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# education and/for social justice

3-6 June 2024, Cagliari (Italy)

Education is a battleground of power, identity, and inequality. This volume unravels the tensions between exclusion and inclusion, privilege and marginalization, tracing how policies, epistemologies, and ideologies shape who belongs—and who is left behind.

# PROCEEDINGS

01

Inequality, Inclusion, and Governance



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Vol. 1  
**Inequality,  
Inclusion,  
and Governance**

Organizers and partners

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# HOMOSEXUAL SONS AND DAUGHTERS: WHY WE SHOULD UNDERSTAND, SUP- PORT AND LOVE THEM

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This essay is divided into three parts. The first part consists of a theoretical overview: it is a reflection on the problem of parents' 'non-acceptance' of homosexual sons and daughters through a targeted psycho-pedagogical analysis. The focus is not so much on the different sexual orientations considered by the LGBTQ+ community, but on the specific case history of homosexual orientation perceived by the parent or declared by the child. The second part focuses on the collection of statistically irrelevant and purely experiential data through research-stimulus of two classes of students at the University of Macerata. The research-stimulus, conducted by the administration – on a voluntary basis – of a questionnaire, makes it possible to activate a circuit of projective mediation which, starting from the requisite return of the results and simple classroom debate on the data collected, makes it possible to imagine and to see oneself in the circumstances envisaged and to elaborate representations of oneself, with oneself and with others, should the circumstances turn out to be true. The third and last part reports on some of the countless intellectual stimuli that emerged during a long-distance interview with Dr Fiorenzo Gimelli, Honorary President of AGEDO (Association of Parents, Families and Friends of LGBTQ+ People), on the subject in question.

family; school; education; inclusion; homosexuality

## 1. HOMOSEXUAL SONS AND DAUGHTERS: “NON-ACCEPTANCE” AS AN EDUCATIONAL PROBLEM

Although society is evolving in terms of the accumulation of knowledge, openness towards homosexuality is still not a given. In some countries, homosexuality is still considered a crime (<https://rainbowmap.ilga-europe.org/files/uploads/2024/05/2024-rainbow-map.pdf>). Monotheistic religions deny the possibility of same-sex relationships. In Italy, homosexuals

are discriminated against in terms of both social policies and civil rights. Within this framework, the first problem we should ask ourselves is with regards to the reception of homosexuals by their families, especially their parents. Parents are the point of reference for every child. If they indirectly communicate to the child, through the words and gestures they exchange with each other, judgments of intolerance or fear of homosexuality, the child will learn that homosexual people are unworthy and that one must “be afraid” of them. If we look at the comedies of the 1970s and 1980s, sarcastic jokes aimed at male homosexuals are abundant: in those societies, being attracted to people of the same sex is considered ridiculous, if not downright despicable. In the 1980s, among other things, male homosexuals were perceived as carriers of HIV because it was believed that the virus was more easily transmitted through intimate contact with anal mucosa. On the contrary, extensive research on the subject has shown that, at least up to ten years ago, most male homosexual couples have anal intercourse infrequently or not at all (cf. Stramaglia, 2015a). However, anal intercourse is also present in heterosexual couples. The problem of preventing risky behaviour does not concern homosexual orientation, but the correct dissemination of information. The long wave of intolerance and discrimination only crashed hard against the rock of the LGBTQ+ community (which includes homosexual people) in the late 1990s, a time when young people attracted to people of the same sex began to express class consciousness, claiming their right to love. It is no coincidence that it was not until 1990 that homosexuality was removed from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. In the 2000s, there is talk on many fronts of the “normality” of homosexual orientation: it is finally understood, awakening consciences from the torpor of the bourgeois, classist and patriarchal education of the previous decades, that homosexuality is not a pathology and not even a perversion.

Parents, however, do not always accept that their child is homosexual, and the child does not feel accepted for this reason. Accepting their child’s homosexuality means to become aware of it, to stop wondering: “Where did I go wrong?”, recognising the dignity of their child’s sexual orientation and wanting what is good for them. The real issue is not whether the child is homosexual, but whether they are at peace. Many parents (most often fathers) pretend that their children can be happy by pretending to be heterosexual: this is an act of arrogance, which hides a deep parental egocentrism and, above all, a feeling of shame and guilt for what the child may represent in the eyes of others (cf. Terriaca and Baiocco, 2019). The truth, on a psychological level, is another. All of us as human beings fear death (cf. Malavasi, 1985). Those who are unable to

produce works of the spirit or are not at peace with the idea of death may come to believe that they become eternal through their children who prolong the lineage. When a son or daughter declares themselves to be homosexual, the most common scenarios are as follows:

- in the case of an only child, parents are concretely confronted with the idea of death and end up blaming the child in order to not admit that, sooner or later, they themselves will die;
- in the case of families with several children, homosexuals are perceived (in some cases) as “black sheep”: as those who have more problems than their brothers and sisters (who will generate, or have generated, grandchildren) or as symbols of their own “failure”, because life that does not generate life is “death”, or decline (radicalisation of emotional blackmail).

Not accepting homosexual children means deluding oneself that one is eternal: if the father and mother are not self-aware parents and have chosen to have children because “that’s what people do,” the result is that homosexual children are marginalised, not recognised, nor loved to the full. On the contrary, they need their parents’ love even more, because their life can only be fulfilling if they feel understood *from the very beginning*. Another “excuse” used by parents for not accepting homosexual children goes something like this: “I accept you, but society does not accept homosexual people”. In reality, on a psychological level, this is nothing more than a projection, i.e. a defence mechanism that consists of attributing personal thoughts to others. The projection, often unconscious, hides the parental inability to take responsibility (cf. Freud, 1961). If the child is homosexual, the correct statement is: “I welcome you: therefore, you will *also* be welcomed by society”. A parent who welcomes, recognises and loves their child convinces them of their worth, and this positively influences their social contacts. In contrast, a child who is not accepted by their parents will think: “If my father and mother do not understand me, how will anyone else understand me?”. In this way, parents become the children’s tormentors. Most probably, these are parents who themselves were not loved as children. But this is not a justification. As the historian Badinter (2012) states, psychological justifications for our actions do not apply when there are common sense reasons. To not accept a homosexual child is to give them death: here is the reversal of the above projection. “You, son/daughter, are telling me that you will not give me any more children, that I will not be eternal; I prefer, therefore, that it is you who will die”. Parents can be supported in the

development of an accepting attitude by means of a few measures.

First of all, avoid exaggerated reactions: these block the communication process, so a more rational and less emotional approach is preferable. Of course, the parent will feel bewildered at first, but the bewilderment should not affect the relationship with the child, otherwise there is a risk of remaining entrenched in one's own positions and communicating nothing meaningful or conciliatory.

Secondly, asking oneself what is really frightening about homosexuality: beyond the child, what *actually* changes in *one's own* life if they discover that they are homosexual? Very often, parental fear stems from the difficulty of facing the opinions of others: "What will they think? What will they say?". Well, everyone, even if we behave impeccably, always has "something to say" about us. Starting from the assumption that we are still subject to judgement relieves us of the fear of others' prejudices. In a scale of values, however, the child should come first, then the others. A child who does not feel accepted by their parents will find it difficult to accept themselves and others, will tend to isolate themselves, and will seek insubstantial social relationships with all the attendant risks. We learn to love our children: we do not judge them. We brought them into the world, something they never asked us to do.

## 2. THE EXPERIENTIAL DATUM: A RESEARCH-STIMULUS EXAMPLE

The research-stimulus presented here was conducted with two classes of students at the University of Macerata on a voluntary basis. A short questionnaire was administered to the students and filled out within ten minutes. The small and statistically unrepresentative number of the sample made the research an *opportunity to reflect* together on the topic in question, without any claim to exhaustiveness. The data were returned and accepted. The instrument chosen to be administered was the following:

Sex:  
.....

Age:  
.....

Degree course:  
.....

Sexual orientation:  
.....

1. Would you like to have a child? (only if you do not have any)

- YES
- NO
- MAYBE
- I DON'T KNOW

2. If you answered YES or MAYBE to the first question, would you rather have a boy or a girl?

- BOY
- GIRL
- I WOULD BE HAPPY EITHER WAY
- I DON'T KNOW

3. If you answered YES or MAYBE in the first question, would you like to have only one child or more than one child?

- ONLY ONE CHILD
- AT LEAST TWO CHILDREN
- AT LEAST THREE CHILDREN
- I DON'T KNOW

4. If one of your children, male or female, told you when they were 15 that they were homosexual, how would you react?

- I WOULD ACCEPT THEIR SEXUAL ORIENTATION
- I WOULD NOT ACCEPT THEIR SEXUAL ORIENTATION
- I WOULD ASK MYSELF WHERE I WENT WRONG
- I DON'T KNOW

What do you think about homosexuality?

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With regard to gender distribution (male or female), as is the case for humanities courses, the representation of the male sex is radically low. The average age for males is 24; for females, 21. With regard to males, the average betrays the objective fact: one male is 21, another is 27. Here, we prefer to omit mentioning the specific degree courses in which female students are enrolled for obvious reasons of confidentiality.

None of the students are parents. Although this is an insignificant and statistically unrepresentative sample (27 students), there are 4 “minority” sexual orientations (1 “homosexual”, 1 “bisexual”, 1 “pansexual”, 1 “transgender”). In one case, however, the student confused gender identity with sexual orientation (“transgender”). To the question: “Would you like to have a

child?”, 0 students answered NO. To the question: “Would you rather have a boy a girl?”, 0 students answered I DON’T KNOW but 24 students answered: “I would be happy with either way”.

The age of *coming out* was set at 15 years in order not to distract the students’ attention from other factors (such as moral judgments, etc.): indeed, it is commonly believed that, at 15 years of age, a teenager can at least have an *idea* of their sexual orientation without being treated as a child by the adults concerned. When asked: “How would you react to your child coming out?”, there were 4 students who stated that they did not know how they would react.

When asked the open-ended and general question: “What do you think about homosexuality?”, 25 students described it as a “normal” variant of sexual orientation, while 2 heterosexual students “do not know what to think”. Nevertheless, 2 heterosexual students who consider homosexuality a “normal” variant of sexual orientation do not know whether or not they would “accept” a homosexual son or daughter.

Some of the open-ended responses provided are worth mentioning, as they open up the need for an *open and clean debate* on this issue both within the family and within the school and the entire civic community, expressing, however, some contradictions in terms:

Personally, I consider homosexuality to be a normal aspect of human nature. Anyone is free to live their sexual orientation openly, without fear and/or reservation (male, heterosexual, does not know how he would react to a son or daughter coming out)

...loving a person of one’s own or the opposite sex does not harm or disturb anyone. I think that homosexuality is also *an issue to be dealt with in the family* (female, heterosexual).

Homosexuality, in today’s society, is still a taboo. (...) *strategies of awareness and respect* should be applied *from an early school age* (female, heterosexual).

In addition to the limitations already pointed out, the research-stimulus carried out presents further limitations: it is a small sample of male and female students, who may have felt “conditioned” in their choice to fill in the questionnaire by the authoritative role of the lecturer; the lecturer has a very clear orientation in favour of the rights of the LGBTQ+ community and this may have influenced them in their choice of answers. It should also be noted that these are students attending humanities degree courses and, therefore,

“inclined” towards issues related to a culture of inclusion.

### 3. INTERVIEW WITH FIORENZO GIMELLI: THE SOCIO-CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

This last paragraph aims to elaborate on some of the cultural stimuli that emerged from an interview with Dr Fiorenzo Gimelli, Honorary President of AGEDO (Association of Parents, Families and Friends of LGBTQ+ People), in line with the theoretical elaboration and the experiential data outlined so far. What parental *awareness* should be emerges from the interview: Gimelli states that a homosexual child, in the mind of a parent, “will have a harder life than others”. The stimulus is important to reflect on the interpretation of this awareness. It is true that being part of a minority makes life more difficult; it is also true that, in life, it is sometimes unavoidable to side with a minority position. The need for parents of a homosexual son/daughter to have a non-judgmental and supportive attitude towards their offspring is reconfirmed, precisely because of the greater harshness (a fact of life) that an “other” sexual orientation such as the one in question entails. According to Gimelli, “We need to move the issue from the level of value (ethics) to the level of identity (person): 1) it is pathological that coming out in Italy still exists; 2) we need sex and affectivity education in schools and in curricular form for everyone”. The stimulus provided allows us to move from the logic of inclusion to that of *normalisation*: it would be a civilisational step if no one were to declare their sexual orientation to anyone anymore; at the same time, today’s schools cannot avoid the task of educating on sexuality and affectivity – not in an ideological form, but as a *preventive* measure against the development of forms of social unease. He also states, “Young people claim their relationships, not just their human dignity, which belongs to everyone”. The problem is not only and not so much sexual orientation, but the *right to be a couple legitimately*, without incurring more or less covert or overt forms of discrimination (Stramaglia, 2015b). Gimelli notes the value of the most recent scientific discoveries: “(...) the variability of the human being is much greater than we once knew; now that knowledge has advanced, we must respect it”. Finally, according to Gimelli: “Very young people have less influence on the formation of laws than adults, they have little affection for politics and therefore, although they are open, they struggle to break down barriers”. The tasks of a democratic school are thus manifested in all their complexity: to promote socio-cultural integration processes through the promotion of a culture of *otherness* and *difference*; to enable all students to feel accepted and understood, providing them with the tools to understand reality in a non-doctrinal and non-politicised, but conscious manner (cf., for example, Burgio, 2022; Fiorucci,

2023); and engage in fruitful dialogue with families, in order to foster processes of shared growth and guarantee all sons and daughters the right to become healthy and happy adults.

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