

Giulia Selmi, Chiara Sità, Federica de Cordova

## When Italian Schools Meet LGBT Parents. Inclusive Strategies, Ambivalence, Silence

(doi: 10.12828/96372)

Scuola democratica (ISSN 1129-731X)

Fascicolo 4, numero speciale 2019

**Ente di afferenza:**

()

Copyright © by Società editrice il Mulino, Bologna. Tutti i diritti sono riservati.  
Per altre informazioni si veda <https://www.rivisteweb.it>

### **Licenza d'uso**

L'articolo è messo a disposizione dell'utente in licenza per uso esclusivamente privato e personale, senza scopo di lucro e senza fini direttamente o indirettamente commerciali. Salvo quanto espressamente previsto dalla licenza d'uso Rivisteweb, è fatto divieto di riprodurre, trasmettere, distribuire o altrimenti utilizzare l'articolo, per qualsiasi scopo o fine. Tutti i diritti sono riservati.

# When Italian Schools Meet LGBT Parents

Inclusive Strategies, Ambivalence, Silence

Giulia Selmi, Chiara Sità and Federica de Cordova

**ABSTRACT:** *Full equality for LGBT individuals and families is still far to be achieved in Italy, especially concerning parental rights for same sex couples. On one hand, the civil unions law doesn't entail stepchild adoption; on the other, in public discourse same-sex parenting is still perceived as a threat to the natural order and to gender complementarity. This lack of legal and social recognition is often reflected in schools and educational contexts. Despite an otherwise deep-rooted culture of inclusivity and participation, the Italian school system seems to struggle when it comes to dealing with non-heterosexual families. Drawing upon a multi-method study, this article explores the challenges faced by LGBT families and the strategies they adopt in their interactions with school contexts. We analyse how and to what extent same-sex parents negotiate their visibility in schools and the process of recognition (or lack thereof) on the part of school staff. We argue that silencing and marginalising practices act as discriminating factors, and that recognition of same-sex parents and their children is reliant upon the individual behaviour of teachers in the absence of a general framework for inclusion.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Same-sex parents, Italy, School, Inclusion practices*

Giulia Selmi, *University of Verona,*

giulia.selmi@univr.it

Chiara Sità, *University of Verona,*

chiara.sita@univr.it

Federica de Cordova, *University of Verona,*

federica.decordova@univr.it

*This article is the outcome of the joint work of the authors. However, if for academic reasons individual authorship has to be identified Giulia Selmi wrote paragraph 2 and 3, Chiara Sità wrote paragraph 4 and the conclusions, Federica de Cordova wrote the introduction and paragraph 1.*

## Introduction

Discrimination against LGBT people and their children persists throughout the European Union (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2016), but there are still significant differences between nations.

In Italy a law against homophobia is still lacking and the formal recognition of same-sex unions was only approved in 2016 with no mention of parental rights. This lack of recognition leaves same-sex parents and their children particularly vulnerable in legal terms. When a child is born to a couple in a same-sex relationship, only the parenthood of the adult with whom she has a biological connection is recognised while, legally speaking, the so-called ‘social parent’ has no rights or obligations.

This regulatory framework mirrors a pervasive public attitude towards families headed by same-sex couples. While the last decade has seen a general rise in the acceptance of homosexuality (ISTAT, 2012), and the visibility of same-sex headed households has increased (Centro Risorse LGBTI, 2017), much ambivalence persists in the public debate around same-sex parenting: gay and lesbian parents are still perceived as a threat to the ‘natural order’ of society (Lasio and Serri, 2017), while the trope that a child’s wellbeing is jeopardised by the absence of complementary gender roles is a recurring part of the narrative (Saraceno, 2012).

These ongoing legal and cultural attempts to delegitimise same-sex parents are reflected within the organisations that provide services for children and families, especially in the field of education.

Despite an otherwise deep-rooted culture of inclusivity and participation, the Italian school system seems to struggle when it comes to dealing with non-heterosexual families, gender-based and homophobic discrimination, and supporting sexual minorities (Lingiardi and Rivers, 2015; Centro Risorse LGBTI, 2018; Sità *et al.*, 2018). For example, the 2013-2015 national strategy developed in the wake of the ‘European council recommendation concerning discrimination of LGBT individuals and families in educational environments’ (CMRec2015/5) has been poorly implemented due to fierce opposition from politicians, certain groups of school employees and sections of the public. In June 2019, the Council of Europe’s Commission against Racism and Intolerance invited Italy to increase its efforts to include diverse gender identities and sexual orientations in schools<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.coe.int/en/web/european-commission-against-racism-and-intolerance/italy>.

This situation has significant implications particularly for non-heterosexual parents and their relationships with educators and school institutions. The curricula in Italian schools rarely take gender issues and family diversity into account. The use of stories and materials that represent different gender roles and identities and family forms is usually avoided as it generates opposition and reaction among both parents and the wider public, particularly in certain political and religious movements (Ottaviano and Mentasti, 2017; Worthen *et al.*, 2017). Nor are there policies supporting the inclusion of either children living in non-heterosexual families or LGB, gender non-conforming and transgender children and youths, who become an invisible minority in educational settings.

Given this background, same sex families are under enormous pressure. They are required to fit into a system that is apparently ignorant to their very existence, and which lacks the resources to handle their needs effectively.

This article explores the challenges faced by LGBT families and the strategies they adopt in their interactions with school contexts. We analyse how and to what extent same-sex parents negotiate their visibility in schools and the process of recognition (or lack thereof) on the part of school staff. We argue that – while direct experiences of discrimination and homophobia are rare – silencing and marginalising practices act as discriminating factors, and that recognition of same sex parents and their children is reliant upon the individual behaviour of teachers in the absence of a general framework for inclusion.

## **1. (In)visibilities: Same-sex parents and school settings**

Being a parent is, in itself, a state of permanent visibility. People introduce themselves as parents and are recognised as such in many everyday situations. We need only think of the ease with which strangers interact with an adult and child who are together in public, presuming that they are parent and child. If this is true for all parents, the process is more complex in the case of same-sex parents, where it entails negotiating both the heteronormative parenting model and the specific legal status of same-sex parenting in Italy. Therefore, in the case of same-sex parents, it is not simply a question of visibility, but also of being recognised as representing a legitimate family configuration.

In this article, we use the term visibility not so much to signify a one-off communication of a couple's family configuration, but as a process of *family display* within social interactions (Finch, 2007). 'Visibility' could be defined as the ways in which the social implications of the familial status of the subjects' relationships are recounted, understood and supported by their significant emotional and social circles (Almack, 2008). In line with Finch's definition (2007), therefore, we understand the process of visibility as the way in which individuals or groups communicate – with each other and within their significant social sphere – that what they do in their everyday relationships constitutes 'doing family' (Morgan, 2011) and that these relationships therefore qualify as family.

Visibility is therefore a process that reveals the interdependence between the unique, subjective experience of the individuals involved and the recognition of that same personal experience by those outside of it. In this interaction, the experience transcends its personal nature and anchors itself in a broader, significant collective dimension. In so doing it is capable of returning a shared sense of belonging to those involved, which in turn enables them to shape their behaviour and emotions by putting in place and developing specific skills and abilities. In this sense, the process of becoming visible is 'situated', namely it is organised and requires specific strategies with regard to the contextual and relational constraints within which it takes shape. As a result of this legislative and social context, in Italy, same-sex parents and their children find themselves seeking greater 'fluidity of movement' (de Cordova and Sità, 2014) as they navigate between moments of 'presence' – in which they are recognised – and sudden invisibility.

From this perspective, entry to the formal education system becomes a crucial transition in the process of visibility. Indeed, this is one of the first structured encounters with the public sphere. The bonds and parental roles built in an intimate family environment and among relatives are measured by the extent they are recognised (or not) by an institution (Ryan and Martin, 2000), and not purely in terms of the relationship between the same-sex parents and teachers, but also in regard to relationships between same-sex couples and other parents and between children (Ray and Gregory, 2001). As shown by Lindsay and colleagues (2006), this is a far from uniform process, with families adopting different strategies of disclosure depending on their personal experience, the level of stigma and homophobia in the specific context and the reactions of the school staff.

In the Italian context, there appear to be two main elements that define the framework of these negotiations. Firstly, the ‘unexpected’ (Ferrari, 2015) or ‘inconceivable’ (Gigli, 2011; Lingiardi, 2013; Franchi and Selmi, 2015) nature of these family configurations, which throw preconceptions about the links between gender differences, parentage and parenting out of kilter, and test the ability of the educational context to make space for them within the parenting models acknowledged by school staff. Secondly, given the precarious legal position of these families, their relationship with the education institution is one that plays out on shaky ground, with the attitudes of individual teachers, the expectations of the families and the institutional structures all in play.

Given this context, the ability of the educational community to understand and include the specific characteristics of same-sex families can significantly impact the wellbeing of children. Indeed, the literature – at both the Italian level (AA.VV., 2013; Baiocco *et al.*, 2018; Everri, 2016; Fruggeri, 2018), and internationally (Biblarz *et al.*, 2010; Bos *et al.*, 2016; Calzo *et al.*, 2019; Crouch *et al.*, 2016; Gartrell *et al.*, 2011) – has extensively demonstrated that there are no significant differences between boys and girls raised by same-sex parents and those raised by heterosexual parents, and that the sexual orientation of the parents does not affect the wellbeing or development of the children. What can have a negative effect, however, is the experience of homophobia in social contexts and the inability of the environment into which they are introduced to recognise and include their family experience (Anderssen *et al.*, 2002; Bos *et al.*, 2005; Rimalower and Caty, 2009). At school, this is manifested in three main ways: the child internalising the impossibility of being able to talk about their family; difficulty in communicating openly with school staff; and a lack of visibility and the failure of teachers, classmates and other parents to understand the child’s family background (Gigli, 2011).

## 2. Methodology and sample

The study was carried out via two lines of investigation: one quantitative, through the administration of an online questionnaire, and one qualitative through fieldwork conducted principally through narrative interviews.

The questionnaire – developed in collaboration with the Family, Culture and Schooling Research Group at the University of California, Berkeley – was designed to investigate the building of skills and parental self-efficacy, the process of family visibility in relational contexts (such as among friends and families of origin) and institutional contexts, and family relationships with health and educational services. The questionnaire was administered online through multiple channels (networks of LGBT associations, the network of institutional services against discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity, and dissemination through social media) in order to achieve a sample that encompassed a broad spectrum of parenting experiences.

Overall, the quantitative research process involved 103 participants – 80 females, 20 males and 3 transgender persons; of these 62% identify as lesbian, 19% as gay, 17% as bisexual and 20% as queer; all of the respondents are living as couples, with relationships ranging from a few months to a maximum of 30 years in length at the time of completing the questionnaire. The majority of respondents have one child, 26.5% have two, whereas 4.1% and 1.1% of the sample have three or four respectively. These include both children conceived within the couple's current relationship (N = 58) and children born within a prior heterosexual relationship (N = 45).

The qualitative survey, meanwhile, involved 32 mothers and fathers in 16 same-sex couples (11 female and 5 male), with children aged between 4 months and 11 years. In contrast with the parents involved through the questionnaire, these are exclusively planned LGB families, with the couples turning to assisted reproduction techniques offered in other countries (since access to these is prohibited to single women in Italy), use of an informal donor or, in the case of male couples, surrogacy in the United States or Canada. The participants were selected on the basis of a series of characteristics: gender, the different ages of the children, place of residence (whether a large city or the provinces, North or South), socio-economic profile, and whether or not they actively participated in LGB parenting associations. The participants were recruited through snowball sampling, both with the assistance of the *Famiglie Arcobaleno* association and through personal contacts. For this reason, not all of the characteristics considered initially are equally represented in the sample: indeed, females are overrepresented (even taking into account the lower number of male same-sex parent couples in absolute terms), and there is a greater representation of

families residing in northern Italy and with a socio-economic status of upper middle class.

Narrative interviews were carried out with these parents both as couples and individually. The interviews were designed to elicit an account of the participants' own family experience with a focus on particular aspects: the building of the couple relationship, the decision to have children and the route taken to do so, and the relationship with the wider social context. The interviews were complemented by the completion of an emotion map showing the relationship between family and context, and a parenting diary (Gabb, 2008). These additional tools have made it possible to explore the daily practices of 'doing family', illuminating the most minute aspects of everyday life (conversations with the teachers at school, encounters with neighbours or with other parents at the park, to give just a few examples) and exploring the processes of positioning and negotiation enacted by the parents in different situations. These data were considered as a single corpus and analysed using coding methods specific to the grounded theory methodology (Charmaz, 2014), a procedure that has allowed us, little by little, to shine a light on the processes by which people build up their function and identity as parents as they engage with the legislative and symbolic world in which they – as individuals or families – and those they interact with, operate in the course of their everyday life.

### **3. Parental expectations and strategies in the encounter with the school**

The quantitative data from the study reveal that in the majority of cases the parents report that their family circumstances are known to the teachers, and that in more than half of the cases (52%) they state that their dialogue with the school staff is both open and unambiguous. There remain 22% (of those to whom the question is pertinent) who have never explicitly spoken with their children's teachers about the fact that they are living as a same-sex couple.

The narratives collected in the interviews offer a deeper insight into the quantitative data; in particular about the visibility of these families in the school context and a more detailed analysis of the everyday practices by which their relationship with the school is formed. They also help provide an illustration of



those aspects of the relationship that require accommodations by both parties, and the blind spots that prevent its positive development. While it is true that the parents involved in the study are largely visible in the school context, this visibility is not the product of a once-and-for-all ‘communication’ regarding their family composition, but rather of a process that unfolds over time.

One of the first elements that emerges from an analysis of the parents’ narratives is the question of school choice. Indeed, in accordance with the results of international studies (Mercier and Harold, 2003; Kosciw and Diaz, 2008), the parents in our sample can be seen to be guided, in their choice of school, not simply by traditional criteria (such as geographical location, the quality of education, etc.) but also by the school’s capacity to accept their specific family make-up and to support their children. The choice of school is usually preceded by one or more meetings where the parents make their family composition known. Roberto’s account of introducing his children to nursery is emblematic of what this process of visibility implies in relation to school staff:

The educators were not really equipped to deal with us. We had some meetings before, but we are the first case of this type, so in my opinion it was a relationship that has... they learned, they saw it up close, they didn’t know about it. It’s not like people just come out and say whether they are prejudiced. I think that there may be some, but it was a relationship that... to some extent, we were the first same-sex parent family and it took them some time to understand the situation (Roberto, father of two 6-year-olds).

For these parents, who are aware of the ‘unexpected’ nature of their family, the practice of introducing themselves to the school and, more generally, of actively engaging in the school context, performs a dual function: it provides the teachers with the elements they need to understand their own experience beyond stereotypical and prejudiced views; and it lays down the relational foundations for both the recognition of the family and an effective educational partnership that is in the best interests of the children. It is not, therefore, just a question of the school ‘being told’, but also of exploring the professional resources that the teachers are able to implement in accommodating the specific characteristics of the family in question. Laura’s account regarding her choice of a pre-school programme for her son speaks of the expectations at work in this process of ‘getting to know each other’:

I saw the teacher and asked her if she remembered us? I wanted to send Giulio here and she said ‘yes, yes, of course I remember you, I’ve already spoken about it with my colleague and there’s no problem!’. So I said to her ‘it’s Father’s Day tomorrow, what are we going to do for it next year?’ And she told me: ‘Father’s Day can be really tough. We can make it into a celebration of spring, or whatever we like. How about you let me know when you tell Giulio how he was born and all that kind of thing, so that we can tell him the same’. And I hadn’t hinted at that, it was her who mentioned it to us, and so this pleased us even more. We will be able to collaborate and that’s the important thing; being able to collaborate with the teacher to lay the foundations for Giulio, some reference points at school and some at home, the same words, the same stories and her reinforcing it with his young friends, who are going to ask questions like ‘But how does he have two mums? How was Giulio born?’ (Laura, mother of a 3-year-old boy).

It is an expectation that goes well beyond an awareness of the family situation on the part of the teachers, and their not exhibiting discriminatory attitudes. Rather, they are expected to be able to carry out their everyday educational activity in a way that is accepting of the family’s specific characteristics. Echoing Laura’s words, we can say that such expectations extend beyond ‘it’s not a problem’ to the teacher’s capacity to address issues such as Father’s Day or childbirth in a way that promotes the child’s wellbeing and inclusion in their peer group.

Building shared references and lexicons; the ability to reaffirm the child’s experience of family, including in the face of questions from other pupils or other families; active collaboration with the child’s parents: these are all features of what we might define as proactive engagement, on the part of school staff, in their encounter with same-sex parents and their children. Such features make it possible for the school and the family to construct a robust, resilient alliance. Few teachers have specific training or expertise in the inclusion of LGBT families. Clearly we cannot lay the blame for such shortcomings at the door of individual teachers; rather, we are dealing with an education system that continues to prove incapable of keeping up to date with the changes at work in the world of the family, a trend that has also been confirmed at a European level (FRA, 2016). In a scenario where there is limited institutional training for staff, the families themselves constitute a vital resource in acquiring the necessary awareness and skills to include these children. Barbara and Luca’s accounts are paradigmatic of this process of parents ‘making themselves available’:

Over the course of the first few months, month and a half maybe, even earlier, we presented one class with the book *Piccolo Uovo* [Little egg] and the other class with *Il grande, grosso libro delle famiglie* [The big, fat book of families], with the idea that they would perhaps swap them. I have to say that they have always shown themselves to be willing. We took it for granted that they would accept the books and read them, but actually, when we spoke about it with our friends, we realised that we shouldn't do because in a more or less implicit or explicit way, shall we say, they often take the book and just have it there and don't actually do any work on it (Barbara, mother of two 5-year-olds).

In addition to speaking to teachers about their own family story and the experiences of their children, parents can also offer a resource in terms of providing educational ideas for working with the entire class on the diversity of family experiences. Indeed, it is often the parents who supply the materials and books that allow teachers to offer more inclusive forms of family representation, providing children of same-sex parents with stories in which they can recognise themselves, and their classmates with a symbolic lexicon with which to interpret these children's experience and include it as one of the different ways of 'doing family'. However, this 'making yourself available' requires the school to take an equally positive stance towards processes of dialogue and the recognition of same-sex parenting experiences.

*And have you already met with the primary school...?*

The class coordinators, yes. Our approach has always been to go and introduce ourselves first to the teachers, let them see what our family is, make ourselves available. It's a new thing, in any case, we are ready to recount our experiences, also in relation to the children, how they came into the world, etc. And, on the other hand, asking them to be aware when it comes to helping the children understand that there are a variety of family models and that our children will sense that their model is a minority, that it is different but not inferior. And this is what I expect from a state school. I expect it. I make myself available, I participate, I talk about it, I share, but then I expect you to convey the same type of message in return. That is what happens with separated or divorced families (Luca, father of two 6 years-olds).

It is imperative that the great willingness of these families to share their own experiences – even their more intimate aspects, such as conception – to provide materials and explanations and to help teachers out in potentially problematic situations be reflected by an equivalent willingness, on the part of the education

system, to translate what can be learned from them into tools and programmes for fostering greater levels of respect and inclusion. And whereas gay fathers and lesbian mothers might speak of their great investment in the relationship with the school, responsibility for the successful inclusion of their children at school and the overall wellbeing of the class group cannot lie entirely with the family. Rather, it must form part of the school's duty to educate.

Furthermore, the ability of the school to recognise these families may trigger social processes that extend beyond its instructive relationship with its pupils. Indeed, in acknowledging the full legitimacy of both parents irrespective of their biological links to the child, the school can be an agent of change in situations in which, legislatively speaking, the social parent does not have any rights. For instance, in bureaucratic terms, the non-biological parent must be named as a proxy by the other parent before they can pick up their children from school and is not entitled by right to participate in school activities or to make formal decisions concerning their child. All the same, in the interviews, many of the parents reported practices that – in the spaces between these regulatory barriers – acknowledged the social parent's role in school life. This is the case in Barbara's account:

They are young, and very attentive, sensitive and caring. Immediately, we were the mums; Mum B and Mum A, we didn't even have to tell them that. Really considerate, extremely good. Then, clearly, there was the part... the 'positive law' part, that only I can sign things, that I have to appoint B. as a proxy so that she can pick up the kids from school... However, the other day, to really show what they're like, there was a form [...] One of the teachers sent it, but Anna said I can't sign it, I mean, I can sign it, but it wouldn't be valid [...] However, she said: 'since this form is ultimately for internal use, we want you both to sign it'. It was her who said it. They are very good (Barbara, mother of two 5-year-olds).

Having the non-biological parent also sign forms, when possible, modifying paperwork to accommodate these familial forms when the original layout only included the terms 'mother and father', and the involvement of the social parent in the school's representative bodies are just some of the experiences recounted by the interviewed parents. These are not events that directly concern the school's educational relationship with the child, but practices such as these are vital in enabling families to participate fully in the life of the school and, simul-

taneously, reinforcing the full legitimacy of the parental role of both parents – irrespective of legal status – within the wider school community.

#### **4. Critical nodes in the school-family encounter: Silences and micro-aggressions**

Encounters with educational contexts are not always positive. Although few experiences of explicit discrimination and homophobia emerge from the questionnaire and the qualitative field work data, there are cases of more ambivalent responses that effectively contribute to the stigmatisation of these families and prevent them being fully included. This is how Eugenio recalls when they were looking to enroll their two children at a nursery.

We had some difficulties with the school when looking for their first nursery. In the sense that we went to speak with the first school, the one run by the Scouts, not even thinking it would be a problem, we mentioned that we are two fathers and the response we got was ‘here’s the menu for the week’. So we realised that they either wanted to ignore it or that they weren’t ready, they didn’t like it, I don’t know... anyway, we just left it. The second school was tragicomic, even if well-intentioned: They said, ‘don’t worry, we’ve also had families of drug addicts, we’ve handled all types of cases’. It came from a good place, though [laughs] (Eugenio, father of two 4 year-olds).

In the first experience reported by the two fathers, the attempt to communicate the family’s configuration falls on deaf ears and the conversation is rapidly brought back to a familiar subject in communications between school and family, in this case the catering options. In the second instance, the specific nature of same-sex parenting is equated to situations of hardship or marginality and the school’s ability to handle this is based on its experience with families in difficulty. In both of these cases, although we cannot say that the behaviour of the school staff was intentionally discriminatory, their inability to adequately understand the specific experience of the family – acknowledging its unique characteristics without associating it with negative judgments – and enter into dialogue with it translates into a *de facto* form of exclusion.

A second problematic element concerns the ability of the school to explicitly accept the same-sex parents as a valid parenting couple and actually refer to

them as such. In our sample, this type of situation is most often found in cases where the visibility of the family is 'patchy', often in the small towns or in the provinces. This occurs, for instance, when the parents themselves have decided to adopt a policy of 'don't ask, don't tell', or do not make specific mention of it to the school, but rather present themselves as a 'self-evident' family, only providing explanations when expressly asked. Such are the experiences of Samanta, and of Sandra and Susy who, although they both go to the school for meetings and to pick up their child and so on, do not explicitly discuss their family configuration with the teachers:

When enrolling with the nursery, I crossed out the word 'husband' on the form I had to complete and I wrote the name of my partner, and they never asked me about it. I didn't explain it, I went to meetings with her and there were no problems, she also came to the interview, no problem, he [their son] even does drawings where there are two mums. Basically, no-one asked any questions and accepted whatever I wrote. For heaven's sake, I only wrote it because it was myself who went along to enrol him and everything because I have signatory and parental authority [...] Then I also bumped into the teacher in the supermarket, and she said to me [...] 'I don't have any problem with it, you know. Last week I went out to dinner with some gay friends, so there's no problem' (Samanta, mother of a 4-year-old son).

SUSY: They've never said anything to us. They've never asked about it.

SANDRA: They know us. Usually we both go together, so...

SUSY: Yeah, yeah... we always go together, even to all of the nursery meetings.

*And the teachers have never asked about it?*

SANDRA: Absolutely not. In my opinion, even if you explain it to them, a lot of teachers aren't really equipped to deal with it. Keeping with the *Famiglie Arcobaleno* mindset [LGBT+ parent advocacy group], there are some places where there are nurseries that are prepared for these situations... but that's not true in our case. Perhaps in Milan, but here they don't even know how to take us. They don't have a specific plan (Sandra and Susy, mothers of a 3-year-old son).

Even in this case, we cannot identify explicitly discriminatory behaviour on the part of the teachers or a desire to exclude or marginalise these mothers. It is more a case of being unable to address the difference that these families present to the school and take proactive steps to accept it, for instance by using it as a resource for educational or relational development. Even though the relative visibility of these families plays a significant role in creating an uncertain relationship, it is

also true that the school staff are vital in creating a welcoming environment – from both a symbolic and emotional point of view – in which families feel encouraged to talk about their experiences and share with the school their choices and the tools they have acquired.

One contributing factor in the creation of this ‘mixed bag’ relationship with the school is the phenomenon of the ‘microaggression’ (Sue, 2010), namely cases where, through verbal or non-verbal communication or the choice and implementation of materials or environmental configurations, individuals are made invisible or subjected to more or less subtle forms of exclusion and negation on the basis of their minority status (Farr *et al.*, 2016). In regard to microaggressions, the data collected using the questionnaire points to three general forms.

**TAB. 1.** *Microaggression by omission*

	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
1 It didn't happen	69	47,92
2 It happened	75	52,08
Total	144	100

**TAB. 2.** *Microaggression by school staff*

	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
1 It didn't happen	9	13,64
2 It happened	57	86,36
Total	66	100

**TAB. 3.** *Microaggression by peers and other parents*

	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
1 It didn't happen	24	31,17
2 It happened	53	68,83
Total	66	100

The first is ‘omission’, namely behaviour and choices that fail to take the specific nature of the families into account and thus prevent any understanding of the child’s family world to develop, e.g. not asking what words the family uses for its various members and how they want to be referred to at school; not using documents and materials that are inclusive of family diversity.

As can be seen, these behaviours were observed by more than half of the respondents (52.8%)<sup>2</sup>. In particular, for 70% of parents with children attending nursery or school, the question of what the children call their parents and how the parents want school staff to refer to them when talking with their child has never been brought up by the school representatives. Additionally, in 45% of cases, the participants judge the school’s personal information documentation and information to be incompatible with their family configuration, while 35% point out the absence of books and teaching materials that make any reference to family diversity. Analysis of the 4 items that form the ‘Microaggression by omission’ subscale also reveals that among those participants to which this measurement is pertinent, namely those who have children in school, there are more cases in which an example of microaggression has occurred than cases in which it has not.

The second and the third forms of microaggression, on the other hand, concern the direct experience of discrimination perpetrated by the school staff (negative comments towards the family, forms of exclusion based on their diversity) or by other parents or classmates (in the last case, the parents recount episodes reported by their children).

In regard to these categories, the parents reveal that their concerns about homophobia or bullying have at times not been acknowledged, that as a same-sex couple they have not felt they were accepted when attending school events or activities, and that they have overheard or witnessed a teacher or school management figure use homophobic language or act in a discriminatory manner. Analysis of the three items<sup>3</sup> that make up the subscale relating to these types of direct microaggressions by school staff found that among the participants to which this measure is pertinent, there are far more cases in which a microaggression is reported to have occurred (83.36%) than those in which such an episode did not occur (13.64%).

<sup>2</sup> Data only refers to the respondents to whom the question pertains, namely those who attend school or nursery. Reliability of the 4 items ( $\alpha = .948$ ).

<sup>3</sup> Reliability of the 3 items ( $\alpha = .982$ ).



Lastly, in regard to the families' relationships with the other parents and children, it emerged that in more than half of the cases, the participants said they felt excluded by the other parents as a result of their sexual orientation, that their children had reported receiving negative comments about their family from their classmates and having been excluded by their classmates due to the 'differentness' of their family.

## Conclusions

Starting with the framework outlined here, what are the fundamental issues that an education institution needs to consider in creating an inclusive context for family diversity? According to our analysis, three main concerns arise in creating welcoming environments for LGBT households at school.

First, visibility is a process of co-construction where personal and family decisions intersect with the response offered (or not) by the context (Casper and Shultz, 1999). For this reason, silence in the face of family diversity and the choice to adopt a 'don't ask, don't tell' strategy are not acts of neutrality on the part of the school. Rather, they risk conveying an absence of recognition, pushing the parental couple towards a sort of non-specificity.

Second, families often challenge the school's position of apparent neutrality by providing teachers with information and tools to help them understand the 'differentness' of their family diversity and combat prejudice. This way of relating to the school is undoubtedly a positive one, insofar as can help resolve impasses or situations of invisibility. However, it is important that we keep in mind that, in this scenario, it is the family – the parents if not the children themselves – that is tasked with providing information, and even educating, the school community around them. Implicit in this is that it is left to the family to create a symbolic space for its own existence (Burgio, 2012), and that there are precise criteria for accessing visibility that reward those who are able to draw on cultural resources, relational skills and association networks and that thus actually risk creating a situation of discrimination. The task of training teaching and non-teaching staff to be inclusive of the diversity of the students' family stories is beyond the capacities of individual parents. Rather, it is the responsibility of the various agents involved in pre-service teacher training (universities most of all) and the educational establishment itself.

Lastly, a further ‘critical node’ to emerge from the data relates to the ability of the education institution to welcome same-sex families and effect a shift to a genuine policy of inclusion. In this sense, there seems to be a gap between the one-to-one interpersonal relationship the parents enjoy with school management staff and, more frequently, with teachers, which is described as positive, friendly and welcoming, and their relationship with the school as an institution, which is distant and, for the most part, silent. A friendly personal relationship does not, by itself, equate to a context-wide policy, nor does it indicate mastery of an appropriate symbolic repertoire with which to interact with all family configurations. The way the institution and its educational programmes are organised and delivered are just as important, both in ensuring the inclusion of diverse families in the school context and in protecting the students’ right to the best possible learning environment, two outcomes that cannot be left entirely to the relational capacities of individual teachers. At this level, the methods used to communicate with parents, the measures by which the school community is built and strengthened, the language and materials used in the education setting, and the choice of programmes designed to promote the recognition of the various forms of family relationship and care experienced by students all have a part to play (Wimberly, 2015).

## References

- AA.VV. (2013), «Omogenitorialità», *Infanzia e adolescenza*, Special Issue, 12 (2), maggio-agosto.
- Almack, K. (2008), «Display Work: Lesbian Parent Couples and Their Families of Origin Negotiating New Kin Relationships», *Sociology*, 42 (6), 1183-99.
- Anderssen, N., Amlie, C. and Ytter, E.A. (2002), «Outcomes for Children With Lesbian or Gay Parents. A Review of Studies from 1978 to 2000», *Scandinavian Journal of Psychology*, 43, 335-51.
- Baiocco, R., Carone, N. and Ioverno, S. (2018), «Same-Sex and Different-Sex Parent Families in Italy: Is Parents’ Sexual Orientation Associated with Child Health Outcomes and Parental Dimensions?», *Journal of Developmental & Behavioral Pediatrics*, 39 (7), 555-63.
- Biblarz, T.J. and Stacey, J. (2010), «How Does the Gender of Parents Matter?», *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 72 (1), 3-22.

- Bos, H.M.W., Knox, J.R., van Rijn-van Gelderen, L. and Gartrell, N.K. (2016), «Same-Sex and Different-Sex Parent Households and Child Health Outcomes: Findings from the National Survey of Children's Health», *Journal of Developmental and Behavioral Pediatrics*, 37 (3), 179-87.
- Bos, H.M.V., Van Balen, F. and Van Den Boom, D.C. (2005), «Lesbian Families and Family Functioning: An Overview», *Patient Education and Counseling*, 59, 263-75.
- Burgio, G. (2012), *Adolescenza e violenza. Il bullismo omofobico come formazione alla maschilità*, Milano, Mimesis.
- Calzo, J.P., Mays, V.M., Björkenstam, C., Björkenstam, E., Kosidou, K. and Cochran, S.D. (2019), «Parental Sexual Orientation and Children's Psychological Well-Being: 2013-2015 National Health Interview Survey», *Child Development*, 90 (4), 1097-108.
- Casper, V. and Schultz, S.B. (1999), *Gay Parents, Straight Schools. Building Communication and Trust*, New York, Teachers College Press.
- Centro Risorse LGBTI (2018), *Be proud, speak out! Ricerca nazionale sull'esperienza dei e delle giovani LGBTIQI a scuola*, <http://www.risorse-lgbti.eu/be-proud-speak-out-report/>.
- Centro Risorse LGBTI (2017), *#Contiamoci! Una fotografia delle famiglie LGBTIQI in Italia*, <http://www.risorse-lgbti.eu/contiamoci-famiglie-lgbtqi/>.
- Charmaz, K. (2014), *Constructing Grounded Theory*, London, Sage.
- Crouch, S.R., McNair, R. and Waters, E. (2016), «Impact of Family Structure and Socio-Demographic Characteristics on Child Health and Wellbeing in Same-Sex Parent Families: A Cross-Sectional Survey», *Journal of Paediatrics and Child Health*, 52 (5), 499-505.
- de Cordova, F. and Sità, C. (2014), *In ricchezza e povertà, in salute e malattia. Famiglie omogenitoriali e diritti in una prospettiva psicosociale*, in C. Casonato and A. Schuster (eds.), *Rights on the Move – Rainbow Families in Europe*, Proceedings of the Conference (Trento, 16-17 October), Trento, Edizioni Università degli Studi di Trento.
- European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (2016), *Fundamental Rights Report 2016*, <https://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2016/fundamental-rights-report-2016>.
- Everri, M. (ed.) (2016), *Genitori come gli altri e tra gli altri. Essere genitori omosessuali in Italia*, Milano, Mimesis.
- Farr, R.H., Crain, E.E., Oakley, M.K., Cashen, K.K. and Garber, K.J. (2016), «Micro-aggressions, Feelings of Difference, and Resilience among Adopted Children with Sexual Minority Parents», *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 45, 85-104.
- Ferrari, F. (2015), *La famiglia inattesa. I genitori omosessuali e i loro figli*, Milano, Mimesis.
- Finch, J. (2007), «Displaying Families», *Sociology*, 41 (1), 65-81.

- Franchi, M. and Selmi, G. (2018), «Challenging the Unthinkable: Gay and Lesbian Parents Between Redefinition and Exclusion in Italy», *About Gender. Rivista internazionale di studi di genere*, 7 (14), 1-21.
- Fruggeri, L. (2018), *Famiglie d'oggi. Qualità, dinamiche e processi psicosociali*, Roma, Carocci.
- Gabb, J. (2008), *Researching Intimacy in Families*, London, Palgrave.
- Gartrell, N., Bos, H.M.V. and Goldberg, N. (2011), «Adolescents of the U.S. National Longitudinal Lesbian Family Study: Sexual Orientation, Sexual Behavior, and Sexual Risk Exposure», *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 40 (6), 1199-209.
- Gigli, A. (2011), *Maestra, Sara ha due mamme?*, Milano, Guerini.
- ISTAT (2012), *La popolazione omosessuale nella società italiana*, Roma.
- Kosciw, J.G. and Diaz, E.M. (2008), *Involved, Invisible, Ignored: The Experiences of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Parents and Their Children in Our Nation's K-12 Schools*, New York, Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN).
- Lasio, D. and Serri, F. (2017), «The Italian Public Debate on Same-Sex Civil Unions and Gay and Lesbian Parenting», *Sexualities*, 22 (4), 691-709.
- Lingiardi, V. (2013), «La famiglia inconcepibile», *Infanzia e Adolescenza*, 12 (2), 74-85.
- Lingiardi, V. and Rivers, I. (2015), «Le cose cambiano», in I. Rivers (ed.), *Bullismo omofobico. Conoscerlo per combatterlo*, Milano, Il Saggiatore, 9-25.
- Lindsay, J., Perlesz, A., Brown, R., McNair, R., De Vaus, D. and Pitts, M. (2006), «Stigma or Respect: Lesbian-Parented Families Negotiating School Settings», *Sociology*, 40 (6), 1059-77.
- Mercier, L.R. and Harold, R.D. (2003), «At the Interface: Lesbian-Parent Families and Their Children's Schools», *Children & Schools*, 25 (1), 35-47.
- Morgan, D.H. (2011), *Re-Thinking Family Practices*, London, Palgrave Macmillan.
- Ottaviano, C. and Mentasti, L. (2017), «Differenti sguardi cattolici sull'educazione di genere nella scuola italiana: chiusure identitarie o aperture di nuove sfide?», *About Gender. Rivista internazionale di studi di genere*, 6 (12), 160-89.
- Ray, V. and Gregory, R. (2001), «School Experiences of Children of Lesbian and Gay Parents», *Family Matters*, 59, 28-34.
- Rimalower, L. and Caty, C. (2009), «The Mamas and the Papas: The Invisible Diversity of Families with Same-Sex Parents in the United States», *Sexual Education. Sexuality, Society and Learning*, 9, 17-32.
- Ryan, D. and Martin, A. (2000), «Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Parents in the School Systems», *School Psychology Review*, 29, 207-16.
- Saraceno, C. (2012), *Coppie e famiglie. Non è questione di natura*, Milano, Feltrinelli.

- Sità, C., Holloway, S., de Cordova, F. and Selmi, G. (2018), «Paternità impreviste. Padri omosessuali e relazione con i servizi educativi e la scuola», *Rivista Italiana di Educazione Familiare*, 13 (2), 43-61.
- Sue, D.W. (2010), *Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Race, Gender, and Sexual Orientation*, Hoboken, NJ, Wiley.
- Wimberly, G. (ed.) (2015), *LGBTQ Issues in Education. Advancing a Research Agenda*, Washington DC, American Educational Research Association.
- Worthen, M.G.F., Lingardi, V. and Caristo, C. (2017), «The Roles of Politics, Feminism, and Religion in Attitudes Toward LGBT Individuals: A Cross-Cultural Study of College Students in the USA, Italy, and Spain», *Sexuality Research and Social Policy*, 14 (3), 241-58.