

Family Language Labels: Effect on Children Living with Non-Parental Caregivers

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Abstract

Schools work hard to create a caring environment for students, but they may be missing an important issue. Some students are having their home life misrepresented in classroom discourse. Teachers and schools are constantly using the word parent, mother, or father to describe children's caregivers when in fact many students live, permanently or temporarily, with caregivers. In this paper a parent is defined as a biological mother or father. The purpose of this study is to examine the effects that continued exposure to the word parent has on elementary students living with non-parental caregivers.

Literature indicates that children live with many types of caregivers other than biological parents, including foster parents, adoptive parents, grandparents, and parents' live-in partners. At the same time, schools are being encouraged to support diversity and use inclusive language. Additional research shows that when children's experiences are not acknowledged in discourse, they can be silenced.

If language theories, usually applied to ethnicity and gender, can be extrapolated to include children with non-traditional families, then schools are doing a number of students a disservice. However, additional research is needed on the actual extent of the problem in schools and the effects on the students.

Six adult females were interviewed in a qualitative study collecting experiences and perceptions of students exposed to misrepresentative family language labels in the classroom. Participants perceived themselves as different from the norm, or did not see themselves represented in discourse. They wished teachers had used more inclusive words when describing families. This study adds to current research by giving a voice to students living with non-parental caregivers during elementary school.

Introduction

California is home to a diverse population of students. One aspect of diversity is home life. I have taught students who lived with their aunts, grandparents, and various other relatives. I had one student who lived with his older brother who was about 19, the brother's girlfriend, and her parents. The brother's girlfriend helped take care of this child; she would sign his homework log.

In addition, not all students live with a legal guardian. One student I taught was under the legal care of her mother but was living temporarily with her grandmother. Another girl saw her mother and aunt in a legal battle for guardianship. At one point this child lived with her aunt, but Mom legally made all school decisions; at the same time, her aunt signed her weekly folder.

Schools have worked to be inclusive of different languages, cultural practices, and learning styles. But I still hear and read the word parent in every room and on every paper. How is this affecting students who are keenly aware that this normalized model does not apply to them? This study helps answers that question by collecting data about language use in the classroom and students' comfort levels, behavior, and perceptions as it relates to that language.

Statement of Problem

How does use of the word parent (or mother and father) as well as other dialogue that assumes a parental presence in the home, affect elementary students not living with parents? Parent is defined as a biological mother or father. I am interested in social, emotional, or behavioral effects that students experience.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study is to examine the effects of the words parent, mother, and father on elementary students who do not live with a biological parent. Since many students go home each day to diverse caregivers, their classroom discourse and school correspondence should reflect their experiences.

Research Question

How does use of the words parent, mother, and father, as well as other dialogue that assumes a parental presence in the home, affect elementary students not living with parents? This study looks to confirm the prevalence with which the word parent is used in classroom dialogue, school letters and forms.

Theoretical Rationale

Numerous language theories, including Muted Group theory (Ardener, 2005) and Co-cultural theory (Orbe, 1998), address issues associated with silenced populations. These theories, and others, state that those in dominant societal groups, middle class, white males from traditional families, construct the language for society. This language must then be negotiated by those from subordinate groups. Therefore, language does not accurately represent all experiences. Language theories further state that language can shape the way people act or perceive things. Therefore, we can see the importance of using language that accurately reflects students' families. If these theories hold true for non-traditional families, school personnel must take a critical look at language use in school situations shed light on potential biases and meet diversity appreciation goals.

Assumptions

It is my assumption that most teachers and administrators in the United States use the word parent, or mother and father, to describe students' caregivers. While I understand that guardian is used sometimes, usually on paper, in conjunction with parent, I do not believe this addresses the issue of inclusiveness, since it is used sporadically and as an add-on to the norm of parent. Furthermore, I assume such practices to some extent negatively affect students being raised by adults other than their parents.

Background and Need

Ardener (2005) has developed and continues to use the Muted Group theory to describe language and culture. Muted Group states that people who are not part of society's normative group do not take part in creating language but are still expected to accept and see themselves in this language. This causes those outside the normative group to be silenced in terms of describing their experiences; it also creates false understanding by perpetuating certain norms as reality for all.

If teachers use the term parent in their classrooms they are silencing many students. Statistics show that many students live with grandparents, stepparents, adoptive parents, foster parents, parents' gay or lesbian partners, and a number of other related and non-related caregivers (Koontz, 1992).

Review of the Literature

A review of current literature confirms that students live in various familial situations, many of which do not involve a biological mother and father. In addition, numerous language theories have shown that some groups of people, such as those from non-traditional families, go unrepresented in societal discourse. Schools are one of many institutions that perpetuate discriminate practices such as marginalizing discourse. Furthermore, research shows the importance of appreciating diversity in schools and briefly addresses the need for inclusive language practices in schools.

Historical Caregivers

The idea that inclusive language is now needed to accommodate current changing family configurations is a misnomer. In actuality, children have always had a variety of caregivers. In the colonial South, half of children thirteen and under had had a least one parent die (Koontz, 1992, p.10). Puritan apprentices once shared half their parenting rights and responsibilities with their masters (Koontz, p. 126). At the turn of the century, 20% of American children lived in orphanages because their parents could not afford to keep them (Koontz, p.4).

In the 1800s, members of black families, who were held against their will and forced to work unpaid for others, faced specific family issues. Masters were able to dissolve slave marriages and rape married or single slaves. Although most families were two parent, fosterage was also practiced; and extended kin, especially grandmothers, played an important role in child care (Koontz, 1992, p.238).

Historically there were more children living without a biological parent than there are now. In 1940, 10% of children lived with neither their mother nor father (Koontz, 1992, p.15). Today's figures have dropped to 4% (Department of Health, 2005; Koontz, p.14).

Statistics on Living Arrangements

Although families have always been diverse, the later twentieth century has seen an increase in family diversity (Koontz, 1992, p.183). Many students live with and are cared for by adults that are not their biological parents. Hampton, Rak, and Mumford (as cited in Schwartz, 1999) found that in urban schools at least 30% of students lived with an adult other than a biological parent. These include grandparents, foster parents, and gay and lesbian couples.

For many children, their grandparent's home is more than just a place to visit. In 1997, 3.74 million minors were living in grandparents' homes. One million of these children were being raised solely by grandparents. In addition, great-grandparents and step-grandparents may also be raising their grandchildren (Glass & Huneycutt, 2002).

Another type of family is created through adoption. According to the 2000 U.S. census, 1.6 million minors are the adopted children of householders. These include adoptions of relatives, stepchildren, and children unrelated to the householder. It is also possible that some of these children may not be legally adopted since, on census forms, it is up to the householder to determine relation; and some cultures practice informal adoption (Krieder, 2003). Stolley (1993) describes informal adoption as a birth parent giving primary care of a child over to another adult, usually another family member,

without formal documentation. She points out the prevalence of this practice in black communities.

It is difficult to determine accurate accounts of adoptions in the United States. Only adoptions that go through public child welfare have to be reported. Private agencies and independent adoptions are voluntary reporters (Stolley, 1993).

Because of informal living arrangements and reporting modes, the same difficulty exists in determining an accurate account of stepchildren. According to the 2000 census, an estimated 3.3 million minors are the stepchildren of householders. However, in some cases these adults may not actually be married to the child's biological parent but may simply refer to them as stepchildren (Krieder, 2003).

As in the case of stepchildren, there are many incidents in which children may live with one biological parent and another adult. It is estimated that between 6 and 14 million students are living with a homosexual, bisexual, or transgender parent (Jeltova & Fish, 2005; Gay, Lesbian and Straight Educational Network [GLSEN], 2003). This means that children may be living with a parent's partner as well.

Around two fifths of children are believed to be living, at least part time, with two cohabitating but unmarried adults. This includes children living with their biological mother and father who are unmarried, but also includes children living with one biological parent and that parent's partner (Bumpass & Lu, 2000). Today many stepchildren are created by cohabitation rather than marriage (Krieder, 2003).

In addition to permanent non-parental homes, some children move through various living situations or from one caregiver to another. Some children may find themselves in extended or short-term foster care. The Code of Federal Regulations

defines foster care as "24-hour substitute care for children outside their own homes" (Child Welfare Information Gateway [CWIG], 2005, para. 1). This includes relative and non-relative foster families, as well as "group homes, emergency shelters, residential facilities, and pre-adoptive homes" (CWIG, para. 1). In 2003, an estimated 523,000 children, with a median age of 10.9, were living in foster care situations. Of these only 23% were in relatives' homes. The rest were living in non-relative homes (46%), group homes or institutions (19%), pre-adoptive homes (5%), or other placements (7%) (CWIG).

Of the children described above, nearly half were expected to be returned to their parent or legal guardian. The other half were looking at adoption, living arrangements with relatives, long-term foster care, or emancipation. However, for 10% of these children no permanent living arrangements had been planned (CWIG, 2005).

Children's stays in foster care range from less than one month to more than five years. Of those who were exited from foster care in 2003, half had been in foster care for less than a year. However, 10% had been in foster situations for 3-5 years, and 9% for more than 5 years (CWIG, 2005).

Children whose parents become incarcerated can also find themselves thrown into new living situations. They often change homes and caregivers repeatedly (Johnston, 1995, as cited in Myers, Smarsh, Amlund-Hagen, Kennon, 1999, p.11; Seymour, 1998) especially if it is their mother who becomes incarcerated (Bloom, 1993, as cited in Myers et al., p.12; Seymour, 1998).

Once a parent is arrested or incarcerated, no single agency exists to oversee the care of dependent children. Correctional institutions and police do not ask about the

children of those they arrest. Because of this there is no accurate account of the number of children displaced due to parental incarceration (Myers et al., 1999; Seymour, 1998). Estimates in 1993 figured 75-80% of incarcerated mothers had dependent children, creating 160,000 children with incarcerated mothers (Myers et al., p.12). One estimate in 2004 figured 200,000 children had incarcerated mothers (Visit to mom, 2004). And these numbers are increasing (Cunningham, 2001; Myers et al.). According to the US Department of Justice, 25% of these children will end up living with their father. However, 51% go to live with a grandmother, 20% with another relative, 4% with a family friend, and 11% will end up in a state placement. The majority of children will go through at least one change in their placement, and around 10% will go through two (Myers et al., p.15). In addition, siblings are often sent to live with different caregivers (Cunningham, 2001; Myers et al.).

In six years of teaching, I have never had a class where every student lived with one or two biological parents. One year I had a very involved aunt who two years earlier had taken custody of her nephew, after he had been severely abused. The next year, I had a girl who lived with her father, but it was his former foster father (the girl's foster grandfather) who came to conferences, signed notes, helped with homework, and collected papers from school.

Culture's Influence on Language/ Language's Influence on Culture

Culture and language are powerfully linked. Many fundamental characteristics of communication portray this connection. First, communication “involves shared meanings that are invented and co-created between and among the participants” (Lustig & Koester, 2006, p.54). It is learned unconsciously. In addition, variations in languages

can show what cultures hold to be valuable. In fact, there is an entire field, pragmatics, dedicated to studying the influence “language has on human perception and behavior” (Lustig & Koester, p.115). One view of the Sapir-Whorf Theory “holds that language shapes how people think and experience their world” (Lustig & Koester, p. 115). Sapir-Whorf was originally designed to explain how women, as a non-dominant group, are affected by dominant culture’s use of language (Lustig & Koester). In fact, most knowledge is acquired through language (Kramarae, 2005).

Many studies have been conducted and theories proposed as to ways in which communication influences individuals. Muted Group Theory was proposed to describe how non-dominant groups within society have their experiences silenced through discourse created and reinforced by dominant groups. It originally focused mostly on women but is generally concerned with whether all groups “participate equally in the generation of ideas and their encoding into discourse” (Ardener, 2005, para. 14).

Ardener explains that those at the top of the societal hierarchy determine the communication system of everyone within the society. Eventually that communication comes to be seen as correct and is applied to all groups (as cited in Orbe, 1998). Specifically, subordinate groups “have their experiences interpreted for them,” and are “encouraged to see themselves as represented in the dominant discourse” (Kramarae, 2005, para. 8).

However, language created by those in the privileged circle— white, middle class, male, heterosexual, traditional family member— may not accurately represent the experiences of those outside it (Kramarae, 2005). People are considered to be muted when they do not see their lives represented in dominant communication (Orbe, 1998).

When language is used to describe a group, it establishes the dichotomy of those within the group and those outside of it (Lustig & Koester, 2006).

A newer model of muted groups is the Co-Cultural Theory. Co-culture is used to replace negative words such as non-dominant or muted. Co-cultural groups, are defined by Johnson (as cited in Orbe, 1998, para. 4) as those unified by “age, class, sex, education, ethnicity, religion, abilities, affection or sexual orientation;” also included are Native Americans and the poor (Lincoln, 1993). Co-Cultural Theory addresses the ways in which traditionally marginalized groups communicate within dominant culture. Its premise is that “certain co-cultures (those of European Americans and men for example) have acquired dominant group status” (Orbe, 1998, para. 4) and that their status renders other co-cultural groups marginalized.

Although these theories were not proposed to describe the marginalization of children from non-traditional families, many researchers see its application beyond gender, race and class. Ardener originally wrote about the silencing of women as a group; but she was pleased to see that her work was still considered in 1999 by Wall and Gannon-Leary to be “relevant and... applicable beyond the gender based” (Ardener, 2005, para.1). In fact her husband, Edwin, “always maintained that muted group theory was not only, or even primarily, about women” (Ardener, para. 11). Ardener is not alone in explaining that her theories apply to many groups other than women, for example different ethnicities or children (Ardener; Orbe, 2005; Tierney, 1993).

Many people have experienced the damaging effects of norms. Koontz has discussed familial norms with her college students and colleagues. Her students share

that, as children, they felt guilty or angry “because their families did not act like those on television” (1992, p.6).

Language describing family can have a powerful effect on children. One colleague I worked with recounted a story about an interaction she witnessed between a firefighter and a young child. While driving one day with a friend, she witnessed a boy who, riding his bike down a hill, swerved and hit a parked car and came off his bike. Because the child’s nose and forehead were bleeding, she phoned 911. After checking the child, one fireman said he was going to call the child’s mom to come pick him up. Having student taught under me, this teacher recounts immediately being worried about the firefighter throwing out the word mom. Her concerns were unfortunately well placed. The eighth grader began crying explaining to the officer that his mom had died two months ago and he was living with his grandmother (personal communication, March 14, 2007).

One principal has also seen how students are affected. She says existing norms make children in non-traditional homes feel “different.” She knows these children are aware that they do not fit the model. According to this principal, the term parent is used “loosely” because everyone is “use to that word” (personal communication, January 30, 2007).

Schools as Perpetuating Institutions

Societal systems that perpetuate inequalities and biases are manifested in schools (Grant & Gillette, 2006; Jeltova & Fish, 2005). Giroux and Apple (as cited in McLaughlin, 1993) have studied the relationship between schools and power. They argue against the idea that schools are objective and instead maintain that schools

reinforce inequalities present in society as a whole by transmitting knowledge without considering power structures. Schools serve to legitimize the values of the dominant group while dismissing values and experiences of those from subordinate groups.

McLaughlin and Tierney collected personal narratives of people whose educational situation in some way silenced them. They recognize that education is shaped by those holding dominate power (Tierney, 1993) and that oppression exists against those whose race, class, gender, etc. differ from those in dominant power positions (LeCompte, 1993). As discussed earlier, Co-Cultural Theory maintains that those from the dominant group pervade societal institutions and therefore these institutions perpetuate the communication of the mainstream groups (Orbe, 1998).

In addition, teachers' perceptions and assumptions influence their treatment of children. Students know whether their teachers are aware of and respect their background, and those who feel included are more likely to perform well in school (Lott & Rogers, 2005). Effective teachers are those that meet the needs of all students regardless of family structure. They understand how students' perceptions of themselves influence their ability to learn (Grant & Gillette, 2006).

Texts and other classroom curriculum can also discriminate against some students. The term hidden curriculum has been used to describe the phenomenon of students from non-normative groups receiving different educations than those from the normative group, one that perpetuates a hierarchy in which they are subordinate (Mickelson & Smith, 2007). Indeed, schools play a part in determining what students see as valuable or what they see at all (Anderson & Collins, 2007). Standard curriculum holds a heterosexual bias, and many schools do not include alternative families in their

discussions (Jeltova & Fish, 2005). By doing assigned readings, students develop ideas about what is positive and what is negative. Therefore library material and classroom curriculum should represent various family structures (Schwartz, 1999).

When young students are still forming their identity they attend schools which reinforce these hierarchies involving “race, class, and gender” (Anderson & Collins, 2007, p. 278). Therefore it can be difficult for students from homosexual families or families of color to develop an appreciation for their home situation if it is being lessened (Anderson & Collins, p. 273) by their schools. What children may actually feel is that they are different than others (Schwartz, 1999). In fact, students from non-traditional homes may feel “isolated, marginalized, and even rejected by society” (Rubin, 1995 as cited in Schwartz, para. 25).

Teachers may not always be aware of children’s background and home life. Children whose parents are incarcerated may be told by caregivers not to tell others what is going on. This silence causes trauma and isolation (Myers et al., 1999, p.20).

Schools can reinforce damaging stereotypes, but they can also work to create positive environments. I have been using the word grown-up and, more recently, adult in my classroom (instead of the word parent) for five years now. This year I’ve had several students begin to use it. One girl asked if this paper was the one her adult was supposed to sign. This girl lives with her mom, and Mom has volunteered in our classroom. Although she and I both knew that her caregiver was Mom, she had picked up the language used in our classroom. Another child asked several questions about a field trip, referring each time to the grown-ups who would be coming with us.

In addition, my Room Mom (I say mom in this case because she is the biological mother of a student), has picked up on our new inclusive language. Although she still uses parent in the majority of her dialogue with students, she sometimes catches herself and uses adult or grown-up.

Diversity Appreciation

Schools today see celebrating diversity as one of their goals. In fact, multicultural education lists one of its teacher goals as “offering students instruction that matches their needs based on factors such as race, sex, ethnicity, and sociolinguistic background” (Rasool & Curtis, 2000, p. 11). In addition to traditional language and ethnicity concerns, Lott and Rogers (2005) include family structure as an important diversity in schools today. Many teachers and schools, however, still hold stereotypes about students, including the assumption of a traditional family at home (Jeltova & Fish, 2005; Lott & Rogers, 2005; Stein, Perrin, & Potter, 2004). In one case a school nurse phoned home looking for a child’s mother; unaware that this child had two fathers, she refused to speak to the man answering the phone (Jeltova & Fish). While editing one school packet for another teacher, I crossed out the word parent in favor of the more inclusive term adult. When I received the final version of the packet, my change of term from parent to adult had not been included.

Using traditional definitions of family can alienate children from non-traditional homes (Stein et al., 2004; Schwartz, 1999). Stroud, Stroud, and Staley (1999, para. 4) suggest emphasizing “belonging” to a family rather than being born into one. Teachers’ prejudice against “broken” stepfamilies can cause problems at home (Koontz, 1992, p.278). Using the word grown-up in my classroom has prompted several students to ask

why I do not say parent. This gives me the opportunity to explain different types of families.

On several class field trips I have had a parent's significant other act as one of our chaperones. One year we had a student's mother's boyfriend join us. The next year a father's girlfriend came. Neither the term parent nor step-parent would have been an appropriate description for these caregivers. However, because every adult was referred to as "Carrie's adult" or "Juan's adult" these children were not singled out in any way.

Inclusive Language

Home-school communication is important. Letters that go home should be accurate and clear. It is often emphasized that they be translated into languages other than English (Epstein, 2000).

Some researchers have also noticed the bias use of the word parent in classrooms. The American Academy of Pediatrics describes the problematic nature of forms calling for the signature of a mother or father (Stein et al., 2004). The Office of Educational Research and Improvement suggests that schools use inclusive language in home-school communications and allow caregivers to identify themselves on forms. Suggested terms include co-parent, person you live with, and caregiver (Schwartz, 1999). Finally, Lott and Rogers (2005) call for services provided to diverse groups to be held to the same standards as those offered to traditional families.

A bay area principal admits schools probably use the term parent more often than they should especially at the beginning of the year when staff is less familiar with children's actual living situations. She mentioned once hearing someone say, I'm calling your dad; but she knew there was no dad in the family. In that situation she

recommended the phrase “calling home.” In sitting down and beginning to think about this issue, she suggested that caregiver would probably be a better way to address correspondence (personal communication, January 30, 2007).

One bay area school district has made some effort to use more inclusive language, at least in print. Their 2004-2005 student and parent/guardian handbook refers to caregivers as “parent/guardian/caregiver” beginning on the very first page when it asks for verification that this adult has received the packet. Attendance guidelines and suspension procedures also explain the rights and responsibilities of the parent/guardian/caregiver. Despite this effort however, some of the forms, including the internet use agreement form, still say parent at the top and parent/guardian on the signature line. Moreover, their second “core belief” explains, “Parents are our partners” (San Francisco, p.2).

The board policy of another school district a few towns away, “encourages attitudes and behaviors that promote mutual respect and harmonious relationships” and calls for the “use of strategies that foster positive social interactions among students from diverse backgrounds” (Novato, policies 5137, 1998). The language they use to describe caregivers, however, does not always address diverse student family lives. Board policy 5145.6 is “parental notifications;” 6020 is titled “parent involvement;” and 6159.3 describes the “appointment of a surrogate parent for special education.” Within the above policies, however, students’ parent/guardian is sometimes referred to.

This district’s board policy also includes many copies of forms in use in the district. Several merely call for a parent signature (NUSD, 1998-2006, exhibits 6141.5, 6142.7A, 6146.11, 6163.4). Others address or ask for the signature of a parent/guardian

(exhibits 5111A, 5113, 5113A, 5141.21A&B, 6141C, 6145.1, 6153A, 6162.52, 6174).

One form, an “Independent Study Master Agreement,” calls for the signature of a parent/guardian/caregiver (exhibit 6158e).

In this same school district, one elementary school’s student directory reflects the contradictory understanding of families. In the directory’s section where students are listed by name, the name of the parent/guardian is also given; but later when students are listed by class the same column is titled simply parent. It also wants everyone to know that “parents are always welcome to attend” PTA meetings (Lynwood, 2006-2007).

One document proves the district is aware of diverse families. Exhibit 51111B of the board policy is a “Caregiver’s Authorization Affidavit.” It lists fourteen specific relatives who are qualified to act as a child’s caregiver. A spouse of any specified relatives may also act as caregiver. It also acknowledges non-relative foster caregivers (NUSD, 1998-2006).

Summary of Themes

Students’ home lives are as various as they are. Although many students live with one or both biological parents, many do not. A biological parent may be around part time or not be the primary caregiver. These situations can be temporary or permanent.

Lumping all students into a family category with parents is inaccurate.

Use of language can cause students to feel marginalized (Orbe, 1998), or included (Lott & Rogers, 2005). Most language theories point to the former, due to inaccurate language which reinforces the values of specific groups of people at the expense of silencing the values of others (Ardener, 2005; Lustig & Koester, 2006; Orbe). Schools

then act to continue normative standards (Grant & Gillette, 2006), including those portrayed through language.

Diversity appreciation and equitable education, a standard for most schools, needs to be inclusive of family structure (Lott & Rogers, 2000; Stein et al., 2004). The word parent, whether used verbally or on written forms, can create many problems (Stein et al., 2004). If forms, board policies, and student documents are an indication the idea of a traditional family, including a biological mother or father, is so ingrained in our language and schools that even an attempt at inclusion leaves those with non-parental caregivers, at best, confused (San Francisco Unified School District, 2004).

How Present Study Extends Literature

Peripheral research abounds to suggest that students living with non-parental caregivers are negatively affected by misrepresentative, marginalizing family language labels. However, no direct research shows the effects students experience when exposed to the inaccurate words parent, mother, or father. Through interviews with adults who lived with neither their mother nor father during their elementary school years, I give a voice to this population and make connections between students' experiences or perceptions and language use in the classroom.

Interview questions elicit the participant's caregiver and schooling background and then ask about the participant's experiences and perceptions of the language used by educators to describe their caregivers.

Interview Background Questions

1. Who were the adults that you lived with during elementary school? If more than one, how long were you with each?

2. What were the circumstances under which you came to live with this caregiver?
3. Tell me about the school(s) you attended? Location? Public or private? Did you attend more than one school?

Interview Experience/Perception Questions

4. As a child, what words did your teachers use to describe students' caregivers? For example, who was the person who should sign homework or tests, or attend field trips? Do you remember any other words being used?
5. Were the same words used to address a whole class or whole school as were used when speaking to you personally?
6. At the time, how did you feel about these words that your teachers used?
7. What did you call your caregiver while you were in school?
8. How did you feel about the words you used?
9. Did you feel that teachers knew who you lived with? Can you tell me about that?
10. Did you feel free to disclose who you lived with to teachers? Why/why not?
11. Did you feel free to disclose who you lived with to friends or classmates? Why/why not?
12. Did you feel your home life was accurately represented in classroom discussions? Why/why not?
13. Do you remember any specific incidences with your teachers or classmates, good or bad, that arose because you lived with (list their caregiver)?
14. Is there anything you would have liked your teachers to have done differently, in terms of their word choice for your caregiver?
15. Is there anything else you would like to share with me that you think may be relevant to my research?

I have chosen to interview adults rather than children for two reasons. First, it is more difficult to gain access to children, as they are a special population, especially those who do not live with a parent and may have issues regarding legal guardianship. Second, I feel that adults are more able to articulate their experiences and opinions without inventing or exaggerating.

I am not collecting quantitative data on what terms are in use in most classrooms. After seven years of teaching I feel it is a safe assumption that parent is being used in most classrooms. In addition, conclusive data to this effect would not help illustrate how the language affects students.

Methods and Procedure

Sample and Site

The sample of participants consists of six women: Sarai, 18; Cheyenne, 20; Lisa 23; Cathy 35; Eva, 49; and Maria, 50. Four participants attended elementary school in California, one in Middle America, and another, Eva, outside the United States. Only Eva attended a private, religious school. Everyone else attended public schools. All participants are current San Francisco Bay Area residents.

Access and Permissions

Three participants are acquaintances of mine. They volunteered to participate after hearing about my project.

Two participants were students of a colleague. She asked them if they would be interested in being interviewed and put them in contact with me. A final participant responded to a flier requesting subjects. All participants were given a copy of the research participant consent form, which was reviewed with them before signing.

Data Gathering Strategies

I began with a broad search for possible interview candidates. Because the candidates' qualifications are so specific, I spoke with colleagues, neighbors, friends, and acquaintances in hopes of being put in touch with possible project participants. I also sent letters to local schools asking office personnel to post my request, emailed friends and family, gave letters to neighbors explaining my search, and posted fliers at Dominican University of California.

Interview participants were then contacted to set up a meeting time and place. During our meetings, I tape recorded the interview. I asked fifteen questions designed to elicit participants feeling and perceptions about language use in their elementary classrooms.

Data Analysis Approach

In beginning to analyze data from the interviews, I replayed each tape recorded interview and took notes on participants' answers to each question. Each subsequent participant's answers were added under the correlating question using a specific color font for each person. This allowed me to track trends by person and by topic.

I then reported the findings in categories, that is, by question or groups of related questions. Using the narrative findings and notes recorded directly from the tapes, I read the compiled information for correlations or themes which are reported in the discussion section.

Ethical Standards

This study adheres to Ethical Standards in Human Subjects Research of the American Psychological Association (Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association, 2007). Additionally, the project was reviewed and approved by the Dominican University of California Institutional Review Board, number 5089. The names of participants have been changed to protect participants' anonymity. School names and specific locations have been omitted.

Findings

Individuals

Participants come from varied home lives. Three participants describe their primary caregiver at some point to have been their grandmother. One participant lived with her aunt. Another lived with her grandmother and two aunts, all of whom played a role in care giving. And one participant was raised on and off by Mom and various older sisters.

Lisa, age 23, lived with her maternal grandmother and step grandfather from second grade on. Her mother was depressed and had tried committing suicide at one point. This sent Lisa to live with her dad in first grade, but his drug use increased. After asking to extend a weekend stay with her grandmother, Lisa soon found a new permanent home. During the years Grandmother worked, Lisa spent mornings before school with her aunt, mom's sister. Occasionally she saw her dad on weekends.

Sarai, age 18, lived with her maternal grandmother from third or fourth grade until sixth grade. She says Mom was unable to support her financially, mentally, or physically and grandma was. She moved from Mom's to Dad's to Grandma's.

Maria, age 50, lived with her maternal grandmother and grandfather for only 4-6 months during first grade. Her mother had tried to commit suicide and was in treatment. Grandmother acted as primary caregiver; Grandfather would sometimes be away at work for several days straight.

Cheyenne, age 20, moved in with her maternal grandmother and two aunts the summer before kindergarten. After her parents divorced, they decided that would be the

best place for her. She had always spent summers with her grandmother and aunts and says she simply did not return home that year.

Eva, age 49, moved in with her mom's sister at age eleven when Mom remarried and moved to the United States with her new husband. She lived with her aunt for four years before joining her mom and step-dad in the United States.

Cathy, age 35, had both her mother and father living in her Midwest home during kindergarten and first grade. Although her father would occasionally return, after leaving, he was never a primary caregiver. Because Mom had mental and physical health issues, she was only acting as caregiver about 30% of the time. In elementary school Cathy's four older sisters, mainly her two oldest, acted as her caregivers. In sixth grade, after Mom moved out, Cathy spent two months as the oldest in her home where she cared for her two younger sisters. The three of them were then sent to live with their oldest sister and her husband in another state. Cathy spent all of seventh grade there before returning to Mom in the eighth grade.

Classroom Language Use

Five participants remember the words mother and father or parents being used by teachers. Eva does not remember what words her teachers used to address the class. Two participants say the word guardian was also used occasionally. Cheyenne recalled the first time she saw the word guardian on a form in fourth grade. "I asked my Aunt, 'What's a guardian?' ... She said, 'It's for kids who don't live with their parents.' I was like, 'Oh, why hasn't anyone mentioned this before.'" Only Lisa remembers any other words being used in a group. She says her sixth grade teacher, who had also taught her in fifth, would say grandparents along with parents.

Of the five participants who remember, four say the words mom, dad, and parents were used when specifically speaking to them as well as when addressing a large group. Cheyenne, however, says when addressing her, staff spoke of her Aunt Rachel. This was because many of her teachers had also taught her aunt, who by first grade also worked at the school. Her aunt had a personal relationship with most staff.

Four participants feel their teachers were aware of their living situations. Cheyenne's Aunt Rachel worked at school; she was acquainted with teachers and other staff. Eva says she told her teachers that she lived with her aunt. Maria believes her first grade teacher probably knew she was living with grandmother because it was noted in school records. According to Lisa, teachers were not familiar with her living situation in the beginning of the year but learned what was going on as they got to know her. However, during 3rd and 4th grade counseling, she says she repeatedly had to correct the counselor who referred to her caregiver as parents, even though she was in counseling because of the issues she had with her parents.

Others say their teachers were unaware of their home life. Sarai's grandmother did not have legal custody, so despite her living situation, Mom signed forms for school and Sarai remembers Dad attending several conferences. Cathy says teachers never knew her sisters were acting as primary caregivers. She was rarely given communication to take home and no steps were taken when Mom did not attend conferences. Although, during seventh grade, her sister communicated with the school for immunizations and to excuse her lateness, Cathy says the school merely knew that the signature on notes matched the signature on file. No one actually knew with whom she lived.

Interaction with Classroom Language

Three of the six participants say they felt neutral about the language their teachers used in elementary school. Lisa says she didn't really pay attention; in her head, she translated what was being said to fit her. It wasn't until high school that she started rebelling against inaccurate language use. Cathy says she accepted the "generic" words and just did what she had to do throughout the day.

Three participants did notice that the language did not fit them. Sarai says it was "not that she was left out, but not included." Cheyenne says, "It always kind of bothered me that they said parent. I look at it now and, yes, they were addressing the whole class and most of the class their parents were who they lived with. But it always bothered me. And I always kind of felt singled out because (I assumed) I was the only one who wasn't living with their parents on a regular basis." Maria says she did not really connect with what the teacher was saying. "If they had said grandmother I would have been more connected with what was being said."

Sarai also says her grandmother was sometimes bothered by traditional family language use. Her grandmother had acted as caregiver for her four older siblings too, and Sarai says Grandmother was upset that she wasn't given credit for that.

Students' Language Choice

Five of the six participants say they felt free to tell their teachers who their primary caregivers were. Sarai says, "I wasn't ashamed." If it came up in conversation she would share her living situation but didn't want to talk about her Mom.

By fourth grade Lisa began correcting her teachers when they would say parents. She says in 2nd and 3rd grade she did not correct teachers because she was quiet about her home life. Cathy never told teachers about her primary caregiver. She worried that care at home was inadequate and was concerned that social services may have come to take them if they knew the circumstances. “So there was no way I felt comfortable revealing any kind of change in what the norm should be,” she says.

All of these five participants referred to their caregiver at school by their relation: grandma, papa, Grandpa Mike, nana, or Aunt Rachel. Cathy, however, never named her caregiver at school. She says, “I wouldn’t say a specific; I would say yes or no” when asked, for example, if mom was coming. Cathy never corrected her teachers. “I think I ignored it and went with whatever they said.” She just communicated about the information her teachers were trying to solicit.

All participants say they felt free to disclose who they lived with to their friends or classmates. Cathy says she had very few close friends but those few would come to her house and were aware of her situation.

Students’ Feelings about their Language

Participants have mixed feelings about naming their caregivers at school. Sarai describes no problems saying grandmother or grandfather at school. Cheyenne says by second grade she was comfortable saying Aunt because everyone at school was familiar with her living situation.

At first, Maria felt awkward saying who she lived with because the situation was new to her. As she adapted to living with Grandma and made a connection with her, she became more comfortable naming her at school. When Lisa first began living with her

grandmother she was just happy to be in an actual home; she did not think about her language use. By fourth and fifth grade, she began, at times, to feel self-conscious describing her caregiver.

Cathy never named her caregiver at school. According to her this was a way to remove responsibility from her sister, who was already busy with a husband and two children of her own.

Familial Representation in the Classroom

When asked if they felt their home life was accurately represented in the classroom, all of the responding five participants say no. Eva says diverse families were not discussed because many students lived in dorms. Sarai says when families were mentioned she knew her grandmother was her family.

Most participants remember families always described in a traditional way. Cathy says families were portrayed as “Mommy, Daddy, brother, sister. That probably had a lot to do with why I didn’t reveal anything to anyone,” she says.

Cheyenne says there were no discussions of families or what constitutes a family until she reached seventh grade. “That was the first time a teacher had actually addressed the fact that you’re still normal... By then I had already had seven or eight years of schooling saying, ‘This is what’s normal.’” “That’s why I always felt different because no one ever addressed that the typical mother, father, three kids family (may be typical, but that) doesn’t mean everyone has that type of family.”

Cheyenne and Maria both remember a standardized representation of families in classroom books and discussions. “We’d read stories... and in all the stories the families are Mom, Dad, and two or three kids.” Cheyenne remembers that her family was herself

and three adult women. Maria says of books, “In a way there wasn’t a dignity there; there wasn’t a value. There wasn’t any place for my life. I didn’t feel the void; I just felt different.” Both Cheyenne, 20, and Maria, 50, remember schools expecting both parents to attend events. Maria remembers, even after returning to her mom, that she was outside the norm for not living with father too. She wishes she had been able to connect to what was going on in the classroom by noticing, “Oh that’s something like me; that’s like me.”

Maria speaks similarly about papers to be signed by parents. “So when (my teacher) said take these (papers) to your mom and dad, I just focused on the paper, not on me. In my mind, because words connect you, I didn’t... picture myself going home to give them to my parents. It left me with the piece of paper... but it didn’t connect me to anything in my life.”

Fighting Back

Both Cathy and Cheyenne recount specific incidences where anger caused them to lash out at school personnel who used inaccurate labels for their caregivers. In 7th grade when Cathy told a school nurse she needed go home, the school nurse humiliated her and told her to call Mom. Cathy remembers yelling, ‘My sister’s at work, and she can’t come.’

For Cheyenne a trip to the principal’s office was nothing unusual in elementary school. But when she was sent to see a new principal, who was unaware of her living situation, she took that opportunity to put her in her place. When the principal said she would have to call Mom, Cheyenne remembers laughing at her and saying, “No you’re not.” When the principal asked who should be called, Cheyenne made her look it up on the emergency contact form. “She should have already had it out in the first place. But I

guess no one had told her that I don't live with my parents. And it kind of hurt." She remembers thinking, "You should know. You're the principal; you run the show. Why don't you already know that you're calling Aunt Rachel or Grandma?"

Changes to Language

Five of the six participants say they would have liked their teachers to use more inclusive language to describe caregivers. Lisa's suggestions include saying the person with whom you live, parents or grandparents, caregivers, or guardian. Sarai realizes that students could be adopted or may live with grandparents, sisters, or cousins. She wishes teachers would "not be so closed minded" and says, "They should really try to word things differently and not be so specific on Mom, Dad." Cheyenne's suggestions include "I need to call home" or "I need someone at home to sign this."

Cathy specifically recalls days when students were expected to bring their adults to school to show off their class work. She says it would have been easier and given her more options if teachers had said, "Is there a grown-up you'd like to show your work to?" She wishes there had been "something that left it more open than 'You're bringing your mom or your dad.'" She wishes she'd been given the option to bring others, like friends from her religious community who acted as grandparents or aunts and uncles. Crying, she says, "Those were special people... Imagine if I'd had that option of inviting one of them." That, she says, would have motivated her to have something worthwhile to show off.

Lisa says that schools should teach about family life, different cultures, and different family types. That's a discussions she'd like to see happen every year.

Discussion

Varied Home Lives

It is clear that the notion of a traditional family does not exist. Statistics from a wide array of sources point to students living in homes with and without parents. And those living without parents cannot be put into one category, nor is their living situation always static. All of the study participants lived with a biological mother or father at an early age and then transitioned to another caregiver. Two participants were in a permanent situation with their new caregiver, while the other four transitioned back to a biological parent at some point. In addition, one participant remembers acquaintances in high school also admitting non-traditional home lives. Another currently has friends whose children have been removed from their care and placed with relatives. Under these circumstances it is not appropriate for teachers to assume that students are living with both or either biological parent or that a parent is acting as primary caregiver.

Language Use

If teachers are indeed using the term parent in their classrooms, which interviews suggest they are, then their discourse is inaccurate and does not reflect the reality of their students. In this study only teachers who were intimately familiar with students' home lives made any attempt to use inclusive language. Cheyenne's aunt had to work at the school in order to be included in dialogue. The only other teacher who used accurate language to describe a caregiver did not do so until after having Lisa in her room for a second consecutive year. Eva, Maria, and Lisa (irrespective of her 5th grade teacher) say their teachers were aware they lived with a non-parental caregiver but continued to use

the terms mother, father, or parents. Even Cheyenne says these terms were used when addressing the whole class.

It appears that teachers make little effort to use inclusive familial language in their classes even if they are aware of diverse families. At best, inclusive language use appears to be tied to an intimate understanding of students' family situations. This is unfortunate seeing that teachers may not actually be aware of students' home lives as was the case with Cathy and Sarai.

No teachers used an inclusive term as a rule around all students. Therefore even students living with a biological parent continue to be taught that their family situation is correct. Even when Cheyenne's caregiver was finally included on a form which said guardian, she was not made aware that this applied to her.

Students' Perceptions

Inaccurate language appears to make study participants feel, even at an early age, that they are somehow different from the norm. While study participants routinely refer to their caregivers by relation— Grandma, Aunt Rachel— teachers rarely do. For this group of students, the words they use are never acknowledged in their teachers' discourse. Even Cheyenne whose aunt was referred to by teachers, says she was taught that her family was not normal.

Even though students felt free to tell their teacher with whom they lived, most teachers did nothing in the way of response or accommodation. Therefore, two participants say they felt like the only ones without parents, although they went on to realize, in high school or as an adult, that there were other students like them.

Books, forms, and teachers' word choice do appear to reinforce the idea that families constitute a mom, dad, and related children. Cathy, Cheyenne, and Maria all felt that they did not fit that mold. Lisa remembers feeling self-conscious naming her caregiver.

Students appear to be bothered by inaccurate language whether it occurs often or seldom. The two participants who remember lashing out at staff who used inaccurate language represent both ends of the spectrum in terms of daily language use. Cheyenne, whose teachers usually called her caregiver Aunt Rachel, lashed out at the one person who did not. Cathy, whose schools never knew about her caregivers, finally broke down when she was mistreated by office personnel.

Additional Responsibility

Students with non-parental caregivers are being put in a situation foreign to other students, in which they must take responsibility for their teachers' language. Often they must correct their teacher when families are being discussed. Lisa had to constantly correct her counselor who saw her for two years. Additionally, when teachers use inaccurate terms in class, students who do not fit the model must translate in their head what is being said aloud.

Unfortunately leaving the responsibility for correction or translation up to students, means it does not always happen. This is not a leap that every student can make. When told to bring her parents to school events, Cathy did not understand that to mean she could bring any influential adult. It was not until being interviewed for this study, at age 35, that she realized she could have brought special family friends if given the opportunity. However, at the time all she knew was that those people were not her

parents. In 2nd and 3rd grade Lisa did not correct her teachers because she was quiet about her home life; then by 4th and 5th grade she felt self conscious about saying her adult was Grandma. Cathy never corrected her teachers because she was worried that her home life did not provide adequate care. Maria repeats again and again that when Mom and Dad were talked about at school she did not connect that to her own experience.

Recommended Changes

Inclusive language for caregivers should be implemented in classrooms. Possible word choices to replace parent are caregiver, adult, or grown-up. These words include all students at all times. Another option is for teachers to vary the caregivers named. For example one paper could be sent home to Mom, Uncle or whomever; and Grandpa, Aunt or another adult could be invited to back to school night. Five of six participants agreed on this point.

In addition, papers that need to be signed or are sent home should use a single inclusive term. Using 'parent or guardian' sets up the dichotomy of those inside the group and those that are not (Lustig & Koester, 2006).

Comparison of Findings with Existing Literature

This study confirms that there are many students not accounted for in statistics of children with non-parental caregivers. Shifting living situations make it difficult for teachers to adapt their word use to meet specific needs. This makes it even more important for teachers to use inclusive language at all times. However, as many expect (Jeltova & Fish, 2005; Lott & Rogers, 2005; Stein, Perrin, & Potter, 2006) they do not.

Study findings reinforce current language theories. Students living with non-parental caregivers are having, as Muted Group Theory explains, their experiences silenced (Ardener, 2005) by having to repeatedly explain their situations and hearing none of their experiences incorporated into dialogue. The observation of Giroux and Apple (as cited in McLaughlin, 1993) that schools actually serve to dismiss the values and experiences of those from non-dominant groups, is clearly confirmed by the fact that even those teachers aware of students' non-parental homes do not adapt their language to include those students.

Interviews confirm Kramarae's idea that minority groups are expected to interpret societal language so that it applies to them (2005, para. 8). This is seen dramatically in Lisa's statement, "I just translated (what teachers were saying) in my head." Cheyenne, too, is made to take an additional leap when asked whose mom can come to a bake sale. In her head she told herself that Mom could not come before adding aloud that Aunt Rachel could.

Two participants spoke about classroom materials inaccurately representing their families. Indeed, as Schwartz (1999) says, these students are learning what is normal and positive. That is exactly what Cheyenne says she learned from her classroom books—that she was not normal.

In addition, Schwartz (1999) speaks about students feeling different or "isolated." This is the same observation one Bay Area principal had about students from non-traditional families. In answer to one or more questions, five participants describe some feeling of being different.

Those changes suggested by participants— using more inclusive language such as caregiver or person you live with— are the same as suggested by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (Schwartz, 1999)

Gaps in the Literature; Limitations of the Study

The available literature is incomplete when it comes to addressing the effects the term parent has on students. Research on students' family structures does not paint a complete picture. Although organizations try to collect data on adoptions or foster families, none of the more obscure home life situations, living with an older brother or aunt, for example, were addressed in literature. Therefore, these students are not being accounted for when we look at diverse family structures. This study gives a small amount of background on students living with grandmothers or aunts.

In addition, current literature contains no statistics describing what titles are given to caregivers in classroom discourse. The few articles suggesting removal of the word parent do not site the prevalence of its use nor the effects this word has on students. Likewise I found little information on the prevalence or lack of classroom climates assuming parents are in every home. Although some research points out a need for library books with gay and lesbian families, no mention is made of teachers' words. This study confirms my experience that parents are assumed, in dialogue and classroom climates, to be the primary caregivers.

With a lack of accurate home life descriptions and no records of classroom discourse, it is no surprise that current literature does not directly address the effects students experience from exposure to the word parent. For example, language marginalization is usually applied to women or ethnic groups. Or, when appreciating

diversity is discussed it is usually in the context of race, language, and sometimes class or gender. There appears to be no research on students' behaviors or attitudes as they pertain to teachers' descriptions of their family. This is the area in which my research fills in some of the gaps.

However, the study itself has inherent limitations. Because the sample size is small, participants' answers cannot necessarily be extrapolated to fit the entire population of students living with non-parental caregivers. Also, all study participants were women; the effects of familial language on men may be different.

Implications for Future Research

Due to current gaps, research is needed in many areas to address the effects that the words parent, mother, and father have on students. Information should be gathered on schools using the word parent and on any other terms that are being used. Demographic information showing the familial situations of school populations should be collected for use with the above statistics. In addition, students should be studied to see what academic, social, emotional, and behavioral issues those living without parents experience due to continued, long term exposure to traditional familial categorizing.

I recommend additional interviews with adults who have lived with non-parental caregivers during elementary school. Interviews such as mine collect information on all three areas in which data is lacking: word use at school, familial makeup, and effects that students experience.

Future interviews should include male participants. In addition, a few questions were left unanswered by my interviews and should be added to future studies. One is whether participants remember their caregivers expressing any opinions about schools'

language choices; this came up as bothersome for Sarai's grandmother who felt her contribution wasn't appreciated. Another question to add would ask what terms interviewees used to describe other students caregivers and under what circumstances. Did these students themselves perpetuate the terms parent, mother, and father?

Overall Significance of the Study

This study supports the ideas that the traditional family consisting of a mother, a father, and two kids is not the family many students know. Moreover, it is clear that inclusive familial language is not being used in classrooms. Mother, father, and parent accurately apply to many students but not all.

These students may or may not correct teachers one-on-one, but even if they do they will not see themselves portrayed in everyday classroom discourse, which almost never uses any terms other than parent, mother, or father. Students living with other caregivers are fighting an uphill battle in which they are marginalized by daily language and subtly, but constantly, told they are different. They see this everywhere in society; it should not be in our schools.

Unlike many problems in the world, this problem is so easy to correct. It's true that discussions about different family types and inclusive classroom materials, such as books, are important. However, a simple change in language from parent to caregiver (or any other inclusive term) can show students that all families are valid and valued. And that can be changed tomorrow.

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