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Family is someone to tuck you into bed: Teaching a unit on family diversity

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Opening Thoughts

As a teacher I'm always searching for ways to make students more tolerant of each other and more accepting of their own lives. Family seems to be a subject close to everybody's heart. We all love our family. That's why, I think, bullying children by making fun of their families seems to stir up so much emotion and to be particularly hurtful. Who, if you work in a school, hasn't heard a variant of:

“Richard^[1] said my mother is fat!” Leslie, barely audible, whispers in between heart wrenching sobs.

“Gaylord!” screams Darrell as he zooms around the corner looking back at his follower Adrian.

“Cara's a retard like her sister!” Lauren casually states to Kari and Susanne as they file in after recess.

Yes. Leslie's mom is obese, Adrian's dad is gay, Cara's sister is a student in a wheelchair, and Lauren is a new student at our school. I hear these casual, emotionally loaded insults. I talk to the particular students, have them apologize, and hope that they won't do this anymore in the future.

However, in my heart I know that apologies and hopes for something better are only band-aids and don't address the root of the problem. What are the roots of intolerance and hatred of difference in our society? Anger is a normal human feeling. Do we have to take it out on others? Do we have to express it by insulting people's families? Why do children do this? Why do adults? Do we feel so insecure about our families and ourselves? I wish I had answers. In an ideal world we could all accept our differences. Perhaps our schools have an important role to play in the process of gradually changing intolerance of differences.

My Philosophy

“We don't make fun of anybody's learning” is my only classroom rule. We do lots of cooperative learning activities and always start the day with class meetings where we sit in a circle of chairs on the carpet. These circle meetings seemed to provide an ideal environment in which to discuss families in more detail. I strongly believe classrooms are never neutral. Children pick up feelings from their teachers and other adults. So, if we were going to discuss this issue of families, I knew I couldn't hide behind the teacher's façade. I was forced to struggle with my own beliefs and feelings. It is my strong belief that knowing “thy neighbour as yourself” helps tolerance, acceptance, and, hopefully, can also curb bullying, and eventually racism. But I had to start by doing some soul searching.

Personal Background

We all come to teaching with a value system. For me it was a white, middle class European value system that originated in the homogeneous Switzerland of the 1950s. It was a system where a family consisted of a breadwinning dad, a stay-at-home mom, and children. I do vaguely remember adults around me talking about divorce, single parenthood, gays and so on. However, this was always done in a whisper. I just knew something was not quite above board about these subjects.

This belief system came with me to Canada in 1967. Here my belief system started to crack. I entered a common law relationship with a divorced man—facts that weren't mentioned any time we visited Switzerland! I wanted a child, but was not prepared to have it out of wedlock, so we got married. Now I was a stepmom to my husband's two sons from his first marriage. After nine months, our daughter was born and we became a blended family, at least during the summer when the boys came to spend time with us. During the next eighteen years both of us worked. I also went to school to study for a Bachelor of Music and eventually my teaching degree. In retrospect, I realize that my life was considerably different from my mom's. She stayed at home, used her seamstress skills to sew clothes for us and occasionally for neighbours and friends. My dad was the main breadwinner.

Despite the reality of more and more separated and divorced families, I did not struggle much with my belief system and the well-entrenched view that “the nuclear family is best.” After twenty-three years, my marriage came to an end. The struggle of finding a place in society became painful. I wasn't a family anymore. I became a divorced, single parent without a child at home (our daughter left for university at the same time). Those labels hurt. I was still a caring human being, but I felt like I was in limbo without a place in society.

Teaching Background

While I was struggling to redefine my role in the absence of my nuclear family, one of my childhood dreams came true. I became a teacher in a classroom. Despite the fact that my experience with life in a nuclear family didn't play out in its ideal form, I still carried the subconscious belief that the nuclear family is best for children. I presumed I was going to teach children who were mostly from traditional families perhaps mixed in with some children from “broken” families. I believed that the latter ones were going to be the ones with problems. Teaching in Vancouver I knew I would encounter families from many different cultures. Despite the fact that I was divorced, I still assumed that most children would have a mom, dad, and siblings.

In my first year of teaching, I encountered students from “broken” families. Again, I assumed that “broken” meant from divorced, single, gay or in any other way “odd” families. I assumed that those students would have problems. These assumptions were also taken for granted in the staff rooms. “Broken” only had to be mentioned once and by magic other teachers somehow knew what to expect. Never was this assumption questioned.

Yet, over the years I taught youngsters from “broken” families who were excellent students and a joy to be with. I also encountered students from traditional families who had major problems. Why? Was it possible that family structure had nothing to do with whether students had problems in school or thrived in it? Was it possible that the presence or absence of a caring, loving environment and not family structure *per se* was responsible for how students fared in school?

Gradually over the years I met the adults who were responsible for all of my students. I started seeing them as interested, caring, humorous, and loving individuals rather than filing them into categories based on their “legal” family situations. I gradually became much more comfortable with diverse family types.

A Passion for Looking at Families

When it came to choosing a topic within the overall theme of social justice for my Master's of Education research project, I was ready to look at family diversity with my students. My earlier reluctance to tackle this topic stemmed from the fact that it is not an easy subject, but is rather one that invites a great deal of controversy. Also, the research literature on teaching a unity on family diversity in the classroom is extremely scarce. In fact, I could not find one such project. However, much has been researched and written about the family itself, and about the ways in which its shape and composition have changed over the last half century.

Questions started popping up in my mind. What is a family in the 21st century in the Western World? Does the nuclear family still exist? What exactly is 'broken' about different family configurations? Should a child who has a mom, dad, and siblings at home feel out of place? Does a child from a gay family have to be secretive about it? Should children be stigmatized according to the adults they live with? Should any child feel bad about their family situation? Do children choose their families?

I believe that my job as a teacher in the public school system is to inform students; to make all students feel good about themselves and the environment they grow up in; and to give them the courage to speak up and stand up for themselves and to question the status quo. By doing this unit on family diversity, I wanted to find out how young students feel and think about their family environment. I wanted to facilitate discussions and exchanges of personal experiences.

Judith Stacey, a prominent cultural critic of changing family paradigms in Western societies, states in her book, *In the name of the family* that:

At the current moment in Western family history, no single family pattern is statistically dominant, and our domestic arrangements have become increasingly diverse....Once the family modernization thesis predicted that all the societies of the globe would converge toward a singular family system—the modern Western family system. Ironically, instead we are converging internationally toward the post-modern family condition of diversity, flux, and instability. (1996: 45-46)

My strong belief is that if we know the people we spend five hours a day with in the classroom better, and if we are learning from each other, family insults will be harder to deliver when we do get angry. I also support the view that teachers have a responsibility to struggle with their own views on family diversity before they actually teach and to discuss those changing paradigms with their students. In my estimation, addressing family diversity in schools could help prevent students from expressing negative, derogatory, bullying attitudes and behaviours toward each other and thus help to stabilize our communities.

Judith Stacey examines the vulnerability and insecurity of family life within our communities today and challenges the rhetoric and politics of family values. She writes:

The uncertainty principle that now governs our work lives—who will have employment, for how long, and with what risks and rewards?—also governs our most intimate relationships, severely disrupting domestic tranquility and seeding nostalgia for those better times which The Family has come to symbolize. (2)

She goes on:

The challenge of post-modernity, as of democracy, is to learn to live with instability and flux as responsibly, ethically and humanely as possible. To do so we must cultivate individual resilience, flexibility, courage, and tolerance while we work collectively to provide the best forms of social and cultural supports we can devise to cushion the inevitable disruptions and disappointments, the hardships and heartaches, that all families and humans must inevitably confront. (13)

My objective for this study was to collect and analyze data about family diversity. What do my students know about family diversity? What do they feel and think about their own families? What are my students' attitudes, opinions, and views about different family configurations? Could knowing about family diversity possibly lead to increased tolerance of classmates, and thereby improve the school environment and our collective sense of community?



If I, as a teacher of young people, am preparing them to become good, critically minded citizens for the future, I have to be able to struggle with my own beliefs, traditions, and opinions. I don't have the right, nor do I want to pass moral judgements on any of my students' families. All families have a right to their own beliefs. I've always believed in change from within. By examining my own beliefs, I could be of more benefit to my students than I could be if I had my head buried in the sand, in this case ignoring family diversity. However, taking on this issue calls for courage. Family diversity in our culture is still a hot, emotional subject, highly political and extremely controversial.

The initial approval for this study that I received from the Vancouver School Board's research committee was a "cautionary approval." Their concerns revolved around two points. Firstly, that parents/guardians would be made aware of the specific ways the concept of "family" was going to be presented to students; and secondly, that the voluntary nature of this study would be made very clear to all participants.

A number of authors explored this controversy in more detail in the book *The family in America—Opposing viewpoints* (1992). In it, David Popenoe wrote that the decline of the family is negatively affecting the quality of life for children. He writes:

Virtually every child desires two biological parents for life...child rearing is most successful when it involves two parents... traditional family may be flawed...millions of people are comfortable with it and it seems to work...we should reinvigorate the cultural ideals of "family," "parents," and "children" within the changed circumstance of our time. (23)

In the same book, Dennis K. Orthner, offers a contrasting opinion when he asserts that only the "family" is in transition, and that the desire to care for children has not changed. He states:

What has changed are the ways people choose to live with each other....There still is a strong desire among the young to have families. VALUES have not changed drastically but the NORMS of family behaviour have undergone dramatic transformations. (29)

My School, Class, and Students

My school, the identifying descriptors of which have been obscured to protect the confidentiality of my students and their families, is a small neighbourhood school with a multicultural mix of students. We are located, in amongst a mixture of single-family homes, condominiums and apartment buildings, on a block that also houses a community centre. The neighbourhood has many heritage homes in it and the residents take pride in the plantings they make in their little gardens, on the street roundabouts and even by the sidewalks. Several small parks are located within walking distance. Looking out of our classroom windows we see grass, trees, flowers, and a minimal amount of concrete.

Because of the day- and after-school care facilities provided by the Community Centre, a number of students are cross boundary. The majority of our students come from employed or self-employed working families in a variety of professions, businesses and trades. The student population is reasonably stable.

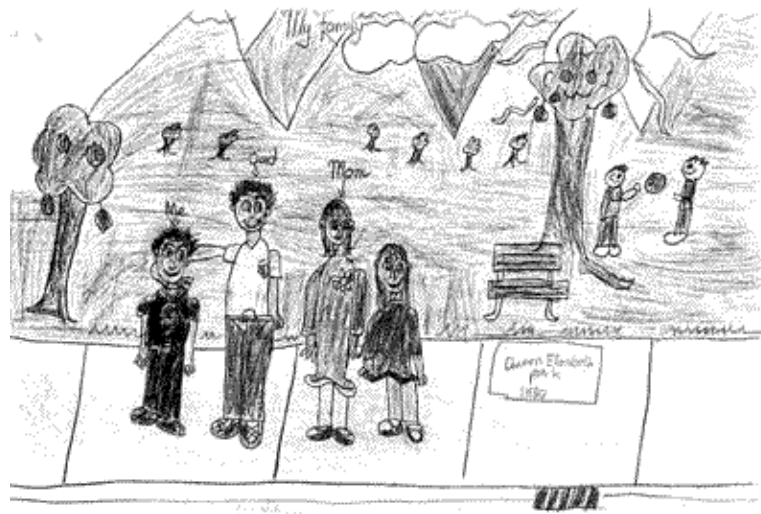
When I started exploring family research in my classroom, I was delighted to realize diversity was blossoming under my nose. We had a variety of blended families, mixed-race families, families with heterosexual and with same-sex parents, single-parent families, families consisting of a single guardian, and one family with a special needs child. Our families were working families, adoptive

families, stay-at-home dad or mom families, and families that were “extended” in a variety of ways, including with the addition of pets. I was amazed when I realized this. No doubt, my subconscious paradigm of a family that consisted of mom, dad, and siblings played a part in this surprise.

At the time I did this research, I had twenty-six students in my class, thirteen Grade 4’s and thirteen Grade 5’s. One-third of the students were girls, and two-thirds were boys. One student was a special needs student in a wheelchair who was unable to take part in either discussions or written activities. Due to the imbalance of girls and boys, I made no gender distinction in the research answers. I felt that would call for a separate research project. Some days not all students were present for an activity.

We have several immigrant students from the Philippines, one each from Brazil, Puerto Rico, Hong Kong, and China. In our class were also students of mixed races who were born here, one each of: Japanese/Canadian, Jewish/Korean, First Nation/Canadian, Chinese/Malaysian, and Chinese/Filipino background. The other students were born in Canada of immigrant parent(s) from Denmark, Italy, the Philippines, Japan, and England. Overall, the students were wonderful, enthusiastic, very social, and warmly caring young people between the ages of nine and eleven years.

Reflecting on my diverse class made me realize that this was not going to be a theoretical teaching unit but a hands-on experiential sharing of life unfolding. However, I was still interested in finding out if the students were or were not comfortable with family diversity and how knowledgeable they really were about it.



Investigating Family Diversity in the Classroom

I decided to do eleven research activities over a period of eight weeks, from February 11 to April 4, 2002. Initially, with the knowledgeable and enthusiastic help and support of my school librarian, I put together a basket of books about “family diversity” for the students to read and share informally with each other. The times chosen for the more formal activities were random, depending on my daily teaching schedule. I did feel strongly that it would be important to leave some time between activities so that the children would be able to digest the information they received from the activities and to formulate questions raised by them.

To start the project, all twenty-six students drew a 22x28 cm picture of what “family” meant to them. I loved watching the care they took in portraying their families.

Later, the students also wrote a paragraph on their view of family. One young student even felt moved to write a poem using animal metaphors to describe family:

A tree with branches of joy and happiness
 An eagle with wings of care and love
 A gazelle with the leap of courage
 A snake with the eyes of help
 That’s what I think family is.

At this point, the slight doubt I had entertained about capturing the interest of students with this subject vanished. The students were extremely open and keen to learn about other families. Many in the class do have firsthand experience with different family configurations through their own situations, visiting a friend’s home, or talking to each other in school, and they were eager to explore these.

For teaching purposes I used many different **picture books** on a wide range of

family structures. After each reading we had extensive discussions and after some of the readings students also filled out a questionnaire and posed written questions of their own. The further into the unit we got, the more at ease the students felt in sharing their own situations and asking each other questions.

To review what we had learned through books, discussions, and the sharing of personal experiences, I showed two excellent videos. *That's a family!* is a film for kids about family diversity by Debra Chasnoff. *Sticks and stones*, by George Johnson (Producer), sensitively addresses stereotyping of same sex families and helps to nurture respect for a full range of family models. More discussions and questions followed. I was particularly interested in finding out what the students' opinions were in response to the question, "Do you think learning about family diversity might be helpful to increase acceptance and tolerance amongst students and perhaps decrease the chance of bullying?"

Only five students felt it wouldn't decrease bullying, because, "most bullies would just not listen," "people don't always bully due to family structure," or "the bullies might just take the discussions for pleasure and continue with the bullying." All other students felt, in one way or another, that it might help. Reasons they cited included, "...the bullies will find out that everyone's different," and "...people only bully others because they don't understand them."

As the final activity for this unit, the students had to work in their tribes (five groups) to compose a definition of "**family**" that took into consideration all we had talked and learned about for the last eight weeks. They briefly discussed this with their group and then wrote their definitions. All five groups came up with definitions which were all-inclusive in terms of the kinds of **family** structures that would fit them.

I found that many students in my classroom already knew a great deal about family diversity. According to those students, their parents or guardians had taken the time to talk to them about different family structures. Slightly more than one-third of my class (ten students) indicated that they were not surprised at anything we discussed. Overall however, I found that my class seemed much more at ease with each other; more open and ready to bring up joys or problems either individually or in our class meetings after we finished the research study. They seemed more aware of each other, were more astute with their observations, and appeared to have become bigger risk takers in all their learning. During our discussions (we always sat in a circle), they started looking at and addressing each other much more. Initially, they directed their comments to me only. Towards the middle and certainly by the end of the unit we always ran out of time because so many students wanted to share their experiences. In general, the oral participation of all students, even the more reluctant ones, increased in all subjects. This was also noticed by other teachers. Students appeared less concerned with making mistakes and offered their opinions and views more freely.



My Recommendations

There is no doubt in my mind that teaching about family diversity is necessary, important, and extremely relevant. My Grade 4/5 students were not only interested in each others' families, but also felt empowered as learners because they were able to contribute their own family backgrounds to the discussion with comments such as, "It felt good [to share about my family] because if you see other kids have the same situation and that person said it you will have the courage to say it too," or "It helped me because I don't get a chance to see my dad but now I know I'm not the only one in the class that doesn't."

The students were mostly familiar with the lingo associated with different types of families, but were far from competent in terms of understanding the meaning of the language. “What exactly is a blended family?”, “What’s the difference between half-siblings and stepsiblings?”, “Why are lesbians also called gay?” were common questions raised once the students felt more comfortable asking them.

As “Family Life Education” is part of our expected B.C. curriculum, we have an open venue in which to teach about family diversity. In doing so, the emphasis should be on teaching for knowledge and for valuing all family diversity. By talking about “broken” families we devalue that family system. According to most of my students, what you need to make a family is, “...a group of people who look after children with care and love, and provide for them.” I also maintain that every family has the right to believe in and teach their own children their own moral code. At the same time, the children do have a right to know, understand, and ask questions about their whole environment.

I highly recommend that anyone who teaches family diversity be clear about his or her own attitudes and intentions when they do. As one of my students very astutely remarked after I asked if they thought it would be helpful for other teachers to teach this unit, “It depends who teaches it.” This particular student felt that some adults say things but don’t really mean them.

The success of such a unit might also depend on the demographics of your school, the whole school environment and the larger community in which it is situated. Is your school population and wider community a homogeneous or heterogeneous one? What is the general culture like, including family configurations and beliefs? I am very lucky to be able to teach in my diverse neighbourhood. Otherwise, I might have wanted to consult with the community health/school nurse, and a variety of community groups before embarking on such a unit. Adaptation to your environment is absolutely necessary, particularly when teaching a sensitive subject like family diversity.

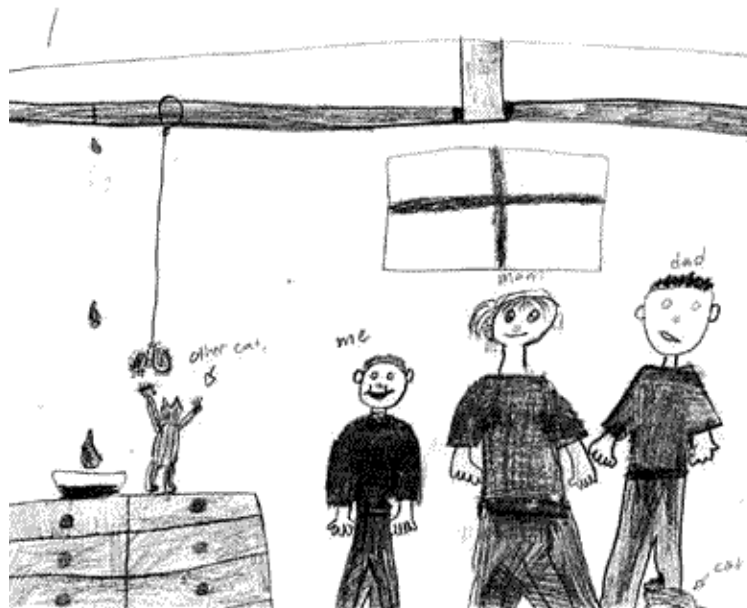
In essence, you have to ask yourself, “What does it take to provide an informative but also safe environment for teachers, students, parents, and the whole community?”

Concluding Thoughts

I was simultaneously surprised at how much the students already knew and had experienced in terms of family diversity, and at how many questions they still had and continue to have about it. Just because we know the words doesn’t guarantee that we fully understand them. I keep asking myself if I will still hear insults like the ones I cited at the beginning of the paper. Now, the students definitely have more vocabulary to work with, but will they remember what the words mean? Even if they don’t remember themselves, will one of their classmates remind them? There are definite delays between the time we know something cognitively, and the time our feelings and habits reflect what we know. Should they choose to use family insults again, will they do it with the understanding that to do so is wrong, and so, will eventually stop doing it?

I learned that, through discussion with their peers, students can become much more relaxed, at ease, comfortable and accepting of their own family situations. Without much prompting, they became more and more interested in how their classmates live, what they feel like, and what their opinions are. The official research study might have ended, however, the effects seem to linger on in our classroom. Just yesterday one of my students asked, “Can you read aloud the book on the gay uncle coming to visit? I like it. It’s so funny.” Everyone agreed. We all had a good laugh at the stereotyping that goes on when we don’t know anything about people. Now, we all know better.

If we as teachers are to achieve a greater awareness of each other in our classrooms, we need to start with our own feelings about our own environment, our attitudes, and knowledge. Once we do this, we’ll no doubt pass that understanding on to our students. For now I am pleased that I have been able to increase awareness of my students’ own families. One student wrote it very simply, “It gave me a better understanding of my family’s importance to me.”



Postscript

The realization, even beyond my expectation, of the importance of family to my intermediate students was heart warming. It also confirmed for me that teaching something meaningful and close to students' hearts engages them easily. They love to talk to one another and teach each other. I listen and mediate when necessary.

Doing research in my own classroom required enormous energy, concentration, and focus. The constantly changing classroom situation from day to day asks for extreme flexibility. However, the challenge of exploring and honing research questions became stimulating and left me with more energy than I thought possible. When I realized the sincere interest of other educators in both research as a pedagogical tool and in the importance of family diversity to students as an avenue for inquiry, my excitement grew even more.

Doing this project has contributed to my effectiveness as a teacher. It provided me with the structure I needed to examine what I consider to be the most important element of teaching—creating a classroom that is accepting of social, cognitive, and personal differences. It also confirmed for me that teaching Family Life as mandated by the B.C. Ministry of Education is worthwhile. My students were highly engaged and together we learned about the sensitivity needed to debate and discuss issues that really matter. They were disappointed when I finished the official research.

Family insults have not stopped. However, now it doesn't take long for the particular student(s) to understand what was inappropriate about using these insults and I feel their apologies are more sincere. I am convinced that with each incident they gain the kind of strength they will need to remain aware, watch for, and stand up for the injustice that is inherent in word calling, sarcastic teasing and bullying using family insults. They seem motivated to create a more accepting and trusting environment for themselves, their friends, their families, their classmates and, hopefully, for all humanity.

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[1] All the names in this article are pseudonyms.

About the author

Ursula Beale currently teaches a Grade 5/6 class at Simon Fraser Elementary School in Vancouver. She completed her Master's of Education degree in the summer of 2002. Her background in nursing and Suzuki violin teaching contribute to her strong belief that family support is vital to successful student learning. Creating a tolerant and accepting classroom environment is her passion.

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