CONNECTING WITH COLLEAGUES: LOOKING AT FAMILY INCLUSIVENESS WITH THE GREAT BIG BOOK OF FAMILIES

Suggested Level: Educators
Length of Time: 30-35 minutes

“When someone with the authority of a teacher, say, describes the world and you are not in it, there is a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked in the mirror and saw nothing.” – Adrienne Rich, poet

This quote by Adrienne Rich or the longer quote by Pulitzer Prize winning author Junot Diaz (see below) sets the context for looking at The Great Big Book of Families. When students do not see their reality reflected in any of the materials used in school, it is like having no mirror. Educators seek to make the school experience relevant and don’t want to leave out any student or leave them feeling “less than.” This book also provides a window for students into many kinds of families to expand their understanding of the world.

Written by Mary Hoffman, author of the well-known children’s book, Amazing Grace, The Great Big Book of Families showcases diverse families and their lives together. It provides a rich tool to include and celebrate the broad scope of human experience with family across race, ethnicity, economic class and family structure.

Activity

• Read aloud the Adrienne Rich or Junot Diaz quote. Discuss the importance of students seeing their reality reflected in the materials used in school.

• With either a personal story from your experience of teaching or this example from a kindergarten teacher, show how a simple beginning of school activity can seem inclusive or not. In a discussion around summer vacation, notice how just saying, “Some families have vacations at home and talking about how much fun it is to spread a sheet over upturned chairs to create a pretend camping trip…or running through the sprinkler” — makes room for children who don’t have economic privilege.

• Then, look through The Great Big Book of Families, highlighting some of the two page spreads on different topics. Start with the first page that illustrates a stereotypical family – white, middle-class, mom, dad, two kids, and a pet.

• Ask educators to compare/contrast the ways that inclusion, cultural relevance and competence reflected in this book and older, less inclusive books effects self-concept, sense of belonging and normalcy.

• Some of the pages to feature include homes, jobs, clothes, who’s in your family, feelings, and family trees. (Also, see the Tree of Caring lesson for alternative activities for family trees.)
• Say that when you use this book in a classroom, you can encourage students to pay attention to
the family structures that they see in the book. How many family structures do you notice that
are different from the first illustration? What other differences do you notice?

• As you read the book, you can stop on different pages and ask: What do you see in this
picture? Does this look like your family or home? How is this family and home different from
yours? How is it the same?

• After you have finished reading the book, ask your students to review what kinds of families
they saw in the book? Then, lead a discussion by asking: What are some important things in all
families? What makes a family? Depending on the age of your students and the size of your
class, you could start this off by asking, your students to turn and talk with 1 or 2 others about
these questions. Then, ask for some comments based on what they talked about.

Additional Books Featuring Diverse Families

*The Family Book*, Todd Parr. (Pre-K – K)
*All Families Are Special*, Norma Simon. (2 – 3)
*Dear Child*, John Farrel (Pre-K – K)
*Who's In My Family?: All About Our Families*, Robie Harris. (Pre-K – 1)
*Who’s in a Family?* Robert Skutch. (Pre-K – K)
*Families*, Susan Kuklin. (3 – 5)

Additional Resources from Welcoming Schools

• Books Highlighting All Kinds of Families
• Using LGBT-Inclusive Children’s Books and Looking at Gender Through Books
• Books to Engage Students: Many bibliographies on family diversity, gender stereotyping and
  identity, and bullying.

"You guys know about vampires? You know, vampires have no reflections in a
mirror? There's this idea that monsters don't have reflections in a mirror. And what I've
always thought isn't that monsters don't have reflections in a mirror. It's that if you
want to make a human being into a monster, deny them, at the cultural level, any
reflection of themselves. And growing up, I felt like a monster in some ways. I didn't
see myself reflected at all. I was like, 'Yo, is something wrong with me?' That the
whole society seems to think that people like me don't exist? And part of what inspired
me, was this deep desire that before I died, I would make a couple of mirrors. That I
would make some mirrors so that kids like me might seem themselves reflected back
and might not feel so monstrous for it."

– Junot Diaz, Pulitzer Prize-winning author

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