
EDUCATION AND FAMILY DIVERSITY

Family diversity refers to the vastly differentiated forms of family that characterize present-day U.S. society and its schools. These differences are recognized in two ways: the structures of families and the attributes of family members. Family diversity based on diverse family structures may include children living with and being raised by grandparents or other relatives, by two mothers or two fathers, by single parents, or by foster and adoptive parents, as well as families blended through new partnerships and remarriage. Family diversity based on the diverse attributes of family members is more akin to dimensions of multiculturalism and may include race, ethnicity, language, religion, sexual orientation, age, and other factors. These dimensions may be varied within individual families, making them inherently heterogeneous where homogeneity is the norm, or they may simply be different from the typical constitution of family members within a particular location, geographic region, or culture. As is the case with most forms of diversity, what is defined as diverse is what is different from what is considered typical. When applied to family, diversity is represented by the forms of family that stand in opposition to the common conception of what constitutes a regular, normal, or ideal family. The real families of today are often juxtaposed and judged against an “ideal” form of family.

The “Ideal” Versus the “Real” Family

There has never been a universal definition of the family that fits the reality of all cultural groups in any historical era. Notions of the “normal” or

“ideal” family represent the interests of the dominant culture in any given time or place. In North American culture, for example, the family that is perceived as “normal” or “ideal” is a middle-class family with two heterosexual parents and two or more biological children.

This image of the ideal family is constantly being promoted through the media, in political debates, and in academic settings and publications, including images of families that appear in textbooks for children and youth. This myth of the ideal nuclear family is so entrenched in the collective psyche that even though fewer than 25% of families in the United States conform to this family model, it is still upheld as the paradigm of family structure. Nuclear families are seen as being healthy and productive. In contrast, families that diverge from this standard often go unrecognized, are underappreciated, and are even labeled by some as “dysfunctional” or “morally wrong.”

If less than a quarter of families in the United States are “ideal” families, then what do the “real” families look like? The following statistics describe the tremendous diversity in U.S. families that has become evident within the past decade.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau report released in 2007, there were 13.6 million single parents in the United States who were responsible for raising 21.2 million children under the age of 21. Approximately 84% of the parents in this group were mothers, and 16% were fathers. During that same time period, 50% of children under the age of 13 were living in stepfamilies, meaning that they were living with one biological parent and that parent’s current partner. The American Community Survey of 2005 stated that 20% of the 776,943 same-sex couples in the United States were raising children. However, these numbers are most likely much higher owing to speculation that large numbers of same-sex couples in the United States are reluctant to reveal information about their sexual orientation to the U.S. Census Bureau. The AARP (formerly the American Association of Retired Persons) reports that more than 2.4 million grandparents in the United States have complete responsibility for raising their grandchildren. The number of adopted children rose from 1.1 million in 1991 to 1.5 million in 2004, and as of September 2006, 510,000 children were in foster care awaiting placement.

The Family in School Curricula

There are many forms of school curricula that commonly address multiple dimensions of family. The term *curriculum* refers to the formal curriculum, such as lessons, textbooks, and activities, as well as the informal curriculum present in school culture, such as school functions and paperwork. Discourses that focus on family in schools include overt, null, and hidden curricula, both formal and informal.

The form of curriculum most familiar, the explicit curriculum, is based on what is present in multiple discourses through what we traditionally consider to be the primary vehicles of learning, such as textbooks, lessons, and activities. This form of curriculum consciously and purposefully addresses knowledge of family. The struggle over selection of textbooks used in the explicit curriculum represents a struggle for control over the messages within those textbooks. Textbook representations of family are among those messages most contested. The idealized nuclear family continues to be the primary focus of textbook depictions of families and family life, which feature misconceptions or narrowly defined normative assumptions.

The null curriculum on family is constituted inversely through what is absent in curricula on family and signifies what is not allowed to represent family. The null curriculum results from decisions made about what to teach and what not to teach and about what gets included and what is omitted from the curriculum. The lack of inclusion in the explicit curriculum of diverse forms of family, either through materials or through lessons themselves, is an example of a null curriculum.

Less obvious than, yet coexisting with, the explicit curriculum is the hidden curriculum on family. The hidden curriculum is created by what is implied as either legitimate or illegitimate knowledge about family within school discourses not usually identified as curriculum. Examples include school paperwork and forms with restrictive categories such as “parents” or “room mothers,” teacher talk of “inadequate” or “dysfunctional” forms of families (typically single-parent families or “broken homes”), and moral judgments about the validity of certain forms of diverse families. By allowing for the narrow definition of an ideal, natural, and normal family, the hidden curriculum implicitly supports the creation of “othered” forms of family.

It is important to note that the unifying construct foundational to these various forms of curriculum is this: Curriculum sends messages to students. Some messages are acknowledged and openly sanctioned, some are implicit and silently supported, and others are unrecognized or only subliminally suggested. Diverse forms of family are often absent from most forms of curricula and also from most educational standards, ruling them irrelevant.

Impact and Improvements

The vast diversity of families found in schools and society today suggests an urgent need for reconsideration of the ways in which families are currently represented in the school curriculum. When curricular conceptions of family are restricted to an idealized family form, other forms of family are omitted and thus devalued. Common diverse forms of family are missing from school curricula on family in spite of the substantial claims by cultural and family scholars that diverse forms of family represent the majority of families and thus constitute what is typical as opposed to what they call the “myth” of the nuclear family.

There is a substantial incongruence between the multiple curricular representations of family and the actual, living, everyday families of students in schools. To make them consistent with reality, curricular conceptual representations of family need to be reshaped to accurately reflect and honor the many and varied ways in which people form caring groups that support and honor their members. Through continued research, education, and dialogue, the discussions about, and representations of, family will become more inclusive.

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See also African American Families and Education; Demography, Family; Divorce, Effects on Children; Families and Schools; Family, The; Family Diversity; Foster and Adoptive Families; Latin American Families in the United States; Stepfamilies, Effects on the Education of Children

Further Readings

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