

What Makes a Family? Sharing Multiple Perspectives through an Inclusive Text Set

Christina M. Tschida and Lisa Brown Buchanan

I want children to understand there is not a perfect box that family fits into. While your family may look different from your friends' family, our commonalities are that we love, take care of, and help each other. I want all of my students to feel welcomed and comfortable in my classroom.

—Heather Landreth, kindergarten teacher, North Carolina

While the concept of “family” is a fundamental part of elementary social studies curriculum, there is scant research regarding how the family unit is taught in the classroom. Some articles point out how teaching about families can help meet national or state standards (e.g., **INDIVIDUAL DEVELOPMENT AND IDENTITY**).¹ Other articles indirectly highlight the importance of presenting multiple perspectives on family through children’s literature; but these focus mainly on issues of culturally responsive teaching, developing cultural sensitivity in children, or using inclusive texts.² Recent articles focus on the inclusion of representations of LGBT students and families,³ or offer strategies on how to deal positively and proactively with students’ families as teachers are planning to present a children’s book with an LGBT-family theme.⁴

What is still largely missing from educational journals is mention of (a) various family **compositions**, including foster, step, and adoptive parents, as well as multi-ethnic, interracial, and multigenerational arrangements and (b) **marginalized family experiences**, including divorce, incarceration, displacement, poverty, military deployment, and deported parents. Coverage of diverse family compositions and experiences (not merely the white, middle class, nuclear family) is gradually increasing in children’s books (see recent NCSS Notables lists⁵ and the **Pullout** in the center of this journal), but is still rare in educational studies on teaching about “family” in K-6 classrooms.

The concept of family has strong socially constructed meanings rooted in traditional definitions such as “a social unit consisting of parents and their children or a group of people closely related by blood.”⁶ Such representations perpetuate a “single story” of what makes a family. In novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s widely seen 2009 TED Talk, “The Danger of a Single Story,” she related her experiences growing up in Nigeria reading American and British children’s books.⁷ Through this literature,

she received specific messages about who belonged in books in which none of the characters looked like her, ate what she ate, or had life experiences similar to her own. This “single story” shaped how she felt about herself, and it inspired the characters and plots she created in her earliest writing.

As educators, we are challenged to consider how our students feel when their classroom or school library perpetuate a single story about family. The dominant narrative does not mirror the increasingly diverse student and family population in elementary schools, creating a gap between what is portrayed and students’ reality. Heather Landreth, a kindergarten teacher at W. H. Robinson Elementary School in Winterville, North Carolina, has seen this firsthand over 13 years of teaching. She explains,

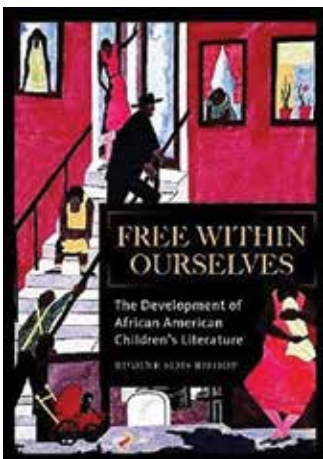
I find it more and more difficult to teach family. I’m trying to be aware of the diversity in my families, but families just don’t look the same as they did when I started teaching. I have used books that focus on themes of “me and my feelings” instead of “family” because I didn’t have any readily accessible [resources] that would address the different types of families in my class. I want to be able to teach using more appropriate books on the diversity of families.

We believe this gap between families’ lives and the single story of family in most children’s literature warrants a rethinking of how we approach teaching family with young children. Books have a pronounced power to either perpetuate or interrupt single stories—and to offer more accurate views of the diversity present in our society today. Disrupting the single story of family is important both for students who see themselves in different stories, and for students who may have never considered a dif-



The Campbell family in 2017. (L to R) Parents Andrea and Chris, children Malik, Mekhi, and Malcolm. (wearethe15percent.com)

ferent composition of family.⁸ As teachers, we understand the teaching materials we choose speak to what we value, therefore we must first examine the single stories we may hold of family. Then we can include books to challenge the single stories our students may hold. Professor Emerita at Ohio State University Rudine Sims Bishop talks about this idea in her well-known essay “Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors,” in which she writes that all children benefit from reading books with characters who have diverse backgrounds and experiences.⁹ Such books give students the opportunity to see themselves (mirrors) as well as to learn about the experiences of others (windows).



Heather’s need for more inclusive books and her desire to value all of her young students’ experiences of family led to conversations and the planning of a three-day unit on family with Christina (the first author) through their school-university partnership. Here we describe that unit, which offers a practical and more inclusive approach to teaching young children about the concept of family.

The Status Quo (A “Single Story” of Family)

While activities focused on learning about one’s self and one’s classmates are customary in elementary classrooms, these traditional activities can sometimes create uncomfortable feelings. Templates and printable materials for common elementary activities such as “star student,” all about me,” or “my family tree” often include language or require answers that do not match the composition of all families. When a student with two moms or from a single-parent home is asked to complete a family tree template with mother and father on either side of the tree trunk, it is problematic. Even a well-meaning attempt to modify the template is troublesome, as it can draw attention and isolate children as different or not “normal.” During initial stages of unit planning, Heather commented, “Early in my career, I attempted ‘family trees’. They were a disaster when trying to accommodate all students’ family types.”

Likewise, activities such as “star student” or “all about me” frequently call for birth photos, which can create stress for students and families with limited or no photos. “I found even this was difficult,” said Heather, “because not all families had photos, and even if they did, many didn’t want to send them for fear of the photos being damaged. I’ve resorted to having children draw pictures of their families.” These longstanding activities, which were intended to show how unique each student is, can actually work to limit understanding of diversity and maintain a single story of family. For the student whose family doesn’t match the template, such experiences are isolating and anxiety producing.

How students talk about such activities, and how teachers mediate the conversations, can also be problematic. Teachers often report being uncomfortable talking about certain types of families (i.e., same-gender, multiracial, foster, homeless) for fear of offending some parents or getting in trouble with administration. (Even being fired over book selection is a reality for teachers.)¹⁰ Additionally, teachers don’t always know how to mediate students’ conversations. When one student tells another, “You can’t have two moms,” rather than simply correcting a wrong assumption, a teacher may gloss over the comment or worse yet, ignore it. This leaves a student who actually has two moms questioning the validity of her family or having to defend her family in conversations with her peers.

Another way the single story of family is maintained in schools can be seen in language found on school-to-home communications and in some school activities (e.g., Mother’s Day, Donuts with Dads). School forms often require information or signatures from “mother and father.” Although some schools have moved to terms like “parent or guardian” on many forms, quite often, a single story of family is favored. Being mindful of the language used in communications sent to students’ homes is a vital step in making everyone feel represented and included.

Introducing Multiple Stories of Family

To effectively mediate our students’ conversations about family, we must be knowledgeable and comfortable talking about the

topic ourselves. We must examine our own understandings of family as well as the activities or materials we typically use, looking for issues with language and opportunities to expand the concept of family with our students.

There are ways to ensure the inclusion and celebration of all families. Assess templates carefully for language that reflects the single story, and examine the directions to students for narrow views of family. Broaden the ways your students can share who they are, the significant people in their lives, and the things important to them. In discussions, focus attention on the people, traditions, and values that make a student's family unique. Use questions that include but also move beyond traditional family labels (e.g., "father," "mother"). For example, if a student enjoys reading with his stepfather (his mother's new partner), and kicking a soccer ball with his biological father on the weekends, is it necessarily a problem that there are two adults that he thinks of as "Dad" in his life? You might ask such a student, "What name do you call each of your dads?" Nicknames can be fun to share, and the discussion honors a student's family.

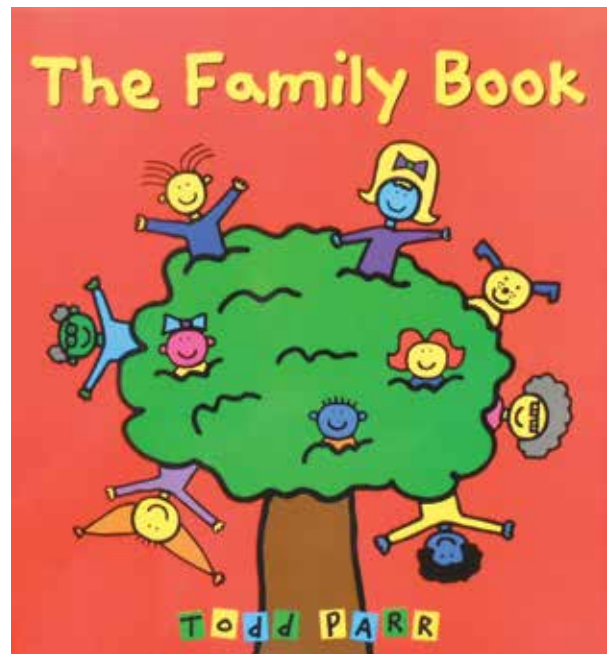
Teachers may ask students to think about their favorite activities, something family members do together, a treasured memory, preferred meal, a favorite holiday, and how they celebrate it, or daily routines in their family. What matters most to children is loving relationships and time spent together with an adult, not by what term that adult is called.

Family interviews or oral histories can also broaden students' understanding of family. Brainstorm questions as a class and finalize the interview questions to ensure the language is open and inclusive, rather than too specific or closed.¹¹ Even young students can conduct interviews if the questions are written and practiced. Some questions might be about important dates or events for their family, traditions or customs they practice, or routines they have in their house. Other questions might center on a specific event or time period you are teaching, offering a personal connection to history. (e.g., What was your life like before immigrating to America?) Having inclusive questions is important in giving students choice about who they share in their family. As one of Heather's students described his drawing of family, he said, "This is my next-door neighbor. He is like a brother to me; we do everything together. He even goes on adventures with my family." Allow students to include such important individuals in their family representations.

Expanding the Story of Family

While planning, Christina and Heather talked about working to expand her students' understanding of family through a short unit of study. They decided to start with an accessible book for young children (preK-grade 2) that celebrates family diversity, *The Family Book* by Todd Parr.¹² Following a class read aloud, students formed small groups, each with an adult leader. Students first talked about the different families described and whimsically depicted in the book. Then they shared who was in their family. Next, students drew a family picture on cardstock for a class family book (each adult completed a page for the

book as well). They had students "introduce" their families to one another in gallery walk style within their small groups. Heather felt her students would have "much more meaningful conversations about their families this way." Allowing students to make their own decisions about how to portray their own families is an important part of activities like this.



In the second lesson of the unit, Christina did an interactive read aloud using *In My Mothers' House* by Patricia Polacco.¹³ Students then completed a two-square response sheet where they drew pictures to show how their family cares for them when they are sick and their favorite family activity (both scenes come from specific conversations students had during the read aloud). Several students wrote captions for their drawings and shared verbally different experiences with their family. A third and final lesson involved students presenting their "Family Book" to the class and discussing the diversity of families in their class.

Conversations that Open Doors

In Our Mothers' House is about a family headed by two moms who chose adoption to expand their family and as a result, their family racial and ethnic makeup is diverse. The story includes everyday experiences of family life (e.g., getting a family pet, holiday traditions, roles and responsibilities, navigating conflict) that young readers may relate to or recognize as different from their family's daily routines and traditions.

Christina is a frequent visitor in Heather's classroom. While she was reading the book aloud to the class, a question came up when the author describes the home as headed by two moms. Nate, a student, interrupted to say, "You can't have two moms." In response to Nate's question, Christina talked about her own family, explaining that she has a wife, which results in their home having two moms. William, another student, interjected, "Yes, you can have two moms...or two dads."

After students had gone home, Christina and Heather reviewed Nate’s question and the utility of this book as a window into wider definitions of “family.” Heather recalled that William had recently been to the wedding of a same-sex couple who were close family friends. For William, hearing about a family similar to his close family friends helped validate his understanding of family. On the other hand, Nate’s single story of family was challenged through real life experiences drawn from peers in his class. He learned that a family may be headed by a man and a woman, but it can also be led by two women or by two men. Because books can serve as vehicles for authentic discussions, Nate and William were both able to take part in extending the overarching question of “What makes a family” through their questions and experiences.

Heather and Christina then discussed other titles that might serve as conversation starters for family diversity that Heather could use following this unit. (See the text set in the **Pullout**) While we think that a conversation that includes families headed by two moms or two dads is important, we understand that families have many other potential designs. Many factors influence the composition of family. For example, in America, adults are free to choose how, when, and with whom they build a family. Families come in all sorts of shapes and sizes. There are numerous single-parent families in any community. Other variations include the many families in which children are raised by grandparents, aunts, uncles, or by an adult who has adopted them. Building upon the opening quote by Heather, a grade-level appropriate definition of family might be “A group of children and adults who live together as they love, take care of, and help each other.”

Extensions and Upper Grade Activities

In our brief unit, we begin by helping our students verbalize their understanding of family, and then we expand on this concept through discussions and activities built around three or four anchor texts. Additional books from a larger text set can be used in accompanying activities. For example, literature circles or book talks can be used with varying degrees of teacher involvement. While younger students will require teacher led discussion, older students can prepare for literature dialogues through activities such as focused reading, where colored sticky notes or designated symbols are used to mark information from the book that they (a) already know, (b) want to know more about, and (c) feel is important to them personally. This gives students a starting point for discussion.

Another activity integrates Common Core State Standards (comparing and contrasting characters in multiple books) by asking students to read three books representing diverse families and answer questions in a graphic organizer (See the **Pullout**). Once all three books have been read and information recorded, students answer the same questions about their own family; allowing them to look across multiple family types to see differences and commonalities. This examination also provides a nice transition from texts to self.

A final activity gives students an opportunity to learn more about others and share their family’s story. “Where I’m From” poems are often used to teach poetry in language arts, but they allow us to integrate social studies concepts of “cultural identity” and “family” in powerful ways. After studying Kentucky Poet Laureate George Ella Lyon’s poem, “Where I’m From,” students are asked to brainstorm traditions, events, and memories from their own families.¹⁴ This must be scaffolded with younger students. Older students might interview family members to gain more insight and ideas for their writing. Next, students use storyboarding to draft their poem modeled after Lyon’s original. Younger students often prefer a template and may even use pictures or visuals to present their ideas.¹⁵

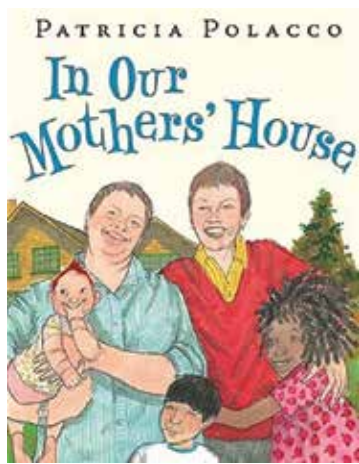
Developing a Text Set

The vast number of books teachers can choose from when searching for children’s literature on family, can make the process of selecting quality text sets overwhelming. Heather experienced this in trying to find books that provided mirrors for the families of students in her classroom. She found it easier to locate books and videos with families represented as animals instead of people but even then, the family compositions were limited. Over the years, she sought resources that represented families in her class but “never really brought in families that weren’t represented in [her] classroom,” in large part because she could not locate appropriate books.

Because developing a quality inclusive text set on family can be daunting, we use a four-step process. Step one involves identifying the big idea to be explored, in this case, family, and writing compelling questions for students to explore. The second step involves unpacking multiple perspectives by identifying the single story of family, identifying whose stories are missing and whose (needed) voices will expand students’ understanding of family. Next, we locate several books that answer the questions from step one and consider how we will use the text, what features are needed (i.e., reading level, accuracy of content, multiple perspectives, etc.), and which voices are being added to the single story. The final step involves narrowing the selection down to ten to twelve books best suited for our goals. Given time restrictions and availability of book copies, teachers use the books in a variety of ways, from interactive read aloud to small group literature circle or novel study. We also devote time to identifying, from the larger text set, three to four “anchor texts,” which we define as titles that provide a comprehensive message about the identified theme, can stand alone in a lesson on the theme, can be used in a variety of instructional formats (e.g., shared reading, guided reading, teacher read aloud), and are widely accessible to teachers.¹⁶

An Inclusive Text Set on “Family”

We’ve composed an inclusive text set for expanding the single story of “family.” (See the *Pullout*) These picture books present multiple perspectives on family structures and circumstances and center on the unifying features of family, love, traditions,



and values. Often, books broaching difficult topics like foster care, adoption, same-sex parents, and separation present anthropomorphized animals as main characters (e.g., all family members are dogs who speak). We believe featuring books with human characters is important for realistic portrayals of family. Intersectionality is also evident within this text set.

For example, the book *In Our Mothers' House* tells a beautiful story of love, commitment, and traditions of a multiracial family from the perspective of an adopted daughter of two mothers.

Conclusion

Providing students with multiple perspectives that disrupt the single story of family is a foundational step in preparing elementary students who are open to diversity and able to see the complexity of world around them. As people have multiple and sometimes overlapping identities, we need to have texts in our classrooms representing the complexity of today's family and engage students in discussions and activities that expand their single story of family.

Acknowledgement

A special thank you to **Heather Landreth** for opening her classroom and sharing her students with us. Heather's commitment to her students and her own learning as an educator are inspiring. The W. H. Robinson Elementary School serves as a university field-experience school in collaboration with East Carolina University in Greenville, North Carolina. Through the school-university partnership, Heather has hosted several elementary field-experience students and interns.



Ms. Landreth with students.

Notes

1. NCSS, *National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies: A Framework for Teaching, Learning, and Assessment* (Silver Spring, MD: National Council for the Social Studies, 2010), Summary at www.socialstudies.org/standards/strands.
2. Christina M. Tschida and Lisa Buchanan, "Tackling Controversial Topics: Developing Thematic Text Sets for Elementary Social Studies," *Social Studies Research and Practice* 10, no. 3 (2015): 40–56; Bryan S. K. Kim, Jennifer L. Greif Green, and Eileen F. Klein, "Using Storybooks to Promote Multicultural Sensitivity in Elementary School Children," *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development* 34, no. 4 (2006): 223; Christina M. Tschida, Caitlin L. Ryan, and Anne Swenson Ticknor, "Building on Windows and Mirrors: Encouraging the Disruption of 'Single Stories' through Children's Literature," *Journal of Children's Literature* 40, no. 1 (2014): 28–39.
3. Wendy Cumming-Potvin and Wayne Martino, "Teaching about Queer Families: Surveillance, Censorship, and the Schooling of Sexualities," *Teaching Education* 25 no. 3 (2014): 309–333; Jill Hermann-Wilmarth and Caitlin Ryan, "Interrupting the Single Story: LGBT issues in the Language Arts Classroom," *Language Arts* 90, no. 3 (2013): 226–231; Elizabeth H. Rowell, "Missing! Picture Books Reflecting Gay and Lesbian Families," *YC Young Children* 62, no. 3 (2007): 24; Caitlin L. Ryan and Jill M. Hermann-Wilmarth, "Already on the Shelf: Queer Readings of Award-Winning Children's Literature," *Journal of Literacy Research* 45, no. 2 (2013): 142–172.
4. Gabriel Flores, "Teachers working Cooperatively with Parents and Caregivers when Implementing LGBT Themes in the Elementary Classroom," *American Journal of Sexuality Education* 9, no. 1 (2014): 114–120.
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7. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, "The Danger of a Single Story," TED Ideas Worth Spreading (2009), www.ted.com.
8. Hermann-Wilmarth and Ryan.
9. Rudine Sims Bishop, "Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors," *Perspectives* 6, no. 3 (1990): ix–xi. See also this book for adults: R. S. Bishop, *Free Within Ourselves: The Development of African American Children's Literature* (New York: Heinemann, 2007).
10. Mark Schultz, "Teacher, Vice Principal Resign over Gay Fable," *News & Observer* (Chapel Hill, NC, 15 June 2015), www.newsobserver.com/news/local/community/chapel-hill-news/article24528550.html.
11. Kathryn Walbert, "How To Do It: Oral History Projects," *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 16, no. 4 (Pullout: March/April 2004), www.socialstudies.org/publications/ssyl/march-april2004/how_to_do_it_oral_history_projects.
12. Todd Parr, *The Family Book* (New York: Little Brown, 2010).
13. Patricia Polacco, *In My Mother's House* (New York: Philomel, 2009).
14. As Kentucky's 2015–2016 poet laureate, George Ella Lyon is collecting a "Where I'm From" poem from residents in each of the 120 counties in the state. Read about the project on the Kentucky Arts Council website, artscouncil.ky.gov/KAC/Vibrant/WhereFromAbout.htm. A PDF of the poem "Where I'm From" is available at www.smithsonianeducation.org/educators.
15. Shanan Fitts and Lisa Gross, "I am from Delicious Lasagna: Exploring Cultural Identity with Digital Storytelling," *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 23, no. 1 (2010): 8–10.
16. For examples of themed text sets related to other elementary topics, see note 2, Tschida and Buchanan.

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