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# HOW DO FIRST GRADERS DEFINE A FAMILY?

by  
Kelly Ann McGrail

A Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the  
Master of Science in Teaching Degree  
of  
The Graduate School  
at  
Rowan University  
June 25, 2010

Thesis Chair: Susan Browne, Ed.D.

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## ABSTRACT

Kelly Ann McGrail  
HOW DO FIRST GRADERS DEFINE A FAMILY?  
2009/2010

Susan Browne, Ph.D.  
Master of Science in Teaching in Collaborative Teaching

The goal of this study was to determine how first grade students define a family.

Qualitative research was used as the methodology for this inquiry. The participants were thirteen first grade inclusion students in a school that is located in Southern New Jersey.

An instructional unit depicting various family constellations was implemented along with authentic discussions, a student survey, an interactive bulletin board, a classroom library containing family books, and writing prompts contained in My Family Journal. The data collected and analyzed was from student discussion, the subjects' work, direct observation of pupils, the instructional unit, and a teacher research journal. It was found that the first graders define a family by love, skin color, and co-habitation although they were able to recognize that some family members can live in different places. Repeated use of the family terms would help in future instruction along with broadening the scope of family dynamics to include those with same-sex parents.

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## CHAPTER I

### Introduction

“In these early years, many of the children treat the details of their lives matter-of-factly. Typical is 7-year-old Jacob Rios of Los Angeles, whose father, John, a nurse, was awarded custody after a divorce. John Rios's companion, Don Harrelson, often picks up the boy at school. ‘Who is that?’ Jacob was asked one day last year by a teacher unfamiliar with his family situation.” “That's my father's husband,’ Jacob explained blandly.”

“This boy may already have noticed some special curiosity about his family, or even disapproval, on the part of other children, their parents, or his teachers. Even if stigmatization is not overt, some common discussions in school might serve to isolate him. He might have felt awkward, for example, if there was a class discussion about the children’s families and the assumption was made that they are all heterosexual. Typically, forms that need to be filled out for field trips and special events call for signatures from ‘mother’ and ‘father’- a dilemma for this child. The books first graders usually learn to read depict heterosexual families. His teacher and his parents could address these issues by ensuring that some of the books they read describe children whose parents are gay or lesbian and that classroom discussions about families acknowledge what is likely to be a wide variety of family constellations represented among the children if this child’s parents feel safe enough to discuss their sexual

orientation at school, they might come to the class one day to demystify their family for all the children” (Perrin & Potter, 2004, p. 1465).

“Similarly, David Hedges-Hiller, a 9-year-old in Terra Linda, Calif., has spent the last few years educating his schoolmates about artificial insemination. ‘I was so astounded the first time he verbalized this that I almost fell off my chair,’ said David’s mother, Sharon Hedges-Hiller, a police sergeant” (Gross, 1991, p.19). Should children be explaining their particular family dynamics to other children or should this be yet another unofficial role of the teacher? “In a public school kindergarten, for example, a 5-year-old presented two mothers in his dramatic play, and his friend asked him: ‘How can you have two moms? You have to have a father.’ The boy replied, ‘My mom went to a doctor and got a seed, and that is how I got started.’” “In a different setting, another child said, ‘My father is a donor.’ Other children choose not to reply or have not yet reached this level of clarity.” “Yet another 5-year-old boy with two mothers was asked by a classmate, ‘But who is your real mother?’ The boy did not respond, and only stared at his friend. And there are new issues for educators to consider when 4-year-old girls ask their teacher, ‘Can we get married to each other?’” (Casper, Schultz, & Wickens, 1991, p.1).

“Confronting the prejudice of early adolescence builds character and thus enriches later life, say these children, their parents and many experts” (Gross, 1991, p.19).

### Purpose Statement

This study will explore the various types of families, particularly alternative families. The purpose is to educate all children that all families are different. “We want



children to understand that no particular family structure is guaranteed success, nor is it doomed to failure. We also want children to realize that no matter what the structure of the family is on the outside, there are many possibilities for happiness on the inside” (Gilmore & Bell, , 2006, p. 294). No matter what the structure, families are important. “The very notion of ‘family’ offers most students some degree of ownership in the topic through their personal experiences of family...” (Turner-Vorbeck, 2005, p. 6,). “Families are important to both adults and young children, and are often the primary support for individuals” (Gilmore & Bell, , 2006, p. 280).

#### Statement of Research Problem and Question

What if a student raises his hand and says, “I have two Moms?” or “I do not have a Dad”? How would I, as a teacher, address these issues? How do you include all students’ family structures in the curriculum? Furthermore, how do first grade students define a family? This topic is most often not explored in curriculums and when done so, it is minimally introduced in the subject of Social Studies. Contained in that subject is usually the topic of community where the focus is not on family. I would like to implement a thematic unit on family to see how the students define the term “family” and how they internalize the information and activities presented. Next is how I thought of this as my research.

#### Story of the Question

It was April 2006. My Grandma had just passed away. It was sudden and unexpected. This began a very difficult time in my life. I experienced varying degrees of sadness, anger, despair, and hopelessness. Every awful emotion besides happiness was

felt by me. In the wake of this terrible tragedy, I came to find out new family information.

My Uncle Jack was my dad's brother. He passed away when I was little between my birth and my younger brother's, which was two years later. I have no memories of him; only a picture of him holding me when I was a baby. Uncle Jack never got to meet my brother, Denny. Since I can remember, I was told how much my personality mimicked my uncle and that my musical talent was inherited from him. What I learned after my Grandma's death was that my Uncle Jack died from AIDS. It was always understood by my brother and I that he passed away from being sick. The sickness was never elaborated on and I did not take the time to ask questions. Following this recent news, came the question, "How did Uncle Jack get AIDS?" The answer supplied by my parents was that he was gay. I would be lying if I said this information did not shock me. I was 18 years old and was just finding out about this! His sexuality did not (or does not) negate my love or that I wished I had memories of him; rather it sparked more intrigue and curiosity then before.

When I got over the initial shock of my uncle being homosexual, I had many questions. Some of which were, "Did you always know Uncle Jack was gay?" "How did Grandma react?" and "Was Uncle Jack involved with a partner when he died?" These questions were mainly directed to my dad, since Uncle Jack was his brother. My mom chimed in when she could. While this discovery was almost 4 years ago, I have not stopped wondering about my uncle's life, including what it would be like today.

After completion of my American Studies' Seminar paper, "The Origin of the Gay Rights Movement as It Relates to the Cold War," and after my family read it, my

dad stated, “Uncle Jack would be amazed at how far they’ve come. He would never believe it.” “They” in this context was referencing gay persons. It is true. Gay men and lesbian women have secured more rights and earned more respect since Uncle Jack died in the late 80’s. I started to think, “What would my uncle’s life be like if he were alive today?”

Some of the things I speculated about were if Uncle Jack had a steady boyfriend, would they travel to another state to get married or obtain a civil union? If he was not content with just being an uncle to my brother and me, would my uncle adopt a child? Research surrogacy? Of those inquiries, the thought that kept reoccurring was, “Would Uncle Jack have a child or children?” I could not shake the thought so I asked my dad. “Dad, do you think Uncle Jack would have had kids?” He laughed and responded, “Nah, I don’t think so. Your uncle liked to have too much fun.” I believe that is another trait I inherited too.

What if my uncle decided to have a child, single or in a partnership? How would his child, my cousin, adjust to school? Would his teacher be supportive of Uncle Jack’s lifestyle? Would my cousin’s family structure even be understood? How would his peers act? These are only some of the concerns I would have had as a cousin and niece if Uncle Jack were alive today. Combining my family history with my chosen major leads me to, what if I have a student in my class that comes from a situation that mirrors Uncle Jack’s? While this family dynamic is important to me, it is far from the only one. How can I create an environment where all family structures are celebrated, no matter how diverse?

## Limitations

Some districts, school personnel, and parents may not want students learning about different family dynamics. A big source of conflict would be discussing Gay/Lesbian/Bisexual/ Transgender (GLBT) families. GLBT persons are a hot-button political topic in most realms, let alone a school. Parents may not want children learning about those types of families. Regardless of how one feels about GLBT's rights to marry or adopt, it is happening nonetheless. Children should be taught to be tolerant of the kind of family their peers might have.

## Organization of the Thesis

The next chapter details the various literatures on GLBT families and non-nuclear families. Statistics, history, Chapter Three will explore how the study will occur, the research design, and model. Then, chapter four will describe the findings and analyze the data. The last chapter will conclude the thesis by providing further implications for research and suggestions to implement in practice.

## CHAPTER II

### Literature Review

#### Introduction

This thesis is going to explore how to include children in the curriculum that come from alternative families. Alternative families in this sense meant gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender parents (GLBT). Pending the Clinical II placement and approval, the following chapter has been broken into two sections. The first section will look at literature and studies representing children from GLBT families while the second will discuss non-nuclear families. Non-nuclear can be defined as not the “typical” family dynamic consisting of a heterosexual married couple with children. Think of the antithesis of the Cleavers in *Leave It to Beaver*. Single parent families, grandparents or relatives as guardians, step-families, blended families, or adoptive families all are non-nuclear. Both topics of GLBT families and non-nuclear families will talk about statistics, why teaching about families is important, and issues raised from that type of curriculum.

#### Prevalence of Non-traditional Families

Research shows that there is an average of 4 million gay parents in America and 10 million children, on average, that have lesbian mothers or gay fathers (Patterson, 1992; Ryan & Martin, 2000 in Jeltova and Fish, 2005). In addition to students with gay parents, 16 percent of school children have a gay or lesbian non-parental family member (sister, brother, aunt, uncle, cousin, etc.) and 72 percent know someone who identifies themselves as GLBT (Contemporary Sexuality). As these statistics show, it is more

common for children to interact with a GLBT person than not. Families headed by GLBT individuals are becoming more visible in the education system and forcing schools to reevaluate their environment (Patterson, 2003; Ryan & Martin, 2000 in Jeltova and Fish, 2005).

#### Significance and Impending Concerns of Non-nuclear Families in Education

Pupils who come from a GLBT family frequently feel unsafe in schools (Ray & Gregory, 2001). This is due to the limited information, if any, distributed to the staff on homosexuality which is only sometimes passed on to the students. In “The Children of Lesbian and Gay Parents Study,” the subjects stated that “gays and lesbians were so little spoken of that when a young child told his or her peers about their family structure, the other children asked many questions and often still didn’t understand” (Ray & Gregory, p. 34 2001). Situations such as these perpetuate an ambiance where students feel that they will be harassed (Ray & Gregory, 2001). Moms and Dads were worried that their children might experience bullying and teasing as a result of their parents’ sexuality. These parents were concerned that families similar to theirs would be left out of elementary instruction (Ray & Gregory, 2001).

Their concerns were legitimate because “most curricula do not deal with diverse family structures and. ...some schools do not want to include topics on alternative families in their curriculums” (Jeltova and Fish, p. 22, 2005). The purpose of schools is to instill confidence with learning by transferring facts, but the ideal of the nuclear family is still prominent (Jeltova and Fish, 2005). Many school districts view “traditional heterosexual parenting as the only [way] for raising children” (Ryan & Martin, 2000 in Rivers, Poteat, and Noret, p. 132, 2008). When comparing children raised by lesbian

mothers to those brought up by heterosexual mothers, scientists found no difference. The children were evaluated psychologically, cognitively, and socially (Ray & Gregory, 2001). Since there are no differences between children from GLBT families when compared to other family dynamics, there is no reason why sexual diversity should not be taught in school. However, there is some opposition. A compromise could be that schools depict, “different types of family constellations” rather than sexual identity of members (Clarke, 2001; Macgillivray, 2000; Ponton, 2003; Ryan & Martin, 2000 in Jeltova and Fish, p. 22, 2005).

#### Non-nuclear Families Presence in Schools

Discussing non-traditional families in schools is very important. Half of the children in the United States’ education system are represented by two married, biological, heterosexual parents (Turner-Vorbeck, 2005). The nuclear family is becoming extinct. Fifty percent of marriages end in divorce with one million children being affected by it (Children’s Defense Fund, 2000 in Gilmore & Bell, 2006). A consequence of divorce is that more single parents are raising children. Single mothers have risen from three million in 1970 to ten million in 2000 with single fathers increasing by 62 percent since 1990 (Children’s Defense Fund, 2000; Fields, 2003 in Gilmore & Bell, 2006). Besides single parent homes, many families are headed by grandparents. 2.4 million children resided with grandparents in 2000. Adopted boys and girls totaled one million and adopting offspring from outside of America has almost tripled in numbers (Children’s Defense Fund, 2000; U.S. Department of State, 2005 in Gilmore & Bell, 2006). These are only some of the households found in the United States. While present day students should be exposed to them, others already were.

## Research Implemented by Distinct Colleagues

A child being exposed to alternative families is not a new concept. Piaget looked at how elementary students defined a family. “Piaget (1928/1976) used a reflective interview procedure in which he asked 30 boys, 7 to 10 years old, to define a family. He found that the youngest children included only persons living in the same home in their definition, often mentioning the house or the family name, but not a genetic (i.e., biological) relationship. Older children recognized the importance of biological relationships but only included relatives living in or near the home. The oldest children included all biological relatives as family, regardless of the location of the relative’s residence” (Borduin, Mann, & Cone, p. 34, 1989). A second study done by, “Gilby and Pederson (1982) asked 20 children in each of four grade levels (kindergarten, second, fourth, college) to judge whether each of several groupings of individuals constituted a family. The groupings varied on dimensions such as presence of children, presence of two parents, living together, and biological (or legal) relationship, allowing the researchers to infer the criteria used in defining a family. Fourth graders and college students relied primarily on biological and legal relationships as criteria for classifying families, whereas the younger children were more likely to use several other criteria simultaneously (e.g., presence of children and two parents all living together) as defining characteristics. Viewed together, the findings from these two studies suggest that there are age differences in the criteria that children use to define a family” (Borduin, Mann, & Cone, p. 34, 1989).

Both of these studies were modernized in Borduin, Mann, and Cone’s study. What the researchers did was “investigated developmental transitions in children’s



understanding of the family during elementary school years, taking into consideration the children's gender and family structure" (Borduin, Mann, & Cone, p. 34, 1989). Children were surveyed in grades one through six by three female and three male teacher researchers. The students were shown "stimulus cards" that contained various groups of people. Cards one through ten depicted families akin to Gilby and Peterson while Cards eleven and twelve were invented by Borduin, Mann, and Cone. Each card was shown to the children and they were to circle "yes, no, or I don't know" to the questions, "Are they a family?" After this was finished, the pupil answered a few demographic questions such as "family size, birth order, parental separation or divorce, and the presence of step-parents in the home." This was cross referenced to data the teacher had on file (Borduin, Mann, & Cone, p. 36, 1989). The results showed that first graders usually used persons living in the same house to define a family. Along with that, if family members were to move out of the residence, children stated they were no longer a family. The ever-lasting bonds of family were not understood by offspring in first grade. In the older students, "genetic relationships and biological heritage" was used to define a family (Borduin, Mann, & Cone, p. 41, 1989). This was merged with the first graders' conception of dwelling to tease out non-biological housemates from personal explanations. These students were more open-minded when using "kinship criteria" (Borduin, Mann, & Cone, p. 41, 1989). This aided in them being able to apply the concept of family when presented with non-traditional dynamics.

#### The Importance of Exploring Non-nuclear Families in Curriculum and Restrictions

"The once idealized 'modern nuclear family' is no longer the norm in the United States (Johnson & O'Connor, 2002; Walsh, 2003). There is now acknowledgement that

parents may be biological, adoptive, step, or foster, that they may be single or in a couple, and that they may be married, divorced, widowed, remarried, or in a partnership, gay, straight, or transgender. Yet, social institutions, including schools, are often steeped in the more traditional family model, and despite efforts to adapt to the needs of changing and diverse family structures, they often lag behind societal realities” (Jeltova and Fish, p. 18, 2005). “...issues emerged regarding their hope for their children to... grow up respecting diversity, understanding the effects of prejudice, and embracing the differences in our world” (Giovacco-Johnson, p. 131 2009). Children echoed the statements made by their parents. “Finn Grade 6 said: ‘Teachers should talk about different families and start in Prep [school]. They should choose children with [drawings of] different families to come out the front and show their pictures to everyone’” (Ray & Gregory, p. 33 2001). While parents and students believe that all families should be taught in school, it is not without controversy.

The majority of school districts do not consider non-nuclear families or GLBT parents in their daily routines (Perrin & Potter, 2004). When brought to attention, it was stated that, “establishing equality for all families represents a serious challenge to the schools because it requires organizational change and strategic planning involving families, the community, and the” administration (Jeltova and Fish, p. 23, 2005). It is not that schools cannot create an environment indicative of all families; it is that they will not. In actuality, this atmosphere is not hard to establish.

#### Responding to the Limitations

As a start using, “inclusive language, both verbal and printed...” brings about revolution in the school (Lamme & Lamme, 2002 in Jeltova and Fish, p. 27, 2005). A

more extensive vocabulary allows staff and students to clearly convey messages, inquiries, or ideas. An example given by Lamme and Lamme is that correspondence sent home should be made out to “families” or the child’s “guardian” not “parents” (Jeltova and Fish, p. 27, 2005). These terms apply to all students, rather than just a few (Jeltova and Fish, 2005). In addition to notes and forms, teachers should be sensitive and accommodating for “...Mother’s Day/Father’s Day projects, family trees, and the like” (Perrin & Potter, p. 1466-1467, 2004). Doing so, will definitely create a least restrictive environment for all students.

One of the best ways to create a classroom where differences are accepted and cultivated is by starting with the physical environment, the classroom itself. Teachers create the attitude of the classroom (Tips for Making Classrooms Safer for Students with Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and/or Queer Parents). By hanging up pictures of famous non-traditional families and having a library on display with books about different family structures will establish the teacher’s attitude on diversity (Jeltova and Fish, 2005). Books displayed in the room are a great way to start but including them in the curriculum will be most valuable.

Students who come from non-nuclear homes need to view their lifestyle in literature (Gilmore & Bell, 2006). When alternative family dynamics are shown in books, children from said families identify with the material and “witness themselves” in it (Hampton, Rak & Mumford, 1997 in Gilmore & Bell, p. 281, 2006). This boosts their self-esteem and determination while showing the students in non-traditional families that they are valuable (Hampton, Rak & Mumford, 1997 in Gilmore & Bell, 2006). Pupil’s emotions can be tapped into by the books read and teachers can pair students together

who share family dynamics and fears (Gilmore & Bell, 2006). Some of these concerns could be minor, but if they are imperative, literature presents a “safe and sensible” way to talk about it (Leland & Harste, 1999 in Gilmore & Bell, p. 281, 2006).

## Conclusion

“Derman-Sparks and Ramsey (2006) assert that young children can learn about diversity in our country and world when teaching focuses on themes related to developing a strong self-identity, understanding the range of diversity, building a capacity for caring, understanding differences in the wider world, identifying and challenging stereotypes, and understanding the importance of sharing natural resources to create equity for all people. Thoughtful intentional anti-bias curricular approaches that reflect the children and environments in which they live show positive effects on children’s development of ideas, feelings, and behaviors towards diversity, fairness, equity and justice” (Derman-Sparks and Ramsey 2006; Hoffmann 2004 in Giovacco-Johnson, p. 131 2009). “One mother writes, ‘The most important [dream] to me is for them to be tolerant, giving, and kind. I think that is what really makes people successful or not. I think that is what makes people happy; it really has nothing to do with wealth or material things’” (Giovacco-Johnson, p. 133 2009).

## CHAPTER III

### Methodology

#### Research Purpose

The purpose is to discover how first graders define a “family.” This will be accomplished by educating all children that all families are different. Classroom instruction will help students identify that no specific family dynamic is superior or happier when compared to others (Gilmore & Bell, 2006). No matter what the structure, families are important. “The very notion of ‘family’ offers most students some degree of ownership in the topic through their personal experiences of family...” (Turner-Vorbeck, p. 6, 2005). Every student has a family, regardless who is contained in it. They are “often the primary support for individuals” (Gilmore & Bell, p. 280, 2006). Therefore, it is essential that children learn about their particular family and the families of their classmates.

#### Research Question

How do first grade children define “family” and based on these definitions, how can a teacher provide a non-threatening classroom atmosphere where all students’ family structures are celebrated in the curriculum?

#### Sub-Questions

- Is the topic of family an intrinsic motivator for children?
- What family dynamics are students familiar with? Unfamiliar with?
- Does the family structure of students play a role in participation?

## Data Collection

- An interdisciplinary unit on Families
- Student surveys conducted before implementation of unit
- Observations/field notes
- Student work contained in My Family Journal

The interdisciplinary unit on Families provided the backbone for the data collection.

It was through this that the students utilized My Family Journal. Without the unit, there would not have been any student work or observations to analyze. Similarly, there would not have been field notes either. The beginning student survey was crucial in determining how students defined a family before any further instruction in the subject.

## Data Analysis

After each lesson, the assessments completed by the students were looked at by the teacher researcher. The children's responses were charted or graphed to identify any patterns. Field notes and observations were reviewed weekly.

## Demographic Information about the School

### Community

The school is located in a New Jersey suburb in the Greater Philadelphia Metropolitan Area. This "bedroom community" has a total area of 11.6 square miles, with over twenty-eight thousand residents. About a quarter of the inhabitants are under the age of 18 with the same percentage over 25 years of age holding bachelor's degrees. About 15% of the residents have graduate degrees.

## School

This inquiry will look at a classroom in Oakland School. It contains the grades kindergarten to fifth, instructing approximately 650 students. Every room and the hallways are fully carpeted and it is a single-story building.

## Classroom

It is an inclusion classroom taught by a regular education and special-ed teacher. There are sixteen students in the class with thirteen participating in the educational inquiry. Of these thirteen children, six are classified with Individualized Education Plans. The student teacher was present for sixteen consecutive weeks starting in January and concluding in May. All three teachers present in the room taught the subjects of Spelling, Language, Reading, Math, Science, and Social Studies. The students also received lunch and a designated special area subject daily.

## Implementation of the Study

To begin the study, how do first graders define the term “family,” the students were asked the first five questions contained in My Family Journal. They finished up the lesson by drawing a picture of their family on the cover. The next day the class completed the survey questions, the short family survey with pictures, and they were allowed to complete the cover of their journal by coloring it. If they finished early, the students were instructed to get a book displayed in the classroom depicting different kinds of families or complete one of the “If I finish early...” prompts in their journal. The third day, the student teacher asked the class to brainstorm what they think makes up a family. Their answers were charted on the bulletin board. A chapter from Gretchen Super’s *What Kind of Family Do You Have?* was read aloud to the children. When

finished, she and the pupils returned to the brainstormed ideas and elaborated on them as described by the book. The students were then sorted into groups where each group received magazine photos of families. They worked cooperatively, discussed, and then wrote in My Family Journal why the pictures are a family. The sentences were shared with the class upon completion of the activity.

For the following day, two sections of Super's book were read aloud to the class by the teacher researcher. These two discussed the characters Rachel and Jose. They each have a nuclear family and extended family, respectively. The terms were defined and the students independently chose either Rachel or Jose's family to compare to their own. They were to first write how the character's family is alike and then how it is different. Children shared with the person sitting next to them and then the whole class if they chose.

The next two lessons were similar and followed the pattern of two sections read out loud, the character's families being defined and discussed, and partner work. Half of the students received a card with a term on it and the other half received a definition. These terms and definitions are right from the sections read aloud from Gretchen Super's book. The children needed to find the matching term or definition that belonged with their card. After finding their partner, the pupils worked together to construct a sentence using both cards; it was written in My Family Journal. Practicing using the family terms greatly aided in the culminating activity.

Last was the culminating activity where the children wrote a story about a family in a photo. Each child was able to pick a photograph that was cut out of a magazine. This picture was the backbone of the story. They completed a web with the help of the



student teacher. The bubbles on the web were “This family’s name is the,” “Who is in this family?” “What kind of family are they?” “What makes them a family?” “Why is this family special?” and a space for the title. When the web was finished, the teacher researcher aided the students through the order and construction of their story. This provided a comprehensive definition of how the first graders now define a family.

### Looking Ahead

Chapter Four discusses the results of the collected data through the interdisciplinary unit, student surveys, observations, field notes, and student work. Chapter Five will address the implications of the study in addition to further research needed.

## CHAPTER IV

### Data Analysis

#### Survey Results

Upon completion of the survey, a few themes were noticed in how the first graders define a family.

- For the first question, “What is a family?” the students’ answers all contained words such as people or a group that love and/or take care of you.
- Question two, “Is everyone part of a family?” twelve out of thirteen pupils replied with yes; only one answered “no.” The answers varied from loving your family and “they live with you,” to “everyone has a family” and “they take you to the mall.”
- When the children were asked, “Who belongs in a family?” no one wrote in their Family Journal “you” or “me.” However, when they drew a picture of their family on the cover of the journal, every student told the teacher researcher that he/she was in the picture, thus producing the theme that first graders recognize themselves as part of a family.
- The fourth question, “How many people make up a family?” showed the students define a family as more than one person. All of their answers contained varying numbers greater than one.

- Every pupil that participated in the study wrote “yes” when asked if parents and children are needed for a family.
- “Do all people in a family live together?” was the next survey question. Each child responded “no” followed by the reasons of divorce, too many people for one house, or they could live in different countries. Only one student wrote yes.
- They were also asked, “Do you need to live together all the time to be a family?” and all the pupils except one wrote and/or verbalized no. Further written explanations were when people go to work, some family members visit (thus concluding they do not live in the same home), and children can grow up and move out. Just because a family member does not live in the same dwelling does not mean he/she is not a part of the family. The students were able to recognize this before any of the lessons were implemented.
- Questions eight and nine were similar and produced similar answers from the study participants. The questions were “Are all families the same? Why or why not?” and “Are all families different? Why or why not?” respectively. Of the thirteen children, ten responded no and three wrote yes. The reasons as to why families are not the same were that different families have “different skin,” family members could have different [last] names, some families may speak a language different from others, and a family could have a member that is disabled such as a deaf child or parent. Different “skin” was another cited reason for why

all families are different. The amount of money some families have and the numbers of people in it were also student responses to how all families differ.

- The last question students needed to write a response for was, “Are pets part of a family?” All of the participants wrote yes. This was a particularly interesting result. The answers were more varied than any other survey question, but the teacher researcher doubts that all thirteen subjects have a pet in their home or in their family. It can be hypothesized that literature may aid in the students defining pets as part of a family. Their writing contained [pets] can have families of their own, [you] take care of them, pets live with you, you love them, and pets can help you as to why pets are part of a family. The teacher researcher can conclude these are analogous reasons if asked why a parent, brother, or sister is part of a family. These written explanations were if the pets were a human member of the family and it can be assumed that pets are more often than not included and treated as a member of a family.

#### Response to Illustrations of Families

The second part of the survey did not include written responses. Students were asked to look at the five various pictures depicting different family constellations and circle “yes” or “no” if it was a picture of a family. The pictures, in order, were an interracial family with children, two grandparents with a child, a father with two daughters, an extended family, and a nuclear family. For the first picture, every pupil circled “yes” that it is a family. The second photo eleven out of thirteen students circled

“yes” with one student circling both “yes” and “no.” Number three, every test subject thought that was a family. The fourth photograph yielded three “yes” and ten “no” replies. Lastly, the picture of family number five, only one subject circled “no” that it was not a picture of a family.

#### First Graders’ Attitudes Towards Family

Upon completion of the survey, students participated in various activities exposing them to different family dynamics. The first activity was brainstorming what makes a family, a family. Students provided love, “they all live together,” related to one another, and “a mom and a dad” to the prompt. These were later elaborated on after a portion of *What Is A Family?* was read aloud. The children were then placed into groups where they had to look at magazine cut-outs and determine why that photograph was a family. Written responses were “they love each other,” “live together,” “because skin color is the same,” “they are all reladit [related],” “They are speilsh [special] names,” and “there [they’re] having fun together.” Not one pupil wrote that the pictures were not a family even though the photographs showed people of varying age, ethnic background, and partaking in different activities. Love, skin color, and living together were the most cited reasons by the first graders that defined the specific photos as a family.

#### Response to Literature about Families

After that activity, the children were read aloud two sections in *What Kind of Family Do You Have?* The sections were read in sequential order, two at a time. For this particular day, the pupils explored the character Rachel’s nuclear family and Jose’s extended family. Each student chose to compare his/her family to Rachel’s. First, they were to write how their family is similar to the nuclear family. Second, the directions

were to construct a sentence describing how their family is dissimilar to Rachel's. Due to time restraints, only about half of the subjects were able to complete the second task. The main ideas gathered from this day's data was that the children were able to recognize that although there are different people contained in a family and they may participate in different activities, it still constitutes a family.

Then, the following two lessons were completed by the teacher researcher reading two sections aloud at a time and the first graders working in partners to use the proper family terms in a sentence. A blended or stepfamily, single-parent family, adoptive family, and foster family were discovered during these time frames respectively. The students were able to work cooperatively given the terms and definitions on separate index cards to form a grammatically correct sentence. This most definitely aided in the culminating activity

#### Constructing Family Stories

The final activity in discovering how first graders define a family was where they had to construct a story using a never before seen magazine photo and a story web. Students were allowed to pick their photographs. They then had to think of a name for the family in the picture such as Brown, Smith, etc. The next step was to list who was in the family followed by what type of family they were. For instance if the child wrote there is a mom and a daughter in this photograph (thus, the family) then they would be a single-parent family. Then, the students were instructed to jot down what makes them a family. Following that, the first graders needed to write what makes that family special. The teacher researcher provided them with the prompt to look at what the people were doing in the photo if they did not know what to scribe. Finally, the subjects were to give

their future story a title and it was said by the student teacher, “You can call your story Meet the Beeps.” Many of the children completed the activity and it showcased results that were not much different from the initial survey. Only two of the thirteen research participants were not able to correctly identify who they described in the picture to the correlating family structure. That number is significantly lower than the students who circled “no” on the one portion of the beginning survey; the teacher researcher can hypothesize that this may be due to not fully understanding the definitions of the different family dynamics. A good majority of the children had difficulty telling what makes their chosen family photograph special. While a significant time was not spent on this part of a family make-up, the teacher researcher perhaps overestimated the first graders’ understanding of “family.” What was consistent in throughout and evident in the end activity was the ideals of love and taking care of one another to be a family. The vast majority of the thirteen children who participated in the study stated “they love you,” “they love ech [each] other,” “they take car [care] of a bady [baby],” and “Mom takes ker [care] of the girl,” as to reasons that make their picture a family. Arguably, the teacher researcher values the fact that the students are able to apply what defines a family no matter what the structure as opposed to identifying the dynamics (i.e. if it’s a nuclear family, extended family, etc.)

### Major Findings

The persistent themes in how first graders define a family seen throughout the study were love, skin color, and living together. Seen in the first survey question, the student work in My Family Journal from the first lesson and Independent Practice, and the ending family story was the theme of love, or taking care of one another, as what

defines a family. The student, Jamie, in the first question wrote, “A family are people who love you,” followed by Melanie’s work from April 28<sup>th</sup>, “They are a family because they [they] love each other.” Lastly, Ray’s story contained the sentence “They love each [each] other” as to what makes that family special and Daniel wrote, “They take care[e] of a baby [baby]” in his web and subsequent story.

Having the same skin color was detrimental in how the students defined a family. When surveyed, five children wrote as a response to, “Are all families the same? Why or why not?” no because they [the families] have different skin. Similar answers were provided to the next question, “Are all families different? Why or why not?” Three pupils scribed yes because they have different skin. The students who responded with no to “Are all families the same?” and the students who wrote yes to “Are all families different?” were not the same ones. The portion of the survey where students were asked to circle “yes” or “no” as to whether the picture is a family or not was interesting. The first photo depicted an interracial family and all the subjects circled “yes” that it was a family. It is believed that if the pictures were printed in color, the survey would have yielded different results. The rest of the photos contained varying family structures but all the persons in the photographs were of similar skin tone. Only one of those questions had the unanimous “yes” that it was a family. Skin color was cited again in the first activity where the students had to sort through pictures and write what makes them a family. Some students wrote sentences similar to, “They are a family because their skin colors is [are] the same and they look the same” and “They are a family because [their] skin color is the same.” While this was a theme in the beginning of the study, it was seen again. That can be attested to the literature used never discussed skin color at all, let



alone its role in defining a family. Not one child wrote in their family story that their chosen photograph was a family because “their skin color is the same.” In addition to these themes, co-habitation as a defining factor in a family was also common.

Number six and seven in the survey before the instructional unit was the questions, “Do all people in a family live together?” and “Do you need to live together all the time to be a family?” The students provided “no” to answer to both of the questions. This was particularly interesting because during each of the follow ups to the lessons the majority of students cited “living together” as what defines a family. This was seen on the photo sort and using the correct family terms in a sentence. Some examples are, Jake wrote, “They are a family because they live together” and Colleen composed, “A nuclear family is when a mothe [mother] father and thir [their] children [children] live together in a family.” The final stories constructed also produced similar answers, although the theme of love was the most rampant.

In addition to exposing the students to varying family structures, the teacher researcher was curious if the topic of family was an intrinsic motivator that children wanted to learn about.

### Student Engagement

Measuring the children’s interests was done by looking at how often they participated (volunteered to answer questions or share a story), how many times they read a book in the display of family books, and if they completed a sentence starter(s) in the back of My Family Journal. It was noted in the student teacher’s Teacher Research Journal that the students who were believed to come from non-nuclear families volunteered their thoughts more often than usual. These students also read a book from

the display put out by the teacher researcher two times on average than the other students. The sentence starters were also completed by these students. One student, Melanie, finished all six sentence starters with Colleen finishing one. Very few students set forth on this task. Upon consultation with the classroom's cooperating teachers along with the students verbalizing who was drawn on their journal covers, it was determined that Melanie, John, Colleen, and Jake could have non-nuclear families. Melanie, John, and Jake were the students who stood out this during the course of the study. When the section was read aloud describing the character Carly as being a part of a single-parent family, John could not stop smiling and raised his hand to share with the class that he had a single-parent family. It was a pivotal moment in that John was able to identify with the fictional character's family and related it to his own. Melanie provided a similar response when the class explored Tasha's blended or step family. Her hand was raised almost immediately upon introduction of the topic and upon completing the read aloud, the student teacher asked the students, "What kind of family did Tasha have?" Melanie was called on and she stated, "A blended or step family and that's what kind of family I have. My parents got divorced." She was very excited to share that information with the teacher researcher and her fellow classmates. Last, but certainly not least, was Jake who stood out. Jake has an Individualized Education Plan and takes medication for his ADHD. He is a very charming boy, but does not welcome adults into his life easily. The cooperating teachers in the classroom were impressed how well he took to a student teacher. They also provided information that his home life is less than ideal. During his annual IEP meeting, Jake's grandmother stated that he has been coming home telling her about how he has been learning about different families and inquired what family they

had. It can be confusing to figure out what motivates Jake and the fact that after school he discussed families with his grandmother, even wondering about what their specific constellation would be called, determines that more research needs to be done using this topic in the education field. Chapter Five explores in more detail what can be done in the future.

## CHAPTER V

### Final Conclusions

#### Summary of the Study

“How do first graders define a family?” was implemented over the course of sixteen weeks in an inclusion classroom. The students participated in authentic activities contained in an instructional unit on Families. During this time they explored different family structures, looked at attributes that all families share, participated in classroom discussions, and wrote in My Family Journal. The student teacher also wrote her own notes in her Teacher Research Journal. She recorded what students participated, how many times they read a family book from the classroom display, and quotes that evidenced learning. The conclusions are detailed below.

#### Overall Findings and Important Lessons Learned

From the beginning of the inquiry, the prominent issues of love, same skin color, living together, more than one person is contained in a family, but the differing number of people in families does not matter. The students were able to recognize that no matter how many members a family has, it still shares love and the people in it take care of one another. They had difficulty using the proper family terms after identifying who was in a photo even though two class periods were spent using these in independent practice. For instance, Matt stated, “It has a dad a sister and a brother. They are a nuclear family.” A nuclear family is not defined as a dad, a sister, and a brother. A single-parent family would have been the correct answer because it is assumed the “sister, and a brother”

written by Matt was meant to illustrate their relation to each other and not to their dad. Another task the children had difficulty with was describing what made their chosen family in the photograph special. Not enough time was allotted for that activity and further limitations are discussed underneath.

#### Implications for Teaching and What Could be Done Differently

This study was conducted in a single classroom, in one school, located in a South Jersey suburb. It is only a small sample size; the studied classroom had sixteen students in it and only thirteen were allowed to participate in the inquiry. While it might not seem like a huge concern, those three subjects that were not allowed to participate depleted an already minute data set. Additionally, the study was performed in an inclusion class and had it been researched in either a regular education or self-contained classroom the results would have been different. A variety of activities that reflect the abilities of those students such as role playing for the self-contained class or more intensive writing for the regular education children could have been implemented. Furthermore, if more time was allowed for the teacher inquiry or it had been conducted in the researcher's own classroom, a learning community where all families are supported and celebrated would have been in place from the beginning of the year. In an ideal district, discussing all family structures including same-sex parents, would greatly aide in discovering how first graders define a family.

#### Additional Questions

Besides seeing how young elementary students would react to same-sex parents raising a family, it would be interesting to see what a year long learning community specifically geared towards families would produce. Would the families that are non-

nuclear appreciate their dynamics being explored? If the ground work was laid in first grade for students to respect families of others, would this carry on to the older grades? No one can really know for sure. While children who have different family structures are not a new concept, it needs to be studied and analyzed more in-depth so educators can truly meet the needs of all of their students.

### Closing

It was a Friday in the month of May, but it was not just any start of the weekend; this particular Friday was my last day of student teaching. I tried to suppress all different emotions throughout the course of the day. It was not easy. In the morning, I received a card from Christie that read, "Dear Miss McGrail, Thank you so so so much for teaching me all about the different kind's [kinds] of family's [families]. My favorite kind was the nuclear [nuclear] family because that's the family that I have! I sure will miss you!!!! Love, Christie." I definitely choked back tears while reading her hand written card. As my last day continued, there was a surprise party my cooperating teachers organized for me. I was extremely touched by their generosity and orchestration of the event without my knowing. Perhaps the most touching aspect of the day was when my cooperating teachers asked the students what they liked most about my time there. Some students stated that they enjoyed Math with me, others said I was nice, and a few verbalized that they liked learning about families with me. That was a great feeling hearing that, except one student took that statement a little farther. Jake, who was mentioned earlier, was believed to have a non-nuclear family. He is a classified student with a heart of gold but it is extremely difficult to keep him on task and once he gets off, it is nearly impossible to draw him back in. Jake raised his hand and stated, "I liked that she taught us about

families” with a big grin on his face. While this merely echoes what the other children said, it meant so much more coming from Jake. To know that I taught him something relatable that he enjoyed participating in made all the difference. That feeling is unlike any other and if I can reach Jake through the topic of family, the sky is the limit with other students all over the world.

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