

Teaching about Sexual Orientation in an Educational Leadership Preparation Program

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Abstract

Issues of diversity and social justice are slowly making their way into educational leadership programs, though scholars have argued that social justice is a responsibility of aspiring school leaders and educators. However, issues directly related to sexual orientation have been treated lightly and we question why this is the case. Given the changing social climate and attitudes towards the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) community, aspiring educational leaders should be prepared to address the issues in their schools. In this article, we provide an overview of some topics that may be addressed in an educational leadership preparation program and provide an example of what some of the reactions to these topics may look like. Here, we analyze reflections from 15 graduate students enrolled in a course focused on social justice during the final year of a principal preparation program. Three common themes emerged from the reflections: 1) limited experiences with LGBTQ people shapes or limits one's beliefs and perceptions about LGBTQ people, 2) principal preparation students were able to accurately identify how expected (masculine) gender norms and heteronormative assumptions drive bullying and name-calling of students who fall outside these gender roles, and 3) a large number of principal preparation students expressed the belief that being gay is a choice and that this belief was related to their stance on LGBTQ issues. Discussion centers on the implications of these findings for addressing LGBTQ issues in educational leadership programs and how reflections are useful in understanding the student's developmental stage in order to approach this topic most effectively.

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Teaching about Sexual Orientation in an Educational Leadership Preparation Program

Educational leadership preparation programs are graduate programs which prepare students to be leaders in educational settings. Most frequently students are preparing for leadership positions in P-12 educational systems, such as principals or superintendents, but can also serve in other roles, such as special education coordinators, consultants, or teacher leaders. Some educational leadership programs can choose to be accredited by regional or national organizations. However, the ability to issue a professional license in school administration requires a program to be accredited at the state level.

Accreditation relies partly on a program's ability to meet national professional standards. The Educational Leadership Policy Standards were developed by several professional organizations under the auspices of the Council of Chief State School officers, which is the body of public officials who head state departments of education. Six standards have been adopted by the National Policy Board for Educational Administration (2007), with statements such as, "An education leader promotes the success of every student by facilitating the development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship of a vision of learning that is shared and supported by all stakeholders" (Standard p. 1). As of the writing of this manuscript, the standards are being refreshed. Currently there is no leadership standard explicitly mentioning social justice or sexual orientation. Instead, leaders are to be focused generally on the "success of every student."

This lack of specificity may be the reason why so few leadership preparation programs address sexual orientation in their curriculum. According to recent research from Capper and O'Malley (2014), fewer than half of University Council on Educational Administration educational preparation programs identified themselves as related to social justice, and only 48.6% of those programs emphasized sexual orientation in their coursework. Clearly, there is still work to be

done regarding educational leadership and sexual orientation as a topic, despite a call from scholars in the field of educational leadership to include social justice issues in leadership preparation programs (see, for example, Cambron-McCabe & McCarthy, 2005; Dantley & Tillman, 2006; DeMatthews, 2014; Goldring & Greenfield, 2002; Grogan & Andrews, 2002; Hernandez & Marshall, 2009; Hernandez, & Fraynd, 2015; Pounder, Reitzug, & Young, 2002; Scheurich & Skrla, 2003; Theoharis, 2007, 2008, 2009). There is also work to be done in paying more attention to issues of sexual orientation within the context of social justice and educational leadership preparation, echoing other scholars (Capper et al., 2006; Hernandez & Fraynd, 2013.)

In this article, we focus on what we can learn from graduate students who aspire to be school leaders, with implications for changes that need to occur within the training itself. We begin by identifying a lack of research and critical discussion around LGBTQ-issues and offer some possible reasons as to why this occurs. Further, we present an overview of the current state of social justice leadership as it applies to issues related to LGBTQ students. Following this, we reiterate the need for research and discussion and turn to an analysis of written reflections from 15 aspiring school principals during a social justice course as part of a principal preparation program. Finally, we suggest implications for preparation programs.

A Lack of Research and Critical Discussion

Some recent scholars have noted that, although LGBTQ-inclusive education has begun to develop a focus on safety and equity, research coming from higher education programs ultimately lacks a certain depth and complexity when discussing critical theory (Szalacha, 2004; Renn, 2010). That is, while LGBTQ issues may be discussed in educational leadership programs, theory development and rigorous research discussing pedagogical concerns of teacher and leader preparation are lacking at institutes of higher education. Other scholars have noted that research related to LGBTQ issues in education is still scarce overall, even in the literature on multicultural education (Gorski, Davis, & Reiter, 2013; Horn et al, 2010).

Among the research that does occur, there are questions important to the wellbeing of K-12 students. Some of these questions include: How do LGBTQ college students navigate the transition from student to teacher (Benson, Smith, & Flanagan, 2014; Stielger, 2008)? How can we choose teachers and principals who will be sensitive to LGBTQ issues and fight to break down assumptions of heteronormativity (Bowles et al, 2014)? How can we identify institutions that make a concerted effort to include LGBTQ -related issues in teacher preparation programs without heteronormative backdrops (Stacey et al, 2010; Carpenter & Lee, 2010)? How can we create professional development for existing educators around LGBT issues (Greytak, Kosciw, & Boesen, 2013)? Answering questions such as these about the identity and preparation of future educators helps us understand and improve that preparation so that they can go serve their future students.

Underestimated Bullying and Harassment

Bullying and harassment of LGBTQ students is a very real problem that is not receiving the attention in educational leadership preparation programs that it deserves. Bullying, harassment, and the failure to promote inclusive and equitable environments begin with specific, often incorrect beliefs about sexual orientation and gender. However, it is important to note that some students may not have given any thought to LGBTQ issues and others may not have been exposed to the LGBTQ community at all. Still, these incorrect beliefs or lack of exposure can be addressed through critical discussion and reflection, and experiences promoting self-awareness in the classroom environment, eventually leading to responsive teaching practices.

Again, reporting O'Malley and Capper's findings (2014), while 83% of UCEA social-justice-oriented programs reported preparing leaders to stop harassment in general, only 64% prepared leaders to stop harassment of LGBT students in particular. For non-social-justice-oriented programs, the comparison was 36% for stopping harassment in general and 14% for stopping harassment of LGBTQ students. No matter the amount of news coverage or "social justice selfies" (online pictures of people holding written statements about social injustices)

posted on social media, if the problem is not being addressed during the training and preparation of future school leaders, then it is not being addressed proactively. It is without doubt that LGBTQ students are regularly bullied (Blumenfeld, 2000; Frankfurt, 2000; Predrag, 2003; Robinson & Espelage, 2011) and LGBTQ students are more than twice as likely to attempt suicide (Gibson, 1989; Kourany, 1994). In fact, sexual orientation is one of the most common reasons that students are bullied, second only to physical appearance (Birkett, Espelage, & Koenig, 2009; Devoe & Kaffenberger, 2005; Kosciw *et al.*, 2012). Further, other researchers have identified that bullying rates increase dramatically when students enter middle school -- a critical time in the development of students understanding of, and ability to express, their identities (Pellegrini, 2002; Friedrichs, 2014).

A recent national survey of over 7,500 students from 13 to 21 years of age reported disconcerting findings regarding the status of our schools. The authors reported that about half of all LGBTQ students felt unsafe in their school, and around 30% missed a day of school because of concerns about safety (Kosciw, Greytak, Palmer, & Boesen, 2014; Kosciw, Greytak, Bartkiewicz, Boesen, & Palmer, 2012; Kosciw, Greytak, Diaz, & Bartkiewicz, 2010). Most students reported avoiding certain areas, such as bathrooms and locker rooms (35%), or other school functions (68%). The study also reported that homophobic remarks, slurs, and verbal harassment towards LGBTQ students were pervasive, both from other students and from teachers.

Though the problem of bullying is undeniable, this issue goes unnoticed by those who have the power to instigate change. Even though recent research has identified that verbal and physical harassment towards LGBTQ students occurs “frequently” or “very often,” very few school leaders believed that this type of harassment occurred often, if at all. For example, in one study, only 12% of principals reported the frequency of LGBTQ bullying as “very often” and 9% as “often” (Markow & Dancewicz, 2008); whereas nearly 70% of students reported a

frequent occurrence of harassment, according to other studies (Kosciw *et al.*, 2010, 2012, 2014).

Though a state may have laws protecting employees or public citizens from harassment or discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation, this protection rarely extends to educational environments and even less to gender expression, as reported by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force (Currah, 2012). In fact, the Task Force also reported that there are only 17 states as of 2012 which have passed laws protecting citizens from housing and employment discrimination based on gender identity and expression (*see also* Koch & Bales, 2008).

Some individuals are particularly marginalized: transgender and transsexuals. While the climate may be improving, however slowly, around the acceptance of homosexuality as a social norm, people are less aware of, or more resistant to, non-binary gender categories. This lack of acceptance may be due to issues around gender expression and fulfillment of masculine gender roles. That is, students who act or dress less “masculine” may be vulnerable targets. Studies conducted by the Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network, henceforth referred to as GLSEN (Kosciw *et al.*, 2010, 2012, 2014), and Greytak, Kosciw, and Diaz (2009) found that transgender youth reported higher levels of harassment and victimization than their non-transgender gay, lesbian, and bisexual peers. Additionally, two high-profile cases regarding transgendered students have recently dominated the news:

Coy Mathis: In 2012, the District Court in Fountain, Colorado ruled that the (then) 6-year old, Coy Mathis, should use the nurse’s bathroom instead of the girl’s bathroom (Safer, nd; Erdely, 2013; Hart, 2014). By the time Coy was four years old, she had identified herself as a girl, her parents treated her like a girl, and she felt comfortable thinking of herself as a girl. The school system, however, disagreed.

Leelah Alcorn: In 2014, transgendered teen Leelah Alcorn committed suicide after not being accepted by her parents, who forced her to undergo

“treatment” from Christian conversion therapists. Leelah posted a suicide note on the social media website “tumblr” describing her experiences and identifying factors which led to her suicide. She stated that she did not get support from friends or family, either at home or at school, and that things did not get easier—they only got harder (Boston Globe, 2015; Margolin, 2015).

The path to preventing cases like this from happening requires change to be implemented both at a broader social level and in specific environments where “safe spaces” can be created. Often times, if a student is marginalized in her home, especially during the teen years, she may seek solidarity in social environments such as school. Therefore, it is imperative that school leaders, teachers, and counselors are prepared to implement policies and practices which create accepting communities.

Steps to Improvement

There are many steps that can be taken to improve the preparation of future educational leaders. Again, we believe that much needs to be changed to include LGBTQ-centered issues in educational leadership programs, but we also believe that much can be learned from aspiring leaders. First, we must understand how future leaders view the world when they enter the program. We need to identify the misconceptions and then attempt to understand how those misconceptions took hold. Many students may hold unsubstantiated views of LGBTQ-related issues and it is the job of the training program to provide empirical evidence about leadership and about LGBTQ students. Finally, leadership programs must provide future leaders with information and evidence so that they can form new evidence-based opinions and actions. Consistent opportunities for reflection and the ability to react to the changes in their reflections are key and this strategy relies on the willingness of researchers, instructors, and students to discuss these issues openly.

A good starting point in leadership programs is to define terms related to sexual identity (see Table 1). While there is much literature regarding the usage of terms related to sexual orientation (see Lugg, 2003), many students may enter educational leadership preparation programs without an understanding or awareness of what these terms mean.

Terms such as *sexual identity* and *sexual orientation* are often conflated, as are *gender* and *sex*. Additionally, many students may not understand (or be aware of) the difference between *transsexual* and *transgender*. Further, the use of a term such as *sexual minority* may be foreign to the vocabulary of many. However, even though clarifying the usage of these terms is a necessary start to creating an inclusive environment, using correct terminology or being “politically correct” will not create an accepting school. Rather, the start of an inclusive and accepting environment begins with the awareness of those sub-social terms- words like *gay* and *fag*, which often fly under our social radars.

Homophobic and sexually degrading name-calling is pervasive and largely ignored. Whereas someone would be immediately chastised for using the “N-word,” the usage of derogatory names referring to sex or gender is still largely accepted (Burns 2000). Prejudice against those of the LGBTQ community and jokes at their expense are as acceptable as the “N-word” was in the 1950s. In the way that students were prohibited from inter-racial dating through the 1970s, and even 1980s, many students currently report not being allowed to attend school functions with a significant other of the same sex (Kosciw *et al.*, 2010, 2012, 2014).

Homophobia is, in some ways, the last prejudice still acceptable in modern society and it should be the prerogative of social justice leaders to target these actions. However, there is a larger issue undermining progress: many students may not believe that using pejorative phrases, such as “that’s so gay” is offensive, or even that it refers to homosexuality derogatorily (Gatti, 2011). While there is plenty of empirical evidence to the contrary (Woodford *et. al.*, 2012; Carnaghi & Maass, 2007), the root of the issue seems to be a widely-held social bias which needs to be overcome.

While the use of homophobic pejoratives may not necessarily identify one as being anti-gay (Burns, 2000), the effects of pejorative terms and sexually degrading name-calling are severe and long-lasting. Swearer and colleagues (2008) reported that boys who were called “gay” experienced more severe effects, such as higher levels of depression and anxiety, than did boys who were bullied for reasons or called names not referring to sexual orientation. Capper and colleagues (2009) reported that sexually degrading name-calling also led to higher levels of anger, anxiety, and illness than other forms of name-calling. Similarly, these effects likely differ for male and female students, as much research suggests (*e.g.* Capper, Schulte, & McKinney, 2009; Swearer, Turner, & Givens, 2008). Homophobic bullying and name-calling appears to rely on perceptions of gender and gender expression. For example, a student who dresses “differently” or breaks the masculine stereotype in a certain way may be perceived as gay and may suffer social consequences because he does not fulfill his gender stereotype.

However, while many schools may be aware of policies which are implemented to protect LGBTQ students, few principals act on these policies. Specifically, many of these policies, so-called “blanket policies,” are designed to protect the school rather than students. In fact, one study (Macgillivray, 2009) reported that, while the majority of schools (96%) had anti-bullying policies in place, as few as 39% of schools reported having policies in place specifically to protect students’ gender expression. Further, these policies are often undermined by a variety of factors, such as lack of administrative concern (Short, 2007), or the challenges of politically conservative parents and families (Ian, 2004; Macgillivray, 2009; Rienzo, Button, Jiunne-jye, & Ying, 2006). Additionally, policies and efforts may also be undermined by closeted teachers and administrators whose efforts to hide their own identities result in the perpetuation of heteronormative power rather than combatting it (Fraynd & Capper, 2003). Finally, it must also be considered that if an environment is unsafe or unwelcoming to teachers and administrators then it cannot be safe for students.

Without explicit protection from policies, decisions on how to act towards marginalized groups are left up to the individual. If the individual is a teacher or school principal who is not prepared or knowledgeable about what actions to take, or is unaware of his or her own bias, then students are left feeling unsafe (Kosciw, *et al.*, 2010, 2012, 2014).

So what does it mean to lead for social justice? Aspiring school leaders should be prepared to lead for *all* students, and for sexual minority students in particular. Theoharis (2007) argues that social justice leaders “make issues of race, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and other historically and currently marginalizing conditions in the United States central to their advocacy, leadership practice, and vision” (p. 223). Leading for social justice should include a focus on equity for LGBTQ students – not the general “all students” of our national leadership preparation standards, but particularly LGBTQ students. We believe that leadership preparation programs can include a focus on issues around LGBTQ students, a focus on critical theory and discussion related to LGBTQ issues, and an openness about the prevalence and frequency of injustices.

To combat this final form of prejudice, we must learn from students what needs to be changed and where to begin. In fact, we believe that much can be learned from aspiring leaders by providing them opportunities to reflect on their beliefs and how these beliefs have changed over key foundational courses. During this study, we did just that. We analyzed reflections of 15 students in a principal preparation program and looked for information as to how their beliefs and understanding of LGBTQ and gender-related issues impacted their beliefs, with the assumption that those beliefs would eventually lead to practices.

In addition to what we can learn about our students, our study might inform other professors in principal preparation programs as these aspiring principals reflect on their own cultural identity and on issues of diversity, equity, and social justice. Our questions are: What patterns and themes about sexual orientation can we identify within the reflections? What do

these patterns and themes tell us about the way students view LGBTQ issues? How should this information influence how educational administration programs are taught?

Methods

Course Description, Participants, and Data Collection

This study analyzes the written reflections of 15 graduate students who were enrolled in a principal preparation program. This study was conducted at a large, Midwestern university. Reflections are an important tool that researchers, students, and professionals can use to gain insight into one's thinking and beliefs about certain issues. Previous research has discussed the value of reflections at the administrative preparation level and how they can reveal and change the beliefs and values of future administrators (Brown, 2004; Ridenour, 2004). Reflections also allow students to think critically about and question their social and personal identities. These specific reflection tasks asked students to consider how their personal and social identities might influence their professional practice.

Course Description

Students were enrolled in a social justice and equity course required towards the end of a principal preparation program. This course returns to an idea introduced in an earlier course in the program, that of cultural identity. It includes an analysis of how school programs meet the needs of diverse learners. The course requires students to write reflections on issues related to equity, diversity, and social justice. The aspiring principals perform these written assignments in class and online in a Web-based discussion forum associated with the course.

Required readings in this course included *Meeting the Needs of Students of All Abilities* (C. A. Capper, Frattura, & Keyes, 2000), *Using Data to Include the Achievement Gap* (Johnson, 2002); and Scheurich, Skrla, and Johnson *On Thinking about Equity and Accountability* (2000). Particularly related to LGBTQ were "The Law and Gay-Bashing in Schools" (Reese, 1997), "Tips for Professionals Who Work with Gay Youth" (Parents, 2010), and "My Son, the 11-year-

old drag queen” (Ebert, 2002). Representatives from a gay-straight alliance also came to class for a panel discussion, as suggested by “Integrating Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual/Transgender Topics...into the Curriculum” (C. A. Capper et al., 2006).

Participants and Context

The 15 participants were nearly all full-time educators and part-time students. They ranged in their teaching experiences from 2 to 25 years, and in their ages from 28 to 56 years. Members were all White, except for one student of color. They worked full-time in school positions such as Kindergarten teacher, special-education educator, and school activities director. There were 8 men and 7 women involved in this study. Students consented to let the course professor remove their names and of other identifying information from their reflections and to let another instructor read and analyze them.

Prompt

Students were required to post a short reflection about LGBTQ issues and their personal experience with the topic.

Trustworthiness and Analysis

Using reflections as a data source subjects the analysis to subjective and interpretive validity, as well as questions about the trustworthiness of the responses, and we acknowledge that there are other factors which may influence student responses on these reflections. However, we choose to believe that students were honest in their reflections and expressions in class. Classroom interactions are social constructions (Bruner, 1990; Vygotsky, 1978), and how a student presents one’s self in a classroom, or their “face” (Goffman, 1959), does not likely differ from a public “face” presented elsewhere. Further, there were many opportunities for reflections in the course and, if students were writing to appease the instructor, then they did so consistently.

The researchers began by analyzing individual reflections and coding for common themes. Reflections were read repeatedly by each researcher and responses were coded according to particular topics under discussion. The researchers employed a coding process similar to that described by Anfara, Brown, and Mangione (2002) (meta-inquiry) along with the constant comparative method (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

The researchers then compared notes as they continued to read the reflections and identified results that were common among each analysis. Finally, the researchers served as peer-reviewers for each other, reviewing analyses and contrasting common findings until the final results were arrived at as outlined below.

Findings

We would like to note that we did not correct the reflections for spelling, punctuation, or syntax. However, when the statement is removed from context, we insert ellipses (...). Additionally, if we've added information to clarify a statement or removed information to protect the persons' identity, we denote the change using brackets []. Finally, we have maintained terminology and word usage.

Themes Found in the Reflections of Students

There were three themes that surfaced in our analysis of the reflections from our principal preparation students. While these three themes did not apply to every student in the class, overall, these findings were pronounced in the entirety of the reflections. As such, the assumption is not that all students have the same mindset nor the same values and beliefs. Instead, these themes were more noticeable and consistent than others.

The first theme we identified was that students claimed they had very little to no experiences with individuals that self-identified as gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered. Though students were honest when it came to their knowledge about sexual orientation, their opinions were based on limited experiences and this became apparent in their comments. The

second theme that emerged was that students noticed that bullying and harassment occurred when behavior was perceived as being outside of expected gender norms. For example, for male K-12 students (the subject most often referred to in the reflections), principal preparation students suggested that this negative treatment was not because of being gay, but rather because the male student was either not masculine enough, or was different than a stereotypical male. Third, we found that our students, who were studying to become future school leaders, believed that being gay or lesbian was a choice. This is mentioned both implicitly and explicitly throughout the reflections. Following is a more detailed description of these three patterns.

Limited Experiences with LGBTQ Individuals

Considering that this course is toward the end of the principal preparation program, we expect students to be relatively knowledgeable about issues related to identity. They have taken at least one other course in which the content emphasized race, class, sexual orientation, gender, and religion, and one which included a book on adolescent identity: *Adolescents at School* (Sadowski, 2008).

The participants in this study reflected about their lack of experience with individuals who identified as gay, lesbian, or bisexual. One student wrote, "...growing up, I was not even aware of the lifestyle until junior high. In those years and I would describe myself and the people around me as extremely homophobic." Though this student later shared that his personal views changed over time (he feels he is now much more open and accepting of GLBT folks), he represents a faction of students claiming little to no experience with issues related to sexual orientation. Over time, this student made progress with his thinking. For instance, he later shared that, "I now openly support students in my school; I attend GSA (Gay-Straight Alliance) meetings and support dialogue on diversity—including sexual orientation."

Another student in our class was also not aware of issues related to sexual orientation until later in life. In his current position as dean of students, he claimed that, "This is an issue

that is not openly discussed at [high school name]. Many of our students do not openly admit they are gay/lesbian, etc. Many teachers and administrators don't address it." While he does not state it directly, the implication in this quote is that if the teachers and administrators are not addressing issues related to sexual orientation, students themselves will not engage in the conversation either. In other ways, this participant is suggesting that the conversation regarding sexual orientation will only happen if the adults in the school allow it to happen. Further, this may imply that some administrators prefer to pretend that these issues do not exist -- a preference that will limit other students' experiences with the LGBTQ community. Further, the student here appears to realize that there is more to the conversation than is currently discussed at their school and the accessibility of the conversation around LGBTQ issues depends on the example set by teachers and administrators (see Fraynd & Capper, 2003). Similarly, this student appears curious and open to the possibility of discussion rather than complacent with the fact that this topic is not open.

Some participants said they were not exposed to issues around sexual orientation until their college years. For example, one student, when reflecting about her experiences, said:

I don't remember thinking about sexual orientation specifically until college, although I do remember being introduced to the topic in high school by various phrases and name calling that I didn't understand. I kept having to ask or patiently wait until someone would explain to me what these 'new' words meant.

This reflection is interesting for two reasons. First, it points to the invisible nature of gays and lesbians, what Anderson has called, "the invisible minority" (1997). Second, because this student was introduced to the LGBTQ community via derogatory names and phrases, reducing the depth of the issue to a few simple phrases which were misunderstood. Further, this student attaches *sexual orientation* to "phrases and name calling" rather than being LGBTQ, possibly indicating a limited association between being heterosexual as a sexual orientation. Similarly, another student specifically mentioned a rural upbringing and implied that this rural context is

responsible for her lack of knowledge about sexual minorities. She wrote, “Growing up in a rural community, I did not experience anyone that was LGBT. If they were, they certainly would not reveal this information.” She added:

I still live in my hometown community and the acceptance level for LGBT individuals has remained the same, in my opinion. Recently, the town is buzzing about the two lesbians that live in the yellow house on the corner.

This particular student implies that she has not seen her community grow in their acceptance of LGBT individuals, and that the town is “buzzing.” Again, GLSEN reported that 81% of rural LGBT students did not feel safe at school (Kosciw *et al.*, 2014). If these individuals stay in their rural community as adults, these unsafe feelings could continue. Finally, this community’s “buzzing” appears to imply that gay and lesbian individuals are a rare occurrence, or at least newsworthy in this town. The social stigma attached to such newsworthiness could limit people’s experiences with members of the LGBT community. However, according to a recent study from UCLA (Gates, 2012), the number of same sex couples is expanding, particularly in rural America. The author suggests that while most same-sex couples tend to live in urban centers, there is a significant number of lesbian and gay couples living in rural areas. While the fact that the town is “buzzing” may not indicate derogation by itself, it certainly implies that this couple has breached the heteronormative standard by which this community operates, likely indicating the community’s limited ability to accept a lesbian couple. Further, this student is very aware of the status of *other* which has been bestowed upon this town’s newcomers, even if the student does not explicitly discuss it as such, and states that the community has clearly not grown in their acceptance for LGBT individuals. According to GLSEN’s survey on being gay in rural America, “nearly all LGBT students in rural areas have heard homophobic, racist, sexist, and negative gender expression-based remarks” (p. X). Students in rural communities reported higher levels of derogatory comments than students from suburban and urban school communities. For example, 97% of rural LGBT students heard gay used in a negative way

(“that’s so gay”) sometimes, often, or frequently and 94% of students hear homophobic remarks such as “dyke” or “faggot” sometimes, often, or frequently.

Are you masculine enough?

The second theme that surfaced in the reflections was related to the ways in which the principal preparation students address being bullied and harassed for being gay with notions of masculinity. According to the literature, “acting like a man” is generally associated with being strong, tough, and having lots of sex. In fact, one of the authors of this study found himself being bullied in school and when

he reported the harassment to a school counselor, it was met with confusion about what to do, but also with the mentality that ‘boys will be boys’ and that the brunt of the responsibility fell on Frank to ‘suck it up’ and ‘roll with the punches’ of high school. In other words, this is what boys do, so go along with it and stop complaining (Hernandez & Fraynd, 2015).

The reflections from our students seem to be consistent with literature when it came to issues of masculinity. For example, one student wrote about his treatment of others in his high school,

I look back now and am ashamed of the language I used and how I treated some people that just seemed feminine or ‘girl-like.’ I stereotyped and made judgments about them. I even acted surprised when they had female dates and even later married.

A critical analysis of the previous quote would indicate that this harassment came not from thinking that a classmate was gay; rather from a classmate whose behavior was outside of the norm for boys. That is, because this student’s classmate challenged the notion of what it means to be a boy, he was bullied and harassed. This response is common, according to research on gender and masculinity, such as that from Pascoe (2012), who explains, “Achieving masculine identity entails the repeated repudiation of the specter of failed masculinity. Boys lay claim to masculine identities by lobbing homophobic epithets at one another” (p. 5).

In another reflection, we see masculinity being challenged and being the cause for student harassment and bullying. A student wrote about a boy in her high school whom she thought was gay but "...he did not come out in high school but he never denied it either." She continued, "He received lots of grief and teasing...he wore different clothing, walked a little different, and liked different things." Careful analysis of this reflection, as in the previous one, would suggest that "different clothes" might point to this student dressing in a way that may be associated with how girls dress or dressing in a way that does not amplify his masculinity. When compared to the literature this appears to be common in rural communities. Again, GLSEN reported that 86% of rural students heard comments from students about someone not acting "masculine" enough sometimes, often, or frequently (Kosciw *et al.*, 2014).

Another student reflection combines our two themes of limited experiences and the emphasis on masculinity. She wrote, "In school, kids would call certain males in the school 'gay' if they dressed nice. One male in particular was a good friend with a lot more girls than with guys, and so he was also labeled as gay." Again, her analysis suggests that certain unwritten norms exist, whether dress or how many friends one has, which provide indicators of what it means to be male or female.

Perceptions of Sexual Orientation as a Choice

The third theme that we found in the reflections relates to the perception of sexual orientation as a conscious choice. This discussion reflects society's quest to identify whether individuals choose their sexual orientation or whether, as Lady Gaga sings, we are "born this way." According to public opinion research by the Pew Research Center, the public is divided on this question, with 42% saying homosexuality is a choice and 41% saying people are born gay or lesbian (Lipka, 2013). The students who discussed this topic had strong opinions and took the perspective that individuals choose to be gay and are not born that way. For instance, one student wrote: "I wondered why people with a sexual preference would announce their orientation? It does not seem to be anyone else's business. It does not matter to me what they

choose to do with their lives. It is their choice.” While the words of the reflection can be interpreted as a “live and let live” philosophy, their tone seems to indicate some frustration with the fact that gay people express their sexual orientation. She implies that having a “sexual preference” is synonymous with the choice of being homosexual. That is, this student is using the phrase “sexual preference” to indicate that heterosexuals do not have (or require) a preference. As she continues to write, it becomes clearer that her own opinion is that gay and lesbian people should stay in the closet and not be open about their sexual orientation. She states, “The concern that I have is the disease issue, and why they have to announce their preference as if that is the most important thing about them.” This student seems to have associated gay sexual orientation with disease, perhaps HIV, and seems annoyed that sexual orientation is discussed at all. Additionally, this is disconcerting because this student may also be displaying a general lack of knowledge about sexually transmitted diseases, reproductive health and hygiene. By addressing homosexuality as a “sexual preference,” this student is implying that the choice to be gay or lesbian is also a choice to open one’s self up to the possibility of contracting an STD. Conversely, the student is implying that the (natural) heterosexual orientation is safe, clean, and less risky- if not completely without risk. One other important note to highlight here is that this particular class, like many, begins with an introduction of students. Nearly 100% of the time, if a student is married, engaged, or pregnant, it is announced to the entire group and within that announcement, students talk about their husbands, wives, upcoming weddings, and children. There is thus a heteronormative standard. This student and her classmates are comfortable announcing their sexual orientation without hesitation, but are, at least in the case of this student, not comfortable hearing about someone else’s sexual orientation.

Other students were more direct and open about what they thought about gay or lesbian individuals. For example, another student wrote:

My own values and beliefs are mixed about people with different sexual orientation than myself. I have no problem with people choosing this lifestyle and I have no problem with them raising children too. My confusion lies within the public display of affection. I do not understand why I am uncomfortable but I find myself grimacing and turning my head away.

The first thing we notice about this reflection is that this student understands that they possess their own sexual orientation, though it may be different from that of a gay, lesbian, or bisexual person. Like the previous reflection, this student also assumes that individuals choose their sexual orientations. We are puzzled by the fact that one could express support for gays and lesbians to raise children and their *choice* of a particular lifestyle, yet express disdain towards displays of affection between same sex couples. What we find promising is that this student is reflecting upon why he or she feels this way. Continued reflection may lead to further questioning of these seemingly dissonant views and changes in thinking.

Another student wrote about a family member who identifies as lesbian. This student states, "There are members of my family who are unaware of her sexual choices and would not be understanding or accepting of her choices." The student goes on to write about a colleague that she recently befriended who also identifies as lesbian: "I have developed a great relationship with a teacher who is open about her choices." Again, while supportive of her family and colleagues, this reflection represents another student who believes that individuals choose their own sexual orientation. The interesting message here is not that this student problematizes differing sexual orientations, but rather how seeing sexual orientation as a choice impacts the perception of those within the LGBTQ community. LGBTQ people, in this light, are seen as an *other* -- a special and different *type* of person. When sexual orientation is viewed as a choice, the person with a different sexual orientation is viewed as needing acceptance because of a way they've *chosen* to distinguish themselves instead of simply because they *are* different. According to GLSEN (Kosciw *et al.*, 2014), many youth contemplate suicide and stay in the

closet for fear of being rejected and judged by those who believe their sexual orientation is their own choice.

While differences existed amongst the students and their reflections, we focused on these three areas that seemed to surface more than others. We appreciated the candor of students regarding sexual orientation and gender. Many of the students also expressed their commitment to continue to learn about the LGBT community.

Implications for Principal Preparation Programs

Our analysis of these student reflections has implications for the ways in which professors in educational administration plan for their lessons, choose content, and approach topics of sexual orientation, gender, social justice, and equity. Though the authors only discuss a sample of reflections from this study, the majority of these reflections support our last finding that students in principal preparation programs think about issues related to sexual orientation in distinctive ways. Thus professors of educational administration cannot afford to ignore these multiple perspectives. If professors of educational administration are interested in helping aspiring administrators develop into socially just leaders, we have to acknowledge where these future leaders are currently, as well as where they might go eventually, in their thinking about issues related to sexual orientation.

This commitment to develop socially just school leaders becomes more urgent as disparities in achievement across racial groups widen and where sexual minority students continue to struggle with acceptance. It has been argued by numerous scholars that educational administration programs must prepare future leaders to become effective at leading diverse schools, and at understanding issues of issues related to sexual orientation at both the personal and institutional levels.

Teaching students to recognize their own biases and giving them opportunities to reflect on their beliefs is a dynamic process. It requires ample opportunities to identify how one's

thinking about issues has changed as well as time to implement these changes. Working with students on issues of equity, diversity, and inclusion can draw them in or make them more defensive. They are not easy conversations in any context, but programs with a social justice focus are far more likely to emphasize other forms of identity, such as race or ethnicity (95%) or socioeconomic status (95%) than they are sexual orientation (49%) (O'Malley & Capper, 2014). We question why scholarship has been slow to form a solid discussion around topics of gender and sexual orientation. For example, we would be slow to discuss white privilege with a student who refuses to acknowledge difference. Why, then, have we not questioned this refusal when discussing sexual orientation in educational administration programs?

We have one theory for this lack of discussion about sexual orientation, a theory which is suggested by O'Malley and Capper's work, but has not been empirically tested. We've already mentioned that only 48% of UCEA programs with a social justice focus report emphasizing sexual orientation as an element of their preparation programs. The only element of identity which is reportedly emphasized less frequently, at 45%, is religion. We do not see these two pieces of information as unrelated. Beliefs about sexual orientation, such as whether it is innate or a choice, are closely tied to religious beliefs. For example, 49% of White evangelicals believe homosexuality is a choice, whereas 24% say it is innate, and 19% say it is related to upbringing (Pew Research Center, 2012). Religious belief has become tightly linked to political party in recent years, and increasingly polarized (2012). Etiquette used to rule that polite conversation did not include religion, sex, or politics (Martin, 1998). Discussing sexual orientation now implicitly encompasses all three. However, social justice leaders need to be able to think critically about the policies and practices at place in their districts and schools, and they need to be able to create inclusive environments and safe spaces for their sexual minority students and staff. Sexual orientation and the intersection between sexual orientation and religion must be acknowledged and included in preparation curriculum.

We will also return briefly to the discussion on the perception of sexual orientation as a choice because this has profound implications for one's understanding of the LGBTQ experience. First, a student's belief that sexual orientation is a choice leads to the implication of responsibility for the biases one experiences. However, these students may also be intuitively relying on the idea of choice to avoid cognitive dissonance arising from moral and ethical conflicts. For example, participants relying on fundamental religious beliefs may simultaneously subscribe to the ideas that homosexuality is a sin but one should also "love the sinner and hate the sin." These conflicting ideals are reconciled by refusing the notion that a person may be born gay and, instead, accepting the notion of choice. Second, many people may also incorrectly come to the conclusion that homosexuality leads to disease, whereas heterosexuality doesn't. This is problematic for many reasons but, most importantly, applies the consequence of disease to a bad choice (homosexuality), thereby negating the possibility that heterosexuals are as open to disease. Finally, many participants simply labeled any non-heterosexual orientations as a sexual *preference* which seems to suggest that students either assume that homosexuality is a choice or haven't given it any thought. This superficial level of thinking is apparent in one student's attempt to express acceptance of a person's *choice* while also expressing disgust at displays of affection- as though the student assumes a person is making a conscious attempt to display their affection to a person of the same sex without any thought to the cognitive, emotional, or physical processes that accompany (or precede) physical affection. One's perception of this notion of choice may be an indicator of one's developmental level related to thinking about the complexity of LGBTQ issues and the consequences of these beliefs and assumptions.

As faculty, we must be able to identify and understand our student's developmental stages in order to tailor discussion to suit their needs and abilities. This, as Ladson-Billings (1995) says, is "just good teaching." Professors training future education administrators must be able to push the boundaries of students' thinking while, at the same time, understanding the

capacity of our students. Most importantly, students should have the ability, and be encouraged, to disagree. We must challenge the way our students think or else we risk creating practitioners who do not actively reflect and seek to change their viewpoints. Additionally, we must provide an environment where our students can understand that their worldview is one of many. Finally, we must ensure that we are pushing our students to put their worldview into perspective. That is, to question whether or not their beliefs promote the best possible experiences for *their* students. However, we cannot claim that we know how to implement all of these practices effectively, and we will not pretend that we have all the answers. Instead, we call on future research to address these issues openly, and for preparation scholars to write more about what they actually *do* in their classrooms, particularly those from the 48% of social justice preparation programs who claim to emphasize sexual orientation. If we can implement strategies in the educational administration classroom, we have some hope of implementing them in our K-12 schools.

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Table 1

Common Terms Related to Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

Sex	Biological sex, as determined by chromosomes and sexual organs
Sexual Orientation	An enduring or relatively stable pattern of sexual attraction as either heterosexual, homosexual, or bisexual
Sexual Identity	The subjective experience of one's gender
Gender	The perception of a social category that one fulfills (e.g. male, female)
Gender Identity	The subjective experience of fulfilling or subscribing to a social category (e.g. male, female)
Heterosexual	An individual whose primary attraction is to members of the opposite sex
Homosexual	An individual whose primary attraction is to members of the same sex
Bisexual	An individual who is attracted to members of both the same and opposite sexes
Questioning	An individual who has yet to define, is questioning, or is experiencing a transition in their sexual orientation or gender
Transsexual	An individual who has undergone sexual reassignment surgery
Transgender	A person who presents themselves (e.g. dress, behavior, language, etc...) in ways associated with the opposite sex
