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**SYNERGIA**

**Sistemi di conoscenza e gestione del cambiamento**

## **General introduction to the workstream 1 the transnational research**

In this report we collect the main results from the first workstream of the project RAINBOW: this phase consisted, first of all, of a review of national and international literature about the theme of homophobia and homophobic bullying in schools. We tried to highlight the main aspects of gender and sexual orientation stereotypes in school systems, we presented key European and national legislation about this topic and we reported the main existing projects against homophobia and homophobic bullying in different contexts. Secondly, we carried out the field work, which was composed of a first part of in-depth interviews to actors of the system (teachers and managers), deepening themes related to internal policies against homophobia and homophobic bullying, to specific projects, to stereotypes and prejudices about gender and sexual orientation, to personal attitudes and, finally, we collected some general recommendations for educational outputs. A second part of the fieldwork consisted in the implementation of some focus groups, in which teachers, parents and experts, starting from the interviews findings, further discussed the topic.

In the report, after a first common part regarding the main **theoretical references and key European legislation**, we will have **different country sections**, with a secondary data context analysis as well as the main results of the field research conducted during the project. Here attached the Italy profile.



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## **1. Theoretical references**

### **1.1. Definition of homophobia**

The term "homophobia" was coined in the middle of the Sixties by a heterosexual psychologist, George Weinberg (Weinberg 1972), which defined it as fear of being near to a homosexual person, that is irrational panic, hate and intolerance of heterosexual persons with regard to homosexual women and men. McCaskell and Russell explain:

*«Homophobia literally means a fear of lesbians or gay men. More commonly it is used to describe the stereotyping, prejudice and discrimination gay people face» (McCaskell and Russell 2000).*

As stressed by Wright, Adams and Bernat (1999), research in homophobia markedly increased in 1973, following the revisions of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)*, in which homosexuality was removed as a diagnostic category. Researchers quickly shifted their focus from trying to modify gay and lesbian individuals' sexual orientation to studying the negative reactions of heterosexual individuals toward gay and lesbian individuals. However, during this resurgence in interest, researchers generalized the term homophobia to denote any negative attitude, belief, or action toward gay and lesbian persons.

In a important study carried out in 1990, Herek discussed the usefulness of the term "heterosexism" for the ways in which it emphasizes the parallels between anti-gay sentiment and other forms of prejudice such as racism, anti-Semitism, and sexism. This term has more of an institutional focus on antigay attitudes and behaviours, stressing social customs and ideologies visible through patterns of institutionalized oppression of non-heterosexual people. In this regard Herdt reminds that homophobia is defined as a collective cultural-historical phobia:

*«Learning to decode and recognize homophobia as a problem of oppression in society rather than as a deficit in the self is the focus of many group discussions on homophobia» (Herdt 1982).*

Still, Britzman makes a compelling case for the use of another term, "heteronormativity," arguing that debates about gay and lesbian oppression and desire must move beyond the humanist psychological discourse of individual fear of homosexuality as contagion



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(and not, coincidentally, the centering of heterosexuality as normal). The term *homophobia* rarely ventures into political critiques of how normalcy becomes produced and sexualized as heterosexuality. The term *heteronormativity* begins to get at how the production of deviancy is intimately tied to the very possibility of normalcy:

«Normalcy can be intelligible only through the construction of its other, that is the deviant. In such a relation, normalcy must always make itself normal, must always normalize itself. Recent writing in queer theory suggests the problem is not a fear of queerness but an obsession with normalizing and containing queerness, and, not coincidentally, otherness» (Britzman 1988).

The scales that are frequently used to measure homophobia contain cognitive and affective statements that assess one's attitudes and beliefs about homosexuality and gay and lesbian individuals; however, since there is no universally accepted definition of homophobia, the scales currently in use may actually be measuring different constructs or at least different components of homophobia (Herek 1984). O'Donohue and Caselles proposed a tripartite model of homophobia in which they suggest that cognitive, affective, and behavioural components may interact differently given various situations associated with homosexuality. They proposed that an understanding of the entire domain of reactions to gay and lesbian individuals would increase the conceptual clarity of what has been termed homophobia. They highlight the point that some negative cognitions and/or behavioural reactions (avoidance) toward gay and lesbian individuals are not necessarily irrational and could be justified on moral grounds, possibly due to religious beliefs. Having information on the interactions between the cognitive, affective and behavioural components of homophobia could greatly increase our understanding of what has been labelled homophobia (O'Donohue and Caselles 1993).

In a study carried out in 1999 by Wright, Adams and Bernat, a 25-item homophobia scale was built; that scale involves three macro-factor, relating to the above definition:

1. *Behaviour / Negative affect* → 10 items;
2. *Affect / behavioural aggression* → 10 items;
3. *Cognitive negativism* → 5 items.

Another example of homophobia scale is provided by Raja and Stokes, in a research study conducted in 1998. The authors developed the Modern Homophobia Scale (MHS), a scale that includes measures of attitudes toward lesbians (MHS-L) and attitudes toward gay men (MHS-G). The final versions of the MHS-L and the MHS-G included items reflecting the following factors:

- Personal Discomfort with lesbians/gay men;
- Institutional Homophobia toward lesbians/gay men;



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- Deviance/Changeability of female/male homosexuality.

An issue closely related to homophobia is the existence and persistence of stereotypes against LGBT people<sup>1</sup>.

One way to explain how oppression is perpetuated in society is through the “cycle of oppression” model, developed by Sheri Lyn Schmidt, at Texas A&M University, in 1994. It defines and puts in relation to each other the concepts of stereotype, prejudice, discrimination, oppression and internalised oppression.

Simmons found mainly negative stereotypes about gay men, that gay men are deviant, mentally ill and suffering from a sickness (Simmons 1965; Levitt and Klassen 1974); Staats (1978) examined college students' attitudes and found a large number of both favourable and unfavourable stereotypic attributes, such as coward, shy, kind, and individualistic. However there is also a clear and consistent pattern of gay men being perceived as feminine: for example, Mason (1997) performed a factor analysis of college students' stereotypes about gay men. Ninety eight Rutgers University students took part in this study as one way of fulfilling a course requirement (-59 female, 37 male, 2 gender not reported-). Mason found that gay men were seen as having feminine qualities and as rejecting the masculine gender role<sup>2</sup>. In this study he found also that gay males were perceived as talkative, gentle, fashionable and artistic, sensitive and individualistic, liberal and different. This study also found, however, that the gay male stereotype included attributes (behavioural and physical characteristic) that had not previously been identified: for example, gay males were perceived to be open about their feelings, melodramatic, artsy looking, and wearing earrings. Other attributes were counter-stereotypical (as the fact that gay males are perceived as not acting macho, not picking fights or hunting animals). Results indicated the presence of two subtypes, both of which included female sex-typed attributes. This finding is consistent with past research showing that people perceive gay males to be like women.

*«The two subtypes are differed from each other in an important respect: whereas the first reflected the perception that gay males exhibit positive female sex-typed qualities,*

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<sup>1</sup> Since Campbell's work on stereotypes and the perceptions of group differences (Campbell 1967), researchers have explicitly or implicitly defined stereotypes as consisting of attributes that are perceived to distinguish between groups.

<sup>2</sup> It is useful to distinguish between: biological sex (which indicates membership in male or female sex and it is determined by sexual chromosomes); gender identity (which means the main identification of a person as male or female); gender role (which is intended as the set of expectations and roles about how women and men should behave in a given culture and in a given historical period); sexual orientation, which is the emotional and erotic attraction to members of the opposite sex, of the same-sex or both (Prati et al. 2010).



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*the second reflected the perception that gay males exhibit female sex-typed qualities that violate acceptable male gender roles» (Mason 1997).*

According to Mason, the positive and negative valence of these subtypes suggest that bias against gay males might arise more from the negative perception that gay males violate what it means to be a man, than from the positive perception that gay males possess favourable qualities associated with women.

Finally, Pietrantoni suggests to divide stereotypes about LGBT people in four categories (Pietrantoni 2000):

- Related to non-conformity to gender roles → gay men would have typical feminine behaviour, attitudes, movements, habits and vice-versa for lesbian women;
- Related to social roles → LGBT people would be lonely, nonconformist, transgressive, insecure, weak, victim, predisposed to specific career and political choices;
- Related to relationships and sexual behaviours → homosexual people would be longing to court, to trick and to “convert” heterosexual people to homosexuality;
- Related to the causes of homosexuality → LGBT people would become homosexual because of childhood traumas, because of a parental desire to have children of a different sex, because of a sexually incorrect education.

## **1.2. Homophobia and stereotypes in schools**

Recent educational research has demonstrated the pervasiveness of homophobia and homophobic bullying, particularly amongst boys, in secondary European and American schools (see, for example: Collins 1997; Ferfolja 1998; McCaskel and Russel 2000). Homophobic bullying refers to all acts of bullying directed at persons perceived as homosexuals or atypical with respect to gender role. As stressed by Prati and Pietrantoni (Prati et al. 2010), the targets of homophobic bullying can be:

- Adolescents who openly call themselves gay or lesbian or who opted for a selected disclosure and whose information was disclosed to third parties;
- Adolescents who are perceived to be gay;
- Adolescents with gay brothers, lesbian sisters, or gay parents;
- Adolescents who have ideas or opinions in favour of LGBT rights.

Research also provides evidence that age, gender, and school climate are related to attitudes and beliefs about homosexuality during the developmental period and that heterosexual students' reasoning about homosexuality and the treatment of gay and lesbian peers, rather than being a unidimensional construct, is multifaceted and draws from different domains of social knowledge. That is, an adolescent's understanding of



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sexual prejudice involves issues such as fairness and human welfare, issues related to social norms, religious conventions and stereotypes, as well as an individual's understanding of sex and sexuality as a private and personal aspect of one's identity. How individuals coordinate and apply these different dimensions of their social knowledge is directly related to their attitudes and beliefs regarding homosexuality and the treatment of gay and lesbian peers (Heinze and Horn 2009). A study of these two authors shows that adolescents reporting to have a lesbian or gay friend were less likely to judge homosexuality as wrong, were more comfortable interacting with LG peers and were more likely to evaluate excluding and teasing a LG peer as wrong, than adolescents reporting other levels of contact. Interestingly, adolescents reporting casual contact did not report more favourable attitudes than those students reporting no contact and, in some cases, reported more prejudicial attitudes, suggesting that contact, in and of itself, is not enough to improve intergroup attitudes and decrease prejudice.

Researchers, however, acknowledge that, generally, school materials seem to have a widely heteronormative framework and, because of the constitutional rights on freedom of teaching, European governments can't easily interfere. The general lack of visibility of sexual orientation issues in school and the feeling of not being able to "be oneself" was shown to have a negative impact on LGBT students' studies: for these reasons, Hunt and Jensen stated that when it comes to addressing homophobic bullying, schools have a long way to go (Hunt Jensen 2007); the two authors found that homophobic bullying, involving verbal and physical abuse, was prevalent and largely unchallenged in school and in some cases even condoned by teachers and the support staff. In a research conducted to find out what school is actually like for young lesbian, gay and bisexual people in 21<sup>st</sup> century in Britain, in 2003 a survey of more than 1100 of these young people was carried out. 65% of lesbian and gay pupils had experienced bullying and many teachers failed to respond to homophobic language. Homophobic language does not just consist of intentional abuse, but includes regular off-hand comments that go unnoticed and unaddressed by teachers. For example, the phrases "that's so gay" or "you're so gay" are used negatively to indicate something useless. Such language is so pervasive that most people think it's "natural" and do not recognize that it is abusive and it can reflect institutional heterosexism and the presumption of its normality. The consequence of institutional heterosexism is that lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people may feel excluded and not fulfil their learning potential. In their study, Hunt and Jensen commented that school work was affected by homophobic bullying and half of those bullied said that they had missed school as a result. In 2008 the NUT Oldham Prevalence of Homophobia Survey found



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94% of teachers had perceived a low level of homophobic incidents at school and 51% had received homophobic abuse from pupils. 78% wanted a whole school training on homophobia. The effects of homophobic bullying have been well documented in studies that show disproportionately high levels of depression, dropping out, suicidal ideation and suicide attempts among queer teenagers (GLSEN 2004; Kosciw and Diaz 2005; Morrison and L'Heareux, 2001) and a correspondingly high incidence of school-based homophobic experiences that include name-calling, threats, social and curricular exclusion, cultural and religious-based condemnation and physical assault (Human Rights Watch 2001; McFarland 2001; Plummer 1999).

For some LGBT people, sexual orientation may be central to their educational experience. Vicars suggests:

*«Cultural homophobia refers to social standards and norms which dictate that being heterosexual is better than being lesbian, gay or bisexual. Often heterosexuals do not realize that these standards exist, while lesbian, gay and bisexual people are acutely aware of them. This can result in lesbians, gays and bisexuals feeling like outsiders in the society» (Vicars 2007).*

Why does this silence about issues on homosexuality exists in schools? Despite its importance in terms of pupils and teachers well-being, sexualities equality remains the one area of inclusion still largely unaddressed in schools, often because of teachers' own fears and concerns. This silence is often echoed by a prevailing view in the public arena that sexual orientation—including diverse family patterns—is not an appropriate focus for education, in spite of significant evidence demonstrating continuing disadvantage for non-heterosexual pupils and teachers (see, for example, Mason and Palmer 1996; Douglas et al. 1999). As stressed by De Palma and Atkinson, heteronormativity, or the organizational structures in schools that support heterosexuality as normal and anything else as deviant, is maintained not only in terms of what is said and done, but also in terms of what is left out of the official discourse (De Palma and Atkinson 2006). These considerations are behind the diffusion of a "don't ask, don't tell" attitude related to the same-sex sexual behaviour.

The assumption that children are "innocent but socially susceptible" casts children as potential victims, and opens the possibility for children to be recruited to homosexuality, the so-called "gay agenda" (that requires an impressionable victim with an incipient but fragile heterosexuality, who, upon receiving the forbidden awareness of sexual transgression, is drawn inexorably to its lure).



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Sears (1999) argues that we «*routinely equate sexual identities with sexual acts*», yet because of the heteronormative construction of heterosexuality as an unmarked category, it is homosexuality that is associated with sexual desire, as the excess and perversion that brackets the normal, as stressed by Foucault. In this sense, transgressive sexualities are born out of the assumption that normality is possible and that homosexuality is merely the deviant shadow of heterosexuality. For lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people, their deviance is always identified with excess. The mere act of making their sexuality visible makes it seem excessive. The affiliation of love with home and heart, and of desire with undisciplined nature, helps to perpetuate the construction of the child as a naïve creature that must be protected from the dangers and perversities of the predatory wild untamed that exists beyond safe and desire-free civilisation (Foucault 1979).

In this framework, initiatives and actions aimed at facing homophobia in schools and homophobic bullying are particularly important. In this regard, the "Triangle Model", articulated by McCaskell (2005), provides a framework for exploring the emancipatory possibilities of school-based equity practices. It places what we know about experiences of homophobia and other forms of oppression into three categories:

- institutional/systemic experiences;
- individual expressions;
- common ideas.

All three factors, arranged in the shape of a triangle, have a role in shaping individual and institutional attitudes about equity. Indeed, these three facets of human experience tend to be mutually reinforcing. For this reason, a comprehensive anti-homophobia policy should address all three sides of the triangle. This model recognizes that oppression often begins with common ideas. Individuals act in certain ways because of the ideas they hold. Institutions act in particular ways because of the ideas of the people who run them. There is a relationship between the common ideas that people hold and both individual and institutional/systemic expressions of oppression. People learn these ideas from institutions such as schools. For this reason, schools have a critical role to play in shaping equitable environments that address the needs and rights of all their constituents (McCaskell 2005). There is also a relationship between individual actions and common ideas. People draw inferences from how they see particular groups of people being treated by others. There are connections between the ways in which individuals behave and the ways in which institutions behave. Institutional power amplifies the actions of the individuals who run them and those actions become entrenched in the way the institution functions. This means that there is a connection between individual expressions of oppression and institutional/systemic oppression.





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Finally, institutions can shape individual actions in ways beyond promoting certain ideas. As McCaskell puts it, people behave in ways that the institution lets them get away with.

Oppression works as an "unbroken cycle." To break this cycle, educators need to challenge oppression at all three levels. While changing people's ideas involves education, McCaskell argues that changing individual behaviour involves implementing rules and consequences as well as engaging in education. To push schools to develop and enforce rules and consequences that challenge oppressive behaviours, and to encourage schools to change what they are teaching, people need to talk to school officials, lobby, protest, sign petitions, and elect leaders who will take action on challenging oppression in schools. This is political action. According to the McCaskell's work, any effective anti-oppression strategy has to include all of these: political action, education, and rules and consequences. If educators concentrate on just one area, the influences from the other corners of the triangle may undo their efforts.

### 1.3. European legislation and homophobia in Europe

The first official European document in which discriminations on the ground of sexual orientation are explicitly prohibited is the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union. In the 21<sup>st</sup> article of the Charter, in fact, we can read:

*«Any discrimination based on any ground such as sex, race, colour, ethnic or social origin, genetic features, language, religion or belief, political or any other opinion, membership of a national minority, property, birth, disability, age or sexual orientation shall be prohibited»<sup>3</sup>.*

In 2003, the European Commission wrote another document related to the issue of fighting discriminations against minorities (included those based on sexual orientation); article 13 of the Treaty of European Union act:

*«Without prejudice to the other provisions of this Treaty and within the limits of the powers conferred by it upon the Community, the Council, acting unanimously on a proposal from the Commission and after consulting the European Parliament, may take*

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<sup>3</sup> Charter of Fundamental Rights (2000).



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*appropriate action to combat discrimination based on sex, racial or ethnic origin, religion or belief, disability, age or sexual orientation»<sup>4</sup>.*

In the text adopted on 18 January 2006, the European Parliament:

- Strongly condemns any discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation;
- Calls on Member States to ensure that LGBT people are protected from homophobic hate speech and violence and ensure that same-sex partners enjoy the same respect, dignity and protection as the rest of society;
- Urges Member States and the Commission to firmly condemn homophobic hate speech or incitement to hatred and violence, and to ensure that freedom of demonstration – guaranteed by all human rights treaties - is respected in practice;
- Calls on the Commission to ensure that discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation in all sectors is prohibited by completing the anti-discrimination package based on Article 13 of the Treaty either by proposing new directives or by proposing a general framework covering all grounds of discrimination and all sectors;
- Urges Member States and the Commission to step up the fight against homophobia through education, such as campaigns against homophobia in schools, in universities and in the media, as well as through administrative, judicial and legislative means;
- Reiterates its position in relation to the proposal for a decision on the European Year of Equal Opportunities for All that the Commission must ensure that all forms of discrimination referred to in Article 13 of the Treaty are addressed and dealt with equally, as stated in the Parliament's position of 13 December 2005 on the proposal and reminds the Commission of its promise to monitor closely this matter and to report to Parliament;
- Urges the Commission to come up with a proposal for a directive on protection against discrimination on the basis of all the grounds mentioned in Article 13 of the Treaty;
- Urges the Commission to consider the use of criminal penalties in cases of violation of directives based on Article 13 of the Treaty;
- Calls on all Member States to take any other action they deem appropriate in the fight against homophobia and discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation and to promote and implement the principle of equality in their societies and legal systems;

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<sup>4</sup> Consolidated versions of the Treaty of European Union and of the Treaty establishing the European Community (2003)



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- Urges Member States to enact legislation to end discrimination faced by same-sex partners in the areas of inheritance, property arrangements, tenancies, pensions, tax, social security etc.;
- Welcomes recent steps taken in several Member States to improve the position of LGBT people and resolves to organise a seminar for the exchange of good practice on 17 May (International Day against Homophobia);
- Reiterates its request that the Commission put forward proposals guaranteeing freedom of movement for Union citizens and their family members and registered partners of either gender, as referred to in Parliament's recommendation of 14 October 2004 on the future of the area of freedom, security and justice;
- Calls on the Member States concerned finally to accord full recognition to homosexuals as targets and victims of the Nazi regime;
- Instructs its President to forward this resolution to the Commission, to the governments of the Member States and to the accession and candidate countries.

On this occasion, European Parliament noticed that a positive, democratic and tolerant reaction had been shown in some cases by the general public, civil society and local and regional authorities that demonstrated against homophobia, as well as by the redressing by judicial systems of the most striking and illegal forms of discrimination; furthermore, the stance doesn't stop to the mere descriptive data, but stresses that:

*«homophobia can be defined as an irrational fear of and aversion to homosexuality and to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people based on prejudice and similar to racism, xenophobia, anti-semitism and sexism»<sup>5</sup>*

However, despite this explicit stance by the European Union, de facto, the current social situation of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people in different European countries remains largely difficult. The need to devote to the problem of unequal treatment of LGBT persons in Europe was underlined recently, for example, in the International Conference on Human Rights, during the so-called "Declaration of Montreal" in 2006: the main demand is to safeguard and protect the most basic rights of LGBT people, rights which are well established and not legally controversial. The indications provided concern the following issues:

- protection against state and private violence;
- freedom of expression, assembly and association;

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<sup>5</sup> Text adopted on 18 January 2006 by European Parliament.



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- freedom to engage in (private, consensual, adult) same-sex sexual activity.

The Declaration also states that education, the media, health care and religion are social institutions of crucial importance to the success or failure of the struggle for LGBT human rights. Each has its own role to play and its own contribution to make. For these reasons, they demand:

- that the competent (national or local) government authorities in charge of education policies, including school boards, include lessons on LGBT human rights in the school curriculum and take action to combat intimidation and violence against LGBT pupils and teachers;
- that the mainstream media contribute to breaking down stereotypes, and promote a realistic visibility of LGBT people;
- that health care facilities and individual health care providers be open to the special health needs of LGBT people, fight prejudice, and supply relevant information on a non-discriminatory basis;
- that governments permit all medical treatment necessary for gender reassignment, that they fund such treatment to the same extent that their resources permit them to fund other medically necessary treatment, and that they amend their legislation so as to permit a transgender person to change their legal sex to the one that corresponds to their gender identity;
- that religious institutions and non-confessional organisations put into practice the principles of tolerance and equality towards LGBT individuals among their own ranks, and to contribute to the fight for LGBT human rights in the world at large<sup>6</sup>.

On 26 March 2007, a group of human rights experts launched the Yogyakarta Principles on the application of Human Rights Law in Relation to Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity. The Principles are intended as a coherent and comprehensive identification of the obligations of States to respect, protect and fulfil the human rights of all persons, regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity. Particularly, relating to the issues of our project, this document states:

*«Everyone has the right to education, without discrimination on the basis of, and taking into account, their sexual orientation and gender identity»<sup>7</sup>.*

For this reason, members of the European union shall:

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<sup>6</sup> International conference on LGBT human rights, Declaration of Montréal (2006).

<sup>7</sup> Yogyakarta Principles (2007).



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- Take all necessary legislative, administrative and other measures to ensure equal access to education, and equal treatment of students, staff and teachers within the education system, without discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity;
- Ensure that education is directed to the development of each student's personality, talents, and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential, and responds to the needs of students of all sexual orientations and gender identities;
- Ensure that education is directed to the development of respect for human rights, and of respect for each child's parents and family members, cultural identity, language and values, in a spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance and equality, taking into account and respecting diverse sexual orientations and gender identities;
- Ensure that education methods, curricula and resources serve to enhance understanding of and respect for, *inter alia*, diverse sexual orientations and gender identities, including the particular needs of students, their parents and family members related to these grounds;
- Ensure that laws and policies provide adequate protection for students, staff and teachers of different sexual orientations and gender identities against all forms of social exclusion and violence within the school environment, including bullying and harassment;
- Ensure that students subjected to such exclusion or violence are not marginalised or segregated for reasons of protection, and that their best interests are identified and respected in a participatory manner;
- Take all necessary legislative, administrative and other measures to ensure that discipline in educational institutions is administered in a manner consistent with human dignity, without discrimination or penalty on the basis of a student's sexual orientation or gender identity, or the expression thereof;
- Ensure that everyone has access to opportunities and resources for lifelong learning without discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity, including adults who have already suffered such forms of discrimination in the educational system.

The last FRA report on Homophobia, transphobia and discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation and gender identity<sup>8</sup> reveals three underlying problems faced by LGBTB persons in the European Union:

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<sup>8</sup> European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), *Homophobia, transphobia and discriminations on grounds of sexual orientation and gender identity* (2010). This is a comparative social analysis started in December 2007 and based on available data throughout the 27 EU member states, as well as field work research consisting on interviews



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- They are forced to live in silence and invisibility;
- They suffer violent attacks;
- They are not treated equally, for example at work, by landlords or when moving around the European Union.

The FRA research identified six main issues where both positive and negative trends can be identified, as shown in the following table:

<b>Issue</b>	<b>Positive trends</b>	<b>Negative trends</b>
<i>Freedom of assembly and expression</i>	challenges for LGBT Pride events or aggressive counter-protests, as well as improvement protection of demonstrators	banning of information about same-sex relationships to minors
<i>Hate speech and hate crime</i>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ limited protection against acts of intolerance and violence towards LGBT people;</li> <li>▪ only a small number of member states expand the use of criminal law to counter such incidents</li> </ul>
<i>Unequal treatment and discrimination</i>	A substantial number of equality bodies cover sexual orientation in and beyond employment	the protection for transgender people remains unclear despite EU case law
<i>Free movement and family reunification</i>	Some EU member states allow recognition of same-sex partnership	Some EU member states restrict or refuse the recognition of same-sex partnerships and marriages concluded in another member state
<i>International protection of LGBT asylum seekers</i>		many member states continue to consider that asylum seekers seeking

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and roundtable discussions with relevant key actors carried out by the Danish Institute of Human Rights and the international consultancy firm COWI.



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		protection from persecution because of their sexual orientation or gender identity are not entitled to it if they can live in their own countries without "revealing themselves"
<i>Gender reassignment</i>	Some EU member states have eased the situation	difficulties in accessing (free of charge) treatment, in obtaining legal recognition and equal treatment in most areas of social life

In accordance to the FRA report, unsettled trends across the EU may reflect or reinforce negative attitudes towards LGBT people and stereotyping. However, public understanding and acceptance can hardly be addressed solely through legal means, but require dialogue and engagement between governments and civil society to foster greater awareness of LGBT rights.

FRA report also states that all EU countries require for legal gender recognition a "medical opinion" aka mental diagnosis, 17 member states demand sterilization. In 15 countries transgender people are not clearly protected from discrimination (in breach of EU law). This and the invisibility of trans issues in public awareness campaigns of public and national equality bodies is appalling: 79% of trans people in EU experience some form of harassment in public, ranging from transphobic comments to physical or sexual abuse. EU law and 17 EU countries view transsexuals to be covered under anti-discrimination legislation. FRA had already in its 2008 report pointed out that there is no reason not to extend the protection from discrimination beyond transsexuals, to cover cross dressers and transvestites, people who live permanently in the gender "opposite" to that on their birth certificate without any medical intervention and all those people who simply wish to present their gender differently. Hammarberg, which is a member of the Council of Europe Commission for Human rights, reported that in a large part of Europe official records can be changed only upon proof that the transgender person has been sterilised or declared infertile, or has undergone other medical procedures, such as gender reassignment surgery or hormone treatment. The individual's sincere affirmation of their gender identity is not seen as sufficient, and the suitability of the medical procedures for the person in question is not considered; additionally, many



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countries require that a married person divorces before his or her new gender can be recognised, even if the couple does not want to divorce. This may have an impact on children of the marriage, as, in several countries, the parent who has undergone the gender change will lose custody rights. Even access to ordinary healthcare is a problem for transgender people. The lack of trained staff familiar with the specific healthcare needs of transgender people – or simply prejudice– render them vulnerable to unpredictable and sometimes hostile reactions. Other serious problems are harassment and discrimination at work, stigmatisation, a high rate of unemployment and difficulties accessing the job market (Hammarberg 2009).

The Council of Europe Recommendation on measures to combat discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation or gender identity provides useful guidance to EU Member States for improving the respect, protection and promotion of LGBT rights. The implementation of this recommendation will contribute to developing a common approach to the fulfilment of these rights.





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## **2. Italy profile**

### **PART ONE – CONTEXT ANALYSIS (SECONDARY DATA)**

#### **2.1. Italian legislation**

In Italy, the “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy (supported by the presence of the Catholic Church) strengthens the separation between public and private dimension: the Italian legislation neither prosecutes, nor defends homosexuality and the latter has to remain a private issue. According to Capozzi and Lingiardi, since Italy became an independent unified country in 1861, the penal code, which had been already introduced in the north, was extended to the whole national territory; however, the law punishing “homosexual actions” was not included in the southern part of Italy, thus generating a sort of “double standard”. Afterwards, in 1889 the approval of the Zanardelli Code decriminalized homosexual behaviours between consensual adults. On the ground of these facts, homosexuality has become legal, and it is basically accepted if “it does not make too much noise” (Capozzi and Lingiardi, 2003).

In the Republic of Italy the concept of non-discrimination is regulated through article 3 of the National Constitution:

*«All citizens have equal social dignity and they are all equal in front of the law, with no distinction according to gender, race, religion, political views, social and personal conditions».*

However, the article doesn't mention explicitly sexual orientation, which could be included anyway within the social and personal conditions.

In the penal code, discriminations are regulated by the so called “Legge Mancino” (legislative decree n. 122 from 26/4/1993 “Misure urgenti in materia di discriminazione razziale, etnica e religiosa”, then converted into law n. 205 from 25/6/1993); as far as its first formulation is concerned, such law included also sexual orientation, but the latter element was deleted from the final version of the text. Thus, within the law it is stated that up to three years of prison term can be requested for people who:

*«spread among the population ideas based either on primacy or on racial and ethnic hate, as well as push others to commit or commit themselves discriminating actions for racial, ethnic, national and religious reasons».*



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Extending the current existing principles concerning racism to sexual orientation would therefore mean to define a punishment for those people who spread ideas based on the primacy of a particular sexual orientation with respect to another one, and thus, to put on trial everyone who had been using words of hatred towards LGBT people in order to discriminate them. Although in the context of a 2006 resolution the European Parliament requested all member states to guarantee both a high degree of protection to gay, lesbian, bisexual and transsexual people from homophobic speeches and that the same respect accorded to the rest of the society was to be given also to partners belonging to the same sex, until now Italy does not record any law targeting such issue. However, the explicit mention of sexual orientation is included in the legislative decree n. 216 from 9 July 2003 ("Attuazione della direttiva 2000/78/CE per la parità di trattamento in materia di occupazione e di condizioni di lavoro"), and such decree prevent from discriminations on the job:

*«The current decree introduces the guidelines concerning the implementation of an equally fair behaviour among people, regardless their religion, their personal ideas, their disability, their age and their sexual orientation, as far as employment and working conditions are concerned, also defining the necessary measures in order to avoid the latter elements to cause discriminating behaviours, and taking additionally into account the different impact that the same discriminating actions could have on men and women».*

However, at first such decree included a couple of exceptions for people working within military, security as well as rescue forces. In article 3 it said:

*«Up to the point of respecting the principles of proportionality and reason, in the context of the relationship between employer and employee or within the entrepreneurial activity, the different treatments related to features implied by someone's religion, personal views, disability, age or sexual orientation do not represent discriminating acts, according to article 2, with respect to those cases where the inner nature of the working activity or the context in which the latter is carried out make those features essential for developing the activity itself.*

*At the same time, the evaluation of such characteristics does not represent a discriminating act, if they end up being important to certify the eligibility to conduct specific functions requested to military forces, security forces, police or rescue forces».*



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This particular rule was afterwards abolished following the infringement procedure promoted by the European Commission against Italy, given that such rule was considered in opposition to the community directives against discrimination.

Nevertheless, it has to be reminded that a couple of attempts to fight sexually oriented discrimination have actually been undertaken by the law: for example, on the 30<sup>th</sup> of September 2008 the MP Concia presented a law proposal within the Commission for Justice: such proposal meant to introduce an additional punishment for homophobic as well as transphobic crimes, according to which, if the latter crimes or violent actions were motivated by hate towards either a homosexual or a transsexual person, the punishment would be higher as well as stronger, compared to the case of analogue crimes originating from different motivations. Thus, one year later, the 2<sup>nd</sup> of October 2009, the Commission for Justice of the Deputy Chamber adopted a basic text, formed by a single article: among the common aggravating circumstances foreseen by article 61 of the penal code, those concerning sexual orientation were also added. However, such text was then rejected on the 13<sup>th</sup> of October 2009 by the majority of the Deputy Chamber on the basis of a potential element of unconstitutionality underlined by one parliamentary group. The rejection provoked harsh criticism towards Italy by EU and UN members: at that time indeed, Navi Pillay (UN High Commissioner for Human Rights) claimed that homophobia is one of the problems affecting Italy and such rejection could be seen as a further proof of it.

A positive reaction to the rejection was instead expressed by the bishop Domenico Mogavero, who had previously defined the law proposal as:

*«only a first step, given that the final aim of such campaign was to enable gay marriage».*

The proposal by MP Concia was again put forward and stopped in 2011.

## 2.2 Homophobia in Italy and in Italian schools

In Italy, the historical coexistence of a strong catholic culture together with a deeply rooted Mediterranean "tolerant" culture – closely tied to a lack of laws prohibiting discrimination against gay, lesbian, bisexual and transsexual people – strengthen the diffusion of the so-called "don't ask, don't tell" attitude, already described. The deep penetration of this type of attitude caused also the incomplete development of gay and lesbian consciousness, with the birth of a specific organisation for the defence of



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their civil rights, only in recent times. Another consequence of such an attitude can be found in the fact that so far Italian social scientists have been conducting poor and limited investigations concerning LGBT issues and homophobia within the national population. In 2008, €180.000 have been destined to a research on homophobia to be conducted by the National Institute for Statistics, , then carried out in 2011.

This research shows that in Italy the 61.3% of the population aged 18-74 believes that homosexuals are very or quite discriminated, while the 80.3% believes that this is so for transsexuals. Although there is a general disapproval of such discriminatory conduct (the 73% totally disagree with the fact that a person might be excluded from work or because she is homosexual or from renting an apartment for the same reason), the 41.4% of the Italian population do not accept homosexual primary school teachers, the 28.1% does not accept homosexual doctors, the 24.8% homosexual politicians. Only the 65.8% agrees with the statement "you can love a person of the opposite sex or of the same-sex: the important thing is to love." Just a slight majority thinks that it is acceptable that a man has a sexual and emotional relationship with another man (59.1%) or that a woman has a sexual and emotional relationship with another woman (59.5%). However, the 55.9% agrees with the statement "if homosexuals were more discrete they would be better accepted," while the 29.7% agrees with "the best thing for a homosexual is not to tell others to be so". About one million people declared himself homosexual or bisexual, than among men, and young people in central Italy. Homosexuals / bisexuals report having experienced discrimination at school or college, most of heterosexuals (24% vs. 14.2%), and so also in work (22.1% vs. 12.7%). Another 29.5% felt discriminated in job search (31.3% for heterosexuals). Considering all three areas, 40.3% of homosexual / bisexual states that he was discriminated against for 27.9% of heterosexuals.

Information about homophobia at national level has been included in the Arcigay dossier that collected every homophobic episode occurred on the Italian ground in 2008, among which the story of a kid from Milan enrolled in the fifth grade of the primary school who refused to come back into class because he was afraid of the jokes and abuses of his mates due to his passion for ballet.

Such information has been collected through the selection of articles published on National as well as local newspapers during 2008, and it has been divided according to the different thematic areas (homicides/crimes/aggressions).



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Within the context of the so-called “Città Sociale” project, the Onlus association I-Ken together with the local authority for Social Policies of the city of Naples organized in October 2008 the First National Study Day with the title “Homophobia. Integrated interventions in the educational field”.

During the conference that involved also the Department for neuroscience of the Faculty of Medicine of the University of Naples and the Italian Institute for Philosophical Studies, the issues at stake were related to the social prejudice about homosexuality, and it was aimed at acknowledging and understanding the dynamics leading to discrimination and marginalization. On that occasion, Lingiardi presented a report concerning the steps made so far by research. He distinguished two main ideas:

- Social homonegativity (or homophobia) → referring to social behaviours against either gay or lesbian people;
- Internalized homonegativity (or homophobia) → referring to the negative attitude that a LGBT person can experience towards his/her own homosexuality: the fear or the idea of being “sick” can affect an individual up to the point of pushing him/her to oppose or hide his/her real identity, thus transforming his/her diversity into deformity (Mieli 1977). Several studies about LGBT adolescents have shown how the exposition to and the internalization of social disregard towards homosexuality expressed by their mates or family of origin is at the basis of feelings such as disrespect, personal conflict and psychosocial stress. That is the way the concept of *internalized homophobia (or transphobia)* has been introduced to define the general negative attitude of LGBT people towards their own sexual orientation. Internalized homophobia (and transphobia) embodies a whole set of negative meanings concerning homosexuality and homosexual people, which have been developing through time and not been elaborated by LGBT people. Internalized homophobia and transphobia are usually an unaware condition and it causes an attitude of closure towards the external reality besides discriminating behaviours put in action by the same LGBT people, both towards themselves and towards the others. The self-directed homophobia shows up in the form of a scarce self-acceptance, inferiority complexes and feelings of shame, the belief of being sick or wrong, up to the point of self-hatred. That is why it is important how LGBT perceive somebody else’s attitude: those who have positive experiences in building their own identity (acceptance and support expressed by teachers, friends, family, etc.) do not develop internalized forms of homophobia/transphobia and they are capable of elaborating it more effectively (Prati and al. 2010). In many cases, according to what stated by Lingiardi during his intervention at the First National Study Day on



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Homophobia, the awareness of being different can reinforce the will and the desire to be better individuals, to be accepted or, at least, not be damaged: the latter could be seen as a compensatory mechanism of internalized homonegativity and it can represent a possible explanation to the inner push towards self-assertion that characterizes some gay/lesbian people.

Lingiardi presented two scales for measuring social homonegativity (SIMO-E) and internalized homonegativity (SIMO-I)<sup>9</sup>: the results of the application of such scales in research concerning the Italian population can be summarized through the six following points:

- there is a higher degree of hostility towards gay people with respect to lesbian ones;
- there is a higher degree of hostility towards homosexual people from your same gender
- Homonegativity (both social and internalized) is positively correlated with age, the degree of religious belief as well as political conservatism;
- A more hostile behaviour is expressed by people who have never met LGBT people;
- There is a link between homonegativity and mental strictness, tendency to conformism, need for stable and unchangeable social representations, hypersensitivity to judgement;
- Tight connection between homonegativity and misogyny.

Research about internalized homonegativity involving gay/lesbian people (e.g. Lingiardi & Nardelli 2007) have produced further empirical evidences, such as the association between internalized homonegativity and dissociative defences: the homonegative social/familiar context can bring gay/lesbian people to build a "double personality" (social and private), making it difficult to self-recognize the deepest feelings or emotions and to express them verbally. In addition, according to the two researchers, the psychological growth of the majority of LGBT people comes together with a continuous stressful condition, macro and micro traumatic, as a consequence of living in hostile environments, being subjected to episodes of stigmatization and violence. The latter phenomenon is called "*minority stress*" (that is, stress due to the belonging to a minority), which is a condition composed by three dimensions:

- Internalized homonegativity (subjective component);
- Perceived stigma;
- Life experiences of discrimination and violence (objective component).

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<sup>9</sup> SIMO means "Scala Italiana di Misurazione dell'Omofobia". It is a sort of "Italian translation" of the MHS scale (Modern Homophobia scale: Raja & Stokes 1998; trans. it Lingiardi & Falanga 2001).



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One key feature of the *minority stress* affecting gay/lesbian people is the fact of being unable to refer, since childhood or adolescence, to various forms of familiar support and communal validation, as it is, instead, actually possible in other minority contexts (e.g. ethnic, religious, etc.). Therefore, the *coming out* process acquires a much more relevant role: the LGBT person that reveals his/her nature has the chance to compare his/her own experience with other gay/lesbian people and (s)he can also count on external validation experiences as well as on sharing self-recognition experiences. Besides the integration process within gay/lesbian communities, another defensive mechanism to face *minority stress* is the possibility, for those who have faith, to move slightly away from the rigid literal interpretation of religion in order to embrace a less strict view (as suggested, for example, by Harris et al. 2008).

Lingiardi's presentation during the National Study Day on Homophobia and Homosexual Discrimination ends with the admission that the lacking of someone else's recognition can be psychologically harmful:

- The experience of love and the creation of emotional ties happens within the context of social relations and in the field of history and culture. The idea of family is not one and only, and politics need to acknowledge this fact.
- As established also by the American Psychiatric Association (2005), avoiding the recognition (symbolically, legally and publicly) of an emotional bond between two free persons who are asking for it – and, therefore, refusing to recognize the true existence of such couple as a social entity – can damage their psychological well-being, relationship and mental health.
- The implicit delegitimization of gay and lesbian people, who end up being bordered in a grey zone, at a “lower citizenship level”, tends to favour the social and personal depreciation, disregard and discrimination: homonegativity and the emerging homonegative bullying feeds itself also through the lack of recognition of a full citizenship right to LGBT people, tacitly implying particular ideas like the following one:

*«If the Church sees these people as unworthy of building a family and if the State stands their presence, but without providing them with help, formal rights and protection, then this means that in front of God and the mankind, these people can not be considered full citizens like everyone else...».*

The chronic going underground, which is typical of someone's sexual orientation, gives birth to a dangerous discrepancy between public and private identity and also to



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feelings of loneliness and to a lack of identity concerning many different fields, as recalled also by Prati (2010):

- *Social* → the adolescent feels alone in the world in many social contexts (in the school, in the church, in the sport groups); he/she spends time on his/her own because afraid to be discovered; (s)he lives in places where there are no meeting or recreational points and uses fewer means of communications (e.g. just internet or an helpline);
- *Emotional* → the emotional distance towards his/her own family increases as a mechanism of self-protection against a potential refusal; the person avoids speaking about himself/herself and ends up into asymmetric relationships in which (s)he tends to listen and help others but without reciprocity; (s)he is also very selective as far as friendships are concerned because afraid of having negative experiences;
- *Cognitive* → (s)he has no access to accurate information about LGBT issues; (s)he builds his/her identity on the basis of biased descriptions; (s)he relies too much on other people's judgement.

Further available data and information, concerning the problem of homophobia in Italy, are the result of investigations conducted mainly at local level. One example is represented once again by a 2005 research developed by Ligiardi, focusing on two specific issues: on one hand, it investigates the relationship between homophobia and personal features, comparing a sample of military soldiers from the Navy Academy settled in Livorno with a sample of students from the University "La Sapienza" in Rome; on the other hand, it studies the relationship between homophobia and gender through the analysis of a sample of 100 university students.

According to his work, the variables which are the most significantly correlated to a high degree of homophobia are:

- Conservative ideas;
- Lack of direct knowledge of gay/lesbian people;
- Religiosity.

However, those who reveal a deeper religious involvement are characterised by a lower level of homophobia, with respect to those who experience a more "formal" and less strong relationship with it; the latter aspect is probably in line with the Christian catholic values of acceptance and tolerance. In both samples (the one with military soldiers and the one with students), homophobia is highly correlated with the lack of direct knowledge of gay/lesbian people. Such result would support the hypothesis according to which personal links with a specific group of individuals are important to understand the existing prejudices and stereotypes. Therefore, in order to fight prejudice, it is necessary for people to have a cognitive model where to accumulate





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new information: that is exactly where education finds its room in the fight against homophobia. A couple of Italian experiences that have been following this path are documented in the important works from Arcidiacono and Gelli (1994), Casamassima and Pietrantonio (1997), Francescato and others (1986).

Pietrantonio underlined how prejudice against gay/lesbian people (especially for kids and adolescents attending school) is not so much the result of a direct experience with non heterosexual people, but, on the contrary, it is the consequence of social, affective and cultural visions, that can be modified during everyone's individual educational path (Pietrantonio 1999). According to this perspective, the role assumed by the school and the teachers is especially important in changing and shaping specific attitudes as well as behaviours.

In the Italian language a long series of colourful verbal offences towards homosexual people can be identified, however there is a significant difference between the attitude shown towards gay people and the one adopted towards lesbians: many offensive words for gay males exist, but not too many for lesbians; the word "lesbian" can be used with or without expressing prejudice, according to the context. The homophobic issue belongs to a symbolic system of manhood which defines strict rules as far as young men growth is concerned, thus stealing from them a high amount of creativity and a deep experience with their emotional side. Words such as "finocchio" or "frocio" (faggot) are true weapons through which adolescents can impose their manhood by denying others'. By looking within someone's own school at how, when and where the word is used, it is possible to become aware of the processes through which manhood is defined and expressed by male adolescents.

However, if there is no way to collect data on homophobia at national level, it is even more difficult to find information concerning the problem of homophobia and homophobic bullying within Italian schools. The only available data concerning homophobic bullying are essentially those coming from the association taking action to defend the rights of LGBT people. Furthermore, even in this case it is possible to find research conducted mainly at local level and each one keeps insisting, on the one hand, on the problem of the silence which is still existing around the topic within schools, and on the other hand, on the problem of kids and guys discriminated because labelled as either gay or lesbians by their peers.

An effective example is represented by the data of the so-called *Gayhelpline*, according to which 35% of the help requests that are received comes from homosexual guys victims of bullying in school. Another project, "Schoolmates", a European research conducted in Italy by the Arcigay association together with the Ministry for Labour, Health and Social Policies between 2009 and 2010 on a sample of 860 students and 40



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teachers at the high school level, involving also directly the homosexual community was aimed at supporting students of secondary and high schools in promoting, at local level, interventions to reduce prejudice and increase people's respect of diversities. According to the results provided by this research, 53% of the students in high school heard directly homophobic insults, more than 10% of them witnesses attacks or mocking towards students considered homosexual and 83,6% of teachers claim to have never been involved in such episodes. Furthermore, two thirds of the students attending secondary school have heard homophobic speech against male students, and actually, for one out of five students, these expressions are part of the ordinary life; one student out of thirteen witnessed, at least once, a homophobic physical assault during the last month (from kicks and punches to sexual abuses), although the majority of teachers claimed not to be aware of it. Around 20% of adolescents has committed at least one action of a homophobic kind, while only 4% of them admits to have been victim of an attack; the bullying behaviour against lesbian students is reported as a minor issue.

According to a web-based poll promoted by the Gay.it web site, it turned out that more than 50% of respondents was victim of bullying in school, 24,3% of victims had been ignored by his/her peers and 12% of them had been left alone also by teachers. Only 5,5% of the victims felt truly helped and just 1,8% of them reported that the teacher dealt with the problem in a class discussion.

As far as evidence is concerned, the president of the Arcigay National Association Paolo Patané claimed that:

*«The current situation mirrors a terrifying as well as contagious phenomenon for which no antibodies have yet been discovered both in school and more generally in society, even though they are deeply needed as soon as possible. The whole picture shows a world made of violence and indifference whose damaging consequences have been so far underestimated. The fact that many schools refused to be involved in such a research project provides a clear idea of how marginally the phenomenon is taken into account within schools in Italy ».*

Let's provide, for instance, some testimonies from people victims of homophobic bullying as they have been reported in the already mentioned "Schoolmates" research paper:



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*«The gym classes at school reveal my feminine behaviours that I am, instead, capable of hiding during the other classes...I honestly do whatever I can to avoid attending those classes ».*

*«The first time I was mocked heavily by students I was 13 years old and I was attending the second year of secondary school. It was related to my boyish attitude and the clothes I used to wear. Many people called me "shitty lesbian". Since then the mocking became a constant and now that I am attending high school many more people are acting badly towards me. I think some of them wanted to hit me too, but luckily it has never happened so far ».*

*«I had been targeted by older guys which had ended up in my classroom because they had to repeat one year, thus every single day there were verbal and physical assaults, like, for example, playing the game of pretending to have a sexual intercourse with me while holding me still ».*

*«Their actions moved from simple verbal insults up to kicks and spits. In addition, they used to simulate sexual violent actions on me, either in school corridors or in the locker room. They used to take my head and push it towards their genitals shouting "suck it faggot", moreover they used to urinate on me and leave me there. They had also the habit of damaging my school material, which was constantly thrown into the toilet or outside the window. In the end, during my last year of high school I received even a couple of death threats which pushed me, first, to try to commit suicide, and afterwards to quit school ».*

The research "Family matters in Piemonte" was conducted by the Department for Social Research from the University of Eastern Piemonte together with the cooperation of Agedo (Associazione GEnitori Di Omosessuali – association of parents, relatives and friends of homosexual people) and it was based on questionnaires and interviews involving parents, brothers and sisters of young homosexuals; it therefore focused on the family needs and on the resources they should have access to in order to face the difficulties related the fact of being aware that a member of the family is indeed homosexual. What comes out is that the school has totally given up its pedagogical role in that specific field. More than half of the interviewed families admits that their son has been victim of several episodes of isolation and bullying because of sexual orientation. Even if the sample of families is small, what was shown was the general



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feeling of an uncomfortable situation, which actually represents only the top of a much greater iceberg.

In Turin, the so-called “LGBT service” is currently operating, aimed at overcoming discriminations based on sexual orientation and also on gender identity; this is the only service of such a kind within the whole Piemonte region. This might also be the reason why in Turin young homosexuals seem to be more ready for public coming out, while in both the small villages and the rest of the region, what can be found is a higher degree of resistance and a deep fear of expressing homosexual orientation in public contexts. Furthermore, the evidence shows that within a family it is the mother the one to whom either a son or a daughter tend to reveal his/her hidden homosexual identity; and the same mothers are, most of the time, the first to start looking for help as well as information. On the contrary, the role of the fathers seems to be less important and effective, given that they usually get to know their son/daughter’s sexual orientation only later and often through the mother’s intermediation.

Finally, a further critical point is the one concerning the fact that the young gay/lesbian’s families are basically alone in facing the difficulties of accepting homosexuality and of helping their own members to stand discriminations and violence: in fact, most of help interventions tend to target just LGBT people, but not their families.

### 2.3. Strategies to fight homophobia in schools

What can be done to reduce homophobia and transphobia in school and, as a consequence, homophobic bullying? As outlined by Pettingrew and Tropp (2006), getting directly in touch with someone is the first step towards the reduction of prejudice, and this consideration implies that if students meet gay people, who already came out publicly, there is the chance that they reconsider their homophobic prejudice. This could happen thanks to three essential elements:

- The increase of knowledge about the members of the other group – for instance, a student reported that, after meeting a gay guy, «I realized he was a simple guy like me»;
- The reduction of anxiety when dealing with members of the other group – for instance, a couple of students reported their fear that interacting with gay people could influence their manhood or make them victims of sexual abuses; however the direct contact itself has to be considered as an opportunity to reduce this feeling of anxiety;
- The possibility to experience feelings of empathy – an intimate contact, for example in the form of friendship ties, allows people to assume the “other’s perspective”.



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Pettigrew and Tropp remark that in order to reduce prejudice, emotional factors (e.g. the reduction of anxiety and the experience of having feelings of understanding for the other) matter more than cognitive factors, such as an increase of knowledge (Pettigrew and Tropp 2008). The latter consideration has been the basis for Pietrantonio and Prati<sup>10</sup> to define four fundamental conditions that can lead to a reduction of prejudice:

- Status equality as far as interaction is concerned (for example, the interaction between a homophobic student and an openly gay one, or an openly gay teacher);
- Cooperation in order to reach a common goal (e.g. playing a certain sport in the same team);
- The intimacy of real contact with respect to a superficial knowledge (for example, due to the fact of being aware that a girl from another class is lesbian);
- The presence of an institutional support capable of providing the maintenance of a tolerant atmosphere (in the case of schools that means basically the teachers).

As recalled also by Pietrantonio and Prati, the prejudices and stereotypes concerning homosexual people are characterized by a strong tenacity and they are therefore not easy to be demolished (Prati and al. 2010). However, from a cognitive point of view, it is possible to underline the processes that favour a modification of stereotypes and a simultaneous decline in prejudicial expressions. According to Arcuri and Cadinu (1998), there are three models describing the ways through which a single person or a group of people can change their stereotype when receiving incongruent information:

- *Accountability* model → the stereotype will change on the basis of a complete balanced analysis taking into account proofs both supporting and not supporting it;
- *Conversion* model → the change happens all of a sudden rather than step by step, as the consequence of the release of a unique relevant information contradicting the stereotype;
- *Undercategorization* model → when someone meets members of a group that do not mirror the idea he had according to his own stereotype and then he changes his view and disentangles the same stereotype into many different subcategories.

A directive n.16 from 5/2/2007 of the Ministry for Public Education, called "Linee di indirizzo generali ed azioni a livello nazionale per la prevenzione e la lotta al bullismo", has the goal of preventing and contrasting physical and psychological bullying, through the empowerment of teachers as well as school directors. However, the role of the school in fighting homophobic bullying can be effective only if teachers follow a couple of suggestions pointed out, among the others, by Pietrantonio and Prati (Prati

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<sup>10</sup> Prati and al. 2010.



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and al. 2010), like for example: defining common norms for respect and non-violence; clarify the main concepts concerning the existence of both heterosexual and homosexual people; underline how stereotypes can be misleading and untrue; remark the variety in terms of the composition of relational and family links. Furthermore, as far as secondary and high schools are concerned, it is important to distinguish between sexual orientation and sexual behaviour, to oppose the ideas of threaten and seduction, to inform on the origin of sexual orientation and not to take for granted that everybody is heterosexual. These concepts have been outlined by teachers who took part to the training course “Educare al rispetto” (education to respect), which took place for the first time in 1998 in the context of the definition of the “Piano Provinciale di Aggiornamento del Provveditorato agli Studi di Pisa” (training for teachers in Pisa) and afterwards in other Italian provinces<sup>11</sup>, up to the point of becoming in 2007 an on-line tool for every teacher and educational operator who want to guarantee and preserve the physical as well as psychological integrity of the students, by reducing violence and discrimination<sup>12</sup>.

As already anticipated, from an accurate analysis of the literature at our disposal it is possible to notice that the actions brought forward in schools and aimed at making students aware of the main issues concerning homophobia and the fight against homophobic bullying are not very spread at national level. According also to Buccoliero and Maggi (Prati and al. 2010), in Italy the development of projects to reduce violence in schools has been so far mainly a local issue, involving just those schools really interested in facing the problem. However, it is necessary to develop projects against homophobia and bullying in schools: more than 500 laboratories to educate male and female students at accepting differences have been implemented all over the country and a network of National educators coming from more than 40 Arcigay provincial committees having received a highly specialized training, ready to develop either short or long term laboratories according to school needs, has been created. The association has also published a manual called *Zaino in spalla*, where the foreseen laboratory educational activities, the necessary learning tools and the exercises that can help to promote a fair information campaign have been reported. However, according to Arcigay, even if this individual actions pushed forward by single schools are necessary, it is not sufficient to contrast the phenomenon as a whole. Sometimes there are also schools that act un-effectively: it happens, for instance, that some schools define a system of norms to be respected by students, but then the same

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<sup>11</sup> It has been realized together with public entities and local organisations from the provinces of Firenze, Brescia, Reggio Emilia, Arezzo, Siena, Pordenone, Trieste and Macerata.

<sup>12</sup> For further clarifications see the web site [www.educarealrispetto.org](http://www.educarealrispetto.org).



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institution is unable to punish systematically those who behave outside the rules; moreover, it can occur that students are continuously punished through negative marks or suspensions which then become useless or even counterproductive. Keeping these things in mind, Buccoliero, Maggi, Pierantoni and Prati developed a true operating manual of actions aimed at preventing and opposing homophobia in schools and providing operators with specific educational tools already tested to serve the main aim, that is contrasting homophobic bullying among adolescents<sup>13</sup>. The general phenomenon of prevarication and abuse – and homophobic bullying in particular – has many roots and thus requires to pay attention to many issues, among which:

- the educational role to be exerted by the adults;
- the reinforcement of communicative and relational skills and duties;
- the building of good group integration;
- the openness towards differences seen as an enriching value;
- the certainty of shared and accepted rules;
- the ability to deal positively and smartly with conflict.

The activities foreseen in the manual provide also suggestions for including LGBT issues within the main school classes and courses:

- History → talking about Saffo, the figure of Stalin, nazism and the prosecution;
- Geography and law → talking about homosexuality and homosexual rights in the world;
- Italian and foreign literature → from the island of Lesbo to Oscar Wilde, up to the book by Giorgio Bassani;
- Science → dealing with HIV among animals;
- Religion → talking about faith and homosexuality in Italy and for Christianity as well as for other religions;
- Musical education → introducing characters like Freddy Mercury;
- Art education → talking about figures like Frida Kahlo and Keith Haring;

Furthermore, an on-going project to oppose homophobia is foreseen, by handling group dynamics, which includes games, simulations, watching movies and musical videos about the issue.

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<sup>13</sup> See Prati and al. 2010.



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## **PART TWO – THE FIELD WORK**

### **The interviews**

#### **2.4 Introduction**

The aim of the first part of the field work (deepened through three focus groups) was to collect data and information in order to enlarge the available knowledge of the stereotypes related to homosexuality in all levels of schooling, among the adults responsible for education and, indirectly, of students and about policies and projects in schools, as experienced by expert witnesses.

In Italy, in the area of Milan, we interviewed 12 expert witnesses, of which 11 work at school and one belongs to the school sector of one of the main Italian associations of homosexual parents (Famiglie Arcobaleno – rainbow families).

<b>Level of schooling</b>	<b>Directors/Deputy directors</b>	<b>Teachers*</b>
Primary (6-10 years old)	1 (a comprehensive school, including also secondary education)	2
Secondary (11-13)	1 (a comprehensive school, including also primary education)	2
High (14-18)	1	4

\* Literature, mathematics, music, gymnastics, support for the disabled pupils, psycho-pedagogy, referee of project against homophobia.

#### **2.5 The main issues**

We present below the discussion of the main issues that came out from the interviews. Unless clearly and differently stated, the opinions expressed are of the interviewees. In brackets are the (translated) words used by teachers/directors themselves.

##### **2.5.1 School policy**

Homophobia is not an emergency, nor visible, nor numerically significant and this is why, according to teachers, in most schools it is not an issue dealt with in lessons: they take actions on contingency problems and sensitive issues are addressed “only if it’s necessary”.





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*«This school was, first of all a high school specializing in education, but now it constitutes a lyceum with various branches, with a strong female composition and... there aren't any (or we don't know) extraordinary bullying cases, but of course homophobic language is not absent, you just need to pay a little attention to perceive it every day »  
(high school teacher)*

*«I have to say that we didn't have any bullying cases... there are arguments that are typical of pre-adolescents, also with the expressions like "I'll wait for you outside"»  
(primary and secondary school manager)*

In all levels of schooling, homophobia is absent from the Ministerial school curriculum. Homosexuality is briefly mentioned in sex education (from secondary school) and in history (talking about Nazism) but all interviewees agree that there is a sort of silence on both of them, meaning that teachers, generally, do not deepen and develop what the texts says.

Homophobia as a subject of study in teachers mind is immediately associated with sex education (a subject that anyway has generally only a little space) and not with rights and citizenship or cross-subjects like pedagogy, psychology and so on.

In primary school, a part from one case, sex education is not taught. Regarding themes such as rights and citizenship, whereas the issue of migration is addressed, as well as the rights of the child, LGBT people's rights are absent.

*«I don't know because, for example, there is always this question time and in these moments it can happen, in history, for sure, when we talk about the Nazism we report about homosexual people in concentration camps» (high school teacher)*

*«In relation to diversity? In pedagogy and in psychology there is a part about disability. In law, for sure, there is the issue of the citizenship of immigrants. But, for example, in literature... I don't think I read any text [with references about homophobia or diversity]» (high school teacher)*

Generally, however, all matters related to sex, to the body and to sexual identity, are outsourced: sex education, starting from secondary education, is foreseen in the official curriculum and it can be in part carried out by the science teacher in class, but it is often "subcontracted": The Local health Authority (called, in Italy, Azienda Sanitaria Locale) has been so far the main public organisation going into schools and dealing



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with sex education. However a couple of teachers pointed out that it is progressively involving other institutions, such as catholic organisations: these types of bodies deal with sex in a very specific way and avoid the issue of homosexuality more than the Local Health Authority or, worse, talk about it as deviance. The logic of outsourcing regards also the only project we found, which seems to be specifically addressed to homophobia, tackled by an external body, the local Gay Association, applicant of the Rainbow project (CIG Milano).

*«The school outsources to extern bodies all this stuff. If there are some problems, the psychologist comes in order to talk about it, about bullying» (high school teacher)*

*«About secondary school, projects are based on affectivity, on sexual education, on drugs abuse prevention, on tobacco addition... for these reasons all this let's say informative channel to students, is in the hand of teachers who have more hours in the classrooms (maths and literature), together with an ASL representative» (primary and secondary school manager)*

Basically, tricky issues like homosexuality and homophobia can be a part of the program only if the single teacher takes the responsibility to integrate the texts and the official curriculum. Teachers are aware that, especially in Literature, Latin, Greek and history there is space for dealing with them, but not all of them actually do it. For example: somebody says it is difficult to find in textbooks a poem of Catullus dedicated to a man or an explanation, regarding music education, of castrated sopranos. If a teacher wants to deal with this, he/she needs to integrate the text. Somebody claims that this has more to do with the training for teachers, than to the lack (and the need to produce) new materials. It is a structural issue to do with the curriculum more than textbooks.

A teacher argues that the body and the biography of the teacher and of pupils don't have to enter the classroom. Especially in primary school, structured activities for males and females are not gender-stereotypical, because all children, in the words of a teacher, "are equal and equally treated".

*«All the words of a book remain a dead thing, until you make them alive. A child can read them, memorize and repeat and then forget them in two minutes. To make them alive you have to fill them with contents, you have to explain them. This is a teacher's job, but not everybody does it» (secondary school teacher)*



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*«We organised some meetings with parents. One of the topics was adolescence, and there was also the bullying! But only with parents, because you have to educate the parents, first! [...] My school is catholic, maybe there is also a little bit of fear, talking about these issues» (primary school teacher)*

This "neutral" approach means also that in high school teachers' free choices (what text to discuss of that specific author, for example), that are guided also by one's biography and theoretical background, are not always explained to students. The fact that the personal life of students and teachers should or should not enter the class and become subject of discussion is controversial among our interviewees. The majority believes, however, that it is important that teachers deal with delicate issues with the mediation of the cultural object, taking inspiration from the subjects studied in the school curriculum, also because, especially with issues not so much addressed in schools (like sex or homophobia), "you never know what reaction you can get from students or if you are hurting their feelings". The majority of them agree on the fact that one can take a personal position regarding values, only if they are clearly stated in the Italian Constitution and in the Universal declaration of human rights.

*«To propose something new, both on contents and method, is always risky, for sure» (high school teacher)*

*«[referring to the opportunity to talk about a same-sex kiss in class] I didn't want to enter [in the talk], I did not want to! This is the person's privacy. You can only imagine, if I talked about... also unpleasant, disturbing» (secondary school teacher)*

*«The reflection, the remark, taking a stand are correct things, valid, especially if they are based on values of our Constitution or European Union Human Rights» (high school teacher)*

In a couple of cases the school implemented a structured work on "rules and regulations", on respect and on students' statute, because it was thought that it is important to start from this ground, which is incontestable and legitimate.

However, in general, somebody says that "during the lessons, teachers tend to repeat themselves and stay in the usual track, because innovation is difficult and gives them more responsibility". In this situation the risk is that an homophobic attitude develops towards the single teacher who proposes innovative projects regarding the topic. In specific instances, like schools with a high percentage of migrant students, teachers



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think it would be even harder to tackle the issue, because in some “cultures” homophobia is deep-rooted.

*«Curricula which include topics related to homophobia and to homosexual's human rights... In primary schools there aren't absolutely, in high schools they deal with D'Annunzio, but I don't know... that's it.» (primary school teacher)*

*«We absolutely don't deal with this theme, it is absolutely ignored. But the worse is that also sentimental and sexual (also “normal”) education is ignored» (headmaster in primary school)*

Schools are currently very aware of parents' concerns and avoid alarming them. That is also why they do not take structured initiatives on the subject, because there is no political/official backing from the Ministry of Education. However, the worry of parents is mainly present in primary and secondary school, because in high school parents rarely participate in school life and are difficult to involve.

Only a minority of interviewees declares that talking about homosexuals' rights should be a priority in school.

*«I'd say that concerns parents, it is difficult to deal with any type of subject unless a problem or a particular situation comes out [...]. So when you are in the middle of the situation, as educator and as teacher you mediate and try not to overlook the problem» (primary school teacher)*

*«It could be very important – and I think it is necessary - a support of schools in order to organise courses targeted to teachers, administrative staff, in order to convey these messages» (high school teacher)*

#### **2.5.2 Specific projects in schools**

One high school teacher decided to introduce the issue of sexual orientation and shows a video (“Nessun è uguale”/Nobody is the same) when dealing with diversity in her socio-pedagogy lessons, in the context of a discourse about diversity (that normally only deals with ethnicity and disability). The video had first been proposed at her attention fourteen years ago by an openly lesbian girl of the school, who had difficulties with her female class mates, who kept her at a distance. The same teacher remembers



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a guide for teachers produced in the past by Arcilesbica (the main Italian lesbian association), but it is not currently available.

Another high school teacher recently proposed to the school a series of workshops on identity and homophobia, with the collaboration of CIG, project that consists of six meetings with volunteers of the school section of the association, where issues such as identity, relationship with diversity and prejudice are tackled<sup>14</sup>. The activities (role playing, games, etc.), which are aimed at sensitising and making homosexuals feel supported, help students to fully develop their potential and personality. The participation of students is voluntary, but it gives the student some school "credits". Apart from some teachers who did not support it, it was approved and it got a good feedback by students. The referee says that probably it got well accepted also because it was a "progressive" school context. The same "sensitive" teacher proposed also a multimedia project to be carried out with the English teacher, using a video he found on the Internet (see Recommendations), a speech by Obama on homophobic bullying and a song by Christina Aguilera (the song is called "Beautiful"), with the aim to teach that we have to respect each person's individuality.

*«I have a specific project about this, when I first arrived here, during the first year of teaching in this school, I attended the projection of a documentary. This Documentary ("Nessuno è uguale" / Nobody is the same) is a documentary... It is a project, actually, funded by Lombardia Region, by Province of Milano, in co-operation with Agedo. In this project they put together pupils from high school with LG pupils who has done the coming out, with the mediation of some teachers and a psychologist dealing with these issues» (high school teacher)*

*«Now, together with the English colleague, I am organising a little discussion, starting from a video realized by an Irish association, a very good video that we can find on internet. Its name is "Stand up". It is very simple, but it invites heterosexual people to activate themselves in order to protect their gay, lesbian friends [...]. Pupils liked that, but let's integrate it with something else! So I downloaded from youtube Obama speech on homophobic bullying, the official commitment. And there is also a song (Aguileira's one) to, let's say, tackle from the point of view of the English language a theme and then propose a conversation » (high school teacher)*

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<sup>14</sup> The same project had been carried out in another high school context a few years ago.



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In a secondary school students were involved in a performance of a Shakespeare piece, where there is a homosexual relationship as well as transvestites (but we are talking of a music oriented progressive school), in order to discuss the idea of the importance of accepting everybody's sexual identity.

*«This comedy is called "The twelfth night". The history, briefly, is about a young woman who disguises herself as a man [...] She accepts a different sexual identity [...]. We talked about that with students and this was an important moment to talk about the acceptance of sexual identity» (secondary school teacher)*

One Italian association of homosexual parents produced a booklet for teachers, which is a story for children, called "La storia di Tommi", running through the life of Tommi, a child with homosexual parents and making it clear that he is diverse in some ways, like everyone is and that he is similar in many other ways to his peers.

### **2.5.3 Bullying**

All interviewees say that homophobia in its extreme and violent sense is absent from their schools, threats and physical assault are not reported, in our little sample.

Homophobic language is however present since an early age (primary school). Small children use words that they do not necessarily know the meaning of, feeling that they are used as an offence in society (among which faggot and gay) and/or in their family. Older children that know their meaning, use them, teachers say, "if they were any other offence, like stupid". It is like every older child, when offending, puts the finger in the "weak point" of the peer, which is his/her diversity. If a child has got glasses, the offence will relate to that, if he or she is of foreign origin, it will be a racist offence, if they are fat, it will be about that, if they are non gender conforming, it will regard that.

*«There are a lot of... insults, which are built... However, there is machismo, isn't it? Therefore... we can put together the sexist ideology with homophobia and they reinforce each other. Then, the thing is more problematic for boys » (high school teacher)*

*« "wimp", "queer" or "gay" come out, but... not in a contextualized way. Rather than saying "stupid" or "silly" or "idiot", one can maybe use such a word. Even if you don't know the meaning, you realize that you are saying it as an insult » (primary school teacher)*



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Although bullying involving sex is a safe bet for the bully (the group will laugh and follow suit), not one interviewee admitted to have experienced in their class repeated bullying against the same pupil regarding sexual orientation or perception of homosexuality. Most say that in their experience they came across few feminine male pupils, but that they more or less integrated in the group of peers.

Homophobic language bullying stays, however, often unchallenged by the teachers, especially in high schools, where discipline is an issue and teachers "have to be careful that pupils do not throw desks out of the window". When it comes up, some teachers say that they would explain the meaning of the word and try to show that it does not make sense to offend their friend with such name-calling.

*«There is a reality of visible students that... often they are female, but there are also males, which live sexual orientation in a more explicit way. They are a minority inside a minority, but I think that we are going in that direction, where the presence of LGBT people between students and maybe also between teachers will become more usual, more obvious» (high school teacher)*

In some cases teasing based on sexual orientation is even encouraged by teachers. Homosexual teachers get offended about their perceived sexual orientation mostly through wall tags.

Projects on bullying have been carried out in many schools, especially in the past, but not with a specific focus on sexual orientation. Normally projects are focused on teachers training in primary and secondary schools and on pupils in secondary and high schools. Starting from secondary school, bullying can become a problem.

*« [referring to presence of offences] From tags like "he is fag" or "she is lesbian" to tags about teachers, which obviously have as a favourite insult the one related to sexual orientation and, in particular, to a type of passive sexuality, therefore related to a very chauvinist ideology. » (secondary higher school teacher)*

*« There aren't particular projects about homophobia, maybe also because it is not a very relevant phenomenon. We activated some project about bullying, starting from primary schools, aimed at sensitizing people.» (secondary school teacher)*



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#### **2.5.4 Stereotypes and prejudices**

According to some interviewees, the first to have stereotypical visions are the adults. Italian culture is steeped in Catholicism and machismo and the adults (teachers and parents) are influenced by it.

Students in their everyday relationships can deal with diversity, stereotypes are not yet rooted, although they might use them when insulting each other.

Coherently with Mason's, gay students or gender non conforming students are seen by both teachers and students (according to teachers) as having feminine qualities and as rejecting the masculine gender role. They are perceived as suitable for the fashion industry and artistic. However, more than one teacher says that nowadays the look and consumption style of youngsters gives less way to clear-cut gender defined differences (the use of colours in clothing, for example is not so different between girls and boys).

*« Sexual identity speech is much more nuanced, it's neutral. Also differentiation evaporates if we think about the way they dress and consume. [...] The proposed model is unisex.» (secondary higher school teacher)*

A stereotype that it is not absent in a couple of interviewees is the one related to the causes of homosexuality: LG people would become homosexual because of childhood traumas, because of a parental desire to have children of different sex, because of a sexually incorrect education. The psychologist becomes the reference figure for the teacher to count on for help in case of supposed homosexuality of a child.

*« We can speak with families and we can say: "try to speak about" or maybe with a psychologist or with someone. [...] someone can try to understand why... [the child is seen or feels different and so derided from other guys] » (secondary school teacher)*

Another stereotype that comes out from the interviews is that homosexual people would be longing to "convert" heterosexual people to homosexuality. This is apparently more of a worry for parents, than for teachers: one interviewee says that she got complaints from parents because one other teacher had suggested to two boys that they seemed like husband and wife, "giving them strange ideas".

The experience of the homosexual parent that we interviewed seems to back the findings of Heinze and Horn (2009) who show that people getting to know well a lesbian or gay person are less likely to judge homosexuality as wrong and are more comfortable interacting with LG people. Knowledge helps fighting prejudice and





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overcome fear. This is the reason why in their everyday relationships they find no problem regarding their situation, even in school.

*« [we were] treated like a family, I didn't feel difficulty [...] in my opinion there was the prejudice before. When you meet these persons and you are yourself, they compare you with themselves. » (homosexual parent)*

Teachers confirm also that there is a higher degree of hostility towards gay males with respect to lesbians, especially regarding homosexual teachers. The association man-paedophile, gay-paedophile is still present and it alarms parents, whereas there is no association between lesbian and paedophile, in the head of teachers, as well as parents. Overtly homosexual teachers could have problems being accepted by teachers and parents, as well as get insulted by students. However, if they perform well as teachers the problems can lead to anything worse than wall tags, rumours and behind the back gossip, according to the interviewees.

Teachers that happened to talk in class about homosexuality notice embarrassment in pupils, like sniggering. Homosexuality is still lived as something anomalous and unusual.

*« [...] concerning Catullo's sonnets they become moments of hilarity, starting point of... embarrassment, it creates embarrassment and so laughter, because it's always something strange. » (high school teacher)*

#### **2.5.5 Personal attitudes of teachers**

Homosexuality is at personal and social level an “unresolved” issue, most teachers admit.

In school there is still a heteronormative approach and a certain obsession with normalizing. Nowadays teachers often have a technical training on the subject they teach, but not necessarily a psycho-pedagogic framework that helps them dealing with cross-subject education. They feel they need the mediation of culture to tackle delicate aspects, such as sex, and this is why some issues are most of the time externalised to specialised organisations. In some cases personal discomfort of teachers regarding homosexuality was clear during the interviews, when they found it difficult to even use the words homosexual, gay, lesbian.

They say they have to deal with other, more visible, problems and do not want to take charge also of homophobia. Some say that homosexuality regards the private sphere and it is not a matter for schools.



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*« Private life shouldn't come in school. » (high school teacher)*

Most say there is no such thing as real homophobia in primary and secondary school, because children are too young. Even when confronted with twelve years old boys that as a joke behave in front of the class in a feminine way, saying "I am gay", one teacher did not feel like talking about it, because "it did not fit the curriculum, we were not in the last year of secondary education, where sex education is implemented".

*« I do not feel comfortable to talk about homosexuality... so, if someone asks a specific question, I respond and I do my duty. But I don't take the initiative because this issue is private.» (secondary school teacher)*

There is an institutional silence (the "don't ask, don't tell" philosophy) on homosexuality and homophobia, even more so on transphobia, because these issues are not considered an appropriate focus for education.

There is in fact no knowledge and reflection about transphobia among the interviewed teachers, although in one special school there is a secretary who is trans.

*« I don't know if we arrived to talk about transphobia... [...] homophobia was a first topic to face and so, we can say, it took more... space. » (high school teacher)*

*« Last year a secretary came, she was not homosexual, she was trans. [...] all the children have seen this! All of children have seen the professor who goes hand in hand with a trans in school and they can laugh, joke and talk about it. » (secondary school teacher)*

Most teachers would feel not prepared, nor comfortable in doing specific classes on the issue, maybe, somebody suggests, because they are not used to dealing with the subject. A teacher says that when she first had to do a sex education class she was uncomfortable, but that then she got used to it and understood what makes students giggle and what embarrasses or interests them the most. Homosexuality is still different and unusual and, as such, difficult to tackle.

*« Ten years ago it was difficult for me to talk about sexuality, now... you are trained, you understand the guys and what they laugh about, about what they are embarrassed,*



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*what you have to downplay and now, it is always a delicate topic, but you know where it can bring you. » (secondary school teacher)*

Most teachers would not be prepared to give cultural suggestions (books, films) about transphobia, homophobia or homosexuality, in case their students asked for references.

### **2.5.6 General recommendations for educational outputs**

- Video is good to elicit reactions from students and pull apart the discourse of diversity: because each one of us is unique.
- Somebody says that it is a better idea to use film clips instead of whole movies, because with the latter there is the risk that students identify with the characters, who often are the victim or the executioner, instead of reflecting on the issue.
- Teachers should be the target of at least part of the educational product, they might also need a little training on the basics: "causes" of homosexuality, possible damages to adolescents exposed to homophobia/transphobia, coming out and so on.
- It is suggested by a couple of teachers to make analogies between homosexuality and other diversities, that are more discussed and accepted in the public discourse: racism, for example, is nowadays considered by teachers (and society) unacceptable in language as well as in actual practice.
- It would be important to work on language: is it, or is it not the same to offend a peer by saying "stupid", "fatty", or "faggot"?
- Theatre is a useful medium to send messages to students. Also story telling for small children is very good, they listen willingly.

## **The focus groups**

### **2.6 Introduction**

Three focus groups have been conducted with teachers and parents of primary school, secondary lower school and secondary higher, together with Arcigay members and Milan local health authority (Asl) experts. In the different focus groups, participants were divided into the list shown below:



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School level	Participants
Primary (6-10 years)	2 teachers 3 parents 1 Asl expert 2 Arcigay members
Secondary (11-13 years old)	1 teacher 2 parents 1 Asl expert 1 Arcigay member
High (14-18 years old)	5 teachers 1 parent 1 Asl expert 1 Arcigay member

## 2.7 The main issues

We present below the results of the three focus groups, attended by various representatives belonging to different groups of the three school levels. The results are presented in different thematic areas and the words used by participants are reported with quotation marks.

### 2.7.1 Homosexuality and homophobia in the school context

All participants agree on the fact that in society awareness about homosexuality and homophobia has increased over time and that the topic is not a taboo anymore, as it was some years ago. Discrimination decreased and students are more open-minded.

*«Among primary, secondary and high school there is a deep gap. In the primary school homophobia and sexuality aren't so frequently tackled. Maybe they can come in from everyday life. In my context I didn't caught negative meaning or insults: on the contrary, I think that at present children are very conscious, and that they live it as something natural. Starting from many homosexual teachers who are very good».*  
(primary school teacher)

*«My daughter attended a course paid by the parents' association, a course about sexuality where the topic of homosexuality has been extensively dealt with, in a smart way, which starts from the children's questions and brainstorming. The need to speak*



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*about sexuality was strong. Children wanted to understand a series of terms». (primary school homosexual parent)*

*«Both my children had or have male homosexual teachers who, I think, didn't display their sexuality, but it's so clear and the youngsters know it and that these professors are very appreciated also by boys... this is not a taboo for them, they are very good teachers, they are teachers like others... I don't know if a homosexual teacher, 20 years ago, could be so easily open about his homosexuality». (secondary school parent)*

*« [concerning teachers' homosexuality openness some years ago in schools] A teacher could loose his job. He was sent away from the school, the parents had particular reactions, they confused homosexual with paedophilia, in this field there has been a very big improvement». (Asl expert)*

*«In this school there are few males, but inside this small group there is a relevant percentage of homosexual boys». (secondary school teacher)*

*«We are observing an increase of overtly manifested homosexual relationship in the school, which is a very feminine school». (high school teacher)*

*«Today we actually talk about homosexuality, while in the past it was a taboo. During a meeting a girl said: "over the years, we got used to hear about divorced parents, and now similarly also having an homosexual friend should be normal to our eyes, it shouldn't affect our judgement about people». (Arcigay member)*

It is confirmed that homophobia isn't considered an emergency, as it could be several years ago. In general it's not a priority to be addressed by the school or the teachers, except in case of critical episodes. Greater emergencies, mentioned by teachers, are: the commodification of the body; generalized and widespread aggressiveness (all the members of the secondary school focus group agreed about this); in some cases racism.

*«Do children need to talk about homophobia? About sexuality? It's neither a priority nor a strong reality. I wish it did not happen in primary school». (primary school parent)*



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*«The emergency is represented by the widespread aggressiveness, in behaviours, in physical manifestations. The youngsters are always pushing each other, but now they do it with more brutality». (secondary school teacher)*

*«Earlier, the teacher started saying that there is more aggressiveness; when we talk about sexual violence we underline the fact that, first of all, it is violence. Also this aggressiveness towards homosexual people is violence first, is aggressiveness towards the person, triggered by a frivolous reason». (Asl expert)*

*«But I have to confirm that we have to look to ten different emergencies daily. In my opinion other forms of bullying or problems that we have to face are more strong and discriminating. Sometimes I think I need to be a teacher and that's it, I have just to transmit knowledge». ( high school teacher)*

*«I live other emergencies with greater urgency. I'm following, for example, a little project about the body image, the commodification of the body, also for males. The emergency is big. We do not talk about this enough». (high school teacher)*

*«We agree on the fact that it is not an emergency. Probably Arcigay follows the single case, has a different prospective. You come into contact with people who ask for help». (high school teacher)*

*«If I have to put a priority scale in this school I would put the acceptance of disability. I have a lot of disable pupils and they tend to be emarginated. There isn't violence. [...] Considered the difficulty of Arcigay to be heard, it would be nice if you join the Asl and do affectivity education projects together, each with your competence.». (high school teacher)*

The Asl experts, also supported by others, emphasize several times the necessity to introduce in primary school the topic of sexuality and homosexuality. This necessity emerged from the big gaps on knowledge about sexuality, noticed by one secondary school teacher and explained by the Asl expert with a reduced presence of operators on the territory and with a poor dialogue inside the families.

*«I do not agree on the fact that it is not an emergency. Certainly, the situation is better than years ago, we talk about it more frequently, there are movies. Earlier, movies about homosexuality were just nice teasing. Among the girls it is very easy to talk about*



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*friendship, and kissing on the street is more widespread. But in male schools, like vocational training schools, there is still homophobia, although I don't hear anyone say: if I meet one of them, I ride over him with my car" ». (Asl expert)*

*«Maybe they don't consider it as a priority not because they don't feel it, sometimes they try not to see it, it's a difficult topic to face, also for us, operators, because often the operators who intervene think that they don't have enough tools to face this issue, so they give up... I, I'm a sexual consultant and I should have enough tools, I try to talk but, beforehand, I test the ground. I don't know if the topic is avoided because it's difficult. [...] concerning sexual education, in my opinion, we have to distinguish: homosexuality in primary school is not so felt, also because there isn't the awareness of sexual orientation or it's very vague, it isn't recognized by the child yet, it's much stronger in secondary school. On one side there is sexual education as an idea to know how we are, how children are born, the interest to the other gender, on the other side there is homosexuality and homophobia.. in the secondary schools this is a topic, because the sexual orientation starts to be a little clear, there is greater awareness about offenses, "you are fag" etc. appears». (Asl expert)*

*«I think that it should be explained. If we have to teach to a child to move in autonomy, so since he is two years old we explain him the traffic light: is red or green! Prevention. The More they are young, the more we have to talk about it. For example, at the nursery we can talk about the fact of peeing standing or sitting. It's not necessary to pee standing if you are male. We have to explain there are things that are good and not good, that you have to pay attention to cars, and also that at five years old there are adults who don't respect you, who touch you, like the uncle who smells of cigar and you don't like it. You have to say that you don't like it. Only in this way a child will be able to say to adults that he has suffered from another adult. In the same way there are people who, if you love someone of the same gender, they say to you that it's wrong. In a secondary school when we said: "Let's talk about homosexuality", they responded: "no, wait". We could talk about blacks and Jews. Every diversity, but not that one. It's fear». (Asl expert)*

*«During primary school the children will be attracted by sex, their own and others. And if they are attracted by the same gender and the issue was not dealt with, these will be suffering boys. It's true that in a class the immigrants are ten and the homosexual one, but it's an emergency also if there is even just one. We have to face the bad side also, that we see only in Italy, because we have some problems. It should not be the bad*



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*side. The homophobia prevention was born from the lack of sexual education. And so it's not necessary to have a classic family». (primary school homosexual parent)*

*«About contraception they don't know anything, about sexually-transmitted diseases and contraception they make confusion... they don't know anything, anything, anything.» (primary school teacher)*

*«For years, we Asl, when we were a lot, we made meetings for every third class of secondary school, they had 6 hours of training from us and also meetings with parents. Now we don't do this and we delegate everything to teachers. In the past they knew more because more was taught. Knowledge has to come from a source. » (Asl expert)*

In the focus group of primary school also the topic of transexuality is touched, which is considered more delicate than homosexuality.

*«We talked about it at home, we talk a lot at home, so... again in the school attended by one of my sons, there was a professor, male, who one day turned up female. So there was this occurrence ... a very beloved professor, the best language teacher in school. [...] so it was a topic of discussion, one person can be born in a body and feel of another gender». (secondary school parent)*

*«But we divide it a lot, one thing is homosexuality, another thing is transexuality and another again is transvestism... they are three completely different areas, so if the issue is homosexuality, there we go. If it is transexuality.. the preamble that I do is that there should be respect, because behind this there are always painful stories. Transexuality is a difficult thing to accept, it conducts me to be in tune with my body and what I feel, maybe with operations, with a big financial commitment, but always in pain». (Asl expert)*

A topic touched in the secondary school focus group was about the rights and the family, little dealt with in the other two focus groups. Parents raise the matter of the State's responsibility, who doesn't protect homosexual families and public culture that encourages some prejudices and behaviors.

The topic of rights is, for someone, "far away", abstract for children, and it becomes relevant in high school. It's however delicate in some respect, especially thinking about wedding and adoption for homosexual couples, which are not contemplated in Italy in





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the political debate. At the same time among some participants there is one difficulty in participating to Gay Pride events.

*«Who has to take responsibility about homophobia education, about homophobia condemnation? For me there are different levels of responsibility... everyone, in his own job, has his/her own competence and responsibility in that context: the teacher at school, the parent at home... for me it's important not to forget the civil responsibility, the need for a regulatory framework which protects homosexuals and a general cultural context that condemns this kind of behavior». (secondary school parent)*

*«When we talk about rights, we can only reach a particular point. [...] it's true, there are rights linked with job, offices and so on. There is a right which I am careful not to touch, because I lose parents' audience, it is the right for adoption. I'm very careful not to touch this topic, because we enter the matter of adoption, on which people are very ignorant». (Asl expert)*

*«Happiness and stability of the family don't depend on wedding, but it's true that the homosexual family is not a family with an easy life. It's part of the regulatory framework which, in my opinion, has to be discussed, because our society is based on it, on the fact that we have a law that governs all our forms of organization, including the family. Then, dad, mum living together with children have it easier...» (secondary school parent)*

*«Homosexuals, are useful to society as any heterosexual, I cannot understand why they have to remark their homosexuality while heterosexual don't. [...] think about the Gay Pride, is never easily acceptable for society. I saw a gay pride in New York: crazy; in London: crazy; in Rome: crazy; they are excessive...». (Asl expert)*

Teachers say that they didn't witness homophobic episodes, but they agree that pupils use homophobic insults. The difference between school levels is the awareness about the meaning of a specific term. In secondary and high school the insult is an offence aimed to hit the fragility/diversity of other peers, while in primary school the insult, according to the teachers, is something that the child repeats because he/she heard it from others, and he/she doesn't know its meaning. Concerning the fact of intervening on the insult hitting presumed homosexuality there is no agreement: someone considers that the opportunity to explain the meaning of a word and to challenge the insult should be always taken, someone else (teachers especially) give less weight to the issue.



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«The insult is divided into two categories. Asshole or idiot. You aren't directing it to someone. Then there are mongoloid and fag. The issue is: if a child says to another: "fat", the teacher or parent feels obliged to intervene, in front of "fag", the attitude is: "it's a insult like others, he [the child] doesn't know the meaning». (primary school parent)

«In the insult "fag" there is a maximum possible abstraction, until secondary school, when they begin to confront one another physically. This abstraction is not comparable with "fat" or "nigger". You are attacking someone for a physically visible characteristic. So the child is more conscious about the attack. "Fag" is more abstract, independently from the family culture». (primary school parent)

«"Nigger" is judged wrong, the teacher corrects it. He gives some guidelines. With "fag" the lack of intervention depends on the fact that teachers feel inadequate to talk about the issue. They don't know how to do it. They are afraid of the consequences. It's a topic untreated and minimized». (Arcigay member)

«My personal experience: it was '86, I was teased at primary. Certainly the boys don't know what those insults meant, but they used these and not others, they didn't say to me: "swot". They plucked a difference: a more high voice or female movements. The insult is a real violence. A child can be affected by it». (Arcigay member)

«In my opinion they use the words without knowing the meaning... because they say "bitch" to each other cheerfully, so to say "bitch", "fag"... if I stop them and I start to talk about it, if I have the opportunity of course... if in that moment I have to pay attention to other things I postpone, but I can find the opportunity and I make them reason on the word». (secondary school teacher)

«I was fat and the others said me: "fat". I was hurt, but it's frequent inside a group. There is a leader and often it is not positive. These are cases when the teacher is important, sometimes one gaze is enough». (high school teacher)

«If we talk about abuse, 4 episodes on 10 concern a person wounded with homosexuality as a humiliation, whether the person is homosexual or not, it's enough if he has a different male or female attitude. We adults sometimes don't realize how it can hurt». (ASL expert)



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*«It's clear that the insult is a part of a more general structure of disrespect, using homophobia. Why a choice has to be the cause of an insult? It is considered a way to insult. Who uses it has no desire to define. There is the culture that gives the possibility to use it as humiliation». (Asl expert)*

*«It depends on whether you hit on that topic [homosexuality] especially, insistently. If today you say to me: "fag" and tomorrow: "fat", ok. But often who uses it doesn't realize». (Arcigay member)*

During the secondary school focus group the fact that boys appear to be interested in talking about sexuality was discussed.

*«Beyond information about contraception that have to be accurate, students really want to chat, they need to talk, more than to know. [...] we don't give a lot of answers, interest drops very easily, they want to talk». (secondary school teacher)*

*«Boys want to talk, and then they are able to do a selection of the information on their own... they ask absurd questions, there are teachers who are embarrassed by boys' questions, but it's natural that they ask about it, because finally they have someone whose opinion doesn't matter, they care about teacher's opinion, also about mum and dad's opinion, so they catch the occasion to talk with us.. » (Asl expert)*

### **2.7.2 Education and sexuality**

One of the topics of the focus groups was the way to address homophobia and homosexual issues and more generally the subjects related to sexuality and who should do it, among the different educational figures (school, family or external). Everyone agrees that in every school level an educational support for teachers who don't have familiarity with this issue is necessary, but Arcigay raises the problem that in fact schools reject their proposals to talk about the issue in schools. For a teacher in secondary school it is useful to talk about sexuality, homosexuality and homophobia, but within larger framework. An Asl expert reminds us that regarding these topics, peer education is very useful in high school.

*«With children's education it's important that there are experts in the school training teachers. It should be included in the official training». (primary school parent)*



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« [the external intervention] should be both for the teachers and for families». (primary school teacher)

« Only Arcigay takes responsibility over the topic. Not even Asl deals with it as they should. We are trained about abuse, but not about LGBT issues». (Asl expert)

«Actually only Arcigay deals with it. Some Asl experts are called to deal with sexually transmitted diseases». (Arcigay member)

«Young teachers have more difficulty in talking with boys about sex, when they have to face questions like: how can I understand if I am homosexual? » (secondary school teacher)

«There should be a general approach... it's like peace education, if you don't see that they say to each other "assholes" and you don't do anything, it is useless... than in a context where there is this approach, it could be interesting». (secondary school teacher)

«If it isn't contextualized what does remain? » (Asl expert in middle school)

«We sometimes make spot interventions in high school, and it's good because we come back every year in the same school, but we would prefer to do the full project, a laboratory to educate to diversity with 6 meetings». (Arcigay member)

«It's important that the experts' intervention is not isolated, that it doesn't fall like a rain, but it's integrated with the rest. It's a sort of inspiration to talk about it also at home! We organize meetings with experts and parents». (high school teacher)

«I would add that we talk about it thanks to the initiative of single teachers, who have particular sensibility and attentions. Schools in general do not take responsibility, it's less common. The question is not only project, but the thought that some areas are problematic and we have to invest. We have to educate, not only to teach». (high school teacher)

«I don't know why schools don't call us. We ask to talk with the health referent, e-mails without answers. We are called by the pupils. It's hard. Our meetings are always done



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*by volunteers and often self-managed. But in this way it is difficult to intercept those who need it, the homophobes. The schools react only a little! We offer our collaboration for free, but they ignore us. We promote! Because there is a lot of fear on the side of parents, only to pronounce the word "homosexuality"». (Arcigay member)*

Asl has socio-affective and sexual educational projects for teachers in secondary school and peer education in high school, without any specific accent on homosexuality. It is mentioned that the higher percentage of heterosexuals doesn't make homosexuality less natural.

*«I work in 12 secondary schools and we train teachers to do socio-affective and sexual education. Some schools decide to do it immediately, during the first and second year, until the third, others are involved in third year and then they bring pupils to our counseling service. It's a meeting focused on sexual aspects, because teachers are very good on socio-affective aspects and they have much more time. We talk about prevention, sex and contraception, about the meaning of gynecological and andrological exams. Also parents are in crisis to pass some messages in primary school to boys, who are entering puberty and they are very happy to delegate. In courses for parents we try to raise the awareness of having the words and ability to talk. They shouldn't do lectures, but they have to be available to talk with children. Talking about it in secondary school means to have confidence and an open dialogue for the future. In primary school children are in love with parents and if we close the topic about sexuality there, we cannot open it during secondary and high school, if we close it there, we close it forever». (Asl expert)*

*«We propose it to everybody, but peer education doesn't work in secondary school, it works in high school. [...] we select boys in their third year and we begin to train them about topics like sexuality, homosexuality, sexually transmitted diseases, drugs and bullying. [...] we go in the third classes because they are ready, in the fourth class they attend another training week about sexuality and drugs and then they do meetings in second year classes about these topics and it works, but in the fourth class they are already boys who talk with second classes' boys or boys in the third class who talk with first classes' boys, they must have the ability to manage the class, and also the ability to acquire and transfer information... in secondary school we train teachers and we meet boys at the end». (Asl expert)*



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There is often a rebound of responsibility between family and school, while an integrated work of the two agencies would be useful. This void carries with it an understanding problem on the side of pupils who, if interested in sexuality, refer to misleading tools, such as pornography. Teachers complain because the family do not talk enough about sexuality, the respect for diversity, etc.

*«Sexuality should enter more the school, starting from the primary school, but without a specific accent on homosexuality. School and family rebound the responsibility. And at the end no one takes care». (primary school parent)*

*«I wish that where the family doesn't arrive, the school arrives». (primary school parent)*

*«Parents were more involved before, students more informed». (secondary school teacher)*

*«Concerning ignorance, they lose a lot of time watching absurd things on the internet which are not scientific... parents are more frequently not at home and they (children) have access to infinite pornographic sites, they know that a lot of information of those sources is not scientific, but meanwhile they develop ideas, they make wrong selections». (Asl expert)*

*«The big problem [related to coming out] is represented by parents. When you realize, do you still want me as I am? » (Asl expert)*

*«The base should be the family, education starts from there. If family did its duty, we would lose the job. It's the first formative agency. If the family talked about sexuality and homosexuality, taught respect, the problem wouldn't occur. It's clear that this doesn't happen». (high school teacher)*

*«I would like to speak in favour of schools,, to which in the last 15 years everything is delegated! We are used as surrogate of the family, which doesn't respond». (high school teacher)*

In the Italian context a problematic issue is also the reluctance of some parents (mostly catholic, but not only) to deal with sexuality at school, in particular at primary level. Furthermore in schools where the courses are taught from catholic counseling services, negative messages about homosexuality are passed.



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*«It's a problem, of culture, not of knowledge and in my experience with this course [of prevention of abuses] a lot of families think that affectivity and sexual education have to be faced inside the family and not in school. the desire to keep this part of education within the house walls, means to open the way to the message that homosexuality is diversity. Unless the boy has direct experience inside the family or family's friends or relatives, homosexuality is alien, it is something to fear. [...] I can't see in the catholic world signs of openness towards homosexuality affectivity. (secondary school parent)*

*It's important to answer to questions which come out from children, to things that happen. Depends on the context. We are in a district where parents are very catholic...». (primary school teacher)*

*«We had a meeting with parents before, where the doctor explained how she would conduct the lesson [about sexuality]. Some parents, practicing catholic, were agitated. They didn't want to talk about these things, because in their opinion children weren't ready. But children were much further then we could expect. (primary school parent)*

*«I would treat the issue of homosexuality when you begin to talk about sexuality, in secondary school. What social contexts do these guys attend outside school? Football for males and dance for females. I have a 9 years old nephew who likes dancing, and he is ashamed. The majority goes to the oratory. Do they deal with sexuality? I don't think so. The school should be secular. (Arcigay member)*

### **2.7.3 Didactic tools**

School books don't propose explicit references to sexuality, homosexuality and related topics, but teachers could integrate. But this proposal is welcomed with a certain reluctance by teachers, because they don't consider these issues so well connected to the program. A particular case is indicated from a secondary school teacher, in whose school books are not used, but every teacher creates *ad hoc* handouts. In the same focus group the participants appear to agree in saying that Oscar Wilde is an homosexual author loved by boys, so he is very useful as a cultural support to face topics linked to homophobia and homosexuality.



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*«When I was in primary school there was the need to anticipate the teaching of sexuality. Some teachers who treated the topic were warned». (Arcigay member)*

*«As far as the equipment is concerned, I would like to have something different from what we have. In my opinion it's correct to talk of sexuality. If we want to face it in different ways, we should also talk about homosexuality. If the question arises, the teacher has to know how to handle it. The ideal is both, an expert training the teacher about sexuality and the teachers having materials to use directly». (primary school teacher)*

*«We haven't had books for 2 or 3 years, we built books by ourselves, so we can choose. But in some fields we have stepped back in my opinion... in science for example, evolution isn't treated in every science book and... our former minister suggested not to talk about it». (secondary school teacher)*

*«I noted that [books] are less boring, they use much more images, diagrams, different logical approaches... at stereotype level, frankly, I never noticed.. » (secondary school parent)*

*«Oscar Wilde is loved by boys and all know that he was homosexual, and they loved and all read "The picture of Dorian Gray", in my opinion it's the book that boys read most.. ». (Asl expert)*

*«For example: I teach sciences and the classic question regards if the homosexual has a dysfunction. I caught the occasion to deepen endocrine aspect». (high school teacher)*

*«I teach Spanish and the Spanish culture changed a lot in the past 20 years. Today we talk about the Spanish family presenting every possibility, but it's not the same for Italian books». (high school teacher)*

*«Examples of openly homosexual writers? Till some years ago I didn't use to make this kind of analysis, because this aspect wasn't considered relevant for their production. We talk about it in Greek literature, Sappho... we can talk about it, but I'm interested in to text analysis. If this kind of topic emerges, we address it. In high school leaving examinations there was a Montale piece dedicated to a man. There are ministerial*





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*programs that indicate the figures that we have to deal with. But we do not want to remark a membership to this category». (high school teacher)*

*«How can you judge if you don't know? When I was a kid, someone said to another child not to play with me, otherwise he could become a fag. That is personal culture, but there should be a minimum information... [homosexuality] is not a disease, while before it was considered so. It's important! At least this should be taught. It's the information that we give. Students have wrong information, unless they have an homosexual friend. I count a lot on information» (Arcigay member)*

Finding it difficult to approach sexuality, and homosexuality in particular, teachers are interested in videos which help them to deal with the issues, but with caution in primary school. Especially when there are little children, parents show a major resistance, while going up to higher school levels, parents have a more marginal role. Sexuality is considered a private choice and a topic difficult to be dealt with in a public context, such as the school. During the focus groups, this triggered a debate, because the common argument about sexuality as a choice, private choice, overshadows the naturalness of homosexuality.

*«Sexual identity is private affair. But on the other side there is the impulse to level the matter, in order not to feel it as normal. It's less usual in percentage, but it's natural and it is lived as such. In my opinion we aren't the generation which will set it free. I, as art teacher, often make them transform from male into female and from female into male. There is a big stress, they make fun of each other. It was as if the other sex was ridiculous. More when males become females». (primary school parent)*

*«Sexuality isn't a private affair. It's public. The way you dress is public!» (Asl expert)*

*«Sexual identity is the identity. It's manifested. It's the sexual act that is private» (primary school teacher)*

Teachers find it useful to talk about homosexuality within a wider framework.

*«I believe that if only the teacher told a fairy tale with two women who fall in love, it would help my daughter. But this tales aren't told at school». (primary school homosexual parent)*



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*«I observed that the publishers aren't brave, also if it's a ministerial choice, but in my son's book the subject from the human sphere skipped to the world of the animals. It's already an improvement, compared to the stereotyped family». (primary school parent)*

*«Would this be a specific product? It depends on the quality». (high school teacher)*

*«Concerning the tools. Video is a very good medium». (Asl expert)*

*«I don't believe in projects on specific topics, a project about homophobia packed and done hasn't value if there isn't a daily work by the teacher. Also because if there isn't affectivity education, if the teachers haven't good relations with students, they cannot face a sexual education project». (secondary school teacher)*

At the end of the secondary school focus group, we have been reported examples of good practices: a production of a magazine for boys and a comic sketch about condoms by a famous Italian showman.

## General conclusions from the field work

- Homophobia is not perceived as a real emergency, neither as something particularly visible or numerically significant. For this reason, in a lot of schools it is not a topic dealt with during the lessons. Teachers have to follow the national curriculum and deal with other priorities.
- Despite the fact that it does not seem to be a taboo for students, teachers and parents, as opposed to some years ago, LGBT issues are absent from the national curriculum.
- In general all topics linked to sex, the body and sexual identity are externalised to other organisations, such as the local health authority.
- A lot of teachers believe that it's possible to express a personal opinion about certain values, but only if these are clearly stated in the Italian Constitution or part of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.
- One of the main problems which lead to gaps in sex education, concerns the rebound of responsibility between the family and the school. If sexuality is a public or private affair is matter for discussion. Apparently, according to some of



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our interviewees, many people consider sexual orientation a private matter and believe that it should be treated only within the family.

- Usually during the lessons, teachers tend to stick to the program, because it's difficult to introduce changes and it implies greater responsibility. Being that it is not usual, the risk is that homophobic feelings and attitudes come out towards teachers who propose innovative projects about these topics.
- If there is the willingness of the schools to introduce sex education and LGBT issues, all agree that a support is necessary, not only for the students, but also for teachers, who have difficulties in treating these issues. It also emerged that despite the fact that there are projects, they are often not welcomed by schools, like for example the previously described Arcigay workshops (offered free of charge).
- In some particular cases, as for example in schools with a lot of immigrants, teachers think that it would be more difficult to face the topic because in some "cultures" homophobia is even more rooted.
- A homophobic language is noticed by teachers since a very young age (primary school). Some little children often use words that they don't necessarily know the meaning, perceiving only that it's used as an offense (including fag and gay). Older children, who know the meaning, use them "as any offense, like stupid", teachers say.
- Homophobic bullying through language is often unchallenged, whereas in some cases teachers intervene, trying to make students reason about the meaning of the words they are using.
- Interviewees state that are adults the first to have stereotypical points of view.
- The training to teachers regarding sex education used to be provided by public local health authorities, both with meetings between experts and students, direct training to teachers and peer to peer education.
- In general teachers feel that LGBT issues and homophobia can only be taught if inserted into a wider thematic framework.
- Homosexuality is still an "unresolved" issue, both at personal and social level, as many teachers admitted. In the schools there is still a heteronormative approach and homosexuality is seen as something different and unusual, difficult to face.



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