

# Who Does the Housework? Gender Roles and Consciousness- Raising with *Piggybook*

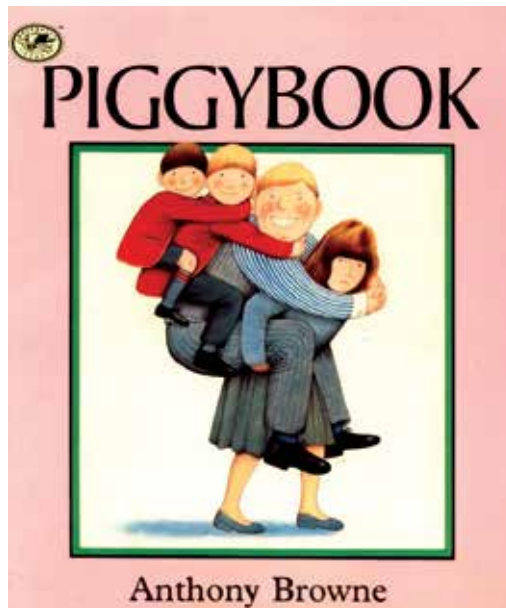
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Can an easy-to-read, funny picture book spur fifth graders to find their inner feminist? It can, if it's Anthony Browne's *Piggybook*,<sup>1</sup> and you use the activity ideas in *Every Book is a Social Studies Book*.<sup>2</sup>

*Piggybook* by Anthony Browne is a tale whose cover tells the story: the mother, Mrs. Piggot, literally carries her husband and two sons on her back; she finds herself doing all of the chores while her sons and husband do nothing in the house. One day, Mrs. Piggot walks out, and the men in the family literally turn into pigs and their house becomes, you guessed it, a pigsty. Children enjoy the imaginative nature of the book; however, it also provided my fifth graders with an opportunity to analyze issues related to gender equity in the book and, ultimately, in their own homes. My goal for this lesson was for students to discuss the extent to which there is equitable distribution of chores that are done in households they are familiar with.

## Exploring Equity in the Piggy Home

Prior to reading the book, I asked students to brainstorm a list of chores that need to be done in their own homes on a daily or weekly basis. Students' responses included, making beds, walking the dog (and picking up after the dog), taking out the garbage, cleaning, washing dishes, vacuuming, emptying the dishwasher, doing the wash, cooking dinner, making lunches, food shopping and putting away the laundry. As students generated the list of chores, I recorded them in a chart that students would use later in the lesson. I also asked students what jobs members of their household were responsible for when away from the home; they talked about the jobs their parents hold and the fact that they, themselves, have to go to school. We included that information on our chart as well.



As we read *Piggybook*, students used their chart to identify who in the pig household was responsible for each of the chores on their list; they also drew a little “smiley or frowny face” to indicate if they thought the pig enjoyed doing the chore. It became clear early on in our read-aloud that Mrs. Piggot did all of the chores in the house. When I asked how Mrs. Piggot felt about doing those jobs, the consensus was that she was not happy to be doing all of the work, but was probably even less happy with the way the rest of the family treated her. Tomas said, “Mr. Piggot and the sons were always telling her to hurry up with the breakfast and calling her ‘old girl,’” and the author referred to Mr. Piggot’s job as “important” and the kids’ school

as “important,” like what Mrs. Piggot did didn’t matter.” Ella added, “It’s not fair that Mrs. Piggot also had to go to work, too, but she had to do all the chores in the house first.” Jesse chimed in, “It was the same thing every day, for every meal.”

I stopped reading the book aloud just prior to Mrs. Piggot’s departure from the house, I asked students to think about the distribution of the chores in the Piggot household. In an effort to target and build their academic vocabulary, I purposefully asked, “To what extent do you think there is an equitable distribution of chores in the Piggot household?” In order for students to answer the question they had to understand the term “equitable distribution”; together, we worked to define the phrase. Madison speculated, “Are all of the chores are distributed to everyone?” Meghan said that she thought the question was asking “if everyone did an equal amount of chores.” Sebastian asked it if meant “everyone did their fair share of work.” I was impressed with their ability to figure out the question.

I’ve always made a concerted effort to ask rigorous, thoughtful questions and to increase and improve my students’ vocabularies, as is now called for by the Common Core Literacy Standards.



I plan questions in advance, slow instruction down a bit to dissect words, and provide adequate time for students to think, talk, and write. I often ask my fifth grade students' questions that start with "To what extent?" because most upper level questions don't have one simple answer or at least not an absolute answer. For example, "To what extent were the chores fairly distributed in the Piggot household?" Once students understood that question, I asked them to consider their response on a scale of one to four, and to cite reasons for their response.

- 1 totally unfair
- 2 pretty unfair
- 3 pretty fair
- 4 totally fair

### Analyzing the Narrative

Students referred back to the story and their charts for the data to support their answers. They worked with their learning partners, voicing their answers, before I had them share in a full class discussion. Most students did not think that the chores were fairly distributed and cited specific lines in the text to support their views. Vincent felt that "what made it worse was that the rest of the family didn't even seem to appreciate all of what Mrs. Piggot did." Sydni added, "They were very disrespectful to her, and they were lazy and depended on her too much, probably because they didn't know how to do anything." I inquired as to whether they thought there were any similarities between the Piggot household and their own. Some students indicated that, even though they knew their moms did a lot in their homes, they felt that things were fairer in their house; many indicated that they had certain chores for which they were responsible.

I did not press them on this issue because I had a related homework assignment waiting in the wings. Instead, I turned our attention back to the book. I asked what they thought Mrs. Piggot should do about the problem. Some students felt that she should make the kids do more work or stop cooking meals so the rest of the family would start to appreciate her. Others felt that Mrs. Piggot should set up a chore chart so that everyone would have certain responsibilities.

We read more of the story aloud. Students were surprised when Mr. Piggot and his two sons came home to find that Mrs. Piggot was gone. She left a note reading, "YOU ARE PIGS."

As we read the second half of the story, students prepared to take note of who was now responsible for doing the chores in Mrs. Piggot's absence...but nobody was doing the chores! The house got messier and messier, dishes piled up, and the piggy boys and their father ended up eating scraps off the floor.

When we finished that episode of the story, we discussed the author's use of language and humor, while dealing with a serious issue. Students liked that he used words like "squealed" and "snorted" as part of the dialogue when Piggot family members are talking. After Mrs. Piggot's departure, Browne also depicts characters actually transforming into pigs, and many aspects of the house developing a porcine look: little pig faces on the wallpaper, pig heads adorning the tops of the salt and pepper shakers and the fireplace implements, the light switch reconstituted as a pig snout, and the painting of *Washington Crossing the Delaware* now shows a pig standing up in the boat.

Of course, Mr. Piggott and the children beg Mrs. Piggot to come home. She does, but things change. We discussed how the distribution of chores changed after Mrs. Piggot's return. Students cited the fact that the children began to make their own beds, Mr. Piggot started doing the laundry, and they all pitched in to do the cooking. At the very end of the book, Mrs. Piggot is found working on the family car. Taylor pointed out, "There were big changes in the Piggot family!" I asked students to consider how each member of the Piggott family might have felt about those changes. A number of students commented that, after Mrs. Piggot left her family, they felt guilty when they realized how much work she was doing and how hard that work was. Vincent said, "So, even if the rest of the family didn't like doing the chores, they knew it was fairer to all to help out around the house." Thomas added, "Plus, they don't want their mother to leave again, so they would probably do anything!"

### Observing Our Own Behavior

When we finished discussing the book, I turned the focus to the students' own households. I asked them to consider the distribution of chores and whether they thought that the

members of their family enjoyed doing the chores they did, as well as the extent to which there was an equitable distribution of work in their homes. Responses were mixed; many students weren't sure about the questions of fairness. As a result, we planned an action research project. We went back to the list of chores that we had brainstormed at the start of the lesson. The students' charge was to go home and record who does each chore and how all of the members of their household feel about the chores they do.

When students returned to class the following day, we discussed the distribution of work in their households. Did it seem equitable? Although family dynamics vary, the students were able to make some generalizations from the class data. Many indicated that their moms did a lot of work each day (shopping, cooking, cleaning up, laundry), and many of their dads helped out in the house, but did more outside of the house (lawn care, taking out the garbage). Some students were required to make their own beds or put their own clothes away, and many of them grumbled about the chores they had to do. A few students were surprised to find out that their parents didn't really like doing their chores either: "some moms didn't like cooking" or "hated folding the laundry." Leann said, "I guess no one really likes doing that stuff!"

### What To Do When It's "Boring"

I asked if there were chores that everyone disliked. In one family, no one liked dusting; in another, no one liked walking the dog early in the morning (or picking up after the dog). We discussed how a family could deal with the chores that no one liked to do so that things were more equitable. Consensus was that those chores should be rotated. When we discussed fairness, one student said that his dad recently lost his job, so his mom expected his dad to do more around the house when she was at work and to cook dinner. His dad didn't like doing those things, but they "kind of agreed that the arrangement would be fair," because his mom was working all day at her job. Another student said that her mom didn't have a job outside of the house, so she did more, and that was probably fair, too. Music, rhymes, and chants can be recited while doing chores. Or if two people are working in the same room, jokes can be recited and invented. Many folk songs originated when people kept each other's spirits up while doing a repetitive task such as threshing grain, pounding railroad stakes, sewing, or weaving.

Students decided that you couldn't just count the number of chores people did to determine if things were fair. We discussed the jobs that have to get done every day, versus the jobs that get done weekly or twice a week. Some jobs take longer than other jobs. I prodded them a bit to see if there were some changes they might make in their households to make the distribution of chores a bit more equitable. A few students acknowledged that there were probably a few areas where they could do more in their homes. Some resolved to take out the garbage each week; others to empty the dishwasher; still others, to start to make their own beds. We discussed what it means to be a responsible

family member, and students agreed that it was important for everyone to help out.

*Every Book is a Social Studies Book*<sup>3</sup> suggests ways to extend lessons, and that could be done here. Students could interview grandparents about what chores they did when they were young, and when they were parents of young children. Students could examine other picture books and assess the distribution of roles in the families portrayed in them. These activities could further develop issues of gender equity that my students had begun to explore. Still, perhaps when my fifth graders reach high school and become acquainted with the words of Betty Friedan, "Women of the world unite...You have nothing to lose but your vacuum cleaners," or when they get older and read Sheryl Sandberg's *Lean In*, or listen to Pete Seeger's song "There Was a Young Woman Who Swallowed a Lie" (a curious update to a traditional folk song), they'll remember that the seemingly inconsequential issue of who does the housework, raised in the picture book by Anthony Browne, is anything but trivial.<sup>4</sup>

#### Notes

1. Anthony Browne, *Piggybook* (New York: Dragonfly, 1990).
2. Andrea S. Libresco, Jeannette Balantic, and Jonie Kipling, *Every Book is a Social Studies Book: How to Meet Standards with Picture Books, K-6*. (Santa Barbara: ABC Clio, 2011), 10–16.
3. Libresco, Balantic, and Kipling, 16.
4. Margalit Fox, "Betty Friedan, Who Ignited Cause in *Feminine Mystique*, Dies at 85" (*New York Times*, February 5, 2006). [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com); Sheryl Sandberg, *Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead* (New York: Knopf, 2013); Pete Seeger, [www.amazon.com/The-Young-Woman-Who-Swallowed/dp/B000SEXSL6](http://www.amazon.com/The-Young-Woman-Who-Swallowed/dp/B000SEXSL6).

#### Student Handout

### Jobs and Workload Distribution in My Family

Down the first column of the chart, you will find a list of typical chores. Along the top of the chart, list the people who live in your house. Identify who does each chore and add a "smiley" or "frowny" face to indicate if the person who does that job enjoys or dislikes that chore.

Jobs in and outside of my home	Family Members
Cooks	
Shops for food	
Washes clothes	
Makes beds	
Takes out the garbage	
Goes to work	
Goes to school	
Cares for a pet	

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