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Children of Single-Parent Families and the Whole Language Classroom

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CHILDREN OF SINGLE-PARENT FAMILIES AND THE WHOLE LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

by

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Household composition has changed dramatically in the past few decades, creating new challenges for our nation's educational systems. "Between 1950 and 1985 the divorce rate has more than doubled. ... As a result of this and other trends, ... there are over ten million female headed households in our country" (Johnston, 1990, p. 3). A growing number of students in our school system are children from these families, and school districts are struggling to find ways to meet the challenges these children present.

A number of studies have examined the pattern of single family households and their effects on school performance. Some have identified the single-parent structure as associated with lower achievement, and others have found that it is not possible to sort out the effects of single-parent structures from other important variables, such as class, income, culture, and amount or time available for child rearing (Johnson, 1990). As a group, however, there is overwhelming evidence that these children are experiencing academic problems in our educational institutions (Featherstone et al., 1992). After examining the evidence and considering the recommendations, my conclusion is that children of single-parent families would benefit from placement in a whole language classroom, facilitated by a teacher sensitive to their needs.

School districts have conducted several studies in an attempt to find ways to meet the special needs of single-parent children in the classroom. The "common thread" throughout these studies is that all agree something needs to be done to advance student achievement, but the suggested approaches and recommendations are quite varied. Wanat's (1993) study stated that action was needed at the state level to develop programs to meet the broad and varied needs of single-parent families that affected single-parent children's performance in school. Palladino (1993) compiled a list of tips for teachers that suggested ways to help single parents improve their children's scholastic performance, or basically, placing information in parents' hands so that they might better meet the educational needs of their children. Nock (1988) stressed the need to revamp the power structures within the educational institutions in order to create a more compatible learning environment for children of single-parent homes. Lightfoot (1978) focused on teachers' attitudes toward children from single-parent families as a major area of concern, while Fredericks et al. (1991) and Wickens (1993) emphasized the need to incorporate "diversified family concepts" into the curriculum.

I'm assuming that each of these authors cared a great deal about the problems experienced by students from single-parent homes or they wouldn't have taken the time to address them. However, some of the recommendations come very close to stereotyping these students and their families, and in the process of trying to help, they may have, in fact, done more harm than good. The following is my attempt to examine these research programs and build support for my thesis statement that children from single-parent homes could benefit from a whole language educational environment.

"Although hesitant to label children by family situation," Carolyn Wanat (1993) stressed the need for the state legislatures to become more involved and develop policies to meet the broad, varied needs of single-parent families that affect children's academic performance. These policies,

Wanat emphasized, should consider the larger social and equity issues that relate to single-parent families. The following are Wanat's recommendations:

1. Educate single parents. States should develop policies that would allow single parents to complete their education. ...
2. Provide social and cultural opportunities for families. ... These activities would allow children and parents to observe and practice appropriate social behaviors. ...
3. Provide a stable environment for children. States need to develop policies that give single-parent children stability. ...
4. Increase involvement of single parents realistically. Schools need to develop new, practical ways to involve single parents who have limited time and academic skills. ... States should also provide parenting skills classes. ...
5. Create opportunities to help children feel accepted. States need to support programs that involve children with positive adult role models and other children. ...
6. Address larger social issues. Children from single-parent families have greater problems both inside and outside of school. These children are more at risk of dropping out of school and more likely to suffer problems that affect their physical and emotional well-being, including abuse and neglect, alcoholic parents, teen pregnancy, unemployment, and juvenile offenses and violent crimes. ...
7. Address equity issues. Resources must be made available so disadvantaged single-parent children come to school as prepared as other more advantaged children to learn and participate fully ... (p. 55).

Wanat may have deep concern for the plight of children from single-parent families, although personally, I found all of her recommendations offensive. In my opinion, Wanat undermines the family unit; it appears as though the author assumes that all children from single-parent homes are living under desperate circumstances. But even if I supported Wanat's recommendations, state legislation leading to social change would take years. Long-term plans and goals are worthwhile, but the concerns of children are immediate.

Palladino (1993) composed a list of "tips" that he thought would be helpful for teachers that had children of single-parent homes in their classrooms. Some of the suggestions would probably be helpful for "all" families. Those, however, aimed exclusively at children of single-parent families may be interpreted as stereotyping. The following are seven of the tips that Palladino recommended:

1. Reach out to establish greater school-parent connections. ...
2. Request and provide information. ... Because we tend to harbor stereotypes about children from single-parent homes, teachers should be asked to obtain as much information as possible about them to better understand them, to develop a significant teaching relationship, and to be aware of variables that may have an impact on learning. ...
3. Help parents structure homework time. Single-parent students seem to work more diligently under structured schedules. ...
4. Provide examples of excellence. Teachers can increase student learning and performance by sharing and discussing excellent test papers, compositions, or reports by other students. Also by supplying parents with such examples, they provide an efficient, powerful means to help parents help children's learning. ...

5. Provide or arrange for tutoring. Single parents often panic when their child performs poorly in school, viewing it as an indicator that they are "failing" as parents. ...
6. Encourage parents to recognize and reward student success. In most two-parent families, education plays a central role in family life. But separation or divorce disrupts daily routines, often negatively impacting the importance of school. ...
7. Assign single-parent students to male teachers. Child development research shows both boys and girls are adversely affected by separation and divorce. Boys need the caring interaction of a male to develop appropriate gender behaviors; girls need opportunities to verbally interact with a caring male, so they can develop interaction skills that can later be transferred to teen and adult relationships. Therefore, place single-parent students from female-headed families with male teachers whenever possible (pp. 47-48).

The previous authors have stressed ways to make the children of single-parent homes fit into the existing educational system. Perhaps a better approach would be to accept these students as they are, respect the diversity of their family structures, and make changes within the educational institutions to accommodate their growth and learning. In his article, "The Family and Hierarchy," Nock (1988) offers insight into the dynamics of single-parent families. Nock suggests one reason to explain why children of one-parent homes achieve less in school than did children in two-parent households. Nock maintains that it may be due to their lack of exposure to hierarchical models of authority. He believes that children raised in less structured family settings are, in effect, disadvantaged in their ability to function in authoritarianism.

Nock concludes as a result of his research that children raised in two-parent homes are socialized to accept authoritative figures. These children are comfortable in a situation where dad and mom are in control. When these children interact in the educational setting, they have fewer problems adjusting to the traditional classroom; they are less inclined to challenge the fact that the teacher is in charge. Children from single-parent homes, however, have often developed a peer-like relationship with their parent, a relationship with elements of equality. These children have been needed to help keep the family going and have been relied upon for emotional support. At an early age they have become responsible for themselves and have developed a sense of self-sufficiency. In the school setting they often feel uncomfortable with the power structure and find it difficult to conform even when they want to. Nock recommends modifying the hierarchical structure within institutions, allowing these children more autonomy and the opportunity to express their independence and self-reliance in the classroom.

Changing an entire institution might take a long time, whereas changing the learning environment in a classroom could be accomplished within an acceptable time frame. Perhaps the most necessary ingredient would be a teacher willing to make some changes in order to facilitate learners' needs. The teacher would need to decentralize the classroom in order to allow for student growth and development. Students would be able to interact with their teacher as a friend, someone that could be counted on for support and encouragement, rather than as an authoritative figure. I believe the whole language classroom would best serve the students and teachers in this situation, insuring a degree of independence for students, while providing a rich and expressive learning environment.

The attitude of the teacher toward children of single-parent homes is just as important as the structure of the classroom. Teachers can communicate directly or indirectly an attitude or prejudice that may have a negative effect on student learning. As Johnson (1990) states:

> Attributing all of a child's behavior to the family structure in which he or she lives does a great disservice to that child and undermines the school's ability to educate him or her effectively. The kid comes to the school from the only family he or she has. Judging it as the "right" or "wrong" family structure does little to advance the child's success or that of the school (p. 7).

In her book, *Worlds Apart*, Sara Lightfoot (1978, p. 12) discussed an interview that she had with a classroom teacher. According to Lightfoot the teacher discussed a group of children in her classroom that lived in a housing project near the school. The teacher stated that "the children often came from single-parent families that did not provide a stable, orderly, and clean home environment." ... "You have a lot more families where there's only one parent. That's them on some kind of subsistence. So that you find a lot of the kids don't come from solid backgrounds" (p. 112).

As the teacher continued, she told Lightfoot that she recognized inequality and injustice in this society, but felt that if the parents worked hard enough they could pull themselves out of the depths of poverty and provide a decent life for their children. And that she, the teacher, could clearly see the direct parallel between poor, chaotic home environments and the students' poor performance in school.

On several occasions I've noted teachers and school officials making prejudicial remarks concerning single-parent families. For example, an enthusiastic second grade teacher once told me that she had "the best class, all good families, no single-parent families." If this was the way that she genuinely felt, what kind of message was she sending to the children in her classroom? Another example occurred at a service meeting when an administrator proposed implementing a "Big Brother" program targeting children from single-parent families. She stated that these children usually lived with their mothers and would like a "Big Brother" since they didn't have fathers.

Unless one of their parents had died, these children do have two parents; they just aren't living together (Fredricks et al., 1991). In all fairness, I feel it is important to point out that many fathers living outside of the home do make a genuine attempt to spend quality time with their children. Furthermore, it would be presumptuous to assume that children from single-parent homes are lonely, just as it would be presumptuous to assume that all children in two-parent homes are not lonely.

For some reason that I fail to understand, it is still socially acceptable to make generalizations about single-parent families. It is with some of these sensitive issues in mind that Lightfoot (1978) attempts to explain some of the complex relationships between school and home.

Basically, Lightfoot places teachers on a continuum. At one extreme are the teachers who denied that family background knowledge made a difference in their style of interaction or their perception of students. If possible, this kind of teacher excluded the family from school interaction. This attitude protected children from bias and stereotyping, but it also inhibited the need for communication and cooperation between family and school. At the opposite end of the continuum were the teachers that were unable to separate the child from the parent. In the teacher's eyes, the child became a shadow of the parent's social position, a miniature version of a doctor, or garbage collector. In this situation, the teacher was unable to look at the child without seeing the parents. Somewhere in the middle of the continuum is the teacher who believes that background information is helpful in communicating with the child and the family. S/he believes that biographic histories of the children s/he teaches can help support healthy child development and can help the teacher better understand the child (Lightfoot, 1978). This type of philosophy is important for the teachers

of single-parent children since the need for authentic communication is so vital and the dangers of stereotyping so devastating.

In the whole language classroom, teachers would get a chance to know their students and better understand the complexities of their family structures, regardless of how traditional or nontraditional they may be. Teachers would have a chance to examine their own belief systems and try to develop new strategies for meaningful discussions about families (Wickens, 1993). Whole language lends itself to informal conversations, allowing teachers to share aspects of their own lives, when appropriate, and reminding students that some teachers are single parents too. In turn, this would allow students to relate to their teachers in meaningful contexts and help them build trusting relationships. Teachers and learners would both benefit by gaining insight into their own lives and into the lives of others (Fredricks et al., 1991).

The whole language classroom, I feel, promotes growth, development, and the overall happiness of children from single-parent families. Teachers could develop curriculum to meet the needs of these students. Through literature, children would have a chance to realize and explore the diversity among families. Classroom activities and books would be representative of the variety of family configurations. While engaged in discussions, children would be able to share their literary experiences with other children in a rich language environment. Together they could discover the many things that families have in common and the special qualities that make them unique. Children would have an opportunity to talk about their families with peers and in the process dispel some of the misunderstandings, while gaining insight into the dynamics found in other families (Fredricks et al., 1991).

As educators, it is our responsibility to address the problems affecting the performance of students from single-parent families. Regardless of their intent, long range plans for social change, or quick-fix tips are inadequate. Rather, teachers must look inside themselves and examine their own perspectives toward single-parent homes and come to terms with any prejudices that may negatively affect their students. Teachers must also be willing to step out of an authoritative role in the classroom, yet continue to provide encouragement and support. Finally, teachers should provide a whole language learning environment incorporating "diversified family concepts" into the curriculum. In my opinion, by addressing the concerns of prejudice, classroom structure, and curriculum we could provide a just and humane solution to the problems now facing students from single-parent homes.

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