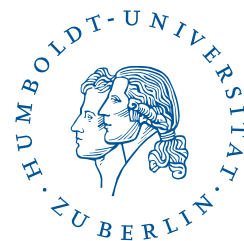


HUMBOLDT-UNIVERSITÄT ZU BERLIN



# SCHOOL IS OUT?!

**Comparative Study**  
**“Experiences of Children from**  
**Rainbow Families in School”**  
**conducted in Germany, Sweden, and Slovenia**

Uli Streib-Brzič, Christiane Quadflieg (Eds.)

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Fakulteta *za socialno delo*

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Berlin 2011

Uli Streib-Brzič, Christiane Quadflieg (Eds.)

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**“Experiences of Children from Rainbow Families in School”**  
**conducted in Germany, Sweden, and Slovenia**

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Uli Streib-Brzič, Malena Gustavson, Evelyn Hayn, Maja Pan,  
Christiane Quadflieg, Irina Schmitt, Ana M. Sobočan, Darja Zaviršek

Children and young people growing up in LGBTQ/rainbow families<sup>1</sup> are becoming more and more visible, for example in social life political debates, legal documents, and in academic discourses. Despite this growing visibility, there are few studies that focus on the children and young people's understanding and experiences. In this report, we therefore focus on children and young people's narratives, which they shared with researchers from Germany, Sweden, and Slovenia.

Families are subject to processes of constant change. In the last two decades there has been an increasing recognition and change of attitude toward non-heterosexual parenthood particularly in Europe (Rauchfleisch 1997, 2001; Zetterqvist Nelson 2007; Funcke & Thorn 2011). However, very little recognition had been paid to the experiences of children and young people growing up with LGBTQ parents/rainbow families in schools and other public spaces.

Our aim has been to seek a greater understanding of how these children and young people experience schools' attitudes towards non-heterosexual family constellation in classrooms and schoolyards. We conducted 124 semi-structured interviews with children, parents and experts in three different countries, Germany, Slovenia and Sweden, during 2010 and 2011. The families we interviewed were different in many ways. We had the opportunity to speak with single mothers, lesbian couples with sole care for their children, lesbian couples who shared care with partners from earlier heterosexual relationships, families with two lesbian mothers and two gay fathers who shared care for their children. One thing was clear: these were only some of many possible ways to be family. We hope that our study can give an idea of the diversity of close, caring and deep relationships and how important they can be for children and young people, parents, relatives, and teachers.

In order to analyse how children and young people in LGBTQ/rainbow families experience school, we have focused on their strategies to negotiate the understandings of family that exist in school. We asked whether children and young people experience discrimination and differentiation based on the parent's socio-sexual relationships. In many European countries, LGBTQ/rainbow families are still not equal according to national legislations or have

become so only in the recent years.<sup>2</sup> LGBTQ/rainbow families see themselves confronted with various prejudices, with parenting sometimes being questioned and concern being expressed for the care of the children (European Commission 2006; Rupp 2009; Funcke & Thorn 2010).

A number of studies, which have been conducted primarily in the USA, Canada, and Western Europe since the 1980s, are dedicated to children from LGBTQ/rainbow parents. These research works unanimously conclude that children and young people growing up with LGBTQ parents are not different in their development from children and young people raised by heterosexual parents (Rupp 2009; Carapacchio 2008; Gartrell & Bos 2010; Bos 2008; Stacey & Biblarz 2001; Tasker & Golombok 1997; Patterson 2005; Zetterqvist Nelson 2001; 2002).<sup>3</sup>

On the contrary, several studies state that children from LGBTQ/rainbow families show higher social competence, respond to differences more respectfully, and have a reflected understanding of sexual identity.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, these studies deal with the question of whether, children in LGBTQ/rainbow families experience discrimination and other forms of violence, such as teasing, exclusion or bullying in their peer-contexts on the basis of their family background. The studies indicate that the children are affected by discrimination and stigma, i.e. direct and indirect forms of violence, as well as intentional and unintentional discrimination. These acts of violence and discrimination can be identified as homophobic, as they refer to the parent's sexuality (Gartrell 2005; Rupp 2009; Clarke & Kitzinger 2004; Bos 2008; Carapacchio 2008).

Our concept of violence includes physical violence (Imbusch 2002), emotional, verbal, and symbolic violence (Butler 1999), as well as structural/institutional violence (Galtung 1975), and making invisible and silencing (Ås 2004). Homophobic, as well as transphobic, violence includes those types of violence which are directed towards people who identify themselves as LGBTQ and those who are perceived as LGBTQ, that means towards those who assumingly transgress the norms of gender and sexual behaviour. The term homophobia is generally defined as a speech code for an aversion or other aggression towards LGBTQ identified people, which is why we use it in this report (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights 2011). However,

<sup>1</sup> We use the term rainbow family as it is used in lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender communities signifying families with non-heterosexual parents. However, it doesn't apply to all of the persons participating in our study, especially in Sweden the term was less in usage than in Germany and Slovenia. It is still a useful term in the more general discussion, and we use 'LGBTQ/rainbow' in the common parts of our text, while the country-specific reports refer to the local usage.

<sup>2</sup> By now Belgium, the Netherlands, Iceland, Portugal, Norway, Spain and Sweden have established the same rights for homosexual and heterosexual couples. This also includes – except Portugal – the right for joint adoption. For an overview of the legal situation in Germany, Slovenia and Sweden, please consult the appendix.

<sup>3</sup> For a meta-analysis of existing research, see Stacey & Biblarz 2001, Jansen & Steffens 2006.

<sup>4</sup> Among others Stacey & Biblarz (2001), as well as Clarke et al. (2004) point critically to the fact, that without exception these studies take heteronormative standards as the norm.

we also use this term critically, and suggest that it would be more appropriate to speak of heteronormative violence.

We inscribe our work in the critical research field of queer-feminist studies with the focus on normative processes and power relations. Aligned to this we use the concept of heteronormativity, which offers an analysis of how heterosexuality is perceived and installed as norm at the cost of other ways of intimacy and relationships which organise and regulate social relations and cultural expectations. It further reconstructs the naturalisation of gender differences.

In our study we want to draw attention to the children's and young peoples' experiences or anticipations of discrimination, de-normalisation, and homophobic attitudes in school. By de-normalisation we would like to stress on how norms are reproduced and reconstituted by exclusionary practices (Hornscheidt et al. 2011). De-normalisation happens when the process of exclusion or othering is responded to by reaffirming one's normality and at the same time reproducing norms.

However, only a few studies have an explicit focus on the perspective of children and young people, i.e. not only analyse the presented incidents of violence, but especially research the strategies which children and young people have developed in heteronormative contexts. Accordingly, we see our study as a contribution to visibility, as well as an incentive to challenge discriminatory impacts of heteronormativity in schools. This change of perspective to children's and youth's agency was important to us, and their narratives and descriptions build the centre of this study. To support this, LGBTQ/rainbow parents were also interviewed, on the one hand to contextualise the children's and young people's statements, but also to show the parents' perspective, their expectations, and fears in relation to schools. To introduce a wider perspective, interviews with experts, i.e. teachers, pedagogues, researchers and political activists were conducted. Their input helped us to get a wider picture of schools as places of education, of socio-political developments and how anti-discrimination campaigns inform attitudes in the media, in legislation and with the general public.

This research project was initiated and coordinated by the *Zentrum für transdisziplinäre Geschlechterstudien* (ZtG; Centre for Transdisciplinary Gender Studies) at Humboldt University in Berlin and realised together with researchers from University of Lund in Sweden (Centre for Gender Studies) and University of Ljubljana in Slovenia (Department of Social Justice and Inclusions, Faculty of Social Work). In the choice of the participating countries

it was decisive that they represent different socio-political situations which would allow comparisons and possible transferabilities to other European countries. This will be further explored and contextualised in Part II.

For this study we chose a qualitative approach. We focused on the context of schools due to the fact that school presents the principal socialisation environment for children and youths. Schools transfer knowledge, but also social and moral competences. Furthermore, schools have a mandate to provide the same educational possibilities to all pupils, regardless of race, gender, religion, and – as the school-laws in all three countries add – sexual identity (School Law for the County Berlin 2004 § 12 (6); Swedish School Law 2010; Janez Krek & Mira Metljak 2011). At the same time, social learning also informally takes place outside of the classroom, for example, in peer groups. Therefore, school is also a place where social norms are mediated and practiced. Social norms are negotiated among schoolmates, reproduced by the curricula; teaching materials are mediated by teachers, and at best also critically questioned. Inspired by norm-critical education research we take a critical approach on the notion of 'tolerance of the other' that reproduces hierarchies by fixing 'others' as in need of help by 'us' who become unquestionable through these acts of tolerance (Bromseth & Darj 2010b; Kumashiro 2002). Moreover, we are interested in the workings of the norms that create 'others'.

With the results of this study we are hoping to contribute to the debates on how LGBTQ/rainbow families can be a visible and living part of school contexts. We also hope that this research will be used by school teachers, parents, policy makers, and young adults, in order to raise awareness for equality, diversity, and as a reflective approach to ambivalent effects of social norms. For this purpose we have also developed appropriate materials for a more open and inclusive teaching in each country, which are based on the results of the study.



## 2. Methodology and Research Question

Ana M. Sobočan, Malena Gustavson, Irina Schmitt, Darja Zaviršek,  
Evelyn Hayn, Maja Pan, Christiane Quadflieg, Uli Streib-Brzič

The main question for our study was to understand:

**if children and young people with LGBTQ/rainbow parents in Germany, Slovenia, and Sweden experience discrimination based on their parents' socio-sexual life, and which strategies they use to negotiate their families in schools.**

The trajectory was to explore how children and young people with LGBTQ/rainbow families anticipate and experience schools as heteronormative spaces. We were also interested in exploring which behaviour from teachers, schools, and parents was experienced as supportive, and how children and young people felt represented in curriculum and teaching materials and processes. Finally, we evoke the children's and young people's expertise about possible changes in schools. We see the experiences of the participants as reflections of broader issues of participation and exclusion in schools as social spaces and, thus, as relevant for all children and young people in schools.

### Looking for Strategies

Rather than asking explicitly about the homophobic nature of experiences with violence, we have opted to ask more openly about different experiences and strategies in the context of school. With this approach we offered the children and young people the biggest possible space to decide which experiences they want to share, disclose or leave unmentioned, and what they themselves perceive as unpleasant, threatening, potentially violent, or, on the other hand, supportive.

We also wanted to bring a de-victimising perspective into the project and therefore focused on the participants' agency. Our perspective of the children and young people as social agents places their strategies, agency and self-effectiveness at the center of the research and also means adopting an attitude of de-victimisation.

This approach is embedded in an understanding of the interdependence of different forms of discrimination, such as racist or ableist discrimination, as the children and parents, and schools, also relate to other social relational processes (Nash 2008; Spradlin & Parsons 2008; de los Reyes & Mulinari 2005; Taylor 2009).<sup>5</sup>

Not least, looking for strategies suggests that social relations are not fixed but constantly negotiated in institutions and must be viewed both in their conditions and their contexts. By emphasizing the dynamics in these negotiations we endeavour to put the processes of these negotiations into focus.

### Reflexivity as Method

Our work is situated in a feminist research tradition. The way we conceptualised the project, it was necessary to be mindful about the specific processes of research. While the local teams formed these processes specifically, we also developed a highly cooperative way to work on the shared frameworks and the comparative aspects of the project. This was done both through regular meetings, as well as through the shared writing of this report. The aim is to be both aware of the specificities, and to understand the complexities and the importance of comparative work.

We are aware that by our choice of focus, the participants are viewed as a 'group', though many of the participants did not refer to a sense of group belonging with other children and young people with LGBTQ/rainbow parents. This is a marked difference from some research, e.g. in North America (Evans 2009). Yet, viewing the children and young people as a group, non-coherent and multifaceted as it is, might challenge normative presumptions of family as heterosexual, and their discussions of these relations is the point of departure in our analysis.

We realised early that some of the terms and concepts of the research topic could not be equally used in the three contexts. For example, we discussed the particular meanings of 'rainbow families', 'rainbow children', 'same-sex families', 'LGBTQ families', and the US-American term 'queer spawn'. Based on these discussions, we adapted our calls for participation, as well as our analytical frameworks, in order to make them meaningful for the communities we related to. This reflexivity is certainly one of the benefits of subject-oriented qualitative research.

Family is a changing and negotiable concept within specific socio-cultural frameworks that needs to be analysed for its meanings in particular contexts and interactions. This applies also to the self-defini-

<sup>5</sup> "Ableism refers to the notion that persons with no identified physical or mental disabilities are superior to persons labelled disabled." (Spradlin & Parsons 2008: 22).

tions of LGBTQ/rainbow families. Both socially and theoretically, the experiences of children and young people with LGBTQ/rainbow parents can be read as challenges to and as re-productions of normative assumptions of what 'family' might mean. Such reflections are important, if we want to understand the narratives of children and young people with LGBTQ/rainbow parents in schools.

It was also necessary for us to reflect upon our own expectations for this research and towards the research participants. What kinds of narratives did we hope for? Thus, our critical reflections of stories of victimisation, as well as of stories of success, mirror these negotiations with our own expectations, which also are situated in communities and political movements. While stories of victimisation can be read as justification for current and future research and political engagement, stories of success can justify lack of action, and nullify any political action or challenges of structural inequalities with research and action. Yet, both narratives, if not critically reflected, can objectify research participants. Instead, we worked with a critical understanding of agency, where people negotiate their positions within their specific contexts (Bacchi 2005; Christensen & Prout 2002).

Beyond the seemingly clear-cut work of this study, we also participated in the – locally different – discussions in the communities we worked with. One thing was clear from the beginning: We have not been interested in looking for victim stories. Neither did we wish to think about children and young people with LGBTQ/rainbow parents 'just as any other kid', which writing a 'success story' about LGBTQ/rainbow families as exceptionally good families would have implied (Epstein 2009). Our view of the children and young people who participated in this study is rather as experts of their lives and we are interested in their narratives and strategies.

### **Reflecting on our Queer-Feminist Research Practises**

We focus on the agency of the research participants, emphasising their strategies, that is to say, we understand the participants as knowledgeable experts of their own lives. Our research envisioned children and young people with LGBTQ/rainbow parents as social actors and recognised their different self-concepts and the complexity of their subjectivities. Postcolonial and queer perspectives have criticised ideas of so-called minorities as unified subjects or positions; highlighting the need to recognise heterogeneities within 'groups' (Visweswaran 1994). While a person can be highly privileged in one situation, they can be excluded from participation in another or experience privilege and subjugation at the same time.

### **Not Giving 'Voice' but Giving Back**

The relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee has been discussed in, for example, ethnographic research. Also, ethical approaches have changed over the last thirty years: From being an informant that could, or rather should, inform the researcher about her or his views or lived experiences. This is a move from participants as a source of documentary character for researchers to scoop from, to a more elaborative and communicative idea of an interview as a place for a common construction of a certain narrative in a certain context.

Viewing an interlocution as a dialogue has also been criticised by feminist researchers, since a dialogue to some extent conceals that the relationship between the interviewer and the interviewed person is not horizontal, but involves a set of power relations on several levels (Ahmed 2000). This also includes the analysis of bodily marked relationships, such as gender, sexuality, skin colour, as well as class, dialects, abilities, age, as well as questions about the researcher's preferential right of interpretation in analysing the interview.

Most ethnographers agree today that the notion of 'giving someone a voice' is patronizing. This also motivated us in this project to reflect on (our) ethical guidelines, as one way to recognise power relations in interview situations. Apart from the more formal ethical guidelines for researchers (which we discuss further down in this chapter), we refer to an understanding of the relationship and communication taking place between the researcher and the interviewed person (Madison 2005).

Analysing interviews and participant observations is a way for the researcher to reciprocate to the field (Czarniawska 2005). In other words, it is the responsibility of the researcher to use critical analytical tools in interpreting the interviews. This is not giving voice, this is giving back, and as such it recognises the interlocution as a site for a reciprocal dialogue performance, as the power relations are acknowledged and taken into account (Madison 2005; Baxter 2003; Bacchi 2005).

### **Research Process**

For this project, we had a qualitative and comparative queer-feminist approach in order to explore how schools conceptualise families and if there are reasons to expect that children and young people with LGBTQ/rainbow parents risk discrimination and violence. We relied on queer-feminist critique of the idea of a normative heterosexual family. The comparative view allows us to further investigate the normative workings and resistances toward these norms in both larger and local contexts (Hemmings 2007).

For the data collection and the analysis, we used diverse methods and collected various materials. Both from a methodological and a political perspective, we aimed to address not only children and young people with lesbian and gay parents, but wanted to reflect experiences of bisexual, trans\*, intersex, and many other queer people, as well as lesbian and gay parents, and those working at and with the intersections of these categorisations (Schmitt 2010b). In all three countries we:

- contacted participants – children, parents, experts – through, for example, snowball sampling, networks for LGBTQ/rainbow families, internet platforms, both within and beyond the researchers' existing research networks. We aimed to reach a variety of participants, in terms of family formations, socio-economic backgrounds, gendered experiences and closeness to or distance from LGBTQ contexts. This process was different in each country.
- met children and young people with LGBTQ/rainbow parents aged 8–23 for interviews. In some interviews, we met children and young people individually, in others, siblings chose to be interviewed together. Some of the younger children were asked to make a drawing of their family. The interviews were of different lengths: from 1 up to 3 hours. We agreed with both children and parents that parents would not be present when the children are interviewed and that the children would not be present in parent's interviews (with few exceptions). This allowed both a space where they could feel able to speak openly about their experiences. We interviewed LGBTQ/rainbow parents. We were interested to learn if and how they anticipated possible experiences of discrimination of their children and the reactions to actual experiences, as well as their strategies to deal with these experiences on their own and together with their children. We wanted to know if parents discuss fears and experiences of discrimination, homophobia, and transphobia with their children, close people, teachers, other parents, and other people. We looked at how parents engage with schools and how this engagement is informed by other social relations such as class or racialization (Taylor 2009; Jiménez 2009).
- also interviewed and had informal conversations with experts such as teachers, other educators, researchers, social workers, psychologists, LGBTQ activists, and policy makers because we were interested in relating our results to the socio-cultural contexts and to the different educational policies. This was helpful in the

analysis of the interviews with the children and young people. The aim was to explore how these experts discuss how schools in the three different societies deal with the presence of LGBTQ/rainbow families, with children from these families in class, as well as with dealing with this topic in class in general. We were wondering if there was an awareness of an everyday normalisation of heteronormativity and homophobic and transphobic acts and attitudes such as silencing, sexualizing, and exoticising? We were also interested in seeing, if the teachers refer to or use different socio-political frameworks for working with issues of inclusion and exclusion.

- used interview guides, which we developed specifically for different groups of participants, and were also tailored to fit the country specific situations. The questions developed through the interview guidelines (for adults and children) were chosen to be as open as possible combined with a high level of sensitivity towards certain issues and adequate ways to formulate them (see appendix).
- tape-recorded all of the interviews, transcribed and analysed them. The analysis involves various stories about schools, friends and families as they were discussed by the participants. As an analytical approach we referred to post-structuralist feminist discourse analysis (Baxter 2003), as well as to aspects of constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz 2006).
- we also felt it is important that we participate in public debates and discussions about the situation of children and young people with LGBTQ/rainbow families in schools.

In the following reflections, we discuss the research processes in Germany, Slovenia and Sweden, and the implications for the study.

### Data Collection and Interview Situations

Interviews are interactive situations with specific power relations. The interviews with the children and young people are central, and we accompany them with the interviews with parents and experts. We understand interviews as re-constructive processes that do not aim at the gathering of 'truths', but focus on the participants' narratives and discursive patterns. In the research process we reflected on how the children and young people would react to us as researchers, and how they would negotiate loyalties with their parents (Epstein 2009: 15; Garner 2005). Another issue that concerned us during the interviews and in the analysis was how the age of the participants informed the conversations.

Theoretical standpoints also charge the interview situation and the work with interviews within a study. In this report we view the interview participants as experts of their own lives, experienced and reflexive and with an analytical insight in their reflections of their everyday life. Our task was to bring together a number of informed narratives to search for patterns, commonalities, and even oddities on various levels of interpretation. Since the specific contexts directly informed the interviews, we will present the local experiences and challenges country by country.

### **Germany**

Altogether 22 children, youngsters, and young adults between 8 and 20 years who grow up in a rainbow family were interviewed in Germany. In addition, 29 adults were interviewed who identified themselves as lesbian, gay, transgender or as homosexual parents and socially-related persons who live together with children in a household. The interviewees live in different parts of Germany, in large and provincial towns, or in rural surroundings.

To contextualise the narratives in regard to experiences of the children and parents within school 8 expert interviews were conducted (teachers at primary and secondary schools, pedagogical experts, and LGBTQ family activists communicating LGBTQ issues in schools, persons from equal-treatment administrations).

In the composition of the group of interviewees, different social categories were taken into account, such as gender, socio-cultural- and socio-economic experiences, as well as limitations in respect to physical arrangements. Also taken into consideration were 'reproductive backgrounds', which might be relevant to the self-image of the family or their perception in the immediate environment; for example, whether a child was conceived through artificial insemination or in a heterosexually organised context.

At the same time, the arrangement of the sample was restricted. Despite many attempts, we were unable to motivate LGBTQ families from Eastern Germany to take part in the study. Many LGBTQ parents said they had already been asked several times for interviews by different researchers and admitted to interview fatigue. Others expressed their fears concerning the treatment of the collected data. Others gave the fact that one of the researchers had already had published several studies on the subject as a reason for their readiness to participate in the conversation. That made it easier for many of them to trust the attitude of the researchers with regard to their responsibility towards sensitive data and the subject as a political issue. There were several LGBTQ parents who agreed to an interview, but

did not want their children to be interviewed or expressed concerns towards this, wishing to protect them against the possible effects of 'othering' or opening up the issue of violence.

As a rule, the parents got in touch with us by email after receiving the invitation to participate in the study. During the first telephone call, interested persons were given the opportunity to openly discuss their concerns. These were, for the most part, questions regarding the basic conditions and duration of the interviews, but also concerning subsequent treatment and use of the results.

All interviews took place with the families at home. In some cases, issues that were especially delicate were only discussed after turning off the audio device. During the interviews, especially with younger children, the interviewer needed to be flexible in responding to verbal as well as non-verbal cues during the communication, and needed to be aware of the 'worlds' of the children and the issues of importance to them in each case.

Children were implicitly and explicitly addressed as experts of their situation. The so called 'expert question', where children and young people were asked to give advice to children with similar experiences and to teachers how they should treat children with LGBTQ families was taken very serious.

The children were encouraged to make the interview situation as pleasant as possible for themselves. They were also asked to feel free to speak in whatever way felt good to them. When asked about their motivation, most of the children and young people stated that they participated to do their parents a favour. Some of them added that they wanted to support the idea to improve the conditions in schools. Some purely enjoyed to be interviewed. Some children and young people were especially interested in the question of what would happen to their narratives. Here it was important for the interviewer to explain to them how their unique personal story becomes part of a much bigger story about other children while preserving its own uniqueness and importance.

The interviews were conducted by two female researchers over the course of one year. We proposed that parents and children met with a different interviewer to allow a fruitful exchange of impressions and experiences.

### **Slovenia**

In the Slovenian part of the study, the researchers encountered more difficulties than expected. Based on the experiences of one of the Slovenian researchers, who conducted the first research on rainbow families in Slovenia, we expected to be able to reach them, as we already had a considerable number of

personal contacts and ‘access to the field’, as well as also high visibility and research-trustworthiness. At the same time, one Slovenian researcher is active as educator for kindergarten and primary school teachers, and the whole research team strived to be as much publicly visible as possible (giving interviews, holding lectures, publishing in daily papers etc.). Nevertheless, it was very difficult to reach and engage children with rainbow families and, thus, the research sample in the case of Slovenia is much smaller than expected and planned. The reasons for this can be found mainly in the fact that families that were created earlier than a couple of years ago (where relatively much more children were born in heterosexual relationships), learned to lead a very secretive life and are continuing to do so in order to protect the children and the parental positions (fear of custody law-suits, for example) in a heteronormative and homophobic environment. Moreover, those parents that were willing to give us an interview were very reluctant to engage their children in the research. We discuss these issues thoroughly in the results section.

We approached this difficulty and drawbacks in different ways. We also interviewed parents who have children younger than the project planned age (younger than eight years old), and asked them about their experiences and projections, which proved to be a successful strategy for acquiring data. We also used other sources, which we believed would be beneficiary to a thorough analysis of the situation: analysis of other related existing research on Slovenia (research on homophobia in schools, research on attitudes of kindergarten teachers towards homosexuality, research on gay and lesbian teachers); micro-research inside courses and trainings for primary school teachers; analysis of public debates and political discourse, mainly connected to the current Family Code Bill (that served us to better understand the context and attitudes towards LGBTQ families); being active in the lives of rainbow families in Slovenia (joining meetings, events, excursions, following their web forum and continuing contacts and exchange with same-sex families). Thus, the researchers were, in addition to the research activities, involved in the following:

- working with the media: acting as experts on the topic, giving interviews, responding in public debates, writing articles for daily papers etc.
- working with teachers: educating teachers on the topic through seminars held for primary school and kindergarten teachers.
- working with the policy-makers: lobbying, attending conferences and communicating, as well as informing policy makers (in the legal arena and in the educational arena).

- working with activists: support and providing expert knowledge to activists, currently fighting for legislation changes.
- working with other researchers: research support to another research project, on attitudes towards homosexuality in kindergarten teachers, using this opportunity to raise awareness in kindergarten teachers and parents.

We strongly believe that we have added some additional value to the project with these activities, and can surely confirm that we have been able to provide support in changes taking place in the attitudes towards children coming from same-sex families in Slovenia.

In Slovenia, 16 parents from 11 families were interviewed: two men, 14 women, 29–54 years old, all except one from urban areas. In these families 15 children are growing up (five aged up to 6 years, six aged 6–14, three aged 14–18 and one older than 18). In addition, three young persons from rainbow families were interviewed. Their age was between 16 and 23 years. The interviews were conducted between November 2010 and April 2011. All of the interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed. Two of the children also made a family map.

In research on teachers five interviews were conducted with primary and secondary school teachers and three interviews with educational professionals: one headmaster, one official from the Ministry of Education, and one high school professor from the pedagogy field.

The Slovenian research study has a strong explorative note: as the interviews with parents (and also children) show, no models of living and coping in same-sex families yet exist or are not yet recognizable to the families themselves. A reflection of this is also an impossibility of typologisation or categorisation of their experiences. Nevertheless, in the results section we do present examples of strategies and clusters of experiences, which are valid in the sense of understanding the daily life of same-sex parents in relation to homophobia and schools.

The process of interviewing included not only a discussion on the experienced or perceived homophobic connoted or motivated violence in school-life, but also a more general discussion on society, projections, and expectations, as well as ideas how to combat homophobia, parental roles and statuses, children’s lives in and outside school, as well as in and outside the connectedness with their family etc. In the case of experts, expectations, ideas, and views on homophobic behaviour, as well as on how to deal with it, were discussed. The implications of all these issues are discussed in the results section of this report.



## Sweden

Our study witnesses a telling paradox. We spread the word about the study both in our personal and professional networks (that include teachers), contacted the association for school nurses, networks of rainbow families, LGBTQ organisations and also created a Facebook site (Regnbågsbarn Daphne). We were confident that our position as queer-feminist researchers within gender studies would make it easy for us to get in touch with participants. From the beginning, we received support from many people who confirmed how important this research would be. Yet, the translation of goodwill into research participation was less smooth than expected. While we have actively tried to contact children and parents with diverse experiences of living in Sweden, we understand that our study reflects a specific part of LGBTQ communities and experiences in Sweden.

The parents that met with us self-identified themselves as lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer and/or trans\*. By addressing and analysing sexuality and gender as interrelated but not naturally linked, we wanted to work with the existing experiences that do not reflect categorisations as lesbian and gay. This includes experiences where 'same-sex' parents gender themselves as transgender.

In addition, we discussed our work in various contexts and participated in the debates in queer communities. Beyond informal conversations with activists and parents, we presented the project at the Rainbow Festival 2010 in Malmö, at Springpride 2011 in Eskilstuna, and at the Rainbow days 2011 in Malmö, as well as in more informal contexts. We were also active in workshops with teachers on norm-critical education, and wrote an article for the national journal for school nurses, as well as in the Nordic journal for LGBTQ research, *lambda nordica*.

We interviewed 8 children and young people. The participants could choose if they wished, for example, that a sibling be present.

We also interviewed 16 parents. These interviews were often, if not exclusively, with two parents, sometimes, all parents the child was in contact with were involved in the study.

We contacted 14 experts (researchers, educators, policy-makers, activists) in two stages, at the beginning of the study and later on for discussions of the pedagogical manuals.

The interviews with children and young people, as well as with the parents, took place at the homes of the participants in most occasions. In one interview with a four clover family the interviews were conducted in both the fathers' home and in the mothers' home. The feeling of safety and confidence

was always our first concern in the fieldwork. Most of the time the interviews with children and young people took place in their own rooms, while there were occasions when we interviewed the children in the kitchen with closed doors. With the younger children there were also discussions on playing, toys, and things relevant to their everyday life, which gave us a context of what it is like to grow up in Sweden today and what matters in their world, since we see playing as the children's way to handle not only relationships, but also emotional situations of conflicts, social skills, friendships, wishes, and selfhood.

We found it easy to create rapport with the children and young people; they were engaged to talk about both their school situation and their families. All of them had a good relation to all of their parents, and many lived with or had lived in shared custody with their father (from their mother's previous heterosexual relationship). One of the children had a close relationship to her mother's previous girlfriend. This does not mean that relationships between the parents in the various constellations were always conflict-free, but this we learned in the parents' interviews rather than in the interview with the child.

As we will discuss further in our results we also learned that most of the children had good experiences at school, with little or no direct bullying at all. Many of the younger children found it difficult to understand why there were questions that connected their parents' same-sex relationship with bullying in school. This does not imply that they could not find connections between certain experiences of being questioned for having a 'different' family; rather, outspoken bullying, harassments, and group bullying were not their experiences, except for one teenager.

If it was difficult to talk about a direct connection between their parents' sexuality and school with some of the children, it was easier to talk about these topics as separate items. Assuming that connection, as the research project to some extent did in its purpose, many of the parents were concerned that the children would automatically make a connection between lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans\* or queer identifications with victimisation or deviance. We were very concerned not to put words in the mouth of the children (nor the parents).

However, as we will explore further, the parents were worried that teachers would express themselves in homophobic ways, and therefore they had taken precautions to prevent that from happening.

In the situations where we met both with children and their parents, interviewing family members one at the time provided us with a map of communication streams that take on different routes.

## Ethics

In this research project, we aimed to be reflexive of the ethical dilemmas that are inscribed in research with children and young people (Schmitt 2008: 65). This has been an important and ongoing debate in child and youth research for some time: “[...] *there are methodological problems particular to the study of children’s cultures that begin when one asks the question: ‘where is the child’s perspective?’ Only by answering this question can researchers begin to move away from the notion that the majority of elements of peer culture originate from children’s perceptions of, and reactions to, the adult world [...]. Moreover, it is important to understand the relationship between the researcher and her informants. Children experience much of their contact with adults in subordinate positions of power.*” (Caputo 1995: 32–33).

Reflexive childhood and youth research works with an understanding that children are social actors and active participants in research conversations with the right to participate, to be informed, to ask questions, and to be listened to (Christensen & Prout 2002: 7; United Nations 1989). As Christensen points out, a researcher does not have to use specific methods but “*has to be aware of [...] local cultures of communication among children, paying attention to the social actions of children, their use of language and the meanings they put into words, notions and actions.*” (Christensen 1999: 76–77).

As researchers we perceive ourselves and the participants, whether children or adults, as social actors, in different contexts.

This ethical approach concerns questions of transparency, openness, and forms of communication – i.e., the protection of rights affected by the research process, for example, privacy, integrity, dignity, and respect. In addition, we consider it an ethical duty to offer the possibility of intervention to the parties involved during the exchange and after the research process so that those who have authorised the research may also benefit through their participation from the result of the work.

Contact with children and young people was mostly through their parents. In following standard procedures in research ethics, we asked for written parental consent for all the interviews with minors. Parents and experts also were asked for written consent.

Parents or other guardians were not present for the interviews, in order to minimise issues of loyalty that might make it hard for children to speak critically about their parents, and to protect the children’s and young people’s integrity.

## Germany

In Germany, whether a research project complies with ethical standards lies with the respective universities. Our basic ethical position was reflected in the actual research process in the following ways.

When first establishing contact with the adult participants, details regarding the concept, objectives, and dissemination of results of the research project were discussed, as well as the implementation of rules regarding privileged information. The latter was explicitly indicated as adaptable, modifiable, and oriented to the requirements and terms set by the participants described.

Before the interview took place, parents were asked to give their consent in writing for the participation of any children under age. In addition, the children themselves could confirm their consent with a written signature. The approval of their own participation in an interview was also confirmed in writing by the parents.

Reassurances to the participants that none of the statements made in the interview would be repeated or passed on to any unauthorised persons or even other family members were well received and accepted by everyone. The participants were informed about the research process and were invited to be continuously involved in it and discuss the results. It was the responsibility of the researcher to be aware of the trust placed in them by the participants and to treat that with care within the limits of confidentiality.

For the analytical process we were careful to reflect upon, whether the children felt obliged to respond to a question in a way that they felt they might be expected to answer. The readiness of the interviewees, whether children or adults, to speak about sensitive issues such as experiences of discrimination and associated feelings of shame, concerns or self-blame often depends on the conduct of the interviewer. The actual interview meetings were framed by informal periods of differing lengths so that the participants could become acquainted with the interviewer.

## Slovenia

In the case of Slovenia, next to general sociological research ethical issues (confidentiality, interviewer-interviewee relationship, reciprocity in research, etc.), we identified also certain specific ethical considerations. One of these is connected to recruitment of interview participants: we would receive information on an existing same-sex parented family (for example, from a school teacher), but this family was not aware of our knowledge of their family constellation, which posed a problem in how to contact them. Another ethical consideration was

(also due to the smallness of the Slovenian population and especially the LGBT population, leading to a situation of ‘everyone knows everyone’) connected to a careful choice of interviewing combination (which researcher will interview whom). This was considered when one or more researchers would personally know a certain family or the parents of a child, which would cause distortions in the interview process (issues of loyalties). The next ethical consideration involved the ‘effects’ of the interview process: for example, one interviewee (parent) felt encouraged after the interview to speak openly with her daughter about the, until then, hidden issues of the homosexuality of parents. Next, the small research sample called for special carefulness regarding the written reconstruction of the family story in the sense of recognisability and privacy/anonymity. Moreover, from the perspective of research ethics, the researchers believe that this research also involved a responsibility for an active promotion of social change.

### Sweden

The Swedish project was reviewed and approved by the regional Ethical Review Board, based on the Ethical Review Act (Ministry of Education and Cultural Affairs 2003). We approached prospective interview persons with invitation letters and interview guides. All the participants were presented with letters of consent for all interview groups (children, parents, experts). Here we explained our obligations as researchers to ensure the participants’ integrity in the research and our scientific handling of the research materials. Integrity implies that participation is voluntary, that we as researchers keep secrecy about participants’ identity, that all personally identifiable materials will be kept in a locked cabinet, and that we anonymise all participants at the earliest moment, that is, during transcription. Also, participants were informed that they are entitled to withdraw their participation, and that they can demand information about the personal information we file.

While we sometimes received information about children and young people with LGBTQ parents, we asked in these cases that these families contact us directly in order to emphasise that participation was voluntary. We also decided not to interview (children of) close friends. We have also interviewed siblings, however in the analysis we do not present siblings as siblings to protect their identity. We have also decided to break up some of the narratives of the children, and present them under different names, if we feel the story is too directly linked to one specific person. Also, we do not mention if we interviewed both children and parents in one family.

## Transcriptions

While we created a common basis for our methodology and the research process, we want to discuss some of the specificities of the process of transcribing. We see this as an important aspect of reflexive research to be transparent also about the details of the research process.

### Germany

*Uli Streib-Brzič, Christiane Quadflieg*

All the interviews were recorded on an audio recording device and, with the help of a transcription programme operated by trained people, put into words. The transcription rules were oriented towards current scientific standards, one necessarily judged through the degree of detail in the presentation of the behavioural characteristics of the conversation, as well as the demands of legibility required and equally agreed upon by the teams (see appendix).

Where a number of people worked on the same transcription, an advance comparison was carried out to ensure its accuracy. At the same time we assume, through Breuer, that transcription undertaken with the participation of several people will bring out, at best, “*a creation made by experts under the maxim of consensus*” (Breuer 2009: 66; [Transl. C. Q.](#)). This means that we should be aware of the fact that the transcribed material reflects the interpretation of the person who has transcribed it.

For the purposes of a re-constructive approach, we have undertaken a reflected and controlled process that addresses the experiences and thinking of the people who have transcribed the recordings and this has been productive for our analysis and enriched it with enhanced perspectives. The focus of this was to ask people to write down their approaches and observations and thinking in a shared discussion with us.

### Slovenia

*Maja Pan*

Before this research I had not been extensively involved in transcription work. After establishing basic transcribing rules in the international team, and sharing technical ideas (programme f4), I got involved in transcribing interviews conducted with children, parents, and teachers/experts. Teachers were the only ones that I was also interviewing. For me transcribing was an opportunity to get closer to the material. Besides, it gave me a different perception of and therefore different insights into the interviewee’s attitudes than I would have gained, if only reading their words written down. Therefore I would like to stress paralingual phenomena such as coughing, giggling, wiping nose, knocking at the



table that I was especially careful about when transcribing. There was a case where snuffing could not be distinguished from crying. For this reason, I deployed a very precise and detailed transcription, as I was aware that readers, who would not have a chance to hear and thus meet the reality of the interviewees, might lose the chance to grasp important non-spoken communication. I also focused a lot on the detailed transmission of the live communication contact between interviewer and interviewee. There were almost no hearing difficulties or difficulties in comprehending the sound.

As experienced in contact with youth and adults who experience homophobia, it proved helpful to recognise the language of some of the paralingual phenomena also just from voice.

## **Sweden**

*Kristin Linderöth*

Literature on transcription indicates agreement about the fact that transcription, though often treated that way in practice, cannot be reduced to a chore or an act of manual labour only. An overview made by Christina Davidson shows that transcription is a theoretical, selective, interpretive, and representational process or, as put by Barbro Klein, an analytical act (Davidson 2009, 2010; Klein 1990).

The lack of scientific interest in the process is partly related to perceptions that transcribers capture the reality of the recorded conversation in the transcript (Tilley & Powick 2002; Franquiz & Dixon 1997). Tilley and Powick underline the importance of questioning the assumption that the recording equals data, that the transcription equals the recording and hence, that the transcription equals data. Instead, transcription is about making choices and the exercise of power in the research process. An important point made by Klein is that, being a matter of choice, the act of transcription can be refined *ad infinitum*. The core task is to capture aspects relevant to one's aim, rather than to strive for correctness, a conclusion also drawn by Jen Ross (Ross 2010; Kvale 1996).

A study on hired transcribers made by Susan Tilley and Kelly D. Powick demonstrates specific difficulties and challenges when the person transcribing is not the same one who has conducted the interview in question. They recommend that hired transcribers have connections to the research project to encourage an investment in the process. They also underline the importance of continuous discussions between researchers and transcribers regarding the complexity of the process, as well as clear instructions from the researchers on how to perform the task at hand.

### 3. Theoretical Framework

Maja Pan, Irina Schmitt, Christiane Quadflieg, Malena Gustavson,  
Ana M. Sobočan, Uli Streib-Brzič, Darja Zaviršek

In both our research processes and our discussions in the research team and separate national teams, it was an important asset that the researchers brought different training, professional, and theoretical background and research experiences to the project. Our analysis is based on various interdisciplinary theoretical approaches and concepts embedded in queer feminist theories that focus on analysing the production of norms. Another important aspect is how we as researchers position ourselves in the field. This means that we analyse how our interpretations are embedded in epistemological perspectives and in ethical considerations that rely on perspectives of social justice (Haraway 1988). Thus, we aim to problematise the instrumentalisation of knowledge, i.e. the reproduction of oppressive mechanisms that have been thoroughly criticised by post-colonial, post-structuralist feminist, and queer feminist theorists. Such mechanisms can be normativisation, normalisation, construction of identities as fixed, or human rightism in the context of liberal ideology (Brown 1995; Rasmussen 2010).

For our research it is relevant to understand that negotiations of family formations in school are not merely relevant for children and young people with LGBTQ/rainbow parents, but are part of the everyday routines. We agree with Epstein that *“schools not only reproduce dominant cultural norms such as homophobia, sexism and heterosexism, but are important sites for the production of sexual and other identities”* (Epstein 1999: 68).

Critical education researchers have long agreed that, as Epstein argues, that *“understandings of the meanings and practises that make up broader student cultures around issues of sexuality and family are crucial to developing pedagogical and administrative practises that effectively challenge dominant norms”* (Epstein 1999: 68).

For making these traditions of thought viable for our study, we focused on analysing how the social categories of gender/sexuality and family reproduce meanings in the context of education and how they were reaffirmed by social practises of heteronormative de-normalisation among other things expressed by forms of homophobic connotated violence. Further, we investigate performativities that also continuously challenge heteronormative discourse and if there also might be different imagi-

naries of the family available in school and thus how they would be presented.

#### Thinking ‘Family’ through Heteronormativity

Our main theoretical challenge has been to deconstruct the notion of ‘family’ and gender/sexuality as normative notions of family are common referents in discussion of family construction in education. The concept of heteronormativity is useful for a critical reading of the notion of family, as it questions such normative assumptions, rather than re-iterating non-normative family formations as deviant. The idea of heteronormativity helps to understand the normative assumptions behind seemingly ‘natural’ or ‘normal’ social formations and relationships, such as the ‘heterosexual monogamous white middle class couple’ (Butler 1990; Rosenberg 2002). That these formations are considered ‘normal’ is a social agreement that is written into societal laws and customs constantly reproduced through social and structural (discursive) practises of normalisation.

Heteronormative structures embrace also those in LGBTQ/rainbow families, in which they sometimes are, and discursively also expected to be, discriminated as the social relations act upon heteronormative agendas. There has been a tendency to victimise children and young people with LGBTQ/rainbow parents through the sexualisation of their parents and by ascribing them non-normative sexualities because of their parents (Mooney-Somers & Somers 2009).

Following Stevi Jackson social constructions of gender/sexuality can be theorised on four levels: *“the structural, at which gender is constructed as a hierarchical social division and heterosexuality institutionalized, for example, by marriage, the law and the state; the level of meaning, encompassing the discursive construction of gender and sexuality and the meanings negotiated in everyday social interaction; the level of routine, everyday social practices through which gender and sexuality are constantly constituted and reconstituted within localized contexts and relationships; and finally, at the level of subjectivity through which we experience desires and emotions and make sense of ourselves as embodied gendered and sexual beings.”* (Jackson 2005: 8–9).

In this research the critique of the normalisation of heterosexuality is seen as central to understanding social and political discursive practices, including those operating in educational institutions. Those practices construct and maintain the power hierarchy of difference across sexual identities by repetitive reaffirming of the dichotomy of male/female corporeality, i.e. gender binarism.

As education researcher Kevin K. Kumashiro argues: *"Oppression originates in discourse, and, in particular, in the citing of particular discourses, which frame how people think, feel, act, and interact. In other words, oppression is the citing of harmful discourses and there petition of harmful histories."* (Kumashiro 2000: 40).

## Thinking Violence and Homophobia Critically

### Analysing Norms, not 'Difference'

We work with an understanding of a 'queer analytical shift' where the subject is analysed as constituted by and at the same time constitutes discourses of and positions in family formations, and where the research perspective moves from analysing 'difference' to analyse norms. With this in mind different concepts and practices of non-conventional/non-heteronormative relations represented by LGBTQ/rainbow families, parents, and children can be seen as a possibility to destabilise the construction of the normative heterosexual matrix (Bower & Klecka 2009; Butler 1990; Butler 1993).

### Conceptualisation of Violence

We contextualise violence in social relations of dominance and discrimination and their interdependences. We refer to concepts of violence which are not limited to dimensions of physical violence such as coercion (Neidhardt 1986), or defined as an intentional act of power with effect of physical harm (Popitz 1992), but refer to concepts with a broader definition (see, for example, Popp 2002). This concept includes psychological violence such as relational violence which is a mostly hidden not an overt form of violence that can be performed verbally or non-verbally through exclusion, humiliation, damage of reputation (spreading rumours) (Ittel & Salisch 2005), as well as through bullying, which is defined as the systematical mistreating of a person by a single perpetrator or a smaller group over a longer period of time (Schäfer & Herpell 2010).

The definition of violence we refer to perceives also institutional, societal, and symbolic structures as possible factors of generating violence (Galtung 1975; Bourdieu 1973). Here we also would include invisibility and silencing as normalised practices (Ås 2004; Stuve et al. 2010). Recent research differentiated forms of gender- and sexuality-based bullying (Moy 2008; Meyer 2009).

Also, we found it important to specifically analyse the meanings and practices of violence in the three concrete research contexts.

### Conceptualising Homophobia and De-Normalisation

We position discriminatory practises such as homophobia, transphobia, and de-normalisation within these conceptualisations of violence. In the first instance, homophobia can be summarised as the negative attitudes and discrimination against people who are seen as or are lesbian, bisexual, and gay, and is, thus, based on non-heterosexual forms of sexuality and socio-sexual identification. Transphobia can be summarised as the negative attitudes and discrimination against people who are seen as or are transgender and transsexual, and is, thus, based on gender expression.

Our discussion reflects different foci to analytically describe the experience of children and young people with LGBTQ/rainbow parents who (might) be addressed by forms of violence in relation to their LGBTQ identified parents and their non-heterosexual organised families.

Following the concept of normalisation we suggest the term de-normalisation to emphasise the effects of normalisation. Describing those who do not comply to (hetero) norms as abnormal through processes or acts of exclusion marks them as 'deviant other' (Hark 1999).

It also works to reaffirm existing norms and perceptions of normality (Butler 2009). To operate with the term de-normalisation means to emphasise on regulative power effects of heteronormativity in the context of negotiations of social power, questions of hierarchy and status among peers, and in respect to interpersonal and structural levels in school (pedagogues and school curriculum) dealing with non-normative formations such as non-hetero-normative families.

Importantly, many researchers discuss practises of discrimination not only, and sometimes not even primarily, as physical violence or processes of direct exclusion. Normalisation and de-normalisation work precisely through assumptions of certain behaviours, which can silence and make invisible experiences that do not match these assumptions. One example for how such assumptions can work is the seemingly innocent strategy of 'just asking', thus marking difference by maintaining a normative position: *"The capacity of ignorance to appear innocent and passive may well be an operation of its power, while the appearance itself of innocence and passivity may be one of its effects."* (Sullivan 2004: 169).

We also reflected on the meanings and implications of concepts such as 'homophobia' and 'transpho-

bia' for this study. These are important terms to name and describe existing power-hierarchies and their sometimes violent effects (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights 2009), as well as ongoing work to change these. Some theorists argue, however, that these terms can easily lead to a homogenisation of non-heteronormative experiences and to an individualisation of discriminatory practises, thus obscuring the structural and interpersonal power relations within heterosexist practises of social stigmatisation (Herek 2004). A feminist critique emphasises on the effect of indirect suppression by not-naming sexist gender norms and power-relations, and the idea of two-gender hegemony (Marehn 2011).

Critical work on homophobia and transphobia can help to understand the structural embeddedness of discriminatory strategies (Meyer 2009). Here it is argued that homophobia and transphobia can be experienced regardless of individual identifications, if, for example, young people with LGBTQ parents are discriminated through homophobia and transphobia (Bouley 2007). It is meaningful to differentiate between 'direct' and 'indirect' homophobia in the context of an understanding that identifications and belongings are neither (fully) biologically fixed nor stable.<sup>6</sup>

Not all researchers in the field use the notion of homophobia to analyse the experiences of children and young people in LGBTQ/rainbow families. For example, Susan Golombok reported in the context of Swedish hearings towards legal change that young adults with lesbian parents had not been "teased" more than their classmates, but that they were "more sensitive" to "teasing" about (their) sexualities (Golombok 1997: 30). We will later on discuss the possibility to read that 'sensitivity' as competence.

<sup>6</sup> Earlier research is intensely concerned with the sexual orientation and gender identities of children with especially lesbian and transgender parents and researchers underscore that the sexuality and gender identity of the parents has little or no influence on the children's development (Green 1978; Golombok 1997). While important in the context of legal changes, some researchers and activists critically question the need for and usefulness of such narratives (Mooney-Somers & Somers 2009; Kuvalanka & Goldberg 2009).

## 4. Socio-political Background of the Situation of LGBTQ/Rainbow Families

## Part II

Children and young people with LGBTQ parents have diverse families.

A recent report on family policies in Europe suggests that there “are two main types of rainbow families: those where the child(ren) stem(s) from previous heterosexual relationships and those where same-sex couples realise the desire for a child via reproductive medicine, adoption or fostering”, and problematically categorises such as families under ‘new and rare family forms’ (Kuronen 2010: 26–27). While this does not entirely do justice to the diversity of family structures and reproductive strategies represented in our study, it reflects the necessity to understand possible implications of the social and legal frameworks the participants in our study related to.

While the focus of our study is on experiences in schools, rather than, for example, on struggles for legal recognition or on medical support for LGBTQ people and families, we understand that these issues affect attitudes towards children and young people with LGBTQ/rainbow parents. Here we would like to present an overview of the social and legal frameworks that inform both the research participants’ experiences, and, even more directly, of our research.

### 4.1. Social and Legal Situation in Germany

*Uli Streib-Brzič, Christiane Quadflieg*

In Germany, homosexual acts between (male) adults – women were excluded from this legislation for much of the time – were legalised in 1968 (East Germany) and 1969 (West Germany). Full legalisation came through the abolition of Article 175 in 1988 (East Germany) and 1994 (West Germany) – more than twenty years after the American Psychiatric Association (APA) changed the classification of homosexuality from a mental disorder to a variation of human condition. In West Germany, an extended implementation of Article 175 that the Nazis formulated in 1935 banning “obscene acts” was not retained in full until 1969.

This undoubtedly influenced and shaped the atmosphere in society along with common attitudes towards homosexuality in the 1960s. The invisibility that gay and lesbians chose and maintained both in East and West Germany lasted for decades.

Rosa von Praunheim’s film ‘It Is Not the Homosexual Who Is Perverse, But the Society in Which He Lives’ (*Nicht der Homosexuelle ist pervers, sondern die Gesellschaft, in der er lebt*), presented during the 1971 Berlin Film Festival can be seen as a turning point in Western Germany. In the 1970s the gay and lesbian movement began to organise itself, founding initiatives like the Homosexual Action West-Berlin (*HAW Homosexuelle Aktion Westberlin*), the Lesbian Action Centre (*LAZ Lesbisches Aktionszentrum*) and, later on, the Lesbian Circle (*Lesbenring*). Events like the annual Lesbian Week and Lesbian Spring Meeting were conducted and the first Gay Pride Parade (organised in 1979) brought 400 activists together to march along the Kurfürstendamm in Berlin. In 1986, the first homosexual kiss was broadcast on television in the popular soap opera ‘*Lindenstraße*’ and again, fifteen years later, Berlin’s mayor Wowereit coined the famous and oft-cited phrase with which he came out: “I’m gay, and that is good the way it is.” Whereas gays and lesbians started to become more visible and claimed recognition, families headed by same-sex couples or single parents remained invisible considerably longer. Gay and lesbian parents – although they raised children before society even recognised or discussed this – have been seen as a contradiction, the “pregnant lesbian felt like an oxymoron” (Streib 1991). Tolerating ‘strange’ sexualities was one thing, but to imagine them as parents seemed unthinkable – the European Eurobarometer 2006 poll still shows that the level of acceptance decreases when respondents are asked whether they would allow adoption for homosexuals (European Commission 2006). Not just from outside but also within the LGBT communities, the idea of parenting and being lesbian or gay seemed to be a mismatch. There were weighty arguments against it: should we not deny the emulation of heterosexual life models and have we not fought against patriarchal institutions like motherhood and marriage? The image of the ‘independent amazon’ was especially attractive for feminist lesbians and even more so as a political idea. Towards the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s marked the first publications about gay fathers (Büntzly 1988) and lesbian motherhood (Streib 1991), followed by others (Sasse 1995; Thiel 1996; Rauchfleisch 1997; Rupp 2009; Gerlach 2010). Lesbian mothers and gay fathers formed groups and initiatives, such as ILSE as a part of the Lesbian and Gay Association (LSVD).



Parenting by LGBTQ<sup>7</sup> people came more and more into focus and was discussed as a possible life-concept: having a family through foster care, adoption, insemination or heterosexual intercourse or relationship, parenting as a couple, as a single person or involving more people as parents. The first representative research on children of LGBT parents was conducted in 2009 and its results – confirming prior research stating that kids develop properly and parents are doing fine – could be read in newspapers and cited on the radio and in TV shows and can therefore be seen as a milestone (Rupp 2009).

In 2001 the Life Partnership Act (*Lebenspartnerschaftsgesetz – LPartG*) drafted by the Green Party and Social Democrats came into force. Although far from equality to the marriage of heterosexual partners, the law gives same-sex couples several rights and obligations in areas such as inheritance, alimony, health insurance, immigration, and name changes. All tax relevant aspects were excluded and especially led to financial disadvantages for gay and lesbian parents compared to heterosexual families. Also the right of joint adoption was – after intense debate – excluded. This invoked resistance and efforts to amend the law. Discussing the scope of the revisions turned out to be a platform for conservative and Christian politicians to air prejudices that had been subdued for a long time. Nevertheless, a revised version came into force in 2005 which at least includes the right to stepchild adoption (and outlawing polygamy, which had obviously been overlooked in the first version, allowing for a number of years the possibility of being legally married to a man and a woman at the same time).

Ten years after the first couple registered, the Green party and the Lesbian and Gay Association LSVD increased their efforts to attain full equalisation. It might help that the European Court of Justice (ECJ) in Luxembourg recently called Germany to account once again for changing its legislation, to ensure that it does not violate the Equal Treatment Directive (2000/78/EC; in force since 2003) and allow homosexual couples to gain the same advantages as heterosexuals (June 2011).

2006 the General Act on Equal Treatment passed banning, among others, discrimination on sexual orientation; earlier on, three German Federal States (Bremen, Brandenburg, Berlin) had amended their constitutions stating that presenting his and her sexual identity has to be a documented right for everybody. The framework curriculum for Berlin schools already included the phrase that talking about “different kind of life-styles” and also “same-sex life models” (Framework curriculum for lessons and education in Berlin schools, AV 27, 2001) should be part of sex-education in 2001. Currently, Berlin initiated a two year running campaign

against homophobia addressing especially schools and the administrative level in the field of education.

### Recommended Readings

- Bubeck, Ilona (Ed.) (2000). *Unser Stück vom Kuchen. Zehn Positionen gegen die Homoehe*. Berlin: Querverlag.
- Dennert, Gabriele, Christiane Leidinger, Franziska Rauchut (Eds.) (2007). *In Bewegung bleiben. 100 Jahre Politik, Kultur und Geschichte von Lesben*. Berlin: Querverlag.
- Funcke, Dorett & Petra Thorn (Eds.) (2010). *Die gleichgeschlechtliche Familie mit Kindern. Interdisziplinäre Beiträge zu einer neuen Lebensform*. Bielefeld: Transcript.

## 4.2. Social and Legal Situation in Slovenia

*Darja Zaviršek, Ana M. Sobočan, Maja Pan*

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) persons in Slovenia face challenges in daily life, not experienced by non-LGBT citizens. The main national legal document *Ustava Republike Slovenije* (Constitution of the Republic of Slovenia), prohibits discrimination also on the basis of sexual orientation. Furthermore, such discrimination is banned in a variety of other fields (regulated by other laws, acts, and statutes), including education, housing, and the provision of goods and services and guarantees freedom of assembly, prohibits hate speech etc. Nevertheless, it is questionable to what extent this legislation is really enforced and discriminatory acts or behaviour sanctioned. Also, for example, the Slovenian penal system does not take into account, if a common crime (such as robbery or assault) is committed with a homophobic motivation (it is not a special or independent element of the relevant crimes).

From 1959 male homosexual acts were illegal in all of (now former) Yugoslavia, until a new penal code decriminalizing homosexual intercourse was passed in 1976 and came into force in 1977, and all discriminatory provisions were removed. There were no references to lesbian relationships in the old legislation. Registered partnership for same-sex couples has been legal since 23th July, 2006. *Zakon o registraciji istospolne partnerske skupnosti* (The Registration of Same-Sex Partnership Act) provides for certain listed rights which are recognised for homosexual partners, but it does not establish a form of union equivalent to marriage and remains distinct from the provisions of the *Zakon o zakonski zvezi in družinskih razmerjih* (Marriage and Family Relations Act). The most obvious difference is certainly the lack of any provisions concerning

<sup>7</sup> From the 1990s on the term LGBTQ\*Q (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual Trans\* – \* implies Transgender, Transsexual – and Queer) – mainly referred to queer theory (Butler). The term has been used by political activists in Germany struggling against hetero-normativity and the two-sex-model as one of its main concepts. Parts of them, influenced by feminist theory, have been formulated radically deconstructive critiques on the social and ‘biologised’ idea of gender.

children, while other important shortcomings have been identified as well. In July 2009 the Constitutional Court of Slovenia held that Article 22 of the Registration of Same Sex Partnerships Act (RSSPA) violated the right to non-discrimination under Article 14 of the Constitution on the ground of sexual orientation, and required that the legislature remedy the established inconsistency within six months. In December 2009 the center-left Government of Slovenia approved the new *Družinski zakonik* (Family Code Bill), which envisages the full equalisation of same-sex unions with other family unions, gay marriage, and adoptions by gay couples, and sent it into discussion at the Slovenian Parliament. In June 2011 a 'compromised' version of the Code was adopted by the parliament, legalizing a same-sex partnership that would have the same legal implications as a marriage in all regards except in the adoption of children. Simultaneously, in 2010–2011 the first applications to adopt a stepchild in female same-sex families have been issued, but the parents received negative responses in the summer of 2011. However, two important legal case examples had been successful in disclosing legal inconsistency within the national legislation, translating existing USA adoption measures to the Slovene legal system. Thus, in a system where no adoption legislation for same-sex parented families exists, two men were acknowledged the equal parental rights over their child (in one case, the child was jointly adopted by two men through a US national adoption system, in the other case, the men became joint parents of the child through a surrogacy arrangement).

There is no reliable estimation (there is no statistical collection of data available) about the number of children living in same-sex families (whether from the birth of the child or due to restructured families, where a child was born in a heterosexual family) in Slovenia, apart from the assessment that it is growing and becoming rapidly more visible each year. Certainly, after 1991 (break-up of Yugoslavia and creation of independent national states) and the accession period to the European Union (2004) many people felt encouraged to form families, regardless of the sexuality of their parents, since the membership status promised to introduce many legal improvements of such concern.

Article 53 of the Slovenian Constitution provides that the state shall protect the family, motherhood, fatherhood, children, and young people, and shall create the necessary conditions for such protection. The concept of family is, however, still bound to a relationship, either marital or extra-marital, between two individuals of different sex and their children. Slovenia is largely influenced by Roman Catholicism, and is, as a whole, still considered to be

rather conservative, especially regarding public reactions concerning gay and transgender rights and visibility of LGBT people. In the last few years there have been a few mass-organised or group violence towards LGBT activism and manifestations. During parliamentary debates many views and discourses unacceptable from a standpoint of human rights and dignity were displayed and only few experts confronted. In a series of negotiations among parliamentary parties regarding the provisions of this law, the right for a joint adoption of same-sex parents was first to be excluded. Moreover, at the moment a governmental crisis conservative backlash is taking place, and an inclusive conceptualisation of families seems highly contested.

Apart from the legislative level, there is also a serious deficit in the educational field, as no contents on existing family realities are being introduced and the same applies also to introduction of homosexuality and non-normative sexuality and gender in general. The information and discussion on homosexuality and family constellations are still not publicly enforced at no level of schooling – neither in kindergartens (Tuš Špilak 2010), nor in primary and secondary school curricula. Also the first national study on the lives of homosexual persons in Slovenia corroborates the prevalent notion of tabooisation and exotisation of LGBTQ lives (Švab & Kuhar 2005).

### Recommended Readings

Velikonja, Nataša (Ed.) (2004). 20 let gejevskega in lezbičnega gibanja [20 Years of Gay and Lesbian Movement]. Društvo ŠKUC.

Velikonja, Nataša (2011). Zgodovina aktivizma za legalizacijo gejevskih in lezbičnih partnerskih zvez v Sloveniji [The History of Activism for the Legalisation of Gay and lesbian Partnerships in Slovenia]. <http://www.ljudmila.org/lesbo/raziskave/ZgodovinaAktivizma.pdf> (accessed 19.10.2011).

## 4.3. Social and Legal Situation in Sweden<sup>8</sup>

*Irina Schmitt and Malena Gustavson*

In 2009, Statistics Sweden counted 749 children and young people under the age of 22 who lived with either a lesbian or gay parent couple, with numbers rising since 2004 (Statistiska centralbyrån 2009). Between 2005 and 2009 568 lesbian couples received assisted fertilisation in Swedish hospitals. Anna Malmquist and Karin Zetterqvist Nelson also suggests that about 200 children have been adopted by partners in LGBTQ/rainbow families since 2005 (Malmquist & Zetterqvist Nelson forthcoming 2012; Malmquist & Zetterqvist Nelson 2010:

<sup>8</sup> Parts of this text are based on the article "Culturally queer, silenced in school? Children with LGBTQ parents, and the everyday politics off/in community and school", with kind permission of the journal *lambda nordica* – Tidsskrift för homo/lesbisk/bi/transforskning (Gustavson & Schmitt 2011).

13). Certainly, many more young people live with LGBTQ/rainbow parents than measured by the statistics based on a heteronormative family model, that is, based on two-parent families that register their relationship.

At the peak of the debate on adoption and insemination rights by the end of the 1990s in Sweden, those speaking in favour of adoption and insemination made the point that children were already growing up in LGBTQ/rainbow families (RFSL n.d.-b; RFSL n.d.-a; Malmquist & Zetterqvist Nelson 2010; Malmquist & Zetterqvist Nelson 2008; Eman 1996b). Many of these children had been conceived in heterosexual relationships, and there was a growing group of LGBTQ people finding ways to have children in their relationships (Ryan-Flood 2009; Zetterqvist Nelson 2007).

In 1997, the Swedish National Institute of Public Health (*Folkhälsoinstitutet*) held a hearing about 'Homosexuals and children', inviting both Swedish politicians and activists and international experts to the debate (Green 1997; Folkhälsoinstitutet 1997; Golombok 1997). Since then, there have been a number of publications on children and young people with LGBTQ parents and their families in Sweden (Malmquist & Zetterqvist Nelson 2010; Sveriges förenade HBTQ-Studenter 2009; Hjalmar 2009; Bergström 2006; Ryan-Flood 2009; Zetterqvist Nelson 2007; Malmquist & Zetterqvist Nelson 2008; Hulth & Ingelson 2005).

The early 2000s witnessed groundbreaking legal changes: in 2002, the Swedish Government Offices published a report on 'Children in homosexual families' as part of the negotiations towards legal change (Regeringskansliet 2002). The same year, the Supreme Administrative Court (*Regeringsrätten*) decided that unregistered lesbian mothers who have a child through unknown-donor insemination may receive child-support, showing a focus on the child rather than the parents (RFSL 2002). This was before insemination for lesbians was legalised in Sweden, and many lesbians went to other countries such as Denmark, where unknown-donor insemination is possible (Ryan-Flood 2009). The Swedish Code on Parents and Children allows insemination for same-sex couples. It acknowledges a consenting woman who was the mother's spouse, registered partner or cohabitant partner as parent since 2005 (Svensk författningssamling 2009).

Since 2003, lesbian and gay couples can apply for adoption if they are registered or married, including adoption of the partner's child (*närstående adoption*) (Malmquist & Zetterqvist Nelson 2008; RFSL n.d.-b). So far, no or very few LGBTQ couples have been successful in adopting a child they had no earlier relationship with (Lundin & Dahlin 2010: 69). These

social and political changes are also reflected in activist-authored books about families with LGBTQ parents (Eman 1996b; Stenholm & Strömberg 2004; Hamrud 2005).

Since 2005, the insemination law allows registered as well as married couples access to insemination and in-vitro fertilization through the health-service.<sup>9</sup> Yet, insemination, that is almost free of cost for women in heterosexual relationships, can cost a lot for lesbian couples (depending on region), a situation that is currently challenged by the Swedish Federation for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Rights (RFSL 2011). In spring 2011, the Swedish government denied single-mother insemination. The reproductive rights of trans\*-people are so far severely restricted as sterilization is a legal prerequisite for surgery and the correction of the birth certificate; also, trans\*-people need to be Swedish citizens to be eligible for sex reassignment surgery. Both issues are under debate at the time of writing. In 2009 the marriage law became gender-neutral. This was preceded by a 'registered partnership' legislation that was introduced in 1995.<sup>10</sup>

### Norm-Critical Education

Equally relevant for the children and young people with LGBTQ parents who are growing up now might be the anti-discrimination law from 2009 that explicitly includes sexuality as well as transgender-identity on the grounds for non-discrimination (Svensk författningssamling 2008). Schools are legally obliged to implement the law into their everyday planning and activities. Analysis of how schools conceptualise family often shows a tension between school rhetoric and its practice, though curriculum advocates equality and diversity (Skolverket 2010: 4; Schmitt in press).<sup>11</sup> While these changes probably had during the time of the interviews little direct effect on the participating children and young people, they inform the debates.

These debates are also reflected in the discussion on anti-homophobia education and norm-critical pedagogies in Sweden, with a number of reports showing the need for further attention (Ungdomsstyrelsen 2010; Nordenmark & Rosén 2008; Edemo & Rindå 2004). In the context of this study, we follow the position of researchers and practitioners that argue that school is an important place for children where the family is reaffirmed as a socially accepted place for safety and well-being (Brade, Engström et al. 2008; Bromseth & Darj 2010b; Henkel & Tomičić 2009).

The concept of norm-critical education has been developed by Swedish researchers and activist, working with and expanding critical pedagogical approaches (Bromseth & Darj 2010a; Kumashiro 2002; Epstein, O'Flynn et al. 2003). The focus is

<sup>9</sup> In 1991, Kath Weston described the centrality of access to alternative insemination in the (again, mainly lesbian) baby boom in the USA from the 1980s onwards (Weston 1991: 169).

<sup>10</sup> Though illegal in Sweden, surrogacy – bearing a child for someone else – is considered one of the few realistic ways for gay men to have a child (Utbildningsradio and Fexeus n.d.; see also Lehtonen 2009: 74). It has been pointed out that legislation has to adapt to the reality of children conceived through surrogacy in order to offer these children the same protections as other children (RFSL n.d.-a; Jönsson 2003). At the same time, surrogacy, both within Sweden and internationally, is highly contested (Ekman 2010).

<sup>11</sup> The National Swedish Agency for Education has recently analysed the most popular anti-mobbing programs in Swedish schools, and comes to the result that none of the programs actually is effective (Skolverket, Flygare et al. 2011). They argue that the most important anti-bullying activity is continuous work that includes analysis of existing situation and evaluations.



on the reflection and interruption of norms rather than on tolerating 'others' (Ambjörnsson 2003; Rasmussen 2006; Rofes 2005; Martinsson & Reimers 2008). They also allow for an analysis of teachers' roles and on how teachers can be supported in questioning exclusionary structures and assumption (Ruffolo 2007).

Young people with LGBTQ parents have various strategies on how to talk about or how to avoid mentioning their parents' sexuality in different contexts (Zetterqvist Nelson 2007). This also becomes clear in the conversations with the children and young people in this study.

### Naming and Framing Families

Both in public debate and in our research, we find differentiations between children born in a heterosexual relationship, pre-insemination legislation families and 'baby boomers', families with children born after 2005. While there is little research on the issue, we see that legislation has influenced the patterns people use to speak about family construction.

A common family structure in Swedish LGBTQ families is the four-leafed clover family (*fyrklöverfamiljen*) with a gay and a lesbian couple who share custody of the children they have together. More recently, the term star-families (*stjärnfamiljer*) is used by families with more than two parents (Gustavsson 2010; Henkel & Tomičić 2009: 198). While this is not directly related to the parents' sexuality, it does reflect the possibility of more-than-two-parents constellations. In Swedish, the term rhymes with the term for nuclear family (*kärnfamiljen*). The term star-family also expands the four-leafed clover family. The term rainbow family (*regnbågsfamiljen*) became a useful tool in the political debate that drew attention to sexual diversity as something positive, and away from the pathologization which had dominated the debate on LGBTQ people outside the communities up until the mid-1990s.<sup>12</sup>

### Recommended Readings

Henkel, Kristina & Marie Tomičić (2009). Ge ditt barn 100 möjligheter istället för 2 – om genusfallor och genuskruken i vardagen [Give your child 100 possibilities instead of 2 – about gendertraps and gender trouble everyday life]. Linköping: Olika and Jämställt.se.

Zetterqvist Nelson, Karin (2007). Mot alla odds. Regnbågsföräldrars berättelser om att bilda familj och få barn [Against all odds. Rainbow parents' stories about having a family and getting children]. Malmö: Liber.

<sup>12</sup> A reflection of Swedish rainbow children's experiences can be found in Hanne Gorton Lindblad's exhibition about rainbow children (Parikas 2009).

## Part III 5. Key Findings

### 5.1. Findings Germany

Christiane Quadflieg, Uli Streib-Brzič

In the context of the research in Germany, rich data material on the children's experiences of violence and strategies related to them was collected. After analysing 22 interviews with children and youths a point of diminishing returns with respect to the variety of re-constructible experiences, strategies occurred.

Guided by the constructivist version of grounded theory, developed by Kathy Charmaz (Charmaz 2006), the experiential data and interpretations of forms of violence, as well as related strategies of the children were re-constructed out of the collected data in each individual case, to develop and conceptualise (discourse analytical) classification categories in a comparative analytical process. Additionally, wishes and expectations of children concerning the forms of support, which are identified as effective, are presented and contrasted or complemented by related statements of parents and experts.

#### 1. Family Context – School Context

The main research question of our study was: how do the interviewed children feel and reflect on themselves as a part of their LGBTQ families and what does this mean for them in the context of school?

In their LGBTQ families and communities the children have different, as well as specific experiences, which are described as 'daily and normal'.

They experience different positions of their family members, parents, siblings, and other related persons according to who and what constitutes family or kinship, opposed to or alongside heteronormative standards and socio-political and legal dimensions of LGBTQ parenthood in Germany.

These experiences are brought into the context of school. Here, the interviewed children and youths act as pupils and peers with associated identifications and social attributions.

The school represents an institution of a social space, where structural and interpersonal social values and norms, social relevant structural categories – such as heteronormative notions of gender, life-love-and-family forms – are regulated, negotiated, mediated, i.e. normalised (Bower & Klecka 2009).

At the same time, the educational claims of schools are also involved with critically reflecting social norms and values, alongside constitutionally guaranteed and referred to rights, as in the case of the General Equal Treatment Act (*Allgemeines Gleichbehandlungsgesetz (AGG)* 2006).

When school is experienced as a place, where conventions and social norms are enforced and at the same time negated, questioned, relativised, and widened through lived differences, also by violence, what happens informally is that the experiences and perspectives are broadened through intersections with peers and other adults such as the parents.

#### 1.1. "For you, who belongs to the family?"

The children and the parents were asked this question separately, and we encouraged the children to draw everyone who in their view belongs to their family. The interviewed children essentially define their family based on these, with different emphasis, three aspects:

- **a biological kinship model**

Most of the children growing up with two mothers name the biological mother first, and sometimes they stress the differentiation between the 'real' mum and the 'other' mummy. Also children in two fathers-families refer to their biological mother. Most children, who know or have contact to their biological father or donor, describe him – also when they experience his role as a much less active parental role – as 'my father' and position him as part of the family.

- **a current, spatial formation of living together**

This is how Joyce describes her family: "*because my father, well, he lives in France and that's why I sometimes only, like now when I'm drawing a picture of our family, I simply paint like this, then I only paint Leonie and Anne and Kaya and me*" (Joyce, 10).

- **non-hetero-conform family models, initiated by adults**

Often these involve two mothers or two fathers, siblings and pets, and sometimes good friends of ex-partners of parents, who are described as belonging to the family. An explicit identification as family is, in most of the cases, important – not only for the interviewed children, but also especially for the adults.

## 1.2. “We are a completely normal family” – Lived Experiences of an Intimate Family Sphere

Most of the children describe the interviewers that they experience their family situation as ‘completely normal’ as long as they look at it from the inter-familial perspective. This is also true for most children who are previously growing up in a heterosexual family structure. Part of the specific experience of inter-familial normality is also the ‘normality’ of the non-conventional attribution of gender-roles in relation to the distribution of responsibilities and work. Unlike in the social environment, the attribution of parents as ‘lesbian’, ‘gay’ or ‘trans\*’ within the family is hardly problematised or emotionally burdened with a sexualised dimension. The children speak of their parents as those, who make them feel loved, protected, cared for, understood, and also sometimes not understood, irritated, and overstrained.

## 2. Experiences in School

### 2.1. Experiences of Bodily Violence, Bullying, and other Interactions, Experienced as Threatening

To our question on the school-atmosphere and violent incidents in their schools, the most children and youths respond that open conflicts, also with physical violence, are rather ordinary.

Enno, 8 years, describes one of these incidents: *“sometimes they also hurt me, they have recently in school, they once took me under the arm, and rubbed my head with the knuckles. They somehow don’t really like me, well, because I am really ahead in maths or so”* (Enno, 8).<sup>13</sup>

Enno is one of the few children and boys, who narrate about their experiences with physical violence, though he does not see them as connected to his family background.

All the children seem to have experiences of bullying.<sup>14</sup> The children describe that they themselves are sometimes involved in bullying attacks and that it would be dangerous to intervene on behalf of the victim.

Frieda, who is part of a clique is temporarily involved in bullying, justifies her behaviour, however, with peer pressure and fear of exclusion: *“well, perhaps, personally you wouldn’t do it like this, but it is actually so, because all others do it, and you don’t want, because if you don’t do it, then you are, you yourself also become an outsider, so to speak”* (Frieda, 13).

Three of the interviewed, all girls, remember that earlier in primary school, they were targeted, and partly also “irritated”, “picked on” and “harassed”. Lisa remembers an incident a few years ago: *“I don’t really know how anymore, in any case they were con-*

*stantly asking me, aah who do I like more and how it is and aah, they constantly, they really asked every day, always the same questions, as if they did not know it at some point, at some point I was totally angry and said it’s getting really annoying and if they could not stop for once, I do not ask if you like your father or mother more either and such things and then they said okay and continued asking the next day (laughs)”* (Lisa, 12).

Luisa says: *“when I was younger then, so about seven, eight, there was a girl I trusted as a friend, I told her, and she then told it further and she then a bit, she laugh-, then made fun of me a bit”* (Luisa, 15).

Also Janne remembers her experience of being “picked on”, which she sees as a single case and as only indirectly connected to her mother being a lesbian: *“actually nothing whatsoever happened to me or so, so now, I was never somehow pressured or black-mailed because my mother is a lesbian, except only from this one girl, who teased me a bit, but now she did not specially say that because my parents, well, my mum is lesbian”* (Janne, 16).

A serene attitude and a determined remark that these experiences lie far back in the past, that they are the past, and that one cannot really remember them anymore, is very recurrent in the narrations of children, when they are expected to speak about unpleasant experiences of violence. In addition to loyalty issues, strategies of fading or the desire to de-victimise oneself can be a further reason why they feel less embarrassed to talk about their experiences of violence, when they seem to have overcome that violence.

It is more the parents who report on the conflictual situations for their children, and express the fear that their family LGBTQ background could itself be a reason for bullying. In their article “‘Kids are just cruel anyway’ – Lesbian and gay parents talk about homophobic bullying” (Clarke & Kitzinger 2004) the authors refer to the relevant dilemma of LGBTQ parents. The parents find themselves between the devil and the deep blue sea, when recounting about their children’s experiences of violence, as this may become a tool of the argumentation of those, who claim that LGBTQ parents expose their children to violence. Denying as parents their children’s experience of bullying would also not be plausible, and, thus, interpreted as an indication of egoistic ignorance, trying to deceive the environment.

As we as researchers were really careful with questioning and gave this topic space to develop, the children also have each confided to us a set of other experiences, which they felt as unpleasant, and we at the same time perceived trusting relationships between parents and kids, suggesting that the interviewed children and youths rather not be exposed to any ‘classic’ bullying experiences.

<sup>13</sup> Please consult the transcription rules in the appendix for explanation of how we marked the transcripts.

<sup>14</sup> The children themselves describe these forms of violence with this term.

It, thus, cannot be directly proven, to what extent the various strategies of avoidance or selective disclosure in relation to their family situation, contribute to what seems to be a smaller occurrence of massive violent attacks.

The assessment of experts – *“that plays out in a much more subtle way”* (Expert 3) – as was confirmed by selected research on experiences of violence in the case of children in rainbow families in Germany (Carapacchio 2008; Rupp 2009).

## **2.2. Anticipation of Violence**

All children express fears about being rejected, devalued, marginalised, no longer liked or even bodily attacked by more violent children because of their LGBTQ family background. Only a few children report that until now they mainly had positive experiences and that they are very popular, liked because of their personal competences (sports, music, school achievements) or on their grounds perceived as unique personalities and due to that are protected. Generally, it could be claimed for the majority of children in school that among peers, in the frame of negotiation of social positioning and development of their own self-concepts, they are also confronted with violence, and that they resort to a repertoire of strategies with which they try to stand up and protect themselves. This also applies for the children, who we interviewed. What our interviews additionally show is that the interviewed children feel exposed to different forms of discrimination in school, related to their family background.

## **2.3. Experiences of Violence-Oriented, discriminatory Behaviour**

The children ranked the following forms of behaviour, which occur primarily on the verbal to non-verbal level, from uncomfortable to discriminatory:

- to be questioned about one's own family, continuously and without and real interest
- questioning or discrediting biological and social family conditions
- heteronormative pejorisation related to the LGBTQ identification
- being identified with sexual orientation of their parents
- absence of LGBTQ families and family forms in teaching materials and as a topic in classroom
- being exposed in front of the class by their teachers.

## **2.4. Violent Behaviour as an Effect of De-normalisation**

The experiences with these connected fears, described by children, can be read as structurally and interpersonally re-produced heteronormative forms of de-normalisation.

For a specific child, such experiences can be referred to as an aspect of his/her family background, which, thus, becomes marked and re-constructed as a part of 'abnormal'. With this, feelings, experiences, and anticipation of rejection, exclusion, humiliation, devaluation and non-appreciation are connected in the child. On the other side, these acts of de-normalisation re-construct the fiction of the 'normal'. This thereby reproduced 'normality' works in a self-validating and self-regulating way, in terms of belonging and power distribution. For both sides the 'normal', thus, presents itself as desirable.

Even though such experiences and feelings of these children are often described as temporary and focused on one aspect of their complex identities/identifications, the children are nevertheless affected by them. They are engaged with applying different strategies, to deal with and protect themselves from these feelings and experiences.

At the same time they witness exclusion practices as part of the social and medial environment, directed towards their LGBTQ identified parents. They need to categorise both, their own experiences of being affected and their parents' experiences of being stigmatised, which also has an effect on them.

To minimise discriminatory experiences and to protect themselves from them, the children have developed partly similar and partly very varying strategies or they draw on strategies, offered to them, i.e. by their parents or other persons, whom they trust.

## **3. Strategies**

The different strategies of children, presented below, can be conceptualised inside this matrix as 'normalisation strategies' and 'strategies of dealing with de-normalisation'.

The first concept which we identify as a 'normalisation-strategy' emphasises, in contrast to 'strategies of dealing with de-normalisation', an active, even if not always necessarily explicit self-positioning inside a hegemonial heteronormative normality. Here we can speak of strategies which, even if they are based on the experiences of de-normalisation, take in view the effort for self-normalisation as adaptation and an appropriation, creating the idea/effect of belonging to the 'normal'. In this way, as exemplified below, heteronormatively-marked speech acts and codes are used for self-protection.

With the 'strategies of dealing with de-normalisation', the reference points are different reactions of children on specific aspects of de-normalisation behaviour. These strategies include reactions and normalisation efforts, as well as variants of construc-

tive delimitation and rewriting of 'being different' and 'wanting to have something else'.

### 3.1. Normalisation Strategies

#### 3.1.1. "I have no problem with it" – "it is just normal" – Dimensions of Normalisation Strategies

In speaking about their families children most often make use of the expression "normal" and the statement "I have no problem with it" occurs. Here, we interpret both of these as codes of normalization. Furthermore, we identified the speech acts of de-naming (Hornscheidt 2011), non-naming and with it 'invisibilisation' of LGBTQ ways of life.

When we ask Enno about his strategies of being open about his family background, he reflects normality as a question of experience and perspective.

**i:** *is it also for you like this, that you tell it to all kids, or do you think a little bit about whom you will tell?*

**Enno:** *aah no, I don't care*

**i:** *you don't care*

**Enno:** *it's normal for me*

**i:** *it's normal for you and you have a feeling, that it's also quite normal for other kids?*

**Enno:** *no, to them it's somehow not so normal*

**i:** *aha, how do you notice that it's not so normal for them?*

**Enno:** *haa, otherwise they would not ask me ((laughs))*

(Enno, 8).

In all interviews the term 'normal' is the central reference point for the children. Next to the differentiation of internal and external, they also refer to the effect of peers, 'who are used to it': *"they have known me for so long, for them it is simply normal"* as Paul, 15, describes.

The children refer to their own experiences, when they switch back and forth between two normalities on a daily basis. Even when their family is described as 'different', this is framed through reclaiming normality as an expression of belonging to 'good and right'. Cristina explains: *"it is different, but it is not negative (...) it is not unnormal, it is simply just different from other families and it is not bad, and it is completely normal as it is"* (Cristina, 13).

Many interviews begin with a statement in which the child explains having "no problem with it" ("it" – de-naming), referring to the motivation for participation in this study. This statement carries different subtexts. It can be heard as having no problem with it

- in the social environment, for example, to speak about the LGBTQ identification of their parents in school

- as specifically related to not finding it problematic, to speak about it in a (half-)open (anonymous) context
- to express that they themselves have no problem with the LGBTQ identification of their parents.

In the course of the interview, the children present various strategies of dealing with de-normalisation and this exhibited the strategic character of the statement "I have no problem with it".

To have "no problem with it" at the same time signals loyalty towards parents and/or interviewers, who are identified as part of the LGBTQ community. It could also be read as something to calm down the adults who might fear that their children could be excluded because of the LGBTQ identification of their parents or that they could themselves reject them because of this identification. For both, we could find indications in the narrations of the children.

When the interviewed children mark the beginning of the interview with this phrase, this can be read as a way to shorten the 'questioning', which they in their daily lives often perceive as harassing, and, thus, make the topic unimportant, and by doing so make it or let it become invisible. This is how a connection to the function of normalisation is induced, which can be found with heterosexually identified persons when they see themselves interpersonally confronted with this topic.

The often declared "I have no problem with it" could be continued as: I have no problem with it, if you will leave me alone, if you do not make a problem out of it, if you do not demand something from me, if you do not expect me to be interested in this, when it is not a topic. That what is not declared as problematic needs not to be talked about or to be discussed. Here, the normalisation-offer has an effect of making-it-invisible and the reversal of having a problem and making a problem.

At the same time, the statement "no problem with it" is especially used among youths, but also among adults, as a common 'formula'. Having "no problem with it" conveys agency and autonomy, ensures de-victimisation, presents itself as a pose of sovereignty and coolness, and can have an effect of self-evocation and empowerment. Last but not least, it possibly expresses a wish for an absence of problems.

#### 3.1.2. De-naming as a Normalisation Strategy

Part of the paradox of linguistic invisibility and making-visible is, with pejorative use of words and sentences, to re-produce the structural discrimination of a so called social group (Hornscheidt 2011), by not-naming the excluded, the marginalised, the other non-normal. In the narratives of some children



the terms such as 'gay' and 'lesbian' were avoided. Thus, with 'it' in the phrase 'no problem with it' naming what is meant with this 'it' is avoided.

The use of referencing words such as 'it' or 'that' and so on has the effect of making something invisible. Through this, uncertainty and/or distancing can be expressed.

### 3.1.3. Normalising Attitudes towards LGBTQ Identifications

Own positioning in relation to LGBTQ identifications vary among the interviewed children and youths. One part of the interviewed children and youths hold a rather reserved to distanced attitude towards LGBTQ. They express reservations, speak about feelings of shame and embarrassment, and some have formulated a clear rejection of it.

Ambivalent and defensive attitudes become clear in these kinds of formulations: *"if everyone would have it, then it would ... actually not be embarrassing anymore"* (Finn, 13).

This statement (as an answer to the 'miracle question'<sup>15</sup>) shows that feelings of embarrassment and shame are present, when the children or young people are asked about their parents' gay or lesbian way of life or when they must confront others with it.

Even some of the interviewed young women, who relate offensively and positively to the LGBTQ identification of their parents, do this in relation to the discourse on homosexuality, which is connected with being excluded, with shame and embarrassment: *"so, I am not ashamed of my mother"*, states Janne, 16, and Cristina, 13, formulates: *"one need not to feel ashamed"*.

Feelings of embarrassment are obviously most connected to the sexualisation of the LGBTQ relationships, which is inscribed in the term 'homosexuality' and always resonates a historically constructed sexuality in it that is 'perverse', abnormal, and as something which calls for an explanation ("how does one become like this?") (Foucault 1983).

At the same time, from the psychoanalytical perspective the feeling of shame must be considered as typical for adolescence in the context of autonomy and dependency conflicts in relation to parents. The psychoanalyst Léon Wurmser describes this with the expression of 'dependency shame' (Wurmser 1990). Not only LGBTQ sexuality and everything in connection to sexuality is embarrassing, but for a variety of reasons, parents themselves are embarrassing.

### 3.1.4. The De-normalisation Practice of Devaluation

*"I'm straight, shut up"* (Luisa, 15) –  
*"it is, I say, very special"* (Frieda, 13)

To the question of their peers, if they are also lesbian or gay, most would emphasise their hetero-identification and support their positioning with a 'proof', such as a heterosexual relationship or at least infatuation feelings.

Even if this could be supported by further research, our results show, that the boys with LGBTQ parents try even harder to prove their non-gay identification, otherwise they would be pushed even further away from the norms of masculinity, for which they are as they see it, questioned by their peers.

In the quote *"it is, I say, very special"* Frieda (13) expresses doubt asking if LGBTQ identifications should not be positioned as deviant. This statement can be read as connecting to the de-normalisation practice of devaluation.

Ole, who sees lesbian and gay identifications as a genetic disposition, commented on the 'miracle question' in the interview, in which he could imagine what it would be like if all circumstances would reverse overnight and all children except one would have lesbian or gay parents: *"that would be abnormal, that would be – no, actually nooo, that is completely unrealistic, that would not be normal"* (Ole, 10).

A more or less aggressively demonstrated acquisition of hegemonial discourse and the provided proof of not being identified as/'infected' by LGBTQ, offers a possibility to ensure one's own belonging. At the same time, this strategy can also be read as an adolescent form of demarcation and reformulation of self-concepts oriented by peers. By criticizing their parents' way of life the cutting of the cord can be performed easier (Katrin Flaake & Vera King 2004; Martine Delfos 2007).

### 3.1.5. Normalisation Strategies for Dealing with Heteronormative Pejoration

In the context of school, the topics of gender, family- and life-styles, and socio-sexual orientation are very important for all children and in specific ways for the children from rainbow families. This is also true from the perspective of reworking self-concepts and securing one's belonging, which takes place significantly during school years and in various peer-contexts.

With the use of terms like 'gay' and 'lesbian' among peers, which were often linked with devaluing or degrading, the interviewed children describe different ways of dealing with it. This depends on how the children assess the use of these words, how they want them to be understood, and what strategies they find effective.

<sup>15</sup> For the formulation of the 'miracle question' which we used in the interviews, see the interview guideline in the appendix. This question is an adapted version of the 'miracle question' developed by the systemic therapists Steve de Shazer and Insoo Kim Berg (de Shazer 1993, Kim Berg & Steiner 2003).

To the question if and in which way 'gay' and 'lesbian' is used among peers, Frieda answers: *"it's not meant so seriously, it's somehow said so often, and yes, you 'fagots' and 'full-blooded-lesbian', you really have that everywhere"* (Frieda, 13).

And she explains further how to deal with "gross words" that are no longer understood as 'insults': *"in our class that's never meant in a bad way I don't know how it is in other classes, but in our class it's like one also says fuck you only to say I like you [...] things like fuck you, shut it, slut, bitch, cunt all sorts are in our vocabulary I also say it [...] that's just completely normal, we don't take it as insults anymore"* (Frieda, 13).

Especially among youths, the use of tabooed and shocking words has a function of marking autonomy and differentiation against the norms mediated by parents and the world of adults. At the same time, with this they practise for the real world. Societal normalisations of a hetero-normative regime which is part of it, is re-produced and affirmed here.

A common phenomenon in peer-relationships of male youths is a demonstratively expressed defence and delineation from anything that is identified as 'gay', as stated in the frame of the critical youth-research (Budde & Mammes 2009). This serves to assure themselves and their peers of a fiction of a heterosexually imagined 'hegemonial' masculinity (Connell 2005). Here, a negatively taken feminisation, assigned to 'gay-ishness' and with it a hegemonial gender-power position is reproduced. The 'lesbian' as a term and insult is much less virulent, which some of the children would confirm in their narrations. Hidden lifestyles of women go alongside a specific stylisation of the 'non-feminine' aggressor, in constructs such as 'fight-dyke' or 'full-blooded-lesbian'.

The answers of the children show, albeit with important differences, also that the children with LGBTQ parents move within a complex field of tension between autonomy and loyalty, when terms, relating to LGBTQ identifications are 're-negotiated'.

They themselves can be involved in the use of these terms, as a strategy of normalisation. The mentioned non-positioning can be read as such, when the interviewed children use these, for example, as personal appellations (such as 'faggottess', 'fight-dyke') instead of the use of the terms 'lesbian' and 'gay' (much more rarely trans<sup>16</sup>) to indirectly associate to their own family situation and to demonstratively delineate themselves from it with their own participation in the use of these terms.

When asked which unpleasant expressions he can imagine in connection to the lesbian identity of his mother, Finn explained: *"so, for sure one can make*

*fun of it or so, but not in a mean way, but more just like this (...) what can I say, some teasing or so. But then it would probably with it (.) quite soon (.) become normalised"* (Finn, 13).

The strategy of relativisation and down-playing and re-iterating makes it possible for Finn to confront or avoid an open discussion about his family background and apply 'normalisation'.

An open rejection of the use of terms such as 'gay' and 'lesbian' is more frequent with younger children. Here we can observe for many younger children typical, strong identification with the parents, and the world views they have.

Thus, the siblings Sarah and Max complain, that the teachers do not respond appropriately when the term 'gay' is used in a defamatory way. To the question what they would like to say to these children, they both reply:

**Sarah:** *"it [= being gay] is nothing wrong actually"*

**Max:** *"nothing wrong"*

(Sarah, 13, and Max, 8).

The "nothing wrong" can be interpreted as confirmation of the normalised perspective.

Where a little less ambivalent or a rather positive attitude towards the sexual identification of parents is obvious, it is not so clear how to interpret dealing with the use of these terms. To the question about the negative connotation of the word 'fight-dyke', Janne answers: *"I don't believe that is simply a cliché, cliché-laden so to say, that one simply says this is how lesbians should look like, so rather there are types of 'fight-dykes' and that is that I believe is not negatively laden and, of course, I know that is not also with everyone"* (Janne, 16).

Janne, who has a lesbian mother, rejects to taking 'responsibility' for a non-discreditory communication among peers. Not out of loyalty, but out of a political claim, which she, as an adolescent young person repeatedly emphasises, she takes a clear position when she thinks it would be appropriate: *"but if someone somehow calls something [...] I don't feel that because I have a lesbian mother I must now care about how one socially behaves towards the other, so, one cares about that simply, if one has a lesbian mother, has a gay father or just simply heteroparents, so (...) I believe, yes, I believe it has nothing to do with it, but that is really such a political issue"* (Janne, 16).

Regarding the choice of the strategies of dealing with pejorisation connected to LGBTQ identifications, we found that there are not only important differences among younger and older children, but also among boys and girls where the reproductive background plays a role. With caution we could say, that the children, that were born in LGBTQ relation-

<sup>16</sup> Terms referring to trans\* identification were not mentioned by any of the interviewed children and youths.

ships, or were adopted into these family constellations at an early age, more often tend to identify with being addressed and assert a combination of moral and political argumentation for a differentiated and valuing attitude towards LGBTQ ways of life.

### 3.1.6. Racist and Ableist Pejorisation

Some of the interviewed children have reported that in addition or simultaneously they have also been confronted with other forms of discrimination, racist or kinds, referring to their 'diss-ability' (Hornscheidt 2011). When they speak about racism, especially addressed to them by verbal abuse, they reflect on the related effect of de-normalisation, as they differentiate this behaviour from words which they call 'normal words and insults', "which are more often used" like Luisa states: *"there are normal words [such as asshole or so] which, which are more often (with laughter in the voice) used"* (Luisa, 15).

A comparative research on the effects of de-normalisation and related strategies in connection to lived or anticipated discrimination on the background of a rainbow family or in connection to ethnic or bodily attributions, would be very revealing with regard to the interdependencies and possible effects of relevant experiences on simultaneous, multiple discrimination.

### 3.2. Strategies for Dealing with

#### De-normalisation

**"and then it actually again came into my mind"** (Joyce, 10)

Before we speak about dealing with de-normalisation in the following section, we quote, as an example, a statement by ten-year-old Joyce, who also experienced racist discrimination by being an Afro-German. We analyse how she perceives and reflects heteronormative de-normalisation as an active approach and how she negotiates related strategic ambivalences and wishes: *"for me now actually I don't notice it so much anymore, who, yes when one so often now, that's for me normal. I do not actually notice that often, when one doesn't speak about it, that I, that we are a rainbow family, so, that can one just say, like that, yes. And, when they have sometimes asked me, then it actually again came into my mind, because it's not so often that one comes to this point, I believe, so, yes it doesn't often come up (.) in life to this point"*<sup>17</sup> (Joyce, 10).

She claimed the term 'normal' for her own family life, but relativised it as a subjective perspective through "for me". The double affirmation of the reason why it just does not "come into her mind", both in the past and in the present this form underlines the validity of one's own experience of normality and makes the contents of it plausible. The frequent use of "yes" functions as a form of self-assurance and also serves as an offer to the interview-

er to adopt her perspective. In contrast the "actually" has a relativizing effect, also in view of her own interpretative demonstrations. This ambivalence of relativisation and self-assurance is repeated in the last sentence and here it seems to favour the latter, when she reaffirms it through "I believe". What is being described in this excerpt is that de-normalisation makes one "talk" about it, after being asked or questioned about it. Her thinking implies the idea that, if it would not come to a debate about it, it would not be possible for it to be abnormal or everything would be normal for everyone.

Joyce formulates and reflects the effect of being questioned, which she herself has experienced, as an impact. This makes her aware of the inevitability of one being labelled, and one having to position oneself as being 'not simply just normal'. That's why the term rainbow family is asserted, as a 'conceptual standard'.

The formulation "get to the point" (orig. *"zur Sache kommen"*) can also be understood as "being mentioned/comes up" (orig. *"zur Sprache kommen"*), and the expression "not so often in life" could be a self-reassurance that this way the 'point' can actually be avoided and with this also the moral responsibility (truth/lived reality), and, thus, one's own dealing with the LGBTQ family background can be alleviated.

This strategy is also presented at other times, for example, when the life-partner of her mother, and in her view the second mother, is presented as a flat-mate to the outside world; sometimes only partly or not at all presented as belonging to the family.

What can also be associated to "get to the point" is "show your colours" – as not recognizing the discriminatory reality – and the speech-order to get around it. Or also "true colours" in the sense of an internalised, parental demand to actively counteract the racist and heteronormative normalisation.

The following strategy for dealing with de-normalisation is part of a spectrum of ambivalences, desires, demands and expectations.

### 3.2.1. Forms of Disclosure and Concealment

**"I don't rub it in everyone's nose"**

(Janne, 16)

How they speak about their family in their environment, in their school, and with peers, should they be open about the LGBTQ background of their parents or should they try to conceal it at first, seem to be emotionally ambivalent topics for most of our interview partners. This was asked on more levels, also once with direct questions about how they shape this for themselves, which ways and forms have they found, and what are the experiences they

17 The interview passage in German: *"mir ist jetzt eigentlich gar nicht mehr aufgefallen, wer, also wenn man das ja so oft jetzt, das ist ja für mich normal. Mir fällt das eigentlich oft gar nicht auf, wenn man gar nicht drüber redet, dass ich, dass wir 'ne Regenbogenfamilie sind also, das kann man ja auch so sagen. Und wenn die mich dann auch manchmal so gefragt haben, dann ist es mir erst eigentlich wie-der eingefallen, weil's eigentlich gar nicht so oft zur Sache kommt, find' ich, also es kommt ja nicht so oft (.) im Leben zur Sache"* (Joyce, 10).



have with this. Others were asked, usually towards the end of the interview, the so called ‘expert-question’.<sup>18</sup> With this question, the children and youths were especially interpellated as experts on their experience with dealing with the topic of LGBTQ families. This is also linked to the idea of bringing them into contact with their ‘internal adviser and expert’ (White & Epstein 2002).

In this question we asked what advice they would give to another child, who is insecure of how to deal with the situation of having a gay father or a lesbian mother, if they would ask him or her how she or he can talk about this situation to others. The most children liked the idea of being addressed as experts. It should be noted that some children and youths would pass on their strategies they deployed and tried out themselves, and others would formulate considerably more careful, defensive behaviour and, yet, others would formulate a recommendation for dealing with it that obviously has a character of a vision – either by themselves or by their parents – about speaking of it in a simple and unburdened way.

The most of the interviewed children and youths describe the openness about the LGBTQ identity of their parents as a venture that requires trust, carefulness, and consideration in its planning. Thus, 11-year-old Amelie announced that she only speaks about it *“when somebody asks me about it”* (Amelie, 11) and Ole emphasised: *“I don’t just go out and around and say, my father is gay, my father is gay, my father is gay”* (Ole, 10). Also Finn says *“in my case actually only very few know about it and also only very good friends. Yes, otherwise one actually doesn’t really speak about it”* (Finn, 13). This carefulness that is expressed by all of our respondents is partly justified with previous experiences or with the necessity to protect oneself. One of the frequently mentioned strategies is also one Leander employs: *“tell it to friends first”* (Leander, 11) and as Mona emphasises, the information must be carefully picked out: *“just to tell everything right away is actually not so good”* (Mona, 8), connected to the idea: *“later one can tell it just to everybody”* (Leander, 11). This is a reference point in the future which deliberately remains vague and creates a space for first wanting to be sure that this openness doesn’t bring along any risks.

For Jean-Marie this balancing has the following form: *“so, one can tell it, but one doesn’t need to, so, one can say, for example, when you were on holidays, you don’t need to hide it. Except when there is this mean one in class, please don’t tell them, because then – you will be picked on or so. And not to the friends of the mean kids because they then tell it to the mean one ((laughs))”* (Jean-Marie, 8).

Others express a wish that this permanent nerve-racking balancing could be put aside, as Joyce wishes, when she writes stories in which her parents appear *“perhaps not even explain it, simply just write down Anne and Mummy”* (Joyce, 10).

Most of our interview partners asserted that they – when they are asked – would not lie, what also Janne advised as an expert: *“I would never deny it”* (Janne, 16). For us this is an indication of the ethical attitude conveyed to them, but also an expression of loyalty towards the parents and interviewers. The interpretation of what counts as a lie is in the domain of the children and youths.

Then there are youths like Cristina (13 years) who shows that in their opinion have made good experiences with expressing their parents’ way of life *“right open, making no secret at all out of it”* (Cristina, 13).

Or Paul when asked as an expert, said: *“if a friend would come to me and tell me about it, then I would, I would advise him to always be just open about it, always tell the truth right away and when they ask him, always tell it right away (.) but I would also say, that then he must prepare himself, that maybe this or that comment may follow”* (Paul, 15).

### 3.2.2. Dealing with Questions and Interrogations “how does that work, two mothers?” (Mona, 8)

All the children report that there are always so many questions and inquiries about their parents’ way of life and about their family. They think it is okay to answer the questions, as long as they can feel real interest and when they do not expose themselves too much, as well as when they themselves can control the situation. Cristina says this: *“people, who are important to me, to them I like to explain it, and people who I don’t care about, they – so I spot somehow right away if or how one really takes interest in someone, there are many, to whom I then say yes, I have two mothers and once I am alone with them, then they would ask like, sorry, I wanted to ask you again now, because I didn’t really understand, and then they would also always say, yea, it can be also embarrassing, you don’t need to answer it, and I find this much better, also for me that’s not embarrassing then, I find it much better, if I can then explain it to them when we are alone”* (Cristina, 13).

For the majority of the interviewed children and youths it is annoying, if they hear the same questions too often.

In contrast to parents who find it surprising that other adults, for example, teachers show so little interest in their way of life and do not address them to find out more about their family, the children and youths find themselves in a stand-by mode, if oth-

<sup>18</sup> See interview guideline in the appendix.

ers ask them questions. Questions can quickly turn into interrogation, a gateway to insults, an arrogant 'off-checking', which positions the asked person as someone who needs to explain; this, provokes (self-)justification. The questions are, thus, experienced as crossing borders, as they question one's existence. Cristina who was conceived through insemination, reports that she is especially irritated by questions like: "how were you actually created, how can that be, where is your father?". She adds: *"I tell this to everyone, but [...] well, if they actually have no interest at all in it, but use this simply as an instrument of power [...] then I don't say anything about it, then I say, I am there, I am here and it actually really does not matter now"* (Cristina, 13).

Mona also reports that other children say: *"that's not even possible"* (Mona, 8), if she shares with them, that she has two mothers. She then counters them: *"that goes very well"* (Mona, 8).

All the interviewed children and youths have shared with us that it is important to know how they can limit and put to an end to the questionings, which they experience as inappropriate. Some of our interview partners said that in this case their parents are their role models and advisors. Janne formulated: *"so, somehow I have it from my mum, always, I've learned a cool saying and so, because she is herself always like this, she can always say something immediately, and I am always quick to say something and then I always say some kind of stupid saying or so and then it is alright"* (Janne, 16).

Some of our interviewees also report about situations, in which their environment only acknowledges information about the LGBTQ family-form or positively comment on it. Paul suspects: *"maybe it is simply only amusing for them, two mothers, and then [...] children, who are so different"* (Paul, 15). Amelie reports that her friends even had the idea to "swap mothers": *"because they imagined it to be cool to have two mothers. That was really sweet, saying: 'can I come to your house to swap mothers?'"* (Amelie, 11).

When family is a topic among peers who are friends – which seems to be much less frequent than suggested by parents – it is mostly about the experiences with divorces, quarrels between the involved parents in custody arrangements and sharing responsibility, as well as commuting between parents and worlds. These aspects are, when it comes to the question of family in discussions between friends, quite often presented as more important than the question of their parents' sexual relations and orientations. This may be due to the fact, that when children with parents in straight and LGBTQ contexts speak about themselves and their families (and the worries they have with them), the aspect of hetero or LGBTQ identification is

not placed at the foreground out of similar reason, much more important is a common horizon of experiences.

### 3.2.3. Dealing with Gender Roles

**"in the school yard, some have always asked me, if I am a boy or a girl"** (Lisa, 12)

In the interviews there are indications that some of our youth respondents have a rather atypical understanding of gender. They don't linearly follow the stereotypical definitions that are virulent for boys and girls. Previous research (Rupp 2009; Gartrell 2005; Patterson 1996) has shown, that LGBTQ parents are obviously very appropriate role models to exemplify that women as well as men are able to prepare coughing syrup, cook one's favourite dish, chase the nightmares away, and explain the math homework, just as they mow the lawn, build a tree house or repair the car.

Enno describes that he is the only boy in his class, who does not get involved in fighting. He says: *"I am a bit different, well, in my class, there is a lot of bashing and beating and there I am the only one, that doesn't do it and does not like it"* (Enno, 8).

Lisa reports that when she noticed the irritation of others, she changed her outfit, which did not fit her gender role: *"much earlier, when I was in the second grade, I had really short hair and pullovers that actually only boys wear and I was always taken for a boy and then we sorted that out and since then I've only worn normal stuff"* (Lisa, 12).

Children and young people are very mindful of how far they can go without risking their belonging to their peer group.

### 3.2.4. Self-Concepts

**"no no, I believe I won't be a lesbian"**  
(Lisa, 12)

Being questioned by peers if they will themselves become lesbian or gay is perceived by most children and youths as a violation. In the interview it was important for most of them to demonstrate a clear commitment to heterosexuality. Only one young woman reports that she is currently in love with another girl and that she believes that it is: *"certainly connected to my mother"* (Janne, 16). Nevertheless, she also emphasises that *"in the circle of my friends, there are actually only girls, who are bisexual"* (Janne, 16). and that she can imagine having love-relationships and erotic encounters with both sexes.

## 4. Strengthening Agency – Empowerment and Resilience Factors

The questions what makes children and youths stronger, what makes them feel supported, what do they need to be able to deal with their special family background confidently – both internally and externally; this is where interviews show clear indications.

### 4.1. Parents as Reliable Counsellors

**“it is always good to know, if the parents stand behind you”** (Paul, 15)

One of the central aspects that our respondents mention, is knowing that their parents stand behind them, that they discuss with them and advise on how they should act if they share some information with someone, how they can react to commentaries, which answers could be appropriate and when they, as parents, should get involved in conflicts. What is central for the children is, that they can themselves decide, which solutions are right and suitable for them.

Even when the concern of the parents – *“we should always tell”*, as Paul and Nikki summarise – gets on their nerves and shows that in their adolescence they develop and seek autonomy, independent of their parents managing their lives, these youths, who have reported retrospectively of situations in which their parents have stepped in with their determination, have reported with relief: *“then there was peace, then it was okay”* (Janne, 16).

Also Paul likes for his parents to be a background protection. He says: *“it is always good to know, if the parents stand behind you then, well actually you can fastly run to mum and say, no, that one was really stupid towards me or something. Yes, that is quite comfortable. But sometimes it is also nice when they – the parents stay out of it and one takes care of it oneself, because usually, one would also get the help of friends. But it is always really good, to have protection, that one knows, if there is something really terrible, then mum will help once again”* (Paul, 15).

Research on resilience shows that trusting relationships with parents and/or at least one closely related person are the basis for the development of children to become stable self-confident personalities with inner strength, strength that enables them to approach difficult situations like challenges, to be able to find solutions appropriate for them, and to grow in it (Zander 2011).

Children find it supportive when their parents are in contact with the school from the beginning on, present themselves as parents to their teachers, and speak about their family situation. The children

experience this as a relief, because they no longer have to judge which moment could be appropriate to present their family situation.

### 4.2. Being Familiar with LGBTQ Identification – Moderating Effects

**“the others know that, for them it is just normal”** (Henrik, 20)

To know other children and youths who also have been growing up in rainbow families has a moderating effect. This usually brings along that children in their environment, their class or sports club speak about their family and are open about their parents' way of life and handle the topic with more security and self-intelligibility.

Young people participating in the study did not necessarily establish close friendships with other youths from rainbow families; family background, all of our youth interview partners have emphasised, is not a decisive criterion for the choice of a friend. Nevertheless, the knowledge about the similar family conditions, conveys a feeling of solidarity, perhaps even an – not necessarily discussed, but observed – alignment of strategies and the certainty that one or the other will take on a protective function in the case of a possible attack. Children and youths experience a relief if other children, youths or adults in their environment mention that they are familiar with LGBTQ as a possible way of life and that they have an open attitude towards it. In this case, as our respondents have reported, they can speak with greater self-intelligibility and without carefully judging what they wish to be known about their family. Another advantage is that fewer questions are posed, as they have the experience that questions can be rather harassing, especially if they are in a defensive position and feel they have to justify what is for them, indeed, normal.

This confirms research on the creation of stereotypes, namely that personal contacts have effects of awareness raising and make a significant contribution to the reduction of the 'images of the enemy' and biases and can promote a respectful, appreciative openness to other ways of life. This can also be formulated as recommendations for teaching, to develop appropriate measures for un-learning thinking in stereotypes.

## 5. Wishes, Expectations and Visions of Parents for School and Teaching

The majority of the interviewed parents have selectively sought out schools for their children which apply to conditions such as 'openness' concerning the behaviour of the teachers, a friendly school atmosphere, violence prevention, interculturality, and gender reflexivity.

Most parents 'out' themselves as LGBTQ parents to teachers, as well as to other parents during parents' evenings and school activities, and hope that this offer for an open attitude with each other will be accepted. Most of the parents were prepared to take over 'official' duties and tasks in the school of their child(ren). They wanted, on the one hand, to be able to have an influence in school events and, on the other hand, felt responsible to support the teachers or to encourage them to create an as pleasant and discrimination-free atmosphere for their children as possible.

A varied representation of family-forms and ways of life, as well as an appropriately differentiated debate in the classroom is a big concern of most of the parents. Some parents also miss a gender-reflective critical perspective.

Where critical concepts of diversity and gender-reflexivity, inter/transcultural, and inclusive approaches could be implemented and appropriate profiles, materials, training retrieved, it would still remain in the hands of the individual teachers and compatibility with their value concepts, their attitudes, their preparedness and engagement, if and how these offers are brought closer to pupils in a lively, motivating way.

Many parents have emphasised here that 'openness and interest' for LGBTQ as a way of life and a family form in the attitudes of the school management and individual teachers are central conditions, to give rise to a school atmosphere, which can make it possible for the children to speak about their families without fear and light-heartedly.

## **6. Conclusion**

### **6.1. Experiences of Violence**

None of the children and young people we interviewed reported having experienced physical violence due to the LGBTQ background of his or her family. Instead, they described experiences and fears of being discredited and ostracised at verbal and nonverbal levels by peers and teachers.

The children and young people interviewed perceive the fact that some peers and/or teachers associate their LGBTQ/rainbow families with being 'not normal' or 'abnormal', and that they themselves feel directly or indirectly addressed in this way, as potentially threatening and related to experiences of violence and the fear of it.

We have conceptualised these experiences as heteronormative de-normalisation.

This analytical category of a discursively applied heteronormative de-normalisation opens up an interdependent approach to other forms of discrim-

ination by de-normalisation, such as racism or ableism.

Children's strategic considerations in dealing with lived and/or feared forms of violence essentially focus on the term 'normality' and concepts and constructs connected to it. Claims about normality regarding their own LGBTQ family situation, for their own self-concepts also as distinct in some regards from their LGBTQ identified parents, are formulated in different ways as a question of belonging, confirmation and agency in a school context.

We designated the strategies of the children and young people as strategies of normalisation as well as strategies in dealing with de-normalisation.

### **6.2. Normalisation Effects within the Peer Group**

We have shown that the children and young people interviewed are actors in a field within the context of school that is characterised by effects of structural heteronormativity and everyday heteronormative forms of pejoration, also of LGBTQ lifestyles at an interpersonal level, and that they take on various positions there. This field is normalised by social conventions and functions as a context for processes of negotiating social power, status and affiliation within the peer group.

'Normality' as a regulative of hegemonic, social dominance relations seems to present itself here as a powerful frame of reference, that is, as access to social power for all involved.

In a social context, however, among other things normality always also means heteronormativity as heteronormativity. Herein lies the challenge for children and young people. To be normal means being 'heteronormal', to function within heterosexually organised structures and thus to identify/position oneself implicitly or explicitly within them.

This challenge is perceived and responded to in different ways. Here we have indicated the heterogeneity of the interviewed group and the complexity of the identification, self-concepts and social attributions of each individual child and young person interviewed. In this regard they did not differ from their peers.

For the development and manifestation of strategies of dissociating from or of defending or identifying with their situation as regards the LGBTQ family lifestyle of their parents, we also referred to the dynamics of the basic conflict of autonomy versus loyalty. This applies in particular to those young people interviewed who tended to be in the midst of a process of emancipation from the parental frame of reference and toward an identification with values and norms of the peer group. At the same time they are confronted with the fact that, especially among

male youths, the peer group often reflect attitudes connoting or motivated by homophobia.

We were able to work out various strategies of how the children and young people attempt to cope with conflicts of loyalty within the tension of peer group versus parental (family) affiliations. They claimed normality for their own family by making reference to the classical functions of parenthood. Either the heterostructuring of a gendered 'father-mother' (child) role was thereby ignored, or an attempt was made to create it by referring to 'fathers' (biological father/sperm donor), even outside of the everyday family system of reference. In the more assertive strategy, they claimed that gender was not significant for parenthood.

As we have shown, in a 'normality comparison' with their peers, most children and young people largely refrain from mentioning the qualities of otherness of the LGBTQ identified family forms that they consciously experience and value (e.g. their other conceptions of gender and its attributes etc.) – even if at times peers specifically broach the subject and envy them for their situation.

Some of the children and young people, however, clearly act assertively and demonstrate their decidedly positive identification with what is 'special' about their family.

### **6.3. Challenging the Invisibility of LGBTQ Parents/Rainbow Families in the Context of School**

Respondents reported to us that – due to improved social and legal conditions for LGBTQ identified people in Germany (registered partnership, step-child adoption), the legal anchoring of non-discrimination in public life (General Equal Treatment Law, AGG) and the civil rights activism of initiatives and LGBTQ self-help groups – it has become easier for LGBTQ identified parents to show themselves with their LGBTQ identity in the context of school, and to demand equal treatment for LGBTQ/rainbow families at structural, material and interpersonal levels.

Most of the children and young people interviewed and all of the parents in our study confirmed with respect to their experience in school, however, that in everyday school routine, ideas of heterosexually structured lifestyles and family forms, as well as the corresponding conventional attributes of gender, are still predominant.

As long as rainbow families appear neither in schoolbooks and curricula, nor often in teachers' conceptions, or they are made invisible by being viewed as a negligible 'other', the supposed visibility of children and young people from rainbow families, who are potential targets of discrimination in

their everyday school routine, occurs only through de-normalisation. Thus they are not really seen in their diversity and in their similar as well as their different experiences.

### **6.4. Questioning Normality**

Questioning normality as a powerful construction and de-normalisation as a violence-encouraging tool for both exclusion and self-affirmation can be productive as a political or educational impulse in the context of school.

In addition to the corresponding supplements and modifications to teacher training, further education curricula, and school lesson plans, what is specifically needed are teachers who feel called upon, together with their students, to critically question 'normality' as a standard and a category, and to reject it where it has a limiting and excluding effect, thereby helping to make 'affiliation' possible as a 'normal' experience for everyone involved.

Dealing with LGBTQ lifestyles and family forms in school would present an opportunity to make their emancipatory aspects productive. Expanding the latitude with reference to gender and erotic/sexual forms of desire could be a subject of discussion in school, as well as consideration of more open forms of conceptualising family and kinship. An ultimate aim could be to encourage schoolchildren to gain a sense of normality in a plural form, and to experience normality/-ties as part of a process and capable of being shaped.

### **Recommended Readings**

- Hark, Sabine (1999). *Deviant Subjekte. Die paradoxe Politik der Identität*. Opladen: Leske + Budrich.
- Hornscheidt, A. Lann et al. (Eds.) (2011). *Schimpfwörter – Beschimpfungen – Pejorisierungen: Wie in Sprache Macht und Identitäten verhandelt werden*. Frankfurt/Main: Brandes & Apsel.
- Stacey, Judith (2011). *Unhitched. Love Marriage and Family Values from Western Hollywood to Western China*. New York: New York University Press.



## 5.2. Findings Slovenia

### 1. General State of Affairs and Existing Research

*Ana Marija Sobočan*

The phenomenon of invisibility can possibly be identified as one of the keycodes of the life of Slovenian same-sex families. Discussing sexuality and social movements in Slovenia, Lešnik writes that the case of Slovenia can be described in terms of a transition from a world where it is dangerous to speak out to a world where it is difficult to make oneself heard (2006: 94). His analysis of the development of the LGBTQ movement shows that “sexual orientation” is at the onset and is just used to signify different possibilities of sexuality. It is only very late that the movement took up ‘identity politics’. Something similar can also be said in the case of gay and lesbian parenting: completely invisible until recently, they slowly became aware that they should have the right to claim same-sex parented families as one of the options of family life and especially, that family life can be an option that gay and lesbian partners can follow up on. Only recently, especially conservative political actors have claimed that same-sex families are also an unfamiliar family form, a deviation, known to the West, but not present in Slovenia. The first (visible) shift probably happened when ILGA Europe and Legebitra (Organisation for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transsexual youth, Slovenia) organised a conference on LGBTQ families in Ljubljana in the spring of 2007. The conference was welcomed by jumboposters showing homosexual partners greeting drivers, cyclists, and pedestrians in Ljubljana, and the first research on same-sex families in Slovenia was also presented at the event.

The LGBTQ movement has broadened its demands for equality to include family life and recognition of LGBTQ families and most recently, they have been at the heart of the debate on the new family legislation. A major breakthrough happened at the end of 2009, when two mothers (with an infant child) decided not only to give interviews to the media (this had already been done – anonymously), but also to share their photos, names, and surnames with the public. This can be identified as the peak of the changes in the last two years. Since then same-sex families have started to claim a space both in the realm of heteronormative family life, as well as in the realm of LGBTQ movements’ agendas. LGBTQ

parents initiated a group of “pink parents”, named Rozalija, formed through an internet forum which was established in order to create a (safe) space for exchanging information and giving group support for those who already have children and those who intend to have them. The value of such a group is not only as an information platform, but most of all, as an environment that fosters awareness-raising, empowerment, and mutual support. The group is also of political importance, as it is the first common voice of a significant number of same-sex families. Rozalija is also one of the founding members of the European LGBT Families Association (NELFA) and intends to become an even more active voice of the LGBTQ families in Slovenia, both in relation to the broader society, as well as in the realm of the LGBTQ community and movement.

Nevertheless, although same-sex families are slowly making themselves visible, this does not yet eradicate their invisibility. The non-biological parent in female same-sex families is currently still ‘invisible’ in a legal sense. This is also generated, framed, and maintained by the cultural attitudes toward non-heterosexual families and parents, who form, as can be claimed, a socially still unwanted form of family life. As in a vicious circle, the lack of legal recognition also disables the non-biological parents in same-sex families from claiming their parental role both socially and symbolically. As becomes clear in the first research on same-sex parented families in Slovenia, the non-familiarity with models of family life, different from the heteronormative, and the rein of biological relationships, lead to people asking the parents in same-sex families: “Whose child is this actually?” and “Who is the child’s real/proper mother?” Such examples show that people locate the images they see in the cognitive models they know, recognizing same-sex couples with children as a mother and her friend, a father and the child’s uncle, a mother and a babysitter. Švab (2007) claims that the reproductive preferences of gay men and lesbians are largely influenced and conditioned by the social context that rejects parenting models outside of the heterosexual matrix. Švab draws on the first sociological research on everyday life of gays and lesbians in Slovenia (Švab & Kuhar, 2005) and determines that the suppression of thoughts about having a family is often motivated by the fear of negative impacts of the heteronormative social contexts on the family and

children. Švab acknowledges that gays and lesbians are aware that the problem originates in a homophobic society, but that the responsibilities for the consequences of homophobic reactions are transferred to gays and lesbians themselves, emphasizing the importance of the 'right' upbringing of children in homosexual families (Švab, 2007: 225).

Moreover, what is especially alarming is that gays and lesbians are also invisible in relation to violence and hate-acts. As Maljevac and Magič claim, most victims of violent acts would either not report to the police. Moreover, violent acts are not attributed to homophobia at all, which again makes them invisible. The research on the everyday life of gays and lesbians in Slovenia in 2005 (443 participants) has shown, that 91 percent of the respondents had already experienced psychological violence, 24 percent physical violence and 6 percent sexual violence, all connected to their (perceived) homosexuality, with the most dangerous space for them being the public space (Švab, Kuhar 2005). A more recent research that explored violence against LGBTQ persons shows, that society and even LGBTQ persons themselves do not react or respond to homophobic violent acts – they seem to expect them and be used to them (Magič 2008: 16). The research identifies school as a space of name-calling, exclusionary practices, and physical violence. The respondents who participated in the research focus groups mostly bring to attention the ignorance of school teachers, who do not respond to daily acts of (homophobic) violence (Magič 2008: 18). Also considered as important the participants speak of the effects of the anticipation of violence – which make them 'eliminate' all visible signs of potentially homosexual identity when they are in public. The respondents speak of school years as a time of loneliness and isolation, due to anticipated or experienced violence (Magič 2008). Research on the everyday life of homosexual youth in Slovenia shows that 57 percent of out gay youths in secondary school have experiences of violence because of their homosexuality and 43 percent of those who are not out. What is even more alarming is that 9 percent of secondary school youths experience verbal violence from their teachers (Maljevac, Magič 2009: 97).

While obviously young people experience violence in school, the topic of homosexuality seems to be silenced. Research about the everyday life of homosexual youths in Slovenia (Kuhar et al. 2008) shows that 98 percent of the participants of the research who attend secondary school have not heard anything or very little about homosexuality in school. This does not speak of unavailable information, but of undesired information, about information which is invalid. As Maljevac and Magič write, comment-

ing on the latter research, approximately only half of the gay youths in secondary school is out to one or more of their classmates, and only 8 percent of the youths say that their teachers know about their homosexuality, too (which would probably mean that they are really out in their environment, not only to their closest classmates. (Maljevac, Magič 2009: 97), which is undoubtedly connected to their perception of school as an unsafe, even dangerous place to disclose one's (homo)sexuality, which is perceived as an unwanted, deviant form of behaviour.

In the last years Legebitra Information Centre has offered free workshops on human rights and homosexuality to more than a hundred secondary schools in Slovenia, and only eight have responded to this offer. Moreover, they have also offered a monthly free newsletter containing information related to homosexuality etc. to all the libraries in secondary schools, but have often encountered a response, such as: 'we don't need it, we don't have such students at our school' (Maljevac, Magič 2009: 99). Legebitra Information Centre also conducted a research among LGBTQ teachers in Slovenia, 'Excuse me, Miss, are you a lesbian?'. LGBTQ teachers experience homosexuality as undesirable and interpret it as something negative and therefore talking about homosexuality (in school) is understood as the promotion of homosexuality (Magič, Janjevac 2011: 8). In her research on the attitudes of kindergarten teachers towards homosexuality, Tuš Špilak (2010: 356) finds the main reasons for not speaking about same-sex families in kindergarten in teachers telling her that this is because it does not apply to them – they don't have any kids from same-sex families in their group (58 percent), because the children would not understand what a same-sex family is (12 percent), because such a family is not a 'proper' family (6 percent), because it is not in the curriculum (5 percent), because they have no information about such families (14 percent), and because the parents do not agree with this (1 percent). The latter result should not be misinterpreted, as there is no information about how many teachers have actually consulted with parents about same-sex families. Taking account of all other available data on attitudes towards homosexuality, there is probably a much higher number of reluctant parents. One of the teachers has exclaimed: *"In the last year there has been a lot of fuss about this deviant form of sex life. The children in my group are from healthy families and have no experiences of same-sex families, so I don't find it appropriate to speak about it with them."* (Tuš Špilak 2010: 357)

## 2. Experts/Teachers

Maja Pan

### 2.1. Sampling

During the course of research in LGBTQ families in Slovenian schools, five interviews were conducted with teachers from primary and secondary schools; one of them had previously been a social pedagogy worker. None of them had had any acquaintance with rainbow families or children coming from LGBTQ/rainbow family constellations in their career: *“at least I had no information”* (Teacher Marija). The interviewees were selected from the professional networks of the researchers who were acquainted with them due to previous activist educational work in schools (Pan 2009). All the interviewees are gender/sexuality-aware professionals and active participants in consciousness raising and homophobic violence prevention work.

Following this round, three more interviews were conducted. The reason for conducting these was the experience gained during the affair about anti-homophobia workshops that emerged in 2010–2011, based on the “right families” ideology propagated by the conservative Civil Initiative for Family and Rights of children, during which homophobic backlash evolved. It revealed not only civil public homophobia, but also a wide range of institutional homophobia displayed in the media (from highest – the Minister of Education, to lowest, the executive level of educational institutions, i.e. particular schools and their professionals in charge). Within this round the interviews were conducted with the following persons: the headmaster of one school who took an active anti-homophobia stance, a high ranking official from the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Slovenia, and an educational expert from the Pedagogy and Andragogy Department at the Faculty of Arts of the University of Ljubljana.

### 2.2 Existing Strategies to address Rainbow Families

In this section we describe the current position of our interviewees regarding their possible strategies in Slovenia when dealing with diverse family realities, with respect to parents’ genders/sexualities.

#### 2.2.1 Reading the White Book

Broad and progressive schooling principles, goals, and directions are set to enable the public to implicitly recognise and respect diverse family-life experiences in schools in Slovenia. The notion of family is kept open and undefined, therefore there is no provisioning of type of family life to be promoted by schools, neither is the phenomenon of plural family formations listed concretely. Rather, the plurality of cultures, encouraging understanding, tolerance, and friendship among nations, races, re-

ligious or other groups are set to be respected. This interpretation stems from a liberal conceptualising in accordance with widely accepted common standards of European heritage and international human rights and their principles, such as plural democracy, solidarity, legal state and tolerance (White Book 2011: 13). It is explicitly stated that public schools are to be kept “neutral” and “laic” by avoiding representing “particular world-views and value systems”, including those of parents. Furthermore, “public schooling has to have autonomy in its relation towards state and power structures, and also in relation to common sense knowledge (*vsakdanjih vednosti*) and beliefs” (White Book, 2011: 14). At the same time this guarantees a school its autonomy in separation from religious beliefs and other particular value systems (White Book, 2011: 14). Also, the functioning of the schooling system has to be subjected to analysis and reflection of ideological mechanisms in the schools and kindergartens (White Book 2011: 14).

How all this is done is certainly not stated in a document such as the White Book. Its idea is set to follow European legal standards and encompass them into a framework that is wide enough to become neutral and nonexclusive, which, rather than advancing possible new social practices, carefully waits for them to be legally provisioned by the state.

While such an approach certainly allows the strengthening of teachers’ autonomy and expertise as a principle (White Book 2011: 14), in the comparative context of gender/sexuality teachings and gender based violence prevention we can recognise that similar historical “overlooking” is/was taking place. Studies done about gender difference and heteronormativity in Slovenia (Dolar, Bahovec & Bregar 2004; Vendramin & Šribar 2009; Vendramin 2011) prove clearly that the teacher’s role is problematic when it comes to addressing hidden curricula, which confirms Apple’s insight that historically hidden curricula for most of its gender/sexuality content was/is not hidden at all (1992: 49). The same is found in some current textbook analyses (Komidar & Mandeljc, 2009: 164–181). “Invisible obviousness” is also present in the widely criticised campaign of the Ministry of Education in 2009, called “Proud of his or her gender”. The campaign was criticised in the 2010 Annual Report by the Advocate of the Principle of Equality 2010 (2010: 155–158) who claimed that it directly employs sexual identity and indirectly sexual orientation discrimination, since it completely disregards LGBTQ pupils.

Finally, the goal of having those explicit realities addressed systematically and inclusively (according to human rights standards) has not been realised



yet. The highly acclaimed autonomy of schools that resonates with the freedom of public schools from religious or other particular beliefs (White Book 2011: 14) is at stake exactly at the point of equality of diverse family formations. Children's right to live without being discriminated in non-normative family settings has not been meaningfully addressed yet. For this reason, all the responsibility for anti-discriminatory education in Slovenia – also for having groups and institutions involved – still rests on concerned individuals and their personal engagement.

### 2.2.2 Teachers' Creative Reading of Curricula

Our interviews imply that teachers recognise personal beliefs and preferences as significant in education but reflect on them only to a certain extent, while in the particular case of gender/sexuality equality these are often interpreted as predominantly *"individual efforts for pupils sensitivisation"* (Teacher Petra). Mainly done within the daily routine and different teaching subjects (our examples: language, chemistry, techniques and technologies), and various school occupations (counselling pupils with special learning needs, class teacher position, school librarian, free time activities organiser), every teacher interviewed strongly believes that attitudes and values on family, gender, and sexuality can be transmitted completely, regardless of the school subject they teach. They mentioned *"through daily routine," "personal comments," "informal conversations," "visible symbols like rainbow flag, posters"* etc., whereas the *"school subjects where a creative teacher can employ human rights themes are countless: citizenship education, ethics, biology, language, history etc., or, as I do, within classes of technology. If inventive enough, a teacher can pick up on any everyday life situation or topic or just pay attention to pupils' inquiries and use them for teaching certain kinds of social knowledge and experience without going astray or coming to conflict with curricula"* (Teacher Pika).

Further on, this can imply *"no need for a special teaching topic or particular mention of it in the curricula"* (Teacher Pika).

Moreover, this brings us to an understanding of the broader epistemological impossibility of a non-problematic situating of teaching/education: there is not one right way to teach gender/sexuality topics and values connected to them, and again, there are *"literally countless ways to pass on personal values of a teacher, regardless of the school subject we might teach"* (Teacher Zdenka). The agency to decide when conflicting values and beliefs are faced rests as much inside as outside particular teachers' position: *"but don't get me wrong, having it in the curricula would certainly help, especially those less informed*

*teachers. Well, then you face a problem if it is okay at all, I mean, if such a teacher can have the right way to deliver non biased information to pupils at all"* (Teacher Lana).

Such practice may not be fully understood as backed up with proper 'knowledge' or 'information' needed to conduct gender/sexuality human rights education, as many interviewed teachers report. Thus, they primarily reflect on their practices as a *"genuine thing to do"*, or *"simple human virtue"*, or *"a human rights advocacy"* position that cannot fully replace a first-hand life experience of a deprived individual or group. For this reason, to deal with anti-homophobia and heteronormative matters, teachers may find it more suitable to employ "non-school" expert sources, like NGO's volunteers. Also peer-to-peer learning is another method they deploy.

Similar is found as an optional strategy for non-heterosexual teachers when they are caught between personal discreteness and a professional urge to address homophobia, transphobia, and gender-based violence. In a recent research by Magič and Janjevak, conducted with the main aim *"to gather data about whether the Slovene school space allows LGBT teachers to truly carry out their primary mission without restrictions, whether it enables them to offer all available support to all their students, and whether it openly allows them to teach and present themselves to their students in their entirety and as a role models"* (Magič & Janjevak 2011).

Our research proves the same striving expressed in the reflection by a teacher at primary school: *"it certainly makes it a lot easier for me as a straight married woman to present and advocate for LGBT families and individuals, as I seem more objective to do so than my lesbian colleague would seem. About her many would certainly state she is imposing her private convictions and simply wants to promote her sexual practice. Incredible, right, but sadly, it is true"* (Teacher Marija).

More importantly, the same reason, i.e. the lack of personal competence, is used as a strategy when negotiating the introduction of these issues with school superiors (in case the issue is presented openly at all). Having external visitor experts is understood as positive for the school, *"kind of added value to our programme,"* but having the content of non-normative gender/sexuality presented openly, rests solely on teachers' own estimation and judgement. In such a case there are two possible options. One is that the teacher invites NGO experts to the school via broader key issues (human rights issues, love issues, prevention of gender based violence, tolerance, anti-discrimination and similar) as an excuse to have gender/sexuality issues addressed in a non-biased way in their class: *"I have told you al-*

*ready that our headmaster is a homophobe, so I decided to wrap up the workshop's title a bit, for our headmaster, sadly enough or luckily, is mainly concerned with whether it involves any costs" (Teacher Lana). The other option is that they openly discuss it with superiors: "our headmaster knows my activist efforts in the field of human rights, and she is supportive of it" (Teacher Zdenka), or "my colleagues know me to be involved in many children's rights issues, so addressing homophobia is considered one of them" (Teacher Pika). Or: "knowing that it might involve myself personally too much, as I was not out to my colleagues, I invited activist educator from NGO to do anti-homophobia workshop in the class" (Teacher Petra).*

### **2.3. Newly Visible Family Forms: A New Partnership between Parents and School?**

As our research reveals, the idea that school is considered to be a socio-political institution often does not imply that teachers have a clear notion of their role in teaching/reproducing social norms, and that they reflect on what is being taught when values are at stake. It seems there is a consensus that social values in educational institutions, like elsewhere, are based on specific teaching contents that cannot be taught once and for good but have to be co-created by different partners: pupils, teachers, and parents, among whom the respective autonomy is seen as the primal condition for their cooperation (Novak 2009: 207). The 'autonomy of school' is understood as ultimate autonomy in local decision-making about teaching issues, being assured by formal legal framework, which, in the case of Slovenia, offers a wider formal space than the practice actually makes use of (ibid.). According to our research, the same can be stated for the autonomy of teachers, pupils, superiors, and parents.

In general it is a reserved and not very developed attitude in Slovenia being a matter of the school's or teacher's autonomy to openly address diverse family structures and heteronormativity. In our research, teachers' and parents' discuss expectations about the necessity to have autonomy acknowledged from above – either from the side of the superiors or from the side of the law (such as Family Code or curricula): *"that would make things a lot easier for us" (Teacher Zdenka). If not as a rule, this response refers mostly to (not) having a chance to initiate anti-homophobia workshops in their schools, and also to receive an unsatisfactory response from the school during the backlash against anti-homophobia workshops, for example, when protest-letters addressing schools by concerned parents appeared in 2010–2011. "After a certain father started to ask the superiors at our school whether we conducted anti-homophobia workshops, our headmaster decided we had better wait till things hush a bit and for the time being we don't give any more work-*

*shops" (Teacher Marija; more or less the same was expressed also by Teacher Lana). As this does not represent an individual attitude, we can generalise that schools use their autonomy in ambivalent ways when it comes to education about diversity or the promotion of a safe schooling environment for all pupils. To explain why this is so, along the legal binding of the Ministry of Education we need to present its concrete role in the backlash against anti-homophobia, since it came up throughout the interviews. We estimate this role to be ambivalent itself, mainly for it results in the fact that since then no effort has been done in the direction to make clearer rules about anti-discrimination trainings and education in Slovene schools.*

Having such rules and understanding of their necessity introduced to teachers and headmasters would make the relations between parents and school much less troublesome when it comes to conflicting values clashing. This way schools would be able to position themselves as actual autonomous experts safeguarding pupils' rights to be included, informed, saved, and respected.

Interestingly, the cooperation between families and schools regarding diverse social values is still poorly reflected and badly informed, although they are common to both institutions. Certainly, it would be naive to expect that the presentation and introduction of alternative realities is enough. The raising of educational awareness concerning hidden but still persistent ideological practices proves to have better potential (Vendramin & Šribar 2009: 24). Moreover, as Kovač Šebart states, *"apart from public common values being obliged to be represented in public schools, we need to deploy also understanding, discussion and critical reflection precisely about the relationship towards diversity in the private sphere"* (Interview, 2011).

Thus, definitely more attention should be paid to raising awareness about daily routine practices in schools and schools' educational openness to ever-changing social realities through recommendations and encouragement of teachers' principal and direct autonomy.

#### **2.3.1. LGBTQ Human Rights Education or Gambit in Schools' Autonomy**

During lobbying activities against the Family Code in 2010 and throughout 2011, the above mentioned Civil Initiative for Families and Rights of Children challenged some MPs with the idea that there is a "homosexual propaganda" and "turning children into homosexuals" going on in numerous Slovene schools. This was proved by posting publicly available educational materials provided by two NGOs involved in human rights education, so the Ministry of Education decided to investigate in the issue.

The public activity that the two NGOs had unsystematically been conducting in schools for nearly ten years was questioned by a letter addressed to all schools asking whether they have had such workshops at their schools in the past two years. This approach was highly criticised by the then State Secretary Kovšča: *"This circular letter was a way of putting pressure on schools. The Ministry should show more respect and trust considering school autonomy"* (Interview, 2011). The outcome was that the majority of schools simply ignored the letter but some panicked and immediately cancelled all the engagements with the two NGOs they had had so far.

In response, both NGOs requested an appointment with the Minister and other authorities to present their LGBTQ human rights education work. Later on, there was a special issue on the topic in the *Journal for Contemporary Educational Studies* (2009) published by the Society of Educational Workers of Slovenia which was, followed by a roundtable discussion entitled "Homosexuality and Schools" in January 2010, and the NGO Legebitra running a seminar "Breaking the Silence" in December 2010. The final response of the Minister of Education to the public was that these two NGOs did not promote any sexual preference.

Up to the present moment the Minister of Education has publicly stated that a teacher must by no means indoctrinate pupils and that the division between parents' opinions or beliefs and the school's practice is determined by the Constitution of the Republic of Slovenia. This opinion resonates with the statement of M. Kovač Šebart, professor at Department of Pedagogy, Faculty of Arts, Ljubljana: *"Education in the public school system may contradict the particular values of parents. Those can be acquired in private schools. Constitution, laws, and curricula are set in the value framework of human rights and duties. Among other conventions, these deploy a norm and bind schools when it comes to education. Expressing actual plurality means that we also need to differentiate knowledge from values and knowledge from beliefs (also religious ones), and we need to differentiate facts from opinions while pupils should be encouraged to distinguish between them"* (Interview, 2011).

Unfortunately, this statement is not accepted and confronted with beliefs based on religiously motivated phobias of conservative protectors of traditional families and advocates of rights of children. They continue to make pressure on public opinion by enforcing their claim on human and children's rights through parents' insistence that children are being violated when family diversity and gender equality are at stake. This is often done with tools invented by traditional grassroots movements (petitioning, graffiti etc.) or parents' involvement in

school processes. Another conclusion we can make is that the Ministry of Education make no effort to encourage schools themselves to differentiate between knowledge based on human rights charters from religious beliefs or discriminating world-views and neither communicate their principles to the parents.

So far no legal case has been envisioned to reassure legal rights for that concern. Since the existent legislation in Slovenia is likely to be supportive for such a case to be solved positively on behalf of school's/teacher's expert autonomy and for the sake of promoting plurality issues, it may be an interesting option to try.

## 2.4. Conclusions

The potential for claiming teachers and principals' legal obligation to respond to all forms of harassment and discrimination in schools has not been explored in our practices so far. Claims for pupils to have the right to attend school in a safe environment, and expect to see their lives positively reflected in curriculum and classroom activities as well, are not enough. Only a gradually growing awareness by educators about the fact that homophobia has to be addressed can be expected (British Columbia Teachers' Federation).

Critically, we have to repeat that the overlooking of homosexuality in schools is definitely one of the most significant and visible silencing strategies that clearly reaffirms dominant social gender-family norms (Kuhar & Sobočan 2010), but it is not the most challenging one, unless addressed epistemologically. Additionally, the conclusions for its solution approach is predetermined: calls for "zero tolerance," harsher punishment, mandatory counselling, nostalgia for traditional families, and increased surveillance have not had efficient results in reducing homophobic and other forms of bullying, and in increasing the visibility of homosexuality (Moy 2008).

At the same time, we estimate that current educational goals in the White Book 2011 for Slovenia (White Book 2011: 16–18) are broad enough not only to allow teachers to introduce new family realities, but also to introduce them without normativising them as some definite curricular contents might or as they did before, for example, regarding body, sexuality, normative family construction, and the instrumentalisation of children's rights. The new White Book has already been criticised by the Civil Initiative for Family and Rights of children for the absence of the traditional family along with motherhood and fatherhood mentioned as an exclusive social and national value. This can be read as a current perplexity in negotiating the issue among opposing ideological parties involved, but also of poor

political will from the side of the Ministry of Education and other governmental institutions to ensure respecting human rights.

Non-biased education on gender/sexuality topics is reportedly done only when teachers have long-lasting, good and trustworthy professional and personal relationships with their superiors. Teachers who would want to employ the first strategy namely that of having broader thematic workshops, would do so because they are aware of their headmaster's lack of understanding. Anyhow, throughout the interviews with activist teachers the same resonates: a necessity to have at least passive support from their superiors when dealing with anti-homophobia topics, if we are to expect any, but not really sustainable results. For this reason there are hardly any teachers to be found who would understand their professional autonomy in a way that they would have their class actually meet content which their superiors would find completely unacceptable: *"For the next year I resigned from having more LGBT rights workshops at our school since without my superior's consent I wasn't able to look for the back-up I need if something goes wrong. Nowadays, parents constantly threaten to take their child out of school..."* (Teacher Marija).

For similar reasons, all teachers state that they find the role of school superiors crucial when addressing socially contested topics, like rainbow families or homophobic violence prevention. Consequently, all of them are also convinced that headmasters are in the position to actively advocate the position of schools regarding the right of pupils for non-biased, diverse information, and a safe school environment, resisting against conservative parents and an environment which is worried about traditional families and children's rights. This suggests Slovene teachers having quite deep and reasonable trust in state authorities, their institutions and laws as representatives and warrants of collective responsibility and common safety.

As for the activist teachers interviewed, significant trust is also expressed towards NGOs which, to their best practice, fill in the meaningful lack in the field of non-discriminatory education. This lack is due to the identification of the problem and the lack of good practice examples, which is also pointed out in the research study on pornography in schools (Vendramin & Šribar 2009).

According to the historical function that sex education occupies in schools (providing information about sexually transmitted diseases, safe sex practices, reproductive health and body hygiene) schools also take on the burden of dealing with 'uncomfortable' issues that would otherwise rely solely on parents/carers. As opposed to the contemporary

interest of parents to claim moral and social authority for family formation issues, research shows that more and more reduced talk on sexuality in families in Slovenia delegate this task to schools (Belović, Fujs & Nikolić 2008).

Against the current of critiques having vague and superficial ideas about gendered socialisation (what gender qualifies for which parental role?), competences (how come LGBTQ parents are suitable for parenting role?) and practices (LGBTQ/rainbow families are becoming a more and more visible fact) and constant claims about curricular changes, the destabilisation of gender/sexual hegemony is needed. Unfortunately, balancing (on equality in gender binary), all-inclusiveness (for the sake of the abstract notion of human rights and tolerance) and pluralisation (seeming universality in monolithic values) alone are not enough. There certainly remains the potential of LGBTQ/rainbow parents' involvement in schools when overcoming their frustrations with not being visible in the school environment.

The results of this research repeatedly point at troubles parents have when expected to take not only a traditional active parenting role, but even an "activist positioning" regarding school and their diverse family structures. Our conclusion is that the fact that the above-mentioned expert's opinion is so poorly present in the Slovene public and in the educational sphere, has the result that the main burden of giving "counter examples" rests primarily on the rainbow parents' shoulders. From the perspective of democratic institutions expecting LGBTQ/rainbow parents to be activists in school is unrealistic and unfair. Besides, eventual legal changes in the family sphere do not guarantee social value changes – which safeguarding and promotion is – or would, then finally have to rest proactively in the realm of education.

### 3. Parents in Same-sex Families

Ana Marija Sobočan

#### 3.1. Sampling

Invisibility seems to be one of the main experiences of LGBTQ/rainbow families in Slovenia, as it has already become clear during the interview process. Practically this means that we have had great difficulties engaging people in the interviews, even though we knew of their existence and contacted them. Despite very good research-relationships with same-sex families from previous research and public and research visibility, we were less successful in interviewing them than we had planned or hoped for. Due to the restrictedness of the sample in Slovenia, the results cannot be generalised: each interview with parents or children provided a story, which can be analysed only as a case study, an



example. Nevertheless, these interviews are a valuable resource for understanding the daily lives of same-sex families and their children in connection to school and for planning activities in connection with them. The process of interviewing included not only a discussion on the experienced or perceived homophobia in the school-life of children, but also a more general discussion on homophobia in society, on projections and expectations, as well as on ideas how to combat homophobia, parental roles and statutes, children live in- and outside of school, as well as in- and outside of their families etc. The case of experts, expectations, ideas, and views on homophobic behaviour, as well as how to deal with these were discussed, etc. Even if we are primarily interested in school experiences of children from same-sex families, this information made it possible for us to thoroughly analyse the elusive school-situation.

In Slovenia, 16 parents of ten families were interviewed; two of these were men and 14 were women, aging from 29 years old to 52 years old. Except one, all live in urban areas (two of the largest cities in Slovenia). 15 children grow up in these families: five of them attend a kindergarten, six primary school (aged 6–14), three secondary school (aged 14–18) and one is already a university student. What has to be noted immediately is that from these families, we were only granted access to two out of eight children (the age group this research is targeting). In the case of four children it was not clear if they knew their parents are homosexual and in the case of two children the parents promised to ask them if they want to participate (and they responded they would rather not).

The composition of the families of the interviewed is quite diverse: children in five families were born in heterosexual relationships (eight children), and children in four families were born in homosexual relationships (five children) and in one family, one child was born in a heterosexual relationship and one in a homosexual relationship. Ten of these children have (more or less active) fathers and five children were conceived either with donor insemination or at home, but the identity of the donors is anonymous. In relation to previous research in Slovenia, in which families of two same-sex partners, families of two same-sex partners who share custody with a previous (different-sex) partner, and families of two same-sex partners who parent together with other two same-sex partners or a gay person, this sample also includes families, in which children have been conceived in a heterosexual relationship but after the recognition of a parents homosexual orientation, both parents still take care of the children on a daily basis (possibly also by still living together).

### 3.2. Family Structures and Passing Strategies<sup>19</sup>

In relation to public attitudes towards homosexuality, it is clear that what seems to be a characteristic of everyday lives of most homosexual parents in families is the homophobic behaviour of their environment – work, school, public services etc. In (Slovenian) society it is considered, that a child should have a mother and a father and this is the prevalent pattern that people seek to position every family in. Thus, it could be considered e.g. that children, living with two mothers, and have fathers (that is, children who were born in a heterosexual relationship or who have a known, active donor-father), are perceived differently than those, who do not. They might more easily answer to the pertaining question (voiced by just anyone in their heteronormative environment): “don’t you have a father? Where/who is your father?”, they might ‘pass’ as ‘ordinary’ children from the perspective of the family and the parents might consider making all parents (mothers and fathers) visible in the child’s life also in a way to ‘normalise it’, make it understandable and demonstrate that the child has the ‘proper’ role-models in his/her life. One of the examples we encountered in our interviews, is the following: in the case of the child (boy behaving aggressively, the school teacher notified and talked to the father, despite the fact that the boy lives with two mothers (and sees his father, living in another city, only every two weeks). The teacher believed that behavioural problems, such as aggression, belong to the domain of the father (the man) and he should (successfully) deal with these. Parents might find it important to follow such a strategy precisely because it gives a chance to the environment (teachers etc.) to relate to what they believe is ‘normal’ or ‘right’.

A way to offer people in the environment a model which is understandable and acceptable was explained by another parent: *“To make it easier for the child, we decided that in [primary] school, I would function as his aunt. They accepted this completely normally, they even found that we [the biological and the social mother] are visually very similar.”* (Ina)

As the mother explained, this role functioned well in a suburban school, where mothers felt it was too dangerous to disclose themselves as a lesbian couple. They felt this worked well, and it gave the opportunity to the social mother to participate in the school-life of the child (e.g. teachers’ meetings etc.). The child also had an identifiable (but not present) father, which would probably cast away any other ‘suspicion’ about the ‘aunt’ being in any other relationship to the mother.

A model which we could also identify in our interviews can be described as a family model where the parents were previously a heterosexual couple, but

19 ‘Passing’ of course evokes Erving Goffman’s concept. Renfrow (2004), for example, distinguishes between (a) passing along highly stigmatized identities and everyday passing across less threatening ones; and (b) proactive passing, which individuals initiate, and reactive passing, in which individuals embrace an identity others have mistakenly assigned to them.

now have new sexual partners, yet remain in a close familial relationship, functioning fully in the child's life on a daily basis. This also makes it possible for the child to 'have' different-sex parents, without necessarily disclosing information about their sexuality. Thus, the family functions in a way recognizable as a 'proper' or just as a 'divorced' family, without the need of involvement of other careers/parents.

In the interviews parents would refrain to explaining how average their family really is, using terms like "normal" and "ordinary". It is obviously important to them that they do not stand out, that they do not seem to be families with special needs or habits, and that their children are perceived and accepted as any other average children.

### 3.3. Invisibility and Protection Strategies

The next important characteristic, in many ways also following from the first one, is the invisibility of same-sex families. This invisibility seems not to be restricted only to the school (public) life, but sometimes overarches also in the family sphere. More parents who were previously living in heterosexual relationships felt reluctant to speak about their (new) sexuality to their children, even if they were, e.g. already living with a partner of the same sex. One of the parents explained that she is reserved about coming out to her children (aged 10 and 13) as she believes she has to protect them from the burden of (their) coming out in an non-urban homophobic environment – if they knew their mother was a lesbian, they would have to be open about it, when asked questions. The latter is especially frequent in cases of possible custody laws – mothers would say that they fear that the fathers would sue them for custody if they knew that they are now in a lesbian relationship and that they do not have enough trust in social services and the legal system to believe that this personal circumstance is irrelevant in custody lawsuits. Some parents would say that they believe that their children already 'suspect' their homosexuality, that they "understand what is going on", but that they have not yet collected enough courage to speak about it with them, again, not because of their personal relationship with the children, but because of the following consequences for the children with their environment. In this way, parents perceive the secrecy of their sexuality as actually protecting the children from being part of it, because the sexuality of the parents, if it is homosexual, sexualises the whole family.

One of the gay fathers spoke of the mother of their child confronting a school-teacher when the children were supposed to speak about their families in school: she claimed these were personal issues, which should not be addressed. Such assertiveness

has the function of protecting the family by preventing an 'information leak'. The strategy of secrecy is obviously quite frequent: one of the mothers e.g. gave the example of her daughter telling a friend with whom she had been together in school for almost ten years – at this point about her family. The friend 'came out' as to also having two mothers although this had been completely invisible for such a long time.

Nevertheless, parents also recognise that there are two sides of the coin to invisibility. One of the mothers presented us with a case of abuse of her daughter in school, after she told in class, that she lives with two women: bad marking and bullying from teachers led to deteriorating health conditions, while her mother was constantly confronted by two teachers "*that the reason for this was that her daughter terribly misses her father*". The mother moved her daughter to another school, but only after recognizing that the reasons for her daughter's bad school outcomes and hospitalisations actually lay in the attitudes of two homophobic teachers, "*I was not able to see that before*". Her family appealed to her that she should report what happened to the police and sue the school, but she decided against it, concluding that because they were not 'out' at school, she would not be able to claim discrimination on this base. When signing her daughter out of this school, "*the headmaster agreed immediately, as she wanted to be out of this matter as soon as possible. All she actually was interested in was, if anyone will 'pay for it', if we will report them, I think she was really afraid of that*".

### 3.4. Activism and Positioning Strategies

Social parents who are out to the kid's teachers as 'parents – partners of biological parents' report that it is often a struggle: they have to be active in a relationship, which is often cold, distanced and some teachers have a hard time getting used to the equal parental role of the same-sex social parent, but in time and persistence, they become used to it and accept it. Some parents find the active role really important, because, as one mother said: "*the teachers say that they don't care about intimate things. And then kids have to write essays about family vacations and rooms in their apartments*". It could even be said that it is unavoidable that the teachers know about the family structure, unless the children learn to hide it.

Some parents would report that they believe that the teachers know that they are a same-sex family, but don't feel like discussing it with them yet. Another mother said: "*My partner didn't agree that we tell them that the kids live with two women; she said, it's not their business, who is sleeping with whom. But I told the teacher. She never said anything to me*



*about it afterwards. But when they were drawing families in school, there were no comments anymore. With the first kid, when she drew two grown female figures, the teacher said: 'today we are drawing family, not friends'. Now, there were no more comments.'* (Ela)

Some parents, for example, feel that it is important that they are out in school, but would themselves not be out in some other spheres of life (such as their work environment etc.).

Recently, more and more families purposefully plan to speak about their family to kindergarten and schoolteachers. They see the importance of "educating" teachers in the fact that children should be able to freely talk about their family reality, without any confusions, secrecy or doubts. Especially the very young families in our research group, where children were born after donor insemination feel that what is important is immediate confrontation of the teachers with their family form and parental roles, as well as clear demands for introduction of images of various family structures into the teaching material. These mothers would all agree that what is important is how one positions oneself: as a "potential victim of homophobia" or as an "equal parent, who just wants the best for his/her child, as most parents do". They see this opened position as a possibility to openly fight for equal recognition and participation. At the same time, it is of crucial importance for them to raise their child in a self-confident, empowered way and to equip her/him with the strength needed for an on-going social battle.

### 3.5. Conclusions: Characteristics of Same-sex Family Life in School

All the strategies that parents employ are directed towards protecting their children from anticipated homophobia in school. In this short presentation, we have named them differently in order to mark the parents' different approaches and levels of understanding what might be beneficial for their families in school and what same-sex families perceive as being open as well as how they (re)construct 'normality'. We have identified these strategies as: passing strategies (father figure strategy, biological relative strategy), protective strategies (strategy of invisibility in the family) and positioning strategies (active parent strategy, activist parent strategy).

All parents anticipate a danger of homophobic attitudes or even violence, but the school life of their children is to some extent uncontrollable, so they approach this anticipated danger in different ways. What is characteristic is, that there are no models, even to some extent no culture of rainbow families – which surely is also a consequence of the fact that same-sex partners in Slovenia are only recently really embracing and claiming their right to become

parents. Nevertheless, in the current social climate the parents seem to have feelings of constant pressure of (1) "justifying" and demonstrating the "appropriateness" of family life in non-heterosexual families, of (2) constructing strategies of how to claim parental identity for both parents, both in the symbolic as well as the legal sense, and of (3) building a sense of belonging by forming a community that is both homosexual and parental (Sobočan 2011). These positions in themselves are demanding and the pressure related to them might also cause insecurity, fear, and secrecy on many levels. The feeling and appearance of 'sameness' or 'normality' might still seem to be the most promising and safe place for children in the view of their gay and lesbian parents without models of how to approach schools, children and the environment. Some parents learn this from comparing the situation of their children with other children, who are 'different' and some parents learn from their own activist experiences. What most of them would agree to is, that true changes in school will happen, when talking about same-sex families and homosexuality become part of the curriculum and their children are able to see families such as their own in picture books and school textbooks.

## 4. Children Living in Same-sex Families in Slovenia

*Darja Zaviršek, Silke Bercht*

### 4.1. Introduction

It is only since the first part of the early 21st century that the stories of children living in families with same sex parents in Slovenia have been discussed publicly. This is at least a decade later than in other Western countries. One of the reasons for this time-lack is homophobia which is primarily based upon the overall post-socialist lack of diversity, the power of the Catholic Church, and the absence of the political will of any political party to raise issues against homophobia. Additionally, another reason is the absence of useful information about medical reproductive technology. The assisted reproductive technology started to be discussed in connection with the new law on assisted reproduction (Infertility treatment and the procedures of the biomedical-assisted procreation act<sup>20</sup>) only after the year 2000. The proposed law resulted in a large heated debate whether the law should only be limited to heterosexual couples or also to single women. The right wing parties managed to propose a referendum on the law. The voters supported the proposed decision of the right-wing populists and the law on medical assisted reproduction became limited to married couples and excluded single women from the right to gain/have assisted reproduction in Slovenia.

20 *Zakon o zdravljenju neplodnosti in postopkih oploditve z biomedicinsko pomočjo (ZZNPOB), Official Gazette of the Republic of Slovenia, No. 70/2000.*

It is estimated that a very small number of women went abroad to search for medical reproductive technology which delayed the birth of children in same-sex families. The consequence is that the majority of children born in same-sex families are currently very young, between 2 to 5 years of age. However, this does not mean that there are no children who firstly lived in heterosexual families and later on, when one of the parents got a new partner, started to live in a family of same-sex parents. The Slovenian part of the research included only those children whose age is between 16 and 23 years.

#### 4.2. Methodology

Due to the belated practice of same-sex couples to have children, the researchers had big difficulties finding young people with experiences living in a same-sex family and willing to be interviewed at all. This was interpreted as one of the signs of the level of homophobia in Slovenian society. So far, no children who were born in same-sex families were able to be interviewed because of their small age. None of the parents expressed their consent for his/her child to be interviewed. Most of them wanted to protect their children from the social constructed messages of 'difference' and 'inferiority'. Therefore, the number of young people interviewed was smaller than expected and children who were interviewed were older than expected, which is between 16 and 23 years of age. All of them gave their own informed consent to be interviewed.

So far three children were interviewed and one parent couple whose child goes to elementary school (7 years of age). All of them study and work in the Slovenian capital Ljubljana. Two of them go to secondary school and one of them finished university and is employed already. One of them lives in Ljubljana and two of them in a smaller town close to the capital but commute every day. The child of the same-sex couples goes to elementary school.

There are some common characteristics among the three children who were interviewed. All of them were born to heterosexual couples and after the divorce of their parents, one of the parents started to live in a same-sex relationship. All of the children have contacts with their biological parents and each of them stayed with their mothers after the divorce. Two of them have been living with the social parent who is the new partner of the mother. The third young person never lived in the same-sex family, but spent weekends and holidays with the father and his partner. The children's age at the time of divorce was between 7 and 13 years. One of the children has lived in the same-sex family for more than ten years, another more than three years, and the third one only occasionally when she visits one of the parents.

Each of the three children has one sibling who is expected to be interviewed in the future. The interviews were conducted between November 2010 and April 2011. All of the interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed. Two of the children also made a family map.

#### 4.3. The Ordinary Families and the Parental "Coming Out"

Children who were interviewed described their families in a wide span, from "unconventional" to "just normal".

*"The best word to describe my family would be unconventional."* (Nadja)

*"Actually, just normal. Just that there are two women instead of a woman and a man. Completely normal! You could say two parents with children. But I wouldn't qualify it, like "now we're in a same-sex family", it's just a family. There's my mom, and B., and my sister."* (Lara)

*"My family is my mom, my mom's partner, my brother, my dad, who lives abroad, and our dog. I can still remember when mom was single. I barely remember anything about my dad, what we were like. After mom's partner came it was a lot easier. Yeah, it's a lot easier if you have two parents. Well, I personally don't have any empirical experience with parenting, but it's obviously harder if you're a single parent than if you have a partner, the burdens is somewhat lightened and it's a lot easier."* (Vid)

Lara and Vid, where the new partner came into the household and started to live with their mothers and siblings, experience the new partner as the social parent. Social parenthood is still a highly undertheorised concept, but has started to be used more often in the last years. It describes a relation between a parent and a child which is not founded on biological but on social ties and presupposes a continuous long-term emotional, economic, social, and everyday care of the adult towards the child and a relation of attachment and affection (Zaviršek 2009).

*"B. takes care of us like mom takes care of us, she cooks for us, does our laundry, helps with homework if she knows how, stuff like that. So she takes care of us like mom would. [...] Now it's better than before, when mom was with my sister's father. Well, as far as I'm concerned it's a lot better. Because, for example, he was – well, it's not like he abused me, that's too harsh a word, but verbally, sometimes I'd really get a beating. He would call me an "idiot" and stuff like that. And when I had to clean up after him, say, he would talk about how everybody has to clean up after themselves. Ok, I agree. But then it would for the most part be me cleaning up after him, all the time. And sometimes it would just get on my nerves so much, and we were always fighting."* (Lara)

For Lara the new mother's partner is "like the mom" in her everyday functions, but relieves her from abusive verbal statements which she experienced by the previous mother's partner who was male. Even if in some areas the fact that she lives with same-sex parents causes some cautiousness in relations of her peers and teachers, as it will become obvious later on, she is relieved and feels safer than before.

Another young girl, Nadja, whose father left home in order to live with a man, experienced father's partner as a "friend" when she lived with him during the weekends.

The societal recognition supports or impediments the everyday narrations and openness about the rainbow families. In Slovenia the very first article about rainbow families came out in 2006 and only recently the issues has become openly discussed (Bercht 2006). It seems that the child's attitude towards same-sex partnerships depends to a large degree on the parents' attitudes towards same-sex families, which is true for homosexual as well as for heterosexual families (Ryan-Flood 2009). Parents might speak openly about the fact that they live in a rainbow family, but might also make a taboo out of it. One of the girls spoke bitterly about her mother who silenced the issue because of her own prejudices and internalised heteronormativity. The mother never discussed the father's sexual orientation or other issues related to sexual orientation with the children. The girl remembered her unease and chaos caused by silencing of something what was stigmatised and made invisible. She and her brother needed to find out themselves what had been going on and had to cope with the double silence, that of their mother and the societal silence at the same time.

*"I was ten years old. I don't remember there being a conversation or anything like that. With us, everything was a little more subtle, a little more incognito, me and my brother got used to it as we went along. During the week we lived with our mom, and on the weekend with dad and his partner. I remember that me and my brother had a problem the first time we went to visit dad, who had moved out, because there was only one big bed in his apartment. I know we didn't get that. How they can have only one bed? Me and my brother didn't talk about it at all, and it was a totally taboo subject with mom."* (Nadja)

Nadja's brother was younger and the two children could hardly give support to each other, since there was not enough support from outside. They were protected by caring and loving parents, but at the same time left alone with many questions. They did not disclose themselves to the father as they unconsciously felt that not asking questions meant not

questioning the father's decision which was a form of showing their loyalty. They did not seek answers from the mother either. It was another form of loyalty, a loyalty towards not breaking the mother's silence, the prohibition of telling. The children had nobody to turn to.

Younger generations of parents today seem to more openly speak with their children about their own sexual orientation which shows that the level of societal recognition about sexual diversity has increased. Lara recalled the conversation between herself and her mother when her mother "came out"/had her "out": *"I think, it was at the beginning of high school, we were driving to pick up my sister from school, when she said that she has something really important to tell me. And I thought, 'My god, what is it, she's pregnant, that's what it is!'" Then she told me that she isn't only friends with B., but that they're together. I was neither shocked nor anything, because it doesn't matter to me, two women, two men, it's all the same to me. [...] And she said that I was even one of the first people she told. I don't know if she told her mother first or not, so I was the second or third person, let's say, that found out. So I said whatever, ok, whatever, it's only a woman, it's nothing that different. I think mom was expecting me to make a big deal out of it: 'goodness, why those two, why with a woman?' But it was okay with me, nothing special; you could call it a new relationship, nothing else."* (Lara)

The story shows an interesting power-shift between the mother and the daughter who might either accept or reject the mother's sexual choice, which partially explains the results of several previous studies about the greater democratic potentials and equality within same-sex families when compared to the atmosphere in heterosexual families (Ryan-Flood 2009). The conversation shows how proud the teenage daughter was that the mother shared the secret with her and that she was one among very few people who got to know. It shows the need of young people to be taken seriously, trustworthily, and treated as young adults. She was not only proud that her mother trusted her but what also gave her pride was the right to accept or reject the mother's sexual choice. Due to the societal stigma and rejection, the parents make themselves open and also vulnerable for acceptance, criticism or also rejection which is partially similar to cases of divorce and to the formation of new partnerships within heterosexual couples, when society is extremely normative and prohibits divorce or cohabitation. Such parent-child relations demand a more open approach towards parenthood and request that the adults have the strength to see their parental identity as negotiable which is a characteristic of a democratic parenthood.

In order to de-stigmatise the same-sex relation between the mother and her partner, both the mother and the daughter used the “normalising” terminology “*she told me ... that they are together*”, which helps to accept the societal unwanted sexual behaviour and to de-sexualise the societal over-sexualised relationships “*they are together*”.

Later on in the interview she describes her mother’s permission to talk about these issues in the future and the fact that she mentions it, shows how important it is for children to have the right to pose questions without the fear that the parent will interpret their questioning as a loyalty problem or even as questioning the parents’ sexual choice: “*My mom told me that if anything bothers me, anything, about anything, not just that, that I could ask her.*” (Lara)

Vid used another strategy to normalise the mother’s same-sex relationship, which he did by controlling how much the mother should talk to him. It is so different from the stories of the two girls that it seems to be a gendered response, a male-specific way of dealing with his emotions. He rejected the mother’s concern about him not understanding and found it “completely unnecessary”, because he “understood”: “*My mother wanted to talk about it, but for me talking about it was completely unnecessary, because I understood the situation. She thought that I didn’t understand, but it wasn’t hard for me, because even before she had put a tolerant mind-set into my head, and then this talking, it almost started to get a little on my nerves.*” (Vid)

In both cases, the interviewees recall a successful resolution of their parent’s “coming out”, which does not need to be the case. The parent might easily risk the parental authority when societal norms dominate over the values of the parents, which demands constant work from the side of the parent to re-negotiate dominant moral, everyday values, and life experiences. This is certainly also true for women who divorce, for mothers who experience violence or have a partner who suffers from addictions and similar. In our case, the parent is challenged to stay in a long-term dialogue with the growing-up child and to possibly correct the heteronormativity and to re-negotiate the child’s recognition and the children’s strive for “normalcy” (to be like other kids).

#### 4.4. Parental and Young People Precaution: “if I don’t need to tell, I don’t tell”

At the same time, parents often remain cautious and due to the fear of homophobia ask the children to give “selective” information to the people outside the family.

“*I grew up, well, in a pretty conservative environment, an area on the edge of the city that was somewhere between a village and a city*<sup>21</sup>. Now it’s more urban. But back then, people weren’t exactly open to the idea, and back then my mother even said, probably for my safety, that if someone asks, I should say that it’s her friend. And that’s what I did, she told me that’s what I should do, and that actually worked out well for me at the time. But the teachers or professors knew about it.” (Vid)

There is limited knowledge and research about the effects of such parental messages. Do such messages serve to strengthen and protect children against discrimination or do they reaffirm the societal heteronormativity and recreate the children’s fear of being different and a potential object of harassment and exclusion? While silence might prevent homophobic violence on the individual and inter-personal level, it, at the same time, confirms structural inequalities against people living in same-sex families.

The right to live a family life regardless of what other people think or might think and the empowerment to speak out against discrimination is probably one of the most important lessons for growing-up children to learn: “*We live by the principle that it’s okay, if someone finds out, they should find out, we don’t care about their opinion. Okay, if they’re cool with it, if they’re not cool with it that’s their problem. You could say that everybody whom we would like to know already knows, so we don’t need to have special talks about whom to tell. [...] We moved to a small town and neighbours saw things, there are two children, two women, and maybe they even figured out that we’re living together, that the moms are together, but nobody comments on it. We didn’t say anything, but we did not keep it to ourselves, we didn’t stay away, we just let people figure out for themselves. And if they’re okay, it’s okay, and if they have a problem, we leave them alone. Except if there’s a kind of problem like the one with my sister’s teacher, who also figured it out for herself, we didn’t tell her anything like that, we didn’t keep back either. We complained, like we complained against the teacher’s attitude. We told them to tell the person to stop it or something like that.*” (Lara)

Cautiousness as a form of coping with homophobia gets transmitted from the parents to the children, who selectively and consciously choose with whom they will speak about their families: “*I didn’t tell my best friend, who is now in my class. Really, I don’t know why, it just didn’t work out that way. Really, I’m also a little afraid to lose her friendship, if that would happen. She – a lot of times, like say one time we were at sociology class, and we were talking about doing a research assignment, and I was like, let’s do the new Family Code, and homosexuality is-*

<sup>21</sup> The interviewee speaks about the time around the year 2000 in Slovenia.



sues and how that is social [a social issues; socially constructed], and she was like let's do Roma, Romany issues. And then we talked about which subject would be better and it was clear that she doesn't have anything against it. But I'm still a little afraid and it's difficult to tell [her] that I have – that I live with my mom and her partner. [...] I mean she's a good person, and I know she wouldn't have anything against it, but I'm still a little afraid how she would react. Although I can, you know, say 100 percent that there wouldn't be anything wrong, it's just that there's that little bit of pressure still weighing on you. Other than that, I have never thought about telling other people [except her best friend], I mean like schoolmates or something like that, other friends." (Lara)

Lara is very careful and especially looks for situations which might unfold her friend's attitudes towards sexual orientation. Even if "a good person" cannot have anything against her biological and social mothers, she would still like to be "100 percent" sure, but that is what she is not.

Vid, too, had no conflict apart from the fact that the everyday heteronormativity prevented him from telling, what he does not need to: *"I never had a conflict because of it, at least not in my circle. It is true that it's not the first thing I say when it comes up. If I don't have to tell [them], I don't [tell them]. If it happens to come up, or if someone asks, then of course I tell [them], I don't hide it. [...] Yeah, if someone asks me directly if I have two moms, I'll say yeah, I have two moms. But otherwise I won't."* (Vid)

It is in a safe environment where young people decide or at least think of telling the peer group that they live in a same-sex family ("best friend", "in my circle"). This does not happen by accident, but is a conscious decision thought through and linked with the feeling of "having to deal with an issue which is not an easy one ("there's that little bit of pressure still weighing on you").

*"Making friends was never any kind of problem for me. But I was otherwise afraid that once I made [friends], I would lose them. Maybe with my boyfriend, my first love, I wasn't afraid he'd leave, my biggest fear was what he would think. He was the only person with whom I was afraid the most."* (Nadja)

For Nadja, losing friends after winning them was an existential fear throughout her childhood. All of the three young persons rationalised the potential rejection which they would have accepted if it had come from "non-friends" outside their own group, "they" might be discriminatory and wicked, but not "their friends". Their stories show the importance of friendship and the recognition from the side of the peers.

*"Two of my friends know and they're okay with it. One friend of mine has the same situation, only she lives with her father, and her mom and her partner are somewhere else. I didn't go telling other people. I said to myself let them figure it out for themselves. Regarding our extended family, sure it was a shock at the beginning, but they all came to terms with it and nobody says anything."* (Lara)

*"The only thing that I said to myself, it was about a year ago, I was with my friends at a store and we were complaining about our parents, how they're always bugging us and typical teenager stuff, and then my friend said, 'you know, I've got a totally crazy situation, way more totally crazy than you!' And I said, yeah, what could be that crazy? Yeah, my mom has a girlfriend. And I said: 'Aha, ok, mine has a girlfriend, too!' And then I looked at the third friend, and she says, 'are you serious?' 'Yeah, I'm serious!' She was a little afraid of what I was going to say. 'Yeah, great, then we're almost like sisters!' Those two are the only two that I told myself, like that."* (Lara)

Young people make a distinction between "they" and "I/we" ("I said to myself, let them figure it out for themselves; then we're almost like sisters"). In the case of Nadja, "they", not she was expected to make the othering through acting or even thinking ("I wasn't afraid he'd leave, my biggest fear was what he would think"). She expressed the processes of othering with the word "they mooch around me", they were "very careful" and they behaved "slightly differently than among each other".

Vid experiences were similar: *"A lot of times, I noticed, it was set up so that I would – I mean, how to put it into words – they actually thought that I'm different, and then they would also act differently towards me in certain situations. Now I'm not talking about my friends, but, you know, about people I knew. When they found out about it, then they were, like, a little like, you know, 'poor him!'"* (Vid)

For a teenage boy it is – because of the gender positioning – especially disturbing when he feels he is pitied and victimised ("poor him"), since this affects his socially constructed maleness.

#### 4.5. Experiencing Silence as a Form of Oppression

The consequences of silence and partial silence create unease, fear, and feelings of stigma which get transmitted from the parents to the children (Goffman 1963). The silence of the parents is internalised by the children and might become a severely distressing experience when it is reinforced by the peer group of the child. The young people get influenced by the unintentional homophobia of the adults and the condensed silence of the adults becomes the silence of the peer group, too. One of the interview-

ees wished that her best friend would finally speak out, that she knew that her father was gay. For this girl the silence was as damaging as talking and became part of the experienced oppression. Being encircled with parental and peer silence disempowered her to speak out for herself. She experienced silence as a form of oppression for almost a decade of her teenage life: *"At that time we didn't discuss it among our friends, until I was about eighteen, until the end of high school. I think all my friends had the same feeling that 'this is something we don't talk about'. [...] My best girlfriends knew that my dad is gay, I knew that they knew, but we didn't talk about it, for example. These were my two best girlfriends, who are still very important [to me] today. Nobody, not a single friend, came up to me and said, 'hey, I saw him on television', 'hey, I read that article', that just didn't happen! Honestly, I think that people could feel that that's something we don't talk about – and so they didn't pry. Only now, when we're adults, do we talk about it [i.e. things that happened] in the past. I don't know, I don't have a clue, why it took us so long. I think it was me that couldn't bring myself [to talk about it]. I couldn't bring myself to hear it, let alone accept it. It was only after I accepted it, only five years ago, for example; after that people could feel that they could talk about it with me. Which is sad in a way, but I'm not ashamed of it. For me it's one part of growing up. [...] I invented a story for myself: 'if you tell [them], they'll be mean', something like that. So that was that fear, and shame. Constantly hiding something wasn't easy, no. It didn't just go past me, like that I wouldn't deal with it at all, but I dealt with it by myself, without outside help, I think. So there was a burden, but nonetheless, I didn't feel it because so much was going on that I didn't have time, really, to be scared or to be ashamed."* (Nadja)

Nadja felt that it was "lost time" and "lost opportunities" that she experienced through different layers of silence (societal, familial, peers, herself). In her story the grief of the father leaving the family and the fact that he was gay enforce each other, but the biggest grief was linked to the fact that the father is not around and not that he is gay.

The young woman does not understand, why it could have happened in such a way, which is one of the common questions of those – especially women – who survived trauma (*"I don't know, I don't have a clue, why it took us so long"*). The trauma of silence was reinforced with the trauma of the father's absence. Additionally, a traumatic experience was also that nobody addressed her reality (*"Nobody, not a single friend, came up to me [...]"*). She blames her inability to speak out and to take in, which expresses her feeling of being powerless, guilty, and responsible for the others (*"I think it was me that couldn't bring myself [to talk about it]"*), but

she also acknowledges the burden of the societal constructed silence (*"Constantly hiding something wasn't easy, no. It didn't just go past me, like that I wouldn't deal with it at all, but I dealt with it by myself, without outside help, I think. So there was a burden, but nonetheless"*). The young woman partially reflects the environmental silence as the homophobic response of the society which prevented everyone from talking about homosexuality, but still blames herself for not being able to stop it (*"It was only after I accepted it, only five years ago, for example; after that people could feel that they could talk about it with me"*). At the same time she minimises the burden of silence, not permitting herself to feel it (*"I didn't feel it because so much was going on that I didn't have time, really, to be scared or to be ashamed"*). She also minimises her felling of fear as being invented (*"I invented a story for myself: 'if you tell [them], they'll be mean', something like that"*). It was a lonely experience, she was alone with the experience, with her story as well as with her own silence and that of the others (*"Nobody, not a single friend, [...] but I dealt with it by myself, without outside help"*).

#### 4.6. Young People and the Experiences of Intentional Homophobia

Young people who were interviewed experienced some events of intentional violence formulated in a form of direct hate speech and explicit "othering": *"I heard the put-down that my dad's a fag or a homosexual, but mostly not from people I knew personally."* (Najda)

A specific form of discrimination and violence was being pitied from other peers. This was particularly strong for Vid, as already mentioned above: *"When they found out about it, then they were, like, a little like, you know, 'poor him!'"* The kids got a message from their peers that they obviously suffer because of their parents' sexual orientation. A similar experience was when peers interpreted particular behaviour of the interviewee as the consequence of his/her parent's sexual orientation. Heteronormativity constructs same-sex relations not only as "different" but as something bad, which causes negative effects on the environment and on the child, as well: *"I also had an experience, when we were a little drunk, we had this concert and we kind of started fighting, and someone came up to me and said to me, 'I completely understand you, that you're nervous, I would also be nervous if I didn't have a dad, but two moms'. And then that's when I snapped, but otherwise I didn't. Other than that, there weren't conflicts or stuff like that, that's the only one I can remember. And this wasn't from my friend or from the circle [of people] I hang out with. [...] I also had the experience that certain people were withdrawn around me. Some just plain didn't believe me. Some were like, you know,*



*they were totally interested, and they would ask a lot of questions, like how that stuff works. And then you explain a little to them, that it's something completely every-day, normal, that there's no difference. There's too many differences and stuff, too much of a difference is made between a man and a woman, like regarding parenting, although we are different, that's logical. But as far as parenting is concerned, there isn't one. It would be a lot more interesting if a person had to study, say, [a situation where] one parent is an alcoholic. These things need to be examined more. Because a kid like that can't have a healthy childhood. I think that we were given everything that a child needs for normal development."* (Vid)

Children and young people are confronted on the one hand with an "ask no question!"-atmosphere and on the other hand with constantly asked questions, like Vid describes in his narrative: *"Some were like, you know, they were totally interested, and they would ask a lot of questions, like how that stuff works."* The German results in this book show constant interrogation about the family situation which is a form of intentional or unintentional violence. Experiencing different forms of behaviour such like being pitied and interrogated, Vid's strategy is to normalise what is seen as strange: *"And then you explain a little to them, that it's something completely every-day, normal, that there's no difference."* Coming from a rather traditional and authoritarian grandparents background Vid's narrative reflects his own traditional construction of gender and gender differences (*"There's too many differences and stuff, too much of a difference is made between a man and a woman, like regarding parenting, although we are different, that's logical!"*) and the societal construction of the normal development (*"I think that we were given everything that a child needs for normal development."*).

The homophobic influences come not only from the side of the peer group, but also from the relatives of the young person expressing homophobic assertions: *"The thing that was a real problem was grandma and grandpa. They are considerably more conservative, they are very successful professionally, but are [politically] a little towards the right, and a lot of times they would say something to me. Whenever I do something that isn't exactly great, they say to me, 'that's because you don't have a father'. And that hurts, well, but in the end you understand them. But even this is getting somewhat better; we've already spent Christmas together [with the new partner of the mother who is a woman]. Sometimes they still cast sideward glances, and they still get really mad and for me personally the easiest thing to do is change the subject, because I don't feel like dealing with that. Because then we'd start fighting anyway, because those two have their religious arguments, and then they'll break out the bible,*

*and what are you going to say then. I won't say anything, because I'm not a hard-core atheist, because then I would just offend them even more."* (Vid)

Vid demonstrates his loyalty to his grandparents. In a traditional household it is the child who has to obey the rules and he tries hard not to offend the adults' values, including their religious belief. In opposite, the adults do not show the respect towards the child's reality and his mother's sexual choice, but offend him with hate speech which hurts: (*"they say to me, 'that's because you don't have a father'. And that hurts, well, but in the end you understand them"*). The attitude which is abusive to the child is excused by the very child (*"but in the end you understand them"*), because they are constructed as the holders of the socially accepted normativity and those who deviate from the norm have to suffer the consequences (the mother divorces the father, she starts a relationship with a woman). Vid feels he would offend them "even more" if he said something against their beliefs, because he and his mother, their very existence already offends the grandparents. His silent acceptance of the abusive grandparents' hate speech shows his guilt which gives the other party the right for symbolic and verbal punishment.

Ex-husbands, too, even after the divorce sometimes use different occasions to harass or violate the relationship between the child and the former partner or to threaten the ex-wife to take the child away. In one of the families the mother fears that the ex-husband will demand the full parental rights over the child if he finds out that she lives with a woman. In a context of everyday homophobia same-sex relationships might be easily used by the ex-partners or husbands as an argument for claiming full-parental rights of the child.

*"On mom's side of the family it's not a secret. But if my sister were to tell her father, and the family on that side, I really think they'd react angrily and then they would, I don't know, want to take her away from her mom, or something like that. That's precisely why we don't tell her, because we want to protect her in a way as far as that's concerned. I really think that if we would tell my sister exactly what's going on, she would really go telling people, because she'd probably think it's fine. Because right now, even now, when they're divorced, he still, I don't know how to put this, teases my mom. Sometimes he says he's going to take my sister."* (Girl 2)

#### 4.7. Silence and Heteronormativity in Schools

In elementary and secondary schools the topics of sexual diversity either do not exist or exist in a form which reproduces sexual stereotypes and prejudices against people in same-sex relationships. Young people recall that in most schools they talked about

sexual orientation called homosexuality, but in a stereotyped way. In schools 'homosexuality' was discussed within the following thematic: homosexuals as the primary source of HIV and AIDS infections; the 'pederasty' in the antique Greece; homosexuality as taboo; sexual orientation as the reason for the criminalisation and pathologisation of people in the past. In none of the examples sexual orientation was discussed among topics such as love, different family forms, family-relations, peer-violence, planning of children, forms of reproduction, experiences of young people who live in same sex families or similar. This shows a power discourse of heteronormativity which does not choose silence but stigmatising and demonising forms of homosexuality and deviancy to reproduce the power discourse of unwanted sexual practices.

*"In grammar school we didn't talk about it at all. In high school, we maybe partially talked about people with a same-sex orientation, but I don't know if we did. So that seems, for the teachers' part, maybe now, when I look back, mostly a bad thing. [...] Also at university, there's not a subject on same-sex orientation. They say that it's a "social group", and that it's a question of human rights. But there's nothing about personal experiences."* (Nadja)

LGBTQ people are homogenised into a 'social group' and as such already put at a distance and made into 'the Other'. Presenting it as a "question of human rights" is another form of distancing and pushing the whole discussion on a formal and abstract level which avoids actual discussions of everyday human rights issues in order to change the practice of violation.

*"I don't remember if Ancient Greece was freshman or sophomore year, all I know is that we mentioned pederasty one time during History, when there was a relationship between an older and a younger man, when the younger man would learn everything from the older, you know, how to fight and other things, and on top of that they could also be lovers. That's what they called that relationship. And maybe that time we focused a little more on it, and we did a little comparison, the relationship between two men then and now. We talked about examples from history, Alexander the Great and Hefaiastos, that confidence he had, and with the teacher we thought about whether there was something going on between them or not. And we watched a film and we asked whether it could be a historical fact that besides being best friends, those two could also have had something else going on. And he said that of course it's possible; that relationship was natural in Ancient Greece they allowed it. I remember that after that I thought, if it was normal back then, and let's say they were more backwards, why isn't it the same today? And that was maybe the only time that we might have mentioned and talked in depth about it."* (Lara)

*"In Psychology and Sociology, we went over how environment influences the selection of a partner, and especially now, when we went over taboos about a month ago, we also mentioned it. We just simply talked about it. There wasn't anyone who would like aggressively say, "no, that's not right;" each person shared his opinion, we had a nice talk. We all mostly had the same viewpoint that it's okay, that it should be allowed. The teacher agreed with us, that same-sex partners should be allowed to adopt a child. I think he even said that it would be better, if, say, we look at it from the point of view that a child is better off with two men, or two women, in a situation where they love him than with what you'd call a normal family that beats him."* (Lara)

*"Also in Psychology, I remember we had a homework assignment where we had to find an experiment. And one of my schoolmates found an experiment that they actually did on homosexuals whom they wanted to treat with different pills and electroshock, and we spent quite a lot of time on that experiment, because we discussed it at length. The teacher said that she couldn't believe how that was possible, and she also told us that when she was at university, the textbooks treated homosexuality as a mental illness. She said that in her textbooks, homosexuality was listed under mental illnesses. You could see she did not approve of that. Well yeah, sometimes a person has to learn something that they don't agree with. I remember how we were all mad that it was a mental illness. I thought it was simply stupid, now of course it's not like that."* (Lara)

Lara talks about an open minded teacher who openly condemned violation against homosexuals in the past which is an important role model for young people. It was obviously very important for her, too, as she recalls the story with lots of energy and very alive.

*"Same-sex orientation was not dealt with as a subject at school. When I worked at a kindergarten I noticed that there they taught the children like this: mom, and dad. There isn't even another option, like a single parent, for example. That probably has a negative effect on the child, if he was born to a single parent, or if his parent is a homosexual, and he could be discriminated against. I also missed how, in say sex education, the only thing said about homosexuals was that male homosexuals transmit sexually transmitted diseases more easily. That was the only thing said, they didn't say anything else."* (Vid)

Vid, too, reflects that sexual orientation is not the only difference among families and among children within the same group and that there are other family formations which need to be addressed, as well. He notices that the heteronormative discourse production focuses on the negative stories about homosexuals and leaves any view which might en-

danger the traditional power relation of normality aside.

*"In our gymnasium, during Philosophy and Sociology, there were always debates around homosexuals. It is true that with certain people you still notice this particular idea, that homosexuality is a kind of disease that it's not something natural at all. Even though you then want to prove, a hundred times, that ten percent of all animals are also homosexual, and that it's perfectly normal. For all I care, you can explain that that's what God wanted, so there wouldn't be so many of us anymore, but you still can't get it into their heads. For them, it's a psychological deformity plain and simple, and then they say that it can surely be cured. That's why something needs to be done to educate people. In my opinion, it's very hard [to believe] that people will accept it one day, you'll always have people who will be against it."* (Vid)

This passage shows that Vid – in order to solve the inner conflict of loyalty towards his mother and his grandparents – finds a theoretical interpretation for the existence of homosexuality, *"that's what God wanted, so there wouldn't be so many of us anymore,"* which is that with the growing number of people who live in same-sex relations, the number of children will decrease which will contribute towards the decrease of the world population in a good way. He also shows a side of him which is directed towards activism and struggle for change.

*"I remember, in eighth grade, we decided to make a research on taboos, in the pupils' council, and I think we really should have talked more about it, especially about those current taboos. More discussions of taboos and more emphasis on current ones, like homosexuality and things like that, and that it is necessary to explain that that's okay. Okay, not everybody agrees with that, you have the right to your opinion, but there's nothing wrong with that, that two men love each other, instead of a man and a woman. I think that's more necessary, that they should make it so that in elementary school they would have to talk about it more, and explain. I think that they should do that for all taboos. Okay, not for the ones that really aren't okay, but that they should talk more about that and also encourage children to ask questions if something's bothering them, to discuss it amongst themselves, or with their parents, with anyone. Just, in order for the pupils to know."* (Lara)

Lara, too, expresses her activist approach when offering solutions for dealing more openly with sexual diversities. She finds that it is important that the school offers more discussions but also that the teachers explicitly give their own stance saying that *"that's okay"*. She shows her democratic attitudes, saying that everybody has the right of opinion, but at the level of human rights, however, sexu-

al diversity has to be accepted: *"Okay, not everybody agrees with that, you have the right to your opinion, but there's nothing wrong with that, that two men love each other, instead of a man and a woman."* (Lara)

She also, like Vid, reflects that there are many issues which are unspoken and taboo which need to be discussed more often in elementary school.

In one of the interviews a direct form of homophobia in school is reported: *"My sister had incidents at school, when she went to school in a smaller town, that's why we transferred her. All of a sudden, and I don't know exactly what happened, in fourth grade, maybe in a class for Social Studies they had a subject where they had to draw a house and talk about who they live with. Maybe it's because of that that the teacher somehow figured out that we have two moms and she really got on my sister's case. She started to treat her very unfairly. Very subtly, like more with grades. She was given questions [during an oral exam] together with a schoolmate, and they both knew about the same, but my sister got a three, and she [the schoolmate] got a four. There were incidents like that. Yeah, mom called, and then they changed the grade when they saw that she really knew enough. And yeah, then we transferred her. [...] I also remember that her teacher for Physical Education started giving her twos and threes, even though she's a really athletic kid. And then mom actually went to complain about her grades, and once again my sister did everything and got a much better grade. I know that she actually had to go and complain. My sister would sometimes come home in tears because she got a bad grade, but she didn't have a reason for the bad grade. That was bad, that a child like has to pay and that they get on her case because of that. Sometimes my sister would actually get sick because of the anxiety and stress. Sometimes symptoms would appear, because she didn't have any reason that she got sick, but she got sick. As long as she didn't go to school, because sometimes that was so stressful, just being there, that she didn't want to go. She really suffered an injustice. She was 9 years old at the time, she couldn't defend herself. Sometimes I went to pick her up at school, sometimes mom [went], and if mom was working until six o'clock, B. went. My sister got along well with her schoolmates. Maybe you could say that they were perhaps a little too young to have the mentality that that's terrible [harassment]. Except if their parents [are like that] from the beginning. Recently, I remember, I saw a picture on the internet, how parents in America dressed their kids, two-year olds, or like six-year olds, in t-shirts with anti-, well, homosexual messages, "God hates fags", or something like that. I saw [it] on the internet, sometimes I look at stuff like that. Now she goes to school in Ljubljana. She feels great, a hundred times better."* (Girl 2)

All of the narratives show that the teachers are of crucial importance when dealing with sexual orientation in school. They can be role models who young people learn diversity and democratic behaviour from, as well as perpetrators manifesting different forms of subtle violence towards the kids from rainbow/LGBTQ families.

There are large differences among rural and urban schools and among younger and older generations of teachers. The female couple recalled an experience from 2010 when their son experienced taunting from his peers (questioning and interrogations) and mockery as he cannot (possibly) have two moms. He was protected by the teachers in the lower grades who told the children that some children have two moms and those [children] who laughed at him had to apologise the next day (conversation with mothers). These show that some teachers are aware that children need to be supported in their everyday life and that they need to be safe from any form of homophobic motivated violence.

#### 4.8. The Reflections of Young People

As already mentioned young people who were interviewed showed a high level of reflection upon experiences of discriminations and upon forms of prevention of discrimination. They reflect on open and more subtle forms of discrimination which they survived. They all experienced ambiguous or even negative attitudes from the outside world. Despite of the fact that they are satisfied with their families (and all three have the experiences heterosexual as well as same-sex families), people around them are not satisfied with their families. When the child enters educational institutions (kindergarten, school) the peer group and the peers become more and more important and the parents' importance get decreased. The outside world which sends messages to the kids that his or her family is "not okay" challenges the authority of the parents: *"When you're a kid, you simply get along fine with the people around you. Regardless of whether the parents are the same sex or not, it simply isn't relevant then. Problems occur later, in puberty. When others remind you that you're different, just like that. But you don't have that feeling."* (Nadja)

One of the young girls reflects her experience of silence while she was in elementary and secondary school and emphasises the importance of school for the education of diversity: *"Later, at university, we had already begun talking about it, but only with the people who were closest to me. With my friends, whom I had also went to the elementary school with, I started talking about it only, – like – ten years after. In my opinion, that's also a result of the fact that in school there weren't debates like that during class. That subject never came up. Of course, it was also eas-*

*ier for me to keep quiet and not mention it. Still, even now I don't understand why, but I think it was easiest that way. So that nobody would be weirded out or something like that."* (Nadja)

Another interviewee reflects the importance that children and young people with same-sex parents know other children and young people who also have same-sex parents: *"Our gymnasium was the kind of gymnasium that accepts that, and they also adapted to it right away, so there weren't problems. At that school, I can't remember ever having any kind of conflicts because of it. [...] There's even a lesbian among the teachers, and people accepted her just fine, and she's also a very good teacher. And that probably also contributes a bit to them accepting her."* (Vid)

For young people early education for diversity is of crucial importance: *"I trained little kids to play football, and I noticed that they're much nastier. And discrimination that has a terrible impact on a child can occur among them. [...] In elementary school, around then, third, fourth grade, here children don't know how to be emphatic with another person, which is normal, because they are not yet capable of that. And you have to explain a hundred times, and a hundred more times. And they can be very, very cruel. They know how to isolate an individual like that ((snaps his fingers)). I noticed how it happens. In school, we've got a grammar school next door, and stuff like that happens every day. In our school, the children are more or less educated in a spirit of acceptance. Yeah, they're more tolerant and open, but it still happens. [...] When a child is in his early childhood he takes in most impressions, in my opinion, then you have to educate him. I won't say that you have to brainwash him then, but I will say that you need to encourage him to think critically as much as possible."* (Vid)

All of the three interviewees emphasise that talking with their parents about issues related to same-sex families is of crucial importance for the empowerment of the children: *"I think that the first and best solution, absolutely, at least in my case, would have been for all those nearest to me, all those who were affected by it, that is, my dad, my mom and my brother, to talk about it. And not talking about it just once, but that it [i.e. conversations] would happen constantly, until the two of us understood. Which means that if it [i.e. coming out] happens when we're ten, it's discussed from the age of ten to the age of twenty, until you're prepared to accept it as an adult. I mean, if you explain it to a ten-year old, or to a twenty-year old, it's a completely different story. How to tell that to a kid, I think that it simply can't be easy to explain to a child. But with the right measure of understanding, love, and patience, [I think] that every child will accept it as perfectly normal, especially if it is explained to him by two people who love him more than anything in the world. Me personally, I believe my parents regardless of every-*



thing, and I'm twenty-three years old. But I really feel that if a child is told by his people that is his dads or his moms, whether they're the same or different sex, that they'll accept it. How the environment will react, you simply have to wait [and see], and get a thick skin. And just preparing for possible blows, but nonetheless knowing that they support you at home. I think that if they support you at home, it's just easier. It wasn't like that with me. [...] So, if you talk about it from the first day, it's definitely different. I don't hold it against my parents, because they themselves didn't know how to act, but it is a lesson." (Nadja)

Nadja offers the very practical advice for parents and adults to open up the issue of same-sex relationships and to repeat the discussions often in order for a child to understand and to accept diversity when he/she becomes an adult. She also thinks about the importance of how to tell, which words to use in order to make herself understood ("How to tell that to a kid, I'm thinking that it simply can't be easy to explain to a child."). She also emphasises that the support at home is of crucial importance, even if the outside world reacts negatively.

*"The younger generation always accepts it without any kind of prejudice. But it is true that from my experience, I can say, that girls are considerably more open than boys. This is true, I'd like to point that out, well, I find it interesting."* (Vid)

The children also reflect their own internalised homophobia: *"For me personally, I felt discriminated even when I realised that I discriminated against myself. If the outside world was open, then things would have been different, then you could say, 'today I'm going to the movies with my dad's partner', right."* (Nadja)

*"Right away, when something happens, one thinks that they had bad intentions, of course the first thing that comes to mind is homophobia, because of the fear, and later it turns out, like in our case, that it isn't true."* (Lara)

*"For me, homophobia is absolutely everything that is against homosexuals. For me, it's really an illogical and incomprehensible fear. Okay, if somebody doesn't like homosexuals, but he should have solid reasons for it, and he should be moderate in his views. That's okay by me. That's just how he thinks, okay. Only I don't think it's alright that others then attack gays, that, like in the sixties, when they arrested them and did who knows what with them, that you verbally insult a child who lives in a same-sex family, I think that's homophobia. A violent, incomprehensible, illogical fear. Okay, if that's someone's opinion, like I would say, 'okay, I don't accept it', okay, I just don't accept it, you simply have your own opinion and you back it up and you are understood through what you say. He has his opinion, I have my opinion. But I think it's really homophobic that they attack, actually verbally, physically,*

*whatever, in writing, it happens and they really torture him, like for example I read about a lot of suicides that occurred because of that torture. And that's what seems to me really homophobic. And not only towards the homosexuals themselves, but also towards their children. What my sister's teacher did to her, that just seems homophobic to me."* (Lara)

Children growing up in same-sex families expand the norm of heteronormativity. They are sensitive towards varieties of differences (ethnic, personal like addiction, sexual) and want to see same-sex relationships as something ordinary: *"Even today, I think it's something ordinary for children to have parents of the same-sex, it wouldn't come to my mind to even ask."* (Nadja)

*"Especially when there was that Family Code bill, I would read articles that had to do with the subject more closely. And I also expressed my opinion more clearly. If, for example, we were talking in class, in Psychology or Sociology, and if the subject happens to be homosexuality, or same-sex families, I state my opinion clearly, what I think, more clearly than I did then, before. Before, it wasn't like I didn't care, someone had, say, the same opinion as me, and I would just say that I agree with him. Now maybe I'll add something myself, or say something more clearly, and I try to persuade, even though there's nobody to actually persuade, because everybody probably thinks the same. I started paying more attention to the situations in which same-sex families find themselves, or to same-sex partnership itself."* (Lara)

Lara is becoming more engaged and more actively involved in the debates concerning the rights of rainbow families. This also shows the topics of her loyalty towards her mother and the researcher, which is also obvious in the German results in this book.

#### 4.9. Conclusion

The interviews show that there is a big gap between the ways how children from rainbow families and how the larger society view same-sex relationships and families. The acceptance and the normalisation of same-sex families by children are embraced by prejudices and non-acceptance from the side of the larger public. There is a large gap between the reality lived by young people and the societal prejudices.

Their acceptance is much greater than it is in the society where they live. This shows that children and their parents carry a burden of societal prejudices, which is a form of everyday homophobia. Young people experience some level of acceptance but also different forms of homophobic motivated violence. A dominant form of everyday homophobia in Slovenia is silence in regard to the rainbow

families, which sometimes already starts within the family itself and gets expanded to the peer group and teachers at schools. Some teachers from Slovenian schools are supportive and open for diversity while others express heteronormative attitudes in teaching and attitudes towards the children. Schools can construct and strengthen the feeling of young people that they are 'different', especially when they have little support from the parents who do not talk about sexual orientation with their children due to fear, shame, and cautiousness.

The stories of young people show that it is of crucial importance that parents talk to their children about the rainbow families in which they live, as well as about their same-sex partnership, especially if this is not the birth family of the child.

Children and young people need adults as their advocates, especially when they live in a homophobic society. They need information and adults who are able to recognise, describe, and explain the emotional processes of marginalisation, minoritisation and othering and offer active support in order to empower the child in different stages of their lives. Parents' advocacy is of crucial importance when children and young people experience pressure and rejection from the outside world. It is important to have active parents in schools and parents who are able to empower the children through networking with other rainbow families. All of this encourages the self-confidence of the child and diminishes the potential negative impact from the larger environment.

The young people's stories also show how important schools and the peer groups are and how important the educational process is. Instead of silence schools in Slovenia need to expand the stereotypical topics in regard of sexual orientation and change them into topics which might support young people's needs for acceptance, diversity, and difference, regardless of the child living in heterosexual or in same-sex families. These topics are: family diversity and family relations; experiences of children in heterosexual and same-sex families, peer support and peer discrimination; homophobia, love and choice, the choice of partnership, and the forms of human reproduction. Parents need schools in order to provide an inclusionary environment for teaching the values of diversity, differences, equality, recognition and acceptance and schools need parents in order to support children towards self-confidence and empowerment for a democratic society.

## Recommended Readings

- Velikonja, Nataša (Ed.) (2004). 20 Years of Gay and Lesbian Movement [20 let gejevskega in lezbičnega gibanja]. Ljubljana: Društvo ŠKUC.
- Velikonja, Nataša (2011). The History of Activism for the Legalisation of Gay and lesbian Partnerships in Slovenia [Zgodovina aktivizma za legalizacijo gejevskih in lezbičnih partnerskih zvez v Sloveniji]. <http://www.ljudmila.org/lesbo/raziskave/ZgodovinaAktivizma.pdf> (19.10.2011).



## 5.3. Findings Sweden<sup>22</sup>

Irina Schmitt and Malena Gustavson

For the Swedish study eight children and young people met with us for interviews. We also interviewed in total 16 parents. Maybe the most obvious result of these conversations is that most of these children and young people indeed have little or no experience of direct discrimination. At the same time, we find stories of 'being the only one' with LGBTQ parents and of often normative family representations in school. Especially the young people in this study discuss their analysis of the homophobia they see in school and a general interest in reflecting gender hierarchies. Most parents are also engaged in how the schools deal with attitudes on gender and LGBTQ. In order to protect the participants' integrity, we sometimes choose to remain unclear about, for example, parental relationships, and to 'split up' a participant into more than one person in the text.

Earlier publications focus on legitimating LGBTQ families with children and on the experiences of children with LGBTQ parents in pre-school (Zetterqvist Nelson 2007). There are also more/many manual-like books for LGBTQ-parents-to-be (Stenholm & Strömberg 2004; Hamrud 2005). Our focus will mainly relate to the children and young people's experience in school.

Our results can be read in different ways. On the one hand, they reflect experiences of children and young people with LGBTQ parents and can be read as concrete suggestions on how school can be more reflective of these experiences. On the other hand – these experiences highlight frameworks that are relevant for all children and young people. Sensitivity towards heteronormativity and (patterns of) discrimination in schools are important for all children and young people in schools, as gender implications/heteronormativity affect all children and young people in their development and in their feeling of safety and confidence.

For the analysis of the interviews, we are interested both in a thematic analysis – how do the participants directly address specific topics –, and in an analysis of the discourses the participants are engaged in in their narratives (Baxter 2003). By discourses we mean certain logics that seem self-explanatory in the moment of the conversation, models of understanding and explaining the world and particular experiences. We worked with the Swedish texts until the final writing of the report in order to avoid misinterpretation and analytical shortcuts.

### 1. Strategies: Is your Family in School?

Having children in a non-heteronormative family might be a challenge when it comes to interacting within society, mainly organised within a heterosexual framework. All the parents we met had strategies to cope with a heteronormative society, including schools, and as gatekeepers parents are careful to expose their children to ignorance and sometimes arrogant situations.

The children and young people had also required a set of strategies and manoeuvres to interact and navigate among different meanings of family and gender. In the following paragraph we will discuss the children and young people's strategies and how they actively renegotiate the social expectations and cultural norms in their everyday life.

#### Some have a Mum and a Dad – Conceptions of Family and Kinship<sup>23</sup>

Two of the interviewed children are in four-leafed clover families, with two dads and two mums. In the interviews we frequently asked if they knew of other children in school with family situations similar to their own. Nine-year-old Pär who lived in one of the four-clover families replies like this:

**Malena:** *what about the other kids, do they also have many mums and dads?*

**Pär:** *in school?*

**Malena:** *yes, in school*

**Pär:** *no, some have, kind of, a mum and a dad, but...*

**Malena:** *so it is, it varies*

**Pär:** *yes*

**Malena:** *and you have most parents of all?*

**Pär:** *yes*

**Malena:** *what do you think of that?*

**Pär:** *I don't know, because I don't know what it's like just to have two [parents].*

Pär's hesitation in the interview, "some have kind of a mum and a dad" suggests that there is a pedagogical moment as something out of the ordinary that Pär needs to explain to Malena. He positions himself as the expert in this situation, informing the researcher about the obvious. The norm of a nuclear heterosexual couple based family is also challenged.

<sup>22</sup> Parts of this text are based on the article "Culturally queer, silenced in school? Children with LGBTQ parents, and the everyday politics of/in community and school," with kind permission of the journal *lambda nordica – Tidskrift för homo/lesbisk/bi/transforskning* (Gustavson & Schmitt 2011).

<sup>23</sup> The notion of kinship is fundamental to ethnography and has been the subject of on-going reflections by feminist researchers. Probably the most well-known text in the context of LGBTQ research is Kath Weston's *Families we choose* (Weston 1991).

In a similar vein, ten-year-old Madicken challenges the dichotomy of families with LGBTQ or heterosexual parents. Madicken lives with her two mothers, and does not have contact with her biological father, though she counts him as family in the more abstract sense of being a distant relative.<sup>24</sup> In the interview, Madicken explains that a girl in class also has two mothers, since the father has married another woman.

**Madicken:** *well, in that case it's Annika. But she's more, kind of... She has a a dad and they have divorced, and the dad has a girl-friend. So she's got two mums and a dad.*

Madicken experiences a difference in family settings, but notes the differences not in terms of her parent's sexuality or gender, but with regards to the number of adults/parents that are in a relationship to the child. In the light of the fact that shared custody is a common experience for many children in Sweden, the parent's sexuality or how they are gendered seems to be less important in the definition of family for Pär and Madicken.

#### (Not) Talking about LGBTQ Families in School – Diversion Strategies

Another of the participants' strategies is placed more concretely in their schools. We asked the children and young people how they discussed families in school, and how they talked about their own families in particular.

Alongside their challenges to (our) normative presentations of the dichotomy of families with LGBTQ or heterosexual parents, many of the participants were aware that their family situation was unique. Most of them had never met other kids with two mums or two dads or four-leafed clover families. Some mentioned that their parents' LGBTQ friends have got children, but that they still were babies. Clearly, they did not identify themselves with other LGBTQ family constellations. Moreover, the younger participants did not immediately draw the link between their parent's sexuality and possible discrimination at school. Since we were careful not to impose that link, and, thus, reproduce a prejudice, we did not stress it further in our conversations with them. However, they all had a conception of their family being either unique or different.

Nine-year-old Björn has two fathers and two mothers, and lives with them alternating weeks. His strategy is to divert questions about his family. He does this by turning the focus towards his fathers' occupations which many of his classmates are interested in.

**Malena:** *do you talk a lot about family in school?*

**Björn:** *no, but – not so much. No, they know well – they know that I have two mums and two dads, and that's not so terrible*

**Malena:** *nobody thinks it's something special?*

**Björn:** *no, they think it is a bit cool<sup>25</sup> (...) They think it is cool, and stuff*

**Björn:** *(...)*

**Malena:** *do your friends ask about it?*

**Björn:** *no, no, they don't but Pelle and – Henrik – Daddy Henrik and Pelle work for [workplace]*

**Malena:** *right*

**Björn:** *and otherwise – and so we can get a tour [workplace] for my class, so that is a bit cool.*

Having parents with an exciting work that is desirable in the view of the peer is always a given opening to social life whether you are a child or a grown up person. Björn also mentioned that his family was special, but rather in its everyday life practice than in its form. The rarity of his four clover family was also translated to being special in more than one way, in terms of the conception of family were captured by another quality than gender. In all social settings the unusual one is monitored. Björn's strategy was to turn away from a discussion that might define meaning(s) of family to the 'qualities' of his father that he and his classmates consider fun. He expresses that his family situation is unique; yet instead of problematizing his family or letting others problematize it, he focuses on his fathers' exciting profession. Further on in the interview, he also mentioned that he once was teased just because of his fathers' jobs. In this context, being special is positively connoted and therefore Björn's strategy could be understood as monitoring his and his parents' cultural and social capital, certainly attracting both attention and envy (Taylor 2009).<sup>26</sup>

In the interviews with teenagers we found another strategy of negotiating families in school. They stated that the issue was unproblematic or rather, underline that they did not have a problem and that families were not very often discussed at school, their own families in particular. Yet, they also employ a certain shift in focus during the interview: being keenly aware of homophobia in society, they discuss that it is nearly impossible to present/come out as lesbian, gay or bisexual in school and that they know of friends who had chosen not to come out until they finished school. The participants' reflections also include – careful – negotiations of their own sexual identifications. Interestingly, the participants refer mainly to homophobia, though we would argue that transphobia is a serious matter that is often carelessly subsumed under homophobia. The only participant who openly discusses gender identification and transgression was Madicken,

<sup>24</sup> Madicken chose this name in reference to Astrid Lindgren's children's book character with the same name.

<sup>25</sup> This is a rather typical moment of Swedish understatement, indicating that Björn can use the fathers' occupation to negotiate his status in class.

<sup>26</sup> Taylor suggests that lesbian and gay middleclass parents in her study in the UK use their cultural capital as protection against expected homophobia in their interactions with schools, yet also invest in middleclass strategies through their negotiations of family in school (Taylor 2009).

who challenged gender-normative assumptions and practices in school.

We asked sixteen-year-old Joakim what it is like to have parents that are non-heterosexual. Joakim's mother is openly out in Joakim's school, both towards teachers and his classmates. Malena asks how the teachers address non-heterosexual families in class:

**Joakim:** *I don't know, really, I've never (...) you know, sometimes it was a bit tense, like in teacher-parent-student-meetings<sup>27</sup>, you know, with old teachers. But, I don't give shit [Malena: uhu] They kind of, they didn't talk about it. We had a principal in school who was, she was also, what's it (...) a lesbian. And she, sort of, had a really hard time with mum [Malena: uhu] because I don't think she was particularly proud of it. [Malena: uhu] So, except from that, it was never a problem for me. I haven't noticed anything.*

Having no problem as he expresses himself, Joakim points towards the principal, who is not "particularly proud". For him, those still in the closet are the ones with issues. Thus, homophobia is somebody else's problem, not his. For Joakim, being open is a way to avoid problems, as well as to show that "it" is not a problem for him nor his mum. Karin, also in her teens, reflects on the issue from a different angle:

**Karin:** *I don't think that (...) that children of gay<sup>28</sup> persons, or whatever you would say, I don't think that in Sweden, they take it so hard that their parents are gay*

**Malena:** *uhu*

**Karin:** *there are not any kind of all these religious things like in the US, at all*

**Malena:** *uhu, uhu*

**Karin:** *so it's more ok*

**Malena:** *the hostilities are not that huge, or what should I say?*

**Karin:** *right, and also, you don't really walk around saying oh, my mum is gay or my mom and dad are heterosexual*

**Malena:** *uhu*

**Karin:** *you just don't go around talking about your family like that. You could say my mom did this or that, but you don't speak of your family very much*

**Malena:** *uhu*

**Karin:** *but I think it's more important for people who are young and gay that they have a place where they can meet, sort of, having meetings and so, those who want to.*

Gradually becoming more independent from your parents is almost an obvious reflection to be made

as we speak of teenage narratives in most European contexts, and thus in Karin's perspective there is one more dimension: the reference to the traditional family idea, here portrayed as a US American right-wing and religious context, distant in time, space and culture compared to her own everyday life. For Karin the homosexuality of her mum was as good as unimportant as long as it were to be understood in a Swedish perspective. Her reflections on teenage emancipation, in which the daily family life is trivial, did not turn into a recapitulation of an established and unidirectional developmental narrative, but rather did her perspective suggested that becoming an independent individual in your teens is a conditioned process. In connection to these reflections she also touched upon the conditions for LGBTQ persons and also that their presence in Swedish public life still is conditioned.

From a pedagogical view these reflections can further inform schools on family relations and how they are renegotiated in school. The competence about anti-discrimination that the children and young people have surely does not stem from a victimising point of view. Many of the interviewed children and young people repeated that they had no problems in school in relation to their LGBTQ parents. Stating that there was no problem raises many questions. The participants' interest in narrating their experiences as basically unproblematic might be seen as a reflection of their loyalty to their parents, having said that it does not imply that the participants' agency in narrating their lives need to be devaluated.

Another angle to this strategy might be that there is little space for the participants to speak of their experiences of homophobia and transphobia in their school space – even if it is not directed at them – as something that affects them maybe in different ways than it might affect heterosexual children and young people with heterosexual parents. This is a challenge for researchers, policy makers, and teachers: while we are not interested in positioning children and young people with LGBTQ parents as victims, we see a need to read their negotiations as reflections of the discursive limitations in talking about families in school.

In the proceedings of the first Swedish hearing on 'Homosexuals and children' in 1997, Susan Golombok points out that concerning young people with lesbian parents "there was a tendency for those from lesbian families to be more likely to recall having been teased about being gay or lesbian themselves – although those from lesbian families may simply have been a bit more sensitive to casual remarks from peers, and more likely to recollect incidents that were quickly forgotten by their counterparts from heterosexual homes". (Golombok 1997: 58)

27 These meetings are a regular event in a Swedish students' life in school.

28 'Gay', in English, is used as an umbrella term in Sweden.

While this needs to be read in the context of the processes towards legal changes in Sweden of the time, it plays down the effects of homophobia for children and young people with LGBTQ parents. More recent texts apply homophobia and transphobia as concepts to analyse the experiences of children and young people with LGBTQ parents. We find this useful, as it underlines that discriminatory practices do not only affect those who might in a simplifying move be considered the 'legitimate targets', but also influences the strategies and negotiations of, for example, children and young people with LGBTQ parents.

### Being Special – Resisting Identificatory Strategies

Activists in North America have coined the term “queer spawn” as a way to address the relationships between queer families and youngsters with LGBTQ parents ‘within’ LGBTQ communities. We see mechanisms within queer communities that overlook some children and young people with LGBTQ parents. How can we account for that? Children and young people with LGBTQ parents are a challenge to our definitions of queer, as Jamie K. Evans underlines: *“queer spawn fit into a unique and sometimes very confusing role in the queer community. We can fit in two distinct ways: as erotically queer or as culturally queer. [...] This is a delicate subject, one that I often find myself struggling with. It took me a long time to understand that I could identify as queer without failing the expectation I felt was put on me by the heterosexist world, that is, that I needed to be straight in order for my parents to be good parents”* (Evans 2009: 237; our emphasis).

The concept of “culturally queer” was coined by US American activist Stefan Lynch (Epstein, Idems et al. 2009; Epstein 2009a: 28).<sup>29</sup> With this concept, Lynch offers a useful framework for understanding the experiences of children and young people with LGBTQ parents. It allows a critique of the idea that (LGBTQ) parents ‘pass on’ their sexuality to their children, a conservative suspicion that LGBTQ parents sometimes have to address (see also Hill-Meyer 2009; Epstein 2009a: 28; Kuvalanka & Goldberg 2009; Vanfraussen, Ponjaert-Kristoffersen et al. 2002). While we are sceptical of simplifying or generalizing identifications, we suggest that it might be useful to consider – locally specific – terminology that reflects these children’s and young people’s experiences (Garner 2005). We also find that the term ‘culturally queer’ challenges LGBTQ communities to reflect on our/their own practices of exclusion that often do not account for the experiences of children and young people with LGBTQ parents.<sup>30</sup> One parent argues that they do not feel they belong to or are welcome with other LGBTQ parents (see also Taylor 2009: 75).

At the same time, the young participants in our study resist an identificatory strategy. Rather, they seemed to enjoy being the cool exception from the rule that LGBTQ people are strange. On the whole, the children and young people we met had very little contact with other children and young people with similar families. In the light of the international literature we read on the topic, this was somewhat surprising, but understandable in the Swedish context where sizable LGBTQ organisations are mainly to be found in larger towns and cities, and where identity politics are dealt with in a different way than, for example, in the Netherlands and in North America, as Loes Van Gelderen, Nanette Gartrell, Henny Bos, and Jo Hermanns discuss: *“Bos and Van Balen [...] in a study of 8- to 12-year-old Dutch children, found that having frequent contact with other children who have a lesbian mother or gay father protects against the negative influence of stigmatization on self-esteem. One interpretation of this finding is that stigmatized children cope with rejection by identifying or identifying more strongly with their in-group [...] Similarly, the fourth wave of the NLLFS found that the 10-year-old children were more resilient in response to homophobia if their mothers participated in the lesbian community [...]”* (Van Gelderen, Gartrell et al. 2009).

This is a long-running topic in research with (mainly lesbian) families (O’Connell 1999). Rachel Epstein, Becky Idems and Adinne Schwartz argue that contact with other ‘queer spawn’ can be essential for children and young people’s strategies of disclosure and participation in school (Epstein, Idems et al. 2009: 228).

Counter to these discussions, in the conversations with the participants, we find two lines of argument: the children and young people engaged in the idea of being special, and the parents’ sexuality have very little to do with their children’s identifications and affiliations. For Jesper, it is somewhat important to be special:

**Malena:** *do you talk a lot about - Do you think they [teachers] talk about the family in a way you could recognise yourself?*

**Jesper:** *no, no, I cannot, sort of, recognise myself*

**Malena:** *no. I think that there are not so many people with two mums and two dads so it gets-...*

**Jesper:** *no, I don’t know anybody. Well, but Rango, a guy, it’s a small guy who has – he has two dads and two mums. Competitor!*

While he directly defuses this as a joke, Jesper at the same time puts some value in his statement by considering himself special, as he has two mothers and two fathers. Meeting another kid – even if this child is younger than he is – feels at least on some level as a challenge to this understanding. Pär

29 See also the US-based network COLAGE, founded in the late 1980s for children of LGBTQ parents (<http://www.colage.org/>).

30 Jesper, on the other hand refers to the children with separated parents, who also travel between parents.



had also met another child who lived in a four-clover family. Yet, he could not remember the child's name. Indeed, he had almost forgotten about this child, and at first did not remember them at all. The level of social recognition for four clover family children (as well as other constellations of LGBTQ families) is rather low in school and Jesper unsurprisingly, did not, find himself in school's representations of family. Maybe that is the reason he values himself and his family as being special. That it gets a positive connotation for Jesper suggests that in spite of the invisibility on a representational level, school has a practice of treating children equally regardless of the children's different social relations. This will be further discussed in the section of the parents' strategies.

Madicken also enjoys being special in this way. When mentioning that she knows no other children with two mums she underlines:

**Madicken:** *hm (.), I like to stand out a bit.*

In the interviews both Madicken and Jesper discussed how gender codes in school sometimes emphasised the expected behaviours from girls and boys in stereotypical ways. Madicken also discussed gender identification and gender transgression, and had chosen a gender neutral name for herself that she wanted to be called at home and in school from time to time. We want to highlight that the feeling of being special does not seem to have much to do with how a family is constructed, since it is not the child's experience that the family is 'unusual' but a discursive effect of the hypervisible heterosexual nuclear family. Their experiences are rather about how the family in its everyday life would constitute other relations to gender than those of the heterosexual family imaginary. The feeling of being special does however enhance their interpretation of family from another perspective than the always expected one.

Karin and Robin both mention that their respective parents have friends with younger children, but they know no one their own age in a similar family situation. This might reflect the current Swedish situation with the post 2005 lesbian baby boom, where it has become possible (if also expensive) for some lesbian couples to receive medical support with insemination. In some places, networks for these children and their parents have been created, with regular activities for younger children. As we write, there is no specific group or space for the older children and young people with LGBTQ parents we met.

At the same time, we also find a reluctance to such an identification, as we have seen for example in Canadian or US American activism. The participants pointed out that they did not care to define

themselves through their parents' sexuality. One of Robin's mothers points out that he is not interested in going to the annual Pride activities, for example.

Karin is generally very sceptical of identity groups:

**Malena:** *sometimes I think that you – well, like this: in gay and queer communities and so on, lesbian communities, feminist, then, it's like in all these communities, it's there because of sexuality*

**Karin:** *uhu*

**Malena:** *would you then think it would be – I mean that you'd feel like, that you'd feel affinity with kids who also have lesbian or homosexual parents? You know, would you ever consider that there is a sense of community there?*

**Karin:** *no, not really I think*

**Malena:** *uhu*

**Karin:** *I mean, at the same time as young people do have a lot of biased opinions, it's still more open (...) it's not like among grown-ups, sort of, that there are some circles that are bi or, what's it called (...) heterosexuals. So I don't (...) I don't really like groups like that*

**Malena:** *no*

**Karin:** *no, so I don't think that I would feel the (...) feel some community feeling.*

Interestingly, Karin defines such groups as an adult phenomenon, and, despite raging homophobia, she sees the advantages of a more open approach among young people. Identity politics – an old peoples' issue?

In relation to North American literature and media production on this issue, this is intriguing. In the USA and Canada, groups have been formed, films produced, and texts written by children with LGBTQ parents, pointing out the need to meet other young people with similar families, to support each other, and to find a language to describe their experiences (Evans 2009). While we find it useful to read the young participants as 'queered by association', who are (sometimes) seen as queer regardless of their own identifications and self-positioning, these reflections by the participants are important to keep in mind. As we will discuss further down, we understand the participants as having queer cultural competence, and that such competence needs to be clearly distinguished from understandings of identity and identifications.

### Parents who go to School and other Activism

One topic that comes up regularly in the interviews with parents is their involvement in school. Many of the parents we met are actively engaged in their children's schools, their engagement ranging from



inviting the whole class to their work place, as Mika's fathers did, to organizing gender and sexuality education sessions at school.

One parent, Susanne, who we met had been at her child's school and given a seminar on LGBTQ issues. She was rather disappointed by the attitude she had to face with LGBTQ teachers choosing not to out themselves to the students:

- Susanne:** (...) so I felt that with the school that there was this typical [part of town] double standard, it is so damned open-minded and educated and hey-ho [Malena: laughs] My ass, I say, well it is – and so one knows well one speaks about this and you invite a RFSL youth [Swedish Federation for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Rights youth organisation] – but you can't be open. Everybody in the teaching staff knows – cause it is one thing if one is (.) I respect if someone isn't really out, because there can be reasons [for that], but being open with the colleagues but not with the students, what kind of bloody signal is that? And what kind of consequences do you get when you show (...) kind of? So at that point, I thought that was, I felt (...) Me, myself also get
- Malena:** did the students know, do you know anything about that?
- Susanne:** no, no, no I don't think so. That was just something you didn't speak about.

Susanne's story reflects an aspect we see as central in this project: while schools and teachers might be willing to accept LGBTQ parents in direct contact and to invite an external agency for an event about sexual education, there is less interest in incorporating these issues into the schools' everyday life. Teachers' inability or unwillingness to be out themselves can be read as a marker for the limitations of a politics of tolerance that does not question given norms.

Susanne continues, stating that there is more to it than just a lack of including routines, that there are mechanisms of exclusion:

- Susanne:** there was another woman who had her child in the same class as I and who was together with a woman. And that felt really good, like, hello! We've seen each other out before, but we didn't in a million years even think of meeting up or sort of doing something in school to support parents. There was no (..) there was a rainbow project in another part of town, but not here in this very clever ... Here it's the clever middleclass, extremely heteronormative.

The self-righteous middle class as Susanne ironises also suggest that a lesbian parenthood would only be accepted as long as it is handled as private business and not as a politicised issue. Being accepted in the parent's meeting in school, a heterosexual coded space, will do if it does not further challenge the heterosexual hegemony of the family. A too obvious connection between the lesbian parents would not only have questioned the heteronormativity of parenthood but also its hegemonic performance of tolerance, as tolerance could be performed only by those who has the privileges of defining normality and deviances. In the same way that anti-racism work cannot be made the responsibility of people of colour only, the on-going analysis of homophobic and transphobic imaginaries and structures also needs to be shouldered by people who are in a privileged position in our given socio-political frameworks.

### Conclusion on Strategies: Politics of Outing in School and Imaginaries of Families

For the last three decades, the attitudes towards homosexuality seem to have improved in Sweden, even though hate crimes are still reported (Klingspor & Molarin 2009). Also, trans\* experiences are much less understood and supported. Both hate crimes against trans\* people and homophobic hate crimes are on the rise (Klingspor & Molarin 2009: 58, 64).<sup>31</sup> As we will discuss in the next chapter, we also need to be aware of teachers' confusion in addressing parents that transgressed their imaginary of properly gendered parents.

Still, and paradoxically, being openly lesbian, gay, queer, trans\* or bisexual is something almost expected in Sweden today since many rights have been passed and society is recognizing homosexual subjects in a legal sense. The struggle towards (partial) acceptance has some side effects; there is an expectation that LGBTQ people should 'be out' and discuss their experiences, though being out can also create adverse reactions, for example, in the workplace. These expectations suggest that LGBTQ is only accepted in its exposure, where LGBTQ people are made responsible for providing information both about their own experiences and an imaginary community. Thus, coming out of the closet has been discussed as a continuous consciousness-raising and pedagogical act within a specific set of social and cultural imaginary framed by homophobic and transphobic attitudes. The closet is in this sense omnipresent and, thus, defines life in the heterosexual imaginary (Sedgwick 1990). Hence, whenever there is an act of coming out we need to ask the underlying question of 'who wants to know?' and to analyse the inclination to define family life in terms of normality or deviation.

<sup>31</sup> Writing trans\* is meant to open up for diverse gender presentations, as well as transsexual experiences, without creating exclusionary binaries between gender and sexuality (Hermann 2003).

Asking the participating children and young people about their experiences about negotiations of family in school is in a sense a mirroring question. Rather than indicating the demarcations of a LGBTQ family closet, the participants discuss their own understandings of family and kinship. They show how they turn the question on the interrogator, suggesting that the interrogator be defined through such a question rather than the interrogated. The children and young people we met do not experience the closeted way of being in or being out, as their everyday life is not (only) defined by a ubiquitous heterosexual imaginary.

## Experiences of Silencing, Dis-recognition and Harassment

Although we are certainly pleased to be able to write that most of the participants do not speak about discriminatory experiences, there are some experiences that we learned about that speak a clear language of discriminatory practises.

Here, we would like to refer to our reflections about our use of the concept of 'violence' that we discussed in the Introduction and in chapter 4. In accordance with both Swedish legislation and definitions of harassment and discrimination, and analytical tools that name 'invisible' power strategies (Ås 2004; Brade, Engström et al. 2008: 73–78), we see silencing and making-invisible as strategies of power that need to be addressed.

### Who's this Parent? One Teacher's Strategy of Dis-recognition

Some of the participating parents had experienced a discrepancy between the theory of inclusion and the practise of silence. Participants' experience that uninformed outsiders might be confused or irritated about the apparent 'lack of clarity' in family relations. Who does a child 'belong to' – who is a legitimate parent? How can parents fit into the known categories of parenthood?

Parents' presence in school is highly discursive as parents and family life is crucial in teaching practice and often viewed as a cornerstone of the formation of identity and self-recognition. The act of bringing younger children to school and picking them up is one of the daily situations of interaction between parents and teachers. This could be viewed as an everyday passage with a potential risk of tension, as the parents enter the setting where family discourses are produced, and where these discourses could either be challenged or re-established (Sullivan 2004: 175). Thus, leaving/picking up provides a specific space of reinterpretation of the concept of family.

In one parent interview, Isa and Lin describe this daily situation as an absurd experience of dis-recognition (Wasshede 2010):

- Isa:** *some of the new teachers are a bit (...) they leave a lot to be desired perhaps*
- Malena:** *uhm, how do you mean?*
- Lin:** *they're not very open-minded, it's more like the classic mum-dad-child version*
- Malena:** *yes, do you think it is like (.) that you get, like, accused, or that it's like-*
- Isa:** *I haven't been so involved in school (..) but some really rude things, I'm thinking especially of one of the pedagogues, she's not there anymore (.) every time I've met her she said just the strangest things. One time I came to school every day – and, I mean if you meet a person everyday with the same kid every day, you think she might recognise me eventually*
- Malena:** *(laughs) right*
- Isa:** *from a security aspect, I feel a bit worried. You know, damn it you'd better know who I am, right? And every day she introduced herself and asked me who I really was. And once she asked if I was his granny*
- Malena:** *no?*
- Isa:** *and I was like, eh no, as I said this morning (.) – I mean, I was really provoked by that – No, as I said this morning I am still living with his mother and with him. To have to say that every day, all the time. And [turning to Lin] she said something very -stupid to you at some point too, really, she asked if you were his dad*
- Lin:** *uhu*
- Malena:** *uhu*
- Isa:** *and when you said no, she's like, well why do you choose to look like that? In front of the kids.*

This active dis-recognition is a way of positioning someone as socially and culturally unintelligible. It shows clearly how homo- and transphobia are performed by using ignorance and arrogance as means of stating/staging the non-normative family constellation. The negative exposure of the non-conformative gender expression of this parent is part of the strategy of ignorance. Maureen Sullivan elegantly references Sedgwick's discussion of the workings of ignorance in *Epistemology of the Closet* (Sedgwick 1990): "*The capacity of ignorance to appear innocent and passive may well be an operation of its power, while the appearance itself of innocence and passivity may be one of its effects*" (Sullivan 2004: 169).

Hiding behind the innocent looking strategy of 'just asking' also makes it difficult to identify the deliberate homophobic and transphobic act that might

even be excused as curiosity. In the conversation with Isa and Lin, gender becomes the stepping stone for the teacher's homophobic and transphobic expressions. There seems to be a sliding translation of sexuality, which is an unspeakable matter, into gender identification of the parents in a process of shaming and disavowal. This hypervisibility of the parents can be paradoxically matched with the children's invisibility in school.

### The Power of Silencing and Bullying

Invisibility is recognised as a serious issue in terms of justice and antidiscrimination work (Brade, Engström et al. 2008: 74). Earlier research in the field, both in Sweden and elsewhere, indicates that there is little awareness of non-heterosexual life among teachers, and that many teachers are not prepared to handle issues of sexuality as a basis of equality and diversity work. Similarly, participants in our study discuss that teachers seem to be reluctant to referring to the children's family constellations and apparently find it hard to include LGBTQ families in their everyday teaching in a non-exotifying way. Thus, the burden of representation rests on the families.

Unsurprisingly, this also has had an effect on the children. In one interview we asked 8-year-old Mika what kind of advice he would give a younger person with two mothers, which is his own family situation. He imagines what he would say to a small girl with two mums:

**Mika:** *will you be bullied? – No, they don't know anything if you don't tell them.*

Mika uses this moment to imagine a situation where he would help another child. Analysing the interview, we wonder what convinced him that it would be best not to tell anyone about his parents. A little later in the interview the subject comes up again:

**Malena:** *you'd say to this child that if you don't say anything you wouldn't have to be afraid of being bullied. Do you have the sense that you are being-*

**Mika:** *no, I'm never bullied*

**Malena:** *no, you're not*

**Mika:** *I haven't told anyone in the entire (..) in the entire school*

**Malena:** *uhu*

**Mika:** *the teachers they know and not even they have said anything!*

The teacher's way of carefully avoiding any discussion about 'it' effectively reinstalls feelings of awkwardness or even shame in Mika. Teachers who cannot acknowledge the family situation of children and young people with LGBTQ parents sig-

nal to both these kids and their classmates that non-normative families are 'unspeakable'. There is clearly an anxiety around families that fall outside of the description of normality. The silencing strategies that the parents and kids experience also show that schools are often not prepared – neither professionally nor personally – to handle differences in family constellations.

This silencing can also create more direct discriminatory situations. While overall, there seems to be little bullying connected to the parents' sexual orientation, one participant, 16-year-old Robin, recurs experiences of bullying. Most worrying is that the teachers are the active bullies; he tells us that he had been bullied by all teachers except for one. Robin is uneasy to talk about it in detail in the interview; yet, the situation goes so far that eventually the teachers are reported to the authorities. Robin discusses the lack of support he has experienced:

**Robin:** *the only time I could talk to the principal was when she said she could help me change schools.*

That Robin is made to change school is an alarming example of the power mechanisms inscribed in schools. Another aspect of this is that it seems that in their bullying the teachers never referred to Robin's mother being a lesbian. Therefore it is difficult to assess if this is a case of homophobia. Still, the sort of bullying that adults perform is different from schoolyard bullying. The silence around the discriminatory subject makes it even more manipulative since the bullied cannot pinpoint the reason of being discriminated or harassed, which increases their vulnerability. This is similar to the suppression techniques that are usually mentioned in feminist analysis of gender discrimination, where guilt tripping, exclusion, invisibility, laughter, and double failure are some strategies mentioned (Brade, Engström et al. 2008: 74–77; Ås 2004).

As we mentioned earlier, we see similarities in the school experiences of children and young people with LGBTQ parents, and queer kids. In research on and with queer kids, teachers have a crucial role in preventing and counteracting exclusion (Égale Canada 2009: 61; Meyer 2009, 2007: 20–22). The silence Mika experiences, and the bullying Robin discusses, can be read as discrimination based on homosexuality-by-association.

### The Excitement of Difference – the Complexities of 'Mobbing' – 'is your mum a dyke?'

While children and parents might have their separate negotiations with schools, teachers and students (and might aim to keep these experiences from their parents or their children), the following interview passage shows that they can overlap.

Lotta speaks about how her classmates repeatedly question her relationship to her parents:

**Lotta:** *they are like ‘but hello where is your dad, where is your dad, why are you not with your dad?’*

**Malena:** *okay*

**Lotta:** *and then I tell them like, that we are not together*

**Malena:** *sorry, you say that...?*

**Lotta:** *just that we are not together*

**Malena:** *no, no, hm. What do they say then?*

**Lotta:** *well, then they get silent*

**Malena:** *they don’t ask more questions after that, no?*

**Lotta:** *they get like okay. And then there are two girls (...) they ask all the time when [mum’s partner] or mum come and pick me up from school, they are like who are you, who are you, who are you?*

Lotta explains that the two girls had repeatedly confronted her mum with this question over the years every time Lotta was picked up at school. When we ask her why they had done that Lotta suggests:

**Lotta:** *no idea, they are curious.*

She continues:

**Lotta:** *yep there is a girl (...) and she keeps saying like but ‘hello why is your mum a dyke?’*

**Malena:** *she keeps saying that?*

**Lotta:** *yes, and I say: it’s just because she likes Matilda*

**Malena:** *yes, exactly!*

**Lotta:** *right! There isn’t really any difference in having two mums and two, with having a mum and a dad, two dads, that is just that is just when you have two mums then it is the same sex.*

When we ask Lotta if she finds it hard to hear these questions, she reacts with a strategy we have seen earlier; by underlining that she does not mind these questions:

**Lotta:** *I don’t care that much*

**Malena:** *right, but then they don’t say anything more, do they?*

**Lotta:** *no*

**Malena:** *so they are well just a bit curious*

**Lotta:** *they are really nice.*

The fact that Lotta, as well as her mothers as they brought it up to in their interview, had a well-meaning attitude towards this disidentification from those who are her friends and that often come to play with her at home, suggests that they refused to become victims in the situations of disidenti-

fication. At the same time it raises questions why these girls actively repeatedly perform a situation in which they pretend not to recognise the one mother or the other. It seems exciting for girls in prepuberty to get access to another kind of femininity and to use forbidden words like ‘dyke’. The ‘curiosity’ can be seen as a mirroring of the girls interest in Lotta’s mums as rare or exotic or different with that double standard of both excitement and distancing that persons in a normative position could allow themselves.

In our analysis, Lotta’s story represents the dilemma we need to negotiate in this study. A strict focus on a discourse of anti-discrimination would lead to an interpretation of this situation that positions Lotta and her parents as victims of the other girls’ on-going harassment, where the parents are exoticised. While we see this as one possible interpretation, we also want to focus on the aspect of agency in this situation. Lotta closes this sequence by saying that the girls are “really nice” and that they are her friends, not her bullies. Thus, an alternative reading might suggest that the girls’ repeated questions are both a way to explore femininities they see as non-normative, and a kind of ironic insider reference.

## 2. Participants as Experts and Advisors

On the following pages, we collect participants’ advice, both for teachers and for other children and young people with LGBTQ parents.

### Kid’s Advice for Teachers

In the conversations with the children and young people, we also learn about their expectations towards their teachers. While some of the participants offer an analysis of teachers’ gendered strategies, eight-year-old Mika states that he wishes teachers would know more about the children in their class. Mika presents what seems like a contradiction that can be important to understand the incongruences he (and probably other children, too) experience in school, as he explains that the teachers know he lives with two mums, but that they never speak about it in class:

**Malena:** *do you sometimes feel that you would like that they would talk about it*

**Mika:** *yes, a lot (...)*

**Malena:** *how should one talk about family, then? Should you like the teachers to talk about that?*

**Mika:** *well, I think that one should talk about it a bit better cause the only thing they talk about is ‘Shall we draw a picture of your family?’ [Malena: uhm] friends, cousins, so [Malena: uhm] Yes they really (...) they really*

*need to get to know the children a bit better [Malena: yes] Cause otherwise they don't know well okay you have – okay you have that and you have that [Malena: uhm] Yes, but they need to learn more about what they should do.*

Clearly, Mika would appreciate the opportunity to talk about his family in class. At the same time, when asked about any advice he might want to pass on to other children with families like his, Mika points out, as we mentioned earlier, that a child will not be teased about its family as long as it does not talk about it.

Reading together, this narrative shows how clearly Mika analyses his experiences in school. In his experience, it is safest not to speak about a non-normative family situation – yet, how would he get the impression that his family might be a cause for ridicule? One part of the answer might be in the teachers' approach to discussing families in class. As Mika explains, talking about family is limited to the drawing of the children's families, with too little engagement by the teachers. Mika finds that there is very little discussion of families on the whole in his class.

In their text '(Re)considering normal: queering social norms for parents and Teachers', Laura Bower and Cari Klecka discuss how teachers find it important to know about children's experiences, though they might see certain family structures as a *"conflict into the norms. Teachers did not want to contradict parents' beliefs by addressing differences. Nor did they want to spend academic time talking about diversity, particularly as related to LGBT issues. Yet, they felt that an essential part of adhering to social norms and being 'good' teachers meant acknowledging student difference"* (Bower & Klecka 2009: 369–370).

From workshops with teachers, we know that there is an understanding that is best if all children are treated the same. Also, text books have few to no reference to non-normative families, which demands that teachers adapt or supplement the existing material themselves (Brade, Engström et al. 2008; Bromseth & Darj 2010b). As we suppose that Mika's teachers mean well, they probably try to avoid pinpointing Mika as 'different'. Yet, by not speaking about non-normative families, they give Mika the impression that he should not speak about this family, either. He recommends that teachers need to learn more about what to do in order to help the children in their class to be well.

Interestingly, Mika's reflections are taken up, though with a different angle, by other participants. Also nine-year-old Pär sees a need for more space to talk about his four-leafed clover family:

**Malena:** *well, if they came [to you]: 'you're having two mums and two dads, how do you think, or how would you say, should we talk about kids with two mums and dads in school?'. for example. Or: 'how should we talk about families in school?' Then, what would you say?*

**Pär:** *that children would tell how they think their family is like. Something like this I'm telling you now. Writing it down, as we're doing [in school].*

Again, this reflects Mika's demand that teachers give more space to discussions about all kinds of families. He sees the interview as an example of how such conversations could be done in school, and is interested in the concrete workings of family life.

Several of the interviewed children and young people often expressed a critical gender view in their everyday life. Madicken, ten years old, referred to herself as queer. She told us that she had protested in class on the schools choice of text books. Madicken was critical towards the traditional division and confrontations between girls and boys that she experienced in school and demanded that both teachers and class would reflect upon heterosexual strategies. Madicken also saw a need for teachers to develop better tools to handle the 'boys' as they often got (negative) attention in school. The narrow-minded gender perspectives in the text books she referred to was that boys were considered being loud and girls were considered being good girls, which irritated her. She brought that up when we asked Madicken of how family is represented in the class room:

**Madicken:** *well, there are no families, but there is a dog called Monty and, well, we follow him in his life so to say. (...) We then listen to a record in English*

**Malena:** *that sounds fun, is it a dog who's telling the story?*

**Madicken:** *uhu, it's 'hello Monty' [with a British accent], its very funny. And then we sing, too. Once there was this really bad song. First all the girls would sing: schh, schh boys, stop that noise, and then the guys answered: shut up girls. I just, eh what?*

**Malena:** *right! That's outrageous!*

**Madicken:** *yes, I said: 'Protest! Protest! Protest!'*

**Malena:** *good! Is that what you say when you don't like something? Can you raise you hand and say, hey wait stop?*

**Madicken:** *I went to my teacher and said why do we sing that song, it's bad*

**Malena:** *did the teacher understand why you thought it was bad?*



**Madicken:** *yes I think so*  
**Malena:** *maybe she didn't think it was that good either?*  
**Madicken:** *uhu, but it wasn't she who decided that we'd play that song*  
**Malena:** *didn't she?*  
**Madicken:** *it was the book that decided*  
**Malena:** *uhu. I think it was good that you told her.*  
**Madicken:** *sometimes you'd feel a bit shy if you want to protest, but sometimes it feels good when you've said it.*

Eighteen-year-old Karin, who lives in one of Sweden's major cities, also discusses how the classroom atmosphere can be polarised in discussions about homosexuality or about feminism, and that her teachers do little to balance that.

**Malena:** *would you like your teachers to be more clear about this?*  
**Karin:** *yes (...) it would be good if teachers (...) Well it is easy to say what's right or wrong but it is often (...) when there are negative comments about things that people at our age don't always understand, they are not so aware about the whole situation so they just say stupid things [about feminism and homosexuality].*

In her experiences, teachers rather invite external experts for discussions about sexuality, and that such debates receive limited time and attention. Karin is not either impressed by the pedagogical approaches employed in these discussions, when the focus is on plenary debates rather than on small-group discussions.

**Karin:** *it just feels like this should be discussed as a part of society rather than (...) it is like it has become another society in some way that we are divided*

**Malena:** *right*  
**Karin:** *yes (...) But it is often like us and them, this sort of permeate the school.*

For our study, Karin's reflections are highly relevant. They underline how useful it is to analyse the experiences of children and young people with LGBTQ parents with the theoretical frameworks of homophobia and transphobia. In Karin's class, homosexuality is something 'difficult' that her teachers feel unable to handle themselves in an adequate way and therefore invite experts which is a common practice at many schools in Sweden.

Thus, we see similarities in the school experiences of children and young people with LGBTQ parents, and children and young people defined as or seen as LGBTQ. In research on and with queer kids, teachers have a crucial role in preventing and coun-

teracting exclusion (Égale Canada 2009: 61; Meyer 2009; Meyer 2007: 20–22). We see a similar chance for teachers to support children and young people with LGBTQ parents which is supported by Karin's discussion. She continues to point out:

**Karin:** *the nuclear family is very present all the time, what could I say. [Malena: uhu] I think there are quite a lot of people who feel, like, that they miss that. Not just because they, kind of, have homosexual parents, but, kind of, that when people are divorced, I mean their parents are divorced or those kind of things. [Malena: uhu]. Or, I miss that too, but that you feel – well, it's like you're not normal.*

What Karin expects from her teachers is a reflection of the discourses of family they engage and reproduce. By referencing the heteronormative nuclear family as norm and normal, other family structures, including families after separation and indeed her own family, are positioned as 'not normal'. Karin would like to see teachers better equipped to handle complex discussions in class, both in terms of knowledge and with regards to pedagogies (Kumashiro 2002).

This is an important analytical point: Karin does not primarily demand more recognition of her particular family situation, but a reflection of normative representations of families as such. (A similar point can be drawn from the conversation with one of the children, who when asked if he knew other children with two mothers referred to a child whose father after separation from the kids mother is now living with another woman – which in practice means that the friend has two mothers.)

Other participants also offered a gender analysis of their classroom experiences. Jesper is annoyed by one of his teachers' masculinist behaviour and pedagogy, which includes refusing solace and a plaster when Jesper hurts himself. Interestingly, Jesper's parents mention how this teacher took the presence of four parents at the regular parents-teacher meeting as a sign that Jesper was spoiled.

Madicken is a ten-year-old queer-feminist activist, who is not scared of discussing the choice of classroom materials with her teachers. Madicken is very critical of the traditional separation and confrontation of 'girls' and 'boys' in school, and regularly demands that both the teachers and the class reflect upon their heteronormative strategies. Madicken also sees a need for teachers to develop better tools to deal with 'those boys' who demand a lot of (negative) attention in class.

### Expert Advice from Kid to Kid

Sixteen-year-old Robin's advice to other children and young people with similar families like his is to demand from others that they accept his family if they want him to accept theirs:

**Robin:** *yeah, I don't know. Like for me it was like mum came out when I was two, so that has never been a problem for me, that has always been like that. But like it is just some thing one learns to accept, that one learns to ignore everything else, that one puts their foot down that well this is how it is and there is nothing you can do about it and I am proud about it like so like. That one just has to learn to acc- – that people have to learn to accept that. And if they don't, so one has to go out and put your foot down [Malena: mhm] that this is how it is. That's what I- that's what I think one has to do, I think that is the only way, that's what I had to do anyway that but yes this is how it is. One has to accept that. Why should I accept that someone has mum, dad, kid when they do not accept that I have mum, Gunilla and myself? Why should I accept them if they don't accept me?*

Robin's narrative shows the complexities in the seemingly simple suggestion to demand acceptance, as it is also necessary for Robin himself to accept his family situation, although he underlines that it has never been a problem for him. Yet, he also spins this further and de-centres the normality of heteronormative families. He does not only demand to be accepted with his family, but makes this the condition for him to accept other's families.

In a next stage, Robin advises to also counteract discrimination. When we recall the conversation with another participant who chooses to keep silent about his family, Robin says this as an example of how important it is to speak up for oneself. He sees in the strategy of silence a fear that is fed by the hope that by keeping silent that child will stay out of harm's way. In Robin's analysis, this is not a fair deal:

**Robin:** *but it is a kind of fe – a kind of fear also. That is just what has crea – that is what has been created all the time that is just what I mean with that us and them that that has been created all the time, that it is a kind of fear about that yes but yes others have it like this I cannot yeas but if I keep quiet nothing will happen so (.) one has to go out and just dare to speak up, otherwise one will sit with that fear all your life and that isn't good. But of course when one is*

*eight years one might feel that – that one is not- well one is not mature, one is still little so that's obvious that one can be afraid.*

For Robin, silence is not an option, although he understands that it might be more difficult for a younger child to counter negative remarks. This final aspect of Robin's advice might be relevant especially for teachers of younger children.

Karin's comments support Robin's suggestion, although she is less demanding:

**Karin:** *oj [laughs], I am so bad at giving advice. But that depends on the child how it feels about its parents, but kind of the best is I guess just to yeah but kind of everything is normal. It is sort of – it doesn't matter. Sort of it is kind of better to have kind of – yes but just a good mum. If the mum is good, well then – or dad – so that's what matters. It doesn't matter what everybody else thinks.*

Karin's comment reflects earlier research that underlines that not the parents' sexuality, but their parenting styles are most relevant to a child's well-being. Karin also highlights the need to distance oneself from other people's opinion. For her, it is (or should be) irrelevant what others think.

### 3. Knowledge about Homophobia – Culturally Queer?

In the interviews with the children and young people it is obvious that they do not see themselves as part of a community, or part of their parent's community, as teenagers rarely are. However, many of the teenage participants mention homophobic harassments in school. In all the interviews with people between 15 and 18 they bring up the problem of homophobia being quite outspoken among teenagers. This is something we refer to as being culturally queer (Gustavson & Schmitt 2011; Epstein 2009), and that could be understood as a particular 'queer competence'. Homophobic talk does not pass them unnoticed, as it is a part of their family life, making them equipped for detecting and handling homophobic situations. Robin mentions that lesbians are rarely the target for bullying, however gay men will find themselves exposed to abuse:

**Robin:** *what you hear it's often (..) what you often hear it's (..) I mean you never hear anything about lesbians or so, I mean, you hear about that too, but most of the time you hear words of abuse, to those who are gay (men). So it's mostly against them hear all kinds of stuff. You hear, well yeah, but girls are girls, so that's okay That doesn't really mat-*

ter, they're usually friends, they usually hug each other, so it doesn't matter. But when there are two guys, then... that's not how things should be

**Malena:** uhu, right, it's like something they're scared of themselves all the time?

**Robin:** uhu. And people are scared because if you'd admit that you accept homosexuality then, well, some think that if you think it's okay with homosexuality then you might become homosexual [Malena: yes, right]. But that's not how it is.

Robin also mentions how he sometimes leaves his peers to wonder if he is gay or not. The reason he says this is that it should not matter, and that people should not be harassed for being gay or lesbian. In this political performance he clearly acts on a culturally queer competence, exposing himself to the anxiety of the heteronormative organisation of everyday life, in which people demand to know other person's sexual preferences. This seemingly unreflective heterosexual demand of 'coming out' as gay indicates, nevertheless, that it requires an obvious homosexual subject to represent the deviation to re-establish the norm. Robin then does not only quickly identify and analyse a homophobic situation, he also acts upon it. By making those who demand to know about his 'proper' sexual orientation to feel uneasy and playing on their insecurity, he challenges the very condition for normative acknowledgement of sexuality.

Joakim makes some similar connections:

**Malena:** how do you think people talk about homosexuality in school at all? Or your generation specifically?

**Joakim:** my generation – well it's like – I don't know, I have never looked at it in a way, I think it is fu – damn good but – what's it called – I mean it's a lot of faggot jokes and lots of shit that I have never participated in but there are many others but you get over it when you get older, I mean that's what it seems like [Malena: uhm]. But I have never cared about that cause I know they don't mean anything against homosexuals, it's not that one tries to insult them by using it as an insult [Malena: uhm] so I never took offence, sort of. But it – it's well – it is like kind of still a bit of a taboo but it's getting better and better

**Malena:** yes. What do you think when you say that they don't mean it in a bad way, why – why use faggot as an insult then?

**Joakim:** because – well I don't know, it's well, it's- I have no clue, I never used it, it was never in my vocabulary, sort of. [Malena: no]. But –

yes but it is well – it is sort of between blokes, like that it calls into question ones masculinity or something, I don't have a clue

**Malena:** that it's those kind of things it is really about

**Joakim:** yes, I don't think it is about - I don't think it is about being – being gay, it is more about – about that I think.

The citations reflect how gender is reproduced through sexuality and that there is a masculine heterosexual anxiety around the topic gay men. Joakim's overlooking and excusing attitude – that this is more about growing up and becoming a man in a common way than that the friends would really have anything against gay men, expresses loyalty towards his friends. At the same time he said 'It has never been in my vocabulary' stating that this is not a jargon he'd use himself. This again indicates how strange homophobic and abusive speech is to the children and young people of LGBTQ parents. Joakim's attitudes also make him rise above biased speech in school. Having queer competence he has access to analytical keys of gender and sexuality, allowing him to draw the conclusion that homophobia many times is a masculinity problem among insecure men, quite similar to Robin's conclusion.

#### 4. Conclusion: Queer Cultural Competence – Family-based, not Community-based

Queer competence we discuss here is based on family life rather than on community life. The kids are part of all sorts of communities, from political parties to sports clubs. None of them mentioned belonging to any queer or LGBTQ communities. However, their family life provides them with keys to understand norms and biases, and to act against them. This also shows that it is not only those who are pointed out as direct victims of homophobia and transphobia that are affected. We would also suggest that it is not only people who identify with a community or through their sexuality or gender identity that need to be a spokespeople of anti-discrimination. To put it bluntly: if the teenagers we met can draw their conclusions of gender- and sexuality-based inclusion and exclusion, teachers can, too.

During the process of writing, we were cautious of the mostly positive outcome – and even that is not new. In the 1996 book 'Älskade barn' [Beloved child], Greger Eman writes about his own scepticism towards stories he receives as editor that are almost too good to be true – and for the need to tell both the problematizing and the happy stories (Eman 1996a).

### Recommended Readings

- Brade, Lovise, Carolina Engström, Renita Sörensdotter & Pär Wiktorsson (2008). I normens öga. Metoder för en normbrytande undervisning [In the eye of the norm. Methods for teaching that breaks norms]. Stockholm: Stiftelsen Friends.
- Bromseth, Janne & Frida Darj (Eds.) (2010). Normkritisk pedagogik. Makt, lärande och strategier för förändring [Norm-critical pedagogy. Power, learning and strategies for change]. Uppsala: Centrum för genusvetenskap, Uppsala universitet i samarbete med RFS Lunddom.
- Eman, Greger (Ed.) (1996). Älskade barn: homo- och bisexuella föräldrar berättar [Beloved child. Stories by homo- and bisexual parents]. Stockholm: Carlsson.
- Henkel, Kristina & Marie Tomičić (2009). Ge ditt barn 100 möjligheter Istället för 2 – om genusfällor och genuskrux i vardagen [Give your child 100 possibilities instead of 2 – about gendertraps and gender trouble everyday life]. Linköping: Olika and Jämställt.se.
- Zetterqvist Nelson, Karin (2007). Mot alla odds. Regnbågsföräldrars berättelser om att bilda familj och få barn [Against all odds. Rainbow parents' stories about having a family and getting children]. Malmö: Liber.

## 6. Comparative Perspective

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### Introduction

In this chapter, we present a comparison of the country-specific findings. Children and young people from LGBTQ/rainbow families were interviewed in the three countries: 22 in Germany, aged 8–20; three in Slovenia, aged 15–23; and eight in Sweden, aged 8–18. These different sample sizes are due to the different societal and political contexts, as well as the current debates and the issues that LGBTQ communities focus on.

One of the important tasks of the research was to interview the children and young people and to understand their experiences as expert knowledge. The participating children and young people found various strategies to deal with and address structural forms, as well as inter-personal acts, of 'de-normalisation' in school and among peers.

### Living with LGBTQ Parents / in a Rainbow Family: a Concern for Children and Young People at Schools?!

The common characteristic of the research in all three countries is that all of the children and young people have developed a repertoire of strategies to deal with feared or experienced forms of discrimination and delegitimisation in the context of school. These strategies can be described as part of a negotiation process of social power, acceptance, and belonging within the peer group. Additionally, they refer to an attitude of pedagogues who often lack knowledge of the importance of interest, sensitivity, and readiness to talk about LGBTQ issues with their students.

The way the participants related to and discussed experiences of discrediting, hostility, and silencing depends on country-specific social conditions, individual resources, and different experiences of support and resilience, as well as social categories such as age, gender, 'reproductive backgrounds' and experiences of being racialised or disabled.

Furthermore, most of the adolescent participants in Germany and Sweden, as well as some of the children, refused to be identified primarily through their LGBTQ/rainbow parents and growing up in a rainbow family. Some of them also refused to be associated with LGBTQ related issues in general. These children and young people often described family as not being "a big issue" among peers; es-

pecially the adolescents stress this. The pejorisation of LGBTQ identifying people and dealing with homophobic and transphobic attitudes were perceived as an everyday phenomenon in school. While respondents in Sweden and Slovenia positioned themselves clearly against others using homophobic or transphobic insults, the young people in Germany saw this differently. They emphasised the interpretation of homophobic, sexist, as well as ableist statements not necessarily as pejorative attitudes, but as codes of youth specific practices.

In this sense they positioned themselves as both loyal to their peer group and autonomous in their decision to intervene or not. They rejected corresponding expectations, such as the demand that they standing up for homosexual rights just because of having LGBTQ/rainbow-parents and as a way of showing loyalty towards them.

At the same time, some of them – especially young female adolescents conceived within a rainbow family – stressed their political and moral attitude. They described that they felt the need to intervene against homophobic or sexist statements clearly and explicitly. Younger children from Sweden and Germany also reacted similarly. They obviously took these statements as direct insults towards their families.

### Experiences of Violence?!

In our research we operated with a definition of violence emphasising forms of social aggression expressed not mainly physically, but by verbal and non-verbal attacks on dignity and self-esteem. This included acts of devaluation, exclusion, insults, and discredit, as well as evoking feelings of invisibility and of not being symbolically represented, which could be seen as intentional, as well as unintentional forms of discrimination with homophobic connotations. This happened especially through the social practices of de-normalizing within a matrix of heteronormativity.

Interpersonal and structural experiences of homophobic connotated or motivated forms of violence in the three countries can be divided into three levels:

- experiences of interpersonal forms of violence from the side of the peers



- experiences of interpersonal forms of violence from the side of the teachers
- effects of the heteronormative discourse of the institutional school curriculum.

On the interpersonal level it has to be stated that in all three countries none of the children reported about ever being physically attacked because of her/his family background. In Sweden the recent changes in attitudes and growing respect for sexual diversity might be the major reasons for not recalling any homophobic motivated physical violence. In Germany another reason for the absence of experiences of physical violence could be the awareness of the parents when choosing a school for their child and, additionally, their commitment within these schools. In Slovenia, where young people also had not experienced violent attacks, paradoxically, the taboo and a long-term silence of children and young people living with LGBTQ parents/in rainbow families most probably protected them from open discrimination and direct violence.

Different kinds of discriminatory behaviour were discussed by the participating children and young people. In all the three countries most of the participants, and especially the younger ones, complained about being questioned and interrogated about one's own family. They especially mentioned that they did not like repetitive interrogations by the same persons or being continuously questioned without a real interest from the side of the peers. These effects have been analysed as de-normalisation of family constellations which are different from the heterosexual normality and as reassurance of the normality of heterosexual families ("who is the real, the legitimate parent").

In all three countries most of the respondents discussed that LGBTQ/rainbow families are invisible in ordinary conversations, as well as in the school curriculum and teaching materials, and some of them criticised the reproduction of normative images of families and gender.

In Germany and Slovenia a questioning or discrediting of biological and social family conditions and family relationships, as well as the different forms of conception ("it is not possible to have two mothers"; "how can you not know your father") seem to be a burden especially for younger children to deal with.

As described above, heteronormative pejorisation related to LGBTQ identifying people were both an everyday phenomenon, but also experienced as directly exposed towards some of the participants with reference to their family background as respondents in Germany and Slovenia described. Another issue was being directly identified with the sexual orientation of their parents. This happened, for example, by stating "you'll be a lesbian later on"/"you'll be gay yourself".

In Slovenia the participants described an attitude of their environment interpreting the things which went wrong in a child's life as connected to the sexual identification of their parents ("no wonder, that you are nervous, if you have such parents").

In Germany and Slovenia some of the children experienced and almost all of them feared being exposed to the class by their teachers or experiencing maltreatment or even unfairness from their teachers.

In all three countries children expressed fears that they might experience rejections, devaluation, and marginalisation from their peers, when they disclosed their family formation. In Germany the intensity of these fears were connected to the atmosphere in school and obvious forms of social aggression. Most of the participants described experiences of bullying in school, rarely as victims, but often as spectators or even as indirect participants.

Children and young people additionally experiencing racist or ableist discrimination compared both experiences. They described that they applied strategies – like ignoring, not listening, fading out, resisting or offering awareness raising or information – which they knew to be effective in both situations.

## Strategies

In all three countries children and young people applied strategies to deal with experiences or fears of being de-normalised. For most of the children and young people, to handle conflicts of loyalty and autonomy seemed to be a complex challenge. They were indirectly involved in experiences of potential social stigmatisation of their parents and of being de-normalised as a part of a family with LGBTQ parents. At the same time they wanted to reassure not only belonging to their families but also to their peer group and the 'normality' of a heteronormative social environment. The weight of this challenge differed and depended on the level of expectations and pressure of the particular heteronormative environments. Here it also mattered how the children positioned themselves as a part of this environment and in which way the parents negotiated their LGBTQ identification. The different strategies the participants applied to reflect specific conditions, for example, whether parents decided or felt forced to keep silent (Slovenia), whether children themselves felt uncomfortable and insecure with the decision of their mother or father changing from a heterosexual background into a LGBTQ identification (Germany), whether there was a big pressure of heteronormative conformity and homophobic behaviour within peer groups (Germany) or if it was expected that living in a LGBTQ family should not be a challenging issue at all in public/school (Sweden).

Most of the children and young people in all three countries used 'normality' as an important point of reference. They described their families as "a normal family" although different, or/and unique ("our family is different but normal"). Reclaiming both being an ordinary family and, as such, being part of normality showed partially a general importance of family as a social concept of identify and partially the need to position oneself within the social convention of 'normality' to express and reclaim belonging and acceptance. At the same time, the explicit emphasises on being a normal family showed a dilemma of the children, as both the concept of family and the idea of normality were based on the construction of heteronormativity.

In all three countries most of the children and young people made sure not to be identified with LGBTQ themselves, in regard of their self-concepts emphasising autonomy. There were a few exceptions in both countries where female participants expressed to be open about their socio-sexual choices or even declared to live bisexual relating that to a more openness and a very liberal atmosphere at home (Germany).

To deny a broader impact of the fact of living in a LGBTQ/rainbow family by one's own self-concept and by one's own social position within the peer group as described above (German, Sweden) was also seen as a strategy to deal with the situation.

In all three countries the most common strategy to avoid troubles or problems seemed to be the careful selection of the person to whom children and young people disclosed the LGBTQ identification of their parents. Even if some of them preferred an offensive way of presenting their family when others asked them about their family, they preferred to stay observant.

In Slovenia the most important strategy was silence which was partially expected by the parents and rewarded by the peers and school teachers. The strategy of silencing partially protected the children and young people from violence, but at the same time affected their self-esteem, resilience, and autonomy. The compulsory silence and tabooisation increased their fear and the feeling of not being safe in the world. In Germany some of the younger children preferred to keep silent about the LGBTQ identification of their parents if possible, interpreting the proposal of the parents to feel free to decide whether to talk about it or not in this way.

While in Sweden children reported about discussions about LGBTQ families in class, in Germany this was rarely mentioned, and in Slovenia there were no such discussions at all.

## Factors of Resilience

Parental support was considered the most important factor for most of the children and young people in all three countries. Parents explained their family constellation to the school teachers in order to support their children emotionally, to take responsibility, and to protect the children in forms of giving them "proper words" or intervening when needed. It was noted that in Slovenia children got the least support from their parents, which means that the amount of emotional burden carried by the children who were left on their own in relation to schools and peers was very high. The German and the Swedish results showed the importance of the parents' involvement in schools in the form of talking to the teachers and talking about the family formation, encouraging schools to include LGBTQ topics in the curriculum (even giving a workshop on certain issues, Sweden), and getting involved in a conflict situation in order to support their child. Parents also spoke about their need to feel reassured that the teachers could handle possible forms of intentional and unintentional forms of discrimination against their children, and that the school environment reflected their children's families (Sweden and Germany). Nevertheless, in all three countries the burden of discussing LGBTQ topics at school lies with LGBTQ parents.

Despite the little support young people in Slovenia got from their parents in comparison to Sweden and Germany, all the participating children and young people showed a rather high level of reflection and self-reflection of the societal responses of the LGBTQ/rainbow families and the need and forms of support.

Another important element for the children's and young people's resilience and feeling of support was to know other LGBTQ identifying adults, as well as children and young people from rainbow families. Having reliable friendships and trustful commitments with peers there is no need to explain, hide or justify the LGBTQ identification of their parents.

Experiences of easy ways of dealing with acceptance, 'real' interest or an explicitly positive valuation of the LGBTQ family background by peers, friends, and lovers were seen as being very supportive by almost all of the children in all three countries.

In Germany, some of the children and young people knew other children from rainbow families from conferences and events organised by the LGBTQ community. At the same time some children and young people declared being ambivalent to having close contact to other children from LGBTQ parents. Perhaps the contact was not so important for them to build up friendships, perhaps there is also

a risk of being identified as a child from a rainbow family by their peers. One eight-year-old boy argued that he did not want to lose his status of being the only one in class with LGBTQ parents, because he loved the status of being unique.

Especially in Sweden and Slovenia, children involved in the research had hardly any contacts with the peers who lived in similar family formations. In Sweden this perhaps partly reflected the refusal of being identified as a child of a rainbow family by the adolescent participants. In Slovenia it might have been caused by a lack of disclosure of LGBTQ identified parents. In both countries the situation had changed with a new generation of the LGBTQ parents/rainbow families (in Sweden from 2005 and in Slovenia from 2008 on) creating networks. In Germany lesbian and gay parent groups who started to form the second parent adoption (01.01.2005) also strengthened similar activities.

### **Recommendations for Pedagogical Multipliers**

All of the children and young people from the three countries emphasise the importance of giving greater attention to LGBTQ/rainbow families in schools. This is proposed to be done, for example, through the inclusion of diverse family formations in teaching materials.

Some of them, especially the younger ones, want teachers to be interested in learning more about their families. They want to be encouraged to describe their family life and to exchange experiences with other children.

Most of the adolescent participants want their teachers to learn more about how to address issues of LGBTQ parents/rainbow families in an appropriate and not blaming way. Some of them explicitly expect the teacher to refer to the style of parenting as most relevant to a child's well-being, rather than to the gendered parental roles.

Most of the children and young people want the teachers and school authorities to recognise that children and young people worry about obvious, as well as subtle forms of violence and de-normalisation with homophobic connotations. Some of the respondents do not refer to their own situation as a child growing up with LGBTQ parents, but imagine the situation of young people identifying themselves as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or queer.

Some of the children emphasise wanting their teachers, as well as other professionals to recognise children as people "with experiences" and to listen and to trust their experiences of daily subtle discrimination in reference to different socially

constructed categorisations, so as being racialised, sexualised, and disabled.

The comparison of the proposed recommendations of the children and young people, as well as the parents show that there was a great consistency in assessing that schools could and should be more engaged and better prepared for the issues concerning LGBTQ parents and rainbow families and the different experiences and strategies the children and young people have developed to deal and cope with experienced and feared forms of heteronormative de-normalisation and homophobic connotated forms of violence.

Therefore pedagogical materials have been developed in all three countries, based on the results of the studies. These materials reflect the similarities, as well as the differences of the results, the country specific research, and the assumed needs of each country also with respect to already existing materials.

### **Concluding Remarks**

The comparative results show that schools often do not seem to be prepared – neither professionally, nor personally – to handle differences in family constellations. This affects children's and young people's openness about their family construction and might cause intentional and unintentional forms of discrimination.

Most of the parents want to make sure that teachers are sensitive about derogatory language of LGBTQ identification and feel responsible to get involved when this happens among pupils. Some parents discuss that teachers often seem to have a difficult role in not "exposing" or labelling children from LGBTQ parents/rainbow families, but at the same time give space to discuss these family formations instead of silencing them. Most of the parents want teachers and schools to assume and address different family formations in class, and to initiate the representation of different families beyond classical heterosexually constructed models of a nuclear family.

Over the last decade there has been a set of changes, often towards the better, for LGBTQ/rainbow families in all three countries. Still, there seems to be some reluctance to include norm-critical perspectives in schools. Yet, all children and young people have to be included in order to meet the requirements of integration and non-discriminatory practice, as one of the democratic foundations in school. As one of the participants said: "it is about the future for **all** pupils".

small initial letters	Continuously write words without a capital
<b>bold</b>	Emphasising; especially clear articulation: "It was <b>really</b> difficult."
[...]	Silence: use brackets
((laughing))	Paralinguistic phenomena
(?means?) (??)	Incomprehensibilities
[uhu, yes]	Note, comment of the interviewer meanwhile the interviewee is talking and vice versa
{{simultaneously}.....}	Overlapping speech i: And how {simultaneously} did you like this ?} k1: {simultaneously} , you know I mean } it was
k1:	kid 1
p1:	parent 1 (mother; father ...)
i:	Interviewer
=	Quick contraction, stutter "was=was"
(name, location 1)	Anonymisation
word- sentence-	Word, sentence is broken off "other peop- other kids"
- ..... -	Searching for expressions, not being sure, not completing the sentence: "- what's the word? -"
interruption	If the interviewee wants to stop the interview: state it

## Socio-political and Legal Situation in Germany, Slovenia, Sweden

	Germany	Slovenia	Sweden
<b>Partnership Legislation</b>			
Name of the law (orig., eng.)	<b>Lebenspartnerschaftsgesetz (LPartG)</b> <i>Life Partnership Act</i>  The law provides rights in the areas inheritance, alimony, health insurance, immigration, but no equalisation with heterosexual marriages.	<b>Zakon o registraciji istospolne partnerske skupnosti (ZRIPS)</b> <i>The Registration of a Same Sex Civil Partnerships Act</i>  This law does not equal marriage or extra-marital relationship of different-sex partners.	<b>Äktenskapsbalk (1987:230) ändrad 2009 (Act 2009:253)</b> <i>Marriage code (1987:230) changed in 2009 (Act 2009:253)</i>  In 2009 the marriage law became gender-neutral. This was preceded by Act on Registered Partnership 1994:1117 ( <i>Lag om registrerat partnerskap 1994:1117</i> ), came into effect 1995.
Year	01.08.2011	23.07.2006	01.05.2009 (01.01.1995)
<b>Child Adoption</b>			
Name of the law (orig., eng.)	<b>Lebenspartnerschaftsgesetz (LPartG) – überarbeitete Version</b> <i>Life Partnership Law (Revision) Act</i>  Stepchild adoption allowed. Joint adoption by same-sex couples is not possible, only a married couple or a single person can adopt (§1741 BGB).	<b>Zakon o zakonski zvezi in družinskih razmerjih (ZZZDR)</b> <i>Marriage and Family Relations Act</i>  Joint adoption by same-sex couples is not possible. A single person can adopt a child. Stepchild adoption pending.	<b>Föräldrabalken (1949:381) 4 kap. Om adoption. 3 §</b> <i>Code on parents and children (1949:381) ch. 4 On Adoption §3</i>  Same-sex couples and individuals can apply for adoption if they are registered or married, including adoption of the partner's child (närsstående adoption). In the Code on parents and children (see Act 2009:254) insemination for same-sex couples is allowed. It acknowledges a consenting woman who was the mother's spouse, registered partner or cohabitant partner as parent since 2005.
Year	01.01.2005	01.01.1977 (current legislation) 2012 (new legislation)	01.01.2003



	Germany	Slovenia	Sweden
<b>Anti-discrimination Legislation</b>			
Name of the law (orig., eng.)	<b>Allgemeines Gleichbehandlungsgesetz (AGG)</b> <i>General Act on Equal Treatment</i>  Includes banning discrimination on sexual orientation.	<b>Ustava Republike Slovenije (Art. 14)</b> <i>Constitution of the Republic of Slovenia</i>  In addition to that also other specific acts, laws and statutes.	<b>Diskrimineringslag (2008:567)</b>  <i>Discrimination law (2008:567)</i>  7 grounds for non-discrimination: – sex – transgender identity or expression – ethnic origin – religion or other belief – disability – sexual orientation – age
Year	18.08.2006	23.12.1991	01.01.2009
<b>Statistical Data</b>			
Children in LGBTQ families	According to Micro-census 2010: 18,000 – 21,000 (Eggen 2010) According to estimates: min. 50,000 (Gerlach 2010) to 160,000 (Lähnemann 2004) Children growing up in registered partnerships: 2,200 (Rupp 2009).	No statistical data available. According to estimates: min. 200 children living in rainbow families.	In 2009, Statistics Sweden counted 749 children and young people under the age of 22 who lived with either a lesbian or gay parented couple, with numbers rising since 2004. 706 of these lived with two mothers. Half of these children were under 4 years (Statistics Sweden 2009). Between 2005 and 2009 568 lesbian couples received fertility treatment in Swedish hospital clinics and approximately 200 children has been adopted by the mother's partner since 2005 (Malmquist & Zetterqvist Nelson forthcoming 2012; Malmquist & Zetterqvist Nelson 2010: 13).
Registered/married couples	Micro-census 2010: 23,000 registered couples (37 Prozent percent of 63,000).	24 registered couples (June 2011).	Approximately 5,900 persons are married or registered partners (Statistics Sweden 2011).
<b>Comments</b>			
(special national issues)		Invisibility of same-sex families. Moment of legal changes.	Surrogacy is illegal, but practised. Act On Insemination (2005) allows registered and married couples access to insemination and in-vitro fertilisation. Trans*_people's reproductive rights are currently under debate.

# Interview Guidelines:

## Interviews with Children and Young People

Thank you for participating in this interview. It is important for us that you want to take part in this study.

There are many forms of families. In this study we will interview nearly 80 children, young people and parents in Slovenia, Germany, and Sweden living in rainbow families. We will also interview different persons who are experts on anti-bullying and anti-discrimination. We want to know which kind of experiences children and young people in LGBTQ/rainbow families have in school, how they are being treated in school, if it is fair and if they feel all right.

Before the interview we will sign the letter of consent. It is important that you understand that your participation is volunteer and that you can interrupt the interview at any time. We promise you will be anonymous in the report of the research findings. No names or places will be connected to you. We also promise that we will follow the rules on how to handle personal data and research materials. We promise that what you say will not be passed on to your parents. But if you want to bring it up with them it is okay.

During the interview you will choose which questions you want to respond to. You can also switch of the tape recorder at any time. The interview will last between 45 and 90 minutes. Please let us know if there are thoughts and ideas that we have forgotten to address.

Do you have any further questions? Are you content with the procedure?

The questions are guidelines for the interview and it is your story that is important. We have several areas of questions and the questions are adjusted to the family situation.

### Family

- Who is family for you? What does family mean to you? Who are your parents? Who brings you/picks you up to/from school?

### School

- Describe a typical day in school?
- Tell me about the class, teachers, classmates.
- Tell me about your experiences from school – what do you like, what do you not like?
- Do you think the teachers have a good way of talking with the children?
- Do you think your teacher is fair?

### School and family

- (How) do you talk about families in school? (How) do you talk about your family?
- Is it okay for you the way teachers talk about family?
- Do teachers speak about children with two mums ... two dads [referring to the child's family situation]? In which way? What do you think/how do you feel about that?

### Bullying and strategies

- Is there any bullying at school? What do the teachers do in this case?
- On a scale between 1 and 10 (1 is little, 10 is much): is there little or much fighting, rows, and bullying at school? How do you feel about this? How do other children feel about it? Have you experienced that you have been bullied or teased or treated unfairly?
- If yes, what happened exactly in this situation? How did you feel? How did you manage/solve this problem? What did the grown ups do, e.g. teachers or parents?
- Who supports you when you have problems in school? What kind of support would you like to have?

### **“Miracle question”**

- “Imagine a miracle occurred during the night (which might be arranged by a fairy or a magician ... but you don’t know about how it happened ... it just did ...) and you wake up the next morning and come to school you’ll recognise that most of your class mates tell you they now also have LGBTQ parents. There is only one child still living with heterosexual parents. How would you recognise, what had happened, what would be different ...”

### **“Expert question” –**

#### **Children and young people as experts**

- “As you are an expert of living in a rainbow family /having LGBTQ parents: If a smaller child with a similar family as your own asked for your advice (i.e. how to talk about his or her family in school, how to deal with class mates asking questions ... [referring to situations the child described before], what would you tell that child?”
- If a teacher asked for your advice, how he or she should treat a child with LGBTQ parents (who, for example, came just recently in his or her class) – what would you tell that teacher?
- If it was up to you, what would you change in school?

### **Closing questions**

- Is there something I have forgotten to ask? Is there something more you wish to add?

Thank you for your participation in this study!

# Interview Guidelines:

## Interview with Parents

Thank you for participating in this interview. It is important for us that you want to contribute to our research.

There are many forms of families. In this study we will interview approximately 80 children, young people and parents in Slovenia, Germany and Sweden who live in rainbow families. We will also interview different persons who are experts on anti-bullying and anti-discrimination. Sometimes the families call themselves rainbow families, sometimes LGBTQ families. We want to know how children in rainbow families are treated in school and how you as a parent perceive the teachers' and peers' attitudes towards rainbow families.

Before the interview we will sign the letter of consent. It is important that you understand that your participation is volunteer and that you can interrupt the interview at any time. You will be anonymous in the report of the research findings. No names or places will be connected to you. The interview and transcribing of it will be stored in a safe space and only researchers within the project will work with the interviews. We follow the ethics committee regulations on the handling of personal data and research materials. Our obligation to observe silence implies to your children.

During the interview you will choose which questions you want to respond to. You can also switch of the tape recorder at any time. The interview will last between 45 minutes and an hour. Please let us know if there are thoughts and ideas that we have forgotten to address.

Do you have any further questions? Are you content with the procedure?

The questions are guidelines for the interview and it is your story that is important. We have several areas of questions and the questions are adjusted to the family situation.

### Family

- Who is family for you? What does family mean to you?

### School

- Tell me/us about your experiences from school as parent/s.
- How would you describe the atmosphere in the school of your child? Does everybody feel safe and secure?
- Does your child/ren like school?
- Do you like school?
- What expectations did you have before your child started in/changed to that school?
- Do you think the teachers have a good way of talking with your child/ren?
- How do you perceive the attitudes towards LGBTQ questions and LGBTQ persons at school?
- How do you perceive the teachers' attitudes towards LGBTQ questions and LGBTQ persons at school?
- How do you perceive the peers' attitudes towards LGBTQ questions and LGBTQ persons at school?
- How do you perceive other parents' attitudes towards LGBTQ questions and LGBTQ persons at school?
- Mark on a scale from 1 – 10 how strongly heterosexual norms seem to prevail in school (1 is weak and 10 is strong prevalence).
- Is it your impression that the family is an important reference in school?
- Do you think it is okay the way teachers talk about families?
- If yes: what do they say? How do you feel about that? How does/do your child/ren feel about that?
- If no: what do they say? How do you feel about that? How does/do your child/ren feel about that? Would you like if they talked about families in other ways? Could you express that in school/ for the teachers?

- Do teachers speak about rainbow families at all? In which way? What do you think about that? What does/do your child/ren think about that?
- Did you ever consider changing schools because of your family situation?

### **School and family**

- Do you talk about school at home? In which way?
- Who helps the child with homework?
- Who brings/picks up the child to/from school? Who presents oneself as parent in school?
- Who at school knows that your child lives in a rainbow family? Teachers? Parents? Peers? Others?
- If nobody knows: why is that so? How does it feel? How do you talk about it at home? Would you like to change that? In what way?
- Are you involved in school activities, e.g. in parent groups?

### **Bullying and strategies**

- Is there any bullying at school? Do you know what the teachers do in that case?
- On a scale between 1 and 10 (1 is little, 10 is much): is there little or much fighting, rows, and bullying at school? If much: do you know what will happen? What do the teachers do? What do the children do?
- Have you experienced that your child/ren has/ have been bullied or teased?
- Have you felt ignored or excluded in class meetings, parent meetings etc. which you think is caused by homophobia?
- Have you experienced that your child/ren has/ have not been taken seriously in school?
- Have you experienced that you have not been taken seriously in school?
- Has your child experienced discrimination in school?
- Have you experienced discrimination in school?
- Who supports you when you are having problems with school? What kind of support would you prefer?

### **Parents as experts**

- If it was up to you, what would you change in school?
- If a teacher asked for your advice, what would you tell that teacher?
- If a parent asked for your advice, what would you tell that parent?
- In case you have not experienced violence or discrimination, what could yet be improved?

### **Closing questions**

- Is there something I have forgotten? Is there something more you wish to add?

### **Demographical data**

- Education
- Work
- Age

Thank you for your participation in this study!



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The European research project 'Experiences of Children from Rainbow Families in School' (2009–2011) conducted by researchers from Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Germany (Centre for Transdisciplinary Gender-studies), University Ljubljana, Slovenia (Department of Social Justice and Inclusions, Faculty of Social Work) and Lund University, Sweden (Centre for Gender Studies) focuses in its comparative study on the experiences of children growing up with LGBTQ-parents/in rainbow families in the context of school.

The crucial question of the study is whether and how children and young people experience discrimination, exclusion or bullying and whether this can be described as homophobic violence. In addition it is analysed how they position themselves in a heteronormative environment and which different strategies the children and young people employ to deal with experiences and fears of de-normalisation, what kind of support from parents, teachers or peers is available for them and what are their specific expectations from school as institution.

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