

Breaking barriers: Fostering social inclusion in Italian schools for same-sex families

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Abstract

Educational settings are increasingly encountering new family configurations, including same-sex families, which are becoming more and more common in the last decades. The widespread homonegativity that still characterizes attitudes towards LGBT+ individuals in Italy, coupled with the absence of specific laws safeguarding and recognizing the role of the non-biological parent, leaves pedagogists, teachers, and educators to grapple with new demands and new responsibilities. This article provides an overview of same-sex families in Italy and offers operational tools and best practices to promote inclusivity of offspring from same-sex families within the educational system. The aim is to overcome discrimination that this segment of the population still faces.

I contesti educativi si stanno sempre più confrontando con nuove configurazioni familiari, tra cui le famiglie con genitori omosessuali, fenomeno sempre più comune negli ultimi decenni. La diffusa omonegatività che caratterizza tuttora gli atteggiamenti nei confronti delle persone LGBT+ in Italia, unita all'assenza di leggi specifiche a tutela del ruolo del genitore non biologico comporta che pedagogisti, insegnanti ed educatori debbano affrontare nuove esigenze e nuove responsabilità. Questo articolo, oltre a fornire una panoramica di questo fenomeno in Italia, mira a offrire strumenti operativi e buone pratiche per superare la discriminazione nei confronti di questa parte della popolazione e per promuovere l'inclusione dei figli delle famiglie omogenitoriali nel sistema educativo.

Keywords: same-sex families; educational system; inclusion; LGBT+; best practices

Parole chiave: famiglie omogenitoriali; sistema educativo; inclusione; LGBT+; buone pratiche

¹ This article was written jointly by the two authors. However, for the purpose of assessing scientific and research quality, authorship responsibilities can be attributed as follows: Valeria Quaglia wrote the introduction, paragraphs 2, 3, and the conclusion; Margherita Graglia wrote paragraph 4.

1. Introduction

In the ever-evolving landscape of education, a quiet revolution is underway. The concept of ‘family’, once relegated to a nuclear, married, heterosexual model, is now becoming more and more a dynamic tapestry of diversities, challenging traditional ideals of familial configuration, and amplifying the need for diverse and personalized educational approaches. In a context like Italy, where the integration of various family models still faces many challenges and LGBT+ individuals still face homophobic discrimination, a focus on educational services for same-sex families becomes both pertinent and urgent. In fact, the persistence of traditional normative ideals surrounding the concept of ‘family’, along with legal obstacles related to the lack of legal and institutional recognition, exert a substantial impact on the actual well-being and development of children and adolescents born to same-sex parents, as well as on the success of the educational processes.

To date, the lack of an officially recognized and protective legal framework for same-sex families, which addresses discrimination and promotes their inclusion, carries profound implications for the organization of the educational system. Overall, legal recognition of same-sex parent families in Italy is, in fact, still very limited. Law 76 of 2016 established civil unions for same sex couples, it recognizes almost all the rights of heterosexual marriage, but it does not allow for the so-called *stepchild adoption*, which means it does not grant legal recognition to the non-biological parent. The proposal for the law had, in fact, excluded the part concerning parenthood as it was considered too ‘divisive’. This law, which is embedded in a political debate that has characterized public discourse in recent years, explicitly distances itself from including same-sex unions within the concept of family, which remains the prerogative only of heterosexual couples. When describing the rights deriving from civil partnership, the above-mentioned law does not refer to same-sex couples as ‘families’ but rather as ‘specific social formations’. The symbolic significance of this exclusion also affects the more practical and immediate aspects of the daily lives of these families. In fact, from a legal perspective, the non-biological parents are legally considered as strangers to their own child. This implies that from a legal point of view, they cannot pick their child up from school, attend the meeting with their children’s teachers, stand by their child if hospitalized, or have formal recognition in various other situations where a legal bond is required. Furthermore, just like heterosexual couples, same-sex couples may also experience separation. In such cases, from a legal point of view, the non-biological parent becomes a stranger to their own child, even if they have desired, educated, and took care of the child from the very beginning. The continuity of the parent-child relationship in case of separation cannot be legally asserted, but it depends solely on the willingness of the biological parent. Moreover, the non-biological parent has no obligation for care or support in the event of separation. Similarly, in the tragic event of the death of the biological parent, the child risks losing the emotional and relational continuity with the non-biological parent. In order to address this discrimination and this legislative gap, many same-sex families resort to a series of strategies. For instance, they may use a private agreement, signed by the biological parent, which ‘delegates’ certain responsibilities to the non-biological parent, such as picking up the child from school or interacting with physicians and teachers. However, as mentioned earlier, this solution remains critical since the recognition is only partial, this document lacks coercive value, and it depends on the willingness of the biological parent.

Additionally, there is the possibility of pursuing a procedure for ‘adoption in special cases.’ In this case, the effects are similar to those regarding the stepchild adoption, but this is a legal process that requires time, involves significant financial costs, several home visits, extensive interviews with psychologists and social workers to ‘prove’ the social parent’s (namely, the non-biological one) suitability as a parent. This, in turn, implies further discrimination, as not all same-sex families have the financial resources to undertake this procedure. Finally, other strategies involve families resorting to legal action or, with the support of their local authorities, having

their children recognized directly at birth through registration with both parents at the registry office. This approach is based on the principle of the child's best interests, prioritizing their wellbeing over the absence of a specific law. This specific strategy is contingent upon the decisions made by mayors and city councils, and this introduces an additional form of discrimination, as accessibility to this option is dependent on the city in which the parents reside, further exacerbating disparities among same-sex families.

This institutional invisibility of same-sex parent families (Cavina & Danna, 2009) implies that there are no clear regulatory guidelines governing the relationship with educational services, and the protection of their children in educational contexts remains at the discretion of the goodwill of teachers/head teachers/educators/pedagogists, as well as the willingness of the biological parent and (in the case of his/her death) the biological parent's family of origin to let the social parent maintain continuity of care, affection, and relationship with his/her children over time.

In addition to the legislative constraints mentioned above, there is also another aspect that needs to be considered. In fact, education and development professionals often risk having a stereotypical conception of LGBT+ people, characterizing them as inadequate parents. As we will elaborate on in the next section, this perception is mainly influenced by stereotypes that portray same-sex couples as inadequate parents due to the absence of a specific gender parental role. Consequently, this view implies a negative judgement of a parental model that is different from the mononuclear mother-father family, which is assumed to ensure proper child-rearing functions. This is despite the scientific literature having long demonstrated that there is no difference in terms of parental competence between LGBT+ and heterosexual parents. Inevitably pedagogists, educators and teachers, without receiving specialized training, risk to absorb the prevailing homonegative and heteronormative culture that continues to define the social and cultural landscape in Italy (Burgio, 2020; Graglia, 2012). As a result, they occasionally find themselves unwittingly perpetuating discrimination to students and families who diverge from the heteronormative norm. This leads to the establishment and perpetuation of educational contexts characterized by limited inclusivity for diversities.

Educational settings, starting with early childhood education, hold particular significance as they constitute, along with healthcare contexts, one of the firsts social arenas where families interact with individuals outside their immediate familial and friendship networks. This is especially pertinent in the absence of formal and legal recognition. Educators, teachers, school administrators, and pedagogists engaging with same-sex parent families frequently find themselves lacking essential information, knowledge, and resources essential for ensuring the effective inclusion of this part of population. The risk lies in this informational deficiency that may lead to sort of 'do-it-yourself education', inevitably grounded in common sense assumptions, individual prejudices, and beliefs unsupported by either scientific data or concrete experiences (Gigli, 2011). As our comprehension of family structures continues to evolve, it becomes evident that educational institutions must adapt to ensure inclusivity and equity for all students.

This article aims to reflect on the inclusion of families with at least one homosexual parent, specifically within educational contexts in Italy. Drawing upon both existing literature and one of the authors' professional experience within this domain, practical instruments for inclusion will be proposed with the aim of supporting professional workers in the context of education and fostering the inclusion of offspring from same-sex parent families within educational services, in Italy.

2. Lesbian mothers and gay fathers: the challenges of doing family in Italy

To provide greater clarity and seek to better delineate the subject of the reflection proposed in this article, it is necessary to start with a fundamental question: whom do we refer to, when we talk of 'same-sex parent families'?

Just like families composed of heterosexual partner/parents, same-sex families may assume various configurations. Historically, the first family structure to emerge were those related to stepfamilies, namely those families formed after a separation, with children born within prior heterosexual unions. The sociological literature on this topic refers to *post heterosexual lesbian and gay parents* (Gusmeroli & Trappolin, 2022), namely individuals that revealed their sexual orientation as lesbian, gay or bisexual after having children in heterosexual relationships. The findings of a recent mix-methods research study carried out in Italy on this part of the population by Gusmeroli and Trappolin (Ibidem) enhance our comprehension of the complexity of LGB families. Gusmeroli and Trappolin conducted interviews and administered a questionnaire to 63 individuals who identified themselves as post heterosexual lesbian or gay parents. The majority of men self-identified as homosexual, while one in three women used alternative definitions such as bisexual to describe their identity. Regarding their civil status, almost all fathers have been married to a woman, and two of them were still married at the moment of the interview. The sample group consisted of an almost equal number of men and women. Almost all fathers were previously married to women, with two still married at the time of the interview. The majority had separated while a minority were divorced, and only one had entered into a civil partnership with their new partner. The sociodemographic characteristics of the mothers and fathers were similar, except for the fact that the number of separations among the mothers was almost equal to the number of divorces. These findings are in line with another recent study conducted on this specific population (Giunti & Fioravanti, 2017). The research conducted by Gusmeroli and Trappolin (2022) reveals that mothers commonly reside with their underage children, either as single mothers or in companionship with their respective partners. Conversely, following the termination of heterosexual relationships, fathers, more frequently than mothers, tend to establish single-person households without cohabiting with their underage children. Notably, the research found that the majority of respondents (2 out of 3) claimed that their visibility as LGB extended beyond their family network into other spheres; conversely, a minority (1 out of 3) reported being more cautious about disclosing their sexual orientation within their social networks. Although the study focused on LGB individuals that may have been activists, and therefore more likely to be visible than non-activists, it still suggests that individuals are no longer inclined to conceal their sexual orientation due to the homophobic stigma still prevalent in modern Western culture.

Currently, in Italy, families composed by post heterosexual lesbian and gay parents remain the most prevalent family configuration, although recent data and insights emerged from research and from experiences collected by LGBT+ associations suggest that the utilization of assisted reproductive techniques is becoming an increasingly common option. Indeed, there is a growing number of first-time families, composed of lesbian couples who have turned to foreign clinics for assisted fertilization or gay male couples who have opted for surrogacy. In some countries, there are also same-sex couples who temporarily adopt one or more child from foster care (in Italy this is possible) or permanently adopt them (in Italy this is not possible). Furthermore, there exist other family configurations, such as first-time multigenitorial families, formed by single individuals or homosexual couples who share, with varying degrees of involvement, parenthood with those who provided the gametes or did the gestation. A further specification of co-parenthood can be illustrated by a lesbian couple who shares the parental role with a gay male couple. First-time families are the ones most frequently discussed and studied as 'same-sex parent families', i.e., cases in which children are born to two mothers or two fathers. Nevertheless, to avoid excessive simplification, it is useful to contemplate a broader definition of same-sex parenthood, encompassing situations where a homosexual parent cohabits with their children but not necessarily with their partner (Bertone, 2011).

Quantifying this phenomenon in Italy is challenging, and this is mainly due to the absence of systematic population-level data collection. A recent study conducted by Istat (2022) and UNAR (the National Office against

Racial Discrimination) regarding workplace discrimination against LGBT+ individuals showed that 18.9% of lesbian women and 23.7% of bisexual women live with their partner, with whom they are civilly partnered, and with their children. Lower percentages (2% and 1.1%, respectively) were observed among male respondents. However, it's important to note that these percentages may be considered underestimations, because the sample comprises only homosexual individuals who were either in civil partnerships or had previously been in such partnerships, while excluding those who were not.

Moreover, another factor that suggests an underestimation of this phenomenon regards data from a survey conducted nearly twenty years ago (Lelleri et al., 2006) which indicated that parenthood increases with age, involving approximately one out of five individuals among the over-40 segment of the sample. Specifically, lesbian women over 40 with children accounted for 20.4%, while gay men over 40 accounted for 17.7%. Another interesting finding from this research concerns the desire for parenthood: in the female sample, to whom the question was asked, the vast majority of respondents desired to have children or to have more children (54%). Since these results date back to 2006, it is plausible that the percentages have increased today, especially considering that, in many cases, the desires for parenthood among younger generations have likely become reality. Consequently, the number of same-sex parent families has probably considerably grown.

Additionally, more recent data emerges from the *Italian Rainbow Families' Census* project (Girasole & Roberti, 2020), conducted by the *LGBT+ Resource Center* in collaboration with *Famiglie Arcobaleno* and *Rete Genitori Rainbow* (namely, the two main Italian associations dedicated to same-sex parent families' rights), with the contribution of ILGA Europe. The project's primary objective was to document and investigate the presence of LGBT+QI families in Italy. Its findings reveal that 28.6% of the interviewed family units have at least one child. A more detailed examination indicates that 24% of the surveyed family units consist of two mothers or two fathers with children. In sum, the research shows that from a sample of 1,391 family units, 328 of them had offspring, and more specifically the total of children and adolescents was over 500. In total, 247 out of 328 couples consist of women (75%), while 80 out of 328 are couples of men (24%), and 2 are mixed couples, in which one of the parents has undergone a gender transition. Furthermore, an additional 4.7% of the interviewed families consist of a single parent who identifies as LGBT+ or transgender. It is worth noting that, also in the situation of a single parent, there is no legal provision for sharing parenthood with a partner who may establish a lasting emotional bond with the biological parent and actively contribute to the upbringing of the children.

As mentioned in the introductory paragraph, in Italy same-sex parent families still encounter discrimination in numerous social contexts. This discrimination extends from the political and institutional realm which, as previously outlined, recognizes only the civil union of two individuals of the same sex but fails to acknowledge the rights (and obligations) of the non-biological parent, to the social and cultural context, which remains imbued with stereotypes that still perceive the association of parenthood and homosexuality as an inherent contradiction. The persistence of stereotypes and prejudices against homosexual parents is still, regrettably, a prevalent reality in Italy. In fact, data derived from the abovementioned Istat survey (2022) concerning LGBT+ individuals' experiences of discriminations reveals that, among individuals in civil unions or previously in unions who self-identified as homosexual or bisexual, who habitually reside in Italy and have children, whether biological or not, and even if they do not cohabit, they have encountered situations in which they were discriminated by other parents due to their sexual orientation (12.4%), and their children themselves have experienced bullying (11.3%) or exclusion (6.5%) from their peers.

On the other hand, as discrimination persists among LGBT+ individuals, there emerges a gradual transformation in public attitudes. In fact, according to a recent Eurispes (2023) report, a noteworthy 64.1% of Italians now endorse legal protection for de facto couples, irrespective of their gender, while 59.2% show support for

same-sex marriage. Of particular significance is the attitudinal shift regarding same-sex parenting. In 2019, a mere 31.1% of Italians favored adoption by same-sex couples; today, this percentage has increased to 50.4%. Despite acknowledging an improvement in collective perspectives on same-sex parent families, it is crucial to consider that still one in two Italians expresses opposition to same-sex parenting.

At this point, it is useful to briefly consider the reasons that inform the hostility towards same-sex parenting. Overall, objections to non-heterosexual parenthood are usually informed by convictions, stereotypes, and prejudices that perceive homosexual individuals, especially their desires for parenthood, as infringing societal conventions. The opposition to same-sex parenting, in fact, finds its cultural origins in the defense of what is deemed a 'traditional' parental model. This model idealizes a family structure consisting of one father and one mother, united in marriage, and characterized by their respective and complementary genders roles, and educational functions. Within this framework, sexuality and procreation are ideally aligned, thereby firmly placing parenthood under the realm of biology. But in the contemporary Western context, the way families are constructed has evolved into new forms and possibilities. The traditional family model encompassing a nuclear, two-parent, heterosexual family is no longer the sole prevailing practice or representation. It was particularly after the introduction of divorce as a legal institution, which occurred in Italy in 1970, that we witnessed a flourishing of new family configurations. This began with stepfamilies, which challenged the traditional triadic and monolithic family structure of mother-father-child. Since then, the so-called *new families* (Zanatta 2008) have led to a redefinition and broadening of the meanings associated with the concepts of *mother* and *father*. In these new family structures, biological ties are no longer the only factor determining parenthood. Instead, *parent* is defined by the relationship with child: a *parent* is the person who fulfills the caring and educational roles, moving beyond the traditional roles of mere procreation and legal guardianship.

Additionally, there has been a change regarding also the gender of the partners within these couples (Bonaccorso, 1994). In fact, same-sex parenting differs from the traditional family structure because it is composed, in the case of first-generation families, by two parents of the same gender, with only one of them sharing a biological tie with the children. The aspect that, more than others, is criticized, is the absence of a specific gender parental role ('male' parental role in the case of lesbian couples, and viceversa) and, consequently, the perceived absence of a gender-based model that supposedly guarantees complementary educational and caregiving functions. As explained more in detail elsewhere (Graglia & Quaglia, 2014), this criticism is not relevant for the functioning of parental roles. First of all, the literature highlights a broader shift wherein the roles and competencies of (heterosexual) parents are progressively perceived as less inherently different and complementary. In general, new models are emerging regarding both couple relationships and parenthood, that point to a more symmetrical and negotiated, less reliant on the stability and complementarity, configuration of gender roles.

Beyond the focus on the deviation from the heteronormative family model, the hostility towards same-sex families is often related to the alleged parental incompetence of homosexual individuals. Over the past two decades, numerous international research studies, particularly in the realm of psychology, have investigated this aspect by frequently comparing families headed by homosexual parents with those composed by heterosexual parents. One of the motivating factors behind these research interrogatives is the contemporary emphasis on child well-being as the central value against which family relationships are assessed. In the past, the specific composition of same-sex families was thought to pose a potential threat to children's well-being (Bertone, 2011). These studies have concluded that there is no difference in terms of parental competence and children's well-being based on the sexual orientation of the parents (i.e. Biblar & Stacey, 2010; Bos et al., 2005; Bos et al., 2016; Crouch et al., 2016; Farr & Patterson, 2013; Goldberg & Smith, 2013; Golombok et al., 2017; Patterson, 2017). Similarly, in recent years, an increasing number of studies and research reviews on same-sex families in Italy have arrived

at the same conclusions, namely that is the parent-child relation that matters, and not the family configuration (Baiocco & Ioverno, 2016; Baiocco et al., 2018; Baiocco et al., 2015; Bastianoni et al., 2015; Dettore & Parretta, 2013; Everri, 2016; Fruggeri, 2011; Ciriello, 2009; Bottino & Danna, 2005).

Besides confirming the parental adequacy of LGBT+ individuals and couples, research has given particular attention to the impact of homonegative stigma on their own well-being and that of their children (i.e. Goldberg & Smith, 2014; Crouch et al., 2014; Anderssen et al., 2002; Bos et al., 2005; Rimalower & Caty, 2009). An especially significant social context in this regard pertains to educational settings. In fact, the next paragraph will focus on this aspect, while the following paragraph will introduce best practices for the inclusion of same-sex families in this specific context.

3. Tackling discrimination and homonegativity towards same-sex families in educational contexts

In recent years, the issue of discrimination and homonegativity within educational settings has gained significant attention in research and public debate. In fact, educational settings occupy a crucial position as primary agents of socialization for children and adolescents. Their important role encompasses not only the transmission of a society's cultural capital, but also a profound obligation to adapt and respond to evolving societal changes. In this ever-changing landscape, educational institutions are asked to recognize, respect, and value the many differences that characterize modern society (encompassing differences in gender, sexuality, religion, ethnic origin, and more). These institutions operate within the general principles of inclusivity and non-discrimination, anchoring their mission in fostering an environment where every student, irrespective of their background or family structure, can pursue learning and personal growth in an equal way.

Unfortunately, for many same-sex families, educational settings have remained social contexts where their identities and relationships are not recognized and are subject to prejudice and, therefore, discrimination. Homonegative attitudes towards same-sex families have significant consequences for the well-being and development of children raised in same-sex households (Bos et al., 2019). Discrimination in this specific social context can take different forms. First of all, it can take a *direct* form, for example when teachers and educators may hold homophobic beliefs towards LGBT+ individuals and their children (Herbstrith et al., 2013). In fact, from the literature, it emerges that educators and teachers may, depending on their cultural and experiential background, hold different opinions regarding various family structures, and they act accordingly, this way they may discriminate against students that do not have a normative family structure. In this regard, as highlighted by Gigli (2011, p. 88), it becomes crucial for teachers, pedagogists and educators to approach their roles without preconceived notions opposing homosexuality or homosexual parenthood when dealing with students from same-sex families. Instead, their primary concern should be to set aside personal beliefs and, just as they would in any other situation, introspectively assess whether their actions and interactions with this student genuinely promote their well-being and successful integration into the educational system.

In fact, within educational services, the focus should be less on defending one's ideological stances and more on improving the execution of their educational function. As will be discussed in the following paragraph, achieving this goal naturally requires educators and teachers to develop an awareness of their own level of knowledge on this issue, as well as any potential baggage of stereotypes and prejudices. The responsibility for such work, however, cannot be only attributed to the individual educator or teacher. As will be highlighted in the next paragraph, in fact, in order to create an environment welcoming to different families, it is necessary for all the social actors involved in the provision of educational services to actively participate. This involvement should begin with those in leadership positions, who have the opportunity to either promote inclusive policies or,

conversely, discriminatory ones (Gigli, 2011). In this regard, another form of discrimination towards same-sex families can be *indirect*, for example in the case in which teachers and educators overlook the presence of same sex families in school policies or curriculum, as these families do not conform to the heteronormative ideal of family (Lindsay et al., 2006). Both direct and indirect forms of exclusion within the education context can have repercussions on the relationship and participation of same sex families within the educational system (Byard et al., 2012; Goldberg & Smith, 2014).

Recent studies have focused on the challenges of inclusion of same-sex families in educational settings. Nothdurfter and Monaco (2022), for example, conducted a qualitative research study with 40 Italian same sex parents, exploring their experiences, and in particular focusing on the uncertainties and challenges they faced when confronting with institutional settings. In this regard, from the interviews it has emerged that for Italian same-sex parents, parenthood and family life require daily commitment to make their family visible-also and specially in school settings - in order to be recognized and legitimized as parents, and to communicate to others that they are a family on par with others. The authors highlight the relevance of constructing LGB parenthood through ongoing practices, not only in the intimate sphere but also in interactions with significant social and institutional environments, such as schools.

Another research study conducted on this topic is that by Bosisio and Santero (2020). From interviews they conducted with LGBT+ parents, it emerges that many of them reported encountering resistance from educators and teachers, especially when the parent-teacher relationship was not well-established. However, there are also numerous positive experiences where parents have found openness from educators and teachers. For instance, in some cases, parents reported that the educational services with which they interacted had recognized the parental role of the non-biological parent even without requiring authorization from the biological parent to pick up the child from daycare or preschool. The analysis further highlighted a perception among the interviewees that, following the approval of Law No. 26 in 2016, there was greater legitimization of these families from educational institutions. Additionally, there was an explicit request from educators and teachers for specific training on this topic. An interesting aspect that emerges from the research is that the interviewed parents believe that the primary reason educators and teachers encountered difficulties and resistance regarding same-sex families was not so much due to their hostile ideological stance but rather a lack of direct knowledge about this specific type of families.

Another study conducted in Italy (Baiocco et al., 2020) focused on the attitudes and convictions of educators and teachers regarding children raised in households led by same-sex parents. An interesting finding was the strong association between a higher level of teachers' sexual prejudice and negative beliefs about children's adaptation in same-sex parent families. Indeed, negative attitudes toward lesbians and gay men emerged as one of the primary predictors of resistance to same-sex parenting. Consequently, to promote a safer school environment, it becomes imperative to equip teachers with appropriate training and encourage them to critically examine both their personal and professional beliefs.

Selmi et al. (2020) conducted a qualitative study on healthcare, social work, and education professionals' perceptions of same-sex parenthood. The research examined how these representations affect professionals' interactions with families, revealing whether they create more or less effective spaces for inclusion and recognition. From their research it has become evident that in different situations acceptance of homosexual parents or hesitancy to change practices originally created for heterosexual families largely depends on the attitudes and personal values of professionals instead of strict adherence to their work duties. Importantly, the analysis identified that professionals frequently note that institutions' tools and practices are designed for heterosexual couples and families. This approach not only complicates the ability of professionals to recognize diverse family

structures and needs, but also fosters a reluctance to be openly visible as LGB parents, encouraging a “don’t ask don’t tell” approach. The authors argue that resistance to change and rigidity in the provision of services can be seen in those cases where individual operators attempt alternative strategies for inclusivity. An example highlighting the need for inclusive language in kindergarten was provided by a socio-educational service manager interviewed by the authors. He mentioned adjusting initial reception forms to create an LGB-inclusive environment. However, the computer system’s registration process proved problematic as it only had fields for ‘father’ and ‘mother’ as parents of the child. Consequently, even when certain tools are adjusted, the overall system seems to exhibit a ‘heteronormative inertia’ making it challenging to institutionalize new inclusive practices and instruments (Ibidem).

In a study conducted by Selmi et al. (2019) in Italy, same-sex parents in their sample reported high visibility within the school setting. However, it was discovered that this visibility was not a result of a single communication regarding their family structure. Rather, it was a gradual process that occurred over time, and it was co-constructed according to the response offered (or not) by the specific context. A strategy utilized by same-sex families to participate in the construction of an inclusive context consisted in providing teachers with information and instruments that allowed them to overcome their prejudices.

The attitudes of teachers and educators have a significant impact on the well-being of same-sex families, and especially of children. This is because schools are among the first social environments where children interact with individuals beyond their immediate familial network. In these interactions, children express the specificity of their family, which may expose them to a hostile environment. Consequently, the role of teachers is essential in promoting an inclusive social environment. In this context, Ferrari (2015) conducted an ethnography in *Famiglie Arcobaleno*, an Italian association dedicated to the rights of same-sex families. The experiences he collected highlighted a concrete danger for children growing up in such families - the risk of being discriminated against and bullied by their peers. Ferrari noted that these hostile situations depend mainly on how adults have taught children to handle diversity in its broadest form, from cultural, to ethnic, and familial differences.

Lastly, the experiences of LGBT+ parents collected by the *Famiglie Arcobaleno* association (La Delfa, 2011) generally seem to indicate initially positive reactions from teachers and educators to the parents’ coming out, responses that appear to endure over time. It is worth noting that LGBT+ parents who are not part of the association may face greater challenges as they are not part of a significant support network and may have limited access to specific resources to address this issue in the educational system.

In light of what has been underlined so far, it becomes evident that the inclusion of same-sex families is a complex process. It is not possible to simply rely on the goodwill of individuals but is necessary to be aware of the existence of intricate social dynamics, often acted upon unknowingly by individuals. These dynamics call for integrated actions aimed at identifying and dismantling stereotypes and prejudices that underlie discrimination (de Cordova et al., 2020). In the next paragraph, we will delve deeper into these aspects and propose some operative tools to promote the inclusion of same-sex families in the educational settings.

4. Best practices in educational settings

The following considerations have been developed by one of the two authors¹ as a result of training experiences conducted in various contexts in Northern Italy. Such experiences started from the late 1990s, with a training project dedicated to teachers and students in primary and secondary education titled “Educating for Respect: Affective Education on Issues of Sexual Identity” (“Educare al rispetto: educazione affettiva sui temi dell’identità sessuale”) approved by the Ministry of Education (Miur) and the regional superintendencies. Since 2015, similar courses have been directed towards teachers and educators in nursery schools, early childhood education,

and primary schools, focusing on topics such as gender stereotypes, gender variance in developmental stages, and the inclusion of same-sex families. In particular, we will focus on the case of the “Interinstitutional Table for the Contrast of Homotransnegativity and for the Inclusion of LGBT People” of the Municipality of Reggio Emilia, as it represents a particularly illustrative case in which various institutions, including educational ones, have networked and worked together with the aim of bringing about changes in the practices of institutions and in the cultural fabric of the territory, promoting equality of gender identity and sexual orientation. The “Interinstitutional Table has been established in 2015 and still ongoing². In this regard, thanks in particular to the work of the Table, the town of Reggio Emilia has received the European Capitals of Inclusion and Diversity Award. The institutions in Reggio Emilia involved in this project are as follows: Municipality, Province, Court, Public Prosecutor’s Office, Correctional Facilities, Health Authority, UNIMORE University, School Office, Nursery and Early Childhood Institution, Sports Foundation, Mondoinsieme Foundation, and the LGBT+ Association Arcigay Gioconda. Among the various initiatives, this project included the signing of a of understanding on principles³ and an operational memorandum⁴. The latter involves the adoption of a set of best practices within different institutional contexts and among them also nursery and early childhood schools in the aforementioned municipality.

This project has embraced a specific methodology to promote inclusion, namely the maieutic approach (Graglia, 2020; 2024), where active participation and dialogue play pivotal roles, with the use of questions as the primary tool. Specifically, this method proves to be particularly effective in addressing a topic that, as we have seen in the previous paragraphs, represents the last bastion of prejudice against non-heterosexual individuals, namely same-sex parenthood, which continues to elicit greatest hostility.

Given that the goal is not solely the transmission of knowledge, but rather a shift in attitude towards prejudices against LGBTQ+ individuals and same-sex families, it is necessary to carefully manage the method so that participants can be receptive and not defensive. The maieutic approach allows participants to express doubts, fears, and ingrained beliefs within a ‘safe space’ where emotional expression and opinions are legitimized without hostility or judgment from trainers, enabling an exchange with other participants to collectively understand the origins of such emotions or beliefs and activate a collective process of change through dialogic interaction. The maieutic approach was adopted both in the initial phase of establishment of the interinstitutional Table and in subsequent actions, particularly in training, which represented the cornerstone for providing specific knowledge and skills on one hand, and on the other, for eliciting the specific needs of institutions, personnel, and service users from various institutions in order to identify and implement best practices. Among the involved institutions, educational institutions were engaged at every educational level: from early childhood to university. In this contribution, while highlighting the emerging best practices, we focused on the case of kindergarten and preschools (0-6 years). In these contexts, training interventions initially involved pedagogists and educators. In a second phase, parents were also involved through meetings aimed at discussing these topics, always using the maieutic method. Subsequently, the action was extended by involving educators and pedagogists at the provincial level through a series of conferences that provided an opportunity for further discussion and exploration of best practices.

The best practices that can be considered for including same-sex parent families, that is, for effectively identifying and responding to the specific needs of these families without discrimination, involve multiple levels: cultural, institutional, interpersonal, and individual (Graglia, 2012; 2019). In particular, we will focus on the latter three levels, keeping in mind that the cultural level—the representations conveyed by language and the images that communicate precise meanings—is in constant dialogue with the other levels. Therefore, the best practices adopted by educational institutions and educators can interact with the broader cultural level, contributing to

the promotion of an inclusive approach and the deconstruction of stereotypes and prejudices. Additionally, indeed a law that fully recognizes same-sex parent families would have an impact on educational practices, as well as on the attitudes and beliefs of educators and teachers.

4.1 Institutional level

Let's start with the institutional level: what can educational institutions do, given that same-sex parent families are not recognized by the highest authority, namely the State? Schools have a sphere of influence that should not be underestimated.

Considering that same-sex families belong to a stigmatized population, that as we have seen has been labeled with negative stereotypes regarding a supposed inadequacy of parenting capabilities and their potential 'risks' because of their divergence from traditional family ideals, the first priority for schools is to acknowledge the existence of same-sex parent families within the institution itself. Due to the social pressure for keeping their identities invisible, that is faced by homosexual individuals (Graglia & Quaglia, 2014) and the common assumption within institutions and among their staff that families consist of two individuals of different genders (an assumption of heterosexuality, see Graglia, 2009), educational institutions and educators often assume there are no students with same-sex parent families, unless these families explicitly come out as such. The result of this assumption is an inability to adjust language, initiatives, and educational approaches to recognize the different family structures, leaving them unprepared to provide appropriate support when such families access educational settings.

At the same time, one might be inclined to believe that in cases where same-sex parent families access educational settings, they would necessarily come out and present themselves as such. However, this assumption fails to consider the fact that belonging to a social group upon which negative meanings have been projected can actually hinder visibility. Being visible entails exposing oneself to stigma and discrimination. Visibility is not solely an individual's decision (in this case, the family's decision), but it also depends on the context: to what extent does the context facilitate visibility? The more hostile the context, the more challenging and riskier coming out becomes. Hostility here does not refer simply to overt manifestations of homonegativity, those that explicitly highlight the negative interpretation that the context attributes to same-sex parenting. It also encompasses silence, and the fact of ignoring the topic of sexual identity in schools, that both effectively convey implicit social hostility. This is how the absence of LGBT+ topics in schools can be interpreted by a population that has learned that silence is not merely an absence, but it is laden with negative connotations. Silence implies that the subject is either unimportant, or inappropriate. Given that sexual orientation is a core aspect of identity, it needs to be acknowledged. Therefore, the second option is valid: the topic is not discussed because it should not be discussed, it's something negative to hide (Graglia, 2012).

In the school, as a space where social groups interact, it is essential to acknowledge the existence of these families and to begin thinking of them as a recognized presence. Unexpected families should become expected by the system and acknowledged. This awareness helps identify the heteronormativity that structures the organization, such as the enrollment forms for childcare facilities that only include options for 'mother' and 'father', thereby excluding other family configurations. In this regard, an inclusive best practice involves revising these forms to expand the available options. An example of this can be found in the childcare facilities and kindergartens in the Municipality of Reggio Emilia. Figure 1 illustrates the part of the document where both parents can select from various options, thus avoiding the use of the terms 'parent 1' and 'parent 2', which have sparked numerous criticisms in Italy.

<p>APPLICANT (person exercising parental responsibility) Relationship with child: mother <input type="checkbox"/> father <input type="checkbox"/> foster parent <input type="checkbox"/> legal guardian Last name... First name... other data...</p> <p>APPLICANT (person exercising parental responsibility) Relationship with child: mother <input type="checkbox"/> father <input type="checkbox"/> foster parent <input type="checkbox"/> legal guardian Last name... First name... other data...</p>

Figure 1. Example of an inclusive enrollment form for childcare facilities

This involves revisiting various forms, the service charters, etc., with the aim of making them adequate for same-sex parent families as well. As an illustrative example, we present some best practices identified by the educational institutions and childcare facilities of the Municipality of Reggio Emilia, which were endorsed in 2019 within the operational protocol:

- 1) Participation in the inter-institutional forum to combat homotransnegativity and promote the inclusion of LGBT+ individuals;
- 2) Encouraging dissemination of the Memorandum of Understanding on principles and the Operational Protocol among employees through meetings with pedagogical coordinators and collegial events involving staff from childcare facilities and kindergartens (namely, the “Protocollo d’intesa sui principi e del Protocollo Operativo tra i dipendenti e le dipendenti dell’Istituzione”);
- 3) Facilitating reflections and discussions with the City Infant Councils (in Italian, “Consigli Infanzia Città”) and the parents of childcare facilities and kindergartens;
- 4) Promoting the dissemination of initiatives and actions endorsed by the school both internal and external communication channels of the institution;
- 5) Organizing training opportunities for institution employees, sensitizing them to the issues of combating homotransnegativity and promoting the inclusion of LGBT+ individuals and same-sex parent families. These efforts recognize the unique rights of the three co-participants in the educational experience and action: children, parents, and educators, particularly within the specific context of ages 0 to 6 years;
- 6) Implement inclusive and respectful language regarding sexual orientation and gender identity in the Service Charter and School Regulations, alongside other differences (such as gender, religion, culture, etc.);
- 7) Employ inclusive and respectful language regarding sexual orientation and gender identity for all individuals in documents, forms, and internal and external communications of the institution. This includes revising forms to align with the legal recognition of civil unions and the existence of same-sex parent families.

The common basic best practices used by all institutions part of the Table has been found in the training, considered as a fundamental tool for increasing knowledge, deconstructing stereotypes and prejudices, and implementing good inclusive practices. Institutional training has the peculiarity of being directed towards all staff as a whole and not just towards the most motivated individuals, who often are already more sensitized. Training represents one of the main actions for inclusion in institutional contexts as it allows for the activation of processes of change, starting from the possibility of understanding the relevance of addressing these issues in an

educational context and taking subsequent measures. A common challenge that often arises is the underestimation of the significance of these interventions, arguing that it only concerns a minority of people and that there are more important and urgent issues to deal with. In other cases, it is participants' ideological positions that hinder the initiation of a common reflection.

Since 2015, nursery schools and early childhood education in Reggio Emilia have initiated an ongoing process of reflection. This process has encompassed various training sessions involving different stakeholders within the institution. For instance, as part of this initiative in 2020, a specific training program titled "Gender Differences and Identity: How Children and Adults Co-Construct Gender" was conducted, primarily aimed at educators. It involved the observation of how boys and girls use gender in their interaction, engagement with families, and sharing insights with the City Childhood Councils and the public through seminars and other initiatives. This was an open and participatory project designed to engage all relevant parties and operate within a network, connecting with other institutional actors in the region.

Networking indeed allows for the continuation and deepening of inclusion by weaving the threads of the territorial fabric and becoming more deeply ingrained in the culture of the city. The project is now expanding its focus from an intersectional perspective, intertwining issues of gender identity and sexual orientation with other differences. Particular attention has been devoted to the adoption of inclusive language, leading to a revision of the documentation to incorporate differences related to gender and sexual orientation.

At the institutional level, in addition to training and the adaptation of forms and documentation, it is possible to consider further initiatives. As an illustrative example, refer to Figure 2 (adapted from Graglia, 2012), which can also be used to assess the extent of inclusion achieved by an educational institution at all levels. In Fig. n. 2 some questions are presented as an evaluation method: the more positive responses there are, the more it signifies that the school has achieved a higher level of inclusion. Simultaneously, each question mentions a good practice that can be implemented. While some initiatives are more suitable or exclusively applicable to higher education, such as sexual education courses and anti-bullying initiatives, they all share the commonality of addressing the issue of same-sex families, necessitating a focus on the gender stereotypes that underlie prejudices against homosexual parenthood.

- Is the existence of same-sex families acknowledged within the school? (How?)
- Is sexual orientation mentioned in any official school documents?
- Are topics related to sexual orientation and gender identity included in the educational curriculum?
- Have teachers undergone any training courses on gender stereotypes or sexual identity?
- Is the topic of same-sex relationships present in the context of emotional education?
- If sexual education is provided, is the topic of sexual orientation included?
- Does the school library contain books on the subject of sexual identity/same-sex families?
- Are there informational materials, educational resources, or posters depicting LGBT+Q+ individuals/same-sex families?
- Are there procedures in place to address homophobic bullying?
- Are there teachers, non-teaching staff, or the school principal who openly identify as gay or lesbian?
- Have any students publicly disclosed their homosexual orientation? (What have been the reactions from adults?)
- Does the school collaborate with local LGBT+ associations?

Figure 2. Assessing school inclusion

Training on gender stereotypes can be done in early childhood settings and continue in different ways to be adapted to different age groups. If there are aspects that may seem unrelated or distant from the issue of same-sex parenting, such as homophobic bullying or the visibility of gay and lesbian educators/teachers, it should be considered that the process of inclusion is not a compartmentalized action but rather relies on all interventions that take into account the theme of non-heterosexual orientations, restoring dignity, value, and equitable treatment to it. The visibility of LGBT+ educators/teachers in schools, for example, serves as a litmus test for how inclusive that context is, bearing in mind that a prejudice still persists that associates homosexuality with pedophilia, and therefore, some gay educators may not disclose their identity as a form of protection.

Moreover, collaboration with same-sex parents' associations is essential; over time, these associations have cultivated valuable resources, such as knowledge, expertise, and community networks. The collaboration with these associations allows to access to a wealth of information and support that can aid in the development of curriculum, policies, and programs that are sensitive to the needs of same-sex families.

4.2 Interpersonal level

The interpersonal level concerns the actions that can be taken by educators, pedagogists, teaching and non-teaching staff in schools towards children and adolescents with homosexual parents, as well as towards the same-sex parent parents themselves. One good practice relates to inclusive language. Through words, we not only describe the world but also contribute to shaping it, by assigning specific meanings. In common usage, although the law on civil unions does not prescribe this terminology, many same-sex couples in civil unions refer to themselves using the terms 'wife' in the case of two women, or 'husband' in the case of two men. Inclusion entails respecting and using the language that members of the couple use to address each other and likewise using the terms they use to designate themselves as parents. Even though the law does not recognize the social parent as a legal parent, when a child grows up in a family with two mothers or two fathers, it could cause psychological harm to the child if the terminology used within the family is not employed.

It is also necessary to be familiar with and to use specific terminology, such as 'social parent', and distinguish this role from that of the 'gamete donor' when the latter does not fulfill a parental role.

A good practice is that teachers and educators should not assume the sexual orientation of parents, by automatically asking a parent they meet for the first time, as might occur in the case of a woman, e.g., "the dad...?", without considering the possibility that there may not be a father, either because it's a single-parent situation or because there is another female parent. This type of interaction conveys that this type of family is not accounted for and indirectly may hinder the visibility of the phenomenon, especially for those parents living in strongly homonegative contexts. Not making assumptions means asking more open-ended and not gender-specific questions, such as: 'Is there another parent?', or 'The other parent?'

Also, concerning occasions such as 'Mother's Day' or 'Father's Day', it is possible to consider alternatives that are inclusive of all family forms, such as 'Family Day' or 'Parents' Day'.

4.3 Individual level

Finally, the individual level concerns the beliefs and emotional reactions of individual persons, including educators and pedagogists. As we have seen, the topic of same-sex parenting is not one that typically leaves people neutral; rather, it often evokes reactions (such as 'I think that...' or 'Oh my...'). These reactions are based on personal opinions, and much less frequently, on analyses derived from scientific data and direct knowledge of same-sex families. We are, therefore, discussing reactions that often find their trigger in stereotypes and prejudices. As seen in the preceding paragraphs, one such stereotype considers homosexual parenthood inadequate

due to its perceived lack of the opposite gender component and, consequently, as detrimental to the healthy and serene development of children. Inclusion, to be effectively implemented, requires an emotional, not just cognitive, reflection on the issues surrounding same-sex parenting.

Indeed, it is not simply a matter of acquiring new knowledge and adopting new practices; for this to be truly possible, it is necessary to create the conditions for a change in attitudes and perspective. For this reason, it is essential to not only focus on the content of the training but also on the method through which it will be conducted (Graglia, 2019). The methodology employed must be inherently participatory, dialogic, and non-judgmental, providing participants with the opportunity to express doubts, uncertainties, and unpleasant emotions, and thus formulate the questions that need exploration for answers (Graglia, 2010).

An interactive and dialogic approach that, through interaction between trainers and participants, stimulates reflection and the deconstruction of preconceived assumptions. In this perspective, the testimony of same-sex families is essential. Thanks to direct knowledge and observation through listening to the experiences of these families, it is possible to deconstruct stereotypes and dispel prejudices. From abstract entities and generalized categories, same-sex families become real individuals, just like everyone else, with strengths and challenges.

5. Conclusion

With a growing number of LGBT+ individuals becoming parents and more children and adolescents entering our educational and training systems, it becomes imperative for pedagogists, educators, teachers, and head teachers to be adequately equipped with the necessary tools to establish inclusive and safe school environments. As mentioned above, the Italian educational system is informed by the principle of non-discrimination, emphasizing the importance of supporting and valuing every possible difference that a student may bring or represent, be it related to religion, ethnic origin, family background, sexuality, and more. Promoting the inclusion and empowerment of children growing up in non-traditional family structures, such as same-sex families, within educational institutions, should be a collective goal for schools of all kinds and at all levels.

As discussed in this article, a significant obstacle in Italy is the lack of legal recognition for the social parent, a barrier often overcome through private agreements or the request for adoption for specific cases. Nevertheless, these strategies are time-consuming, and they are not financially accessible to all families. Therefore, addressing this urgent and prioritized legal recognition is paramount to achieving equity for non-heterosexual families in all social contexts.

In addition to this crucial change, our contribution has proposed several best practices aimed at operating on various levels – institutional, interpersonal, and individual – with the goal of dismantling the barriers that still hinder full inclusion of children born into non-heterosexual families within our educational institutions.

While possessing replicability features, and indeed the Interinstitutional Table's experience has currently been exported to other contexts, it is essential to consider that in its implementation, specific obstacles and challenges related to the particular context may arise. Firstly, there must be the political will to allocate specific resources to this project, depending on the political orientation of the territory concerned. In addition, the more conservative the orientation, the more difficult (but also necessary) it may be to implement such good practices at different levels, from the general population to school staff and local and national politicians.

Note

1. Namely, Margherita Graglia, who is the coordinator of the “Interinstitutional Table for Combating Homotransnegativity and Promoting LGBT+ Inclusion” of the Municipality of Reggio Emilia .

2. <https://www.comune.re.it/argomenti/pari-opportunita/tavoli-interistituzionali/tavolo-interistituzionale-per-il-contrasto-all2019omotransnegativita-e-per-l2019inclusione-delle-persone-lgbt>
3. The document can be downloaded from the Reggio Emilia Municipality's website: <https://www.comune.re.it/argomenti/pari-opportunita/tavoli-interistituzionali/tavolo-interistituzionale-per-il-contrasto-all2019omotransnegativita-e-per-l2019inclusione-delle-persone-lgbt/documenti-allegati/protocollo-di-intesa-del-tavolo-per-il-contrasto-allomotransnegativita-e-per-linclusione-delle-persone-lgbt.pdf>
4. The operational protocol can be downloaded from the Reggio Emilia Municipality's website: <https://www.comune.re.it/argomenti/pari-opportunita/tavoli-interistituzionali/tavolo-interistituzionale-per-il-contrasto-all2019omotransnegativita-e-per-l2019inclusione-delle-persone-lgbt/documenti-allegati/protocollo-operativo-del-tavolo-per-il-contrasto-allomotransnegativita-e-per-linclusione-delle-persone-lgbt.pdf>

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