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Inclusion of Homoaffective Families in Education Services and Schools in Italy: A Pedagogical Issue

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Abstract

For some time now, pedagogy of the family has been dealing with so-called ‘plural families’, but the interest for LGBT (homoaffective) parenting officially began in Italy in 2010. Since then, the major efforts have been carried out in order to enhance professional training to offer theoretical guidance and operational tools to support appropriate educational actions. The article analyzes some specific goal of pedagogical science and some basic concepts, which should be indispensable contents in education programmes for education workers in order to including children from LGBT families in nurseries and schools and reduce the risk of teachers, educators, heads teacher, pedagogists basing their own attitudes towards ‘Rainbow Families’ on prejudice and individual beliefs, unsupported by scientific data or concrete experience.

Keywords: homoaffective families, children, school, inclusion, pedagogy.

1. Introduction

For some time now, pedagogy of the family has been dealing with so-called ‘plural families’, but the interest for LGBT (homoaffective) parenting officially began in 2010, the year in which the Department of Educational Science in Bologna held the conference ‘*Children with homosexual parents*’, the first of its kind in Italy to tackle this topic in the pedagogical field.

Since then, also following the publication of the book ‘*Maestra, ma Sara ha due mamme? Accogliere le famiglie omogenitoriali nei servizi educativi e scolastici*’ (Gigli, 2011) studies and research have been conducted to offer theoretical guidance

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and operational tools to support appropriate educational actions: the main objective was to reduce the risk of teachers, educators, heads teacher, pedagogists basing their own attitudes towards 'Rainbow Families' on prejudice, fantasies and individual beliefs, unsupported by scientific data or concrete experience. Actually, the major efforts have been carried out in order to enhance professionals' training: beyond those that are mentioned in this essay, there aren't any other studies in the field of education conducted in Italy that monitor what has been carried out in the school and in educational services (hence, it is not possible to add more references).

2. In the need of training: some educational goals

In the last years, the requests from educational institutions and public and private organisations for training and information on this topic has increased: action has been taken in terms of teaching and dissemination, with the implementation of research projects, dissertations, European partnerships and publications. The topic has also become part of the curriculum in degree programmes for educators, teachers and pedagogists at the Universities of Bologna, Milan and Florence.

Education professionals' interest and need for knowledge can be explained both by the effective spread of the phenomenon, and its emblematic value: on one hand, there is a need to fill a '*knowledge gap*' in order to conceptually and concretely train them for working with children from all types of families; on the other hand, this event has a huge heuristic potential as it inevitably leads to dissolving epistemological knots, offering the 'spectacles' required to observe and assess family realities. The inclusion of children from LGBT families in nurseries and schools forces us to verify the actual capacity of integration, revealing if and how educators – consciously or otherwise – set limits in the acceptance of diversity and/or express homophobic tendencies. This situation is greatly revealing, it leaves no space for 'feigned' attitudes or rhetoric discourses on integration.

It is therefore a specific task of pedagogical sciences to set the following objectives:

- to fill the knowledge gap through training and education of all education workers;
- to reveal the stigmatising and prejudicial paradigms which often underlie the thought of many education workers when dealing with different family types;
- to expose and correct discriminating practices and attitudes and establish good practices for integration, fighting homophobia.

2.1 First goal: to neutralize the unaware but judge attitude

In this work, we aim to cover the three points in this list, starting from the first objective: the need to neutralise 'ignorant yet judging' attitudes through education.

In our cultural context, associating homosexuality to parenthood is still a 'borderline concept': it is quite understandable therefore that it may be a 'hot' issue, bringing questions which, where not accompanied by lucid information, may lead to closed minds, and even refusals, which are highly dangerous in an educational context where homophobia must be fought and not fuelled.

Questions like: *'But are the children ok? Will they grow with a weight on their shoulders? Will this weight prevent them from developing whole personalities? Will they suffer from social, sexual disorders, will it disturb their gender identities?'*, demand responses which should arrive through reasoning and studies deriving from an interdisciplinary approach, a multitude of visions, perspectives and languages able to fully capture the complexity of the phenomenon; and, above all, it is fundamental that these are as free as possible from ideological, militant and/or political pollutions.

Here I will limit my contribution to explaining some basic concepts, which should be indispensable contents in education programmes for education workers:

- a detailed and broad overview of around thirty years of research documenting how the sexual orientation of parents is not correlated to any kind of deficit or difficulty in the emotional, psycho-social and behavioural adjustment of the children. Parenthood is understood as the set of functions aiming to satisfy children's needs to create bonds, experiment developmental and relational dynamics, build identity, acquire competences, develop social skills, move towards the exploration of different worlds and new ties, find the resources to pursue independence. The results of many research works document how there is nothing that dysfunctionally links the ability to perform these functions and sexual preference. (Gigli, 2011: 12).
- In studies investigating the sexual orientation of the children of LGBT families, the majority stated they were heterosexual, respecting the frequencies shown in the general population, demonstrating no peculiarities in the development of their gender identity. No differences were found in psychological measures including: locus of control, behavioural problems, process of separation and individuation, self-concept, self-esteem, intelligence, school results, personality traits, moral sense. (Lingiardi, Caristo, 2011: 45).

- As regards parental skills, as we will see, no differences emerge between homosexual and heterosexual parents concerning the ability to ensure the good development of self-concept and psychological well-being. The majority of research works show that the problematic element is sexual stigma in relation to social adaptation: in other words, children of gays and lesbians may suffer from the fact that their parents are discriminated against. The main risk factor for the well-being of minors is, and remains, the homophobia expressed on different levels and in different ways: this is the area where work can be done, hoping for a change.

2.2 Second goal: to unveil the prejudice

The second pedagogical objective, of measuring the stigmatising and prejudicial attitudes that often underlie the thought of many education workers when dealing with different family models, starts from a preliminary assumption: to neutralise the recurrent tendency of many educators and teachers to assess *'if they are for or against homosexual parenthood'*. Wondering if a homosexual may or may not be a functional parent is a question ascribable to complex cultural, religious and ideological factors which we cannot investigate here but which is undoubtedly an improper and misleading question for at least two key reasons.

It is not pertinent to the educational function or professional ethics to express opinions, which are almost always ignorant yet judging, on the legitimacy of the affective choices of the parents, where on the other hand the principle to be affirmed should be 'all children from all types of families' must be accepted and included, whatever the characteristics of their parents. (Gigli, 2014: 100)

Firstly, making this type of judgement is not part of the professional tasks of school and education workers (nursery school teachers and teachers from all school levels). They have a *mission* to welcome all children, whatever the characteristics of their families, because the pedagogical basis of our education services is the ethical duty to appropriately include all diversities. For this reason alone, teachers must not ask if they are 'for or against', but should rather wonder if they 'are doing the right thing', if they are working for and with the pupils to facilitate their well-being, integration into school and harmonious growth (Gigli, 2011).

The second reason concerns the parameters for defining parental functionality/dysfunctionality: there are many complex factors to be considered when performing such an evaluation (e.g. the ability to care, relational skills, some aspects of the personality, etc.) but these certainly do

not concern the sphere of the sexual identity and affective preferences of the mothers and fathers: being heterosexual or homosexual is not a variable that affects the ability to be a good parent.

Parenthood is an autonomous, independent function also in relation to the sexual orientation and gender identity of individuals. Sexual orientation (homosexual, heterosexual, bisexual) has nothing to do with the (functional or dysfunctional) exercise of parental duties. There are no assumptions on which we can state that a homosexual person is not an individual able to guarantee protection, affection, care and security. (Taurino, 2016: 75).

To consider differences as a resource, rather than a 'normality deficit', operators must review their own knowledge and interpretative paradigms: they must lose the habit of considering families as normal/different in relation to an 'ideal family model' based on its morphological structure.

We can state that the family structure (i.e. the members of the family) is important but cannot alone determine the success of a family model: to understand how far a family performs its tasks appropriately we also need to observe the quality of relationships and communication processes, the way in which interpersonal bonds are developed and evolve, the ability to cope with critical events, the interactions with the context. In other words, we must adopt the paradigm of diversity and functionality instead of that of normality/deviance (Gigli, 2016).

Moreover, the concepts of functionality and parental competence must be defined starting from multi-factorial and interdisciplinary approaches:

For education professionals working with families, 'parental competence' is a concept that deserves thought. Described increasingly in strictly psychological, cognitive and/or affective terms, it seems to have lost its original, exquisitely pedagogical connotation, which refers to the specific role of education in knowledge-forming processes, and in actions characterising parent-child relationships. Today's dominant interpretation of parental competence, and the most common technical and professional responses, could embrace many more possibilities by multiplying their visions of the family: from historical-cultural to anthropological, from socio-political to critical pedagogical. This revised interpretation is developed through three steps: the effort to understand the broader context from which, in relatively recent times, all this attention on parental competence has come; the pedagogical, yet also multidisciplinary, multi-faceted and stratified definition of the concepts of competence and parenthood; the possibilities of meaning and action which are available to educational activities with families, in particular through autobiography (Formenti, 2008: 78).

Some key concepts must be acquired to facilitate this paradigmatic step:

- parental and conjugal functions can be performed independently;
- parents may be parents whatever their biological link to the children;
- family roles and parental functions are not necessarily linked to those of gender.

For educators and teachers, in particular, there is also a problem of relating with the pluralisation of family models and, therefore, of accepting diversities while 'staying within the relationship', without placing any barriers to communication or any other obstacles which could undermine mutual trust. It is a question of bringing to the fore that knowledge which is unconsciously stratified in educators and which is affected by their hidden prejudices, stereotypes and interior monologues.

The professional skills required for the educational profession include the ability to work empathically even with those families who appear furthest from the self. In other words, 'it involves placing one's own habitual references in which the most hidden and unconscious prejudices lurk between brackets, opening up to the significance that others identify in the experiences they are experimenting. It is a need for decentralisation, placed on a person we presume is self-conscious, able to register and recognise their own cognitive and emotional processes' (Contini, 2002: 167).

If diversities, in all their possible declinations, are still considered and treated as 'deviations from normality' the concept of integration risks losing all meaning, becoming one of those tired words used frequently in projects but rarely pursued with any authenticity. This consideration is valid in the specific case of LGBT families, but obviously concerns all family forms (even those with traditional structures), which can embody various kinds of differences.

Today more than ever we must ask what integration really is and what we mean by inclusion, clarifying the fact that this is not a 'static condition' but a dynamic process based on the ability to 'embrace change, focus cognitively and emotionally outside of ourselves, cope with the frustration which may derive from the encounter with others who are different from ourselves and manage any divergent positions, establishing shared rules' (Gigli, 2011: 97).

To produce integration in educational services, much work must therefore be done, starting from the development of the relational skills allowing people to establish and maintain significant and satisfactory relations with others and, in the event of difficulty or conflict, to manage them appropriately.

If we ask educators to be accepting, we must support them with appropriate training, pedagogical supervision and opportunities for thought

and discussion, but unfortunately in the current scenario the availability of such tools leaves much to be desired...

An educational approach suited to removing the film hiding 'implicit knowledge' must therefore challenge people to activate their cognitive and emotional skills: many techniques and methodologies are used for this purpose, such as for example autobiographical writing, role playing and the techniques of the Theatre of the Oppressed (Zanchettin, 2011).

2.3 Third goal: to settle good integration practices

The third pedagogical objective, to expose and correct any discriminating practices and attitudes and establish good practices for integration and fighting homophobia (Gross, 2011; Chiari, 2011; Hart Barnett, Mourot, Aros, 2012; Lautier, 2016), is linked to the need to rethink some consolidated practices (those governing access, inclusion, educational alliance, teaching activities) and base them on a pedagogical model which refuses heterosexist prejudice and allows the possibility that children may also come from non-traditional families (e.g. adoptive families, single-parent families, recomposed families, etc.) and from families with homosexual parents.

The 'match' of inclusion is played in some crucial moments, which C. Chiari (2011: 152) groups into four categories:

- 'small, everyday interactions made of glances, gestures, facial expressions, comments, languages;
- interviews with parents, particularly the initial interview;
- documentation and material produced (invitations, panels, photos, communications, letters ...);
- activities carried out during the year involving the children (e.g. family photos, calling the register) or their parents (e.g. mother's day, father's day).'

Schools often send out signals which underline a poor attitude towards diversities, such as the forms and documents used which do not contemplate roles other than that of the mother or father: very few schools in Italy have included the possibility to officially recognise other parental figures in their forms.

Starting school is an important and delicate step generally for all families, but especially for homosexual parents it can be an event that increases fears and anxieties.

An element which significantly affects this is the attitude of the parents themselves: choosing the path of transparency and authenticity seems to be the best way of facilitating the initial impact and subsequent school life (Gross, 2010; Hart Barnett, Mourot, Aros, 2012; Goldberg, Smith, 2014) and

is rightly supported by the *LGBT Family Associations*¹ broadly in line with the theoretical orientations of pedagogy of the family.

From a survey carried out in Italy 2011 by *Famiglie Arcobaleno* (La Delfa, 2011) it was shown that the initial reaction of teachers faced with the explicit declaration of homosexual parents was 45% enthusiasm; 25% no reaction, indifference; 18% curiosity and fear; 6% embarrassment; 6% annoyance.

Probably, the most authentic and correct educational attitude is precisely that of curiosity, seeking more information, understanding the situation better, recognising the possibility of error when faced with an unusual situation for which we are perhaps not always well prepared.

To reduce these risks, facilitate the parents and also and above all the teachers, today there is a wide range of methodological instruments, operational ideas and thoughts on the specific topic of the school life of 'rainbow children' (Beppato, Scarano, 2010).

Now there is a wealth of children's literature, also in Italy, offering books and picture books that are 'free of preconditioning and gender stereotypes' (Bastanoni, Baiamonte, 2016: 126) which can be used effectively in teaching, educating towards family diversity, provided we do not come up against shields and barriers raised by parties outside the institutions acting outside of the pedagogical vision and fighting ideological or fideist battles.

3. Conclusions

Finally, it is worth underlining that in order to trigger a virtuous spiral towards integration, both educators' competences and a strong pedagogical foundation of the practices of inclusion are required, along with the assumption of responsibility by those playing a 'director's' role in educational and school services (school heads and/or teaching coordinators), as well as all other educational stakeholders (auxiliary and administrative staff). However excellent, individual action detached from the context will not produce the desired effects: an accepting educational community is required.

In order to implement inclusion and integration practices, as well as actions fighting homophobic and other forms of gender discrimination, very precise *governance* choices are required: in our country this may seem courageous, but in almost all member states of the European Union these practices were consolidated years ago.

There is one last but very important issue that must be tackled to conclude these considerations, which is the aspect of an often underestimated

¹ <http://www.famigliarcobaleno.org/it>

question but which, from my observing position as researcher and trainer interacting continuously with education workers, is currently the real knot that needs to be untied.

The steps forward in recent years and which still have to be consolidated in terms of cultural change, the acquisition of skills and the establishment of good practices to ensure proper inclusion of all family diversities, including LGBT families, are generally well accepted by education workers. As time passes, mentalities are changing; with the legal recognition of civil unions and families and some recent court cases which have begun to make *step child adoption* a concrete reality in our country, we can imagine that the level of homophobia will progressively decrease.

One problem however remains, which causes alarm and worry and which, although not originating exclusively from homosexual parenthood, is inevitably linked to it: that of emotional and sex education in all school levels and in preschool education services.

The presence of children born and growing up in homosexual couples (perhaps using assisted reproductive techniques) inevitably provokes legitimate questions in both young and older children: 'how are the children born?', or rather 'how can they be born?' and make the fact that love is also possible between people of the same sex visible. These questions, in pedagogical terms, are absolutely normal: it is a question of legitimate curiosity, part of the achievement of developmental steps required for harmonious personal growth: they require prepared, clear answers, with no malice or taboo, supported by scientific knowledge and appropriate teaching methods and instruments suited to the different ages of the children.

The WHO guidelines, acquired by the European Union² and diligently and profitably adopted in many countries, in Italy still cause embarrassment, closure and conflict at different institutional levels and often loud protest and barriers on the part of some families who consider emotional and sex education to be the exclusive task of the family.

Despite the fact that it has been widely proven that offering appropriate information to children is an 'investment' for reducing health risks, guaranteeing all minors the right to correct information, fighting disinformation, ignorance and bad information deriving from frequenting media in a highly sexualised society like ours in which access to child pornography has also reached alarming levels, despite the fact that it has been demonstrated that correct education in topics of sexuality and affectivity is a powerful weapon against bullying, homophobia, gender discrimination and

²http://www4.ti.ch/fileadmin/DECS/DS/CERDD/Educazione_sessuale/Documenti_riferimento/STANDARD-OMS.pdf

violence, Italian educational institutions 'hide their heads in the sand' and abandon teachers in the 'front line' tackling all the contradictions involved.

Working in these areas for several years, I feel that I can state that, still today, this aspect is the one great obstacle to be overcome, demanding more consideration and investments and which, once overcome, can, transversely, make inclusion, integration and diversity a concretely achievable goal.

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