beliefs and attitudes as well as demographic, educational, and personal characteristics of participants. The purpose of the survey was to investigate sexual prejudice, operationalized as beliefs and attitudes toward sexual minorities, and to clarify the relationship of demographic, educational, and personal characteristics to levels of sexual prejudice among K-12 pre-service teachers. The dependent variable, sexual prejudice, was operationalized in the survey as beliefs and attitudes toward lesbians and gay men. To estimate levels of sexual prejudice among pre-service and in-service teachers enrolled in professional teacher education programs at the institution, the PREJUDICE scale was calculated from twenty-four Likert items taken from previously validated scales that measured beliefs and attitudes toward gay men and lesbians (Modern Homophobia Scale; Aosved et al., 2009; Raja & Stokes, 1998) and covert and explicit homophobia (Subtle and Overt Sexual Prejudice Scales, Pérez-Testor et al., 2010; Quilles del Castillo et al., 2003). The PREJUDICE scores were calculated as the mean value of the twenty-four items for each survey participant. Cronbach’s alpha coefficient for the PREJUDICE scale was greater than 0.700 as recommended by Field (2009) indicating that the items were measuring consistent constructs. Survey questions regarding demographic, education, and personal characteristics integrated previous research on sexual prejudice among pre-service and in-service

teachers (Mudrey & Medina-Adams, 2006; Pérez-Testor et al., 2010; Raja and Stokes, 1998; Riggs et al., 2011; Sprott, 2007). Testing one independent variable (demographic, education, or personal characteristic) at a time against the PREJUDICE scores clarified how participants' beliefs and attitudes were associated with other characteristics.

The electronic survey was piloted with faculty both inside and outside teacher education and with graduate students outside teacher education to make sure that all facets of the electronic survey system were functioning properly. All aspects of Institutional Review Board approval were followed throughout this study.

Undergraduate and graduate students in teacher preparation programs received an e-mail invitation to participate in the electronic survey. Participant e-mail addresses were collected from the institution's print directory and entered into an electronic survey system. Out of 948 emails sent, 86 surveys were completed and six were partially completed ($n = 92$; 9.7% response rate).

Research Design and Data Analysis

The research design was cross-sectional, ex post facto (similar to Campbell and Stanley's pseudo-experimental Static-Group Comparison, 1963, Design 3, p. 8). Cohen and Manion (1994) explained that ex post facto research is appropriate in cases where "the independent variable or variables lie outside the researcher's control" (p. 150).

Data were analyzed for differences related to gender, race, age, educational license sought, college credit courses completed with multicultural education content, college credit courses completed with sexual orientation content, political viewpoint toward multiculturalism, religious affiliation, affiliation with homosexuals (friends, coworkers, family members), participant sexual orientation, teacher education content area, and finishing the survey.

Rather than interpreting individual survey items, the PREJUDICE scale was calculated as the mean of twenty-four items for each survey respondent. The PREJUDICE scores were then tested against the independent variable that represented the number of completed college credit courses with multicultural education content. Since the frequency of in-service teachers was too low for an analysis of in-service teachers only, this analysis was restricted to pre-service teacher participants. We hypothesized that levels of sexual prejudice would be lower for those who had completed more courses with multicultural education content. An independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare PREJUDICE scores by the number of college credit courses completed with multicultural content. In addition, independent-samples t-tests were conducted to compare PREJUDICE scores among pre-service teachers by political affiliation, religious affiliation, participant sexual orientation, and by the number of sexual minority friends, family members, and coworkers.

Results

The following research question guided the analysis: What is the relationship between sexual prejudice and demographic, educational, and personal characteristics among pre-service teachers? There were no significant differences in sexual prejudice as estimated by PREJUDICE scores for any demographic characteristic. Only one educational characteristic resulted in significant differences in sexual prejudice as estimated by PREJUDICE scores: the number of college credit courses completed with multicultural content. Pre-service participants who completed no courses were found to have statistically significantly lower PREJUDICE scores ($M = 1.52$, $SD = .47$, $n = 5$) than pre-service participants who completed three courses ($M = 2.23$, $SD = .77$, $n = 13$), $t(16) = -1.90$, $p = .04$, $\eta^2 = .09$ (medium). No other significant differences

were identified for pre-service teachers completing one ($M = 1.99$, $SD = .68$, $n = 8$), two ($M = 1.62$, $SD = .65$, $n = 9$), or four or more ($M = 1.93$, $SD = .92$, $n = 14$) courses with multicultural content. In general, more completed courses were associated with higher PREJUDICE scores for pre-service teachers. However, personal characteristics were statistically significantly associated with the variance in PREJUDICE scores. Statistically significantly higher levels of sexual prejudice as estimated by PREJUDICE scores were associated with pre-service participants who reported being politically conservative and with being heterosexual. These are not surprising results considering the current cultural climate of the U.S. In addition, statistically significantly lower levels of sexual prejudice as estimated by PREJUDICE scores were associated with pre-service participants who reported having friends, coworkers or family members who were non-heterosexual (see Table 1).

Table 1

Relationship between personal characteristics and PREJUDICE scores for pre-service teachers

Personal Characteristic	Levels			Sig.
Political viewpoint toward multiculturalism	Conservative	Higher than	Moderate	$p = .00$
	Conservative	Higher than	Somewhat liberal	$p = .00$
	Conservative	Higher than	Liberal	$p = .00$
Religious affiliation	Non-Christian	Lower than	Catholic	n.s.
	Non-Christian	Lower than	Other Christian	n.s.
Friends	<=Two	Higher than	Three	$p = .01$
	<=Two	Higher than	4-5	$p = .00$
	<=Two	Higher than	6-25	$p = .00$
Coworkers	None	Higher than	One	$p = .03$
	None	Higher than	Two	$p = .00$
	None	Higher than	3-10	$p = .01$
Family members	None	Higher than	1-4	$p = .00$
Participant sexual orientation	Heterosexual	Higher than	Non-Heterosexual	$p = .00$

Note: this table is adapted from Foy (2014), Table Q.3., p. 403

Discussion

Limitations

Statistical analysis of survey items from pre-service and in-service teachers in one teacher education program provided some clarity with regard to improving gender and sexual diversity education within teacher preparation. Caution, however, should be applied in generalizing these findings beyond the current sample. The limitations to useful interpretation of these findings center around three primary barriers: (1) how the question of completed college-credit coursework with multicultural content was asked, (2) the identity state or stage of survey participants, and (3) personal characteristics of survey participants. Each of these three barriers will be discussed below.

Although caution should be exercised in generalizing these results beyond this sample, specific implications suggested by these results are that further research is needed toward teacher education experiences that will raise awareness of pre-service and in-service teachers' heteronormativity and how their students may be affected by their sexual prejudice. Teacher preparation that questions heteronormative beliefs and attitudes extends multicultural teacher

education beyond the protection of individual homosexual youth, enculturating pre-service and in-service teachers toward practices that advance social justice (Payne & Smith, 2012a, 2012b, 2013).

This study contributes to the literature on sexual prejudice among K-12 teachers despite the small sample size ($n = 92$) and the low response rate (10%; 92 out of 948) because of the implications for improving teacher preparation. Reasons for small sample size and low response rate may have included participants placing less value on educational research or being uncomfortable sharing beliefs and attitudes toward sexual minorities. However, participants in this study could have experienced cognitive dissonance around the subject of sexual diversity as a result of completed coursework and may not have resolved their discomfort at the time of participation. Discomfort with the topic of sexual diversity and cognitive dissonance provide clues to addressing the development of K-12 classroom teachers as social justice allies. These features of the ally development process require the guidance and facilitation of multicultural teacher educators.

Implications

Students are admitted into teacher preparation with a suite of characteristics (age, political and religious affiliations, non-heterosexual friends, coworkers, and family members) that shape their beliefs and attitudes toward sexual minorities. Even when the teacher educator challenges the pre-professional to reflect upon the source and meaning of their personal and demographic characteristics, only the educational content is directly in the hands of the teacher educator. The finding that completed college credit courses in multicultural education was associated with higher levels of sexual prejudice is contradictory with previous research (Riggs et al., 2011; Sprott, 2007) and suggests that more research is needed into the kinds of experiences with sexual minorities that will raise awareness among pre-service teachers of how heteronormativity affects teacher performance and practice in the classroom.

Overall, these findings raise more questions than provide answers. Under what conditions is sexual prejudice not changed by external influences (such as education or required experiences)? How will changes in levels of sexual prejudice promote improved teaching practices? How will changes in levels of sexual prejudice motivate changes in educational policy for the benefit of all students?

These questions are important because of the automatic preferences (Banaji & Greenwald, 2013) that we acquire in the United States regarding gender, race/ethnicity, and age through socialization processes (Harro, 2008). When a student walks into a classroom, automatic preferences go to work inside the classroom teacher and inside the student to categorize every other person in the room based on these preferences unless reflective practices are in place to counter stereotypes. Perhaps the strongest example of automatic preferences in the U.S. is racial prejudice. Banaji and Greenwald (2013) suggest that racial prejudice exists among Americans no matter how progressive people see themselves. Repeatedly, researchers have confirmed that Americans exhibit racial bias when completing the Implicit Association Test (IAT). Banaji and Greenwald (2013) propose that this persistent bias may extend to heterosexuality. That is, if there were enough research conducted with the sexual IAT, as there has been for the racial IAT, we would see that Americans are consistently biased toward heterosexuality and against homosexuality. In their work they have shown that these biases are extremely difficult to change even when the person desires to change (Banaji & Greenwald, 2013). Their work applies to gender and sexual diversity education. Even with racial prejudice as the norm, multicultural teacher preparation provides the possibility of becoming a social justice ally.

We assume that with appropriate gender and sexual diversity education, teacher education faculty, pre-service teachers and in-service teachers develop themselves as social justice allies. An ally makes a conscious decision to be supportive of and accepting of the Other; whoever the Other is. At the most, an ally is able to overcome their own biases sufficiently to make friends with those who are different from them, to have genuine empathy, compassion and intimacy with individuals who are different. We maintain that, at the least, a social justice ally should be willing to put aside their personal biases in professional situations. Knowing one's own cultural identity, one's unearned privileges, and yet putting those aside to work with a student who is different is the professional work of the social justice ally. Developing social justice allies (Ligon, Mason-Browne, McGill, Rummery, & Sannes, 2012; Metzger, Carlson, McGill, & Vickers, 2014) should be included in multicultural teacher preparation along with understanding privilege (McIntosh, 1988, 2009, 2012).

Recommendations

Pre-service teachers must be guided toward a more sophisticated and inclusive understanding of their role as classroom leader. Toward this aim, educational researchers need to answer three essential questions: (1) what best practices should be incorporated across the teacher education program to guide and monitor identity development?; (2) what characteristics of student teachers should be evaluated within student teaching that will ensure the safety and encourage the belongingness of all students in that new teacher's classroom?; and (3) what specific best practices should be incorporated within the multicultural education classroom to prepare new teachers for GSD students? To discover the answers to these questions will require both quantitative and qualitative educational research efforts among many teacher education programs. This effort will ensure that all students are able to learn in their K-12 classroom environment.

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