

**The Experiences of Married Gay and Lesbian Maltese Couples
in the Education of their Children**

By

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to consummate an extensive insight into the experiences of married gay and lesbian Maltese couples in the education of their children. To realise the aims of the study, six semi-structured interviews were held with three married gay couples and three married lesbian couples who have children between the ages of six and sixteen, who are, thus, in the compulsory education system in Malta. Thematic Analysis was employed as a methodological framework to systematically organise and categorise the research data, allowing for a structured exploration of the emergent themes. Critical Pedagogy was utilised as a theoretical framework to empower gay and lesbian parents by facilitating a deep understanding of their perspectives and encouraging the critical challenging of the dominant knowledge systems that unquestionably perpetuate their marginalisation. Four central themes were identified and discussed relating to the positive experiences of the same-sex parents, the negative experiences of the same-sex parents, the miseducative experiences, and the recommendations put forward. The study's critical analyses shed light on the idiosyncratic personal journeys of the informants, yet they unmistakably point to the enduring lack of social justice within both the local educational system and the broader Maltese society. This study underscores the urgent need for improved teacher training and calls for a holistic approach that combines bottom-up efforts of advocates with the effective implementation of policies from the top-down, ensuring that inclusivity becomes a reality for all, including rainbow families.

Keywords

gay parents

lesbian parents

heteronormativity

critical pedagogy

parenthood

inclusive education

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I am truly moved by the openness of the participants who dedicated their time and shared their stories. Their willingness to contribute their experiences has made this research endeavour possible and meaningful. Each informant who has been part of this journey has left an unforgettable impression on me, and for that, I am profoundly appreciative.

Dedication

I dedicate my dissertation to the six same-sex couples who participated in this study by inspiringly sharing their experiences. Your voices serve as beacons of change, leading us towards a world that embraces diversity and compassion. In tribute to your enduring fortitude, I was inspired to share these sentiments:



Designed by: Ms. Sarah Cassar Dymond

*In loving memory of Aunty Iris,
whose open-mindedness created an environment
where I learned to embrace and accept myself.*

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List of Abbreviations

ADPD	Alternattiva Demokratika, Partit Demokratiku
APA	American Psychological Association
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
CP	Critical Pedagogy
FRA	Fundamental Rights Agency
FREC	Faculty Research Ethics Committee
GDPR	General Data Protection Regulation
GLSEN	Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network
HyDi	Hybrid Discovery
ILGA	International Lesbian and Gay Association

JSTOR	Journal Storage
LG	Lesbian and Gay
LGB	Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual
LGBT	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender
LGBTI+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex
LGBTIQ+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, Queer and/or Questioning
LGBTQ+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and/or Questioning
LSEs	Learning Support Educators
MEDE	Ministry for Education and Employment
MGRM	Malta Gay Rights Movement
MTL	Master in Teaching and Learning
NCF	National Curriculum Framework
OAR	Open Access Repository
PSCD	Personal, Social and Career Development
SLT	School Leadership Team
SOGIGESC	Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, Gender Expression and Sex Characteristics

Chapter 1: Introduction

Introduction

This preliminary chapter lays out an overview of the subject matter which is being tackled in this dissertation. It details the Maltese context within which the study is taking place, the dissertation's rationale and objectives, as well as a rundown of the dissertation's structure. This study, which applies a qualitative methodology and utilises critical pedagogy, from now on, CP, as a theoretical framework, centres around the experiences of married gay and lesbian Maltese parents in the education of their children. Thus, the study delves into the positive and negative experiences of married gay and lesbian Maltese parents who have school-aged children presently attending local schools, the parents' levels of perceived inclusion in the school community, and suggestions for improving both the parents' and their children's experiences in schools.

The Maltese Context

“Malta has always been viewed as a staunchly Roman Catholic island, but its conservatism is being replaced with a progressive cape” (Dalli, 2017, para. 1). Catholicism holds official recognition in the Constitution of Malta (1964) as the designated religion of the country, with Article 2.2 of the constitution acknowledging that the authorities of the Roman Catholic Apostolic Church bear both the responsibility and entitlement to impart teachings regarding moral principles, distinguishing between those considered correct and those deemed incorrect.

Just half a century ago, in early 1973, Malta witnessed the significant milestone of decriminalising homosexuality (Borg, 2021). At the time, an Episcopal letter authored by the Episcopal Congregation, which was published on the 6th of January, 1973, on *Lehen is-Sewwa*, explicitly stated that individuals identifying as homosexual were “sick” people. The Congregation of Bishops, by means of the aforementioned Episcopal letter, aimed to clarify

that, in their view, the legal decriminalisation of homosexuality went against what they believed were moral rules from a higher power. The Congregation of Bishops suggested that those vested with legislative power ought to consider the principles bequeathed by preceding generations that inherently reflected the moral tenets of the Catholic faith.

In 2013, the political landscape in Malta underwent a notable transformation as the social democrats, that is, the Malta Labour Party, assumed power after a prolonged period of fifteen years in opposition (BBC, 2013). Within this milieu, the advocacy for the rights of the LGBT community was strategically positioned as a prominent component of the social democrats' electoral agenda (Harwood, 2015). Having said so, a Misco study which was commissioned by the Catholic Church, surveyed 500 Maltese locals and unveiled that eighty percent of the informants, spanning across all age cohorts, demonstrated resistance to the notion of same-sex parent adoption (Sansone, 2014). Irrespective of the surrounding controversy, swift action followed the social democrats' ascent to power, with the new government successfully enacting the *Civil Union Act* within a relatively short span of thirteen months (Harwood, 2015). The Nationalist Party parliamentary representatives, demonstrating their apprehensions regarding same-sex parent adoption, decided to abstain from voting in favour of the *Civil Union Act* (Dalli, 2017). This legislative framework introduced a legal recognition akin to marriage for same-sex couples, including the right to adopt, despite its nomenclature as a "civil union" (Harwood, 2015). As a reaction, The Archdiocese of Malta (2014) published *A statement by the Bishops on the Civil Unions Law* which stated that "our society should strive to keep cherishing and giving preference to the natural family, built upon marriage between a man and a woman" (para. 1). The statement also quoted Pope Francis (2014) who attested to the significance of a conventional familial configuration consisting of a paternal and a maternal figure as integral to fostering the utmost advancement and maturation of children. Despite the enactment of the *Civil Union Act* the

previous year, a significant step in recognising and legally protecting same-sex relationships, a Facebook group with over 6,000 followers named “Parents and teachers against gender indoctrination of our children in schools” was formed in 2015 following MGRM’s donation of a number of publications featuring different forms of families and same-sex relationships to the Ministry of Education (Diacono, 2015, para. 5). Due to the enormous amount of backlash, Evarist Bartolo, the Minister of Education at the time, had decided against distributing the donated books in schools (Diacono, 2015). Vassallo (2020, p. 95) asserted that “such a move gave the message that ignorance has power over social justice.”

In 2016, for the first time, Malta achieved the top ranking on the International Lesbian and Gay Association (ILGA) Europe's Rainbow Index. This prominent recognition reflected the nation's leading position in terms of its legislation and policy measures pertaining to LGBTIQ+ rights (ILGA, 2016). “The major milestones that brought about this change were the introduction of Civil Union Act 2014; the *Gender Identity, Gender Expression and Sex Characteristics Act* of 2015; the *Affirmation of Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Gender Expression Act* of 2016” (Borg, 2021, p. 9). In 2016, Malta attained a pioneering status in Europe by becoming the inaugural nation to implement an educational policy entitled *Trans, Gender Variant and Intersex Students in Schools Policy* that specifically addresses the requirements of children identifying as transgender, gender-variant, and intersex (ILGA, 2016). Also in 2016, Ben, a boy who has Down syndrome, found himself at the centre of Maltese history as he became the first child to be adopted into a legally recognised family formed by two gay men (ONE News, 2016). One of Ben’s fathers, Vella Grima (2017, p. ii) stated that “although LGBT individuals have gained the right to marry and adopt, there are multiple masked social anomalies that have not been accounted for. They are located in the ideological dominance of conventional family structures and services.”

In 2017, the *Marriage Equality Act* was introduced in Malta and “any person irrespective of gender identity and sexual orientation [was] free to contract marriage and to parent children” (Cassar & Sultana, 2017, p. 172). Within the Maltese parliament, only one member of parliament, Edwin Vassallo, a representative aligned with the Nationalist faction, voted in opposition of the legislation (Times of Malta, 2017). He grounded his opposition in his Catholic faith, highlighting the perceived incongruity between his faith and what he characterised as a legislation of a morally unacceptable nature (Times of Malta, 2017). A few days prior to the parliamentary discussion concerning same-sex marriage, in a homily held on the 26th of June, 2017, Archbishop Charles Scicluna reaffirmed that regardless of legal provisions, marriage will continue to be defined as the enduring union between a man and a woman (Archdiocese of Malta, 2017). During the homily, the Archbishop clarified that, in spite of not being in favour of changing the traditional concept of marriage as established by God, hatred or mistreatment of individuals based on their sexual orientation is not aligned with the religious teachings.

Aħna m'għandna xejn kontra l-gays. La raġel li jmur ma' raġel u lanqas mara li tmur ma' mara. Huma bnedmin li għandhom dritt għar-rispett u l-imħabba tagħna. Ħa nkun ċar għax ma tistax tkun ma' Ġesù u tobġhod lil xi ħadd għax hu magħmul kif inhu magħmul jew tinsulentah, jew ma turihx rispett. Imma m'għandniex għalfejn inbiddu l-mod kif Alla ħalaq iż-żwieġ biex aħna issa ngħidu: żewġt irġiel jistgħu jiżżewġu jew żewġ nisa jistgħu jiżżewġu (Archdiocese of Malta, 2017, para. 5).

[We have nothing against gays. Neither a man who has a relationship with a man nor a woman who has a relationship with a woman. They are human beings who have a right to our respect and love. Let me be clear because you cannot be with Jesus and hate someone because he is made the way he is made or insult him, or show him no respect. But we don't have to change the way God created marriage so that we now

say: two men can marry or two women can marry (Archdiocese of Malta, 2017, para. 5).]

Whilst ILGA Europe (2023) has classified Malta as the reigning front-runner in terms of LGBTIQ+ laws and policies for eight consecutive years, social acceptance remains comparatively rudimentary. In *Mapping the Rainbow* (2020), Hon. Dr Zammit Lewis acknowledged that whilst the changes in legislation and policies have been positively transformative for the LGBTIQ+ community members residing in Malta, societal change is a gradual process and thus, several hurdles faced by the LGBTIQ+ community still evidently persist. Likewise, in the recent publication entitled *LGBTIQ Equality Strategy and Action Plan 2023-2027*, the Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, Gender Expression and Sex Characteristics (SOGIGESC) Unit and the Human Rights Directorate (2023, p. 10) recognised that even though the indications of advancement are to be proudly embraced, “we are still far from eradicating LGBTIQ+ prejudice in Malta.” For instance, the Eurobarometer survey (2019) revealed that almost 2 out of every 5 Maltese respondents believed that discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation is still locally prevalent. The research survey carried out by LGBTI+ Gozo (2021) revealed that 64% of Gozitan respondents expressed hardship in being open about their sexual orientation in Gozo. The EU LGBTI survey II, carried out by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA, 2020, p. 1) publicised that “47% avoid often or always holding hands with their same-sex partner in Malta.”. On a more positive note, over three quarters of the respondents in the same survey were of the opinion that there was a decrease in LGBTIQ+ discrimination in Malta (FRA, 2020).

In January 2022, a Maltese priest named David Muscat made a derogatory comment on Facebook in which he claimed that “being gay is worse than being possessed” (Tortell, 2022, para. 1). Fr Muscat’s “gayyagni” comment provoked a torrent of outrage amongst

several LGBTIQ+ activists who demanded legal action to be taken against this incident of hate speech (Times of Malta, 2022). Archbishop Charles Scicluna took a decisive step by delivering a formal caution, termed a “penal precept” in Canon Law, to Fr. David Muscat (Archdiocese of Malta, 2022). During a mass held at Curia, Mons. Scicluna also offered an apology to the LGBTIQ+ community and their family members who might have experienced feelings of hurt and betrayal stemming from the Church, consequent to the hate speech that had transpired (Vassallo, 2022). A few days after this incident, a two-hour meeting was held between Mons Scicluna, Auxiliary Bishop Joseph Galea-Curmi and the leading LGBTIQ+ local organisations (Drachma, 2022). This meeting, being the first of its kind, “had a profound sense of synodality that was clearly felt and expressed by all those present” and thus, signified the Catholic Church’s evolving stance towards acceptance and understanding of the LGBTIQ+ community (Drachma, 2022, para. 6). In May 2023, Fr David Muscat was issued a six-month prison sentence, albeit with a suspension extending over a two-year period, which communicated the message that locally, hate speech will not be condoned and so, individuals proven guilty will be held accountable (Borg, 2023). Recently, Anthony Fitzpatrick, the parish priest of Marsa, also demonstrated the Catholic Church's increasing acceptance of the LGBTIQ+ community in Malta by sharing a Facebook post captioned “The House of God is open to all,” featuring a couples’ mass flyer showcasing diverse couples, including same-sex couples (Calleja, 2023).

Lately, “Dancing With Pride”, one of the activities which led-up to EuroPride 2023, which was hosted in Malta, became a subject of controversy (Times of Malta, 2023a). The catalyst for the social media uproar was a photograph, which included the local drag artist Olivia Lillith as well as a number of children, that was initially posted by John Bundy, a Maltese public figure (Azzopardi, 2023). The comments section beneath the post quickly filled with opinions asserting that events of this nature should exclude children (Azzopardi,

2023). As Times of Malta (2023a, para. 6) reported “ADITUS, ADPD - Malta’s Green Party, Allied Rainbow Communities, Drachma LGBTI, Drachma Parents , Equality Labour (Partit Laburista), LGBTI + Gozo, and MGRM - The Malta LGBTIQ Rights Movement hit back in a joint statement.” In the statement, the aforementioned eight organisations appealed for responsibility from influential figures in Malta who, regrettably, opt to employ their public platform to propagate discrimination against LGBTIQ+ members (Times of Malta, 2023a). They argued that the conservative responses regarding the involvement of children serve as a poignant reminder of the ongoing necessity for Pride, underscoring that despite legal milestones, there remains a substantial amount of work required to foster education and transform mindsets within the Maltese Islands (Times of Malta, 2023a). Another striking reminder of the gap between progressive laws and social acceptance emerged when a EuroPride poster was vandalised in Valletta during broad daylight, three days prior to the opening of the EuroPride activities (Grech Urpani, 2023a). Numerous members of the LGBTIQ+ community and their allies had promptly expressed their strong disapproval of this act of vandalism, asserting that such incidents are clear evidence of the continued necessity and significance of events like Pride in the year 2023 (Grech Urpani, 2023b). A third discriminatory incident during EuroPride 2023 occurred after the pride march held in Gozo when a group of queer Gozitans faced verbal harassment upon approaching a bar, and as tensions escalated, one person in the group was subjected to a physical assault in which “the victim [...] suffered head injuries, a split lip and dental pain” (Times of Malta, 2023b, para. 19). Despite these regrettable acts of homophobia, the organisers of EuroPride 2023 in Malta stated that the ten-day activities were a resounding success, drawing a substantial turnout of over 38,000 people for the Pride March and the headlining concert (Agius, 2023).

In light of the preceding contextual description, the following account of the Croatian context by Bartulović and Kušević (2023, p. 3) may be adequately applicable in describing the local scenario:

Despite a favourable legal framework, the propagated tolerance of the Catholic Church, the official comprehension of homosexuality as a variant of sexual orientation and the absence of extremely negative public attitudes towards the LGB community, the daily existence of LGB people is not entirely positive.

The Dissertation's Rationale

The present study seeks to explore and document the lived experiences of gay and lesbian married couples in Malta who have school-aged children currently enrolled in local educational institutions. McDonald and Morgan (2019, p. 486) assert that “the experiences of same-sex parents in schools and other social institutions is an internationally under-researched area”, which is certainly the case for Malta. The rationale behind this study stems from a critical gap in existing research concerning the intersection of the parents’ sexual orientation and the educational environments within the Maltese context. Additionally, within the lens of CP, which is this study’s theoretical framework, “criticality requires that one be moved to do something, whether that something be seeking reasons or seeking social justice” (Burbules & Berk, 1999, p. 53). Hence, this dissertation transcends mere academic inquiry since this study’s investigation aligns with the principles of social justice and human rights, advocating for equal rights, opportunities, and fair treatment for individuals, regardless of their sexual orientation (Breunig, 2016).

The noticeable incongruence between the legal and the social conditions in Malta, which was accented in the preceding sub-section, raises interesting questions regarding the experiences of gay and lesbian parents in the education of their children whose family configuration diverges from “heteronormative family ideals” which refer to societal norms

and expectations regarding what is considered a “normal” or conventional family structure, primarily centred around heterosexuality (Goldberg & Smith, 2014, p. 464). Hence, while Malta has made portentous strides in recognising the rights of the LGBTIQ+ community, there remains a shortage of comprehensive investigations into the daily realities and challenges faced by same-sex parents whilst navigating their interactions with local schools, which this study intends to uncover. Without a thorough examination of the first-hand experiences of same-sex parents in Malta, it becomes challenging to recognise the aspects that are functioning effectively, identify areas that require improvement, and move towards the eradication of discriminatory practices within educational institutions, that is, move towards a more socially just educational landscape.

The Dissertation’s Objectives

One of the strategies put forward by the SOGIGESC Unit and the Human Rights Directorate (2023, p. 29) in the *LGBTIQ Equality Strategy and Action Plan 2023-2027*, is to “address knowledge-gaps on lived experiences of LGBTIQ+ persons through research on their family life, wellbeing, barriers encountered, living conditions, and other social determinants.” The primary objective of this study is aligned to this said strategy since this study aims to comprehensively examine the lived experiences of gay and lesbian married couples in Malta who are raising school-aged children currently attending local schools. In pursuit of this overarching goal, a number of specific research objectives have been identified. Firstly, the study aims to comprehensively describe the positive and negative experiences encountered by these couples as they navigate the local educational landscape, including their interactions with the school personnel and parents of other students. The description of the experiences of same-sex parents in local educational settings also embodies an exploration of the levels of acceptance the parents in the study perceive within the educational institutions their children attend. This objective strives to provide insights into

the dynamics of acceptance, highlighting both areas of progress and potential areas for improvement via uncovering and critically analysing the dominant ideologies that underpin the educational system. Additionally, the study endeavours to put forward the practical recommendations from the participants themselves regarding potential pathways to enhance inclusivity thereby improving their own experiences, as well as the experiences of other same-sex parents, in Maltese schools. Thus, empowerment of gay and lesbian parents is made possible through the developed recommendations for change which have the potential to incite positive advancements in the local educational institutions.

The Dissertation's Structure

This dissertation is organised into six chapters, each serving the purpose of advancing the understanding of the lived experiences of same-sex married couples in Malta who have school-aged children attending local schools. Each chapter follows the guidelines of the APA 7th edition, not only for referencing and in-text citations, but also for the formatting and presentation of content throughout the document.

This introductory chapter lays the groundwork for the study by providing the context for the subsequent research, and elucidating the rationale behind investigating this underexplored area as well as the set research objectives. The second chapter delves into an extensive literature review of the existing scholarship on the subject in question. The third chapter comprehensively elucidates the methodology employed for this study. The chapter details the research questions, theoretical framework, epistemology, ontology, research methodology, research method, sampling procedure and analytic method applied as well as the ethical considerations and reflexivity involved in this study. The fourth chapter presents the empirical findings of the study which were assembled from the interviews that were conducted with the study's informants. The fifth chapter illustrates an in-depth discussion of the findings. The empirical data is examined through the perspective of CP, compared with

existing literature, and analysed through the lens of the research objectives. The final chapter concludes the dissertation through a summary of the key findings and insights derived from the study, along with an overview of the study's limitations, the study's applicability, and a set of propositions for supplementary research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

This literature review pieces together a compilation of research studies on the educational experiences of gay and lesbian couples in the education of their children. Given that there is a global “dearth of research” (Leland, 2018, p. 76), as well as no local inquiries specifically on the subject in question, this literature review starts to address this gap by referring to international findings mainly from the United States as well as Australia, Canada, China and a number of European countries such as Croatia, England, France, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands and Spain. Thus, the findings are situated in contrasting contexts, that is, in both liberal and conservative settings. This is predominantly pertinent since this dissertation “is located within a social and cultural context that could be considered contradictory” (Grech, 2020, p. 6). Namely, in Malta there is a noticeable incongruence between the legal and the social conditions (Grech, 2020) which raises noteworthy questions regarding the experiences of gay and lesbian parents in the education of their children. Boertin and Bernardi (2019) explain that the quality of life of same-sex parents and their children derives from the legal and social environment within which they reside. In this respect, it is enigmatic to infer which worldwide conclusions, if any, credibly exemplify the lived experience of gay and lesbian parents in Malta.

This dissertation deals with the experiences of married gay and lesbian parents in Malta. This literature review, however, deals with the experiences of gay and lesbian couples who are not necessarily married. The notion of same-sex marriage is a relatively recent development in many jurisdictions worldwide. In the existing literature on same-sex parenting, the specific marital status of participants is often not explicitly mentioned. However, in the context of my study, I have made a deliberate choice to include the variable of marital status and focus on married gay and lesbian parents. As Gates (2015, p. 67) puts it

“as more and more same-sex couples marry, we have the opportunity to consider new research questions that can contribute to our understanding.”

In order to gather the references for this chapter, electronic searches were conducted on the University of Malta library portal HyDi, OAR@UM together with particular electronic databases, namely: Education Collection (ProQuest), JSTOR, LGBT Thought and Culture (Alexander Street), SpringerLink and Taylor & Francis Online. The search terms used in order to obtain relevant academic literature included: “same-sex marriage and parenting”, “same-sex parents experiences of children education”, “inclusive education and same-sex parent households”, “gay and lesbian married couples and children education”, “education experiences of married gay and lesbian couples”, “curriculum inclusion and gay lesbian parent families”, “LGBTQ+ families and educational experiences” and “LGBTQ+ families educational involvement”. The funnelling of the fitting research studies included in this literature review was driven by the research questions which are, inherently, guiding this study.

The literature review comprises of five sections. The first section denotes the positive experiences of gay and lesbian parents in the education of their children. Contrastingly, the second section illustrates the negative experiences of the cohort in question. The third section encompasses an account of the recommendations which have been put forward in order to combat the unfavourable and unjust happenings. The fourth section contains a critical discussion of the literature which has been reviewed. The concluding section sums up the main information discussed in this chapter.

The Positive Experiences of Gay and Lesbian Parents

The conclusions of the limited pool of academic studies concerning the experiences of gay and lesbian parents in the education of their children in developed countries denote “several positive parental experiences of acceptance and inclusivity” (Grigoropoulos, 2021,

p. 591). This is particularly the case when it comes to populations living in progressive countries which have an approving legal ambiance for gay and lesbian couples since, as Oswald and Holman (2013) asserted, “place matters”. This concept was lately re-pronounced by Leland (2021, p. 165) who asserted that “doing family differently for fathers in intolerant towns continued to remain significantly more challenging than families in Emerton and gay-friendly havens”. The significance of context is assignable to structural stigma, which refers to systemic and institutionalised prejudice and discrimination inherent in societal institutions, policies, and practises that disadvantage and marginalise specific populations, in this case, on the basis of sexual orientation (Boertien & Bernardi, 2019). Moreover, people who live in stigmatised or marginalised communities tend to have a higher level of stigma consciousness as a result of their increased knowledge of unfavourable stereotypes and prejudices linked with their identities (Pinel, 1998). A formidable level of stigma consciousness may adversely impact the affected individuals and lead to “cognitive and behavioural consequences” (Pinel, 1998, p. 7). For example, Nouvilas-Pallejà et al. (2018, p. 1117) explain that in non-heterosexual individuals, “stigma consciousness is negatively associated with well-being and positively associated with stress, symptoms of depression, internalised homophobia, negative feelings, and physical symptoms.

In a mixed-method study, Richardot and Bureau (2020) recruited 278 gay and lesbian parents residing in France and established that 96% of their sample consider themselves and their nursery school aged children to be regarded no differently than straight parents and their offspring by both the teaching staff and the other parents. Similarly, out of a sample of 154 same-sex parents, 75% of the lesbian mothers and 89% of the gay fathers in Goldberg’s (2014) study in the United States claimed not to have weathered any negative encounters in their pre-school children’s educational setting which can be attributable to their status of gay and lesbian parents. Likewise, Michaud and Stelmach (2019), who conducted a qualitative

case study with four gay and lesbian parents residing in Western Canada, claimed that their participants discussed encountering acceptance from their childrens' teachers regarding their identities as same-sex parents, thus, the study's informants did not perceive their sexual orientation to negatively impact their relationships with their childrens' educators.

Analogously, 95 of 96 gay and lesbian parents in Farr et al.'s (2016) study in the United States experienced helpful and supportive school environments. Correspondingly, Leland's (2017) qualitative study, also conducted in the United States, comprised of four gay couples and illustrated optimistic results in which three couples described highly positive concurrences with all of their children's school staff as well as with the other parents. What made the school experience mostly positive was the fact that their childrens' teachers were mainly compassionate, understanding and cooperative. In a separate qualitative study, Leland (2021) investigated 22 households led by gay fathers residing in two distinct community types: inclusive areas known for their positive attitudes and support towards rainbow families, and intolerant towns characterised by a lack of acceptance and support for rainbow families. In this study, Leland (2021) noted that each gay father residing in an inclusive area reported that their children's teachers proactively sought their input on how they wished to commemorate Mother's Day. Conversely, fathers residing in intolerant towns indicated encountering constraints concerning how their children could engage in Mother's Day activities (Leland, 2021).

At face value, these positive research outcomes are greatly uplifting. Yet, it is vital for these optimistic results to be re-surfaced for critical questioning. The presently obtainable literature alludes that the formerly outlined positive experiences are partially due to the "proactive approach", such as by gay and lesbian parents openly addressing their diverse family arrangements at the get-go to ensure that the educational institutions are well-informed and supportive (Goldberg, 2014, p. 678); "pre-emptive actions", such as by same-sex couples

relocating to more progressive regions and choosing to enrol their children in schools perceived as more inclusive and thus, safer for their children (Leland, 2017, p. 643); and, “protective strategies” such as gay and lesbian parents actively engaging in their children's school life in order to build strong ties within the school community (McDonald & Morgan, 2019, p. 486). These actions are deemed as requisite on behalf of gay and lesbian parents in order to establish their family as a “real” one and thus, serve as a fortification against the conceivable marginalisation brought about by the heteronormative environment (Goldberg et al., 2017). In other words, “involvement functions as a form of protective self-advocacy” (Goldberg et al., 2020, p. 1658). Accordingly, “sexual minority parents who report positive relationships with their children's schools discuss working intentionally to foster such relationships” (Bower & Klecka, 2009a, p. 231).

By employing a constructionist grounded theory methodology to a sample of 17 gay and lesbian parents residing in England, McDonald and Morgan (2019, p. 192) graphically represent this phenomenon in the figure below. For the purposes of this literature review, two of the safeguarding engagements, namely, “selecting inclusive schools” and “being involved in school life” will be explored in more detail.

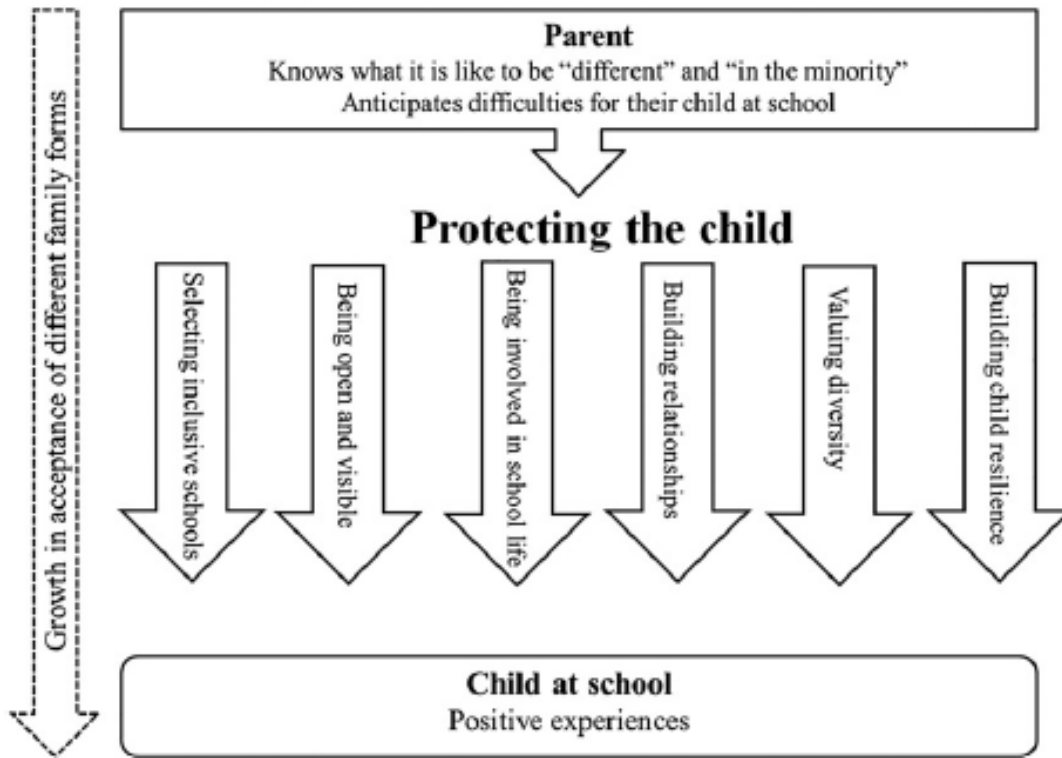


Figure 1 Protective Factors Engaged in by Same Sex Parents

Note. Retrieved from “Same-sex parents’ experiences of schools in England” by I. McDonald and G. Morgan, 2019, *Journal of GLBT Family Studies*, 15(5), p. 192. Copyright 2019 by Taylor & Francis Group, LLC.

One of the main procedures which is cogently outlined in the published academic research is that of pedantic school selection. Gay and lesbian parents endeavour to enrol their children in schools which are outwardly open-minded and progressive so as to lessen the probability of stigmatisation (Mercier & Harold, 2003). In fact, approximately 1 out of every 2 LGBT parents enquires about how the school would deal with LGBT matters prior to registering their children to the said school (Kosciw & Diaz, 2008). In an American qualitative study, Goldberg et al. (2018, p. 693) gathered data from 34 gay and lesbian headed families and applied the notion of intersectionality to explain the multifariousness involved in picking the fitting school for their children who have “multiple minority statuses”. They concluded that “no single social location—race, sexuality, gender, or class—

emerges as singularly important in shaping parents' decision-making" (p. 697). The contributors' experiences were characterised by feelings of apprehension and guilt. They also point out that, in the first place, the fact that the participants had a choice between different schooling options is primarily attributed to their affluent status in terms of being financially and educationally privileged. In Bourdieu's (2018) terminology, the participants' ability to exercise a choice between different schooling options can be understood in terms of the parents' possession of significant cultural and economic capital. As denoted by Bourdieu (2018), individuals with high levels of cultural capital have the knowledge, skills, and cultural competences to traverse the complexity of the educational system. They are familiar with different schools' selection criteria, application processes, and requirements, helping them to make educated judgments about their children's education. Furthermore, according to Bourdieu (2018) their economic capital allows them to evaluate a broader range of educational options that may provide distinct educational benefits.

Another commonly cited tactic that contributes to the positive experiences of gay and lesbian parents in the education of their children is activism in their children's schools. For instance, in Baldwin's (2019, p. 91) doctoral dissertation, which comprised of a sample of seven lesbian mothers, "all participants reported an active level of involvement with their child's school" through joining in, or volunteering, during different school activities such as aiding in the organisation of talent shows and supervising students during school outings. Similarly, the four gay couples in Leland's (2017) study narrated their contribution and engagement with their children's schools, both during and after school hours, which aided in increasing their visibility in the school setting. Drawing on her personal experience as a lesbian mother, Savage (2002, p. 35) pointed out that due to the discrepancy between the home and school settings, parental involvement is a must since it "smooths the dissonance, bridges the gaps, allows the edges of those two competing worlds to overlap a little."

Principally, it is apparent that gay and lesbian parents are inclined to feel obliged to expel misconstructions and educate others about their non-heteronormative families; and they attempt doing so through their activism in their children's school community through which they build strong community ties and enhance their visibility in the educational system (Riggs & Willing, 2013).

The Negative Experiences of Gay and Lesbian Parents

Fundamentally, schools mirror the wider society that they are set in and so, there is a tendency for them to echo and, thus, aid in the preservation of, the “ideological and political imperatives of the group in power” (Jeltova & Fish, 2005, p. 21). Even though schools are frequently perceived as “neutral and apolitical spaces”, critical academic research consistently demonstrates that, in schools, “the ideological hegemony of heteronormativity is maintained”, that is, the dominant ideology is upheld and reinforced through the school practises which are, ultimately, echoing deeply ingrained conventional cultural values, typically a reflection of religious creeds (Hoang, 2019, p. 149). Schools are regarded as being somewhat apathetic in terms of their acknowledgement and adaptation to the diversified family configurations, such as gay or lesbian headed families (Goldberg, 2014; Goldberg et al., 2017; Goldberg et al., 2018). Hence, schools are playing a chief role in the perpetuation of heteronormativity (Byard et al., 2013). “Reinforcing normative constructions of family often occurs by way of curricula, school-generated forms, and parent-related activities” (Leland, 2021, p. 147). In this regard, “despite the rhetoric of inclusivity” (Riggs & Willing, 2013, p. 367), the educational system is considered to be upholding the status quo and enduring power structures (Jeltova & Fish, 2005). Given that “lesbian and gay parent families challenge basic social models of what a family is” they may, in turn, be more vulnerable to be beleaguered by a stigmatising or marginalising environment at school (Grigoropoulos, 2021, p. 591). For instance, Radis and Nadan (2021, p. 955), who explored the lived experience of

fifteen African American lesbian mothers residing in the East Coast of the United States, narrated the frequent “invalidating and emotionally upsetting” homophobic happenstance in which educators, amongst other community members, refuse to “recognise the family as a unit without a male/father figure.”

Mistreatment produces “minority stress”, that is, exposure to distinct stressors which emerge from the gay and lesbian parents’ stigmatised position within a context which is preponderantly heteronormative (Meyer, 2003). Meyer (2003, p. 674) elucidates that “stigma, prejudice, and discrimination create a hostile and stressful social environment that causes mental health problems.” In fact, amongst individuals who are non-heterosexual, there is a “disproportionally high prevalence of stress-related psychological morbidities” (Mazrekaj et al., 2022, p. 8). Grigoropoulos (2023) who applied the minority stress theory in a qualitative study that extrapolated data from 11 gay fathers residing in Greece, described that a central stressor for these fathers was the fact that they felt obliged to hide their sexual orientation and thus, their family structure, from the school in which their children are enrolled so as to avoid being faced with social stigmatisation. The experiences of gay and lesbian parents encompass not only the anticipation of potential rejection directed towards themselves but also the expectation of their children facing societal rejection, leading to an added stressor unique to same-sex parenting (Mazrekaj et al., 2022). Mendez (2022, p. 528), who conducted a deductive study with four gay and lesbian headed families in the United States, concluded that gay and lesbian parents “engage in queer socialisation because of concerns for their children’s wellbeing.” That is, “queer socialisation” which is defined as “the process by which children learn about queer culture” (Mendez, 2022, p. 513) is a preventative process undertaken by same-sex parents “in order to prepare their children for lives in a hegemonic heteronormative society” in which the same-sex parents are highly aware that there is a high possibility that their family will be discriminated against (Mendez, 2022, p. 516).

Hence, as discussed in the preceding section, the positive experiences in schools narrated by gay and lesbian parents in presently available academic literature may, in part, be a result of the tactics undertaken by the parents to minimise marginalisation or stigmatisation (Goldberg, 2014). Despite such efforts, experiences of discriminatory practices, in both blatant and subtle forms, are still commonly denoted in academic research. In fact, approximately 50% of LGBT parents expressed different exclusionary instances they experienced at their children's schools: "being excluded or prevented from fully participating in school activities and events, being excluded by school policies and procedures, and being ignored and feeling invisible" (Kosciw & Diaz, 2008, p. 78).

A mishandled happening which is recurrently recounted by gay and lesbian parents in the literature is that of Mother's Day and Father's Day. In fact, in Richardot and Bureau (2020)'s study, Mother's Day and Father's Day is described as a "watershed moment" for gay and lesbian parents due to it being insensitively handled by teachers. An example of such an occurrence was explained by a lesbian mother in Goldberg's (2014) study who narrated that her child was not permitted to do two candles during a Mother's Day craft. A lesbian mother in Bower and Klecka's (2009a) study recounted that her daughter once felt the need to make a Father's Day craft addressed to a person who she made up so as to be able to participate in the Father's Day activity. Locally, Farrugia's (2019b, p. 47) undergraduate dissertation explicated that the three homosexual couples in her study each "mentioned how that at school during Mother's Day or Father's Day they are not recognised". At times, well-intentioned efforts towards inclusivity are poorly executed and so, still result in feelings of "otherness" (Leland, 2017). For instance, a gay father in Leland's (2017) study expounded that the Mother's Day activity comprised of a spa day in which the mothers were invited to school for some basic pampering such as the application of nail polish. His child's teacher

attempted to be inclusive by insisting that this father attended the event, however, reasonably, this father recounted feeling out of place during this day.

Another inequitable occurrence which is repeatedly cited in the literature is that of heterosexist paperwork, such as registration forms, which assumes the presence of both a mother and father (e.g., Adams & Persinger, 2013; Goldberg, 2014; Mercier & Harold, 2003). For instance, the four gay couples in Leland's (2017) study and six out of seven lesbian mothers in Baldwin's (2019, p. 88) study claimed to have come across administrative forms which "presumed a traditional family structure". Vella Grima (2017, p. 72) confirms that this is also the case in Malta since "applications... are still co-signed – MOTHERS NAME – FATHERS NAME". As a lesbian mother, Savage (2002) stated that, together with her partner, editing school forms so as to include an additional column for a second mother was something which they did in order to stress their right as equal guardians.

Another frequently referred to factor which contributes to a more implicit way to marginalise gay and lesbian headed families is the non-appearance of their family structure in school curricula (Goldberg & Smith, 2014). "Heteronormativity is highly institutionalised in the curriculum" (Hoang, 2019, p. 146). This leads to a "lack of alternative narratives" rendering homosexual parents and their children invisible to the educational system (Allen, 2015, p. 371). In this way, teachers, and school personnel in general, come across as unyieldingly abiding by "the heteronormative code" thereby positioning themselves as adversaries, as opposed to allies, to gay and lesbian headed families (Grech, 2020, p. 60). As Goldstein (2019, p. 139) puts it, "allyship without action is an oxymoron." Principally, the educators' acts of remaining silent covertly augments stigmatisation and marginalisation (Larrabee & Kim, 2010). The invisibility of one's own family configuration from the curriculum has the potential to cause the concerned students to feel a lack of validation and a sense of abnormality (Hill & Willoughby, 2005). The curriculum is even less acknowledging

of students with “multiple stigmatised identities” such as children of same-sex parents who have been adopted transracially (Goldberg et al., 2018, p. 700). Such an exclusionary curricular framework is noticeably demonstrated when such students are, inconsiderately, assigned the task of creating a family tree (Bower & Klecka, 2009a; Goldberg, 2014; Kosciw & Diaz, 2008; Leland, 2021). Grigoropoulos (2021) interestingly pointed out that, whilst the being left out of the school curriculum is acknowledged by the lesbian parents in the study, a few of the contributors seem to reconcile themselves to this reality due to perceiving it as out of their hands, that is, as something they have to learn to live with. This demonstrates a feeling of powerlessness and what Boudieu would call “doxa”, that is “assumptions [...] which are taken for granted and lie beyond ideologies, yet which can generate struggles” (Deer 2014, p. 115). Such feelings are understandable since even on occasions in which parents actively tried to bring about a change, such as by providing their children’s schools with books that contain same-sex parented families, these efforts were generally overlooked (Goldberg et al., 2017; Leland, 2021).

Gay and lesbian parents’ negative experiences also stem from them being ill-treated by other parents of their children’s school. About 25% of LGBT parents stated being treated badly by other guardians (Kosciw & Diaz, 2008). A lesbian mother in Baldwin’s (2019, p. 80) published dissertation recounted an instance in which a group of parents from her child’s school were attempting to plan “a father-daughter dance or a mom-son bowling night”. Her suggestion to organise a “family dance or a family bowling night” instead, was misinterpreted as her asking for special treatment when, realistically, she was simply requesting for a less outdated viewpoint so that such festivities can be enjoyed by all the families, irrespective of their family composition. Thus, “parent communities in schools are sometimes sites of disconnection, exclusion, and hostility around intersections among gender and sexuality, and race and class” (Goldberg et al., 2020, p. 1655). Goldberg et al. (2020) elaborate on the ties

formed by parents in the school setting by pointing out that gender might be a noteworthy dimension in gay fathers' identities which may impact their rapport with other parents since parent groups are typically composed of heterosexual mothers. Even when favourable relations were reported, moments of transitions, such as at the start of a new scholastic year, and all school gatherings, were still approached with a sense of apprehension amongst the gay fathers due to anticipating possibilities of mistreatment. Grigoropoulos (2021, p. 598) illustrated that the participants in her study were hesitant to come out to other parents since they perceived doing so as "exposing themselves to their scrutiny". The agitation of being susceptible to scrutiny led to the lesbian parents self-marginalising themselves.

The Recommendations Put Forward

As corroborated in the former sections of this literature review, the experiences of gay and lesbian parents in the education of their children vary "from noticeable hostile to overwhelmingly accepting" (Bower, 2008, p. 181). From a social justice point of view, even a solitary act of ill-treatment to one parent is too much (Baldwin, 2019).

The formerly mentioned research outcomes explicate a dire need to "move beyond passively tolerating diverse family structures to proactively including them in curricula and class discussion" (Goldberg et al., 2017, p. 157). This stems from the view that education is a pivotal factor in the lead up to meaningful change (Grech, 2020). It is essential for such education, which is characterised by authentically inclusive curricula, to begin in early childhood settings (Cloughlessy & Waniganayake, 2019). "Queering" the curriculum would assist educators in cultivating learning contexts which are just for all students, including students forming part of marginalised minority groups, such as children of gay and lesbian parents, since the curriculum will be dynamically involved in nullifying, rather than perpetuating, heteronormative, heterosexist and homophobic assumptions (Goldberg et al., 2017). An inclusive curriculum may be perceived as embodying both a "mirror" and a

“window” since it can “enable the student to look through window frames in order to see the realities of others and into mirrors in order to see her/his own reality reflected” (Style, 1996, p. 21). This can be actualised by the usage of curriculum resources which identify, and validate, alternative family forms, for example, through the use of books which illustrate gay and lesbian headed families (Baldwin, 2019; Bower, 2008; Cloughlessy & Waniganayake, 2019; Goldberg, 2014; Kelly, 2012; Leland, 2021; Riggs & Willing, 2013; Smith & Goldberg, 2014). Nowadays, numerous child-friendly resources are being created. For instance, the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) is an American organisation which provides a lot of online material to aid teachers on the matter in question (Adams & Persinger, 2013). Local efforts can also be noted since in 2015 the MGRM donated around 150 books, which centred on diverse family compositions, to the Ministry of Education. Relatedly, in 2020, the MGRM published the *Safe and Seen Education Toolkit* which was intentionally created for educators to use so that students can learn about LGBTIQ+ matters in both formal and informal educational settings.

It is evidently discernible that whilst the body of literature reviewed discusses the notion of curriculum, it does not specify a particular form of curriculum. Portelli (1993) explains that the formal curriculum which is what is formally acknowledged, explicit, publicly available to anyone who seeks it and represents an idealised version of what education aims to achieve; is to be differentiated from the actual curriculum which is what is actually executed in the classroom. “The invisibility of LGBT topics in the formal curriculum puts teachers in a situation where [...] they must intuitively make complex pedagogical decisions when dealing with this topic which currently polarises our society” (Bartulović et al., 2023, p. 55). Easton (2023, p. 550), in her discussion about formal curricula in “liberal, pluralist societies”, presents two different approaches to a more LGBT-inclusive formal curriculum which she terms “LGBT Respect” and “LGBT approval”. “LGBT Respect”

focuses on teaching children to acknowledge the equal moral and political status and rights of LGBT individuals while remaining neutral on the moral evaluation of LGBT relationships. “LGBT Approval,” aims to cultivate a positive attitude towards LGBT relationships, encouraging students to reject the notion that being LGBT makes a relationship morally wrong. Easton (2023) concluded that in the current, less than optimal scenario, which is still extensively characterised by bigotry in the realm of LGBT issues, an “LGBT Approval” approach to the formal curriculum is needed. Schieble (2012) underscores the vitality of avoiding a tokenistic approach to LGBT representation in the formal curriculum since simply including a few LGBT-themed texts in the formal curriculum without actively engaging with the underlying social and cultural issues related to sexual orientation can be insufficient and, potentially, counterproductive. By integrating LGBT-themed literature into lessons that promote critical thinking skills via tackling the notions of homophobia, discrimination, and unequal power structures, teachers can encourage students to examine and reflect on their own biases and prejudices, fostering a sense of social responsibility and promoting positive social change (Schieble, 2012). Flores (2016, p. 2) adds that the LGBT inclusive formal curriculum “should not be taught superficially but instead focus on the civil rights struggle, love, acceptance, family, and forms of oppression, such as heterosexism and homophobia.” Local governing bodies appear to have come to the recognition of the importance of implementing an LGBTIQ+ inclusive formal curriculum in compulsory education, in fact, one of the strategies put forward in the *LGBTIQ Equality Strategy and Action Plan 2023-2027* (p. 47) is to “develop and pilot intra-curricular approaches to LGBTIQ+ inclusion in schools.”

“Cis/heteronormativity illuminates often-implicit ways of being and produces hidden curriculum in the classroom” (Van Horn, 2022, p. 37). Portelli (1993) makes the case that, though not explicitly highlighted, the hidden curriculum is an essential component of the

actual curriculum, covering the inadvertent information and learning outcomes that students absorb from the educational environment, beyond the official curriculum which, thus, impact students' experiences in educational environments. Giroux and Penna (1979, p. 22) defined the hidden curriculum as being “the unstated norms, values, and beliefs that are transmitted to students through the underlying structure of meaning in both the formal content as well as the social relations of school and classroom life”. Since, as Čeplak (2013, p. 164) puts it:

Educational institutions [...] are a crucial place where, through the mediation of controlled knowledge about facts and worthiness, conscious and unconscious processes of reproduction and naturalisation of a heteronormative symbolic order and processes of constructing individuals as gendered and sexualised subjects unfold.

When engaging in the process of “queering” the curriculum, it is imperative to take into account both the formal and hidden curriculum. In fact, Goldstein (2021, p. 113,114) argues that beyond the queering of the formal curriculum, we should “strive to disrupt school cultures that promote heteronormativity and cisnormativity, where only heterosexual and cisgender students and families are understood as normal and expected at school”, thereby not only queering the curriculum, but also “queering schools and classrooms.”

Given the teachers' chief responsibility of curriculum delivery, “teachers' education and professional development training programs” are to be prioritised for significant change to be facilitated (Grigoropoulos, 2021, p. 599). This idea is strengthened by Goldberg et al.'s (2017, p. 157) observation that when it comes to the negative experiences narrated by parents, the teachers' “ignorance” was what characteristically led to insensitive behaviour or remarks. In this regard, specialised educational sessions should be implemented so as to offer teaching staff the space to reflect upon their own biases and come to terms with any misconstructions they might have about LGBT families (Baldwin, 2019; Bower & Klecka, 2009b; Adams & Persinger, 2013; Scerri 2016). Such sessions may also help the school staff

to carefully evaluate the language used so as to ensure that inclusive language is affected, for instance, in school forms, to “reflect the diverse nature of families” (Bower, 2008, p. 183). Training sessions may also aid educators to recognise the need to adapt certain projects to ensure that different needs are met (Goldberg, 2014). For instance, students who have two mums or two dads may be permitted to make two Mother’s Day or Father’s Day crafts (Goldstein, 2019). Other classroom projects, such as family tree exercises may also need to be modified. They can be altered to the creation of a “rooted family tree” (Goldberg, 2014, p. 679) or even a “family mosaic” (Bower, 2008).

Moreover, to create an inclusive and supportive learning environment for students from different family configurations and LGBTIQ+ backgrounds, teacher preparation must occur before going into the place of work, not solely through continuous professional development over the years, ensuring that educators are equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills from the outset (Dedeoglu et al., 2012). As Woodruff (2014, p. 180) puts it “universities must focus their goals on not only high quality professional preparation , but also equity, diversity, and cultural competence.” In a quantitative study which gathered data from 438 student teachers residing in Italy, Scandurra et al. (2017, p. 257) explained that at university level it is essential to incorporate designated threads on LGBTIQ+ matters within all the training programmes designed for student teachers. Kearns et al. (2014, p. 22) affirm that “the opportunity for pre-service teachers to understand how to engage in anti-oppressive teaching practices is a key component of school and education reform.” Kearns et al. (2014) note that the actualisation of the well-intended, rainbow families inclusive school policies becomes more perspicuous once the educators have been well-informed about LGBTIQ+ matters. Vassallo (2020) stresses the need for increased local teacher training about diversity, especially since his undergraduate dissertation, which included qualitative interviews held with six teachers in Malta, identified a hierarchy along which educators

differentiated and constructed their comprehension of varying identities. Within this “hierarchy of difference”, issues pertaining to gender and sexuality found themselves relegated to the lower rungs of the hierarchy when compared to other facets of diversity, such as different ethnicities or religious backgrounds (Vassallo, 2020, p. 91).

Coulter et al. (2021, p. 235) stress that “pre-service teachers need more than isolated lessons on LGBTQ-related knowledge and information.” One-off teacher training sessions, applied as isolated mechanisms are “insufficient to support transformative change of entrenched heteronormative beliefs and behaviours that sustain heteronormativity within the school system” (Steck & Perry, 2018, p. 236). Ideally, in a teacher education programme on LGBTIQ+ matters, there is “socialisation and contact with diverse sexual minority communities, rather than simply the presentation of educational material by an instructor in class” (Kwok, 2019, p. 355). In agreement, Hegde et al. (2014) explained that having the opportunity to first-handedly listen to the lived experiences of gay and lesbian parents is a promising tool to increase the preparedness of educators for any prospective encounters they may have with gay and lesbian parents. The direct interaction and exposure to real-life experiences fosters a stronger emotional connection, leading to an increased personal commitment among teachers to be inclusive when they teach (Robinson & Ferfolja, 2008). Thus, Coulter et al. (2021, p. 236) insist that “service-based learning” is the most effective way of going about a teacher education programme in relation to LGBTIQ+ matters since it includes “a combination of community service, instruction, and reflection activities” thereby providing a space in which future educators can directly interact with members of the rainbow community and enhance their allyship through having a higher degree of knowledge, empathy and self-efficacy.

Discussion

After the present review of the academic research over the last twenty years pertaining to the lived experience of gay and lesbian couples in the education of their children, I admit that I was somewhat surprised to read the positive accounts that gay and lesbian parents disclosed related to the experiences of their children in schools. It is not that I expected all of the academic studies to be negatively charged, but I somewhat projected that the negative experiences would be more blatantly displayed. This is conceivably due to the fact that I am mindful that even though “Malta has made giant leaps in a relatively short time [...] there is a discrepancy between enactment and enforcement” (Fenech, 2019, p. 47, 49).

A Lack of Genuine Endorsement of Diverse Identities

Upon further consideration and deeper engagement with the literature, I realised that, in fact, the situation at hand is more intricate than it outwardly appears. In fact, as Riggs and Willing (2013, p. 367) impeccably put it “when marginalisation is experienced as the warp and weft of everyday life for some people, it may at times become so axiomatic as to be almost invisible.” Bettinsoli et al. (2022) explained that modern variations of prejudice encompass convictions that reinforce and sustain inequality in subtler ways, particularly through the denial of persistent discrimination directed at marginalised groups, such as members of the LGBTIQ+ community. Simply put, Bettinsoli et al. (2022) put forward the notion that despite ongoing disparities and mistreatment, modern forms of prejudice manifest as discourse that maintains that discrimination against marginalised groups is no longer a concern and this results in an unwillingness to acknowledge or tackle the ongoing challenges faced by disadvantaged individuals. The notion of the so-called modern forms of prejudice neatly fits into Paulo Freire’s conviction that “the greatest single barrier against the prospect of liberation is an ingrained, fatalistic belief in the inevitability and necessity of an unjust status quo” (Burbules & Berk, 1999, p. 52).

The above brought me to the realisation that we have gotten ourselves into a kettle of fish since, in schools, tolerance to gay and lesbian parents is, at times, being fallaciously mistaken for acceptance of them and support to them. As Twenge et al. (2015) point out, there is a stark difference between the notions of tolerance and support since the former concept merely refers to permitting the public expression of the minority group in spite of their dissimilarities to the norm whilst the latter comprises of the belief that difference is to be esteemed, to the extent that society is taken to be in an advantaged position due to this prevailing diversity. Hence, it is vital to give ears to “the “little bits” of discrimination that constrain and oppress” gay and lesbian parents in their day-to-day experiences since overlooking or ignoring them would result in perpetuating an environment of inequality, fostering the normalisation of discriminatory practices, and impeding progress towards more inclusive and just educational institutions (Riggs & Willing, 2013, p. 367). Thus, in spite of amplified tolerance, there is still a considerable lack of genuine support in educational institutions due to the apparent reigning core belief of heterosexism in which “lesbian and gay couples are considered ‘inappropriate’ or ‘second best’ homes for children” (Wallis & VanEvery, 2000, p. 411). This considerable lack of genuine support in educational institutions may be analysed in terms of the Goldstein et al.’s (2007, p. 183) “safe, positive, and queering moments framework”. Goldstein et al. (2007) describe that “safe moments” foster an attitude of tolerance but not necessarily acceptance or affirmation of variability in sexual orientation and expression. “Positive moments” endeavour to nurture acceptance that goes beyond mere tolerance and closer to fuller embracement of diversity. Yet, both “safe and positive moments” fall short due to having “equity strategies based on a notion of sameness” which leads these two approaches “to normalise others, individualise homophobia, and naturalise and unproblematise sexual identity categories” (Goldstein et al., 2007, p. 186). Tied to Goldstein et al.’s (2007) conceptualisations, in my view, while there may be a move

towards “putting up with” rainbow families in terms of tolerance, there still seems to be a long way to go towards the complete acceptance, appreciation, and celebration of the wide range of human differences in all their forms. To me, the literature exemplifies a sense of stuckness as although there is progress, there remains a need for a genuine understanding and endorsement of diverse identities and experiences. As a way forward, Goldstein et al. (2007, p. 187) promote the notion of “queer schools” which “require pedagogical practices that trouble the official knowledge of disciplines; disrupt heteronormativity and promote an understanding of oppression as multiple, interconnected, and ever changing.”

In my view, Goldstein (2019, p. 141) got to the heart of the matter when she illustrated that “putting up posters supporting LGBTQ students and families without working to change school culture is like “putting lipstick on a pig.”” In this light, it appears that even though, on paper, schools in Malta have all the right constituents to formularise authentically inclusive environments via the application of the *Respect for All Framework* (MEDE, 2014), certain deep-seated ideologies still triumph thereby hindering gay and lesbian parents and their children from meaningfully experiencing equitable school settings. The persistence of a sense of stuckness in the inclusion of gay and lesbian parents in educational settings, despite apparent progress in policies and paperwork promoting inclusivity, reveals deep-rooted systemic challenges. In a sense, it can be implied that schools are only progressing superficially via the prohibition of overt forms of marginalisation. Other than that, the policies which are published seem to fall short from reaching their aims due to inadequate implementation. There is still the continuation of concealed and disguised forms of marginalisation which characterise the system. These are equivalently, if not more, destructive due to them being less noticeable or recognisable.

The paradox of leaps of legal advancements intertwined with a sense of societal stuckness calls for an examination of the factors hindering the translation of progressive legal

strides into practical implementation. The following part of this discussion taps into two factors, religious background and parental resistance, which, in my view, are not only hampering progress but also reinforcing the status quo, thereby perpetuating a climate where marginalised voices remain sidelined thereby causing the genuine acceptance and recognition of LGBTQ+ identities to remain a distant aspiration.

Religious Background

“Surely the most emotional and deeply embedded sources of antagonism toward gay and lesbian people are the positions of some organised religions” (Casper & Schultz, 1999, p. 19). In many societies, including Malta, as elucidated in the introductory chapter of this study, religious beliefs often play a significant role in shaping individuals’ values, attitudes, and perspectives on various social and moral issues, including those related to gender and sexuality. When these beliefs come into contact with progressive and inclusive educational practices that aim to embrace LGBTIQ+ individuals and families, tensions typically arise. Borg (2020, p. 108) maintained that “with the Catholic Church being one of the main providers of education in Malta, the regulatory discourse on ‘deviant’ sexualities is maintained.” An Italian study which gathered data from 438 individuals who are studying to become teachers concluded that “pre-service teachers who practised the Catholic religion at the moment of the study were more likely to report sexist, homophobic and transphobic attitudes” (Scandurra et al., 2017, p. 255). Sanjakdar (2013), who conducted focus groups with 15 Australian Muslim teachers in which they discussed the topic of homosexuality, explained that these educators perceived themselves as guardians of their students’ moral development and the preservation of their Muslim identities within the context of a pluralistic society. Thus, the influence of religious background and values highlights the complexities of reconciling diverse worldviews within educational spaces.

Parental Resistance

“Discourses of freedom of conscience, parental rights/home authority, and child protection become the discursive resources available to and mobilised by heteroactivists to frame schools as ideally value-neutral (yet heterosexual) public spaces” (Kitching, 2022, p. 14). Bartulović and Kušević (2023, p. 19) note “the role of parental resistance in preserving LGBT taboos in education.” In this light, the watchful eyes of parents over contentious topics, particularly, LGBTIQ+ matters, might lead teachers to exercise caution, or avoidance, when incorporating resources related to same-sex families in their lessons (Michaud & Stelmach, 2019). Hence, parental resistance is described as a “gatekeeping mechanism” which is exerting a substantial influence on the extent to which LGBTIQ+ inclusion is achieved within educational settings; that is, parental resistance manifests as a hindrance to the broader integration of LGBTIQ+ perspectives, discussions, and materials within the curriculum (Hermann-Wilmarth & Ryan, 2019, p. 89). Informational gaps evidently contribute to parental resistance. For instance, as highlighted in the initial chapter, a local incident unfolded in 2015 when Malta’s Minister of Education encountered substantial parental opposition in response to proposed distribution of LGBTIQ+ themed literature to state primary schools (Diacono, 2015). The concerned parents contended that this initiative amounted to indoctrinating children to which Evarist Bartolo, the Minister of Education at the time, responded that “people who are currently criticising the books are creating a monstrosity that doesn’t exist” (Diacono, 2015, para. 3). The viewpoint of the protesting parents aligns with the notion of the so-called “gay agenda,” which is a widely debunked concept employed to evoke fear and suspicion about LGBTIQ+ individuals who are falsely accused to be actively working to manipulate, influence and corrupt society, particularly young minds (Walton, 2014).

Care and Love

At the end of the day “we have a duty of care to all groups in our society, particularly to those who are vulnerable” (Knight et al. 2017 p. 375). In the realms of research and education, Goldstein (2021, p. 153, 154) avows care as a “core value” and conceptualises it as “a political form of resistance [...] and an opportunity and responsibility rather than a burden.” By side-lining the duty of care and thus, passively allowing that the unjust existing state of affairs is perpetuated, we are doing a disservice to gay and lesbian headed families and this also has repercussions on the educational experiences of their children. hooks (2001, p. 5) explains that the provision of care is merely a singular aspect of love and thus, an act of care does not automatically translate to an act of love since “to truly love we must learn to mix various ingredients - care, affection, recognition, respect, commitment, and trust, as well as honest and open communication.” In this regard, any act of love involves a conscious decision to actively love as opposed to an instinctual happenstance since when we love, we are making the willful choice to do so (hooks, 2001). Applying the notion of love as a deliberate and intended volition to the field of education, Van Horn (2022, p. 3) accentuates the fact that “we have the power to decide whose voices will be heard and silenced, who will be (un)safe, and who will be (dis)honoured.” Biana (2021, p. 128) spells out hook’s concept of love by describing that “the practice of love is a way out of oppression” since the employment of the act of love is what will bring about “the toppling down of dominant, oppressive structures and systems.” Conceived in this way, it may be argued that the negative experiences narrated by gay and lesbian parents in the preceding literature demonstrate an absence of love in educational institutions towards gay and lesbian headed families. Embracing a practice of love towards rainbow families does not only have the potential to foster a sense of belonging and acceptance for the gay and lesbian parents and their children but also contribute to the broader dismantling of oppressive norms and the

promotion of social justice within the educational system. As Cohen, Duarte and Ross (2023, p. 110) put it “we create homes out of the abundance of love and resilience we learned from recognising the toxicity of our educational spaces.” All in all, the educational system needs to be called out for ostentatiously operating under descriptions of equality without actually putting in the required love to materialise all the principled ideals that there are on paper.

Conclusion

It is apparent that “limited research has investigated the experiences of LG families within the school context” (Prendergast & MacPhee, 2018, p. 29). The available literature explicates that, whilst a growing body of studies is pronouncing gay and lesbian parents’ positive experiences in terms of their children’s schooling (Grigoropoulos, 2021), this is often in correspondence with the parents’ extensive participation in their children’s school as a “form of protective self-advocacy” (Goldberg et al. 2020, p. 1658). Despite the emergence of a seemingly more tolerant backdrop, the narration of negative experiences by gay and lesbian parents, signifying their vulnerability to being othered, cannot be overlooked (Boertien & Bernardi, 2019). As movingly put by Goldstein (2019, p. 141) “creating a school culture that expects, accepts, and supports LGBTIQ students and families requires intentionality, advocacy, activism, allyship, a long-term commitment, and ... love.” Thus, for significant progress to occur, there is a pressing need to move from the published idealistic documentation to the meaningful materialisation of it.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Introduction

The principal aim of this study is to acquire a profound apperception of the experiences of married gay and lesbian Maltese couples in the education of their children. Owing to the fact that, on a global scale this is an under-researched area of study (McDonald & Morgan, 2019), and there is no local research on the subject, this dissertation starts to address this gap. This study seeks to give precedence to the encountered realities and viewpoints of married gay and lesbian Maltese parents who have school-aged children who attend schools locally. Heretofore, these lived experiences and worldviews have been unreservedly overlooked or side-lined. Thus, this study aspires to give insight into these formerly disdained realities. This chapter describes the research questions, theoretical framework, epistemology, ontology, research methodology, research method, sampling procedure and analytic method applied in this study. All are taken from a CP perspective which delves into the “relationship between culture and power, specifically as it translates into the everyday life of pedagogical theory and practice” (Weil, 1998, p. 25). Furthermore, this chapter also includes a discussion of the ethical considerations and reflexivity involved in this study.

Research Questions

This dissertation is guided by three research questions:

1. What are the positive and negative experiences of married gay and lesbian Maltese couples in the education of their children?
2. Do gay and lesbian Maltese couples feel included in the school community?
3. How may the experience of gay and lesbian couples and their children be improved?

These three research questions were intentionally formulated to address the central purpose of this study and effectively guide the rest of the research process. Hence, in a

collective manner, the three research questions direct the data gathering process pertinent to reaching the research objective, which is that of obtaining insightful understandings of the experiences of married gay and lesbian Maltese couples in the education of their children. The research objective can only be actualised once the research questions are thoroughly addressed.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework adopted in this study is CP, which is an educational philosophy and approach that aims to support educators in reshaping their teaching practices to empower all students, particularly in the context of contemporary society, due to the “increasingly power inscribed world where dominant modes of exclusion are continuously “naturalised” by power wielders’ control of information” (Kincheloe, 2008b, p. 9). Hence, CP “exists in the context of collective struggle for social justice and the dismantling of structures of oppression” (Mayo & Vittoria, 2021, p. 4). Incontrovertibly, CP's impetus is derived from politics, with its founding notions lying in Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and his “profound commitment to fight social injustices [and] recapture the loss of our dignity as human beings” (Macedo, in Freire, 2000a, p. 25).

CP, inspired by Freire (2000b), distinguishes between the banking system and the problem-posing system in his key foundational text, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. The banking system exemplifies the traditional pedagogical approach, which is characterised by the deposit of knowledge from the teacher to the acquiescent learners, who are reduced to passive repositories awaiting intellectual deposit. Pupils are here robbed of critical thinking and agency, eventually reproducing authoritarian hierarchies. In stark contrast, the problem-posing system offers a transformative educational praxis that succours active student participation and engagement. “Problem-posing education reaffirms human beings as Subjects, furnishes hope that the world can change, and, by its very nature, is necessarily

directed toward the goal of humanisation” (Roberts, 2000, p. 55). It promotes a collaborative environment in which students become co-creators of knowledge, while investigating and questioning societal conventions (Kincheloe, 2008b). As Freire (2000b, p. 81) puts it, “the students—no longer docile listeners—are now critical co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher.” In essence, in the problem-posing system “learners and educators obtain a critical distance from the world they know to perceive it in a different and critical light” (Mayo, 2013, p. 10). As a result, using the problem-solving system promotes liberation, empowerment, and the quest of social justice (Shor, 1992).

Another central facet of the CP theoretical framework is the need to be “existentially self-reflective” (hooks, 2010, p. 182), that is, to be conscious of one’s own situation, or as Freire (2000b, p. 109) refers to it, to have “conscientização”, and to be critical of it. Gloria Watkins, known as bell hooks (2010, p. 183) observed that “the most vital, the most liberating strategy, that beloved teachers offered me, [...] was learning to be a critical thinker: to ask questions, to reserve judgement while putting together the who, what, when, where, why, and how.” Thus, nurturing students’ growth as critical thinkers is a fundamental component of cultivating conscientisation since it enables them to interact with the world in a manner that grants them insight into the functioning of society and their potential to effect change within it (hooks, 2010). Dialogue is the means through which individuals achieve “conscientização” (Freire, 2000b, p. 109). Shor (1992, p. 114) explains that “when educators offer problem posing, democratic dialogue in the classroom [...] they offer a critical rethinking of existing socialisation.” Dialectical dialogues stimulate critical thinking and enable students to recognise the intersections of power, culture, and politics (Giroux, 2011b). “A dialectic is that space between two opposing views or ideas that are incompatible or contradictory. It is also in that space that we are not sure where we fall” (Christensen & Aldridge, 2013, p. 8). Through dialogue, students can unpack how knowledge is constructed

and disseminated, recognising the influence of dominant ideologies (Apple, 2013). Roberts (2000, p. 146) explains that,

conscientisation and praxis ought to be seen as necessarily intertwined.

Conscientisation [...] is the reflective dimension of praxis. Hence, when one engages in praxis, one is of necessity being conscientised. Conscientisation occurs in the transforming moment where critical reflection is synthesised with action.

In this regard, critical consciousness pertains to the manner in which individuals cultivate a capacity for critical analysis, that is, they become critically literate, thereby enabling them to decipher and evaluate the oppressive societal systems, and subsequently take action to address the oppressive elements within the sociopolitical landscape (Freire, 2000b). Praxis, the process by which individuals, particularly within educational contexts, engage in a continuous cycle of critical reflection, practical action, and further reflection, is, fundamentally, the realisation of critical consciousness in action (Christensen & Aldridge, 2013).

CP enquires into the transforming potential of education and the role of hope in generating social change (Giroux, 2011b). “To attempt to do without hope, which is based on the need for truth as an ethical quality of the struggle, is tantamount to denying that struggle is one of its mainstays” (Freire, 2014, p. 11). According to hooks (1994, p. 72), hope is more than wishful thinking since it is “not a naive fantasy”; rather, it is a deeply founded confidence in the possibility of change and the quest of truth. Giroux (2011b, p. 122) articulates that “educated hope provides a vocabulary for challenging the presupposition that there are no alternatives to the existing social order, while simultaneously stressing the dynamic, still unfinished elements of a democracy to be realised.” In *Education for Critical Consciousness*, Freire (2021) demonstrates the manner in which critical consciousness and hope are mutually reinforcing concepts. Critical consciousness, which is fostered by the

problem-posing system, enables people to grasp the core causes of oppression and envision alternatives. Hope, on the flip side of the coin, provides encouragement, resilience, and confidence in their acts' transforming power.

CP discusses the importance of coherency between what we preach and what we live. Freire (2000a, p. 43) describes an "indispensable virtue, namely that of coherence" which contrives the notion that educators are to embody the ideals they teach, avoiding inconsistencies between their words and deeds. By aligning their praxis with their teaching, educators become genuine catalysts for social change and liberation (hooks, 1994). Furthermore, CP highlights the significance of personal experiences and active listening. hooks (1994) advocates for educators to listen attentively to students, valuing their perspectives and narratives. McLaren (2015) puts stress on the fact that what is entirely unacceptable within democratic education is when educators, whether overtly or covertly, enforce their personal interpretation of the world onto their students. Drawing on the works of John Dewey, Kincheloe (1991) envisions an ideal democratic educational model, in which schools do not impose predefined social roles or career objectives on students. Instead, the primary emphasis lies in cultivating profound critical thinking, independent thought, and a comprehensive exploration of the entire spectrum of human experiences with the goal of equipping students with the ability to autonomously determine their most suitable career paths. Kincheloe (1991) explains that such educational institutions play a liberating role, emancipating students from ignorance, and allowing them to make informed choices about their future endeavours. By incorporating personal experiences and actively listening, democratic education becomes a dialogical process that respects the learners' agency and empowers them to critically engage with their own realities and the world around them (Giroux, 2011b). Fundamentally, hooks (2010, p. 17) explained that "democracy thrives in an environment where learning is valued, where the ability to think is the mark of responsible

citizenship, where free speech and the will to dissent is accepted and encouraged.” For this reason, “the future of democratic education will be determined by the extent to which democratic values can triumph over the spirit of oligarchy that seeks to silence diverse voices, prohibit free speech, and deny citizens access to education” (hooks, 2010, p. 17).

From a CP stance, in an educational framework, neutrality is illusory (Apple, 2013). As attested by Freire (2000b, p. 81) in *The Pedagogy of Freedom* “no one can be in the world, with the world, and with others and maintain a posture of neutrality.” In the realm of education, Apple (2013, p. 23) articulated that education can never be neutral since it is inherently inveigled by values, beliefs, and biases: “Education is not a neutral activity, it is intimately connected to multiple relations of exploitation, domination, and subordination—and very importantly to struggles to deconstruct and reconstruct these relations.” It is against this background that CP aids us in identifying that “even ostensibly benign curricula and a range of social messages include powerful ideological messages promoting hegemonic interests” (Hyslop-Margison & Dale, 2010 p. 159). Indeed, Steinberg and Kincheloe (2006) contended that educators are required to acknowledge their own positionalities and embrace a critical stance that challenges oppressive systems. This is because power relationships emerging from dialogue is a fundamental concept in CP (Freire, 2000b).

A CP framework distinguishes between authority and authoritarianism. Shor (1996) stressed the contrast between authority and authoritarianism in his understanding of CP by clarifying that authoritarianism denotes repressive and hierarchical power systems that discourage critical thinking and discourse, whereas authority reflects the legitimate competence and knowledge that educators possess. Whilst authority is not inherently negative, deliberate efforts to challenge and diminish the authoritarian elements within the educators’ authority are imperative (Shor, 1996). Thus, in a CP framework, teachers have a “counterhegemonic role” since they have the duty to “actively contest existing relations of

power and privilege” (McLaren, 2015, p. 185). hooks (2010) advocates for democratic educational circumstances that respect the authority of teachers while encouraging democratic involvement, shared decision-making, and collaborative idea exchange, ultimately confronting oppressive authoritarian regimes. As phrased by Giroux (1997, p. 103), “the concept of emancipatory authority suggests that teachers are bearers of critical knowledge, rules, and values through which they consciously articulate and problematise their relationship to each other, to students, to subject matter, and to the wider community.” Hence, “any relinquishing of authority must be strategic and never compromise the ability of the teacher to direct the dialogue in ways that both deepen and extend self and social analysis” (McLaren, 2015, p. 185).

Correspondingly, the scope of this dissertation is to confront the prevailing social injustices in relation to gay and lesbian married parents in Malta in the context of their children’s educative experiences. By critically analysing power relations, this study can unveil the heteronormative assumptions and discriminatory practices that impact these families, shedding light on oppressive structures within society. CP offers a theoretical foundation for this study to centrally position the voices of the gay and lesbian parents so as to acknowledge their experiences and perspectives as deserving of being recognised and understood in order for the system to be truly socially just. “Critical pedagogy isn’t a talk-liberals talk. CP takes language from the radical - radicals must do” (Steinberg, 2007, p. ix). “Critical pedagogy attempts social reformation” (Ayoub Mahmoudi, Khoshnood & Babaei, 2014, p. 86). Thus, this study utilises CP in an attempt to uncover and critically analyse the dominant ideologies that underpin the educational system and empower a minority whose realities and requirements are recurrently side-lined.

Epistemology

“An epistemology is a collection of theses or beliefs” regarding knowledge (Hetherington 2019, p. 26). Thus, epistemology relates to acquiring an understanding of the nature of knowledge and how this knowledge is formed, reasoned and appraised (Kincheloe, 2008b). According to the Oxford Dictionary of Education, since “epistemology addresses the issue of what counts as knowledge”, it relates to “how knowledge is recognised as knowledge, ways of getting it (methodology), and its relation to reality, truth, certainty, and cultural differences” (Wallace, 2015, p. 100). This study, basing itself on CP, will be utilising Paulo Freire’s social constructivist epistemology. Constructivism can be defined as an epistemological approach to knowledge acquisition and meaning-making, wherein individuals actively construct their understanding of self, school, everyday experiences, and society through reflective processes (Hirtle, 1996). This perspective, as opposed to realism, posits that knowledge and meaning are not pre-existing entities; contrariwise, they are products of social construction (Scotland, 2012).

Social constructivists within a Critical pedagogical framework argue that meaning and knowledge are not only produced by individuals in isolation, but arise via the combined efforts of individuals within a social environment (Powell & Kalina, 2009). Taking a social constructivist epistemology, it can be denoted that knowledge is not merely an authentic reflection of reality; contrastingly, it is fundamentally formed by the principles, ideologies and power relations of those who produce and use it while they enter into dialogue with each other (Kincheloe, 2008a). The fact that humans use language already demonstrates to social constructivists that meaning is formed by an entire community rather than by individuals in isolation. Following a social constructivist slant, language occupies the position of an intermediary which connects the learner and the surrounding environment, thereby instigating the moulding and broadening of understanding (Hirtle 1996). For social constructivism,

meaning and knowledge are not a matter of discovering what has been created for us but we become the creators of knowledge by entering into dialogue with each other and challenging each other's thoughts and beliefs (Kincheloe, 2008b). Curiosity is recognised as a critical component in the formation of knowledge in Freire's social constructivist epistemology. It is considered as a dynamic and active process of questioning, searching, and seeking clarification while entering into dialogue with each other and constructing knowledge (Freire, 2000b).

Consequently, the selected epistemology is salient to the research in question since the eventual objective is that of unveiling and confronting the power imbalances and established socially unjust systems of knowledge thereby empowering gay and lesbian parents who are combating the heteronormative educational institution as well as the broader institutional systems. In this manner, the social constructivist epistemology which has been employed strives to enable the empowerment of gay and lesbian parents via profoundly comprehending and voicing their worldview and critically questioning the dominant knowledge systems that indisputably preserve and propagate their marginalisation. Thus, more socially just consensuses of knowledge can start to be crafted.

Ontology

Ontology is described as “the nature of reality and being” (Ponterotto, 2005, p. 127). Hence, Kincheloe (2008b) goes on to elucidate that ontology is related to the characteristics and configuration of reality, and an inquest regarding the degree of conceivability of that said reality. Thus, the vitality of the researcher's positionality about reality and its operationality becomes central (Scotland, 2012). This study has employed the ontological position of historical realism. “Historical realism is the view that reality has been shaped by social, political, cultural, economic, ethnic, and gender values” (Scotland, 2012, p. 13). This methodically aligns with CP, which I will be using as my theoretical framework, in which

emphasis is assigned to realities which are brought about through relations of political powers that are socially and historically founded (Kincheloe, 2008b). This is tightly linked to CP's notion of historicity which underscores the idea that historical settings and situations shape persons and society (Freire, 2000b). It entails comprehending the historical processes, events, and power dynamics that have had an impact on our lives (McLaren, 2015; Steinberg & Kincheloe, 2006). Individuals can contextualise their experiences and engage in transformative action towards social justice and freedom by acquiring a critical awareness of historicity (Freire, 2000b; Steinberg & Kincheloe, 2006).

In compliance with the aforementioned notion, CP's ontological principle of human unfinishedness reflects the idea that human beings are not static or complete entities, thus, our inherent state of incompleteness as human beings serves as the foundation for understanding how knowledge is formed (Darder, 2011; Giroux, 2011b). Human unfinishedness implies that we are not complete or final beings, but rather we are in a constant state of growth and development owing to the fact that humans possess the capacity for continuous learning, transformation, and critical consciousness (Mayo, 2006). One of Freire's (2000b), who is one of the main fathers of CP, central insinuations was that being a complete human being necessitates facing the world in a critical manner by posing inquiries regarding how the existing social relations were created and by delving into what maintains them. According to Freire (2000b), the recognition of our unfinished nature manifests in two salient outcomes. Firstly, it engenders a continuous state of inquiry and exploration, instrumental in the construction of knowledge. Secondly, this ongoing process of searching holds transformative potential, fostering personal growth and enabling collective change. Collectively, this warrants the construction and reconstruction of knowledge.

Thus, a core notion of historical realism is that there is the capacity for reality to be altered via human conduct and consequently, reality, as it is contextually understood, needs to

be uncovered and confronted in a critical manner for social justice to transpire (Scotland, 2012). It is against this background that the chosen ontology is concomitant to the research in question. The study intends to tap into the lived reality of gay and lesbian Maltese married parents and uncover the veracities they experience in the current local context. In this manner, the reality of married gay and lesbian Maltese couples in the education of their children can be disclosed, critically analysed and an aspiration towards an enriched reality characterised by more social justice can start to be shaped.

Methodology

“At its core, qualitative research is about capturing some aspect of the social or psychological world. It records the messiness of real life, puts an organising framework around it and interprets it in some way” (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p. 20). A qualitative research design supports the obtainment of a thorough understanding of distinctive worldviews (Landridge, 2004). Alternatively, a quantitative methodology refers to the gathering and analysis of numerical data, which allows for precise measurement and statistical analysis since it prioritises objectivity, generalisation and hypothesis testing (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007). In this respect, a qualitative methodology is deemed more fitting than a quantitative methodology for my research as the former recognises the centrality of meanings which differing participants attribute to their lived experiences thereby necessitating rich descriptions, rather than numerical portrayals, of meanings and experiences (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). In essence, when a qualitative research design is adopted, the intent is that of establishing an “in-depth synthesis, analysis, and interpretation of what it means to live as members of groups and in human societies” (Durdella, 2017, p. 6). Hence, empathy is a crucial skill through which the researcher gains entry to, and comprehends, the participants’ distinct realities via the participant's own verbalisations and behaviour (Taylor, Bogdan & DeVault, 2016).

The merits of the qualitative methodology made it suitable for the research in question since the intention is to unveil previously concealed realities and so, give voice to a minority in our Maltese society. Thus, this study empowers gay and lesbian couples, whose somewhat newly-founded realities, that is, raising children in a self-contradictory heteronormative society, have not yet been heard, let alone considered. Hence, a qualitative methodology made it possible to gather a first-hand detailed depiction of their framing of the phenomenon in question. Within this frame of reference, it is recognised that implementing a qualitative methodology opens a window of opportunity for the gathering of valuable insights about the experiences of married gay and lesbian Maltese couples in the education of their children. These said insights are not solely paramount in terms of shedding light on the experiences of gay and lesbian parents, however, they may provide eye-opening realisations which are requisite as a pediment for the cultivation of an educational system which is more inclusive and supportive of gay and lesbian parents and which are more in line with the NCF (2012) which emphasises the concept of *Education for Diversity* but which never mentions rainbow families and their realities in schools.

To sum up, a qualitative methodology allowed for a more thorough look at the multifaceted nature of same-sex parenting in the context of their children's education. A qualitative methodology enabled a deeper understanding of the diverse and individualised experiences of married gay and lesbian parents in Malta, allowing their voices to be heard and offering valuable insights for promoting inclusivity, challenging stereotypes, and advocating for supportive policies and practices.

Research Method

The qualitative methodology was supported by a qualitative research method, that is, semi-structured, face-to-face interviews. "Characteristic of its unique flexibility, the semi-structured interview is sufficiently structured to address specific dimensions of your research

question while also leaving space for study participants to offer new meanings to the topic of study” (Galletta, 2013, p.1-2). Through the use of open-ended questions, the research method proved to be a practical and interactive method of data collection which permitted the participants to unreservedly share their lived experiences, subsequently allowing me to gain a profounder insight of their vantage points (Bryne, 2004).

Since each couple was interviewed together as a pair, they could communicate in a dynamic and synergistic way. This made it possible for each couple to build on and complement each other's remarks, resulting in a more detailed comprehension of their shared experiences. The interview setting stimulated conversation, allowing for a more in-depth investigation of their perspectives and increasing the data's richness. Joint semi-structured interviews with each couple provided purposeful, accurate and deep explanations into their lived experiences as parents in the setting of their childrens' schools. The couple's interviews together provided a thorough knowledge of how they navigate and engage with the education system as a unit. It allowed them to voice their shared ideas, positives, as well as the concerns, about their children's education and the current reality which they are faced with. I gathered insights into how the couple collaboratively interact with school policies, talk with teachers and other school staff, and promote their children's academic and social growth by studying their joint interaction. Furthermore, the pair was able to affirm one another's narratives, confirm their shared experiences, and provide mutual support in the face of potential impediments or discrimination through joint interviews. Additionally, in the organisation and planning of the semi-structured interviews, interviewing the couple together was more time-efficient and logistically practical. It eliminated the need for many individual interviews, which sped up the data collection process.

The interview schedule was based on the research extrapolated from the extensive literature review I did (Appendix A). In semi-structured interviews, an interview schedule is a

flexible guide or framework used by researchers to structure the interview process while allowing for open-ended and exploratory converses (Bearman, 2019). In other words, it is a list of questions that the researcher plans to discuss during the interview which serves as a structure for ensuring that major topics of interest are addressed while also allowing for the participants' idiosyncratic viewpoints and experiences to emerge (Bearman, 2019).

Throughout the data collection process, the interview schedule was used as a guideline rather than as a fixed documentation which needed to be rigorously adhered to in a standardised manner. In this way, the interviewees were given the time to converse on matters which are significant to them, even if these had not been foreseen by the researcher (Braun & Clarke, 2013). The scheduled date and time of the interview, as well as the meeting place at which the interview took place, were selected by the gay and lesbian parents themselves. The interview with each couple lasted one hour.

On this basis, semi-structured, face-to-face interviews were a fitting data collection method for this study since they provided married gay and lesbian Maltese parents a space to flexibly articulate their lived experience with regards to the education of their children with the intention of decreasing their invisibility to the system which may be paired to the long term objectives of creating a more just educational system, eliminating within the educational system the reproduction of hetero and cisnormativity, making gay and lesbian married parents feel included and hopefully also improve curricular practices. Hence, once again, the vitality of using CP as a theoretical framework comes across. CP is political because it recognises that education is inextricably interwoven with power relations, social inequality, and political processes (Freire, 2000a). The significance of tackling issues of power, privilege, and marginalisation within educational contexts is emphasised by CP, as is in this study. The research findings of this study, expedited by the semi-structured interviews, can

raise awareness of structural inequities, allowing for advocacy for fully equitable practices that actualise that which is written on paper.

Sampling Unit and Size

In view of the fact that the study is entitled “the experiences of married gay and lesbian Maltese couples in the education of their children”, the suitable study population was married gay and lesbian Maltese parents who currently have school-aged children attending school in Malta. Given the nature and scope of the dissertation, “good informants” were those who were “articulate, reflective and... interested in sharing the information with the interviewers” (Shaheen, Pradhan & Ranajee, 2019, p. 26). The sample in this study consists of three gay and three lesbian parents who fit the inclusion criteria formerly mentioned. The ages of the participants range from thirty-eight to fifty-two years. The ages of their children range from six to sixteen years thereby ensuring representation in both the primary and secondary sectors of the local educational system.

Parent 1 (Name, Age)	Parent 2 (Name, Age)	Children (Name, Age)		School Sector
Nadia, 45	Pam, 45	Emma, 13	James, 14	Independent
Rebecca, 46	Sarah, 43	Kim, 6	Leah, 16	Independent
Lisa, 52	Janet, 51	Francesco, 8		Church
Nick, 52	David, 38	Paul, 7	Stefan, 10	State
William, 47	John, 45	Adam, 12	Tim, 15	Independent
Robert, 55	Thomas, 44	George, 8		Independent

Table 1 *Participant Profiles*

Note. This table demonstrates the informants’ names, ages as well as their childrens’ names, ages and sector of school attended.

As elucidated by Vasileiou, Barnett, Thorpe and Young (2018, p. 1), in qualitative studies, selecting a sample size which is considered to be acceptable is “an area of conceptual debate and practical uncertainty”. The sample size was considerably smaller than what is characteristically requisite in quantitative research designs since the cynosure was not that of generalisability, but rather, a matter of attaining a profound apperception of the phenomenon in question (Gill, 2020). Nevertheless, efforts were made to ensure diversity within the chosen sample by ascertaining discrepancies between the couples' demographic characteristics, socioeconomic backgrounds, and individual experiences in the context of being married same-sex parents in Malta. These distinctions may contribute to variances in their general experiences, attitudes, challenges, and support networks among the participant couples. For instance, the study's sample, which comprises of six couples, consists of one couple who enrolled their child to a church school, one couple who enlisted their children to a state school, and the remaining four couples who registered their children to the independent sector. The sample distribution suggests a higher share of couples with children attending independent schools, whereas attendance at church and state schools is lower. This uneven distribution will be considered when interpreting the data, since the experiences and viewpoints of parents and children attending various types of schools may be influenced by the educational contexts in which they are engaged.

Sampling Procedure

The sampling procedure applied was that of purposive sampling. The purposive sampling procedure “is typically used in qualitative research to identify and select the information-rich cases for the most proper utilisation of available resources” (Etikan, Musa & Alkassim, 2015, p. 2). Hence, this sampling technique was reasoned to be the most fitting for the study since it entailed the intentional selection of research participants who were able to provide responses which aptly answered the research questions (Gentles, Charles, Ploeg, &

McKibbon, 2015). In this case, in keeping with the research questions of this study, during the semi-structured interviews, the contributors willingly conversed about their positive and negative experiences in the education of their children, their perceived levels of inclusion in the school community, and the ways in which their experience can be improved.

The participants were recruited through the socio-political, non-governmental organisation the MGRM and also through personal contacts. MGRM endeavours to attain an unprejudiced state of embracive equality in status, rights and opportunities for LGBTIQ+ individuals on the Maltese islands (MGRM, n.d.), thus, their mission is appropriately aligned with that of this study. I initially approached MGRM via email. As a researcher, I contacted MGRM to request their help in recruiting participants for my study. I initially approached them via email. Ensuingly, the MGRM coordinator and I held a video call during which I described the proposed research questions and objectives. Following our talk, MGRM agreed to assist me with participant recruiting, recognising the importance of the research and its potential impact. Their agreement was confirmed both verbally and through an email (Appendix B) which was shared with the Faculty Research Ethics Committee (FREC) of the Faculty of Education as proof of having MGRM as a cooperating institution. I contacted MGRM again after receiving ethical clearance for the study and provided them with a recruitment letter (Appendix C). The recruitment letter was then shared by MGRM to members of the Rainbow Families Network who might be interested in sharing their lived experiences thereby getting involved in the study. Subsequently, Maltese gay and lesbian married couples that have school-aged children attending school locally who were keen on participating in the dissertation contacted me either via email or WhatsApp. At this point, a digital copy of the information letter and consent form was forwarded to the interested couples through email. If the couple decided to participate, we came together to set up an interview day and time that was convenient for both parties.

Bearing in mind that there are few gay and lesbian married couples in Malta who have school-aged children, the specificity of the sample made the participant recruitment process quite a challenging one. Considering that it proved difficult to find six couples that satisfied the inclusion criteria, I also turned to personal relationships to help with participant recruitment. I was able to recruit two out of the six couples included in the study through personal ties, mainly, through friends of friends. I contacted them personally by private messaging on Facebook or WhatsApp, explaining the study and inviting them to participate in it.

Analytic Method

Even though data analysis is the part of qualitative research which is the most complex, it is concurrently the stage which obtains the least deliberation in the literature (Thorne, 2000). Given this insight, the selection and application of the analytic method was given its due weighting during this study. Thematic analysis was used to qualitatively analyse the collected data. Braun and Clarke (2013, p. 175) define thematic analysis as “a method for identifying themes and patterns of meaning across a dataset in relation to a research question.” In essence, thematic analysis is known for being a “flexible systematic approach” in which patterns that emerge from a data set can be identified, examined and recounted (Ozuem, Willis & Howell, 2022, p. 145). Given that the analysis of the obtained data was underpinned by the theoretical framework of the study, CP, it was indispensable to note that “similar to interpretivism, analysis often involves thematic interpretation of data; however, explicit values are now placed on these interpretations” (Scotland, 2018, p. 14). In this case, a critical lens was applied in order to evaluate the power dynamics and social inequalities that characterise the educational system in relation to gay and lesbian parents.

Braun and Clarke (2006) recommend six central steps to be adhered to when undertaking thematic analysis. The researcher must first acquaint oneself with the dataset.

Secondly, preliminary codes are to be produced. The third step involves looking for themes. Fourthly, the researcher is to reassess the previously drawn themes. The fifth step comprises of giving a definition and title to the selected themes. Lastly, the researcher is to construct a report which reflects the selected themes. The six aforementioned phases made it relatively straightforward to apply this analytic method and hence, this approach was chosen due to it being an accessible mode of analysis. “Through its theoretical freedom, thematic analysis provides a flexible and useful research tool, which can potentially provide a rich and detailed, yet complex, account of data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 78).

Whilst applying these steps to my research study, I gave particular attention to the fourth step which entailed the reassessment of the initial themes that were sketched out. Since the theoretical framework of my study is CP, I made sure to acknowledge the prominence of the participants’ active involvement and contribution throughout the research process (Creswell, 2009). This is since the core idea is that of carrying out the research *with* the participants in question rather *for* them (Freire, 2000a). Hence, whilst I was reassessing the themes, “member checks” were employed with the research participants so as to have an assurance of correctness and accurateness in the understanding and presentation of the participants’ lived experiences as well as to empower them to take ownership in the research process (Kornbluh, 2015). Hence, the gay and lesbian parents that participated in the semi-structured interviews were contacted in order to provide feedback on the analyses that were being made. The feedback of participants was taken up prior to the continuation of the data analysis.

To sum up, thematic analysis was regarded as being a suitable analytic method for this study since it supported the identification of patterns and themes in the dataset which offered nuanced knowledge of the positive and negative experiences of married gay and lesbian Maltese couples in the education of their children. Additionally, thematic analysis

supported the discernment of the levels of perceived inclusion in the local school communities and the critical analysis of the ways in which the experience of gay and lesbian parents and their children in the local schooling context be improved. Thus, empowerment of gay and lesbian parents is made possible through the developed recommendations for change which have emerged as a consequence of the study's conclusions.

Trustworthiness and Rigour: Transparency, Member Checks and Critical Reflexivity

Trustworthiness and rigour are two crucial notions in the development, conduction, implementation and analysis of research which inter-relatedly contribute towards quality in qualitative research (Creswell, 2013). Since this research aspires to contribute to the body of local educational research in a sound manner, these two aforementioned conceptualisations, trustworthiness and rigour, are given their due consideration in this section.

Trustworthiness may be described as the extent to which the conclusions of the study are a truthful reflection of the veracities of the participants of the research (Stahl & King, 2020). "To develop trustworthiness in qualitative research, Lincoln and Guba (1985) initially presented four criteria: credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. In 1994, Guba and Lincoln added a fifth criterion, authenticity" (Cope, 2014, p. 89). When these criteria are diligently adhered to, the research process is said to be rigorous (Maher, Hadfield, Hutchings & de Eyto, 2018). In qualitative studies, rigour relates to the degree to which the research process is meticulous and systematic (Mays & Pope, 1995). "All this rigour is to a purpose, for it is precisely this that renders the outcomes of research more deserving of belief than those that might issue from thought, inquiry or any other source that lacked these features" (Bridges, 2019, p. 500-501).

According to Adler (2022, p. 600), the most significant contributor in attaining trustworthiness in qualitative research is transparency which conveys the idea that "not only should the research techniques be precisely spelled out, but also that the epistemological and

theoretical bases of the work must be made explicitly apparent”. Closa (2021) also highlights the vitality of transparency in qualitative research due to the subjectivist stance that is recurrently adopted. In this regard, this chapter in this study endeavours to provide the readers of the study with full transparency.

In order to meet the criterium of trustworthiness, a number of practices were put into place during this study. Given that this dissertation uses CP as the theoretical framework, as a researcher, I gave particular consideration to the potential power dynamics that may be present between myself and the participants. Since my ultimate intention was that of empowering gay and lesbian parents via giving prominence to their lived experience, I wanted to assure that throughout the research process, any prevailing power disparities were not reinforced. In order to combat the matter of power differentials, member checks were extensively employed so as to solicit the opinions of the contributors on the research outcomes. “Member checks” are deliberated to be “the gold standard for establishing trustworthiness” in qualitative research studies (Kornbluh, 2015, p. 397). I followed Kornbluh’s (2015) suggestion of working on having equitable and authentic interactions with the research contributors in order to eliminate any potential perceptions that participants may have in terms of viewing me as an expert and thus, undermining their own fundamental contributions. Additionally, I also followed the suggestion of deliberately informing the participants of the selected research design and analytic method so as to further empower the participants in the provision of cognisant feedback during the progression of the study.

Another practice that was undertaken during this study in order to meet the criterium of trustworthiness was that of critical reflexivity. When planning and executing qualitative research, critical reflexivity, that is, the researcher’s engagement in a critical introspection, is vital throughout the research process in order to meet trustworthy standards (Mason, 2002). More specifically, critical reflexivity may be defined as the “set of continuous, collaborative,

and multifaceted practices through which researchers self-consciously critique, appraise, and evaluate how their subjectivity and context influence the research processes” (Olmos-Vegaa, Stalmeijer, Varpio & Kahlke, 2023 p. 242). Hence, the ongoing process of critical reflexivity is related to the identification of the researcher’s positionality in terms of the values that are upheld and any other contextual information or prior experientiality in relation to the phenomenon in question which have the capacity of biasing the research process (Underwood, Satterthwait, Bartlett, 2010). Throughout the entire process of the research, I engaged in critical self-reflections on several matters such as my own social position, my social location relative to that of the participants in the study, my role in the solicitation of frank and authentic accounts from the study’s participants, the potential implications of the study’s conclusions, and the ways in which the prospective implications will have a weighting on the contributors’ willingness to restfully specify candid responses. I kept track of these self-reflections in a reflective journal.

Remarkably, in the context of research which is underpinned by the tenets of CP, critical reflexivity is not merely “a concept of qualitative validity, but also as a tool for achieving the emancipatory goals intrinsic to qualitative research conducted from a critical paradigm” (McCabe & Holmes, 2009, p. 1519). McCabe and Holmes (2009) elucidate that the utilisation of “expanded reflexivity” has the potential of enabling the researcher to recognise and foster “subtle forms of change within (and for) both participants and the researchers themselves, thus resulting in a deeper, more organic change over time” (p. 1525). This viewpoint highly impacted the way in which I approached my research since it made me aware of the great potentiality of the research which goes well beyond the reliance of the emancipation of gay and lesbian parents via visible changes in society.

Ethical Considerations

The Dissertation Proposal Form was approved by the MTL Dissertation Board on the 6th of April 2022 (Appendix D). The Research Ethics and Data Protection Form was approved by the Faculty Research Ethics Committee (FREC) of the Faculty of Education on the 3rd of August 2022 (Appendix E). Thus, the ethical soundness of the study was professionally weighed before the commencement of the dissertation. The objectives of abiding by ethical standards is “to protect participants and researchers, minimise harm, increase the sum of good, assure trust, ensure research integrity, satisfy organisational and professional demands, and cope with new and challenging problems from concern to conduct” (Aluwihare-Samaranayake, 2012, p. 65).

“The principles of privacy, confidentiality and anonymity... are basic principles of human dignity” (Mero-Jaffe, 2011, p. 241). Compatibly, the leading ethical concern during this study was the likelihood that the participants may be identifiable because of the specificity of the sample, that is, there are few gay and lesbian married couples in Malta who have school-aged children. This ethical concern was overcome through acquiring informed consent from the study’s participants. An information letter (Appendix F) and a consent form (Appendix G) were prepared. These documents clearly highlighted the possibility of being identified due to the specificity of the sample. A clear verbal explanation was also provided to each participant prior to the start of the semi-structured interview. Hence, the participants who voluntarily chose to take part were fully aware of this possibility and they signed a consent form which clearly explained this matter. The collection of primary data only started following the participants’ verbal and written approval. Thus, no form of coercion or deception was involved. Conversely, there was a respect towards the autonomy of the participants, that is, the notion that people should be allowed to make their own decisions about what works best for them and take charge of their own life (Hammersley & Traianou,

2012). Additionally, the notion of caring for the contributor's in order to ensure that no harm has been instigated was one of my main moral responsibilities as a researcher since I kept in mind that fact that the participants "entrust us with their most valuable possession: the stories that give meaning and purpose to their lives" (Pascoe Leahy, 2022, p. 791).

The commitment to ensure confidentiality was maintained throughout the research process. In qualitative research, confidentiality may be defined as the circumstance in which "researchers know the identity of the participant but commit to not revealing the person's participation and identity" (Roth & Von Unger, 2018, p. 8). For instance, since the semi-structured interviews were audio-recorded, the audio-recordings were transferred to an encrypted file on my password-protected laptop on the same day in which the respective interview took place. Due to the distinguishability of each participant's voice, the contributors were identifiable in the audio-recording, consequently, the recorded interviews were manually transcribed by myself in a private room. Additional security was provided through the use of earphones during the transcription process. The typed verbatim transcripts were pseudonymised, hence, the participants' identity was not noted on transcripts or notes from their interview. The pseudonymisation key, that is, the confidential documentation that links the pseudonyms used in the research data with the participants' real names and identifiers was stored securely and separately from the data, in a distinct encrypted document stored on my password-secured laptop. Access to this document was limited to the supervisor and myself.

The participants' identities were protected as much as possible when it came to the presentation of the research results in the results and discussion chapter of the dissertation. Direct identifying information which could be used to directly identify participants was excluded or concealed in the write-up. For instance, since there are only a few same-sex married parents in Malta and they could readily be identified, specific identifying information

such as their occupation, and whether they are the biological parents or whether the children have been adopted or fostered has been omitted. However, as previously stated, due to the nature of the study requiring the specific characteristics of the sample population, it is likely that there still is the possibility of identification through a combination of indirect identifying information and so, the adult participants acknowledged this fact prior to participating in this study.

In accordance with both the GDPR and national legislation, the participants were granted the right to access, correct, and where permissible, ask for the data about them to be deleted. Both the information letter and the consent form visibly specified that should the study's contributors decide to remove oneself from the dissertation, all the data gathered from their interview will be deleted as long as this is feasible, except if the deletion of their data would have compromised the attainment of the study's objectives, in which case their data would have been kept in an anonymised way. This reinforces the notion that during qualitative studies, "‘consent’ should be ongoing and renegotiated between [the] researcher and researched throughout the research process" (Miller & Bell, 2002, p. 61).

Conclusion

This chapter has offered a detailed account of the research objectives of the study and the research questions which have guided the entire research process. Furthermore, this chapter has addressed the ontology, epistemology and theoretical framework that this study has employed. These selections materialised in the choice of research methodology, research method, sampling process and analytic method. The practices applied in order to put forward a trustworthy and rigorous study were also transparently explicated. Finally, the ethical considerations that have been made were also described. The presentation and discussion of the results, in relation to the literature that was precedingly depicted is provided in the subsequent chapter of this study.

Chapter 4: Findings

Introduction

This chapter proffers the findings of the study which were emanated from the semi-structured interviews carried out with six married same-sex couples. All the participants referred to the significance of their married status since, apart from providing the legal recognition to their relationship, thereby granting the participants the same rights and responsibilities as opposite-sex couples, their married status ensures that both spouses have legal parental rights and responsibilities for their children. The data elucidates the positive and negative experiences of Maltese married gay and lesbian couples in the education of their children, the miseducative experiences that are presently hindering progress, and the recommendations for a way forward. This chapter details four central themes that address this study's research questions. The four themes materialised after the utilisation of the thematic analysis steps put forward by Braun and Clarke (2006). The following table illustrates the four superordinate themes along with their respective subthemes.

Themes	Subthemes
Theme 1: The Positive Experiences	1.1 High Perceived School Safety 1.2 A Sense of Normalcy 1.3 School Recognition and Praise 1.4 Children's Classroom Presentations 1.5 Invitations for Parents to Share their Experiences 1.6 Moments of Representation 1.7 Instances of Teacher Sensitivity 1.8 Instances of School Leadership Team (SLT) Sensitivity 1.9 Children's Peer Relationships 1.10 Seeing their Children Thrive

<p>Theme 2: The Negative Experiences</p>	<p>2.1 Invisibility in the Classroom 2.2 Non-inclusive School Forms 2.3 Exclusion by Other Parents 2.4 Instances of Bullying 2.5 Instances of Teacher Insensitivity 2.6 Instances of School Personnel & School Visitor Insensitivity 2.7 Obstructive Thoughts and Society’s Gaze</p>
<p>Theme 3: Miseducative Experiences</p>	<p>3.1 Lack of Teacher Preparedness 3.2 The Impact of Inadequate School Leadership for the LGBTIQ+ reality in schools 3.3 Fear of Parental Backlash 3.4 Roman Catholic Influence 3.5 Social Ignorance: Heteronormativity & Homophobia 3.6 Social Ignorance: Gender Stereotypes 3.7 Insufficient Utilisation of Resources 3.8 Unprioritised Area of Focus 3.9 Limited Awareness of Diversity and Intersectionalities</p>
<p>Theme 4: Recommendations</p>	<p>4.1 Bottom-up Approach 4.2 Top-down Approach 4.3 Improved Teacher Education Programmes 4.4 Continuous Professional Development 4.5 Increased Support to Educators 4.6 Normalising Rainbow Families</p>

Table 2 Themes and Subthemes

Theme 1: The Positive Experiences

1.1 High Perceived School Safety

When asked about their perceived levels of school safety, each of the six same-sex couples shared that, in their view, the school that their children attend ranks high in safety. For instance, Pam, whose two children are secondary school students in a private school,

explains that she is aware that whilst at school, her children are well looked after and so, has no concerns over her children's safety during school hours.

I think they're in a safe school. I don't have, jiena m'għandix inkwiet li nitlaq lejn ix-xogħol u ngħid x'biza', it-tfal tiegħi, nothing at all iġifieri. Moħħi mistrieħ li they're there, li they are going to be looked after. - **Pam**.

[I think they're in a safe school. I don't have, I don't have any worries about leaving for work and saying, how scary, my children, nothing at all. My mind is at rest that they're there, that they are going to be looked after. - **Pam**]

Nick, whose two children attend a small primary state school in the Northern Region of Malta, shares that his perception of safety in the school is partly attributable to the school's small size. He is mindful that this perception might shift as their children transition to a larger state secondary school.

So, basically, at this stage, the fact that in our case, that we live in a small village, it's a small school, everybody knows each other. And the fact that Paul started school from year one here and he will stay here up to year six, so far, we feel that he is safe. Even for Stefan, he started kinder and he will go up to year six. Then, when they go outside the village, which is a bigger school we don't know but maybe he can have issues but at this stage we feel safe - **Nick**.

For the interviewed same-sex parents, safety was a central factor in their school decision-making process. The four couples who chose to enrol their children in independent schools cited a heightened perception of bullying and consequently, a diminished sense of safety in public schools, particularly, in secondary public schools. Thomas, whose son has a disability, recounted observing a significant level of bullying targeting a fellow classmate with a disability during his own attendance at a government school. This firsthand experience served as a deterrent against enrolling their son in a public school. Additionally, two of the

couples, William and John, and Nadia and Pam, who reside in the Southern Eastern Region and the Southern Region of Malta respectively, commented that the catchment system did not work in their favour. In fact, Nadia stated “in senior school, I thought they might be bullied or ostracised. So we decided to fork out a lot of money, a LOT of money, to send them to a school we thought they would be safest in.” The use of capitalisation in the word “LOT” is due to the fact that, during the interview, Nadia stressed the high monetary cost of enrolling children in a private school.

1.2 A Sense of Normalcy

Out of the six gay and lesbian couples participating in this study, five alluded to the positive value of experiencing a sense of normalcy, wherein their identity as members of the LGBTIQ+ community does not result in differential treatment by the school community.

I think, from day one, we’ve felt, which is nice, we felt normalised. So, nobody made a fuss that it’s two men, so, let’s you know, let’s create special treatment, which, you know, I appreciate. We’re just two parents, we don’t want special treatments, so that I appreciated - **John**.

The participants of this study mentioned different members of the school community who contribute to their sense of normalcy in their roles as same-sex parents. To illustrate, Nick and David shared that their children’s LSEs extend the same respect to them as they would to heterosexual parents. Nadia and Pam feel treated in an ordinary manner by their children's teachers during parent-teacher meetings or whenever they visit the school. In fact, Pam stated “When we go to school, or have parent’s meetings for them, us being a mum and a mum is very normal.” Janet and Lisa, whose son attends a church school, recounted the school administration's invitation for Janet to read during a school mass, which to the couple affirmed that they were embraced in the community just like any other parents. Robert and Thomas, whose son attends a private school, voiced the deep resonance of being embraced by

the fellow parents, solidifying their perception of their normalcy within the school community.

Robert: Jien naħseb, you know, the welcoming from the parents on every occasion.

Thomas: Qisu qatt ma rawnha li ghax aħna gays u hekk. Qisna we adapted, like kif tgħid? Like normal people, qatt ma rajna ħazen.

Robert: Kif għedtlek, qatt, iġifieri issa qiegħed, Grade 4 qiegħed (it-tifel) u qatt ma kellna tipo...

Thomas: Anzi, they're very nice.

Robert: I think it's one of the things that kept us attracted to the school. Qisha l-iskola tagħna.

[**Robert:** I think, you know, the welcoming from the parents on every occasion.

Thomas: It's like they've never seen it because we're gay. It's like we adapted, like how can I say it? Like normal people, we never experienced bad intent.

Robert: As I told you, never, I mean now, he's in Grade 4 (their son) and we never had, kind of...

Thomas: On the contrary, they're very nice.

Robert: I think it's one of the things that kept us attracted to the school. It's like it's our school.]

1.3 School Recognition and Praise

In response to being asked about whether they perceive heightened scrutiny as same-sex parents, three out of the six couples narrated the recognition and praise of their care, commitment, and success in parenting within their children's educational environments. Rebecca and Sarah explain that during the period that their younger daughter attended nursery school, the initial curiosity of the educators, generated by their non-traditional family structure, evolved into a sense of admiration and commendation directed at the couple's

parenting skills. Hence, Rebecca stated “Aħna n-nursery kienu jgħidulna “Madonna kemm trabbuhom sew. Kemm intom ħelwin. Kemm nieħdu gost.” Kważi minn kurzitā jingibdu lejkh għax jibdew jgħidu “ara naqra għandna two mummies! Taf kemm jieħdu ħsiebhom?” [“At nursery they used to say to us “My goodness, you raise them so well. How sweet you are. We’re really happy.” They are drawn to you, almost out of curiosity, because they start saying “wow, we have two mummies! Do you know how much they care for them?”].

Nick and David explained that when they were faced with challenges, primarily because of their younger son’s disability, the school reassured them that it is not their fault. The couple share that the school management appreciates and acknowledges their dedicated care for their children, particularly, their active involvement and contributions as parents. Additionally, Nadia and Pam shared that the recognition and praise they receive from the school their children are enrolled in revolves around their status of adoptive parents of older children.

I don’t think we’re judged. Nahseb mill-iskola, as adoptive parents, whether it’s same sex or not, I think the fact that we adopted older kids, għandna din il-qisu l-lallu, tipu jinżawlha l-kappell, fhimt? We get that a lot. “Il-lallu kemm għamiltu good job.” - **Nadia.**

[I don't think we're judged. I think, from school, as adoptive parents, whether it's the same sex or not, I think the fact that we adopted older kids, we have this kind of wow factor, sort of, hats off to you, do you understand? We get that a lot. “Wow, what a good job you did.” - **Nadia]**

1.4 Children’s Classroom Presentations

Two of the interviewed same-sex couples, Nick and David, and Robert and Thomas, whose children are in the younger age group, recounted a positive occurrence when their children were afforded the opportunity to deliver class presentations that integrated their

family structure. Such opportunities allowed their rainbow family to be showcased within the classroom setting. These presentations had a special impact because they not only allowed the children to share their family's configuration but also educated their teachers, LSEs, and fellow classmates who do not appear to know much about the subject. The parents hold such experiences dear as, to them, it demonstrates how education can foster understanding in a meaningful and personal way. In fact, both couples mentioned that whenever their children have opportunities for classroom presentations, they ensure to include family photos in the PowerPoint to promote their family's visibility and representation.

David: There was one time that Paul did a project. It was very nice.

Nick: He needed to say something about himself so we created a 6-page presentation. The Portugal flag, plane, this is my family. The children (classmates), they started to ask him questions. You feel that the child is accepted.

David: He is teaching others now.

Nick: Exactly, so, even when he has other presentations like “what did you do in Christmas?” he always includes the parents. Because our scope is always the family. Through his presentations, then, we are also teaching his LSE, teacher, and the other kids as well. That is something that I will always remember.

1.5 Invitations for Parents to Share their Experiences

Four of the couples highlighted instances where the school extended invitations for them to share their experiences as a same-sex couple. Two couples, Nick and David, and William and John, explained that they were asked to share their lived experiences with fifth former students in a public school and a private school respectively. Additionally, William detailed that he was approached by the school to share his personal experience in a seminar attended by the school's teachers, right at the outset, when he and his husband enrolled their two sons in the school. This request was made in the context of them being the first same-sex

parents within that particular independent school community. Rebecca, through MGRM, gave a training session to all of the teachers who teach at the school in which her daughters are enrolled. Moreover, Lisa, who works in a church school in the Northern region of Malta, described the opportunity she had to narrate her story to the school staff and the auxiliary bishop, who was invited by the school for this particular staff seminar in order to pass what was said to the Synod of Bishops. Following the sharing of her experience, Lisa received a substantial amount of positive feedback from the teachers.

Jiena tkellimt, għax talabni ċ-chaplain tal-iskola, quddiem l-istaff kollu tas-sekondarja u tal-primarja, biex ngħid l-istorja tagħna, quddiem l-isqof iġifieri. U l-feedback li kelli mit-teachers, iġifieri tgħidx kemm għaddew granet, kuljum ikellimni xi ħadd. “Proset, proset”, kien enormi (ir-rispons) u kien hemm min baġtli messagġi, u kellmuni. Kien hemm wieħed partikolari iġifieri teacher kbir li suppost qiegħed irtirat iġifieri, gie, qalli “nista ngħannqek?” Qatt ma kellimtu kont iġifieri. Iġifieri, le, it-teachers apprezzaw ħafna. - **Lisa**

[I spoke, because the school chaplain asked me to, in front of all the secondary and primary staff, to tell our story, in front of the bishop that is. And the feedback I had from the teachers, I mean, as the days went by, someone different approached me everyday. “Well done, well done”, (the response) was huge and there were those who sent me messages, and talked to me. There was a particular one, that is, an older teacher who is supposed to be retired, he came, he said “can I hug you?” I mean, I had never spoken to him. I mean, no, the teachers really appreciated it. - **Lisa**]

1.6 Moments of Representation

Three of the couples recounted positive experiences which exemplify instances wherein they felt represented in their children’s schools. William and John elaborated on the school's annual concerts, with John noting that “the concerts always have a particular

message of inclusion and equality and love”. For Nadia and Pam, the act of representation unfolded through an encounter with their school's physical environment. They recalled a moment when they entered the school and were greeted by a staircase adorned with rainbow colours. They also recalled an episode in which their son returned home from school with a pamphlet from MGRM after the students had a talk by the organisation. Another instance emerged in the narrative of Rebecca and Sarah who recounted a memorable diversity day organised for secondary school students. This event took the innovative form of a human library, in which several individuals served as living books, sharing their personal experiences and narratives. Rebecca stated that “ħamsa mill-human books kienu LGBTIQ people. Fantastic hux?” [“five of the human books were LGBTIQ people. Fantastic, right?”]. Rebecca and Sarah also narrated a moment of representation in their younger daughter’s classroom. They explained that, initially, when confronted with a book depicting different family configurations in the classroom, their daughter openly mentioned her adoption but hesitated to share that she has two mothers. However, a peer inadvertently revealed her family configuration to the rest of the class which made their daughter feel shy. Two weeks later, during a designated diversity day, the teacher extended an invitation for their daughter to select and read a book to the class. Opting for *Heather Has Two Mummies*, their daughter took this opportunity to communicate her family structure. The parents observed a transformative progression from the initial guardedness to active engagement.

Kien hemm page jisimha *I am adopted*. It-tifla tagħna qalet “like me!” Kien hemm page oħra li tgħid *I have two mummies or I have two daddies* u t-tifla tagħna ma qalet xejn. Qabżet tifla oħra u qaltihom, li tiġi għandna ħafna, qaltihom, “like Kim, Kim has two mummies!” Kixfitha, qisu, she outed her (in class). [...] Għidtilha, “how did that make you feel?” Qaltli, “I was shy.” Għidtilha, “why were you shy?” Qaltli, “because no one has two mummies but there is another boy who is adopted.” So, it’s

all about being different you see. [...] Imbagħad ġimġhatejn wara, t-teacher, kellhom diversity day, u marret fil-klassi u qaltilha, “Kim you want to read another one of those books?” U qabdet Kim u ħadet *Heather Has Two Mummies*, veru ktieb ħelu li naqraw id-dar, u qratu lill-classroom hi stess. Qisu, on a second opportunity, she was okay talking about her own family through the book. - **Rebecca**.

[There was a page called *I am adopted*. Our daughter said “like me!” There was another page that said *I have two mummies or I have two daddies* and our daughter didn't say anything. Another girl spoke up and told them, she comes to our house a lot, she said, “like Kim, Kim has two mummies!” She exposed her, it's like, she outed her (in class). [...] I said to her, “how did that make you feel?” She told me, “I was shy.” I said to her, “why were you shy?” She told me, “because no one has two mummies but there is another boy who is adopted.” So, it's all about being different you see. [...] then two weeks later, the teacher, they had diversity day, and she went to the class and said, “Kim you want to read another one of those books?” And Kim picked up *Heather Has Two Mummies*, a really sweet book that we read at home, and she read it to the classroom herself. It's like, on a second opportunity, she was okay talking about her own family through the book. - **Rebecca**]

1.7 Instances of Teacher Sensitivity

When discussing positive experiences within the educational institution attended by their children, two sets of parents narrated instances that showcased teacher sensitivity directly related to their family structure. In the case of Rebecca and Sarah, they recounted a specific year when their older daughter had a primary teacher who was notably adept in emotional awareness. This teacher was a PSCD teacher. They described that during that school year, their daughter felt extremely “held emotionally and supported”, leading her to confide in the teacher about her family configuration. This teacher assisted their daughter in

sharing her rainbow family structure with her classmates. As claimed by Rebecca, this teacher “was exceptional. I mean, I will never forget her.” William and John recalled a recent situation during a religion lesson that touched on the church's stance on same-sex families and related matters. In this lesson, the teacher made a deliberate effort to clarify that their perspective did not necessarily align with the church's view. Following the lesson, the teachers showed sensitivity by engaging their son in a discussion about his feelings.

To say something positive, recently there was an episode in class, and they were speaking about, it was a religion subject, and they were talking about, in a mature way, the church’s views on same-sex families and the rainbow issues etcetera and the message in the classroom given by all of the educators was along the lines that “we don’t necessarily agree with what the church is saying.” So, the educators made it a point to clarify that this is not necessarily the way it is. This is an opinion which we might not be happy with. And in fact, they took aside our son and they asked him if everything was okay. They realised that it was a sensitive subject for him. - **John**.

Another two sets of parents, Robert and Thomas, and Nadia and Pam, narrated instances that showcased teacher sensitivity which was not directly related to their family structure. Both couples detailed the considerate approach adopted by their children’s teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Nadia and Pam shared how the educators exhibited sensitivity and adaptability in response to the challenging circumstances. Robert and Thomas highlighted the significance of teacher sensitivity, which took on special importance during a period when their son lacked a supportive LSE.

Fil-COVID [...] aħna kellna t-teacher, hemmhekk kienet teacher tajba u l-LSE ħazina, kienet incredible. Tagħmillu lezzjonijiet miegħu one-to-one t-teacher, u tiġi d-dar kienet iġġiblu l-affarijiet. Tant ħassejtni apprezzat, kont ktibt article on the role of the teacher in learning. - **Robert**.

[During COVID [...] we had a teacher, in that situation we had a good teacher and a bad LSE, she was incredible. The teacher did one-to-one lessons with him, and came to our home to bring him things. I felt so appreciated, I had written an article on the role of the teacher in learning. - **Robert**]

1.8 Instances of School Leadership Team (SLT) Sensitivity

When reflecting upon positive experiences within their children's educational institution, four pairs of parents recounted instances that foregrounded the School Leadership Team's sensitivity in approaching the distinct situations faced. Nick and David recounted that when their eldest son experienced a seizure at school, the SLT offered invaluable assistance and provided consistent support to the family. David stated “They helped us a lot.” Nick added that “(the SLT) also sent us personal messages, you know, to ask us how he is.”

Nadia and Pam articulated an instance in which they engaged with the head of the school to effect a change in their son's registered name. Their son, upon arriving in Malta, expressed the desire to be addressed by a different name which is more commonly used in English-speaking countries than the name he was originally registered by. This variation led to a discrepancy between the name listed on the attendance sheets and the name he preferred to be called. In response to their request, Pam explained that “they (the SLT) were accommodating [...] they were fast in adapting into certain things which were very sensitive.”

William and John shared an incident involving a non-inclusive school form that featured the traditional labels “mother” and “father” instead of the more inclusive terms “parent 1” and “parent 2”. This led the couple to approach the SLT to express their concerns about the form's language. William explained that the situation was handled sensitively since “it was noted in a positive way, not in a hurried or hushed way.” The couple noted that, even though, occasionally, there is an odd form which they receive that is still not updated, most of the forms which they are handed contain inclusive language.

Janet and Lisa described being personally contacted by the assistant head of school through a phone call prior to father's day in order to discuss how it would be best to tackle the matter as an act of the SLT's sensitivity which the couple truly appreciated. Lisa articulated "meta kien ċempilli ħabba tal-father's day, apprezzajt." ["When he called me because of father's day, I appreciated it."]

1.9 Children's Peer Relationships

Four of the same-sex couples highlighted the positive aspect of their children's friendships within the school community. For instance, Robert and Thomas expressed satisfaction in observing their son's seamless integration among their peers. In fact, Robert stated "he was always integrated, erm, għandu his BF (best-friend), qatt ma kellna problemi" ["he was always integrated, erm, he has his BF (best-friend), we've never had any problems"]. Parallely, Nadia and Pam describe their daughter as "incredibly sociable" and note that both of their children have formed close friendships, frequently visiting each other's homes and even organising sleepovers. Similarly, Sarah and Rebecca note that their eldest daughter is "well-integrated". Rebecca shares that their daughter has a strong support system since her daughter's friends willingly defend and support her in times of need. Thus, Rebecca expressed "jekk ma titkellimx binti ħa jitkellmu l-ħbieb tagħha u jaqbzu għaliha" ["if my daughter doesn't speak, her friends will speak for her and stand up for her"]. Comparably, Nick and David articulated that the presence of their eldest son's friendships provides them with a sense of safety, as they note that these schoolmates will remain by their child's side during the transition from primary to middle school. Hence, Nick disclosed that "at this stage, we feel safe, honestly, the fact that his peers will always be with him."

1.10 Seeing their Children Thrive

When discussing their positive experiences as parents, four sets of same-sex parents shared the feeling of incredible joy felt while watching their children succeed and grow, both

in and out of school. Janet and Lisa discussed their amazement at their son's intellectual growth and the insightful words that effortlessly flow from his mouth. Lisa thinks to herself “ngħid il-lallu, ċertu kliem li jgħidli (it-tifel), joħroġ b’xi waħda pereżempju, xi kultant, ngħid, dan vera hu?” [I say, oh my, certain words he (my son) tells me, for example, he comes up with something, sometimes, I say, is this really him?]. On a similar wavelength, Nadia and Pam are evidently filled with immense pride as they reflect on their adopted children’s remarkable journey. Their children's very good behaviour in school adds to their sense of accomplishment. Upon reflecting on their son’s growth, Pam states “Filli ma jafx jittellem bl-Ingliż, għal li jistudja erba’ lingwi. And he did well. Filfatt, jiffollowja l-mainstream Malti, erm u ħa jipprepara għall-O-level is-sena d-dieħla!” [“From not knowing how to speak English, he's now studying four languages. And he did well. In fact, he follows the mainstream Maltese curriculum, erm and he is going to be preparing for his O-level next year!"].

Upon reflecting on their older daughter’s journey, Rebecca and Sarah articulate that they have come to realise that their sexuality did not negatively impact their daughter’s life since they observe that she is thriving both personally and socially. As Rebecca put it “We have a fantastic 16-year-old. [...] Għandha principji very tajbin. She’s assertive. She’s doing well in school as well socially. Veru mhux LGBTIQ issues affetwawlha ħajjitha.” [“We have a fantastic 16-year-old. [...] She has very good principles. She’s assertive. She’s doing well in school as well socially. It was not LGBTIQ issues that affected her life.”].

Robert and Thomas proudly spoke of their son's impeccable manners and growing independence, underscoring their commitment to providing everything he needs for his growth and their willingness to make personal sacrifices for their son’s benefit. As Robert stated, “Nixtieqek tiltaqa’ mat-tifel, tant għandu, għandu l-etikett li dejjem xtaqtu li jkollu. L-awtonomija li għandu, qed tifhimni? Aħna noqgħodu lura minn ħafna affarijiet, għax, imma

jien, l-edukazzjoni ntiha l-prijorità. Jien għaliġa, l-edukazzjoni is a huge investment.” [I wish that you could meet my son, he has the etiquette that I always wished he would have. The autonomy he has, are you understanding me? We hold back from many things, because, for me, education takes precedence. For me, education is a huge investment.”].

Theme 2: The Negative Experiences

2.1 Invisibility in the Classroom

The theme of invisibility was consistently addressed by all the parents in this study, as they mentioned the upsetting absence of representation of diverse families within the educational setting. Rebecca made reference to the curriculum's lack of inclusivity and expressed concern about the persistent underutilisation of books that depict diverse family configurations.

Il-curriculum gravi. M’hemmx inkluzjoni ta’ xejn. Issa per eżempju, Clare Azzopardi, author Maltija popolarissima, tagħmel il-kotba li jintużaw għall-Malti. Kitbet ktieb bħal dak, *Kamilla*. Veru tajjeb! Oh my god! It talks about different families u hemm ukoll same-sex family fih. Għala ma jintużax fil-klassi dal-ktieb? Għala?! - **Rebecca**. [The curriculum is very bad. There is no inclusion of any sort. Now, for example, Clare Azzopardi, a very popular Maltese author, writes books that are used in Maltese classes. She wrote a book of such a high standard, *Kamilla*. It’s really good! Oh my god! It talks about different families and there is also a same-sex family in it. Why is this book not used in class? Why?! - **Rebecca**]

Nadia pointed out that “there is still a lot of invisibility. In text-books, in examples given in class, you know? The heteronormativity is still there in everything.” Sarah explained that the invisibility is so severe, that “we (the parents) actually give them (the teachers) books.” That is, at the beginning of the scholastic year, Rebecca and Sarah take the initiative to provide their younger daughter's primary teacher with a collection of books that showcase

a range of diverse families so that they can be used in class and their daughter can be represented. The couple especially engage in this proactive behaviour since Rebecca recalled that during one of the first Rainbow Families Network meetings, the topic of education was tackled in which Mr. Evarist Bartolo, the Minister of Education at that time, was invited to give ear to the narratives of youths who are part of rainbow families. Rebecca recounted her emotional response upon reviewing the minutes of the meeting, as her eldest daughter shared her perspective on the distressing experience of feeling unseen within the classroom environment.

Veru bkejt meta qrajt in-notes għax it-tifla tiegħi bdiet tgħid “we’re invisible.” It-textbooks ma jirrapreżentawniex. It-teacher qatt ma tuża eżempji ta’ familji bħal tagħna. Bdiet tgħid li qatt jingħataw dal-eżempji. Qatt m’hemm representation fit-textbooks. Ir-riklami kollha ma jurux same-sex parents. Il-comprehensions. Insomma, dil-issue tal-invizibiltà taffetwahom ħafna lit-tfal. - **Rebecca**.

[I really cried when I read the notes because my daughter started saying “we’re invisible.” The textbooks do not represent us. The teacher never uses examples of families like ours. She started saying that these examples are never given. There is never any representation in textbooks. No advertisements feature same-sex parents. The comprehensions. Anyway, this issue of invisibility affects children a lot.-

Rebecca]

Two couples, William and John, and Nadia and Pam, drew attention to a distinct disparity between the inclusion of diverse family structures in secondary-level PSCD lessons and the complete invisibility in all the other subjects. In fact, John stated “In PSCD, yes, but in everything else it’s like everyone is the same.” Having said so, Nadia pointed out that it is only “the slightest, really small part of the PSCD curriculum” that addresses rainbow families. Nadia also explained that “issa qisu naqra żgħira ċ-ċans” [“now is the little chance

we have”] since their son will soon finish compulsory education and so, the exposure to diverse family forms will not be tackled in future years whilst he is at sixth form or University. Janet discussed that the high level of invisibility in schools results in them having to attend distinct meetings organised by the Rainbow Families Network in order to expose their son to families with the same configuration as them, which, ultimately, segregates them from the broader community.

Għaliex it-tifel, biex jisma u jkun jaf li hemm tfal oħra bħalu li għandhom same sex parents, irridu mmorru bilfors laqgħat li qed jiddistingwuna mill-bqija tal-komunità? No! Hażin! [...] Jiena ma rridx lit-tifel tiegħi biex ikun jaf li jeżistu familji oħra bħalu rrid immur x'imkien apparti mill-bqija tas-soċjetà. Għax għalhekk isiru l-focus groups. Waħda mill-primary reasons kienet biex ma jhossuhomx waħedhom f'realtà li hi differenti mill-mainstream, għaliex fil-mainstream channels mhijiex imsemmija. -

Janet.

[Why is it that, to hear and know that there are other children like him who have same sex parents, we are required to go to meetings that are distinguishing us from the rest of the community? No! This is wrong! [...] I don't want to have to go somewhere apart from the rest of society in order for my son to know that there are other families like him. Because that's why focus groups are done. One of the primary reasons was to not feel alone in a reality that is different from the mainstream, because it is not mentioned in the mainstream channels. - **Janet**]

2.2 Non-inclusive School Forms

Four out of the six sets of parents shared their experiences of encountering frustrating situations involving non-inclusive forms that include the terms “mother” and “father” instead of “parent one” and “parent two.” To illustrate, John stated that “there is the issue of, on average, most application forms, would have mother or father. So, we constantly need to

remind everyone that it is parent, parent. We still need to do that.” Nadia and Pam highlighted the fact that while a form might seem insignificant to some, it holds significant meaning for them. They expressed that non-inclusive forms make them feel as if one of the parents is being invalidated or ignored.

Pam: Għax you think it’s a form, but aħna nirċievu dawn u ngħidu, nifrustraw ruħna.

Nadia: Xi ħadd minnha ma jeżistix tipo.

Pam: So, it does make a difference, it does make a difference. Li inti ma jkollokx toqgħod taqta’ u tikteb mother and mother. It makes a difference to us.

[**Pam:** Because you think it's a form, but we receive them and say, we find it frustrating.

Nadia: It’s like one of us doesn’t exist, kind of.

Pam: So, it does make a difference, it does make a difference. That you don't have to stay crossing it out and writing mother and mother. It makes a difference to us.]

In general, the parents described their approach to addressing this issue by crossing out the non-inclusive terms on the forms and also, informing the school personnel so that “they (the school personnel) start changing their approach” (Nick). Rebecca expressed how their frustration increased as these incidents of encountering non-inclusive forms persist over time. “Judy, kellna issues veru kbar. Bqajna niġgilduhom u konna naqtawha veru kbira father u niktbu 2nd parent u nerġgħu nibgħatu email. Hafna ninsistu u nintaqgħu meetings.” [Judy, we had really big issues. We continued to fight them and we used to cross out father really big and write 2nd parent and send email again. We insist a lot and meet up for meetings.”]

Additionally, William and John pointed out that the issue of non-inclusive forms is not exclusive to educational institutions since “it happens even if you go to a regular government department, it’s the same problem” (John).

2.3 Exclusion by Other Parents

Five of the couples recounted instances of exclusion by other parents within the community. Rebecca shared that “fuq livell ta’ parents, jien batejt hafna mal-mummies eh” [on a parental level, I suffered a lot because of mummies, eh]. She elaborated that although she had a supportive group of mum friends, there was one specific mother who “ma baqghetx thalliha tigi torqod għandi t-tifla. F’daqqa waħda riedet tigi magħha hi” [“no longer let her daughter come to sleepover at mine. Suddenly, she wanted to come with her”]. William and John narrated an episode in which a number of mothers were discussing plans for a “mummies lunch” on the predominantly female-dominated parents WhatsApp chat. John received no response when replying “are daddies invited as well?” Nadia and Pam recalled an incident during a parent’s meeting about the Year 5 PSCD book which included the topic of sexuality. “There was this parent, he was, I think he was Muslim and, he said I don’t want my daughter to learn about stuff like that” (Nadia). Nick and David narrated an online attack by a father of one of their youngest son’s classmates. The attack targeted their sexuality and included disparaging remarks about their son. Janet and Lisa explained that Janet had experienced exclusion from a conversation among mothers specifically because they had learned about her being a lesbian. This painful incident prompted the couple to relocate their son to a different location for catechism classes so as to protect his well being.

Lisa: Peress li lili qatt ma rawni, kienu jaraw lil Janet biss, tipo, l-conclusions saru, imbagħad ħarġu, meta sar il-precett. Meta wara l-precett reggħat ħaditu l-mużew, filfatt eh, il-ġenituri lil Janet lanqas kelmuha.

Janet: Mela, għamli ċirku, speċi qatgħawni ‘l barra miċ-ċirku.

[**Lisa:** Since they never saw me, they only used to see Janet, so, kind of, the conclusions were made, then they came out, during the First Holy Communion.

When, after the First Holy Communion, she took him to catechism again, in fact, the

parents didn't even speak to Janet.

Janet: That's right, they made a circle, they kind of left me out of the circle.]

2.4 Instances of Bullying

Among the six sets of parents interviewed, four of them recounted instances of bullying directed at their children, marking it as a negative experience. Only one couple, Rebecca and Sarah, specifically related the bullying to their sexuality. During a specific parent's day when her eldest daughter was still in primary school, Rebecca recalled that an LSE took her aside and expressed concern about her daughter being a target for bullying. The LSE explained that other children persistently asked her daughter questions like “Who did you travel with? Who did your mummy bring? Who is this Sarah? Is she her friend? Do they sleep in the same bedroom?” Moreover, Rebecca explained a specific instance in which her daughter “marret fic-chapel fil-break u daruha xi erbat iħbieb [...] u qalulha “is it true that your mummy and her friend kiss?” U bdew jgħidulha “jaqq, how disgusting!”” [“went to the chapel in break and four friends circled her [...] and they told her “is it true that you mummy and her friend kiss?” And they started to tell her “yuck, how disgusting!””]. Whilst this specific bullying episode happened a number of years ago, her daughter, who is now a teenager, is still being teased at school regarding her parent's sexuality. “Veru qed jaqbd u magħha l-boys. Veru qed jgħaddu botti u kummenti u jokes” (Rebecca) [“The boys are really picking on her. They are passing a lot of comments and jokes” (Rebecca)].

Contrarily, Pam stated “qatt ma kellna instance fejn, per eżempju, li bżajna aħna, jien naf, li jista jkun hemm inċidenza ta' bullying ħabba li għandhom two mothers” [we have never had an instance where, for example, we were afraid that there could be an incidence of bullying because they have two mothers”]. The bullying faced by Nadia and Pam's daughter stems from her disability, particularly from a specific boy in her class. “Ġieli (l-bully) waddbilha affarijiet li kienu mid-dustbin, imma mostly it's verbal” (Nadia). [“Sometimes,

(the bully) threw things at her that were from the dustbin, but mostly it's verbal" (Nadia)]. Similarly, Nick and David explained that their youngest son "doesn't even have friends in class" (Nick). The couple shared that this is because of the lack of understanding of his disability which has given him a bad reputation "that he is not a good boy" (David).

William and John discussed that their sons experienced teasing primarily due to their adoption status, rather than the fact that they form part of a rainbow family. As put by William, "ġieli jkun hemm xi kummenti negattivi [...] inqas fuq il-fatt li aħna żewġt irġiel, u aktar forsi li addottati" ["sometimes there are some negative comments [...] less on the fact that we are two men, and more perhaps, because they are adopted"]. Nadia and Pam identically outlined this matter when discussing their son. They explained that, due to his adoption, the name listed on the attendance sheet did not align with the name he was commonly known by in Malta. This inconsistency became a point of mockery and taunting.

2.5 Instances of Teacher Insensitivity

Three couples among the participants shared instances of negative experiences involving insensitive behaviour by their children's teachers. Robert and Thomas recalled that they were excitedly awaiting their child's first card from school, an anticipated milestone. However, when the card arrived, it was addressed ambiguously as "to everyone at home." Baffled by this oversight, the parents approached the teacher to address the situation. The teacher responded that she was not sure how else to approach the writing of the card.

I was looking forward to George's first card per eżempju, imma ma kinux jafu kif se jiktbuha. Eżempju l-ewwel darba niftakar kitbuha "to everyone at home," to everyone at home? Erm u ħadtiela lura, għeditilha "I don't want this. Everyone at home?!"

Għeditilha "lil ħaddiehor mummy and daddy għamiltu." Qaltli "għax ma kontx naf x'se nikteb." Għeditilha "darboħra saqsi." - **Robert.**

[I was looking forward to George's first card for example, but they didn't know how to write it. For example, the first time I remember they wrote it "to everyone at home," to everyone at home? Erm and I took it back to her, I told her "I don't want this. Everyone at home?!" I told her "For the others, you wrote mummy & daddy." She told me "because, I didn't know what to write." I told her "next time, ask me."-

Robert.]

Nadia and Pam described an awkward incident that occurred during their son's parents' day in which the teacher said "All right? You're the mummy and daddy? And we're there in front of her" (Nadia). The couple also highlighted instances of insensitivity when some teachers lack knowledge about their family and background. They explained that this matter is especially relevant now that their two children are teenagers, thus, they have multiple teachers. As Nadia put it "it-tnejn li huma għandhom pataflun teachers, u they don't know anything about their background. La jafu li adopted, la per eżempju, t-teacher tal-Ingliż u tal-Malti, meta ma jmorrux daqshekk sew, speci ġieli ngħidilhom, isma, dawn ilhom erba' snin biss" ["both of them have a lot of teachers, and they don't know anything about their background. They don't know that they're adopted, for example, the English and Maltese teacher, when they don't do as well, kind of, I tell them, listen, they've only been here for four years"].

Rebecca and Sarah described an encounter of insensitivity by their child's primary teacher in which they approached the teacher to talk about the significance of utilising books that depict a range of family structures. They received a less than favourable answer since the teacher pointed them in the direction of the PSCD teacher, implying that the topic was beyond her realm of responsibility. "Għidtilha, għalfejn qed titfagħha fuq il-PSCD teacher jekk PSCD għandhom darba fil-ħmistax u int kuljum magħhom? Aghmilha inti l-affari! U qaltli, hu paċenzja, aħjar tkellem lill-PSCD teacher" (Rebecca) ["I told her, why are you

placing the responsibility on the PSCD teacher if they have PSCD once a fortnight and you are with them everyday? Deal with this matter yourself! And she told me, it would be better to speak to the PSCD teacher”] (Rebecca).

2.6 Instances of School Personnel and School Visitor Insensitivity

As part of the negative experiences shared by parents, two couples highlighted instances involving insensitive school personnel or school visitors. Nick and David spoke about an incident with the school janitor who exhibited a lack of awareness regarding their family configuration. The janitor was taken aback by the alternating parental presence as each father picked up their son from school on different days. David narrated “I went (to school) and he (the janitor) said to me: “Who are you?” I told him that I am the father. He said: “What? The father? How can that be?” In another account, Rebecca and Sarah described an upsetting situation in which a priest gave the students a talk in which he made disparaging remarks about gay and lesbian families, claiming that they were not actual families. Their eldest daughter was present when this occurred. “(Il-qassis) qalilhom familji ta’ żewġ nisa u żewġ irġiel mhumiex familji. Dawk ħbieb. It-tfal tagħhom mhumiex tfal tagħhom. Huma tfal li qed irabbuhom huma” (Rebecca). [“(The priest) told them that families of two women and two men are not families. They are friends. Their children are not their children. They are children being raised by them” (Rebecca)].

2.7 Obstructive Thoughts and Society’s Gaze

Four sets of parents referred to apprehensions surrounding how they think are perceived within their social environments. These parents expressed a heightened sense of being “more harshly observed” (Robert) due to their non-heteronormative family configuration. This increased scrutiny leads to feelings of “added pressure” (John) and concern. For instance, Nadia recalled thinking to herself “tghid qisu ma jkunux iridu, jien naf, jithalltu magħhom?” [“could it be the case that they wouldn’t want to, I don’t know, mingle

with them?"] thereby worrying that the parent's sexual orientation might impact her children's social relations. Rebecca expressed that their family structure exposes them to an extra layer of judgement. She shared her concern that if her children were to encounter any challenges, the blame might unfairly fall on their family configuration.

Dejjem nibżgħu li jekk ikun hemm girfa se jiħduha li “mhux ovvja hux dawk lesbjani.” Qed tifhmu l-punt tagħna? Dejjem konna nħossuna li they have an additional reason why to judge us. Anki jekk, per eżempju, it-tifla kien ikollha behavioural problem, konna ngħidu, “hemm aħna, issa jwaħħlu li għax aħna gay.” Mhux għax anki f'ħafna familji heterosexual ikun hemm behavioural problems. Imma dejjem ikollna dil-biżgħa li se niġu judged għax aħna gay. - **Rebecca.**

[We are always afraid that if there is a scratch they will interpret it as “it's obvious isn't it, it's because they are lesbians.” Are you getting our point? We always felt that they have an additional reason to judge us. Even if, for example, our daughter had a behavioural problem, we used to say there, “there we go, now they will blame us because we are gay.” Even though in many heterosexual families there are behavioural problems. But we always have this fear that we will be judged because we are gay. - **Rebecca.**]

Children too get obstructive thoughts on how they will be perceived by society, in fact, Rebecca and Sarah, narrated two painful experiences in which their two daughters were resistant to being publicly seen or associated with both of their parents together in the context of their school. The couple explained that her eldest daughter communicated to her mothers that only one of them should attend the school soiree. As Rebecca put it, “fis-soiree qaltilna “waħda minnkom biss tiġi” u veru ħadniha bi kbira [...] it's really sad” [“in the soiree she told us “only one of you should come” and we really took it to heart [...] it's really sad”]. On a separate occasion, their younger daughter expressed her preference for only one of her

mothers to attend a school outing, while both insisted on accompanying her. Despite their presence, she remained distant during the outing.

It-tifla tagħna, li għandha 6 issa [...] ma riditniex imorru (l-outing). Qaltilna “I don’t want both of you to come because no-one in my class has two mummies. Waħda minnkom tista tigi.” U għidnilha “ma tarax, aħna niġu miegħek kullimkien u għada ġejjin miegħek l-iskola għax m’hemm xejn hażin.” Ma ridniex ngħidulha iva, qisna qed intuha l-messaġġ li hemm xi haġa hażina. U morna, u very kienet aloof, eh. Bdiet timxi quddiemna. Ma riditx toqgħod magħna. - **Rebecca.**

[Our daughter, who is 6 now [...] did not want us to go (to the outing). She told us “I don't want both of you to come because no-one in my class has two mummies. Only one of you can come.” And we told her “no way, we come with you everywhere and tomorrow we’re coming with you to school because there is nothing wrong.” We didn't want to say yes to her, as if we were giving her the message that there is something wrong. And we went, and she was very aloof, eh. She started walking in front of us. She didn't want to stay with us. - **Rebecca.**]

Theme 3: Miseducative Experiences

I am employing John Dewey’s (1997) conceptualisation of miseducation which is understood as an obstructing experience that halts or distorts the growth of subsequent experiences. Miseducative experiences can be contrasted with educative experiences, which live “fruitfully and creatively in subsequent experiences” (Dewey, 1997, p. 28).

3.1 Lack of Teacher Preparedness for the LGBTIQ+ reality in schools

All the same-sex couples in this study uniformly highlighted the lack of preparedness among teachers to address LGBTIQ+ related matters. For instance, William shared that “teachers are not equipped with skills to deal with what is different.” Sarah stated “they are not prepared at all.” Her wife, Rebecca, explained that the situation is so severe that in all the

years of their eldest daughter's schooling, they have only met one teacher who they can classify as being highly prepared. "Naħseb it-tendenza hi li t-teacher tkun intensa fuq is-sillabu u jinsew li hemm a baggage of emotions and experiences quddiemhom" (Janet) ["I think the tendency is for the teacher to be so concentrated on the syllabus that they forget that there is a baggage of emotions and experiences in front of them" (Janet)]. Lisa addressed the fact that, since the teacher's level of unpreparedness is so high, she has taken on the role of a reference point in these matters at the school she works in.

Three couples, Robert and Thomas, William and John, and Rebecca and Sarah, blame the lack of teacher preparedness and empowerment on the local teacher preparation programmes. Rebecca questioned "kemm hemm, fil-verità, credits li jiccoverjaw diversità u LBGTIQ issues, you know? M'hemmx, jew very fitit. Allura ovvjament teachers don't feel supported. Jibżgħu." ["really and truly, how many credits which cover diversity and LBGTIQ issues are there? You know? There aren't, or there are very few. So, obviously, teachers don't feel supported. They feel scared."] Similarly, Nadia discussed that "teachers are uncomfortable, and mostly they are, or scared." Rebecca added to the notion of teachers being scared: "mhux talli m'humiex prepared, talli anki jekk itihom il-materjal, jibżgħu jużawh" ["it's not only that they are not prepared, because even if you give them the material, they are afraid to use it"].

Nadia and Pam explained an encounter with a young PSCD teacher who gave them a PowerPoint presentation about diverse families for some feedback. In spite of the teacher's young age, Nadia "felt that she was uncomfortable" and noted that the PowerPoint presentation "was really incomplete and incorrect." Nadia noted that when it comes to the discussion of diverse families, teachers "generally just take the easy way out and just skim through it [...] You know, like there is no room for discussion, or if they are challenged by the

students, they are ill equipped.” William observed an “element of panic and fear” whilst his husband, John, mentioned that he feels that teachers are “afraid to offend us.”

I am not sure that they are equipped to handle it because when the time comes illi jghidulna “isma, we’re going to tackle this issue. Do you have a problem with this?” It is somehow, the feeling I get when I get this comment, is that there is fear. So, it is not something that they are comfortable with. Qishom they are treading very lightly. [...] turi ċertu sensitività, imma turi wkoll ċertu nuqqas ta’ preparazzjoni naħseb jiena illi t-teachers m’għandhomx, it-teachers in ġenerali, regarding l-issue. - **William.**

[I am not sure that they are equipped to handle it because when the time comes that they tell us “listen, we're going to tackle this issue. Do you have a problem with this?” It is somehow, the feeling I get when I get this comment, is that there is fear. So, it is not something that they are comfortable with. It's like they are treading very lightly. [...] it shows a certain sensitivity, but it also shows a certain lack of preparation that, I think, the teachers don't have, the teachers in general, regarding the issue. - **William.]**

Three couples, William and John, Rebecca and Sarah, and Lisa and Janet pointed to the fact that, when evaluating the attitudes of teachers, it is essential to differentiate between homophobia and fear stemming from a lack of knowledge. They assert that the majority of teachers are not actively displaying homophobic behaviour. However, they highlight that many teachers may lack the necessary knowledge and awareness about LGBTIQ+ matters.

I don’t think the teacher's attitude is done, in the majority of cases, with intent to be exclusive or harmful. I don’t think so. [...] I think teachers, in their heads, generally have the interest of kids in their hearts, in their heads, in the way they perceive it. So, I think it’s more a fact of them being required to make an added effort to break out of the mould that they are used to - **John.**

In order to combat the serious matter of lack of teacher preparedness for the reality of rainbow families in schools, Rebecca and Sarah explained their proactive approach during the “Meet the Teachers Evening” in which they support teachers by giving them resources as well as an agenda of how they wish for matters to be tackled.

We actually tell them, give them an agenda of what we want them to do. We do it very, not in a controlling way, we do it very kindly, imma, sibna li hemm teachers li jhossuhom hafna iżjed supported b’dal-mod. - **Rebecca**.

[We actually tell them, give them an agenda of what we want them to do. We do it very, not in a controlling way, we do it very kindly, but, we found that there are teachers who feel much more supported in this way. - **Rebecca**.]

3.2 The Impact of Inadequate School Leadership

Three sets of parents discussed the pivotal role of school leadership in fostering progress. Robert stated that “it’s the management of the school that should educate the whole system.” These parents are of the opinion that “it very much depends on the head” (Rebecca). In fact, Nadia pointed out that “you can send them to a school, then the management changes, and everything changes.” In agreement, her wife, Pam, stated that since the functioning of a school heavily relies on its leadership, the selection of an educational institution is akin to a “russian roulette”. To exemplify this, the couple explained the situation in a particular church school to which they send their children during summer school. “Magħtul is-sena orrajt, għax għandna ħbieb tagħna jiħduhom hemmek [...] imma s-summer school jieħu ħsiebha qassis ieħor” (Nadia) [“During the year the school is okay, because we have friends who send their children there [...] but during summer school, another priest takes care of the school”] (Nadia). They noticed that the discrepancy between the scholastic year and the summer period is a result of changed leadership, with the summer school experience being more noticeably negative due to the priest in charge being less inclusive of LGBTIQ+ individuals

than the priest leading the school during the scholastic year. In a similar vein, Rebecca recounted the differing experiences her family has had a result of different heads of school.

Aħna kellna head very staunch Charismatic Renewal u veru batejna f' dawk is-snin [...] Imbagħad meta telaq dal-head u ġie head ieħor, u kellna l-ewwel meeting mill-ewwel indirizzana Mrs. and Mrs. He was fantastic [...] He used to make you feel seen and acknowledged for who you are. You know what a difference that makes? -

Rebecca.

[We had a head who was very staunch Charismatic Renewal and we really suffered in those years [...] Then when this head left and another head came, and we had the first meeting, he immediately addressed us as Mrs. and Mrs. He was fantastic [...] He used to make you feel seen and acknowledged for who you are. You know what a difference that makes? - **Rebecca.**]

3.3 Fear of Parental Backlash

Four of the couples shared their concerns about the fear of potential parent backlash, which they perceived as a hindrance to progress. When describing why educators are hesitant to include LGTIQ+ inclusive material in their classrooms, Rebecca stated “il-parents jirreżistu ħafna” [“parents resist a lot”]. Similarly, David shared that “there is a problem with other parents because, sometimes, they don't accept that there are people like us.” Janet expressed a sense of frustration at the notion that teaching about LGBTIQ+ topics in schools would likely lead to accusations by miseducated and conservative parents of indoctrinating students in terms of influencing the children’s sexual orientation to become gay or lesbian. “As if you can change a person!”, Janet claimed. Likewise, David said “they start saying that you are brainwashing the kids.” In order to combat such parental backlash, his husband, Nick, suggests that education about LGBTIQ+ matters should not start before Year 6.

Two couples, Lisa and Janet, and Nadia and Pam, recounted a specific incident which occurred locally in 2015 in which there was a high amount of parental backlash following MGRM's donation of a number of publications featuring different forms of families and same-sex relationships to the Ministry of Education. As a result of this backlash, the Minister of Education had decided against distributing the donated books. Janet recalled that “furur kien qam” [“a furore was raised”]. Due to the large amount of parental backlash received in 2015, Nadia thinks that “it would be a while before anyone ever touches that again.”

The main fear is because of what happened when they introduced the books. The famous books. I think that there's a lot of fear of backlash from the parents. Erm, the majority wins, so if the majority feel that this shouldn't be tackled in a more normal way, kind of, and introduced to different families, I think that is the fear. - **Nadia.**

Nadia and Pam elaborated on the fact that the fear of parental backlash, is not only impeding the inclusion of rainbow families, but it is also deterring the inclusion of other minority groups which are present in the school community. Nadia pointed out that there is a high probability of parental resistance when it comes to celebrating the diversity of religions. In Nadia's own words “naħseb li kieku jibdeu jgħidu “ħa nagħmlu celebration tar-religjonijiet differenti” ukoll ħa joqomsu ħafna parents” [“I think that if they start saying “let's do a celebration of different religions” many parents will protest”].

3.4 Roman Catholic Influence

Two couples, William and John, and Rebecca and Sarah, made reference to the notion of stagnation as it relates to the influence of the Catholic Church within Maltese society, including the educational context in Malta. Rebecca and Sarah conveyed the deeply ingrained Catholic perspective stemming from the upbringing many have experienced which endorsed the idea that being gay is considered sinful. As Rebecca emphasised “Ma ninsewx li f' Malta, kulhadd, gay u mhux gay, għandna internalised homophobia. That's how we were raised. We

were raised to believe that it's a sin and that it's not ok." ["Don't forget that in Malta, everyone, irrespective of being gay or not, has internalised homophobia. That's how we were raised. We were raised to believe that it's a sin and that it's not ok."] At the same time, Rebecca notes that upon analysing the parents who form part of the Rainbow Families Network, "l-inqas li hemm problemi, funnily enough, hija fiċ-church schools" ["funnily enough, there are the least amount of problems in church schools"].

William pointed to "the idea of teaching religion when in reality it's the catechism of the Catholic Church" stating that this is a practice "which should be abolished". He claimed "to have a subject called religion, when in reality it's catechism, let's call it catechism please, don't try to fool me by calling it religion because it's not." John added that "it's not just the subject issue, it's the general environment. You are paying a lot of money to be in a, technically, a private entity and you don't have a choice because there's nowhere in Malta that you can send your children outside of that ethos, it doesn't exist." In John's view the issue lies in the inherent nature of the Roman Catholic faith which does not align well with LGBT inclusivity.

There is no real choice for an educational system or an educational structure that does not subscribe to one particular faith. The problem isn't the faith per se, the fact, if it subscribes to a faith you know it's their choice, the problem is that the faith subscribed to is not very LGBT friendly, erm and again even if you have a school environment like our kids where the school management and the school system is very LGBT friendly, the fact that ultimately, ultimately, there are, there's script from the Bible printed on the walls, and there are these prayers going on and on, the subtle messages are anyway being transmitted. The moral messages of the Church are still being passed on so I find that particularly annoying. The problem is, there is no choice, because you really don't have any choice in Malta. Cause, even, even

independent schools, they all, all of them have a religious ethos, starting from the school name to the school timetable of every day and the way they, the way they describe themselves. I find that upsetting. - **John**.

Robert and Thomas expressed scepticism about sending their children to church schools, despite the fact that they were already deeply involved in their church community.

Qisni (skola) tal-knisja bdejt nibża, mhux għax ġejna maltrattati mill-knisja, erm aħna [...] għandna support kbir mill-komunità tal-knisja, kbir! Aħna involuti ħafna fil-knisja, umm qatt ma sibt, qatt ma sibt, imma yes, [...] gietna ġo mohħna li forsi jkun hemm ċertu rezistenza ta, li jintegraw lilna, mhux lit-tifel, lilna. - **Robert**.

[It's like, I was fearful of church schools, not because we were mistreated by the church, erm we [...] we have great support from the church community, great! We are very involved in the church, umm I never found, I never found, but yes, [...] it occurred to us that there might be a certain resistance to, to integrate us, not our son, us. - **Robert**.]

Lisa and Janet, uniquely represented in this study as the only couple with a child enrolled in a local church school, highlighted their consistent acceptance within their church community and school. They described themselves as church goers who are very actively involved in their church community, in fact, their son is an altar boy. They emphasised the significance of refraining from forming stereotypes without first-hand experience. They discussed being angered by the perpetuating misconceptions about the church by other members of the Rainbow Families Network, asserting that such stereotypes are inaccurate. “Jekk aħna ma rridux niġu stereotyped, don’t use stereotypes on others, mingħajr għarfien, għax m’għandekx esperjenza” (Janet). [“If we don’t want to be stereotyped, don’t use stereotypes on others, without any knowledge, because you do not have any experience” (Janet).] Additionally, the couple also acknowledged that many individuals may have

experienced significant hurt from the church, making it difficult for them to move past that pain. They stated that in this day and age, when dealing with the church, it is crucial to be discerning about where one chooses to attend due to the remaining presence of certain homophobic priests. For instance, they referred to the priest who went viral due to his homophobic claim that being gay was worse than being possessed by the devil. They clarified that they would avoid attending such a priest's services. “Trid tagħżel fejn tmur, iġifieri, ma mmurx għand dak il-qassis li ħareġ jgħajjat bil-*gayyaġni* u nippretendi li se jaċċetta u jilqa” (Janet). [“You need to choose where to go, that means, I won’t go to that priest that blurted about *gayyaġni* and expect him to be accepting and welcoming” (Janet)]. The interviews revealed this notion of varying experiences in the church, particularly in two discussions about baptism. Robert and Thomas recounted a positive experience, highlighting the church's complete acceptance of their son during the baptism. “Niftakar il-George għollih u dawru l-knisja kollha. Dar bih, hekk, il-knisja kollha biex jurihom li hu jrid jiġi inkluż bħal ħaddieħor” (Robert). [“I remember that he carried George and went around the whole church. He went round with him, to the whole church to show them that he must be included like anyone else” (Robert).] On the other hand, Nick and David shared a negative experience during their eldest son’s baptism since the priest displayed insensitivity. David narrated that “when the father goes with the candle, he (the priest) said “okay, only one.” I told him “I am the father too.” He said “no, it’s like you’re the part of the mother.” It’s not nice. [...] I was very angry about it.” Additionally, Nick and David also noted that when sharing images of their son’s baptism on social media, they received a substantial amount of online hate “not by the church itself but by members from the Christian community.”

Rebecca recognised that “il-knisja għamlet ċaqlieg kbir” [“the church has made big leaps”] and expressed that, at this juncture, the matter at hand transcends religious or faith-based perspectives and delves into the realm of human rights.

We really need to take a stand. I mean, this is human rights. This is not about religion or faith. This is a human rights issue. Even if it conflicts with your faith, it's still a human rights issue. And even the pope has taken a stand about this. So, even those very Catholic teachers can take a stand. - **Rebecca**.

3.5 Social Ignorance: Heteronormativity & Homophobia

All of the couples in this study shared instances in which they encountered social ignorance, both inside and outside of the school context, highlighting a lack of knowledge about rainbow family matters which is impeding the overall advancement of the Maltese society. In fact, Robert stated “l-edukazzjoni soċjali li hemm in-nuqqas” [“there is a lack of social education”]. All of the couples observed the prevalence of heteronormativity in schools, where assumptions are often made that everyone is heterosexual. Nadia shared that “the heteronormativity is still there in everything.” Rebecca pointed out that even simple children’s puppet shows always feature the traditional family. She claimed “jiħduha for granted li dejjem heterosexual. We need to be the opposite. Never take it for granted għax hawn hafna familji differenti” [“They always assume heterosexuality, We need to be the opposite. Never take it for granted because there are a lot of different families”]. John alluded to the fact that “the school framework is based on certain assumptions that we don’t fulfil.” Rebecca insinuated that the school’s heteronormative framework can also be coupled with homophobia when she recalled an instance in which an educator told her “jiena gay u nibza nidentifika bħala gay ġo dil-iskola għax nibza li niġi discriminated” [“I am gay and I am afraid to identify as gay in this school because I am afraid of being discriminated against”]. Similarly, Nick mentioned that the dated misconception that associates gay men with being sexual predators hinders gay educators from coming out in the school setting. He stated that “there are educators who are gay and they cannot say “I’m gay” because parents will say “eh, se jbabas lit-tifel tiegħi” [“oh, he’s going to molest my son”].

Nadia explained that her mother's first reaction to her coming out was "no, it's a fashion thing." Even though a number of years have passed since then, Nadia is of the opinion that a similar misconception rooted in social ignorance still prevails since members of society "think it's cool" to be gay. In a similar vein, she mentioned that she is aware that the phrase "you're so gay" is still "used in a derogatory way", highlighting the need for further social education on LGBTIQ+ matters.

Nick and David described two encounters, one with another parent outside of the school gate and another with a paediatrician in a healthcare setting, in which these two individuals demonstrated a lack of awareness that gay men can get married and adopt children locally. Lisa and Janet brought attention to the fact that a large quantity of individuals lack direct exposure to same-sex parents, which leads to them having a limited understanding of their lives. The couple explained that such individuals may not fully comprehend that, at the core, same-sex parents are ordinary individuals with the same concerns, joys, and responsibilities as any other parents. To exemplify this matter, Janet narrated an anecdote in which her colleague came to the realisation that, just like any heterosexual couple, Lisa and Janet would need to go grocery shopping.

Darba minnhom għadda minn hdejja bil-karozza, u fuq is-seat ta' wara kelli x-shopping bags magħluqin [...] Taf x'qalli? Għax lanqas jitwemmnu ta! Qalli "bħalna inthom kos hu, tridu tagħmlu x-xirja!" [...] umbagħad, dawn in-nies li qatt ma kellhom kuntatt viċin ma' persuni gay jirrealizzaw li, isma, dawn nies bħalna. - **Janet.**

[One time he passed by my car, and in the back seat I had closed shopping bags [...] Do you know what he said to me? Because it's rather unbelievable! He told me "oh, you're like us, you still need to buy groceries!" [...] then, these people who have never had close contact with gay people realise that, listen, these people are like us. -

Janet.]

Describing an upsetting incident of social ignorance, Robert and Thomas narrated that an employee at an extracurricular activity which their son attends caused a scene due to deeming it inappropriate for two men to be changing a young boy, which was, in actual fact, their own son. The couple explained that upon analysing the situation it became evident to them that this worker's actions stemmed from a lack of information.

Tgħidx kemm għajjat magħna, “x’igifieri giex irġiel biex ibiddu tifel ta’ seba’ snin?!” Erm u baqa’ jgħajjat u jgħajjat, [...] Mort id-dar u ktibt email kif support u rrapportajtu lill-Ministru tal-Edukazzjoni. Mill-ewwel kelmu, he was expelled mix-xogħol. Igifieri, għamlu ġimgħa sakemm issir l-investigazzjoni. Imma kienet injoranza. Imma kieku kien haddieħor kien jibqa’ forsi jgħid, jagħlaq għajnejh, u tibqa’ għaddejja. Igifieri, nahseb jien, advocacy, f’kull aspett, anka fejn jidhlu same sex u t-fal għandha tkun. U mhux aggressiva, meaning, jekk tpoġġi bilqegħda u titkellem, issir taf li hija nuqqas ta’ informazzjoni. - **Robert**.

[He shouted at us so much, “what do you mean two men changing a seven-year-old boy?!” Erm and he kept shouting and shouting, [...] I went home and wrote an email and reported him to the Minister of Education. He spoke to him immediately, he was expelled from work. That is, they spent a week until the investigation was done. But it was ignorance. But if it was someone else he would probably close his eyes, and keep going. I mean, I think, advocacy, in every aspect, even when it comes to same sex and children should take place. And it's not aggressive, meaning, if you sit down and discuss, you'll find out that it's a lack of information. - **Robert**.]

Thus, it becomes evident that, as Rebecca put it, “the more we share, the more we educate through our experiences. The more we let people get to know us, the more they will realise that we have more in common than in difference then them.”

3.6 Social Ignorance: Gender Stereotypes

Four of the couples, the three male couples as well as Rebecca and Sarah, highlighted the persistence of traditional gender stereotypes as a factor inhibiting progress within the educational system. For instance, John noted that “we still have, you know, the man who is the doctor or the pilot, and the mother who is at home. So, we still get that and I find that a bit upsetting to be honest.” As William put it:

This whole idea of the pink and the blue with the boys and the girls, it's pretty much, very strong in our educational system. So, certain things only the boys can do at school and only the girls, or the girls can do. Umm, I don't know, like when the two lines are formed, we need to break the rules and the traditions, I think, if we want to instil the idea of diversity.

The male participants in the study uniformly pointed out that they often find themselves as the sole men attending school meetings or actively engaging in parent's groups chats since it “tends to be a mother-dominated conversation” (John). “We are always, even in meetings of something of the school, we are the only men that attend” (David). In their interview, Nick and David communicated that the responsibilities associated with the children's schooling are consistently placed within the realm of the female role. John discussed that the local educational system encompasses several components that presuppose the presence of a non-working female or mother which indirectly excludes them. John elaborated that

Malta's entire educational system is based on the assumption that one of the parents is a non-working mother in terms of schooling time, the kind of homework given to the children which assumes that someone is going to assist them with it, to the tasks they are given. After-school care is challenging. So there are a number of elements within the system which assume a non-working female or mother. [...] There isn't someone at

home waiting for them when they come home from school to sit down and do their homework. There isn't someone who can take, who is free on a Monday morning because they have a school bazaar, or someone has to bake all the muffins and be at school to be there selling them. Which, you know, most other kids, their mummies turn up because they can, we don't because you know it's not our lifestyle. I've never felt any comment or any attitude, never; but I do feel it as an added burden on the family as we cannot do what others are doing. So, the exclusion happens indirectly. So, when there are these things we cannot participate like everybody else.

Rebecca pointed out that, due to traditional gender stereotypes, gay men often encounter additional scrutiny and prejudice in the realm of parenting. As she articulated, “Id-daddies aghar msieken eh. Id-daddies hafna aghar [...] madoffi żewg irġiel kif qed irabbu? Iżjed jiġġudikaw lill-irġiel. [...] It's not about gender you know? Even research shows us this. Imma there are a lot of stereotypes. A lot.” [“The daddies have it worse eh. The daddies have it much worse, [...] my goodness, how are two men bringing up children? They judge men more. [...] It's not about gender you know? Even research shows us this. But there are a lot of stereotypes. A lot.”] Robert and Thomas put forward the importance of recognising the multifaceted nature of caregiving beyond rigid gender expectations. In discussing the notions of mothering and fathering, Robert stated “this is not about me being the mother or the father.” He explained that “mother's day, it's not about the gender, it's about mothering. We have fathers, single fathers, which are mothering and fathering. We have nannas (grandmothers) which are mothering and fathering, we have mothers which are mothering and fathering.” In fact, Robert mentioned being urged to attend the school's “morning spa for mothers.” Despite being a father, he attended the event, feeling a sense of inclusion and recognition for his role in mothering his son.

William observed that gender stereotypes are reinforced within the educational system through the prevailing gender disparity within the teaching profession. He implied that students are accustomed to having predominantly female teachers throughout the duration of their educational journey, with male teachers becoming more prevalent in the senior years. These male teachers are often found teaching subjects like science or information technology, further contributing to the reinforcement of gender stereotypes. William added that, in order for progress to occur, there is a necessity to confront and challenge the traditional gender roles “from the very early roots, also because some children are aware that they do not belong to the dualities.”

3.7 Insufficient Utilisation of Resources

In the interviews, four couples referred to a considerable roadblock in the educational system, that is, the limited use of resources that promote diversity and LGBTQ+ themes. Even though there are numerous readily accessible materials, the parents shared their worries about schools not using such content into their teaching. As phrased by Robert, “tant kemm għandna riżorsi illum il-ġurnata li naħseb mhux qed nagħmlu użu minnhom biex inqajmu iktar awareness fit-tfal fuq diversità u funzjonijiet ġol-familja.” [“we have so many resources nowadays which I think that we are not utilising to raise more awareness in children regarding diversity and functions within the family.”]

John expressed that, whilst, in the past, most lessons were based on academic books, “now we’re faced with class presentations and PowerPoints made by teachers so you’d expect that there is more of an awareness, more of a consciousness, as to how things are presented.” He added that all it takes is that “if you think of a presentation on the home, you know, you put in the two men or two women.” His husband, William, added that “the subtle messages of resources, they need to change if we want our schools to be more inclusive.” The couple explained that, since teachers have added freedom in the creation of their teaching

materials, all it takes is for them to conduct a quick search on the internet in order to obtain images which are more inclusive.

Rebecca and Sarah shared that at the start of each school year, they make sure to provide their daughter's teacher with a variety of rainbow family inclusive books and resources. However, they have noticed that these materials are not being utilised as extensively as they hoped. Instead, the teachers, who come across as scared to address family diversity in their classroom, tend to turn to the school's wellbeing team, counsellors, or PSCD teachers.

Going back to the time in which they were asked for feedback on the PSCD teacher's PowerPoint presentation about diverse families, Nadia and Pam shared that they felt displeased with the insufficiently thorough presentation. Additionally, they disclosed that teachers are meant to have access to the valuable resources created by MGRM, but in this case, the teacher did not have access. They explained that, despite these resources being resent to the teacher, the teacher still did not utilise them. As narrated by Nadia,

Hemm pataflun rizorsi [...] iġifieri, they give them, like, packs li kkrejawhom mill-MGRM and she (the PSCD teacher) didn't even have access. Bagħtnihomlhom aħna, iġifieri bġhatt lil MGRM biex jibġathuhomli and I resent them. But, I'm pretty sure that she never used them. U dawn they're really good resources, taf kif? Qegħdin hemmhekk, b'xejn, għalik and, yet, you decide to make this powerpoint nofs kedda. [There are loads of resources [...] that is, they give them, like, packs that were created by MGRM and she (the PSCD teacher) didn't even have access. We sent them to her, that is, I contacted MGRM to send them to me and I resent them to her. But, I'm pretty sure that she (the PSCD teacher) never used them. And these are really good resources, you know how? They are there, freely available for you and, yet, you decide to make this half-hearted powerpoint.]

3.8 Unprioritised Area of Focus

Four of the interviewed sets of parents underscored that the lack of prioritisation in promoting the diversity of families within schools is hampering the overall progress and enhancement of the educational environment. According to John, the inclusion of diverse family configurations is so overlooked in schools that “the vast majority fall in the category of not even considering it.” Nadia shared that she perceives school efforts as “kind of the bare minimum. Not to ruffle any feathers.” Her wife, Pam, said that the inclusion of minorities is done, “but it’s done lightly so as to tick the box.” Nadia claimed that teachers who prioritise diversity dedicate more than a single lesson a year to raise awareness among students about different family structures and the harmful use of derogatory language.

Jekk inti tkun teacher li tixtieq inti li vera tqajjem, you know, raise awareness and you reach the kids, you will dedicate more than 35 minutes in a whole scholastic year to discussing different forms of families and how destructive it can be to use language like, “kemm inti gay”, in a derogatory way, and how difficult it is when you know that some of your friends might be struggling with their sexuality, or their gender identity u li inti tuza dan il-kliem, you know. So they should see, like, the bigger picture. - **Nadia.**

[If you are a teacher who really wants to raise awareness, you know, raise awareness and you reach the kids, you will dedicate more than 35 minutes in a whole scholastic year to discussing different forms of families and how destructive it can be to use language like, “you’re so gay”, in a derogatory way, and how difficult it is when you know that some of your friends might be struggling with their sexuality, or their gender identity and you use these words, you know. So they should see, like, the bigger picture. - **Nadia]**

Lisa and Janet, discussed the evident lack of investment from the education department. They clarified that by investment, they do not mean money. As Janet elucidated “žgur li m’hemmx bižzejjed investiment mid-dipartiment tal-edukazzjoni. Žgur! Issa, investiment mhux bilfors flus. Jistgħu ikunu nies, illi l-irwol tagħhom hu illi jduru l-iskejjel, jagħmlu laqgħat mat-teachers u ma’ min imexxi l-iskola, mal-LSEs [...] you don’t have to inject money” [“there definitely isn’t enough investment from the education department. Surely not! Now, investment does not necessarily mean money. There can be people, whose role is visiting schools, holding meetings with the teachers and the school leaders, with the LSEs [...] you don't have to inject money”]. Rebecca and Sarah asserted that despite the availability of free training provided by MGRM for schools, it's evident that prioritising this training is lacking, as schools are not allocating time slots to ensure that their staff receives this training. Rebecca expressed her frustration at the situation by stating: “qed noffru t-training b’xejn bħala MGRM, għalfejn kedda biex iħalluna nagħtuh? [...] iġifieri, it's not even about financial resources. It’s about importance. This is not a priority.” [“we are offering free training as MGRM, why is it such a hassle to let us conduct it? [...] so, it's not even about financial resources. It’s about importance. This is not a priority.”]

3.9 Limited Awareness of Diversity and Intersectionalities

In the interviews, all of the parents stressed that for schools to become truly inclusive, it is essential to take on a more comprehensive approach to inclusive education that extends beyond the inclusion of diverse family configurations. The parents demonstrated that schools currently lack a comprehensive awareness of diversity, as evident in the invisibility of many facets of diversity such as adoption, race, disabilities and religious beliefs and their intersectionalities. For instance, John stated “for us, it’s not just an issue of two men, it’s also an issue of skin colour, ability, disability.” When reflecting on the under-representation of disability, Nadia noted “no kid with disability ever features in any of the scripts or

comprehensions, or books, anything.” John stressed that “the crucial message that they (educators) need to get, that in front of them they don’t have a homogenous group of 16 children. The variety is immense.”

Lisa, who works in a school setting, recounted her observations of two incidents that centred around the lack of awareness of the student body’s diversity. In the first instance, a teacher told pupils to look for their christening pictures without acknowledging that certain students had not been baptised. In the second incident, a teacher disparaged India although some of the pupils in the student body were adopted from India. Lisa called for an increased sensitivity when she stated “jekk tpoġġi ruħek fis-sitwazzjoni ta’ dak li jkun, ma titkellimx hekk” [“if you put yourself in the situation of others, you won’t speak in that manner”]. In a similar vein, Robert recalled being angered when he attended his son’s fast movement Christmas show since it was non-inclusive to students who have Autism. He said “li tagħmel show shiħ fast movement, storbju ta’ muzika, u dawn bl-awtizmu, jaħasra, beżgħu jartilgħu fuq il-palk. Aghmel nofs siegħa performance minn tliet siegħat, silent movement, silent art. Illum tant tista’ tagħmel affarijiet, tkun qed iġġib rispett” [“putting forward a full show with fast movement, loud music, and those with autism, poor children, were afraid to go on stage. Organise a half hour performance out of three hours, silent movement, silent art. Today you can do so many things, you would be demonstrating respect”].

Theme 4: Recommendations

4.1 Bottom-up Approach

The same-sex parents in this study advocate for a bottom-up approach as a recommended strategy to enhance inclusivity for rainbow families within schools. The parents recognise that “someone has to ring the bell. The reason is that, if we don’t ring the bell, nobody’s going to take some action” (Nick). Likewise, Pam asserted “jekk ma ngħidux aħna, min se jittellem?” [“if we don’t speak up, who will?”] In this light, Rebecca expressed

that, in the years of her daughter's compulsory education, she has not witnessed any change, "what has improved is our assertiveness." The parents express the sentiment of actively engaging with educational institutions to bring about change. As Robert put it "f'kull settur, jekk il-ġenituri they advocate ikun hemm bidla [...] id-dritt ma jispiċċax billi inti tiktbu fuq karta, trid teduka, u teduka, u teduka, and you have to advocate" ["in every sector, if the parents advocate, there will be change [...] the right does not end with its writing on a paper, you have to educate, and educate, and educate, and you have to advocate"]. By putting themselves forward as advocates, these parents believe they are not only driving change but also protecting their children. "When I put myself out there, I am automatically telling them, don't you dare" (Rebecca).

4.2 Top-down Approach

The participants in this study also stressed the significance of a top-down approach to promote inclusivity within schools. They proposed that change needs to be facilitated by the authorities to ensure comprehensive implementation via institutional support. The reasoning behind this approach is that, in the view of the participants, schools are unlikely to take initiative on their own due to the fear of parental backlash thereby necessitating a push from higher authorities. As Nadia put it "ma naħsibx li se jkun hawn daqshekk teachers li se jagħmluha huma minn jeddhom. So it has to be something, either something on a more national (level), that you introduce these topics" ["I don't think there will be that many teachers here who will do it out of their own free will. So it has to be something, either something on a more national (level), that you introduce these topics"]. Similarly Janet stated "iridu l-awtoritajiet jaraw li l-valuri tad-diversità u l-inclusion qed jiġu riflessi, imma bilfors [...] jekk ha jħalluha f'idejn l-iskejjejl, ifhimni hadd mhu ha jcaqlaq il-qigħa, ma jmurx jiddardar naqra tal-ilma. Iridu jintroduċu standards mingħajr biża mill-bigotti." ["the authorities need to see that the values of diversity and inclusion are being reflected, but by

force [...] get this, if they leave it in the hands of the schools, no one is going to rock the boat, so as not to disturb the waters. They need to introduce standards without fear of bigots”].

Three couples, William and John, Lisa and Janet, and Nick and David proposed the introduction of an equality policy that goes beyond being a mere statement on paper. As suggested by John “it should be made mandatory in every single education institution to have an equality policy. Which is monitored, renewed on a regular basis and enforced.” Nick emphasised the vitality of explaining this policy to all the parents of the school community in the beginning of each scholastic year. Two couples, William and John, and Robert and Thomas, discussed that the school’s inclusion officer should have the role of ensuring that the principles of diversity and equality are being adhered to especially when it comes to anything created by schools such as posters and teaching materials. Robert suggested that “kull haġa li tiġi organizzata fil-klassi trid tgħaddi l-approval minn taħt l-INCO biex tara hux inklussiva” [“everything that is organised in the classroom must pass approval from the INCO to see if it is inclusive”].

Additionally, two couples, Nadia and Pam, and Nick and David, proposed that the celebration of Pride Month and other important LGBTIQ+ dates should be integrated into the curriculum and school calendar.

4.3 Improved Teacher Education Programmes

All the participants highlighted the necessity to include knowledge about LGBTIQ+ families in teacher education programmes. Rebecca stated that the said enhanced preparation will lead to further empowerment of teachers. Nick claimed that “first and foremost, they need to learn that people like us exist.” Additionally, he expressed the importance of improved teacher training especially since, in his view, in our context, when it comes to rainbow family matters “education begins at school” since “the parents are not educated.” William and John discussed that teacher preparation programmes must go beyond merely

listing the different facets of diversity within the student body. Thus, they recommended practical training sessions in which the aspiring educators would be prompted to consider the diverse range of students they would encounter and be assigned with practical tasks that require the student teachers to adapt, adjust, and structure their educational approaches to cater to the diversity of their students. John asserted that these suggested practical sessions should be conducted for all student teachers, regardless of the age group they are teaching or the subjects they are focusing on; “whether it is a Junior 1 craft for Easter or Senior 5 and you’re doing a literary criticism.” William added that following such training sessions, “the resources then need to reflect this mapping, this classroom constellation.” Likewise, Robert stated that improved training will make the student teachers more sensitive to the discourse, examples and materials used in class, thus, “from the very first day, they give a voice to everyone.” According to John, the central take home message from teacher preparation programmes should be that diversity “makes the classroom more exciting, more engaging, more alive and it could be a resource for the teacher to use in the methodology.”

4.4 Continuous Professional Development

Two sets of parents, Rebecca and Sarah, and Robert and Thomas, recommended continuous professional training to all the school personnel “from management, to clerical staff, to whatever” (Robert). Rebecca explained that “meta mmorru fl-iskejjel ngħidulhom ġibu s-segretarji, ġibu l-admin, ġibu r-receptionist, ġibu l-cleaners. Kulhadd għandu jkun preżenti” [“when we go to the schools we tell them to bring the secretaries, bring the admin, bring the receptionists, bring the cleaners. Everyone must be present”]. Robert emphasised that, as the name implies, continuous professional development should not be a one-time occurrence, but rather, ongoing education on a yearly basis. In Robert’s own words, “għandu jkun hemm aktar edukazzjoni, u edukazzjoni mhux darba għax ninsewha, meta niġu trenjati darba se ninsewhom. Iġifieri għandu jkun hemm, tgħid every year iddaħħalha fil-COPE

session, from a different perspective, imma ddaħħalha” [“there should be more education, and not once because we’ll forget it, when we are trained once we will forget the content. I mean, there should be, say, every year it is included in the COPE session, from a different perspective, but it is included”]. Nick and David asserted that such continuous professional development should not be restricted to individuals working in a school setting, but should also be extended to other workers, such as healthcare professionals.

4.5 Increased Support to Educators

John shared that “my fear is that, not only with schools, that it will go on and on and on with training, training and training, which is fine. But training is a soft approach.” He explained that training, by itself, may not necessarily lead to significant changes, concrete actions or substantial transformation. In order to combat this matter, Rebecca underscored the necessity of not only educating educators, but also supporting them. Rebecca perceived the notion of supporting educators as a collective effort involving various stakeholders, as it ultimately benefits students and the overall quality of education. As worded by Rebecca

It-teachers iridu jkunu educated u supported. Igifieri kellna teachers li kienu educated u open imma ma kinux supported bil-biża li se jaqilghuha. “Ma jmurx jigi xi haġa, rrid insaqsi lil head.” Għandna, fin-network tar-rainbow families, għandna 4 teachers li huma LGBTIQ parents. Kieku taf kemm jibzghu fil-klassi. Qas temmen li huma LGBTIQ. Jghidulna fil-klassi nibza nitkellem openly ghax nibza li jkolli backlash mill-parents jew nibza li niġi fit-trouble mal-head. Igifieri dawn open u educated. [The teachers must be educated and supported. That is, we have had teachers who were educated and open but they were not supported and feared getting in trouble. “Something might happen, I need to ask my head.” In the rainbow families network, we have 4 teachers who are LGBTIQ parents. If only you knew how scared they are in class. It is unbelievable that they are LGBTIQ. They tell us that in class they’re

afraid to speak openly because they're afraid of having backlash from parents or getting in trouble with the head. I mean, they are open and educated.

4.6 Normalising Rainbow Families

The parents in this study recommended normalising rainbow families and diverse family structures within educational settings. Rebecca stressed that “it has to become a norm because it is a norm so it has to be infiltrated on all levels.” “You know how they tell us that we should start reading to children from when they're babies? From when they're three months? That's where we need to start” (Rebecca). All of the parents maintained the value of representation in the classroom that goes beyond merely mentioning diverse family configurations during PSCD lessons. Nadia stated that examples given in class “is the most normal way of doing it.” Her wife, Pam, illustrated “għax, inti qed tagħmel il-maths, u għandek stampa ta' żewġ missirijiet, per eżempju. Mingħajr ma' trid tiġi normalised” [“because, if you are doing maths, and you have a picture of two fathers, for example. Without knowing it will become normalised”]. John claimed that the normalisation of rainbow families can only occur if there is a conscious effort to challenge one's ingrained habits. As he put it “I think a switch needs to be alerted constantly of, do it differently, do it differently, until different becomes the norm then, that's all it takes.” Janet also suggested that, within their social circles, same-sex parents in Malta also play a crucial role in the normalisation of rainbow families since they serve as role models.

Kulhadd fiċ-ċokon tiegħu, jagħti l-eżempju lil ta' madwaru [...] jarawna kif inrabbu, jarawna inkwetati bħalhom għat-tifel, u jekk inhu privat, u jekk inhu sport, [...] iġifieri da kollu jgħin biex dan-nies jirrealizzaw, li isma it's just another normal, jekk tista' teżisti l-kelma normal, family. - **Janet**.

[Everyone, in their own social circle, acts as an exemplar to those around them [...] they see how we raise our son, they see us worried about our son, and if it is about

private lessons, and if it is about sport [...] I mean, all this helps people to realise, that listen it's just another normal, if the word normal can exist, family. - **Janet**]

Conclusion

This chapter has put forward the findings from the semi-structured interviews held with six married Maltese same-sex couples who have school-aged children. This chapter provides an insightful understanding of the lived experiences of gay and lesbian married parents in the education of their children. Hence, collectively, the four themes, namely, the positive experiences, the negative experiences, the sources of stagnation, and the recommendations address the research questions of this study. The quoted findings showcase the diversity of experiences among participants, indicating that whilst their experiences share certain commonalities, their realities also vary at points. The upcoming chapter provides a discussion of the findings of this study.

Chapter 5: Analysis

Introduction

In the preceding chapter, empirical findings derived from six same-sex married Maltese couples who have school-aged children were described. This chapter marks a pivotal shift from the presentation of those findings to a deeper, more critical examination of the data, viewed through the lens of CP. This chapter strives to communicate an understanding of why the observations made in the findings chapter matter within the context of Maltese schools. Hence, rooted in the principles of CP, this analysis aims to ascertain underlying power structures, inequalities, inequities and avenues for transformative change in the realm of the Maltese educational system and same-sex parented families. Additionally, the data collected, which exhibits the gay and lesbian parents' lived experiences in the education of their children, is further fortified or challenged by drawing comparisons and differences with relevant international literature which was conducted priorly to this study.

Theme 1: The Positive Experiences

The Normality Paradox

Five out of the six gay and lesbian married couples in the study described the favourable experience of not encountering differential treatment within the school community because of their gay or lesbian identity. They each equated the positive occurrence of a lack of differential treatment to feelings of normalcy and fitting into the schools that their children attend. Hence, to the participants, being treated like “normal” parents, that is, heterosexual parents, was seen in a positive light. When critically analysing the findings of the study, it became apparent to me that the conventional notion of a “normal” family, which is deeply rooted in heterosexual frameworks (Goldberg & Smith, 2014), creates a paradox when applied to families with same-sex parents. On one hand, there's an external pressure for these families to conform to traditional norms, to be perceived as “normal” by societal standards. A

specific example of traditional norms is that “caregiving roles are generally defined according to parent gender” (Carone & Lingardi, 2022, p. 1). For instance, in their interview, Robert and Thomas implied that, in spite of both parents being male, Robert takes on a “mothering” role whilst Thomas takes on a “fathering” role in raising their son, thereby having a dynamic which aligns with the traditional gender roles in heterosexual parenthood. On the other hand, the very definition of normality excludes their rainbow family configuration. To me, the irony lies in the fact that, to feel normal in the eyes of society, these parents are compelled to conform to a norm that fundamentally excludes them. In essence, I am making use of the phrase “normality paradox” to encapsulate the intricate interplay between societal expectations and the authentic experiences of same-sex parents, in an attempt to flag the complexity and contradiction inherent in their pursuit of normalcy within a traditional, and often exclusionary, societal context.

I surmise that the construction of normalcy in educational contexts is to be critically unpacked since, by default, the discourse of normality positions those who deviate from the established deep-seated “normality”, as abnormal. In the sociology of gender and sexuality in general, but also in CP, normalcy is understood as a concept that is socially constructed which reflects the values and interests of those in power (Butler, 2002; Freire, 2000b). Hence, “the ideological apparatus of the state creates a ‘common sense’ that reinscribes dominant elites’ social positions as natural and inevitable” (Seal, 2019, p. 53). Thus, in CP, the “production of normalisation” is posed as a “problem of culture and thought” (Britzman, 1998, p. 214). Those who appertain to the dominant culture do not comprehend it as a system; contrarily, they tend to merely interpret it as the standard, that is, something that requires no conscious consideration or questioning (hooks, 1994). Banaji and Greenwald (2016) demonstrate that such “blindspots” pose a hefty challenge as individuals remain oblivious to the impact that these biases have on their thoughts and behaviours. Freire

(2000b) identifies a deeply ingrained belief in the inevitability and necessity of “normality”, that is, an unjust status quo, as the most formidable obstacle to achieving liberation. From a CP perspective, schools are acknowledged to be socio-political establishments which directly act as contributors towards the reproduction of the established societal norms and expectations (Giroux, 2011b). As put by McLaren (2015, p. 126) “educators within the critical tradition argue that mainstream schooling supports an inherently unjust ideological and political imperative, resulting in the transmission and reproduction of the dominant status quo culture in all its sexist, homophobic, and patriarchal splendour”. Giroux (1983) asserts that schools should not be sites of reproduction, but of reconstruction. Hence, from a CP perspective, there is a need to “identify how ideologies get constituted and [...] then identify and reconstruct social practices and processes that break rather than continue existing forms of social and psychological domination” (Giroux, 1983, p. 39).

Thus, the point that I want to convey is that when positive experiences are equated with “normal” treatment, there is an inadvertent contribution to the reinforcement of existing inequalities, in this case, imparities, particularly in relation to the heteronormative view of family structure. Firstly, such normalcy discourse might dangerously perpetuate the idea that those who deviate from the so-called “normal” are somehow less deserving of positive experiences. Secondly, considering gay and lesbian parents being “treated as normal” as a positive experience overlooks the broader mission of dismantling systemic discrimination and fostering a more inclusive and diverse societal understanding of family structures. As put by Goldstein et al. (2007, p. 186):

Equity strategies based on a notion of sameness constitute a re-assertion of traditional rules and roles that promote the right of marginalised persons by receiving the right to speak as Others. The problem is that the dominant group must sanction the voice of

Others. This constitutes a normalising effect in that Others must become “just like” the dominant group.

Hence, the objective should be that same-sex parented families, as well as all other family configurations, are thought of and treated on equal footing with one another. The idea of comparing them to a notion of a “normal” family should be erased. Rather, every family structure should be acknowledged in their own right, without any hierarchy or discrimination.

The Shielding Power of Gay and Lesbian Parents

When the participants were asked about how safe they felt their children were at school, each of the six same-sex couples described a strong sense of perceived security. At first glance, these encouraging research findings bring a sense of optimism; yet, it is crucial to subject these positive results to critical scrutiny. First and foremost, the participants in the study exhibited careful school selection, which serves as a protective measure for their children. This observation points towards the vitality of drawing a distinction between autonomous choices and those made under the weight of societal norms. For instance, Janet and Lisa opted for a church school where one of the mothers is employed to be sure that their child would have a safe environment. The very fact that gay and lesbian parents feel the need to conscientiously consider which school to send their children to, due to perceiving unequal levels of safety in different schools, reflects an educational system that is still inadequately hospitable to rainbow families. The findings of my dissertation suggest that, in Malta, inadequately hospitable schools arise from a combination of deep-rooted societal attitudes, lingering prejudices, and a lack of institutional inclusivity. This finding aligns with the international academic literature that was discussed in the literature review of this study (e.g. Kosciw & Diaz, 2008) and points to the inequalities that are tenaciously embedded within the unjust educational system (Shor, 1992).

Additionally, in accordance, amongst others, with Rist (1970) and Bourdieu's (2018) research, who claim that education is aimed at the middle class, the ability of four of the couples in this study to select from diverse educational options and opt for enrolling their children in a private school can be understood in the context of the parents' socioeconomic status, that is, the possession of substantial economic and, in these particular cases, cultural capital. CP aligns with insights by Rist (1970) and Bourdieu (2018), as well as local scholars such as the late Sultana (1991), that recognise that the importance of social class in shaping educational outcomes and power dynamics since those with more capital can perpetuate their advantage (Freire, 2000b). Thus, the affluent status, mostly coming from a middle-class social status, of the parents in the study translates to greater economic and social power, which tellingly impacts the positive educational experiences described for their children. This study shows that a notable manifestation of this influence is the gay and lesbian parents' ability to advocate for their children within the educational system. Parallel to the research studies described in the literature review (e.g. McDonald & Morgan, 2019), the proactive involvement and engagement of gay and lesbian parents in their children's schools, including advocacy efforts such as giving talks and providing resources to teachers, serve as a shield which strengthens the families' defences to guard against the potential marginalisation resulting from the prevailing heteronormative setting.

The parents in the study viewed their advocacy efforts as a way to assert that there is nothing wrong with their gay or lesbian identity and to contribute to creating a more inclusive educational environment. Thus, the gay and lesbian parents in the study explained that they openly disclose their sexuality to their children's schools. The local scenario of the participants being forthright about their sexuality in school interactions can be starkly contrasted from some foreign literature (e.g. Grigoropoulos, 2023), which details gay and lesbian parents as hesitant to disclose their sexuality to schools due to fear of stigmatisation.

In my view, the evident contrast between countries suggests a potential correlation with legal frameworks that lead to more openness to and acceptance for LGBTIQ+ people in Malta (FRA, 2020). Malta's progressive legislation on LGBTIQ+ rights, which has positioned it at the forefront (ILGA, 2023), may be contributing to empowering gay and lesbian parents to feel secure in expressing their sexuality within educational settings. Thus, in spite of the still existing discrimination and injustice for LGBTIQ+ individuals, Malta emerges as a potential exemplar where proactive legal measures positively influence individuals to feel secure in exercising their rights and openly sharing their sexuality, without fear of reprisal (FRA, 2020).

Moreover, whilst, on the one hand, the study's informants express a feeling of safety for their children, they paradoxically also communicated that there are still several instances of bullying as well as a high level of invisibility of rainbow families in the school environment. When analysing this finding from Goldstein's et al (2007, p. 183) CP framework on gender and sexuality based on "safe, positive, and queering moments" in schools, it becomes perceptible that, presently, local schools cannot even be classified as "safe schools", let alone as "positive schools" or "queer schools". Local schools can more adequately be described as engaging in "safe moments" in which tolerance is, on the whole promoted, yet, still being coupled with a lack of affirmation and a lack of meaningful efforts towards the connivance of heteronormativity (Goldstein et al., 2007).

One-Time Sparks Versus Sustained Fire

During the interviews, the gay and lesbian parents communicated a series of positive experiences that they experienced in the schools which their children attend, including instances of representation, teacher sensitivity, and SLT sensitivity. While these moments were perceived positively by the study's informants, it was apprehensible that they illustrated isolated sparks of inclusivity rather than ongoing, sustained inclusivity efforts in the

educational system. During the interviews, the participants articulated an awareness that, while appreciative of the sporadic positive experiences, there is an imperative for educational institutions to uphold more unremitting efforts that go beyond the “bare minimum” (Nadia) so as to establish a just educational system that veritably affirms their rainbow family configuration. Fundamentally, CP considers closely the importance of coherency between what we preach and our actions (Freire, 2000b). As explicated in the literature review (e.g. Schieble, 2012), a tokenistic approach to LGBT inclusion in schools is inadequate and, in actuality, counteractive, since it merely exhibits superficial or symbolic performative gestures, that is, a checking the box set of exercises, without any genuine or authentic engagement with the deeper issues to confronting the societal biases, discrimination, and complexities that members of the LGBTIQ+ community tirelessly face (hooks, 1994).

Ultimately, CP evokes the conviction that the pursuit of legitimate social justice in education requires ongoing critical reflection and action (Steinberg & Kincheloe, 2006). Firstly, the word “ongoing” flags that one-off or isolated inclusive activities are insufficient for appropriating meaningful social change. In other words, social justice is not a static goal that can be attained with a single action or event; it is an evolving and dynamic process that involves resolutely addressing the long-established unjustness (hooks, 1994). Secondly, the attainment of social justice rests on critical reflection and critical action operating in a mutually reinforcing, or, dialectical process, since as individuals become more knowing of the systemic oppression and injustices in society, this critical consciousness incites them to intercede so as to bring about societal transformation; and, in turn, as they buckle down to action to address injustice, they gain a deeper understanding of the evolving societal conditions (Freire, 2000b). As worded by Giroux (2011b, p. 1), critical consciousness enables students to “connect knowledge to power and the ability to take constructive action.” It can be observed that not all of the study’s parents neatly follow Freire’s (2000b) formulation of

critical reflection and critical action emerging in a dialectical manner. While all of the gay and lesbian parents outwardly communicated an awareness of injustices and exhibited critical consciousness, they do not all translate this consciousness into critical action. For instance, John stated “we don’t feel that pressure, no. [...] we don’t feel the need to be militant.”

Theme 2: The Negative Experiences

Navigating the Labyrinth of Heteronormativity

The interviews with gay and lesbian parents unveiled the persistent prevalence of heteronormativity within local schools in both primary and secondary levels of compulsory education in Malta. Heteronormativity may be spelled out as a principle that “promotes gender conventionality, heterosexuality, and family traditionalism as the correct way for people to be” (Oswald, Blume & Marks, 2005, p. 143). Heteronormativity aligns with traditional power structures and discrimination, which are at odds with the principles of CP such as social justice and critical thinking (McLaren, 2015). Heteronormative ideals were the chief underlying cause of the vast majority of the negative experiences disclosed by the participants. In this study, heteronormativity was notably reflected through the invisibility of non-heteronormative family structures in classrooms in Malta, where an erasure of the realities, experiences and backgrounds of rainbow families was noted. Non-inclusive school forms which employ terminology like “mum and dad” instead of the more inclusive “parent 1 and 2,” further underscored the systemic challenges stemming from traditional gender and family norms faced by the same-sex parented families in the study. Exclusion by other parents, certain instances of bullying, and teacher, school personnel and school visitor insensitivity were also discussed as being fuelled by heteronormative societal expectations, where biases and stereotypes held by those in the school community contributed to the cultivation of unwelcoming educational environments for gay and lesbian parents and their children. Finally, the participants’ and their children’s heightened awareness of deviating

from mainstream heteronormative standards was verbalised as instilling obstructive thoughts regarding society's gaze, and hence, leading to adverse effects on their wellbeing, due to, for example, constant overthinking and a reevaluation of their every action.

The extensive reach of heteronormativity found in the study affirms that whilst eminent strides have been made in advancing LGBTIQ+ rights and social acceptance in Malta (ILGA, 2023), the lived experiences of married gay and lesbian parents continue to reveal that the clout of heteronormative ideals, which prioritise and reinforce traditional heterosexual norms, for instance, the idea that marriage should be between a man and a woman, has endured and, thus, has a tangible footprint on the lives of same-sex parented families. The persistence of heteronormativity as an ongoing challenge for rainbow families aligns with broader scholarly observations which were extensively detailed in the literature review (e.g. Goldberg et al., 2017). Thus, whilst the occurrence of heteronormativity in the local school setting was anticipated, the extent to which heteronormativity persists, particularly amongst individuals who are typically, perhaps mistakenly, presumed to be educated and knowledgeable, such as teachers, has genuinely taken me by surprise. Having said so, as a current student in the MTL programme at the University of Malta, I acknowledge that while the units cover various aspects of diversity and inclusion, there is a noticeable gap in addressing sexual and gender diversity. This omission is particularly significant given the reality of LGBTIQ+ students and parents in local educational settings. This finding suggests that, in Malta, despite progress in various areas, there are still entrenched beliefs and lack of awareness regarding sexual and gender diversity even among well-educated segments of the population.

Heteronormativity is to be countered by queering the curriculum, classrooms and schools. As worded by Goldstein (2021, p. 113):

The present absence of LGBTQ people from curriculum and the design of school spaces is a reflection of the cisheteronormative way schools are organised. In other words, this “presence absence” highlights the systemic exclusion of LGBTQ students, families, and queerspawn. Queering school and classroom means disrupting and undoing the cisheteronormative nature of public education.

“Queering moments [...] prompt an understanding of oppression as multiple, interconnected, and ever changing” (Goldstein, 2019, p. 137). Goldstein (2019, 2021) acknowledges that queering schools is not just about the content of lessons but also about the attitudes, behaviours, and atmosphere within the school that encourage critical reflection on how educational spaces can be more affirming for all students. Hence, as discussed in the literature review, from a curriculum perspective, it is not enough to queer the formal curriculum via the deliberate inclusion of various family structures, including those headed by same-sex parents so as to validate and normalise their experiences; but, it is equally imperative to address the hidden curriculum (Giroux & Penna, 1979; Portelli, 1973), as it holds the potential to contain implicit messages or assumptions that could unintentionally marginalise or stigmatise rainbow families. As suggested by this study’s participants, the hidden curriculum can be addressed via concrete actions such as diversifying the images on the walls to showcase various family structures, including rainbow families, expanding the school library’s collection to include literature that features LGBTIQ+ characters, ensuring the use of inclusive language amongst educators which avoid assumptions about family structures or relationships that may exclude LGBTIQ+ experience, and integrating LGBTIQ+ awareness and celebrations, such as Pride Month, into the school calendar.

Layers of Identity: Intersectionality

The negative experiences narrated by the married gay and lesbian parents in this study communicate that the adversities experienced are not solely concomitant to their sexuality but

also to intersectionality. “Intersectionality is a sociological explanation of people’s experiences of inequity that identifies uneven power relations as a result of differently intersecting social markers (race, ethnicity, class, nationality, gender, etc.)” (Eick & Ryan, 2014, p. 32). The term intersectionality was coined by Crenshaw (1989, p. 140), in the realm of Black feminist activism, who argued that “any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated.” Hence, intersectionality challenges oversimplified portrayals of group experiences based on social identity categories since it showcases the necessity to make sense out of the complex hierarchies of power and oppression that exist both within and spanning the interconnecting identity categories (Collins, 2015). In this regard, the challenges faced by the participants span across various facets of their identities, encompassing dimensions like their children’s disability or adoptive status. For instance, only one couple, Rebecca and Sarah, attributed the bullying their children faced in school to their own sexuality. In stark contrast, William and John mentioned that their sons primarily encountered teasing related to their adoption status, while Nadia and Pam, along with Nick and David, explained that their children experienced bullying as a result of having a disability. Thus, this study has sustained that “LG (lesbian and gay) parents and their children possess multiple, intertwining identities that influence families’ access to power and resources and expose them to visible and invisible forms of oppression and privilege within their broader social context” (Goldberg et al., 2018, p. 700).

The findings that shed light on the challenges faced by gay and lesbian parents and their children, extending beyond their sexuality to include other facets of their identities, has been significant since it has exemplified the multifaceted nature of the participants’ experiences and underlined the requirement to address the heterogeneity amongst the sample, that is, the need for a comprehensive approach to punctuate the intersecting aspects of their

identities. In the case of this study, consistent with the findings of Vassallo, Azzopardi Lane and Azzopardi (2022), the participants hold multiple minority identities that are marginalised within Maltese society due to factors like their sexual minority identity, adoptive family structure, and, for four of the participating parents, raising children with disabilities. However, adopting an intersectional approach also reveals that their middle to upper social class, influenced by factors such as educational attainment and financial resources, along with, in the case of men, their gender, confers certain privileges that may influence their interactions within their communities and their experiences when engaging with schools. This recognition underscores the intricate meshing of a myriad of identity dimensions since these parents often find themselves in a unique position of being simultaneously disadvantaged and privileged. For instance, the participants' familiarity with the educational system enables a more seamless interaction with schools which empowers them to have a voice that allows them to advocate for the inclusivity of their children. However, their privileged position stemming from their socio-economic status coexists with the pervasive heteronormative environment in which there is an ongoing struggle for the recognition and acceptance of rainbow family configurations.

Understanding intersectionality is weighty since CP gives importance to personal experiences in one's own life (Giroux, 2011b). For critical pedagogists, learning should have its foundation in the lived experiences of those engaging in it and so, educational resources need to be drawn from and connected to people's everyday existence (Kincheloe, 2005). Hence, it is crucial to grasp that every student's personal experiences hold immense value and, thus, embracing and cherishing students' personal stories, which are shaped by their unique intersectionalities that weave together in complex ways, is at the heart of creating a veritably inclusive classroom (Freire, 2000b). "One way to build community in the classroom is to recognise the value of each individual voice" (hooks, 1994, p. 29). Thus, CP also

conveys the importance of listening. When teachers actively lend their ears to the students' idiosyncratic stories and narratives, they not only validate the authenticity of each student's journey but also open doors to broader conversations leading to actualising the transformative potential of education (Shor, 1992).

Theme 3: Miseducative Experiences

Miseducative Versus Liberating Education

The concept of miseducation in philosophy and sociology of education was developed by Dewey (1997, p. 25-26) who stated that:

[A]ny experience is miseducative [if it] has the effect of arresting or distorting the growth of further experience. An experience may be such as to engender callousness; it may produce lack of sensitivity and of responsiveness. Then the possibilities of having richer experience in the future are restricted.

Whilst Dewey was not linked to CP, his philosophy of education showcases the stagnating effects of miseducative experiences since such experiences have the negative effect of blocking further growth, and, thus, contribute to a roadblock in the pursuit of the inclusion of gay and lesbian parented families in schools. Thus, the findings related to the miseducative experiences observed by the gay and lesbian parents in the study reveal a series of substantial challenges that is impeding progress in the local socio-educational setting. Of central importance, social ignorance, in the forms of heteronormativity, homophobia, and gender stereotypes, is inherently miseducative because it promotes simplistic and exclusionary views of the wide range of human experiences, identities, and relationships and thus, perpetuates damaging biases and misconceptions which hinders both personal and societal progress. As articulated by hooks (1994, p. 29) "it is painfully clear that biases that uphold and maintain white supremacy, imperialism, sexism, and racism have distorted education so that it is no longer about the practice of freedom."

From a CP perspective, the analysis of miseducative experiences underscores the growing imperative for educational institutions to interrogate “beneath surface meaning, first impressions, dominant myths, official pronouncements, traditional clichés, received wisdom, and mere opinions” so as to result in a liberating education (Shor, 1992, p. 125). In this frame of reference, it can be stated that CP “forges critique and agency through a language of scepticism and possibility” (Giroux, 2011b, p. 172). Liberating education, in its essence, is the antithesis of miseducative experiences, as it promotes and brings growth and continuity thereby functioning as a dynamic force aimed at dismantling ignorance so as to liberate individuals from its constraints, forging a path towards greater social justice (Dewey, 1997; Freire, 2000b). It embodies the principles of problem-posing education in which the ultimate goal is to cultivate a sense of agency among learners, equipping them with the tools to challenge societal constructs, critique dominant narratives, and actively contribute to the creation of more just societal spaces (Freire, 2000b).

Having said so, this theme, which discusses the miseducative experiences observed by the gay and lesbian parents in the study, highlights not only the challenges within the Maltese education system but also brings into focus the broader societal landscape. It becomes evident that the barriers to achieving liberating education extend well beyond the walls of educational institutions. Instead, it is the larger societal context that is marked by widespread miseducation which acts as a formidable obstacle. For instance, the apprehension of the study’s participants that introducing topics related to LGBTIQ+ issues in schools may provoke negative reactions from miseducated and conservative parents, who misconstrue it as an attempt to influence their children's sexual orientation, such as the negative reactions in 2015 following MGRM’s donation of several publications showcasing diverse family structures to the Ministry of Education (Diacono, 2015), is an exemplification of a societal obstacle that is presently acting as an impediment to liberating education.

The Continuing Impact of Roman Catholic Influence

With Sunday Mass attendance in Malta recorded at just under 37% in the *Malta Sunday Mass Attendance Census 2017*, projections indicate a further decline with Sunday mass attendance anticipated to drop to 10% of the Catholic population in Malta by 2040 (Farrugia, 2019b). In spite of the significant decline in Sunday Mass attendance, the Catholic Church continues to exert a notable influence in Malta, as evidenced by the accounts of all the married gay and lesbian couples interviewed in the study. The participants in the study shared an understanding that the still luminescent controversy about same-sex relationships in Maltese society partly stems from people's strong adherence to the Catholic Church's teachings. William and John pointed out that, even in the context of private schools, the entire school environment is influenced by the Roman Catholic faith, making it challenging for families, particularly rainbow families, that do not align well with this faith.

The lived realities of the parents in the study present a spectrum of interactions with the Catholic Church in Malta. The experiences shared by couples like Nick and David, and Sarah and Rebecca, who faced difficulties with the Catholic church environment and clergy that displayed homophobic behaviour, shed light on the ongoing tensions and complexities surrounding LGBTIQ+ inclusivity and religion, reinforcing the significance of further dialogue and advocacy in this context. For instance, Sarah and Rebecca described the painful experience of their daughter encountering a homophobic priest at school who invalidated same-sex parented families by stating that they cannot be classified as real families. Nick and David explained that they had a negative experience during their son's baptism, where the priest displayed insensitivity by questioning David's role as a "second" father. They continued by recalling the online hate they received from members of the Christian community upon sharing images of their son's baptism on social media. Such experiences

underscore the importance of addressing homophobic attitudes not only within the church itself but also among its members.

Conversely, two of the same-sex couples in the study, Robert and Thomas, and Lisa and Janet, described themselves as church-goers. They are actively engaged in church-related activities, for instance, Lisa and Janet's son is an altar boy and also attends a church school. Moreover, they discussed feeling high levels of acceptance from the Catholic church due to receiving substantial everyday life support from members of the clergy within the Catholic Church as well as fellow church members. For instance, Robert and Thomas explained that the parish priest sends an email of concern whenever he does not see them in church on Sunday. Both couples expressed frustration towards other members of the LGBTIQ+ community who oversimplify the situation by labelling the church as non-accepting to rainbow families. In fact, Robert and Thomas specified that over the years, they have received much more support from the Catholic Church when compared to MGRM. Additionally, Janet stated "there are those who are morally bigoted, that are not necessarily Catholic" thereby arguing that homophobia is not inherently tied to being Catholic but rather, pertains to the individuals' attitudes and prejudices, regardless of their religious affiliation.

The finding that some gay and lesbian couples in the study have strong ties to the church and express positive sentiments about their experiences was indeed a surprising and unexpected finding. It underscores the complexity of the relationship between gay or lesbian individuals and religious institutions and challenges my preconceived notions about how different identities can intersect with religious faith. It adds depth to my research by revealing that the experiences of married gay and lesbian parents in Malta vary widely, and it stresses the necessity for a more elaborated understanding of these interactions in the context of the study.

CP calls for the liberation from oppressive systems (Freire, 2000b). Liberation, in this context, refers to the process of emancipating individuals from oppressive systems, enabling them to exercise critical agency, and ultimately working towards a more just and equitable society (Freire, 2000b). Within the framework of CP, the mixed experiences of married gay and lesbian parents within the church reveal a complex interplay of liberation and oppression. Some parents find a sense of liberation within the church when they encounter acceptance and support, which aligns with the principles of liberation advocated by CP (Giroux, 2011). They are empowered to express their identities and challenge traditional norms. However, others continue to grapple with oppressive practices, as exemplified by experiences of homophobia and insensitivity (hooks, 1994).

Pope Francis recently allowed priests' blessings of same-sex couples, but under specific conditions, distinct from traditional heterosexual weddings, and evaluated on a case-by-case basis (Latza Nadeau, 2023). The Pope's statement is in contrast to a prior explicit ruling by the Vatican's doctrinal office in 2021, which prohibited such blessings (Maqbool & Cooney, 2023). The Pope reaffirmed the Church's doctrine that matrimony is reserved for a man and a woman, emphasising its openness to procreation. However, he simultaneously maintained the importance of "pastoral charity" and the avoidance of a judgmental approach, ascertaining that blessings may be a means for individuals to seek spiritual growth, even when some actions are considered morally unacceptable by Church standards (Maqbool & Cooney, 2023). He concluded by clarifying that such blessings should not become standard practice and should not receive blanket approval from Church authorities (The Associated Press, 2023). As a reaction to the Pope's statement, Fr Colin Apap revealed that, in the past years, he was one of the priests in Malta who faced criticism for offering blessings to same-sex couples (TVM, 2023). He continued by stating that through such a declaration, the Pope "opened up a new pastoral road, which does not change anything, in the sense that what the

Church teaches about marriage being between a man and a woman forever, and being a sacrament, that was and remains the Church's teaching" (TVM, 2023, para. 4). Hence, in my interpretation, the Pope's stance remains somewhat ambiguous. While it leans toward individualised consideration, it does not signify a definitive endorsement of same-sex blessings within the Catholic Church. It demonstrates a willingness to address the issue's complexity and underscores the importance of pastoral care for LGBTIQ+ individuals while upholding traditional Church teachings on marriage and procreation. The Catholic Church's growing openness to same-sex couples, while still accompanied by a degree of ambiguity, exemplifies the concept of hope in action as it signifies the potential for positive change even within the most entrenched systems. This unfolding position, which reflects the church's growing willingness to engage with the particularities of contemporary societal realities, may, in turn, offer hope to those who may have felt othered and invalidated within religious communities. The dialogue and acceptance emerging from the church's evolving stance align with the principles of CP, foregrounding the need for critical examination of established norms and deeply ingrained beliefs, in the pursuit of more inclusive societal structures.

Theme 4: Recommendations

Teacher Education Matters

In this study, all the same-sex couples consistently asserted the high levels of witnessed unpreparedness of teachers when it came to addressing LGBTIQ+ related issues. While this finding was not entirely unexpected, the degree of unpreparedness described was surprisingly extensive. It was anticipated as a potential finding but not to the severity revealed by the participants. The findings in this study align with Goldberg et al.'s (2017) assertion that teachers' lack of knowledge is a defining factor contributing to discomfort, hesitancy and fear in addressing same-sex parents. In both investigations, it is evident that educators' insufficient understanding of LGBTIQ+ issues underpins their insensitive

behaviour and comments when interacting with same-sex parents, thereby highlighting the urgent need for teacher education and training programmes to address these knowledge gaps.

Undoubtedly, on paper, at a theoretical level, the importance of diversity is widely acknowledged in the realm of education, evident not only in the educational policies and curricula, such as the *NCF* (2012) but also in teacher training programmes, such as the units covered in the Master in Teaching and Learning (MTL) course at the University of Malta. However, the persistence of a gap between this recognition and its effective implementation is a complex issue which is worth delving further into.

From a CP stance, the role of theory is not to dictate, but to enact and enable practice (Giroux, 2011a). The role of theory is to make people in the field aware of different critical positions and encourage and support them to think critically, even if they make themselves vulnerable within their own practices (Giroux, 2011a). Taking a CP perspective, Smyth (1989, p. 5-6) advocated for teachers to engage in a structured process of self-analysis, examining their knowledge, beliefs, and practices in a series of stages: “describing (What do I do?)”; “informing (What does this mean?)”; “confronting (How did I come to be like this?)”; and “reconstructing (How might I do things differently?)” In this critical framework, theory becomes a catalyst for self-reflection and dialogue.

Unfortunately, the findings of this study suggest that the teacher training that I, and a lot of other teachers underwent, disappointingly lacks in critical reflection. Instead of employing a problem-posing approach that encourages critical thinking, it adheres to the banking model of education (Freire, 2000b). To me, the MTL content that tackled the notion of diversity in the classroom fell short of the intended goal of nurturing critical thinking skills and instead felt like a checkbox exercise to ensure exam clearance. The course repeatedly put forward the necessity of embracing diversity, yet it lacked personal engagement since diversity was promoted as an abstract concept rather than a lived experience. Such

educational content left little room for us prospective educators to explore the potential tensions, biases, and complexities associated with diversity, which, in my view, are essential aspects of developing a more inclusive and CP. Furthermore, it was notable that the teacher training programme lacked specific lectures dedicated to addressing family diversity, particularly with a focus on same-sex parented families, and gender and sexual diversity, both of which are becoming a big reality in schools today. Instead, the MTL programme was highly focused on cultural and economic diversity in the classroom. This is not to say that knowledge on concepts such as multiculturalism is not important, it definitely is; but leaving out issues of gender and sexual diversity in the entire two years of the programme is a big deficit, especially as I myself am a teacher in a local private school in Malta and I know that the LGBTIQ+ reality and same-sex parents are now quite present in schools. The omission of such specific content meant that prospective educators were not provided with the necessary tools and insights to navigate the unique dynamics that may arise in classrooms with diverse family structures. This gap in the curriculum further reinforced the idea that the approach to diversity was insufficiently nuanced and often neglected the complexities of real-world educational settings.

The study's informants seem to overlook the critical role of theory and put forward the recommendation that teacher training programmes need to incorporate hands-on, practical components that enable educators to translate their understanding of diversity into concrete actions in the classroom. For instance, William and Nick stressed that teacher training should include case studies that apply theoretical concepts to real-world scenarios, allowing student teachers to develop strategies for managing diverse classrooms effectively as opposed to an endless theoretical component about the facets of diversity. In my view, the ideal scenario would be an interplay between theory and practice, in which teachers become not just consumers of knowledge but active agents of change in the classroom. The relationship

between theory and practice is dynamic, where theory informs practice, and practice, in turn, enriches theory, creating a continuous loop of growth and development for educators (Giroux, 2011a). In this regard, as I see it, teacher education, including the MTL, needs to be improved on both a theoretical and practical level. On a theoretical level, the MTL programme needs to allocate more time and space for content about sexual and gender diversity including covering topics like the impact of heteronormativity in schools. Additionally, on a practical level, the MTL programme should provide student teachers with the opportunity to make good use of the theory they are exposed to, for instance, via the engagement in critical analyses of specific lesson plans in which student teachers are supported in queering the lesson content. Such practical exercises have the role of informing and refining their initial theoretical understanding.

The notion of continuous professional development is prominent in CP, since it is closely associated with the concept of unfinishedness which underscores that individuals are perpetually evolving and developing, rather than being static or finalised beings (Mayo, 2006). This ongoing growth is a result of our inherent capacity for continuous learning, transformation, and the cultivation of critical consciousness (Freire, 2000b). Teachers who are critically aware are not only acquainted with the facets of diversity but also possess the skills, knowledge, and commitment to act upon this awareness effectively since they can accurately comprehend the bearing that they can have on their students' learning and their families' lives. Hence, in my view, it is not just the initial teacher training that matters, rather, it is a continuous journey that involves delving deeper into the intricacies of diverse classrooms thereby empowering all educators to confront their own biases, adapt their teaching methods, and create inclusive, nurturing, educative, just and safe spaces.

Towards a Shared Commitment

In charting a way forward, the voices of the gay and lesbian parents in this study have illuminated two distinct, yet, interconnected paths. The bottom-up approach harnesses their role as advocates and change agents, empowering them to actively participate in the transformation of schools, both through their individual actions and collective efforts. Simultaneously, the top-down approach alludes to the responsibility of educational authorities to implement and enforce LGBT-inclusive curricula, policies and practices across all schools. These two directions, though different in their points of initiation, converge towards a shared commitment of creating inclusive, affirming, and equitable educational environments for the children of gay and lesbian parents.

In line with what was analysed in the previous sub-heading, in discussions about the educational system, there is a high tendency for “blame [to be] squarely fixed on teachers [...] and administrators and school boards remain unaccountable and paranoid” (Steinberg & Kincheloe, 2006, p. 283). For this reason, when taking a critical stance, “it is time that we begin to guard our guards” (Steinberg & Kincheloe, 2006, p. 285). As phrased by Giroux (2011b, p. 13), from a CP perspective “education has a responsibility not only to search for the truth regardless of where it may lead but also to educate students to make authority politically and morally accountable.” When critically analysing the local scenario, the disconnection between progressive policies, such as *A Policy on Inclusive Education in Schools* (2022) and the lived experiences of gay and lesbian parents within schools brings out a considerable concern. These policies are undoubtedly a vital trail toward the cultivation of increasingly socially just educational environments, yet, they often remain dormant on paper, failing to find real-life application. For instance, the aforementioned inclusion policy by the Ministry for Education, Sport, Youth, Research and Innovation (2022, p. 17) acknowledges “gender and sexual diversity” to encompass “learners with LGBTIQ parents”. Despite this

inclusive policy, both gay and lesbian parents, along with their children in this study, encounter ongoing negative experiences within Maltese schools. This underscores that, despite the explicit acknowledgment of LGBTIQ parents in the policy, this particular aspect of diversity remains neglected in the local educational context. For example, the policy is “based on the conviction that all our learners are entitled to enjoy a meaningful educational experience which is fruitful and relevant” (Ministry for Education, Sport, Youth, Research and Innovation, 2022, p. 9), yet, all of the participants in the study discussed that their family configuration is invisible in the school curriculum.

This study shows that the effective implementation of inclusive policies often encounters resistance from various sources; the central source which emerges as a significant barrier being traditional societal ideology as it may not align with progressive policy objectives. This misalignment between policy and societal ideology can hinder the practical realisation of socially just practices. Thus, reinforcing the idea that progressive policy alone is meagre in the enablement of change since there is a relationship between policy and societal norms.

In my view, the presence of superficially inclusive policies can, in actual fact, be more counterproductive than having no policies at all, as they create a chimaera of progress and inclusivity while little or no real transformation is actualised. When policies profess inclusivity but there is a failure to convert these claims into practical, lived experiences within educational systems, it creates a stark disconnect between rhetoric and reality. This disjuncture between policy and practice can lead to the alienation of individuals who are affected by these policies. From a Freirean perspective, this alienation can be addressed by not only having policies that promote inclusion but also by actively engaging in praxis – critically reflecting on these policies, identifying areas of disconnection, and taking meaningful actions to bridge the gap between rhetoric and reality (Freire, 2000b). Ultimately,

my position is that the responsibility of policymakers should extend far beyond policy formulation, demanding a commitment to active engagement in the realisation of policies, which are fundamental to nurturing a more equitable and inclusive educational landscape. This necessitates a principled and non-negotiable stance, undeterred by potential societal backlash, and a steadfast pledge to social justice. In essence, it is of utmost importance that policymakers avoid the temptation of pursuing policies solely for the purpose of maintaining popular appeal or securing votes. Instead, their responsibility lies in putting their neck out there to guarantee social justice due to it being a fundamental matter of human rights that should be granted to all, irrespective of sexual orientation or gender identity.

Conclusion

This chapter has provided a comprehensive analysis of the complex landscape of rainbow family inclusivity in Maltese schools through the application of CP as a theoretical framework. This analysis has explored the multifaceted experiences of six married gay and lesbian parents with school-aged children in Malta. It has provided a critical reflection of the positive and negative encounters they face within the educational system, the miseducative experiences that hinder progress towards LGBTIQ+ inclusivity and recommendations for a way forward. In the upcoming concluding chapter, I consolidate the findings and insights derived from this research study to formulate conclusions and recommendations aimed at amplifying the voices of married gay and lesbian parents in Malta, with the ultimate goal of enhancing rainbow family inclusivity, and, chiefly, social justice, within the school environment.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

Introduction

This final chapter concludes the dissertation through a summary of the key findings and insights derived from the study, along with an overview of the study's limitations, the study's applicability, a set of propositions for future research and finally, my conclusion that attests that change, from the way how I see it, can occur only through the transformative power of love.

A Summary of the Key Findings

This study's first research question sought to shed light on the positive and negative experiences of married gay and lesbian Maltese couples in the education of their children. All participants discussed the importance of being married. Beyond legal recognition for their relationship, marriage grants them the same rights as heterosexual couples, ensuring both spouses share legal parental rights and responsibilities for their children. As positive experiences, the parents in the study shared that they perceive the schools that their children attend to rank high in safety, that they feel a sense of normalcy within the school setting and they also recalled instances of school recognition and praise. Additionally, the study's informants also narrated the positive experiences of their children having the chance to present their family configuration to their classmates as well as the experiences of the parents being invited to share their personal experiences with other members of the school community, such as teachers or school pupils. The participants also described moments of representation of their rainbow family configuration within the school setting as a positive experience for them. The parents also recounted specific positive experiences in which their children's teachers or the school leadership team showed sensitivity towards them or their children. Finally, the parents shared that for them, their children's development as well as their children being well integrated are regarded as positive experiences. On the contrary, the

study's participants also shared a number of negative experiences, particularly their experience of having their family structure being completely invisible from the classroom and the curriculum, the non-inclusive school forms, being excluded by other parents and instances in which their children have experienced bullying or were reluctant to be seen with them. The parents also narrated a number of instances of insensitivity stemming from their childrens' teachers and the school personnel. Finally, the parents also described the burden of their obstructive thoughts on social scrutiny.

The second research question sought to uncover whether gay and lesbian married Maltese couples feel included in the school community. Whilst the participants narrated certain moments which, to them, signified feelings of inclusion, an all-encompassing level of inclusion is being restrained due to several miseducative experiences, namely, a lack of teacher preparedness, school leadership, a fear of parental backlash, the Roman Catholic context, social ignorance resulting in heteronormativity, homophobia and gender stereotypes, an insufficient utilisation of resources, family diversity being an unprioritised area of focus and a limited understanding of the phrase diversity.

The third research question attempted to convey ways through which the experiences of gay and lesbian couples and their children can be improved. The participants in the study pointed to both a bottom-up and a top-down approach. The findings suggest the need for improved teacher preparation programmes, continuous professional development, increased support to educators and the introduction of efforts which normalise rainbow families.

A Summary of the Insights Derived

The primary findings derived from this study were analysed through the framework of critical pedagogy. While the positive experiences reported by the married gay and lesbian parents in the study were undoubtedly uplifting, they consistently underscored the critical importance of being perceived as "normal" parents within the context of a predominantly

heterosexual society. The concept of “normality” in this context casts a discerning light on the educational system, revealing that these positive experiences were often a result of the protective strategies employed by the gay and lesbian parents. These strategies included carefully selecting educational institutions and harnessing their medium to high levels of economic, social, and cultural capital to advocate for their children's rights and well-being. Furthermore, these positive experiences unveiled sporadic instances of inclusivity within the educational environment, which, upon closer examination, appeared to represent tokenistic gestures rather than genuine efforts towards achieving comprehensive social justice.

The critical analysis of the negative experiences disclosed that heteronormativity served as the chief cause behind a majority of the adversities faced by the study's informants. These negative experiences encompassed various issues, including the omission of same-sex parents from the curriculum and the use of non-inclusive school forms. The need of queering schools, not only within the formal curriculum but also across the broader school environment, was discussed in the analysis; the more intersectionalities present, the greater the challenges they had to face. Additionally, the discussion on negative experiences delved into the complex issue of intersectionality, demonstrating that the challenges experienced by these married gay and lesbian parents extended beyond their sexual orientation. They encompassed various aspects of their identities, including their children's disabilities or adoptive status, reflecting the intricate tapestry of their experiences.

The Deweyan theme of miseducative experiences was examined with a critical lens, shedding light on the ongoing struggle between miseducation and liberating education. Liberating education, in stark contrast to miseducation, was conceptualised as a dynamic force dedicated to dismantling ignorance, advancing social justice, and empowering learners to challenge prevailing societal norms and dominant narratives. The analysis revealed that the barriers to achieving liberating education extended beyond the confines of educational

institutions and were deeply entrenched in the broader societal context characterised by pervasive miseducation. Furthermore, the continued influence of the Roman Catholic Church on the lives of the participants was critically discussed. The participants' mixed experiences within the context of the Catholic Church showcased how some parents found solace and acceptance within the Church, aligning with the principles of liberation advocated by critical pedagogy, while others grappled with oppressive practices, including experiences of homophobia and insensitivity.

The section dedicated to the analysis of the recommendations put forward by the participants centred on the critical significance of teacher training and the urgent need for a shared commitment to charting a more equitable and inclusive path forward. However, it was underscored that a top-down approach is indispensable to ensure that progressive policies translate into tangible changes in the everyday lives of rainbow families. This necessitates a principled dedication to social justice, in which policymakers shoulder the responsibility of championing social justice as a fundamental human right, irrespective of an individual's sexual orientation or gender identity. Policymakers should actively ensure the tangibilisation of the progressive policies not for the sake of optics or electoral gain, but because it is an intrinsic moral imperative and the right course of action.

The Study's Limitations

Within the scope of this study, certain limitations emerged that merit consideration. Firstly, the lack of local research on married gay and lesbian parents resulted in a dearth of directly related studies for a thorough contextual comparison. Secondly, given the study's focus on six specific same-sex married couples, it becomes important to acknowledge a limitation pertaining to the generalisability of the interpretations. The study's focus restricts the extent to which more expansive conclusions may be derived, even while the insights produced are valuable within the context of the informants which were engaged in the study.

Additionally, the possibility of selection bias due to the self-selection of the participating parents is a weakness of this study. Those who are more involved in the LGBTIQ+ community may have been more willing to participate. In fact, predominantly, the participants were individuals who dedicatedly participate in advocacy efforts and possess moderate to high levels of economic, social and cultural capital. This could have resulted in a sample that is not fully representative of all married gay and lesbian parents in Malta, potentially impacting the range of perspectives captured in the study. Moreover, the study's exploration of the same-sex parents' experiences within the educational institutions of their children might not fully encompass the broader social and institutional dynamics that shape the informants' lives. Moreover, the study's exclusive focus on gay and lesbian married couples with school-aged children might not fully capture the experiences of other segments of the LGBTIQ+ community, such as transgender parents, non-binary parents, or single-parent gay or lesbian parents. Additionally, while the study delves into the experiences of married gay and lesbian parents, it concedes a limitation in not affording sufficient emphasis to the variable of marriage. Finally, given the fast changing social and legal landscape around LGBTIQ+ rights, several aspects of the study's findings may become out of date over time. Despite these drawbacks, the study advances our understanding of gay and lesbian married couples' actual experiences in Malta and lays a strong groundwork for future research in the area.

The Study's Applicability

This study allows us to learn from the self-experiences and struggles of married same-sex parents in Malta because without critical reflection on such data, policies and practices for further inclusion of their children cannot be changed. Hence, from an academic stance, the findings of this study, which offer enhanced knowledge on the complexity of experiences encountered by gay and lesbian headed families inside of local educational environments, can

provide a springboard for further academic investigations into LGBTIQ+ matters, specifically with regards to rainbow families and educational inclusivity. From a practical frame of reference, the findings of the study can serve as a pedament for making informed decisions, and act as a guide for school leadership teams and educators in becoming more empathetic to the idiosyncratic requirements of same-sex parents and their children and more critical of dominant knowledge systems that indisputably preserve and propagate their marginalisation. By gaining insight into this matter, educational institutions can create comprehensive curricula, backed by supportive systems and policies, thereby fostering a more conducive learning environment for each student. Finally, on a broader scale, through the authentic dialogues shared by the study's informants, this dissertation hopes to educate and thus, solicit all of its readers to be more critically conscious of the realities that these families encounter on a daily basis thereby actively facilitating the empowerment of individuals to cultivate more just surroundings.

Future Research

The data for this study was obtained from four married same-sex Maltese couples with children in independent schools, one gay couple with children in a public school, and another lesbian couple with a child in a church school. However, further research is recommended to inquisite the determinants influencing the experiences of same-sex parents and their children in these different sectors of schooling. Such a comparative study might provide a more thorough knowledge of how different school environments affect the well-being and educational path of gay and lesbian parents and their children. Furthermore, more inquiry into the specific experiences that gay and lesbian parents and their children face in different levels of schooling, that is, in primary, middle and secondary school is warranted. On top of that, the shift from primary to middle school is a key moment in a student's educational path, defined by a variety of adaptations. This shift may bring with it new

experiences and issues for gay or lesbian headed households. Exploring this transition in depth can give pivotal specifics on how rainbow families negotiate the changes that come with shifting to a new school setting.

Investigating the intersections between a parent's gay or lesbian identity and other aspects of diversity, such as race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and disability, could lead to a deeper understanding of the challenges and support systems experienced by families. For example, future research could focus on exploring the experiences of same-sex parents with children who have disabilities, specifically examining how their LGBTIQ+ family identity intersects with their child's disability. This type of study would offer valuable insights into the unique obstacles and support requirements that these families encounter in educational settings. Such research would enhance the comprehension of intersectionality within the rainbow families parenting context.

Longitudinal studies that track the experiences of gay and lesbian parents and their children would be beneficial in offering insights into the evolving experiences faced by rainbow families. By understanding the lived experiences of gay and lesbian parents over time, the comprehension of the progress made in supporting diverse families can be documented.

Future research can also explore the first-hand narratives of children raised by gay and lesbian parents. By understanding how these children perceive and experience family differences within the school environment, deeper insights into the impact of parental sexual orientation on their educational experiences can be acquired.

Future research endeavours can also embrace a more inclusive lens that encompasses the diversity of LGBTIQ+ marital relationships by explicitly delving into unions involving individuals who identify as trans, non-binary, intersex, and other identities.

Supplementary research is also required in order to analyse the specific content needed in teacher training programmes in Malta, as well as evaluating the effectiveness of such training. Such research should concern itself with the curriculum of teacher training programmes, identifying gaps and areas where content related to LGBTIQ+ matters can be amalgamated. Moreover, an assessment of the bearing of such training on educators' attitudes, knowledge, and classroom practices could provide valuable insights. By reviewing the efficacy of teacher training in promoting awareness, sensitivity, and the adoption of inclusive practices, this research can be instrumental in the continuing amelioration of teacher education programmes, ultimately fostering a more inclusive and affirming educational environment for rainbow families.

Conclusion: The Transformative Power of Love

Freire (1984, as cited in, Darder, 2017, p. 198) asserted that “the future only exists to the extent that we change the present.” In this statement, Freire opined that the future exists in its potentiality, awaiting our choices and efforts to bring about momentous reform. The narratives shared by the participating same-sex parents echo Freire’s call for intentional change. Building on the works of Freire and hooks, Silverman (2022, p. 71) affirmed that “the ethic of love is essential in any holistic concept of care, as well as in any conceptualisation of both education and social justice.” Thus, I choose to conclude my dissertation by embracing the transformative power of love in education, through the recognition that we each have the faculty to have an impact on history and create a legacy of positive change for generations to come. This study, much like the broader effort, incurred challenges and unmasked areas that necessitate further perusal, however, I have hope that this research effectuates in furthering the ongoing dialogue and action required to persevere “towards a day when LGBTQ families won’t need to be pushing the envelope to feel expected, welcomed and supported at school” (Goldstein, 2021, p. 184). Such transformation

will not actualise if we are superficially optimistic, but rather, development will be able to occur once we become critically conscious of the fact that “social injustice dehumanises us, distorting our capacity to love each other, the world, and ourselves” (Dander, 2017, p. 40).

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Appendices

APPENDIX A

Interview Schedule

1. Can you tell me something about yourself and about the process used to get a child?
2. As a gay/lesbian couple living in Malta, you decided to get married. How did the fact that you got married impact your parenting experience?
3. What was your own experience of schooling? Did your schooling experience impact in any way the decisions you took related to your child's schooling? If yes, how?
4. May you kindly mention some positive experiences as gay or lesbian parents in your child/children's education?
5. May you kindly mention some negative experiences as gay or lesbian parents in your child/children's education?
6. Do you, as gay or lesbian parents, feel that school is sufficiently safe for your child/children to attend? Please elaborate on your response.
7. Do you, as gay or lesbian parents, feel accepted and included by the school community (other parents, SMT, teachers, LSEs)?
 - If yes, may you please give concrete examples why you say you feel accepted and included?
 - If no, may you please illustrate concrete examples why you say you feel unaccepted and excluded?
8. What is your opinion on the level of preparedness of SMT, teachers and LSEs to effectively handle LGBTIQ+ families?
9. Can you provide me with concrete examples how, in your opinion, schools and the curriculum can be more inclusive of gay and lesbian parents?
10. Would you like to add anything else to this interview?

Skeda tal-Intervista

1. Tistgħu tgħiduli xi haġa dwar kom infuskom u dwar il-proċess użat biex tiksbu lit-tifla/ tifel/ tfal tagħkom?
2. Bħala koppja gay/lesbjana li tgħix Malta, iddeċidejtu li tiżżewwġu. X'impatt halla l-fatt li żżewwġtu fuq l-esperjenza tagħkom tat-trobbija ta' wildkom/wliedkom?
3. X'kienet l-esperjenza tagħkom fl-iskola? L-esperjenza tal-iskola tagħkom influwenzat b'xi mod id-deċiżjonijiet li hadtu relatati mal-edukazzjoni tat-tifel/tifla/tfal tagħkom? Jekk iva, kif?
4. Jekk jogħġobkom, tistgħu ssemmu xi esperjenzi pożittivi bħala ġenituri gay jew lesbjani fl-edukazzjoni tat-tifla/tifel/tfal tagħkom?
5. Jekk jogħġobkom, tistgħu ssemmu xi esperjenzi negattivi bħala ġenituri gay jew lesbjani fl-edukazzjoni tat-tifla/tifel/tfal tagħkom?
6. Intom, bħala ġenituri gay jew lesbjani, thossu li l-iskola hija sigura biżżejjed għat-tifel/tifla/ tfal tagħkom biex tattendi/ jattendi/u? Jekk jogħġobkom elaboraw dwar ir-rispons tagħkom.
7. Intom, bħala ġenituri gay jew lesbjani, thossukom aċċettati u inklużi mill-komunità tal-iskola (ġenituri oħra, SMT, għalliema, LSEs)?
 - Jekk iva, tistgħu, jekk jogħġobkom, tagħtu eżempji konkreti ta' kif thossukom aċċettati u inklużi?
 - Jekk le, tistgħu, jekk jogħġobkom, tagħtu eżempji konkreti ta' kif ma thossukomx aċċettati u esklużi?
8. X'inhil-opinjoni tagħkom dwar it-thejjija tal-SMT, għalliema u LSEs biex jimmaniġġjaw b'mod effettiv il-familji LGBTIQ+?
9. Tistgħu tagħtuni eżempji konkreti kif, fl-opinjoni tagħkom, l-iskejjel u l-kurrikulu jistgħu jkunu aktar inklużivi ta' ġenituri gay u lesbjani?
10. Tixtieq iżżid xi haġa oħra ma' din l-intervista?

APPENDIX B

Email Correspondence with the Cooperating Institution

MTL Dissertation External  Inbox 



Judy Magri <judy.magri.15@um.edu.mt>
to mgrm 

Thu, 26 May, 18:11   

Good evening,


My name is Judy Magri and I am a student at the University of Malta, currently reading for a Masters in Teaching and Learning in Ethics Education. Subject to obtaining ethical approval, I will be conducting a research study for my dissertation titled '*The experiences of married gay and lesbian Maltese couples in the education of their children*'; this is being supervised by Mr. Manuel Joseph Ellul.

For the purposes of this study, I require a sample of **3 three gay and three lesbian married couples who have school-aged children attending school in Malta**. The participants will be required to take part in a one-time, semi-structured interview which is expected to last one hour. Would you be willing to help me to recruit the research participants please?

Kind regards,
Judy Magri



mgrm@maltagayrights.org via gmail.com
to me 

Sat, 11 Jun, 08:22 (2 days ago)   

Dear Judy

I hope this email finds you well. I am emailing to confirm on behalf of MGRM, that we can assist you in finding participants.

Kind regards
Cynthia



APPENDIX C

Recruitment Letter

My name is Judy Magri and I am currently reading for a Master in Teaching and Learning (MTL) in Ethics Education at the Faculty of Education of the University of Malta. I am presently conducting a research study for my dissertation titled '*The experiences of married gay and lesbian Maltese couples in the education of their children*'; this is being supervised by dott. Manuel Joseph Ellul.

I am contacting you to invite you to participate in an interview in which we will converse about your experiences as same-sex married parents who have children attending a school in Malta. Participation will require an hour of your time and will be held at a location of your choice.

If you are interested in participating in this study or have any questions about me or my research study, please contact me by phone +35679791104 or by email at judy.magri.15@um.edu.mt.

Thank you in advance for considering my request.

Kind regards,

Judy Magri

Ittra ta' Reklutagġ

Jiena Judy Magri, studenta fl-Università ta' Malta, u bħalissa qed insegwi Master in Teaching and Learning (MTL) fit-tagħlim tal-etika. Ir-riċerka għat-teżi tiegħi jismha '**L-esperjenzi ta' koppji Maltin gay jew lesbiċi miżżewġin, fl-edukazzjoni ta' wliedhom**'; it-tutor tiegħi huwa dott. Manuel Joseph Ellul.

Qed nikkuntattjakhom sabiex nistedinkom tipparteċipaw f'intervista li fiha se nitkellmu dwar l-esperjenzi tagħkom bħala ġenituri tal-istess sess miżżewġin li għandkom tfal li jattendu ġo skola f'Malta. Il-partecipazzjoni tkun teħtieġ siegħa mill-ħin tagħkom u ssir f' post tal-għażla tagħkom.

Jekk intom interessati li tipparteċipaw f'dan l-istudju jew għandkom xi mistoqsijiet dwari jew dwar l-istudju tiegħi, jekk jogħġbokkom ikkuntattjawni bil-mowbajl fuq +**35679791104** jew permezz t' ittra elettronika fuq judy.magri.15@um.edu.mt.

Grazzi bil-quddiem talli kkunsidrajtu it-talba tiegħi.

Dejjem tagħkom,

Judy Magri

APPENDIX D

Ethical Clearance by the MTL Dissertation Board



L-Università ta' Malta
Faculty of Education

Masters in Teaching and Learning

Date	Day	Month	Year
	6	4	2022

Dissertation Proposal Form - Minor Amendment/s

Name of Student:	Judy Magri
------------------	------------

Email	judy.magri.15@um.edu.mt
-------	-------------------------

Name of Principal Supervisor	Manuel Joseph Ellul
------------------------------	---------------------

I confirm that as principal supervisor I endorse this/these amendment/s.	Signature <i>Manuel J. Ellul</i>
--	-------------------------------------

Title of Research Study/Project
The experiences of married gay and lesbian Maltese couples in the education of their children.
Write any changes/additions and indicate the section number/s the changes refer to.
Section 4.1: Research question number 3 reworded from: "What may married gay and lesbian Maltese couples suggest to improve their experiences?" to: "How may the experience of gay and lesbian couples and their children be improved?"

Chairperson(MTL Dissertation Board) <i>Stephen Schembri</i>
--

Dr Stephen Schembri

Approved

X

APPROVED

Not Approved

--

APPENDIX E

Ethical Clearance by FREC



Faculty of Education

University of Malta
Msida MSD 2080, Malta

Tel: +356 2340 3058/2932
educ@um.edu.mt

www.um.edu.mt/educ

3rd August 2022

RE: Application for Research Ethics Clearance EDUC-2022-00205 Judy Magri

Dear Judy Magri,

With reference to your application EDUC-2022-00205 Judy Magri for Research Ethics clearance, I am pleased to inform you that **FREC finds no ethical or data protection issues in terms of content and procedure.**

You may therefore proceed to approach potential informants to collect data using the tools/documents outlined in this application.

You are reminded that it is your responsibility - under the guidance of your supervisor - to distribute Information Letters and Consent/Assent Forms that are written in appropriate and correct English and Maltese.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "J. Gravina".

Dr Joseph Gravina
Chairperson Faculty Research Ethics Committee
Faculty of Education

APPENDIX F

Information Letter

Dear Sir/Madam,

My name is Judy Magri and I am a student at the University of Malta, presently reading for a Master in Teaching and Learning (MTL) in Ethics Education. I am presently conducting a research study for my dissertation titled *'The experiences of married gay and lesbian Maltese couples in the education of their children'*; this is being supervised by dott. Manuel Joseph Ellul. This letter is an invitation to participate in this study. Below you will find information about the study and about what your involvement would entail should you decide to take part.

The aim of my study is to gain an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of married gay and lesbian Maltese married couples in the education of their children. Your participation in this study would help contribute to a better understanding of the self-experiences and struggles of same-sex parents because without critical reflection on such data, policies and practices for further inclusion of your children cannot be changed. Any data collected from this research will be used solely for purposes of this study.

Should you choose to participate, you will be asked to take part in a one-time, semi-structured interview which is expected to last one hour.

Data collected will be treated confidentially and anonymised through the use of pseudonyms. The data will be stored in an encrypted file on my password protected laptop and destroyed after 12 months from the completion of this study. The data will only be accessible to my supervisor and I. Although your identity and personal information will not appear in the dissertation or in any other publications resulting from this study, identification by persons who know you might still be possible due to the small number of married same-sex couples who have children in Malta.

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary; in other words, you are free to accept or refuse to participate, without needing to give a reason. You are also free to withdraw from the study at any time, without needing to provide any explanation and without any negative repercussions for you. Should you choose to withdraw, any data collected from your interview will be erased as long as this is technically possible (for example, before it is anonymised or published), unless erasure of data would render impossible or seriously impair achievement of the research objectives, in which case it shall be retained in an anonymised form.

If you choose to participate, please note that the study may benefit you since the data gathered allows us to learn from your self-experiences and struggles as same-sex parents since without critical reflection on such data, policies and practices for further inclusion of your children cannot be changed.

Your participation does not entail any known or anticipated risks.

Please note also that, as a participant, you have the right under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and national legislation to access, rectify and where applicable ask for the

data concerning you to be erased. All data collected will be stored in an anonymised form and erased within 12 months from the completion of the study.

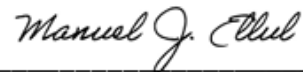
A copy of this information sheet is being provided for you to keep and for future reference.

Thank you for your time and consideration. Should you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me by e-mail: judy.magri.15@um.edu.mt; you can also contact my supervisor over the phone: +35679066413 or via email: mellu11@um.edu.mt.

Sincerely,



Judy Magri
judy.magri.15@um.edu.mt



dott. Manuel Joseph Ellul
mellu11@um.edu.mt

Ittra ta' Taghrif

Għażiż/a Sinjur/a,

Jiena Judy Magri, studenta fl-Università ta' Malta, u bħalissa qed nsegwi Master in Teaching and Learning (MTL) fit-tagħlim tal-etika. Ir-riċerka għad-dissertazzjoni tiegħi jisimha: '*L-esperjenzi ta' koppji Maltin gay jew lesbiċi miżżewġin, fl-edukazzjoni ta' wliedhom*'; it-tutor tiegħi huwa dott. Manuel Joseph Ellul. B'din l-ittra nixtieq nistiednek tipparteċipa fir-riċerka li qed nagħmel. Hawn taħt għandek issib aktar informazzjoni fuq l-istudju li ser nagħmel u fuq xi jkun l-involvement tiegħek jekk tiddeċiedi li tiegħu sehem.

L-għan tal-istudju hu li jinkiseb għarfien fond tal-esperjenzi ta' koppji miżżewġin gay u Maltin fl-edukazzjoni ta' wliedhom. Sehem jgħin biex ikun hawn iżjed għarfien dwar l-esperjenzi u l-isfidi ta' ġenituri tal-istess sess peress li mingħajr riflessjoni kritika fuq id-dejta, politiki u prattiċi għal aktar inklużjoni tat-tfal tiegħek ma jistgħux jinbidlu. L-informazzjoni kollha li tingabar fir-riċerka se tintuża biss għall-fini ta' dan l-istudju.

Jekk taqbel li tipparteċipa, ser tintalab tiegħu sehem f'intervista semi-strutturata ta' darba li mistennija ddum siegħa.

L-informazzjoni miġbura ser tiġi ttrattata b'kunfidenzjalità assoluta u se tkun anonimizzata permezz tal-użu ta' psewdonimi. Id-dejta se tinħażen f'fajl kriptat fuq il-laptop tiegħi li huwa protett bil-password u tinqered wara 12-il xahar mit-tlestija ta' dan l-istudju. Id-dejta se tkun aċċessibbli biss għalija u għat-tutor tiegħi. Għalkemm l-identità u l-informazzjoni personali tiegħek mhux se jidhru fid-dissertazzjoni jew fi kwalunkwe pubblikazzjoni oħra li tirriżulta minn dan l-istudju, l-identifikazzjoni minn persuni li jafuk xorta tista' tkun possibbli minhabba n-numru żgħir ta' koppji miżżewġin tal-istess sess li għandhom it-tfal f'Malta.

Il-partecipazzjoni tiegħek f'dan l-istudju hija għalkollox volontarja; fi kliem ieħor, inti liberu/a li taċċetta jew tirrifjuta li tiegħu sehem, mingħajr ma tagħti raġuni. Inti wkoll liberu/a li twaqqaf il-partecipazzjoni tiegħek fl-istudju meta tixtieq, mingħajr ma jkollok tagħti spjegazzjoni u mingħajr ebda riperkussjoni. Jekk tagħzel li tirtira mir-riċerka, l-informazzjoni li tkun laħqet ittiegħdet fl-intervista miegħek titħassar dment li dan ikun teknikament possibbli (ngħidu aħna, qabel ma tiġi anonimizzata jew ippubblikata), u sakemm l-għanijiet tar-riċerka jkun jistgħu jintlaħqu u ma jintlaqtux serjament. F'dak il-każ, l-informazzjoni tiegħek tintuża u tinzamm anonima.

Jekk tagħzel li tipparteċipa, jekk jogħġbok innota li l-istudju jista' jkun ta' benefiċċju għalik peress li d-dejta miġbura tippermettilna nitgħallmu mill-esperjenzi u l-isfidi tagħkom bħala ġenituri tal-istess sess peress li mingħajr riflessjoni kritika dwar it-tali dejta, politiki u prattiċi għal aktar inklużjoni ta' wliedek ma jistgħux jinbidlu.

Il-partecipazzjoni tiegħek ma fiha l-ebda riskju magħruf jew mistenni.

Bħala partecipant/a, għandek id-dritt, skont ir-Regolament Ġenerali dwar il-Protezzjoni tad-Data (GDPR) u l-leġiżlazzjoni nazzjonali, li taċċessa, tikkoreġi u fejn hu applikabbli, titlob li l-

informazzjoni li tikkonċernak titħassar. L-informazzjoni kollha li tingabar fl-istudju se tinżamm b'mod anonimu u titħassar f'temp ta' 12-il xahar minn meta jitlesta l-istudju.

Qed ngħaddilek kopja ta' din l-ittra biex iżzommha bħala referenza.

Grazzi tal-ħin u l-konsiderazzjoni tiegħek. Jekk ikollok xi mistoqsija, tiddejjaqx tikkuntattjani fuq: judy.magri.15@um.edu.mt; tista' tikkuntattja wkoll lit-tutor tiegħi fuq: +35679066413 jew elettronikament fuq: mellu11@um.edu.mt.

Tislijiet,



Judy Magri
judy.magri.15@um.edu.mt



dott. Manuel Joseph Ellul
mellu11@um.edu.mt

APPENDIX G

Consent Form

I, the undersigned, give my consent to take part in the study conducted by Judy Magri (183297M). This consent form specifies the terms of my participation in this research study.

1. I have been given written and/or verbal information about the purpose of the study; I have had the opportunity to ask questions and any questions that I had were answered fully and to my satisfaction.
2. I also understand that I am free to accept to participate, or to refuse or stop participation at any time without giving any reason and without any penalty. Should I choose to participate, I may choose to decline to answer any questions asked. In the event that I choose to withdraw from the study, any data collected from me will be erased as long as this is technically possible (for example, before it is anonymised or published), unless erasure of data would render impossible or seriously impair achievement of the research objectives, in which case it shall be retained in an anonymised form.
3. I understand that I have been invited to participate in an interview in which the researcher will ask a series of open-ended questions to explore the lived experiences of gay and lesbian married Maltese couples in the education of their children. I am aware that the one-time semi-structured interview will take approximately one hour. I understand that the interview is to be conducted in a place and at a time that is convenient for me.
4. I understand that my participation does not entail any known or anticipated risks.
5. I understand that if I choose to participate, the study may benefit me, and others, by contributing to a better understanding of my self-experiences and struggles as a same-sex parent since without critical reflection on such data, policies and practices for further inclusion of my children cannot be changed.
6. I understand that, under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and national legislation, I have the right to access, rectify, and where applicable, ask for the data concerning me to be erased.
7. I understand that all data collected will be stored in an anonymised form on completion of the study and destroyed after 12 months.
8. I am aware that, by marking the first-tick box below, I am giving my consent for interview to be audio recorded and converted to text as it has been recorded (transcribed).

MARK ONLY IF AND AS APPLICABLE

I agree to this interview being audio recorded.

I do not agree to this interview being audio recorded.

9. I am aware that the if the interview is held online; the researcher will use Zoom and will activate the *Require Encryption for 3rd party endpoints SIP/H-323* function. The researcher, with my permission, will video record the session.

10. I am aware that extracts from my interview may be reproduced in these outputs, either in anonymous form, or using a pseudonym [a made-up name or code – e.g. respondent A].
11. I am aware that my data will be pseudonymised; i.e., my identity will not be noted on transcripts or notes from my interview, but instead, a code will be assigned. The codes that link my data to my identity will be stored securely and separately from the data, in an encrypted file on the researcher’s password-protected laptop, and only the researcher and the supervisor will have access to this information. Any hard-copy materials will be placed in a locked cabinet/drawer. Any material that identifies me as a participant in this study will be stored securely for the duration of the study and destroyed after 12 months.
12. I am aware that although my identity and personal information will not appear in the dissertation or in any other publications resulting from this study, I might still be identified by persons who know me due to the small number of married same-sex couples in Malta who have children.
13. I have been provided with a copy of the information letter and understand that I will also be given a copy of this consent form.

I have read and understood the above statements and agree to participate in this study.

Name of participant: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____



Judy Magri
judy.magri.15@um.edu.mt



dott. Manuel Joseph Ellul
mellu11@um.edu.mt

Formola tal-Kunsens tal-Parteċipanti

Jiena, hawn taħt iffirmit/a, nagħti l-kunsens tiegħi li nieħu sehem fl-istudju ta' Judy Magri (183297M). Din il-formola tal-kunsens tispjega t-termini tas-sehem tiegħi f'din ir-riċerka.

1. Ingħatajt l-informazzjoni bil-miktub u/jew bil-fomm dwar l-iskop tar-riċerka; kelli l-opportunità li nagħmel il-mistoqsijiet, u kull mistoqsija ngħatajt tweġiba għaliha b'mod sħiħ u sodisfaċenti.
2. Nifhem ukoll li jiena liberu/a li naċċetta li nieħu sehem, jew li nirrifjuta, jew li nwaqqaf il-parteċipazzjoni tiegħi meta nixtieq mingħajr ma nagħti spjegazzjoni jew mingħajr ma niġi penalizzat/a. Jekk nagħzel li nipparteċipa, jaf niddeċiedi li ma nwegibx kull mistoqsija li ssirli. F'każ li nagħzel li ma nkomplix nieħu sehem fl-istudju, l-informazzjoni li tkun laħqet ingabret mingħandi titħassar dment li jkun teknikament possibbli (ngħidu aħna, qabel ma tiġi anonimizzata jew ippubblikata), u sakemm l-għanijiet tar-riċerka jkunu jistgħu jintlaħqu u ma jintlaqtux serjament. F'dak il-każ, l-informazzjoni tiegħi tintuża u tinzamm anonima.
3. Nifhem li ġejt mistieden/mistiedna nipparteċipa f'intervista u l-persuna li qed tagħmel ir-riċerka se tistaqsi sensiela ta' mistoqsijiet miftuħa biex tesplora l-esperjenzi ta' koppji Maltin miżżewġin li huma gay jew lesbiċi fl-edukazzjoni ta' wliedhom. Jiena konxju/a li l-intervista semi-strutturata ta' darba ddum bejn wieħed u ieħor siegħa. Nifhem li l-intervista se ssir f'post u f'ħin li huma komdi għalija.
4. Nifhem li l-parteċipazzjoni tiegħi ma fiha l-ebda riskju magħruf jew mistenni.
5. Nifhem li jekk nagħzel li nipparteċipa, l-istudju jista' jkun ta' benefiċċju għalija, u għal oħrajn, billi nikkontribwixxi biex jigu mifhuma aħjar l-esperjenzi u l-isfidi tiegħi nnifsi bħala ġenitur tal-istess sess peress li mingħajr riflessjoni kritika fuq id-dejta, politiki u prattiċi għal aktar inklużjoni tat-tfal tiegħi ma jistgħux jinbidlu.
6. Nifhem li, skont ir-Regolament Ġenerali dwar il-Protezzjoni tad-Data (GDPR) u l-legiżlazzjoni nazzjonali, għandi dritt naċċessa, nikkoreġi u, fejn hu applikabbli, nitlob li l-informazzjoni li tikkonċernani titħassar.
7. Nifhem li l-informazzjoni kollha miġbura se tinzamm b'mod anonimu meta jintemm l-istudju u titħassar f'temp ta' tnax-il xahar minn meta jitlesta l-istudju.
8. Konxju/a li, jekk nimmarka l-ewwel kaxxa t'hawn taħt, inkun qed nagħti l-kunsens tiegħi l-intervista tiġi rrekordjata bl-awdjo u maqluba f'kitba fl-istess waqt (traskrizzjoni).

IMMARKA BISS DAK LI JAPPLIKA

- Naqbel li l-intervista tiġi rrekordjata bl-awdjo.
 - Ma naqbilx li l-intervista tiġi rrekordjata bl-awdjo.
9. Jiena naf li jekk l-intervista se ssir online; ir-riċerkatriċi se tuża ż-Zoom u se tattiva l-għażla tar-*Require Encryption for 3rd party endpoints SIP/H-323*. Ir-riċerkatriċi, bil-permess tiegħi, se tirrekordja l-filmat tas-sessjoni.
 10. Konxju/a li siltiet mill-intervista tiegħi jistgħu jigu riprodotti b'mod anonimu jew bl-użu ta' psewdonimu [isem ivvintat jew kodiċi - eż. parteċipant A].

11. Jiena konxju/a li l-informazzjoni tiegħi se tkun psewdonimizzata, jiġifieri l-identità tiegħi mhix se titniżżel fit-traskrizzjonijiet jew fin-noti tal-intervista, imma minflok, se niġi assenjat/a kodiċi. Il-kodiċijiet li jorbtu l-informazzjoni dwari mal-identità tiegħi se jinżammu b'mod sigur u separat mill-informazzjoni, f'file kodifikat fuq il-kompjuter tar-riċerkatriċi, protetti b'password, u r-riċerkatriċi u t-tutor biss se jkollhom aċċess għal din l-informazzjoni. Kwalunkwe materjal stampat se jitqiegħed f'armarju msakkar. Kwalunkwe materjal li jidentifikani bħala parteċipant/a f'dan l-istudju se jinżamm b'mod sigur sakemm isir l-istudju u se jinqered wara tnax-il xhar.
12. Konxju/a li għalkemm l-identità tiegħi u d-dettalji personali tiegħi mhux se jiġu żvelati fid-dissertazzjoni jew f'xi pubblikazzjonijiet oħra li jirriżultaw minn dan l-istudju, xorta nista' nkun identifikat/a minn persuni li jafuni minħabba n-numru żgħir ta' koppji miżżewġin tal-istess sess f'Malta li għandhom it-tfal.
13. Ingħatajt kopja tal-ittra ta' tagħrif biex inżommha u nifhem li se ningħata wkoll kopja ta' din il-formola tal-kunsens.

Qrajt u fhimt l-istqarrijiet t'hawn fuq, u naqbel li nipparteċipa f'dan l-istudju.

Isem il-parteeipant/a: _____

Firma: _____

Data: _____



Judy Magri
judy.magri.15@um.edu.mt



dott. Manuel Joseph Ellul
mellu11@um.edu.mt