

“The Changers and the Changed”: Preparing Early Childhood Teachers to Work With Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Families

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Abstract:

The Census Bureau estimates that up to 14 million children under the age of 18 are being raised by lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT) families. Just as heterosexual families require child care to enable work and want high-quality early childhood education to enhance their children's development, LGBT families experience the same needs and desires for their children. However, similar to other educational institutions, the early childhood field has either held negative beliefs regarding diverse family structures or ignored the unique needs of LGBT families. As part of an effort to address teachers' understandings of equity, faculty at a southeastern university sponsored a course designed to prepare early childhood teacher education students to offer welcoming, inclusive learning environments for LGBT families and their young children. The purpose of this article is to examine the learning process and transformation of students in this course. Findings from quantitative and qualitative data are presented, as is a discussion on how courses on family equity can and should be incorporated into teacher education programs.

Keywords: Early Childhood Education | Teacher Education | LGBT Families | diversity

Article:

As part of an effort to invest curricular time in building dispositions of compassion, understanding, equity, and justice related to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) individuals, faculty at a southeastern university sponsored a course designed to prepare early childhood teacher education students to offer welcoming, inclusive learning environments for LGBT families and their young children. This institution exists in a social-historical landscape of competing and overlapping cultural discourses of civility, religious and political conservatism, struggle for civil and economic rights, homophobia, and progressive resistance (Chafe, 1980; Segrest, 1985). In this context, the process of expanding the university curriculum to

include LGBT children and families engendered change at the institutional, faculty, and student levels in both personal and professional domains.

The Making Room in the Circle² curriculum developed by Lesser, Burt, and Gelnow (2005) provided the overall structure and content of the course. Two of the curriculum authors served as the instructors of the course. Both instructors were European American women who had several years of professional experience working with families and young children, as well as training teachers to work in diverse communities. These instructors, one of whom identified as a lesbian and one who identified as a straight ally, team taught the course to include differing perspectives and personal experiences regarding early childhood education and LGBT families. The instructors would often alternate who introduced a certain topic or activity and both instructors evaluated students' progress throughout the course. Having instructors with different sexual orientations provided students an opportunity to relate to an instructor who shared their own sexual orientation.

Overall, the objectives of this curriculum were: (a) to encourage both preservice and in-service early childhood educators to reflect upon their beliefs and practices regarding LGBT families, and (b) to provide information and resources to students so they may be able to recognize and address the needs of LGBT families in early education settings. In this context, the instructors challenged students taking the course to create new narratives about the role of teacher and the definitions of family, classroom inclusion, and social justice. The multilayered, dynamic process of teaching and learning that emerged from the course is reflected in the lyrical phrase “the changer and the changed” (Williamson, 1975). Students were asked to examine their beliefs and practices about LGBT families (be changed) and were called on to be allies with LGBT individuals who are often invisible and treated unjustly in many arenas of life (be changers).

In order to construct these new narratives, students engaged in processes of learning compassionate, ethical, and effective ways to work with young children and their families (Robinson, Ferfolja, & Goldstein, 2004). Through interactions with people who are “not like them,” students jointly reflected on their existing narratives, including places of openness and resistance, movement and entrenchment. These competing dynamics became the context of this endeavor to teach “difficult knowledge,” which Britzman and Gilbert (2004) define as “disrupting and challenging world views and threatening core values within existing belief systems.” Through interviews, surveys, and participant observation, we, the research team, examined the students' experiences of learning and unlearning in this course. What emerged was a deeper, more nuanced understanding of the tension between personal and professional beliefs, and the struggle, challenge, and ambivalence involved in working with “difficult knowledge” in early childhood teacher education courses.

The purpose of this article is to reveal what was learned in this change process and to stimulate dialogue about working at the intersection of personal beliefs and professional practice in early

childhood curricula. Based upon this purpose, the following research questions, in combination with the conceptual framework described later, served as a guide for this study.

1. How do students experience a change process through a course regarding LGBT families in early childhood education?
2. How does the sociocultural context of the students and the institution affect this process?

The Research Team

Before describing the course and the study in more detail, we present our own profiles and positionality as a way to highlight our perspectives and biases. Composed of two faculty and two doctoral students, each member of the research team was a European American, middle-class woman. We varied in ages from 26 to 66 years. In terms of sexual orientation, two of the researchers identify as lesbian and two identify as heterosexual. Each of the researchers had unique religious backgrounds: one researcher grew up in a Southern Christian fundamentalist tradition; another researcher came from a Unitarian Universalist background; a third researcher was raised attending conservative Protestant churches; and the fourth member of the team grew up in the Catholic tradition. At the time of the class, each member of the research team, though influenced by her own religious background, identified as progressive or liberal in her spirituality and did not adhere to a more fundamental Christian belief system. Despite the differences in our backgrounds, we were each motivated to participate in the course because of our desire to understand and enact equity and social justice in early education settings.

We engaged in the course solely as participant observers; neither the faculty members nor the graduate students created assignments or assessed the students' performance on assignments. Additionally, no one on the research was enrolled in the course for credit. Although we read the various assigned readings, we did not complete the out-of-class assignments given by the instructors. Through our participation in and observation of the course, we each were challenged and empowered to be more intentional in standing up for LGBT issues in our personal and professional lives. For instance, following the data collection phase of the study, the faculty members arranged a training workshop for other early childhood faculty in the city, and the doctoral students incorporated some of the course content and activities into their own courses. The lesbian faculty members also had the opportunity to explore how to teach from and through their personal experiences to help students navigate their own personal and professional transformations. Overall, participating in this course and observing the students' process of learning and unlearning moved each of us to deeper, more complex knowledge of ourselves, the students, LGBT families, and early childhood teacher education.

LGBT Families and Children in Early Childhood Today

We begin putting the course into context with our understandings of the presence of LGBT children and families in our communities, current attitudes within early childhood education (ECE), and the ethical foundation of including LGBT families in ECE classrooms.

Children in LGBT Families

According to the 2000 Census (*Summary file 1*), approximately 600,000 households in the United States consist of same-sex partners (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008). The Census data also indicated that 250,000 minors were living with unmarried same-sex couples (COLAGE, 2008). These statistics should be interpreted with caution and considered conservative estimates of LGBT couples and families. This information is certainly not representative of all children with LGBT parents. That is, the census question that provided these estimates is based on only one box on the census form that, if checked, denotes a person's relationship as "not related" and as an "unmarried partner" (COLAGE, 2008):

The census did not measure the total number of people with LGBT parents, or the number of LGBT people who are parents. It did one thing and one thing only, and that is to measure the number of unmarried same-sex couples who reported having children under the age 18 residing with them in their household. This means that in the census, only a very small portion of LGBT families was actually counted. (COLAGE, 2008, p. 1, italics in original)

Reports from Family Pride (n.d.) indicate that 33% of female same-sex partners and 22% of male same-sex partners have children under 18 living with them. However, children are a part of both partnered LGBT families, as well as LGBT families whose structures do not neatly fit within this box. For example, LGBT families headed by a single parent are not included in these statistics. Furthermore, children may become a part of the family biologically or through adoption. Family Pride has reported that 2 in 5 adopted children are placed with LGBT families. Consequently, the national data representing LGBT families with children are likely a low estimate. In fact, the estimates of children raised in LGBT households are quite variable, ranging from 4 to 14 million (Family Pride, n.d.). Although trustworthy data are beginning to emerge, it is clear that the number of LGBT families and their children continues to increase. Such increases likely mean there will be more children from LGBT families in early care and education systems. Just as heterosexual families require child care to enable work and choose early childhood education to enhance children's development, LGBT families experience the same needs and desires for their children. Thus, it is essential that early childhood educators be prepared to incorporate these families into educational settings in an open and nondiscriminatory manner.

Homophobia in Early Childhood Education

Unfortunately, the field of early childhood education is no exception to the sociocultural trend toward exclusion and discrimination against lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender individuals and families. According to Derman-Sparks,

Openly talking about the realities and specific needs of young children and parents in gay- and lesbian-headed families has been taboo in early childhood education at worst and difficult at best... . In practice, this course of non-action really has meant ignoring the growing reality of children being raised by gay and lesbian parents, and regardless of intent, is harmful. (as cited in Casper & Schultz, 1999, p. ix)

Additionally, Maney and Cain (1997) noted the influence that homophobia has on teachers' classroom practices and interactions with students. They state that, "homophobia is reflected in the classroom in a variety of ways, including lack of sensitivity to alternative family structures or rigid assumptions about the role of gender in students' lives" (p. 237). These assumptions and homophobic attitudes can leave young children and their families in fear of experiencing discrimination such as name-calling, loss of relationships, or exclusion from school and community activities (Family Pride, n.d.). Left unexamined and unchallenged, perspectives of silence and/or homophobia in ECE professionals seriously limit progress toward the goal of intentionally including all children and families in early childhood programs.

Ethical Considerations

Understanding the reality of how many LGBT families with children live in our communities is crucial. However, given the current climate of homophobia and incorrect assumptions regarding LGBT families, this knowledge alone does not always create an ethical imperative to prepare teachers to be accepting of all families and children. Thus, it is essential that the inclusion of LGBT families and their children be grounded in professional ethics such as the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC, 2005) Code of Ethical Conduct. This code reminds us that "children are best understood and supported in the context of family, culture, community, and society" (p. 1), and that supporting a child in context means to respect the dignity and diversity in each child and his or her family. When ECE professionals or programs do not create respectful, strengths-based relationships with LGBT families or do not include them in their classroom settings, they are ignoring an important aspect of who the child is and how the child develops. In fact, as NAEYC describes, such professionals are participating in "practices that are emotionally damaging ... disrespectful, degrading ... or intimidating to children" (p. 3). We acknowledge that many teachers are not engaging in these harmful practices intentionally; nevertheless, it is imperative that the exclusion of LGBT families and children from ECE classrooms is identified and changed.

The context of mis-education, myths, religious/moral beliefs, and fear surrounding LGBT families creates reluctance and resistance that must be understood and addressed in order for early childhood teacher education programs to adequately embrace this ethical foundation for teacher education. This study offers experiences and evidence that can inform the field as we make our way forward in changing beliefs and practices related to LGBT families and children.

Conceptual Framework

Teachers' Beliefs and Practices

Though efforts in teacher education programs to prepare early care and education students to intentionally include LGBT families and children are increasing, there is wide variation in how these issues are presented and discussed in the classroom (Robinson, 2002). The current project documents a connected teaching approach that acknowledges and incorporates into the curriculum an understanding and appreciation of the relationship between students' beliefs and teaching practices. This includes acknowledging the wide variation among students in experience, awareness, and comfort with LGBT individuals and issues. Challenging students to adopt inclusive classroom practices requires them to examine and often change their personal and professional beliefs and to become changers in the school and community contexts in which they work. In essence, they are asked to consider the role of teacher as a social change agent, moving from being changed themselves into encouraging others to change. This process of becoming changers requires students to reflect upon beliefs that tie them to their families, religion, culture, and previous experiences. This intense personal and professional self-examination is occurring in the context of a shifting social-political landscape that influences their perceptions of the relevance and importance of these issues to their preparation as teachers (Ferfolja & Robinson, 2004). As they reflect upon themselves and the issues facing them as early childhood professionals, the students then learn specific strategies to begin creating change in their personal and professional lives, including communication techniques, resource identification, conflict resolution.

Clark and Peterson (1986) propose that teachers' beliefs act as a guiding factor for planning and decision-making as well as action in the classroom. Thus, teachers' personal beliefs help create the framework from which they plan and implement activities, as well as influence how they make immediate interactive decisions in the classroom. If teacher educators want students to incorporate social justice into their understanding of the role of teacher, it is essential that teachers learn to examine critically their beliefs. A panel from the National Institute of Education noted:

It is obvious that what teachers do is directed in no small measure by what they think. Moreover, it will be necessary for any innovations in the context, practices, and technology of teaching to be mediated through the minds and motives of teachers. (as cited in Clark & Peterson, 1986, p. 256)

Therefore, understanding teachers' beliefs regarding LGBT families is essential to guiding students through the process of learning and unlearning (Robinson, Ferfolja, & Goldstein, 2004).

Unfortunately, because sexuality is regarded as taboo, teachers' beliefs and attitudes towards LGBT families are often ignored or excluded from both teacher preparation programs and research in early childhood education. Nevertheless, the few studies on teachers' beliefs offer important information for teacher educators as they help students identify, articulate, and reflect

upon their beliefs towards diverse family structures. Maney and Cain (1997) surveyed 195 elementary education students from a northeastern university on their general attitudes and knowledge about homosexuality, as well as their comfort level for interacting with gay- or lesbian-headed families. Their findings indicated that a large portion of the participants (ranging from 62% to 84.7%) had positive attitudes towards both gay men and lesbians; and they “strongly disagreed” that homosexuality is a perversion or that individuals should be discriminated against because of their sexual orientation. However, approximately one-quarter to one-third of students still reported negative feelings about homosexuality.

Robinson (2002) found similar results in qualitative interviews with early childhood teachers and administrators. Specifically, participants were least comfortable in discussing sexuality in comparison to other forms of diversity. Additionally, one-quarter of Robinson's participants stated that religious perspectives (either their own views or those of parents in the classroom) would hinder them from incorporating LGBT issues in the classroom. The majority of participants expressed that they would incorporate LGBT issues in the curriculum only if they knew there were children from LGBT families in their classroom. As some LGBT families choose not to identify their family structure to teachers or other school officials, teachers may assume incorrectly that there are no LGBT families in their classrooms. This may lead teachers to overlook salient family issues and dynamics that impact children in their classrooms. Additionally, functioning under the attitude of only discussing LGBT families if they are included in the classroom reflects the assumption that children are not capable of understanding sexuality or issues of diversity (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010). Unfortunately, it is precisely these assumptions that help to create silence around LGBT issues, thus perpetuating misinformation, stereotypes, and discrimination that stigmatizes both children and families.

In a study by Bliss and Harris (1999), teachers responded to questionnaires regarding their perspectives of children from LGBT families as well as their overall attitudes towards and knowledge of LGBT individuals. Similar to other studies, the majority of teachers did not have much knowledge of LGBT issues and had not been exposed to professional experiences or materials on homosexuality. Nonetheless, many of the respondents (approximately 40–60%) held positive attitudes towards homosexual parents and their children; and participants disagreed with questionnaire items such as “I prefer not to deal with lesbian parents” or “Children with a gay father are less emotionally stable than children with a heterosexual father.” However, when interviewed by the authors, some of the participants expressed more prejudiced attitudes towards LGBT families than appeared in the questionnaire data.

Connected Teaching

The teaching approach of the faculty was grounded in “connected teaching” theories (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Hayes & Flannery, 2000). These theories presume that individuals interpret, understand, and come to know through interactions with others. Teachers and students engage in the process of group reflection and dialogue about the personal narratives

they believe to be true in relation to the information and narratives of others presented in the class. The particular aspects of the connected teaching strategies that were most apparent during this course were the attention to the individual experiences of students, the respectful way in which students were challenged, the grounding in common experiences of family, and the framework of ethical practice.

One example of the group reflection process and connected teaching strategies employed by the instructors comes from the very first class activity. The class began by students and the members of the research team writing one- or two-word phrases in reaction to prompts, including: Family is? Family does? Family teaches? and Family means? Following this exercise, class members were placed in groups and asked to create definitions of family based upon their own experiences and any words listed that resonated with them. This allowed the students to voice their own narratives and begin to hear others' stories. Each group read its definition aloud, which led to a group discussion on reactions to the various definitions. The instructors used this discussion to identify students' assumptions hidden in their definitions, raise questions that challenged their ideas of what constitutes "family," and frame the inclusion of all families in classrooms as an ethical obligation.

Throughout this and other activities (e.g., panels and role-playing exercises), the instructors were observant and responsive to the experiences of individuals and created opportunities for individual contact with struggling students. Moreover, faculty created a climate of respect for each student's personal beliefs and experience, while simultaneously challenging each person to gain a deeper understanding of the lives of LGBT families and children. A focus on commonalities with LGBT families rather than differences promoted a sense of inclusion and empathy and interrupted students' initial understandings of LGBT families as "other." Finally, the framing of the entire class as an application of the NAEYC (2005) Code of Ethical Conduct provided a professional imperative to engage with the issues and concepts in the course. This ethical foundation appealed to the students' sense of themselves as emerging professionals whose work is to promote the best interest of all children and families.

Method

Participants

All students enrolled in the course were invited to participate in the study. Students were informed of the purpose and procedures of the study during the first class session. At this time, students indicated in which components of the study they were willing to participate. Overall there were 19 students in the class, all of whom participated in a least one aspect of the study. Students were primarily preservice ($n = 7$) and in-service ($n = 10$) teachers or directors who were working on their 4-year degrees in early childhood education. However, a few of the participants ($n = 2$) were faculty or staff at the university who were taking the class because of personal and professional interest in course content. In terms of sexual orientation, two students identified as

LGBT and 17 identified as straight. Though the majority of the students were from a European American background, there were students of other ethnicities in the course. Specifically, there were three African American students, one multiracial/multiethnic student, and one student who self-identified as Black. One student chose not to specify his/her ethnic background. Most of the students ($n = 16$) were in their early 20s; the other students' ages ranged from 31 to 50. Finally, one student was male and 18 students were female.

Procedure

Quantitative methods

As a requirement of the course itself, all students in the class completed quantitative pre- and post-questionnaires regarding their experiences in the course. These surveys were developed by the instructors of the course and were given at the first and last class. Each of the surveys asked questions regarding students' perceptions and knowledge of LGBT issues in early care and education, as well as their perceived ability to incorporate these families into classroom settings. On the postsurveys, students also responded to questions regarding the impact of the class on their personal and professional lives. Students gave permission for the research team to use their pre- and postsurvey responses in the current study.

Both the pre- and postsurveys consisted of a variety of question types such as Likert rating scales and “yes or no” questions. For each of the Likert-type questions, students rated themselves from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). In the preclass survey, students responded to questions about their current awareness of and action regarding LGBT issues. Examples of these questions include: “I have the tools and knowledge I need to set up a welcoming environment for LGBT families”, “I am aware of the privileges or lack of privileges in society based on sexual orientation”, and “I actively confront homophobia when it occurs in my presence in my professional life.”

The postsurvey focused on students' increase in awareness or knowledge, as well as whether the class inspired them to become more active in challenging biases against homophobia. For instance, items from this survey included, “I have increased awareness of the importance of making LGBT families feel welcomed in ECE environments” and “This class has inspired me to seek more knowledge and support to develop my capacity to work for change.” Other Likert-type questions on the postsurvey asked students to rate the extent to which they felt it was important to experience homophobia in the class or how valuable it was to have instructors of differing sexual orientations. Additionally, both the pre- and postsurveys asked the students to rate themselves on the Beyond Tolerance Action Continuum (Washington, 1991). This continuum, the only item exactly the same for both surveys, ranged from 1 (*active participation in discrimination*) to 9 (*initiating and preventing discrimination*).

It is important for us to note that this is the first time these instruments have been used in formal research; therefore, there is little psychometric information on these surveys. Although there

seems to be evidence of internal consistency based on the current data (Cronbach's alpha was .923 for the presurvey and .966 for the post), these statistics should be interpreted with caution. Further research is needed to test the reliability and validity of these scales and to establish specific constructs. Due to these limitations, the current study only reports descriptive information using the quantitative data.

Qualitative methods

As noted earlier, the research team engaged in the class as participant observers. During class times, the team kept field notes of activities and experiences in the class, as well as the overall class dynamic, the students' processes of learning and unlearning, and the teaching strategies employed by the instructors (Spradley, 1980). Although the research team did discuss the class, curriculum, and students' learning processes informally with them, the instructors did not collect or analyze data.

Seven of the students volunteered to participate in unstructured interviews at the beginning and end of the semester. In the preinterviews, students discussed why they were interested in taking the class, some of their preconceptions regarding both the course and LGBT families, and previous experiences with LGBT individuals. Correspondingly, the postinterviews allowed the students to voice their unique experiences in the course, as well as offer their perspectives on the teaching strategies and class content. In all of the interviews, students were asked open-ended questions about their personal experience with LBGT individuals and their reflections and feelings as the class progressed (Creswell, 2008; Fontana & Frey, 2005). One of the doctoral students on the research team conducted all of the interviews.

Data Analysis

Quantitative analysis

Descriptive analyses were run on the pre- and postsurvey responses in order to create a global picture of students' perceptions of the class and the changes they experienced throughout the course. Because the pre- and postsurveys did not contain all of the same questions, it was neither possible nor appropriate to create and compare any type of composite score on the surveys.

Qualitative analysis

Our participation in the course allowed us to approach the data with a more comprehensive understanding of the students' experiences. As members of the class, we were able to dialogue with students about their questions and witness their struggles and breakthroughs throughout the process of creating new narratives (DeWalt, 2002; Fontana & Frey, 2005; Spradley, 1980). All of the qualitative data (unstructured interviews, field notes, and short answers from pre- and postsurveys) were analyzed using an interpretive approach (Creswell, 2008). After interviews were transcribed, the members of the research team independently read the transcripts to gain an

overall impression of the data. Memos were written and an a priori coding scheme was identified collectively through discussion among the four coders. This coding scheme was then applied to the transcripts by highlighting and labeling text with an appropriate code. Any new codes that were identified were recorded as memos for future analysis. A continual process of reading and assigning codes to the transcripts among the four coders ensured themes were applied appropriately. Discrepancies in coding were resolved through discussion among the research team (Creswell, 2008). Both individual and group themes were used to highlight the juxtapositions of students' experiences, as well as demonstrate the overall impact of the course. Although the themes presented below focus primarily on students' shared experiences, there are also unique voices within each theme.

Results

The results below demonstrate the changes that students experienced in their understandings of and perspectives on LGBT issues within ECE, as well as give insight into the process of change in which students struggled to reconcile their beliefs and practices in the classroom setting.

Survey Results

The quantitative data from the postsurvey revealed marked changes in attitudes as compared to the presurvey data due to participation in the Making Room in the Circle class. As Table 1 indicates, students reported that they had an increased awareness of LGBT families, the issues faced by LGBT parents and their children, as well as the biases against and privileges denied LGBT families. Perhaps most importantly, students also indicated that they came to possess tools and knowledge that would allow them to provide a more welcoming environment in early childhood classrooms for LGBT families.

Table 1. Percentages From Pre- and Postcourse Survey

Item	Presurvey: Agree and strongly agree (%)	Postsurvey: Agree and strongly agree (%)
I have tools and knowledge to set up more welcoming environments for LGBT families.	16.7	88.2
I have awareness about how LGBT families are formed.	27.8	88.2
I know about issues faced by LGBT parents.	16.7	93.8
I know about issues faced by children of LGBT parents.	16.7	88.2
I am aware of biases toward LGBT families.	44.5	82.4
I am aware of privileges based on sexual orientation.	38.9	83.3

The surveys also included open-ended questions to which the students responded. Prior to the class, most of the students expressed a desire to engage in conversation about LGBT families that would assist them in using appropriate terminology so that they would be sure not to offend anyone and also to work on their own biases. They also wanted to learn about “other lifestyles” of which they were less knowledgeable. One student indicated that “I always promote diversity; however, I do not want to leave any culture or family out.” Other students were interested in becoming advocates for LGBT families and seeking resources for their classrooms to aid them in working with children from LGBT families. This was an unanticipated outcome for the presurvey questions because it was expected that students would not be prepared to be the changers. However, in their responses, it became clear that some students were prepared engage with change. Nevertheless, these students seemed more comfortable with professional than personal change that might be initiated by the class content. For instance, a student indicated that “my personal life ... I'm still not quite sure about that.” Further, several students expressed concern about their religious beliefs and how these beliefs might play into class discussions. One student said, “I do have pre-existing beliefs that will not be compromised.” Another expressed that the “challenge for me has to do with my religion. It will be a little hard to accept LGBT families mainly because of my religion.” This parallels the findings of Maney and Cain (1997), who reported that students who held strong religious beliefs were more likely to view LGBT individuals in a negative way.

Postsurveys indicated that students felt more open and had increased comfort in addressing LGBT issues. The majority of students expressed a growing awareness of the bias that exists against LGBT individuals, the rights and privileges that are not available to LGBT families, and the importance of being a straight ally. However, there were still some students who were not able to express complete comfort in accepting LGBT individuals or serving as a straight ally. For instance, one student noted her continual struggle with accepting different sexual orientations: “Because of my religious beliefs I will not say being LGBT is okay, but when the issue arises I will say it's not okay for LGBT people to be discriminated against.” This perspective is reflective of change as it relates to professional behavior but does not represent a personal transformation. The students also expressed the importance of being encouraged to use curriculum materials that included LGBT families (a children's book and a matching game) in an early childhood classroom. This experience helped the students understand the social construction of stories regarding sexuality and gender as the students discovered that the children were very accepting of the book and games. Incorporating these materials and discussing the topic of LGBT families was much less of an issue for the children than it was for the students in the course. In the postsurvey results, we see that students did experience some change in their attitudes and understandings regarding LGBT issues, but overall, this change remained at a professional, rather than a personal level.

Interviews

Although the survey results are quite compelling, the interview responses provide further detail about the process of change in student beliefs and attitudes as they began to construct new narratives. Interview data revealed four overarching themes including: conflict/confusion, personal/professional, secrecy/silence, and advocacy/action.

Conflict/confusion

Perhaps the most strongly vocalized theme was that of conflict and confusion as students attempted to reconcile their strongly held beliefs with the compelling information presented to them in the class. For instance, one student expressed her concern about her conflicting beliefs: “How do I uphold my beliefs but at the same time, not, in a sense, instill them on the children and also accept the children for who they are? That's been the hardest part for me.” The discussion about transgender-headed families was particularly problematic for the students as they attempted to determine, “Am I really okay with that?” Another point of confusion concerned the age-appropriateness of discussing LGBT families with young children: “I think that it's your job to protect young children from certain things that they don't have the understanding to comprehend at that time ... wait ‘til later, at least until after age seven.” This statement exemplifies the confusion and discomfort some of the students described during the class because of equating LGBT families with sexual behavior. Despite the class discussions, which directly addressed this stereotype, many students were still conflicted by a belief that sexuality was inappropriate content for young children. Indeed, this was a common concern—discussion of LGBT families is akin to a discussion about “sex.” Although most individuals would not consider a discussion of heterosexual families to be a discussion about “sex,” the perspective is quite different when focused on LGBT families.

Additionally, conflict and confusion resulted from students' struggles with feeling judged or stereotyped. One of the lesbian students expressed her conflicted feelings about heterosexuals: “I just thought that, you know, heterosexual people were, you know, just really judgmental and I never really listened to why they thought the things they thought.” Because the class was conducted in a very religiously oriented part of the country, it is not surprising that strong religious beliefs were responsible for much of the students' confusion. The social/historical context of the institution in which the class was taught is a critical factor in the beliefs of the students enrolled in the class. Although the university is public, its location in the “Bible Belt” fosters a relatively conservative religious climate in the student body with regard to LGBT issues. However, some of the students were attempting to combat what they felt to be stereotypes about who and what is a Christian. According to one student, “I felt that people were looking at Christians as bashers and haters and just whole stereotypes and ... I don't want to live up to that, to this community, I don't want to live up to them thinking that I hate them ... but overall, it's been tough, really tough, spiritually for me, from, you know, my whole background.” However, she further stated that “I've been extremely uncomfortable in the class, but it's been a good uncomfortable cause I have had to face the biases that I've had toward this community ...” It was

quite typical for students to express discomfort at the same time that they were acknowledging accompanying change.

Personal/professional

In order to manage these conflicts, many students seemed to try to compartmentalize their personal and professional selves on the topic of LGBT families. These students agreed that it would not be appropriate to discriminate against particular families in their classrooms; however, their personal beliefs were that an LGBT family was not necessarily an appropriate family structure for young children. One student described her perspective: “As a teacher I have a dilemma because it's my ethical responsibility to all children and all types of families to provide the children with the same care ... the same welcoming in the classroom.” Additionally, during a class activity, one small group discussed “putting your [personal] feelings aside” in order to ensure LGBT families were included in early childhood settings. The struggle to separate personal beliefs and actions from professional beliefs and behaviors was ongoing for the students and was not resolved during the semester-long course. The discourse regarding the personal and professional selves seemed integrally related to the strongly held religious beliefs of the students. Those students with strong conservative religious convictions seemed more likely to make this distinction than those who did not express such strong convictions.

Secrecy/silence

A number of the students in the class described never having discussed the topic of LGBT families in the past. As one student indicated, “In our community it's not just in your face, you know, it's kind of they're hidden in the closet.” For a few students, there was not only secrecy within their communities, but in their families as well. A student expressed, “To be honest I haven't told my parents what class I'm taking.” Another student described how LGBT families were secrets within early childhood classrooms: “It was a silent thing ... the silent factor that played into our work.” Unfortunately, even after the completion of the class, one student stated that “if I didn't have an LGBT family represented in that classroom, I wouldn't bring it up.” This comment provides some evidence of a silence that would continue in spite of the encouragement by the teachers of the course and fellow students to include information about LGBT families. It also expresses a sentiment of not valuing the topic as generally relevant but seeing it as only meaningful if children of LGBT families are part of their classrooms.

The secrecy/silence theme seemed most poignant for the two students in the course who identified as LGBT. Specifically, one student who is gay and grew up in an LGBT family indicated that in school LGBT families were not a topic of discussion. She further stated, “My mom, like, she didn't want me to talk to anybody about it ... it was like she was in denial about being gay.” She also voiced that “I don't want people to know because of the way they might treat me.” For the other student, being gay meant that she had to keep her sexuality a secret, especially in church. This student expressed, “Now I'm happy with who I am and with my

sexuality, it's just the church ... I can't be open in church." Silence and secrecy seem almost inevitable themes for a controversial topic such as LGBT families, but there was evidence that some students were ready to break the silence through action and advocacy.

Advocacy/action

The class had a quite different impact on students depending upon where they began the process. Some students who had not grappled with these issues before remained silent, whereas others were able to move from their silence to advocacy. This theme most clearly delineated the changers and the changed, as some students were examining their own beliefs regarding LGBT families while others were comfortable with their own beliefs and moved to act as allies for LGBT families. For one LGBT student, "It really kind of hit a soft spot. I know that I grew up in an LGBT family, but I never really thought about other people. Like there's more people that were going through the same things and I can't just stay quiet." She further stated, "This class has helped me talk more instead of just sitting back and being quiet and acting like it's not there." Furthermore, a straight student explained how she perceived her role as an ally, "I'm in a unique position [as a straight ally because] I can say things that gay people can't say or that gay people would say and other people who opposed them would ... not care." Another student who is employed as an early childhood teacher indicated that "the class gave me the tools on how to talk to her [my director] and get the conversation prepared ... so right now we have three books [on LGBT families] in our curriculum so it's a start." Similarly, another student noted that she now has the information and strategies to better talk to others: "I have, like, tools to talk to people better while still understanding why they feel that way. You know, not like attacking them, like oh, you're wrong, you suck." Though many of the students struggled throughout the semester, it is clear that the class had a significant impact on the participants and provided perspectives for further reflection and impetus for action on the topic.

Discussion and Reflection

The teaching strategies embodied by the faculty were key to any changes experienced by the students. This has implications for any course that challenges students' fundamental belief systems. The connected teaching approach utilized by the instructors meant that the course validated students' experiences and perspectives and enabled the instruction to be based on relationships. This formed a strong foundation of trust on which fundamental beliefs of students could be questioned. The resulting disequilibrium and discomfort created the opportunity for students to think deeply and to understand the connections between their beliefs and their teaching practices with children. The nature of this approach provided insights into the students' thinking as they worked with the information and experiences offered in the course. The faculty continuously adapted to handle emerging concerns and issues and to respond to students who were having personal difficulty during the process.

Overall, the results portrayed students as complex beings who may hold contradictory beliefs that are often related to context (i.e., the themes of personal and professional, conflict and confusion, secrecy and silence). The data indicate that they can hold personal prejudices and narrow-minded perspectives, while publicly and professionally portraying themselves as tolerant and open-minded. For example, students' separation of the personal and professional was evidenced by students' views of including the topic of LGBT families only if they had an LGBT family as part of the classroom. Some students also expressed a clear distinction between the role of the family and the role of the teacher in addressing the topic. Because many viewed the topic as directly tied to "sex," some students perceived it as the purview of the family. Although some students clearly viewed LGBT issues as part of social justice, many others defined it as a family matter that had no place in the classroom unless an LGBT family was part of that classroom. According to Bliss and Harris (1999), such views are often linked to a strong religious background. In their study, participants' responses,

... reflected feelings that sexual orientation was not an issue, and that discussion of it should take place only when there was a problem. Sexual orientation was felt to be a private matter ... it didn't have anything to do with class work or students' performance. (p. 161)

In the present study, some students were clearly comfortable in identifying and embracing issues of discrimination and oppression related to race, culture, and gender; yet, they did not perceive heterosexism in the same light. This is consistent with the research of Robinson (2002), which indicated that students were less likely to be comfortable discussing sexuality than other forms of diversity.

Sociocultural Context

Throughout the results, there were glimpses of how students' personal histories and sociocultural context influenced their experiences of the course and the change process. For example, students experiencing conflict or confusion discussed how they had learned stereotypes from interactions with their family, friends, or community. In the theme of secrecy and silence, students also expressed difficulty in sharing information about their families or being afraid of community reactions to what they experienced in class.

Furthermore, the religious beliefs of the students as expressed in their statements played a critical role in how students were able to create new narratives about the inclusion of children from LGBT families. Maney and Cain (1997) attributed some of the negative feelings of students about homosexuality in their study to students' reported religiosity: Students who had strong, conservative, religious beliefs were more likely to view gay or lesbian parents in a negative way. Because there were multiple versions of religious beliefs expressed by class members, it is with caution that we attribute negative feelings to something as global as religiosity. However, the students who most consistently struggled with understanding, accepting, and advocating for

LGBT families and their children expressed that their personal and community religious beliefs and teachings acted as a barrier to their transformation.

A final reflection on context highlights the cycle of acceptance and resistance observed in and between class sessions. Several students expressed reception to a new understanding of LGBT issues and an openness to a shift in their own beliefs during a class session, and then would retreat to what appeared to be “holding on” to all or part of their original beliefs by the next class session. This expression of resistance to change can be understood in the constructs offered by Schuler (2003). Schuler suggests that change is resisted when it is perceived as threatening the connection to people in their lives who disagree with such a change in their beliefs or behavior. This dynamic was observed as some students reported having negative discussions with family and friends about what they were learning in the class about LGBT families.

Additionally, Schuler (2003) proposes that change is resisted when there are no role models for behaving in a new way or an individual lacks confidence to change his or her behavior. Some students did report that no one at their work site was intentionally offering an inclusive environment for LGBT families and felt that colleagues would disapprove of their efforts. When asked to carry out some of the activities (e.g., reading a book or playing games) that included LGBT families, many students expressed a great deal of anxiety about “how to handle this.” Therefore, the lack of role models in their work environments and questions about their competence likely fed the cycle of resistance to change that was observed. Unfortunately, by the end of the course, some students remained firm in their original personal beliefs and were only able to change their behavior toward children and families when such professional action was validated by supervisors or coworkers.

Given the students' unique contexts and the challenging nature of the course, students ended the course at varied points in the change process. Some students were becoming changers who engaged in various forms of advocacy and action in their lives and work. Other students struggled with the beginnings of the process and were able only to make small changes in incorporating LGBT families into the classroom.

Implications for Teacher Education

These observations of teaching approaches and students' experiences are instructive as early childhood teacher educators embark on constructing experiences for students that require a deep examination of their own beliefs and behaviors. It is a cyclical process that is highly influenced by the personal contexts of the students. Expectations of faculty regarding the possibilities and the limitations of this work can be more effective if grounded in this reality.

This exploration of an effort to prepare preservice early childhood educators to become teachers who can offer welcoming learning environments for LGBT children and families offers several considerations in designing educational experiences that push beyond traditional curricular content. Although we cannot predict student responses, this experience points to the following

critical elements of a teaching-learning environment that may have significant potential for students' learning to be effective with children from LBGT families. Specifically, early childhood teacher preparation experiences should include: (a) faculty who feel confident and prepared to respond to the personal conflicts that may emerge as a result of confronting this topic, (b) opportunities for students to know LBGT families and experience the commonalities and differences between their families and in their everyday lives, (c) teaching strategies that facilitate the students' understanding and commitment to the NAEYC Code of Ethics and the mandate that “we shall not harm children” (NAEYC, 2005, p. 3), and (d) intentional opportunities for students to (re)create their narratives about teaching to include being the “changer and the changed.” As the early childhood field learns to welcome LBGT families into schools and classrooms, it is essential that teacher education programs and faculty find ways to incorporate LBGT issues into the curriculum through the use of connected teaching to help students through their own process of unlearning stereotypes and biases and moving toward more inclusive ways of teaching.

Notes

¹Quotation on title page is an album title from C. Williamson (1975).

²For more information on the Making Room in the Circle Curriculum, please visit the Parent Services Project website at <http://www.parentservices.org/lgbt.php>. Teacher educators can learn more about the curriculum at this site.

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