

New Family Configurations: Educational Challenges and “Good Practices”

*Karin Bagnato*¹

Abstract

The social, cultural, and economic transformation of contemporary society has led to the emergence of new family configurations posing significant challenges and questions to education professionals. The contribution analyzes the concept of “Good Practices” (GPs), clarifying their origin in the economic context and their subsequent adaptation to the educational sphere, highlighting their potential and critical aspects. The paper also emphasizes the importance of a dynamic and strategic approach to new family realities, considering the complexity and uncertainty of the current context. The aim is to provide methodological and operational tools to support education professionals in promoting family and social well-being, through empirically grounded, adaptable, and critically oriented pedagogical practices.

Keywords: family pluralism, unexpected parenthood, education professionals, Good Practices (GPs), educational complexity.

Abstract

La trasformazione sociale, culturale ed economica della società contemporanea ha determinato l'emergere di nuove configurazioni familiari che pongono molteplici sfide e questioni ai professionisti dell'educazione. Il contributo analizza il concetto di “Buone Pratiche” (BP), chiarendone l'origine nel contesto economico e il successivo adattamento in ambito educativo, mettendone in evidenza potenzialità e criticità. Il lavoro sottolinea l'importanza di un approccio dinamico e strategico con le nuove realtà familiari, che tenga conto della complessità e dell'incertezza del contesto attuale. L'obiettivo è fornire strumenti metodologici e operativi per sostenere i professionisti dell'educazione nel loro compito di promuovere il benessere familiare e sociale, attraverso pratiche fondate su evidenze empiriche, adattabili, e orientate da una visione pedagogica critica.

Parole chiave: pluralismo familiare, genitorialità inattesa, professionisti dell'educazione, Buone Pratiche (BP), complessità educativa.

¹ Associate Professor in General and Social Pedagogy at the Department of Cognitive, Psychological, Pedagogical Sciences and Cultural Studies at the University of Messina.

1. *New family configurations: A challenge for education professionals*

The social, cultural, and economic changes that have shaped our society have paved the way for multiple unprecedented forms of family life, gradually transforming the traditional family model². The concept of family has evolved to such an extent that its use no longer refers to a single-family structure. This is evident in the increasing use of expressions such as new families, so-called “archipelago of families”, new family realities, constellations of families, and new family configurations – terms that highlight differences in composition, bonds, organizational patterns, and more. All these family *forms* reflect the growing presence of family pluralism within our society.

New family configurations, such as cohabiting couples, single-parent families, reconstituted families, mixed-religion or mixed-culture families, families with internationally adopted children, families with one or more children born through Assisted Reproductive Technologies (ART), same-sex parent couples etc., represent the new realities that education professionals must engage with.

The changes that have affected the family undoubtedly raise new and urgent questions. Still, at the same time, they represent the concrete reality from which to begin to grasp their educational implications, avoiding both ideological simplifications and purely problematic interpretations. These transformations have certainly generated new challenges, but they have also contributed to overcoming reductive views of parenthood. From this perspective, new family configurations demonstrate that being a parent is a complex and culturally situated process that requires time, resources, and specific skills.

This awareness contrasts with still widespread representations – both in common sense and in certain legal or institutional contexts – that tend to equate parenthood with an innate disposition or a biological or normative automatism (Bertone, 2024; Bove, 2020). Some authors (Gjerde, 2004; Holloway, 2010; Milani, 2018; Sità, 2017; Weisner, 2002) emphasize that parenthood is a process involving multiple levels – individual, couple, and the interaction between individuals and

² For further information on the topic of family pedagogy see among others, with reference to the Italian context: Bellingreri (2014); Gigli (2017); Milani (2018); Pati (2014); Perillo (2019); Santerini (2024). For full details, please refer to the References section. In addition, hereafter, unless otherwise indicated, all footnotes are by the Author, Editor's Note.

the reference models of a specific cultural context. These levels ensure that being a parent is not only a *private* practice but also a public one, requiring engagement with institutions and services that should be prepared to accommodate diverse parental identities (Bertone, 2024; Bove, 2020; Finch, 2007; Gui, 2024; Sità *et al.*, 2024; Various Authors, 2009).

Today, the *public* dimension of new families poses significant challenges because they represent an element of the unforeseen and unexpected within a social imaginary and practical framework still oriented towards a dominant family model. Consequently, these families must navigate social prejudices – both from societal opinions and attitudes toward them and from perceptions regarding their child-rearing and educational practices.

It is a fluid and constantly evolving situation that requires education professionals to demonstrate openness, continuous learning, and critical thinking to work effectively within increasingly diverse and ever-changing family contexts. From this perspective, the identification of “Good Practices” (GPs) represents a useful – though not exhaustive – tool for navigating work with new family constellations, as it allows for the integration of empirical evidence, professional experience, and pedagogical reflection, while also valuing the complexity and diversity of individual situations.

2. “Good Practices”: A dynamic model in educational work

“Good Practices” (GPs) refer to methods, techniques, or approaches that have proven effective and useful in solving problems or achieving specific goals. They are based on experiences, knowledge, and empirical evidence accumulated over time and are considered valid and reasonable by experts and professionals in the field³. The primary goal is to define criteria shared by professionals in a specific field to identify and preserve the GPs that contribute to elevating the professional culture of that sector over time. GPs can therefore be considered effective, valid, flexible, socially contextualized, and easily shareable.

³ The definition of “GP” presented here is a synthesis based both on commonly shared knowledge in the fields of management, engineering, healthcare, organizational development, and education, and on effective approaches described and proposed by national and international institutions and organizations such as the World Health Organization, the European Commission, the National Institute for Documentation, Innovation and Educational Research, and the United Nations.

The term “Good Practices” was introduced in the early twentieth century in the economic and managerial fields to refer to techniques capable of ensuring the best results. Through a process of observation, systematization, and formalization, these techniques were transformed into a set of rules to follow to improve the efficiency of production processes. From this perspective, the key element was identifying what proved effective in optimizing production, rigorously and systematically replicating analyzed and meticulously broken-down processes to achieve identical *products* in different contexts (Drucker, 1954; Porter, 1985; Taylor, 1911).

The use of GPs has long since expanded into the educational field, demonstrating the usefulness of a construct originally developed in the economic-managerial sphere. What makes this concept particularly interesting is its ability to highlight the relationship between theory and practice, which lies at the core of pedagogical reflection. This relationship enables an original and specific generativity, distinct from other *practices* aimed at improving professional quality (Michellini, 2018).

In this context, despite the lack of a clear definition of GPs from both conceptual and operational standpoints, they are commonly understood as effective and replicable actions, validated by professional experience and applicable to specific situations.

In the educational field, however, considering GPs solely as techniques for identifying effective solutions might suggest that they do not need to be placed within a broader educational framework or be subject to pedagogical reflection. In this case, the link between GPs as techniques and pedagogy would be reduced to merely accepting what has proven effective in practice. However, pedagogy is a discipline that integrates contributions from other areas of knowledge and tools developed by other professionals, always using them critically and consciously (Baldacci, 2024; Cambi *et al.*, 2017; Frabboni, Pinto Minerva, 2001). In this context, the use of GPs raises the issue of how to critically assess a construct originating from economic culture and evaluate its potential application in educational practice.

Therefore, an additional level is needed – one that connects thought and practice, reflection and action, goals and means, within a discourse that is both utopian and critical, capable of guiding and orienting rather than merely acknowledging what has proven effective in non-formal educational contexts. However, this issue raises problems related to epistemology, ontology, and the relationship between professional practice and scientific research evidence (Biesta, 2010a).

From an epistemological perspective, it is legitimate to ask how knowledge can be acquired about what works, considering what experimental research has yielded in terms of data on specific phenomena. The culture of Evidence-Based Education (EBE) (Coe, 1999; Davies, 1999; Vivanet, 2014) assigns experimental research to identify scientifically valid evidence to guide educational practice toward what has been proven effective. In contrast, Good Practices, which do not fall within the culture of Evidence-Based Education (EBE) but are based on empirical evidence, professional experience, and expert consensus, do not aim to identify the optimal or sole solution but rather to identify one of the valid and effective options within a given context.

The ontological dimension raises the central issue of establishing a causal link between *actions* and *results*. This refers to the complexity of educational phenomena, which cannot be explained through a single-factor model (Mantovani, 1998; Mortari, Ghirotto, 2019; Visalberghi, 1989).

Finally, the relationship between professional practice and scientific research implies two complementary directions (top-down/bottom-up) in experimentation, definition, and dissemination of GPs. EBE culture adopts a top-down approach, in which experimental research collects data on what works, and these findings are then applied in practice (Miniello, 2012; Ranieri, 2007). On the contrary, the numerous experiences developed around the concept of GPs demonstrate the validity and usefulness of bottom-up approaches, in which professionals from a specific field develop and test effective solutions to address complex and unprecedented problems. Subsequently, thanks to their authority and direct experience in real-life contexts, these solutions are shared and adopted by other professionals in the field (Michelini, 2019). This is particularly relevant when education professionals find themselves in unprecedented situations or faced with new and unfamiliar family constellations.

Considering this, GPs can be regarded as the result of a process of selecting and validating effective and relevant solutions, carried out by experts in each field through ongoing experimentation and evaluation. To paraphrase what Maria Chiara Michelini (2018) writes, there are at least three distinctive features that make GPs particularly useful and effective when working with unexpected forms of parenthood, namely:

- *Generativity*: GPs represent solutions to new problems for which no predefined or previously validated answers exist. They reflect the cultural autonomy of education professionals who, through knowledge acquired in practice, can address the multiple difficulties and challen-

ges of today's reality, characterized by continuous change and complexity. In this context, distinctive skills, specific competencies, and ethical virtues unique to each professional emerge;

- *Dynamism*: it emerges and develops from practice, fully valuing its potential while maintaining a constant link to theoretical dimensions. This represents a continuous interplay between theory and practice within a framework of ongoing problematization. According to Dewey, practices are the true testing ground for the validity of theoretical hypotheses and scientific conclusions, which, in turn, serve as guides for action, exerting a liberating function (Dewey, 1929). For this reason, preserving the intrinsic dynamism of GPs is essential;
- *Complexity*: the need to integrate multiple aspects and challenges of complex and constantly evolving family realities requires maintaining a dynamic balance between theory and practice, between expert autonomy and research rigor, and between context-specific experiences and the formalization of solutions. In this sense, GPs reflect the plurality of ways in which the world is interpreted, and particularly in education, a pluralistic research approach will undoubtedly offer greater benefits than a monolithic one;
- *Exemplarity*: GPs define a way of conceiving ideality starting from concrete reality. Their validity expresses and materializes the constant tension toward this goal. The effectiveness, utility, and practicality of the solutions developed to address unprecedented problems cannot be separated from the solidity of their theoretical assumptions, the principles guiding them, and their appropriateness to educational objectives. Practices are truly good and useful when they demonstrate their effectiveness beyond functional and immediate aspects, as they are conceived and evaluated in the continuous interplay between values and practice, between goals and means. Exemplarity, therefore, arises from the fact that once GPs are systematized and recognized as applicable and replicable in different contexts, they can foster better outcomes.

The potential of GPs lies precisely in its usefulness in solving a problem that arises in a specific context, even before the scientific demonstration of the reasons and principles behind its effectiveness. Often, GPs serve as a precursor to what will later allow for a scientific explanation: in other words, what works serves as a guide for subsequent scientific research aimed at validating and explaining the value of what is not yet fully understood, according to parameters recognized by the scientific community (Biesta, 2010b; Calvani, 2007; Michelini, 2018).

GPs, therefore, represent a valuable opportunity, serving as strong indicators of unknown or problematic paths, as long as the underlying visionary drive remains alive. Conversely, halting this momentum would strip them of their driving force, limiting their potential.

The fact that certain Good Practices (GPs) prove effective in a specific context could mistakenly lead to considering them as established truths and as solutions to be automatically applied in other contexts, rather than as tools to inspire new paths of discovery (Cattaneo, n.d.; Fielding *et al.*, 2005). GPs should be understood as methods, techniques, or approaches aimed at fostering knowledge and improving modes of action.

From this perspective, no set of GPs can be considered definitive or flawless; rather, GPs should be seen as a flexible tool serving an ongoing process of research and reflection (Michelini, 2008). GPs gain value to support changes in the quality of experience and as provisional hypotheses that sustain the continuous exploration of reality.

For this reason, the concept itself is particularly fertile: action requires tools that, even if only temporary, help illuminate the way. Conversely, if GPs are treated as fixed knowledge, immediately transferable from one context to another, they risk becoming obstacles to the development of quality. In this sense, the human need for certainty may weaken the dynamic drive of the learning journey that originates in practice itself.

3. *How to build “Good Practices” in working with new family constellations*

To make the most of the potential of Good Practices, especially when working with new family realities, they must be grounded in theoretical frameworks capable of capturing the complexity of family systems and the dynamics that characterize them. From this perspective, education professionals should consider families not only as isolated entities but also as interconnected systems, where reciprocal relationships and environmental influences play a crucial role in the development process and in shaping life projects.

Therefore, education professionals must adopt an ecosystemic view of family reality, considering the interconnections between individuals and their environment within a model of circular causality and emerging complexity (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Rodrigo *et al.*, 2008). This approach would allow for overcoming a reductionist view of problems and understanding the relational dynamics that influence family well-being.

Additionally, education professionals must adopt a constructivist perspective on human reality, recognizing the plurality of social constructions within the communities in which families operate (Vygotskij, 1978). These constructions represent the context in which family models acquire meaning. Understanding reality as a social construction implies that professional knowledge cannot be rigid or purely specialized; rather, it must be flexible, contextualized, and the result of integrating different theories and perspectives (Vega, 1997). Such knowledge, while rooted in specific contexts, maintains its validity when transferred and adapted to different situations (Fook, Ryan, Hawkins, 2000).

Finally, education professionals should view change as a discontinuous and nonlinear process – one that is not merely gradual, progressive, or cumulative (Nosari, 2017). The goal of working with families is not solely to enact change but also to raise awareness of the possibility of change. In other words, change itself should be regarded as an essential objective, as a family may ultimately choose to remain in its current situation but with a better understanding of itself, greater self-esteem, and more adequate beliefs about its capabilities and possibilities (Gigli, 2017; Simeone, 2002). The primary aim, therefore, is to enhance the freedom and responsibility of families, expanding their choices and promoting the achievement of multiple objectives.

From the above, it becomes clear that the work of education professionals engaging with new family structures is characterized by complexity, uncertainty, and dynamism. It constitutes a strategic and continuously evolving activity in which attention must be paid to multiple variables of action: carefully analyzing the reference context, planning adequately and rigorously, setting the right priorities, selecting the most appropriate strategy to promote change, effectively utilizing available resources (empowerment), providing adequate support, among other factors (Luque, 2005; Monereo, 2002; Morgan, 2011; Solé, 2005). This is a profession that requires making decisions in uncertainty and operating within a constantly evolving landscape of family plurality.

Rodrigo *et al.* (2013) argue that the construction of GPs for unexpected parenthood unfolds along a continuum, gradually transitioning from implicit assumptions to GPs. Specifically, in the initial phase, professionals operate based on the practical knowledge they have acquired, personal experiences, and direct observation of other experts (Level 1 – *Individualized professional practice*). Subsequently, they share their practices with others to create a common foundation (Level 2 – *Consensual professional practice*) and, over time, establish sufficient conditions

to reach consensus among professionals in the same field and foster exchange with other services (Level 3 – *Evidence-Based professional practice*). At this stage, one can speak of Good Practices.

In educational work with new family realities, constructing GPs based on sound theoretical assumptions and optimal epistemological contexts allows education professionals to work with greater critical awareness and to avoid the risk of standardization, thus fostering a more inclusive and contextualized approach.

In conclusion, in the educational field, GPs represent a valid construct when integrated within a scientific and pedagogical framework. Therefore, its use in educational work with new families, although still emerging, can provide added value by effectively bridging the gap between theory and practice (Michelini, 2018; Rodrigo *et al.*, 2013). Pedagogical discourse, under its scientific status, can offer an epistemological and heuristic foundation to the GPs construct in a critical, active, and proactive manner. This would allow for a more effective response to the diverse needs of the so-called “archipelago of families” and enable education professionals to experiment with new modes of action in the field, subject to revision and adaptation.

From this perspective, GPs become a viable path to be pursued with awareness and rigor, supporting those engaged in the search for new solutions and the continuous improvement of educational practices.

References

- Baldacci M. (2024): *Trattato di pedagogia generale*. Rome: Carocci.
- Bellingreri A. (2014): *La famiglia come esistenziale*. Brescia: Scholè.
- Bertone C. (2024): *Il familiare è politico. Attrezzi di ricerca per uno sguardo posizionato*. Milan: Meltemi.
- Biesta G. (2010a): *Good Education in an Age of Measurement: Ethics, Politics, Democracy*. Boulder: Paradigm Publishers.
- Biesta G. (2010b): What Works Still Won't Work: From Evidence-Based Education to Value-Based Education. *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, n. 29(5), pp. 491-503.
- Bove C. (2020): *Genitorialità, contesti sociali e istituzioni*. Florence: Firenze University Press.
- Bronfenbrenner U. (1979): *The Ecology of Human Development*. Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press.
- Calvani A. (2007): Evidence-Based Education: ma “funziona” il “che cosa funziona?”. *Je-LKS Journal of E-Learning and Knowledge Management*, n. 3, pp. 139-146.

- Cambi F., Giosi M., Mariani A., *et al.* (2017): *Pedagogia generale. Identità, percorsi, funzione*. Rome: Carocci.
- Cattaneo A. (n.d.): *I fattori che influiscono sul trasferimento delle buone pratiche. Risultati di un'indagine sulla realtà scolastica inglese* (www.indire.it/lucabas/lookmyweb_2_file/Articolo_cattaneo.pdf, last access: 16.07.2025).
- Coe R. (1999): *A Manifesto for Evidence-Based Education* (www.cem.org/evidence-based-education/manifesto-for-evidence-based-education, last access: 16.07.2025).
- Davies P. (1999): What is Evidence-Based Education? *British Journal of Educational Studies*, n. 47(2), pp. 108-121.
- Dewey J. (1929): *The Sources of a Science of Education*. New York: Liveright Publishing.
- Drucker P.F. (1954): *The Practice of Management*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Fielding M., Bragg S., Craig J., *et al.* (2005): *Factors Influencing the Transfer of Good Practice*. Falmer: University of Sussex & Demos.
- Finch J. (2007): Displaying Families. *Sociology*, n. 41(1), pp. 65-81.
- Fook J., Ryan M., Hawkins L. (2000): *Professional Expertise: Practice, Theory and Education for Working in Uncertainty*. London: Whiting & Birch.
- Frabboni F., Pinto Minerva P. (2001): *Manuale di pedagogia generale*. Bari-Rome: Laterza.
- Gigli A. (2017): *Famiglie evolute. Capire e sostenere le funzioni educative delle famiglie plurali*. Parma: Junior-Spaggiari.
- Gjerde P. (2004): Culture, Power, and Experience: Toward A Person-Centered Cultural Psychology, *Human Development*, n. 47, pp. 138-157.
- Gui L. (ed.) (2024): *Fare i genitori senza certezze. Genitorialità e servizio sociale*. Milan: Franco Angeli.
- Holloway S. (2010): *Women and Family in Contemporary Japan*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Luque A. (2005): Imprescindibles, o desconectados? Sentimiento de competencia y necesidades de formación de los orientadores en los Departamentos de Orientación. In C. Monereo, J.I. Pozo (eds.): *La práctica del asesoramiento educativo a examen*. Barcelona: Graó, pp. 221-240.
- Mantovani S. (ed.) (1998): *La ricerca sul campo in educazione. I metodi qualitativi*. Milan: Bruno Mondadori.
- Michelini M.C. (2008): *Riflessività e pratiche educative*. Naples: Tecnodid.
- Michelini M.C. (2018): *Per una pedagogia critica delle buone prassi*. Milan: Franco Angeli.
- Michelini M.C. (2019): Buone prassi in educazione. *Pedagogia più Didattica*, n. 5(1). (<https://rivistedigitali.erickson.it/pedagogia-piu-didattica/archivio/vol-5-n-1/buone-prassi-in-educazione/>, last access: 16.07.2025).
- Milani P. (2018): *Educazione e famiglie. Ricerche e nuove pratiche per la genitorialità*. Rome: Carocci.
- Miniello R. (2012): Ricerca evidence-based e pratiche formative. Politiche e

- prassi. *Formazione & Insegnamento*, n. 10(1), pp. 231-248.
- Monereo C. (2002): *Modelos de orientación e intervención psicopedagógica*. Barcelona: UOC.
- Morgan D.H. (2011): *Re-thinking Family Practices*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Mortari L., Ghirotto L. (2019): *Metodi per la ricerca educativa*. Rome: Carocci.
- Nosari S. (2017): *Pedagogia del cambiamento. Punto di vista, traduzione, successione*. Turin: UTET.
- Pati L. (2014): *Pedagogia della famiglia*. Brescia: Scholè.
- Perillo P. (2019): *Pedagogia per le famiglie. La consulenza educativa alla genitorialità in trasformazione*. Milan: Franco Angeli.
- Porter M.E. (1985): *Competitive Advantage: Creating and Sustaining Superior Performance*. New York: Free Press.
- Ranieri M. (2007): Evidence Based Education: un dibattito in corso. *Journal of e-Learning and Knowledge Society*, n. 3(3), pp. 147-152.
- Rodrigo M.J., Chaves M.L.M., Quintana J.C. (2013): *Buenas prácticas profesionales para el apoyo a la parentalidad positiva*. Madrid: FEMP.
- Rodrigo M.J., Chaves M.L.M., Quintana J.C., et al. (2008): *Preservación familiar: un enfoque positivo para la intervención con familias*. Madrid: Pirámide.
- Santerini M. (2024): *Adottare e accogliere. Una sfida per la società e le famiglie*. Rome: Studium.
- Simeone D. (2002): *La consulenza educativa. Dimensione pedagogica della relazione d'aiuto*. Milan: Vita e Pensiero.
- Sità C. (2017): La genitorialità intensiva e le sue implicazioni per la relazione tra genitori e professionisti. *Consultori Familiari Oggi*, n. 25(2), pp. 45-55.
- Sità C., de Cordova F., Selmi G. (2024): I genitori LGBT+ tra impossibilità simbolica e lavoro di visibilità nella relazione con spazi pubblici e istituzioni educative. Quali sfide per la ricerca empirica. *Civitas Educationis*, n. 13(1), pp. 87-99.
- Solé I. (2005): Formación continua y competencia profesional de los asesores psicopedagógicos. In C. Monereo, J.I. Pozo (eds.): *La práctica del asesoramiento educativo a examen*. Barcelona: Graó, pp. 273-286.
- Taylor F.W. (1911): *The Principles of Scientific Management*. New York: Harper & Brothers.
- Various Authors (2009): *Essere genitori oggi. Contesti che cambiano, difficoltà di sempre*. Ferrara: GIFT Documentation Center.
- Vega S. (1997): Instrumentos de trabajo. In M. Coletti, J. Linares (eds.): *La intervención sistémica en los servicios sociales ante la familia multiproblemática: la experiencia de Ciutat Vella*. Barcelona: Paidós Terapia Familiar, pp. 167-200.
- Visalberghi A. (1989): Ricerca empirica e ricerca sperimentale in educazione. *Scuola e Città*, n. 5-6, pp. 209-214.

- Vivanet G. (2014): *Che cos'è l'Evidence Based Education?* Rome: Carocci.
- Vygotsky L.S. (1978): *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*, ed. by M. Cole, V. John-Steiner, S. Scribner, *et al.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Weisner T.S. (2002): Ecocultural Understanding of Children's Developmental Pathways. *Human Development*, 45, pp. 275-281.