



7th International Conference on Intercultural Education “Education, Health and ICT for a Transcultural World”, EDUHEM 2016, 15-17 June 2016, Almeria, Spain

Barriers and limitations to school intervention in family diversity. A case study of homoparental families

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Abstract

Although Spain is the third country in the world that has regulated marriage between people of the same sex, schools continue to overlook or even deny the reality of homoparental families. This work presents a case study conducted in a public Primary School of Huelva (Andalusia, Spain), whereby the factors that favour or hamper the school's intervention in family diversity are analysed from the viewpoint of faculty. The discoveries of this study provide greater knowledge of how educational organizations approach one of the most remarkable changes in our society in recent decades: transformation of the family. The results highlight the need to create an in-depth debate in the heart of the school community and focus on the teaching task as well as training, research and educational policies. This way, we can help foster social recognition of the changes taking place in our society and benefit from the inclusion of family diversity in schools.

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Peer-review under responsibility of the organizing committee of EDUHEM 2016.

Keywords: family diversity; homoparental families; school; education.

1. Introduction

Since Organic Law 301981 of July 7 was approved in Spain, amending the regulation of marriage in the Civil Code and permitting annulment, separation and divorce, the social changes in family relationships that have promoted legislative actions have continued. The passing of law 132005 legitimizes families formed by couples of the same sex and up to 2013, a total of 28,310 such bonds were formalized, following a progressive upward trend, in contrast to

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heterosexual marriages (INE, 2015). These data show that this family group is increasingly represented in our society, and hence in our schools.

Schools are characterized by the diversity of family models coexisting in them. We find ourselves in a situation in which we have gone from "model family" to "family models" (López Sánchez, Díez, Morgado & González, 2008). Faced with this reality, it seems logical that the school still maintains an ideology based on patriarchy, where the only possibility conceived is of a model family, represented by a nuclear household formed by a man, a woman and their offspring.

To analyse which factors promote and hinder school intervention in family diversity, a case study was conducted in a school where the boys and girls were from homoparental families. The categories analysed were: school culture related to the family; the school's educational project in relation to family diversity; family-related activities and the methodological procedures used; the importance the educational community affords these educational practices; the training needs of teachers; family models included in textbooks; the attitude of the educational community towards these families; discrimination, mockery or rejection experienced by these minors and the school's response to these incidents; and the difficulties perceived by teachers in the school's use of the homoparental family model. This article presents the specific results related to this category (difficulties perceived by teachers in school use of the homoparental family model).

2. Methodology

The work that we present here was carried out during the school year 2014/15. In this period, we conducted a case study in a primary school in Huelva (Andalusia, Spain). The method enabled us to draw up detailed descriptions of the scenarios and the experiences and strategies of those taking part in the case, and thus achieve a holistic, comprehensive and profound analysis of the attention to family diversity.

The aim was carry out a particular, singular and exclusive in-depth study of the description and understanding of the events, circumstances and the position of the people involved in it (Simons, 2011). The case-study allows us to overcome positivist reductionism and produce more meaningful, relevant and thorough information on situations and particular contexts through in-depth observation (Johnson & Christensen, 2004).

To select the cases, relevance to the research subject and accessibility were the criteria followed (Stake, 1998; Rodríguez Gómez, Gil & García, 1996; Simons, 2011).

The interview was the main instrument used to collect details related to the difficulties perceived by teachers in the inclusion of the homoparental family model in schools. The study is based on 12 in-depth interviews with teachers, 2 men and 10 women, with different professional profiles. In addition, there was also information from an undetermined number of non-structured interviews, which came about naturally and spontaneously and which were not recorded.

3. Results

The results that we present below include the following nomenclature (E=interview; P=teachers; Number assigned to the participant). The results are set down as they were expressed by teachers, without including interpretations by the researcher.

3.1. Ideology and beliefs of teachers

In the opinion of two teachers (EP1; EP14), the ideology and religious beliefs of teachers could be a barrier to the implementation of actions aimed at family diversity, which is to say that it is acknowledged that there are educational professionals with a homophobic attitude who are against same-sex marriage (EP1). Educational laws have no effect when people are not aware of their actions. In this sense, the curricular prescription of family diversity would not prevent these people from passing on their attitude and ideological position (EP14).

This depends on the teacher's ideology, because becoming a teacher doesn't mean leaving behind one's ideology. Fortunately, our society is changing, but there are still homophobic people. In addition, there are old-fashioned faculties, with teachers who are more interested in the fact that the children learn their numbers than in making them happier (EP1).

Certainly, this is what the “street school” would have said to you before. According to how you feel it, you transmit it, even though they tell you that the families are all equal by law. You don't even have to commit any act against the law; whatever you do; the children are going to infer your attitude. If the law forces you not to discriminate and you're a discriminator, even though you try to contain yourself, in the end you transmit your attitude to the class (EP14).

One teacher (EP7) says there are still teachers who see the homoparental family as a deviation. To demonstrate, she said that on one occasion, a co-worker related the misbehaviour of one of her students to illustrations of different family models that she had hung in the classroom.

(...) There are still people who see the homoparental family as a deviation. On one occasion I hung photos of different families in the classroom. One day a child behaved badly, and a colleague told me: it's completely normal, look at the pictures you hung up! (Note: refers to illustrations with different family models that decorated the classroom), I quickly stopped him and said that the images had nothing to do with the child's behaviour (EP7).

One of the interviewed teachers (EP11) said that the beliefs of the professionals against treatment of family diversity must be respected. This is to say that teachers cannot be forced to talk about same-sex marriage, because their ideology or religion makes it difficult for them; although the teacher added that as civil servants they should put aside their ideology and work for democratic order, laws and society.

Only one element doesn't have that much influence, in my opinion. Anyway, there are many teachers in our school, so if there is any teacher who for any reason doesn't want to talk about these families, because of their religion or anything, I think that someone else can undertake their work for that day, the physical education teacher or someone else. I think that there may be people who are against talking about gay or lesbian marriages, and we cannot press them to teach these contents. The fact is that we are civil servants and we have to put aside our ideology and work according to democratic order, laws and society. I personally could not give a lesson against abortion, even if another person could, but he or she must understand that it is an official requirement and must accept the rules. You can be nationalistic, but you have to talk about Andalusia. You have to talk about families and about the fact that marriage between homosexuals is now permitted. Another thing is that in semi-private schools, when you start working, you sign an ideological contract, which can happen because they are private companies, but state schools cannot do this (EP11)

3.2. Lack of involvement of teachers

Lack of teacher involvement is highlighted as one of the main difficulties in the inclusion of family diversity (EP1; EP8; EP11; EP13). Possible causes that are given are include the lack of importance given to this subject (EP1; EP11), insufficient awareness in faculty (EP8), saturation of tasks (EP8) and the effort that undertaking change implies (EP13).

The main difficulty is getting all teachers involved. If they are not aware of the importance of family diversity, because of their personal circumstances or their ideology, family diversity will not be dealt with in schools. For it to happen, everyone needs to row in the same direction (EP1).

I believe that here the level of awareness that teachers and parents have on this subject is highly influential; even though it seems unbelievable, we live in a very chauvinist society; although we think we are liberal, we are not so much. I don't believe that other problems had such a negative impact. Maybe some teachers might complain about their heavy workload, and that they want to put all their energy into the school and "bite off more than you can chew", but these are small problems (EP8).

Involving teachers is hard as only some of the teachers are ready to take on the change. If one takes the initiative alone, then those who see these issues approached successfully can be encouraged to follow suit. (EP13).

3.3. Prejudices about LGBT families

Another of the limitations mentioned (EP7) are the preconceived ideas and prejudices that some people have towards non-traditional family models. Regarding this limitation, it is important to refer to the important role played by family in the transmission of these prejudices to their sons and daughters.

Unfortunately, there are still some people who fail to acknowledge that the family has changed. Some children, because of what they hear at home, or because they are not so tolerant, can make comments to children from homoparental families and offend them (EP7).

3.4. School, family and society

The relationship between the message of the school, family and society, is seen as crucial to bringing about change (EP11; EP14). The school will not succeed in the development of these values if they are not shared with the family and society in general (EP11). Moreover, it is pointed out with some pessimism, that the influence exercised by society in the transmission of prejudice and homophobic stereotypes, has a negative impact on the work undertaken at school (EP14).

In addition, care must be taken, because we're going to tell the child something that they're going to tell their parents when they go home, and the parents' attitude is not necessarily known. Marriage between homosexuals may be spoken of at school as something completely normal, a view which may then be contradicted at home: "Two gays! It's disgusting!" Then there may be a difference between what is told to the child in the school and the family values; the child may hear something from us and something different from their family, which is likely to happen, which is what I see as the main problem. In fact, on television, the values of society and everyday language have not changed so much. Queer is still an insult even on channels such as Telecinco, where there are many gays working. In other words, that there might be a contrast between the values of television, the family and school (EP11).

3.5. Opposition of the families

Another limitation indicated by teachers is the reluctance some families to talk openly about the LGTB family model (EP7) (EP8). One teacher (EP7) puts forward as an example the suspicion aroused in some families because of the simple fact that she hung a few lithographs in the classroom featuring a boy and a girl who were naked.

The fact that children say something at home that their parents don't like and that I have told them; in other words, the attitude of some parents towards these issues. I showed a lithograph of a doll of a naked boy and girl, because a parent was offended by having an image of a naked child in class. If some parents are alarmed by this, imagine if I talked about homosexual families, but I don't care about that; they have the right to choose a doctor, but not the teacher. I live in this world, and I'm not going to take the classroom out of the world. If we're talking about this issue now, it's because it is something that is changing in society, ever more so, and we cannot ignore it (EP7).

However, as one of the teachers surveyed said (EP1), the school has the obligation to promote respect for family diversity, regardless of the fact that some people don't share this principle of equality.

Parents and children have to understand that they come to a school and that they coexist with other children. If a parent doesn't want to hear that their child's best friend has a mum who lives with another woman, she should take him to another school. The parents can have their opinions, but at school there are rules of respect for diversity (EP1).

3.6. Curriculum design

The curricular prescription of family diversity is considered a key factor, so the students can see their family model reflected (EP6); joint measures related to family diversity (EP8); acknowledging the different family models and accepting these differences (P11); and so that school intervention on this issue does not depend on the will of the faculty (P13).

It seems to me to be very important and I believe that it must be done, because it would bring an end to all these problems we have, besides students and pupils of LGBT families feel different and that would remove this problem (EP6).

I agree that working with family diversity does not depend on the will of the faculty. If everyone respected social values we wouldn't need this, but as there are all sorts on this God's earth, perhaps it is needed (EP13)

For other subjects (EP1; EP10), the current curriculum is open and flexible. From this point of view, family diversity could be included without any inconvenience. In other words, equality is collected as one of the basic principles of teaching, and even if it is not specified, this includes equality of the different family models (EP1). Additionally, in the current regulations the family is mentioned in a wider sense, not only confined to the traditional nuclear model (EP10); this means that family diversity is understood and the realization of the different family models would be redundant.

In the curriculum it is not stated that the family is father, mother and child, so if we're talking about family this should include all types of families that exist. I see that it is not necessary for them to be included, because I don't take it for granted that the word family just covers a stereotypical family unit. Family is a highly variable and diverse reality, so diversity is already implicit in the word. It wouldn't be a problem to include it, but I don't think it's necessary (EP10).

4. Conclusions and discussion

In general, there is a positive perception on the implementation of family diversity in school. However, the faculty point out some barriers that could arise in the school before educational intervention in family diversity, especially for the LGBT family model.

First, we cite the ideology and beliefs of teachers as one of these possible barriers. In this sense, the homophobic, negative attitude to same-sex marriage of some teachers is acknowledged. It is even defended that from an ethical point of view, families cannot be forced to speak about homoparental families to teachers with an opposing ideology or religion. From our point of view, the moral right should not prevail over the public right. Therefore, regardless of ideology or creed, the professionals who form part of the public school have the obligation to defend the principle of equality and respect for family differences.

Other limitations shown include the lack of involvement of the teachers, the low importance given to this subject, very little awareness, task saturation and the resistance to change. Prejudices and preconceived ideas about the issue are also pointed out as possible barriers, something that occurs frequently in the family nucleus. In this way, the enculturation process lessens the effect of what is learnt in school, due to the mismatch between the values promoted by the school, family and society.

However, a school does not remain isolated from cultural adaptation, and its critical function depends on the attitude of the teaching staff and the interest of the educational administrations to promote such practices.

On the other hand, the reluctance some of the school's families to openly discuss the issue might involve another handicap. As López Sánchez (2009) mentions, fundamentalists and conservative families may pose some difficulties. It is necessary to make it clear that it is these families that have a problem (homophobia) and not the homoparental families. The school must promote respect for family diversity, despite some families not sharing this idea due to their ideological position or religious beliefs. "People have a right to be conservative, but not to be fundamentalists imposing their ideas on others or creating social difficulties" (López Sánchez, 2009, p.24).

For some teachers of family diversity, curriculum prescription would catalyse this process of change. According to these views, the normative regulation would mean that treatment of this subject would not depend on the will of the faculty and the articulation of measures relating to awareness and respect of family differences for students to see their family model reflected in the school. This idea is shared by Aguado (2010), who raises the need to include family diversity in State and regional educational legislation. However, for another sector of teachers this prescription is not necessary, as equality is one of the general principles of teaching, and even if it is not specified, equality of different family models is taken into account. From this perspective, it is argued that the openness and flexibility of the curriculum allows the treatment of family diversity. This debate raises the dilemma of greater flexibility or curricular concretion. From our point of view, over-prescription hampers the autonomy and freedom of the faculty, as stressed by Santos Guerra (2010) and Torres Santomé (2011), but openness and curricular flexibility should be accompanied by training and teaching commitment, support and orientation of educational inspection.

The results highlight the need for a profound debate in the nucleus of the school community and an approach to teaching, training, research and education policy that acknowledges the changes in our society, favouring the inclusion of family diversity in schools.

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