

“School is out?”: a European qualitative study on the experiences of children from LGBT families in schools.

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Children and young people growing up in LGBTQ /rainbow families 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 the study that was presented, we focused on children and young people’s narratives, which they shared with researchers from Germany, Sweden, and Slovenia. 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. 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 centre of the research and also means adopting an attitude of de-victimisation. 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. 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.

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.

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 delegitimation 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, sensitiveness, 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 disablised. 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; especially the adolescents stress this. The pejoration 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 practises. 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.

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 connoted 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.

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. 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).

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. 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. 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.

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. 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.

More information:

<http://www.gender.hu-berlin.de/rainbowchildren/downloads/studie>