

Using family as a frame in social justice activism: A guide for activists and funders in Europe

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On portraying “rainbow families” in education

The guide “**Using family as a frame in social justice activism**” mentions using family in strategic communication and messaging. In the field of education this must be done very carefully – especially when it comes to educational resources.

Many LGBT organizations develop education resources picturing “rainbow families” and a diversity of genders and sexual orientations. Translating our own identity, experiences and needs into educational resources often seems a logical strategy to help teach children, in an age-appropriate way, about diversity.

Yet we caution against rushing into this type of work, which may bring satisfaction to our movement but have limited potential for dissemination and impact.

Some of these resources address children in primary schools. They tend to represent rainbow families, for example through posters of rainbow families or a drawing of a same-sex couple to be coloured by children. More elaborate versions can include printed booklets, or video interviews of rainbow family.

These materials are mostly centred on their authors: they argue promote that rainbow families are nice, good or equal families to counter negative stereotypes. Yet they may have unintended effects: some valid critiques have argued that these resources mostly represent middle-class, white, happy gay and lesbian families. They often fail to represent rainbow families in their diversity, and omit bisexual, transgender, recomposed or more complex families.

Research also shows that symbolic representation or role modelling alone have limited or no impact on tolerance and behaviour.

Other resources encourage teachers to mention diversity, for example by mentioning rainbow and other types of families to illustrate diversity. They usually mention more varied families (single parents, adoptive parenting, extended families...), ethnicities and cultures. But importantly, they are centered on their *audience*: they take account of children’s perspectives and experiences, and build on their desire to explore diversity and ways to deal with persons and situations that may lie outside their initial comfort zone.

These resources can include situations, discussions and exercises about aspects of life that aren’t ideal or fictitious. They offer more realistic role models, and show how life can be challenging and how those challenges can be overcome.

Positively, these materials don't focus on LGBTI issues alone but diversity skills at large. They offer a better promise for educational impact, and better chances to be used in schools.

Both types of resources face trouble, however. First, they may not be disseminated very widely due to lack of commitment or interest. Second, they may not be implemented well in schools when they weren't developed in cooperation with education experts and teachers, who may be unprepared to use them.

We recommend that LGBTI organizations consider these points first before developing expensive new resources. Ideally, educational materials in support of diversity should be the conclusion of a needs analysis, not a first step. Education isn't about us and our desires, but about children and their needs.

