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Abstract: This article presents and discusses some of the findings of the PRIN project 'Constructions of Parenting on Insecure Grounds' (CoPIInG) in which the Free University of Bolzano-Bozen's research unit focused on uncertainties and challenges experienced by same-sex parents in Italy. An analysis of 40 qualitative interviews revealed that same-sex Italian parents are predominantly concerned with issues relating to recognition and inclusion in their surrounding social environments and institutional encounters. In this regard, same-sex parents' experiences and relationships with their children's schools and educational staff are of central and emblematic importance. The article highlights same-sex parents' fears, challenges and coping strategies, paying particular attention to practices of making their families visible and working for their legitimation and social recognition in school environments. The article concludes with indications and recommendations for making Italian schools more inclusive for same-sex parent families.

Keywords: same-sex parents, displaying family, family practices, school, Italy

Introduction: Same-sex parent families and the school

Parents consider their children's experiences at and the whole family's relationship with the children's school vital, not only to their children's upbringing but also in terms of interactions and recognition of their families within institutional contexts. School is not only the most important place where children learn outside of the home, but it also constitutes a key arena for socialisation and belonging. At school, children are given the opportunities to gain social experiences and cultural awareness by exchanging ideas with teachers and peers and by having contact with other children and families (Grusec & Hastings, 2007; Keppens & Spruyt, 2019; Kyrönlampi, Uitto & Puroila, 2021). Unsurprisingly, many parents carefully and scrupulously select their children's schools (Walberg, 2007; Naldini, Solera & Torrioni, 2012; Robersshaw, Bradley & Waddington, 2022). They want to ensure that their child will receive appropriate training in terms of content and didactics and, at the same time, a personal and social education that realises their child's potential, empowering them to be a responsible world citizen (Buckingham, 2002; Davids, 2019; Merry, 2021).

In addition to the needs just mentioned, some parents can have further concerns and face additional challenges relating to their families' characteristics and their identities as parents. In recent decades, societies have seen considerable changes in family life and composition, challenging dominant narratives and forms of recognition by societal institutions. In this context, visibility, recognition, and inclusion of different families in institutional contexts, such as schools, become an important issue.

As the sociological literature has highlighted (Chambers, 2012; Saraceno, 2016; Price, Bush & Price, 2017; Choen, 2018; Berger & Carlson, 2020), today families are characterised by greater complexity, differentiation and fragmentation. Even if the family remains a central institution and system of solidarity essential to constructing identity, developing a sense of belonging, and engaging in affective and caring practices, in contemporary societies, families take on multiple forms, developments and characteristics (Faircloth, Hoffman & Layn, 2013; Mortelmans et al., 2016; Naldini, 2016; Castiglioni & Della Zuanna, 2017). The reference (and often still normative and idealised) model of the so-called nuclear family, comprising married mum and dad with their children, has become one of the many possible family types. Contemporary families come in much more differentiated forms, and not all of them are equally recognised at the social or legal level.

This is the case, for instance, for families involving same-sex couples as parents having children together. In spite of their increasing visibility and presence, their social and legal recognition varies from country to country. Sometimes important societal institutions, such as schools, are not yet ready

to properly include them (Goldberg et al. 2018; Leland, 2019; McDonald & Morgan, 2019; Selmi, Sità & de Cordova, 2019; Bosisio & Santero, 2020; Siegel et al., 2021).

This article focuses on the Italian context. In Italy, certain sections of society, politics and culture still show persistent reservations or even repugnance towards same-sex parenting, originating from deeply rooted prejudices and stereotypes (Scandurra et al., 2019; Franchi & Selmi, 2020; Carone, 2021). Families with same-sex parents challenge and are themselves challenged by the normative idea of good parenting assumed in the collective mind as a result of the overlap between heterosexuality, marriage and generativity (Taurino, 2012; Lingiardi, 2013; Ferrari, 2015; Parisi, 2016; Saraceno, 2017; Monaco & Nothdurfter, 2021; Scandurra et al., 2021). Being in opposition to the idealised model of the so-called traditional family, same-sex parenting is often considered uncondusive to a suitable context for raising children and subject to stigmatising instrumentalizations by both Italy's conservatives and right-wing populists (Lingiardi, 2007; Bosisio & Ronfani, 2015; Garbaglioli & Prearo, 2018; Corbisiero & Monaco, 2021).

These positions are based on prejudices consistently disproved by an extensive body of research and international debate, which have emphasised for years that children's psychosocial well-being is not dependent on the form of family arrangement but on the quality of the processes and relational dynamics within their families. In other words, neither the number nor gender of parents can be considered in and of themselves significant factors when establishing the best conditions for children's upbringing and development. What significantly determines children's well-being during their formative years are their parents' capacities for providing care and support and their educational competence rather than factors concerning their parents' gender or sexual orientation (Perrin, 2002; Biblarz & Stacey, 2010; Crouch et al., 2014; Calzo et al., 2017; Patterson, 2017, Baiocco, Carone & Ioverno, 2018).

Despite the scientific evidence and the increasing number of families involving same-sex parents, the situation in Italy is still characterised by partial legal recognition, meaning children growing up in same-sex parent families lack full legal protection. In fact, both Italian law and jurisprudence fail to fully protect the rights and recognise the needs of children who have two mothers or two fathers, neglecting the recognition and safeguarding of their system of affective and caring relationships (Galasso, 2017; Leo, 2021; Monaco, 2022a). Children born to same-sex parent families are substantially discriminated against compared to children of different-sex parents, since the law only recognises the link to their biological parent(s) (Dell'Anna Misurale & Viterbo, 2018; Bosisio & Long, 2020; Naldini & Solera, 2020). This phenomenon can be considered solid evidence of institutionalised heterosexism with

far-reaching consequences for same-sex parents and their children (Taurino, 2013; Minetti, 2017; Gusmeroli & Trappolin, 2019). The Italian legal context implicitly reiterates the stigmatisation of same-sex parenting, also involving children in a dynamic of disavowal of the full rights of citizenship (Schuster, 2011; Lingiardi, 2013; Monaco, 2022b).

In this context, societal institutions, such as schools, assume a central and delicate position. Schools are challenged to guarantee children from same-sex parent families full acceptance and inclusion. This also challenges teachers and school professionals as institutional representatives who shoulder not only a professional responsibility but also an obligation to respond to their institutional mandate. This means that school professionals must operate within the regulatory framework, but at the same time, they are also required to promote social change by creating inclusive and non-discriminatory conditions for all their students (Nes, Demo & Ianes, 2018; Walker, Chung & Bonnet, 2018; Brown, 2019; Selmi, Sità & de Cordova, 2019; Bosisio & Santero, 2020; Finn, 2021).

Against this backdrop, this article presents and discusses Italian same-sex parents' fears, challenges and coping strategies pertaining to their choices, experiences and relationships with their children's schools. It is based on some of the main findings of a national project (PRIN) named 'Constructions of Parenting on Insecure Grounds' (CoPinG), which considers the challenges and uncertainties same-sex parents face in Italy.

The research project

The CoPinG project is a broad qualitative study aimed at critically analysing the constructions of parenthood and parenting practices of people living in uncertain or vulnerable conditions in contemporary Italy. The project focuses on parenting practices in context by analysing parents' representations of parenthood and parenting and critically investigating how policies and professional practices are in line and connected with parents' representations and needs. The project therefore also focuses on parents' encounters and relationships with institutions, services and professionals.

Among the different groups of parents sampled, the project involved parents belonging to sexual and gender minorities. Focusing on these parents, the research group from the Free University of Bolzano-Bozen carried out 40 interviews with same-sex parents of school-age children between March 2020 and March 2021.

The study participants were selected in accordance with theoretical sampling (Glaser, 1978). The research group in fact categorised participants residing throughout Italy into different types (balancing the presence of bio-

logical and social parents), so that the research could proceed analytically with a constant comparison among the collected information.

The sampling strategy involved contacting parents' associations and recruiting via social media. The sample involved 23 women and 17 men, 18 of them being between 30 and 40 years, 15 between 40 and 50 years and seven more than 50 years old. Most of the interviewed parents had an advanced level of education (university degree) and 30 were employed in high skilled occupations, while seven worked in medium skilled occupations and three were not in employment at the moment of the interview. While 24 parents had one child, 16 had more children (up to a maximum of four). 22 of the interviewed parents were living in the main metropolitan areas and other larger cities of the country, 18 in smaller provincial towns and rural areas. 20 of the interviewed parents were living in the North, seven in the Centre and 13 in the South of the country.

During the iterative research process, based on empirical evidence emerging from the data analysis, the interview questions were revised, in line with the theoretical assumptions of the constructivist approach of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Charmaz, 2006; Morse et al., 2009).

According to the circular character of the study, data collection and analysis overlapped and were characterised by continuous reflections on the research process. The grounded theory approach meant it was possible to formulate a final theory, which coherently outlined the main concerns, phases and challenges in the construction of same-sex parenthood and parenting. Furthermore, specific aspects that emerged as recurring issues were explored in depth via thematic analysis.

The following paragraphs do not present the grounded theory but concentrate on the main findings that emerged from a specific thematic analysis in relation to same-sex parents' fears, challenges and coping strategies regarding the choice of and interaction with their children's schools. Although parents' experiences and relationships with their children's schools were not initially among the main topics under investigation, as the study went on, researchers realised that this aspect was central in the accounts of many same-sex parents. Therefore, same-sex parents' school-related concerns and experiences were taken into account and investigated via a series of specific questions.

These findings provide a good example of same-sex parents 'doing' parenthood as ongoing processes of (co-)construction and legitimation of their parenthood and families in everyday contexts and institutional encounters. The highlighted aspects are illustrated with quotes from the interviews. The interviews were anonymised to ensure the privacy of the parents who took part in the study.

As to the limits of the study, due to its qualitative nature the findings cannot claim to paint the general picture of Italian same-sex parents' experiences regarding their children's schools. However, the qualitative approach is suitable for deepening the understanding of these experiences starting with parents' detailed accounts and representations. A further limit of the study could be that experiences and interactions with schools was not the research project's main focus but was an aspect that, in the course of the study, transpired to be highly relevant to the research project's overall objective.

What kind of fears?

Data analysis showed that Italian same-sex parents experience uncertainty in various situations. The interviewed parents voiced their concerns relating to the Italian legal, social and cultural context – namely, their feelings that parenting is made more difficult due to the lack of legal and social recognition of their parenthood and families and challenged by the everyday consequences of these shortcomings.

The choice of school and the relationship with educational staff, as an important institutional encounter, constituted a primary concern associated with uncertainties and fears related to their same-sex parenthood and their type of family. These issues were expressed by all the same-sex parents interviewed. They were emphasised, however, especially in relation to the very first encounters with the institutional context of the school involving, besides the primary school, preschool and kindergarten. Although the same-sex parents interviewed had different experiences, the findings show that contact with the education system is a common cause of particular concern, involving similar fears for all the parents interviewed.

As to the choice of school, parents living in bigger urban areas certainly had more options. Nonetheless, parents living in smaller provincial towns underlined that they tried to make a careful choice about their child's school as well. Most of the parents interviewed chose their child's school not solely on the basis of typical criteria, such as didactic and educational quality, or practical aspects, like proximity to home, but also by carefully considering other aspects intrinsically linked to their type of parenthood and family.

When we had to choose a school for our son, we asked the teachers two types of questions. The first type was all about the daily routine, such as the time school finished and whether there was any after-school tutoring. The second type of question was related to the school's experience with same-sex parents. We wanted to know if children of other gay parents had attended the school; [if so], what the relationship with those parents had been like or [if not], what would they imagine the relationship to be like. (interview 38, man, gay, Centre)

As illustrated by the quotes below, all the interviewed parents, regardless of living in urban or suburban and rural areas, showed great concern about the level of openness and acceptance towards children living in families with same-sex parents. More specifically, one of the biggest concerns reported was that teachers may lack adequate knowledge about same-sex parenting. In fact, although schools are constantly called upon to respond to new scenarios and specific social needs, parents' accounts illustrate that the ability to provide adequate solutions cannot be assumed.

We don't feel relaxed. We have not enrolled our child in any school. Before enrolment, we went to see all the schools. Obviously, we did not just want a nice and attentive school. We also needed to find professionals who share our political point of view. Otherwise, there was a risk of experiencing situations where our child was not welcome. (interview 6, women, lesbian, South)

We intend to enrol our daughter in kindergarten, and in a way, we will of course select a nursery school that is very open to children born in families with gay parents. (interview 12, man, gay, Centre)

Before enrolling our son, we went to talk to the school psychologists at the school we had chosen. In other words, we went to verify the situation before enrolling our child. (interview 28, woman, lesbian, South)

The choice of school depends totally on the attitudes and the ideological environment. For example, we've never considered a Catholic school. (interview 38, man, gay, Centre)

Some parents stated that they had known teachers who were unprepared to welcome children from same-sex parent families into their classes, reporting critical episodes of silencing and concealing.

In primary school, they had my son do an assignment about family activities during holidays. He had to answer a series of questions: have you been on holiday for a few days? Where did you go? What vehicle did you use to go on holiday? When did you leave? He wrote about our family's holiday. The next day, when it was his turn to read, the teachers did not let him read the assignment aloud. The day after, I asked the teacher for an explanation. She told me that she didn't know how the other children would react to my son's work. (interview 8, woman, lesbian, South)

In this regard, the findings show the apparently contradictory aspect that episodes of silencing and concealing were more frequent in accounts from same-sex mothers. While both same-sex mothers and same-sex fathers pointed out that parenting 'without a mother' might prompt more perplex-

ity and negative attitudes on the one hand, on the other hand, the presence of a mother makes it easier to silence or conceal the reality of a same-sex parent family and the presence of a second mother.

Some of the interviewed parents also reported that they had met some teachers before enrolment who were very kind and well disposed towards them but were afraid of other parents' reactions and the possibility that they might complain about their presence at school. Although this type of the research does not allow for generalisations, in this study's interviews, schools' concerns about negative reactions from other parents were mentioned more by parents living either in smaller towns or in cities governed by right wing-populist parties in which challenging traditional family models might have led to stronger reactions or even public protests.

The only negative situation we had was when we were choosing a school for our son. Among the various options we had contacted was a private school where the school principal basically told us that she was not sure that the other families would like our presence. (interview 33, man, gay, North)

Parents who reported such episodes often felt that some teachers not only lack sufficient knowledge and skills pertaining to same-sex parent families but also lack the resources to deal with any potential hostility.

Another concern stated by the parents involved in this study was the possibility that their children might experience some form of discomfort due to habitual practices, customs and rituals that in some way respond to the needs of so-called traditional families. The most typical example in this context is represented by Mother's and Father's Day. These festivities began to be celebrated in Italy in the 1950s and 1960s, reflecting the culture of the time. On these occasions, schools usually offer children some class activities celebrating the affective relationship with their father or mother, implicitly implying that all the children in the class have both a mother and father. To this end, children are often asked to make small handicrafts as a sign of their affection for the parent with whom they celebrate.

According to most of the interviewed parents, this type of activity can represent a source of stress for children who have two mothers or two fathers. Parents fear that their children may feel that they are different from others or excluded from group activities involving most of their peers.

We have some friends who are in bad situations in public schools because they are homophobic schools. Every year, they find themselves dealing with the issue of Father's Day and the related activities that last a month, during which their children have to do a different task [from the rest of the class]. This might seem minor to us as adults, but for a child, working for a month on a different task from the rest of the

class is absolutely a kind of exclusion. (interview 6, woman, lesbian, South)

Mother's Day and Father's Day always create a bit of discontent. [...] Schools should try to empathise with children who don't have a mother or a father. (interview 7, woman, lesbian, South)

It was important for us to find out from the school how they would handle Father's Day. We asked the teachers if there was an alternative activity for our son or if it was better to keep him at home to prevent him from getting too stressed out. (interview 49, man, gay, North)

Some parents thought that uncomfortable or stressful situations can also be caused by school supplies, such as textbooks, that often propose family models of heterocentric heritage. Some respondents stated that most school-books not only lack images of same-sex parenting, they also perpetuate gender discrimination and stereotyping of parental roles. In several cases, participants reported that the father is usually represented as the working parent, absent from home all day, while the mother is portrayed as a housewife.

Textbooks used since primary school are still riddled with gender stereotypes. (interview 12, man, gay, Centre)

Another aspect generating concern among the interviewed parents was the school's willingness to recognise and involve both parents, regardless of their biological or legal ties to the child. This concern is closely linked to the Italian regulatory context. In fact, as shown above, even if same-sex partners plan their family as a couple and have children together, there is no provision for recognising same-sex parenthood under article 4 of Italy's law n. 40/2004. Thus, for both parents to be legally recognised, parents have to go to court, which can, at its discretion, decide to recognise the parenthood of the social parent or, as usually happens, allow a so-called stepchild adoption following a positive evaluation by social services.

Not all same-sex parents want or can afford to undergo these procedures meaning that they continue to be recognised as parents by their children and socially, but not by the Italian state and its institutions. This lack of legal recognition can give rise to uncertainties and require negotiations between the school and the family about who is considered a parent and can act accordingly. Sometimes schools and teachers may be insecure and have difficulties managing the relationship with parents who are not legally recognised. On this aspect, the parents who took part in the study stated that the choice of their children's school was strongly determined also by the school's position on this issue and by school staff's willingness and ability to relate to both parents as such.

The teachers never asked anything about the bond between us and our daughter. We went to their school shows interchangeably. (interview 15, woman, bisexual, North)

When our daughters were at primary school, I was authorized to pick them up from school. The teachers were always very kind. They knew about our situation. They congratulated us on the occasion of our civil union. At Christmas performances, I was always welcomed in an easy-going way. (interview 19, woman, lesbian, North)

When we enrolled our daughter in school, I immediately told the teachers that I did not accept the idea of having to present proxies since I was not a neighbour who needed authorization to pick her up but another father. (interview 37, woman, lesbian, North)

In summary, it can be argued that the school is an important social arena of recognition and inclusion for same-sex parent families but one that is also associated with many questions and fears. Parents' main concern is that their children may have unpleasant or exclusionary experiences. For this reason, same-sex parents worry about different aspects, such as the school as an institution and the school staff as its representatives' general attitude towards same-sex parent families, or the question of how the school deals with practices relating to a certain family model that could be exclusionary towards their children. In addition, parents are concerned about the teachers' knowledge and competence regarding same-sex parent families as well as teachers' readiness to react appropriately in critical situations or in case of inappropriate comments from fellow pupils or their parents. Finally, another important aspect concerns dealing with the lack of legal recognition and the involvement of parents who are not legally recognised as such.

What kind of strategies?

To address their school-related concerns, the parents who took part in the study revealed a number of strategies they employ to reduce uncertainty by preparing environments, preventing (potential) unpleasant situations and making their families more visible. They described their constant alertness and efforts to anticipate and possibly prevent critical situations by intervening directly and assertively to make their families visible and their needs known. These strategies must be seen in the light of the fact that most of the parents interviewed had a higher level of education and higher socio-economic status, allowing them to engage with the school system in a certain way and to successfully implement the following strategies.

In practice, they not only inquire about schools before enrolling their children, but in most cases, they ask for a meeting with school principals,

teachers and sometimes even with other parents to introduce their family and to assess the level of knowledge and openness towards them before the beginning of the school year.

Before finalising enrolment, we went to talk to the school principal. We explained our family situation. (interview 6, woman, lesbian, South)

A specific aspect considered by many parents concerns strategies and initiatives to promote the inclusion of all children in school and reduce the risk of exclusion, bullying or discomfort.

The teachers at the school where we will send our children have shown themselves to be very open, as is the school principal, not only towards same-sex parenting but towards the LGBT world and other issues in general. Last year they did a project on homophobia and another one on African culture. So, I think we have made a good choice. (interview 24, man, gay, South)

As a good obsessive, my husband practically forced me [...] to take part in all the open days in the city. We visited all the kindergartens and one struck us in particular. On our usual question 'How will you manage Mother's Day and Father's Day?', the teacher told us that she had received instructions from the school principal that Mother's Day and Father's Day should not be celebrated because for them there is only the celebration of love. We chose that kindergarten partly for this reason. (interview 25, man, gay, South)

In critical situations or in moments in where they did not know how to behave, the teachers always contacted us and asked us what they should do, how we dealt with things at home. (interview 27, woman, lesbian, North)

Faced with the fear that teachers are not sufficiently prepared, some parents said that they provided teachers with teaching materials or readings useful to dissolve some doubts or perplexities.

Already from the nursery we gave the teachers books in advance and talked about our family situation. We did not let our guard down even when they told us 'but we already know, we have already taken part in a course on these issues'. (interview 11, woman, lesbian, North)

Finally, to prevent conflict and increase their children's social inclusion, some of the interviewed same-sex parents declared that they are committed to letting teachers and other families participate in their family life. Many of the study participants explained that they tell teachers and parents the story of their family and also engage in a series of activities, such as organising parties for children or running for election as parents' representatives. As

can be seen from the following quotes, these strategies are aimed at normalising the image of same-sex parent families and, at the same time, implicitly answering questions and doubts about same-sex parenting.

Since kindergarten, I have been the parents' representative [in order] to have a closer relationship with the school [and] with the teachers. I try to be present as much as possible. (interview 6, woman, lesbian, South)

The only way to make your child grow up well is to be visible always, always, 24 hours a day. You cannot hide yourself. You have to expose yourself more so that your children have to expose themselves less. (interview 7, woman, lesbian, South)

In primary school, I informed the teachers that I am gay. They asked me, 'Why are you talking to us about this?' I said, 'Look, I did an interview. If someone reads it, this thing will come out at school. It is good for you to be prepared.' In middle school, I went to talk to the teacher, saying, 'I want you to know that I am gay because it is right for you to know that my daughter is the daughter of a gay parent. If you hear classmates talking about homosexuality negatively, be ready to intervene.' (interview 12, man, gay, Centre)

In summary, most of the interviewed parents take an active attitude and adopt preventive strategies, rather than wait for critical situations to occur. On the contrary, their main coping strategy is to work with the school environment in advance in order to handle uncertainty and avoid exposing their children to the risk of being marginalised or bullied.

Their strategies to control risk exposure as much as possible differ. Parents introduce themselves and their family without hiding details about their history; carefully evaluate the teachers' level of openness and knowledge about same-sex parent families; inquire about the school's initiatives to promote an inclusive social climate; provide educational material on same-sex parent families; and tell professionals in advance the expectations they place on the school, emphasising the need for recognition and preparedness to ensure an inclusive environment and to intervene, if needed. In this sense, same-sex parents constantly display their parenthood and family life not only to obtain recognition but to constantly prepare social and institutional environments to prevent their children from experiencing any negativity resulting from their parents' sexual orientation.

Discussion

The findings show how being a same-sex parent in contemporary Italy requires ongoing processes of doing and displaying parenthood, not just in

the private realm of domestic life but also outside the home and in social interactions with key actors in institutional contexts. In line with the literature on doing and displaying parenthood (Morgan, 1996, 2011; Silva & Smart, 1999; Weeks, Heaphy & Donovan, 2001; Hertz, 2006; Finch, 2007; Hall & Holdsworth, 2016), it can be emphasised that parenting today increasingly appears to be the result of a series of activities that are carried out both in intimate contexts and in the wider social and institutional spaces.

The findings suggest that this is particularly relevant in the case of same-sex parents, who do and construct their parenthood by sharing experiences with other people significant to their family, such as teachers and other parents, enlarging their family spaces and promoting and legitimising their caring relationships. These activities are described by parents as necessary strategies for preparing social environments and navigating ambivalent orders of recognition within institutional contexts.

Thus, it can be argued that same-sex parents engage in what has been described as the institutional work of family (Bourdieu, 1996) and practices of displaying parenthood (Finch, 2007). These kind of activities are even more necessary when legal frameworks are narrow and institutional recognition is lacking (Rault, 2020). Family legitimacy, visibility and normalisation is promoted through these practices of showing and giving meaning to same-sex parenthood and family life in everyday interactions and institutional encounters. As the findings show, for Italian same-sex parents, parenthood and family life require daily commitment to displaying their family in order to communicate to themselves and to others that they are a family on par with others (e.g. Bertone, 2017; Satta, Magaraggia & Camozzi, 2020; Bertone & Satta, 2021).

These kind of practices can be framed within the perspective of family practices theorised by Morgan (1996, 2011), who highlights how parents and their children build their relationships and family life by performing, showing and narrating the daily practices through which they make a family. Although not developed looking specifically at same-sex parent families, theories on family practices and doing parenthood can well serve to frame the presented findings, as they offer a micro-processual reading of the family that is linked to new sociological orientations and contexts of daily life (Bertone & Satta, 2021). They shift the analysis from family forms to family practices and are therefore suitable for interpreting the findings on constructing parenthood through ongoing practices, not only in the intimate sphere but also in interactions with significant social and institutional environments, such as schools. Sharing family activities and family-specific characteristics outside the home help to make visible and legitimise same-sex parents by demonstrating that they are not (only) qualified as parents by their (legal) status but by the 'doing' of their parenthood. In this sense, the concept of

family practices helps extend the notion of family from the more traditional legal, biological or cultural prescriptions to an alternative (potentially better), but no less significant, way to practise family.

For many of the parents who took part in this study, the process of doing family directly involves significant others within or revolving around the important institutional context of the school and is based on a set of relationships built and consolidated daily through exposure, dialogue, and sharing knowledge and experiences. Thus, it can be argued that same-sex parents recognise the important role as well as the competences and responsibilities of the school. At the same time, they try to prepare the school by building a shared and secure ground on which to collaborate with school staff and other parents. These findings are in line with the literature on the subject (Adams, Harris & Jones, 2015; Willemse et al., 2018; Ishimaru, 2019), which emphasises that collaboration between parents and teachers is one of the main strategies capable of promoting children's well-being at school.

It is important to underline, however, that the quality of the relationship and interactions between same-sex parents and their children's school depends not only on parents' preventive strategies and displaying practice but, as parents' accounts have pointed out, also on the school staff, acting as significant others and institutional representatives. As Selmi et al. (2019) point out 'school staff are vital in creating a welcoming environment – from both a symbolic and emotional point of view – in which families feel encouraged to talk about their experiences and share with the school their choices and the tools they have acquired' (p. 238). If teachers are reluctant or not very inclusive towards same-sex parenting, the conditions for constructing a relationship based on sharing and mutual knowledge are poor (Herbstrith, 2013; Hegde et al. 2014).

Simultaneously, while school staff's good will and warm predisposition are necessary elements, they are not always sufficient. The development of an inclusive school environment cannot depend on the good will or predisposition of single school professionals and the one-to-one interaction between teachers and parents (with the latter taking the responsibility for the interaction). Rather, an overall policy of inclusion as an institutional concern is required, as are strategies for handling (family) diversity and symbolic repertoires in order to welcome and include all children and their families (Polat, 2011; Brooks, 2018; Epstein, 2018; Juvonen et al., 2019, Selmi, Sità & de Cordova 2019).

In this context, Mother's Day and Father's Day are a good example. Many of the parents interviewed voiced that these celebrations are a cause for concern, since either a mother or a father could be missing from their families. An overall policy of inclusion requires reflection and a strategy for dealing with symbolic repertoires anchored in a static and traditional image of the

family, which risk overlooking familial diversity, implicitly delegitimising other forms of family and putting children in uncomfortable situations by affirming a social norm that excludes their families. An inclusion policy would not leave the handling of such issues to chance or individual professionals but would look for a way to rethink such occasions and, if so, celebrate them eliminating any possible misunderstanding that a family must comprise two parents of different genders (Goldberg, Allen & Carroll, 2020).

Conclusion

Their child's school environment constitutes a key issue and an important institutional encounter for many same-sex parents. Although contact and co-operation with their children's schools was not originally this study's main focus, the parents interviewed emphasised this topic, so it was further explored in the course of the research process. Although accounts of explicit discrimination and open homophobia were extremely rare, the parents expressed concerns and fears, reported ambivalent situations of silencing and concealing, and voiced their constant alert and proactive strategies to prepare the school environment and to protect their children by preventing unpleasant or exclusionary episodes as much as possible. While the affirmation and multiplication of new and different family models demand that schools increasingly be prepared for social change, this study's findings show that preparedness at both the individual and the institutional level cannot be assumed. In this sense, the findings concur with other studies that have noted the lack of institutional recognition for same-sex parent families and absence of inclusive policies in Italian schools (Selmi, Sità & de Cordova, 2019; Bosisio & Santero, 2020). As Bosisio and Santero (2020) underline, most same-sex parents can rely on their high socio-economic status and cultural capital to counter social exclusion and stigmatisation, and offer their experiences and knowledge to educational institutions and professionals. However, it is still very much up to same-sex parents themselves to work for their families' recognition and their children's inclusion at school. These critical aspects have also been pointed out by Selmi et al. (2019), who highlight that visibility is always a matter of co-construction, dependent on the responses offered (or not) in context. In this sense, silence or misunderstood neutrality in the face of family diversity results in reduced visibility, recognition and inclusion. It is predominantly left to same-sex parents to fight for their inclusion, to provide information and, put in general terms, to work to open (symbolic) spaces for their existence, legitimisation and recognition. In this context, most parents can count on positive and welcoming interactions with school management and teaching staff. However, genuine policies of inclusion at the institutional level are largely non-existent. School, as an institution, re-

mains insecure ground for Italian same-sex parent families, where their recognition is absent or at least ambivalent, and it is mostly up to the families to work for their own visibility and inclusion.

Against this backdrop, there are recommendations for actions at levels. As the findings show, parents' concerns relate to school staff's openness and knowledge about same-sex parenting and same-sex parent families. It is important to prepare school staff by ensuring that they have adequate education to reflect on their perceptions of and attitudes towards same-sex parents. Moreover, staff require training in relation to the language they should use and inclusion strategies for different parents and types of families. For some time now, some scholars (Kim, 2011; Zulfija, Indira & Elmira, 2013; Biktagirova & Khitryuk, 2016) have stressed the need to provide teachers with specific training on inclusive and effective communication towards both students and parents. Therefore, in line with Caspe's theory (2003), teacher education and professional training programmes should promote the development of their communication skills in relation to same-sex parenting and same-sex parent families. In this context, it can be helpful to include same-sex parents and their associations as well as other professionals to develop school staff's knowledge, skills and attitudes, and to support them in their professional mandate to ensure optimal inclusion of all children and parents. Through telling their stories, same-sex parents can help deconstruct some persistent stigma that exists in the school system and help professionals develop their knowledge about same-sex parenting (Guasp, 2010; Peter, Taylor & Edkins, 2016). Similarly, other professionals and experts can be involved in training and supervising school staff and in helping them in practical situations.

However, required action cannot just involve individual school professionals nor can it rely on the contribution of same-sex parents, their associations and other experts in terms of preparing and training school staff. The recognition and inclusion of same-sex parent families at school is a matter of institutional responsibility and requires the development of inclusive policies that signal to same-sex parent families that they are seen and welcomed and that their particularities and needs are taken into account. It is up to the schools to make sure that the idea of the 'family-like school', theorised by Epstein (2010), also applies to same-sex parent families. School, as an important societal institution, is responsible for the inclusion of diverse families and for providing the best possible school environment for all children. That said, it is at Italy's institutional level that the greatest resistance and insecurities regarding recognising and including same-sex parent families persist. Until these issues are not addressed at the institutional level, school will continue to be uncertain ground for same-sex parents and their children, and

same-sex parents will have to work hard for their visibility and recognition, hoping for support from well-meaning and welcoming school professionals.

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