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Acknowledgments

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Children's Books Featuring Diverse Family Structures and Living Arrangements: Recommendations for Elementary Teachers

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KATIE WATERS graduated from Presbyterian College in May 2017, majoring in Early Childhood Education and minoring in Psychology. During her time at PC, she helped to lead events in the Education Department. She was a host for the Education Department's Documentary Film Series, introducing films and leading discussions after the films. During her sophomore and junior years she volunteered for the Special Olympics helping athletes engage in creative activities in between their competitions. She was also a member of the conference committee for the Annual Charles Chadwell Special Education Institute, in which role she assisted with the program, speakers, and registration. In Spring 2015, Katie worked as an international buddy and mentored a Norwegian student at Presbyterian College to help her acclimate to another culture for a semester. Katie also spent a month studying psychology at Lillehammer University College in Norway during Summer 2016. In the fall, Katie will be a kindergarten teacher at LEAD Academy Public Charter School in Greenville, SC.

The majority of children in the U.S. do not live in traditional family units, and an increasing number of children live with adult family members who were born outside the U.S. Despite this reality, most children's books depicting children's home lives offer little variety regarding character diversity and family types. All children should be able to see themselves and their living situations reflected in the curriculum. Teachers are responsible for incorporating representative literature that accurately reflects the lives of children in their classroom. If teachers intentionally incorporate books that reflect the lives of children in their class, students will gain a sense of belonging as well as an understanding of families different from their own.

Children's literature has the potential to present children with a realistic picture of the world. Through a diverse selection of books, students have opportunities to learn more about the backgrounds of their classmates and the world in which they live. Zacher (2006) proposed that children read to create their own identities and compare their ideas to those of others. When students see their lives reflected in classroom literature, they will be able to better relate to the material, which will deepen their understanding of the texts. Boyd (2004) found that when students can connect with the characters in a story based on a shared background, they are better able to comprehend and recall important details, allowing them to contribute to class discussions.

Boyd (2004) proposed that incorporating discussions for younger students through read-alouds can help children solve problems and express their individual thoughts and reactions. During discussions, children are able to hear their classmates' perspectives and learn more about one another. Such discussions also allow teachers to address misconceptions and prejudices that students express. By talking through these misconceptions, students may become more accepting of others. Through discussions and opportunities to respond to literature, the teacher can also gain insight on children's home lives that they would not have gained otherwise.

In this article, I describe the process of compiling a list of quality children's books representing diverse family structures and living arrangements in order to increase awareness and acceptance of children in schools. Exposing children to books that reflect their living arrangements and family types can help to validate children's experiences. Additionally, when children learn about their classmates, it creates opportunities for them to discover similarities between themselves and their peers. Children's books help children understand the social world in new ways.

Therefore, acquiring children's books portraying a variety of family types and living arrangements can be beneficial for all children as they help children learn more about themselves as well as others' home lives.

Reading books on different types of families and living arrangements also provides opportunities for students to develop critical literacy skills as they identify different perspectives in the text. In this way, children are able to make text-to-self and text-to-world connections and broaden their literacy skills in the process. Often, teachers of young children rely on familiar texts with "safe" storylines rather than stories that reflect the harsher realities of children's lives. Teachers who have difficulty relating to the characters and stories in the texts may also be hesitant to incorporate books addressing diversity in their classroom. Through my research, I provide teachers with a list of recommended children's books applicable for students in a variety of family living situations through which students have the chance to identify personally with the text and concurrently develop essential literacy skills.

Literature Review

A review of the literature on children's home lives and family units indicates the importance of integrating children's books that portray diverse family types and living arrangements into the curriculum. When faced with personal challenges, students can seek refuge in books that reflect their lives. When classmates are exposed to these stories, it can create a more accepting classroom environment. I begin this review with research on home lives and living arrangements that present challenges for children and families, and I draw on studies that demonstrate the importance of providing consistency and support in children's lives. I then describe how families created by adoption have been represented in children's literature. These situations point to the need to incorporate children's books on a variety of family types and living arrangements into the classroom.

No two families are alike; families may encompass individuals of different races, countries of origin, genders, sexual orientations,

ages, abilities and disabilities, employment statuses, marital statuses, religious affiliations, as well as biological and non-biological relationships. Teachers may make assumptions about children based on their family's composition and may expect less of children from certain types of families. Teachers may be influenced by negative stereotypes and may not want to include certain family types in the curriculum; however, it is important for all children to see their families represented in children's literature. In addition, including books that help children understand situations experienced by their classmates contributes to children's understanding of the world and acceptance of others.

Dedeoglu, Lamme, and Ulusoy (2012) gathered data from 29 pre-service teachers in Turkey to study their attitudes about children's picture books featuring lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) family structures. It was found that the number of participants who would (n = 26) and would not (n = 28) use the books were almost equal. Consistent themes in the negative responses indicated that participants did not feel that LGBT individuals were normal and they did not share commonalities with them. However, other participants felt that LGBT individuals were the same as everyone else and should be treated equally. Some participants felt the topic may confuse children. Although the negative responses of preservice to LGBT children's book may seem to represent more traditional aspects of Turkish culture, there is also strong opposition to LGBT children's books in certain regions of the United States (e.g. the "Bible Belt").

In some parts of the United States, LGBT individuals are denied the same rights as heterosexual couples regarding children they can welcome into their families. Maxwell and Kelsey (2014) examined the experiences of same-sex parents who adopted children from foster care in North Carolina. Although gay and lesbian individuals were permitted to foster or adopt a child, they were not allowed to marry in North Carolina at the time of the research. Because both parents were not recognized as legal guardians under state law, if something were to happen to the legal guardian, the adopted

child could be sent back to foster care. In one case described in the study, a boy had been in 29 different homes prior to his adoption by a gay couple. Given the tempestuous lifestyles of children in foster care, it is imperative that those who are fostered or adopted by an LGBT couple have access to books that provide them with a sense of normalcy and acceptance. Children with LGBT parents are likely to feel a sense of comfort from seeing their families represented in books, and these books are likely to increase understanding among their classmates.

When dealing with children facing situations such as foster care and homelessness, consistency is vital, especially with regard to the provision of support. Zlotnick, Tam, and Zerger (2012) reviewed 43 articles on mental health and case management and concluded that providing interventions to aid in the transition from homelessness to foster care could help to minimize trauma for children. In order to create a solid foundation on which children can depend, it is important that they have a sense of stability and consistent support network. Books can provide one source of support for children experiencing trauma from frequent transitions, particularly when used within the context of bibliotherapy.

When children are homeless, it is often difficult for them to find support in schools. Moore and McArthur (2011) conducted a study using interviews, art activities, and group discussions with 25 children and young people who had experienced family homelessness. The findings indicated that children who were homeless shared experiences in the following areas: high levels of family separation; exposure to violence; poor health; feelings of stress, anxiety, loss, and grief; social isolation; and struggles attending and achieving in school, as well as making and keeping friends. The researchers emphasized the crucial role schools play in the lives of students and proposed that schools should develop partnerships with organizations to help families get the support they need.

It is imperative that schools provide support for students living in particularly challenging situations. Roberts and Loucks (2015) conducted a descriptive study about the experiences of

children in the U.S. and Australia who had a family member in prison. They interviewed teachers, judges, government officials, caregivers, imprisoned parents, and their children. The findings indicated that children of prisoners were often neglected and did not get adequate support in school. Accordingly, teachers can provide books as a resource for children with incarcerated family members so they can see their lives reflected in literature and feel that their situation is being acknowledged in the classroom rather than treated as a taboo topic.

Although books representing diverse family types and living situations can be useful resources for teachers who want to incorporate literature that reflect the lives of students in the class, care must be taken in making appropriate choices. Fitzpatrick and Kostina-Ritchey (2013) reviewed 40 children's books about adoption and examined how families were portrayed in the books. The books highlighted the realities of the lengthy application process for parents as well as the positive support they received from social networks. However, the researchers felt the works fell short in regard to showing cultural disparities between adoptive parents and international adoptees.

Inspiration from personal experience can positively contribute to an author's work and result in books that are reflective of tensions experienced in intercultural adoption. Based on her personal experiences, Yi (2013) reviewed 14 children's picture books depicting the effects of immigration on Korean children. She found that common themes in the literature involved: language conflicts, choosing a name for the child, the child's role as a language mediator, diverse family values, and the child's adaptation after immigration. These are situations that many adopted children will be able to relate to and are important situations to address through literature. Because most children are adopted from other countries at a young age, they are likely to experience intense confusion during their transition to life in a new country. In order to help children through the adoption process, educators should incorporate quality children's books about real immigration stories that help children realize they are not alone in their

struggles.

It is important for children to develop a sense of awareness of not only their personal environment, but also the world around them. It is therefore essential to provide them access to books that allow them to learn about different types of families they might not have been exposed to. Mattix and Crawford (2011) reviewed 42 picture books about adoption that would be found in a public library. Each author was assigned a set of books and developed criteria for each book that made it stand out from the others. The results showed that the themes in the texts often mirrored situations in real life. As the researchers point out, these books serve as a resource and educational tool for children to inform them about the process of adoption, in addition to teaching them about diversity and respect.

Even exposure to real life situations that mirror those portrayed in books can help deepen students' understanding and acceptance of different family situations. Kelly (2012) read books featuring gay and lesbian families to kindergarten children in New Zealand. The classroom teacher in the study was pregnant and the children were aware that her baby would have two mothers. The researcher felt that this situation helped influence the students in an affirmative way and contributed to their positive responses to the books. It was found that all students were accepting of nontraditional families and were able to understand diverse family structures.

The studies described in this literature review included many approaches to research on family types, living arrangements, and children's home lives. The findings of these studies indicate that children's books can serve as an important resource in helping children come to terms with difficult situations such as adoption or homelessness. Books provide a means of escape for children and at the same time can provide them with information on topics with real life applications. When teachers incorporate books in the classroom that reflect a variety of family formations and living arrangements, they are likely to appeal to a broad range of children who see their lives reflected in the stories. It is essential

for teachers to provide students access to these books so they can feel comfortable and accepted, both in the classroom and in the wider society.

Method

In order to find quality children's books portraying diverse family structures and living arrangements, I began by asking early childhood education majors and professors in my college for recommendations. I then searched for the books they recommended using the electronic database, THOMCAT and found the books in my college library or ordered them from other libraries through the Partnership Among South Carolina Academic Libraries (PASCAL). I searched for additional books by conducting a Google search using terms such as, "children's books about families." Through this search, I found several booklists on the following websites: Parentbooks, National Association for the Education of Young Children, Welcoming Schools, Goodreads, Parenting, Read That Again, Pragmatic Mom, Institute for Humane Education, Operation We are Here, and IFAPA (Iowa's Foster & Adoptive Parents Association). After reviewing the book lists and selecting appropriate books, I ordered more books through PASCAL. I also searched for children's books on Amazon using different keywords such as "homelessness," "adoption," and "foster care." I reviewed many of these books online using Amazon's "Look Inside" feature.

Through these various sources, I reviewed over 100 books relating to diverse families and living arrangements. I narrowed the books to a list of 50 using the following selection criteria: (a) copyright date of 2000 or later, (b) diverse family structure or living situation, (c) positive reader and editorial reviews, (d) interesting plot, and (e) engaging illustrations. If a book did not have diverse characters or if it perpetuated stereotypes, I did not select it. I also noted if the book was written and illustrated by the same individual. If this was the case, this person would have the opportunity to illustrate their own story accurately, thereby preventing any unintentional bias on the part of the illustrator. Such books included, *In Our Mother's House* (2009) by the acclaimed Patricia Polacco and *The Name Jar*

(2003) by noted author Yangsook Choi.

After completing my search, I compiled a table listing all 50 books. For each book, I noted the family situation addressed (e.g., child living with extended family, incarcerated parent, deceased parent). I then went through the books and noted if the family situation fell into more than one category. *A Shelter in Our Car* (Gunning, 2013), for example, featured a homeless immigrant family headed by a widowed single mother and therefore fell into multiple categories. In addition, I incorporated a column for the race/ethnicity of the main characters so I could ensure good racial and ethnic representation when making my final book recommendations. I also considered it important to include animal characters as they allow a variety of readers to be able to connect to the characters. McTigue, Douglass, Wright, Hodges, and Franks (2015) recommend using a range of books with both animal characters and diverse human characters to help readers' learning transfer to the real world.

Top Ten Book List

After compiling a list of 50 books that represented a variety of different family structures and living arrangements, I began the process of narrowing the selection. I retained books that were highly rated and popular, and also took into account whether they encompassed diverse characters and a variety of family arrangements and living situations. Table 1 provides a list of children's books that would be most practical for use in the classroom based on their representation of different family structures and living arrangements as well as the inclusion of different forms of diversity within the book. The book categories are divided by the home life/family situation featured in the book as well as the parents/caregivers. It is recommended that teachers choose books based on the needs of children in the class while considering the importance of providing opportunities for students to see themselves and their families represented in children's literature.

Book Descriptions

In the following section, I describe my ten recommended books featuring diverse families

and living arrangements with information on students who would benefit from having the book in their classroom. Teachers can select books from these recommendations based on the needs of students in their class. Alternately, they may wish to obtain all ten books to expose students to the variety of family types and living arrangements they will encounter in society.

And Tango Makes Three is an inspiring book that is based on a true story of two male penguins at the Central Park Zoo in New York City. Roy and Silo make a nest, and with the help of the zookeeper who gives them their own egg, they become parents. Their child, Tango, is the first penguin in the zoo to have parents of the same-sex. Incorporating this book in the classroom will be especially beneficial for children who have same-sex parents and will provide validation that there are others, both human and nonhuman, with the same type of family as them. This book is beneficial not just because it addresses same-sex parents, but also because it helps young children understand that families can be formed in a variety of ways; in this case, through obtaining an egg much like a human couple may foster or adopt a child.

I Love You Like Crazy Cakes is based on the author's personal experiences and is about a woman who adopts a girl from China. She travels to China for a once in a lifetime trip to pick up her new baby. The child is immediately welcomed into her new home in the United States. This book will be helpful to children who have been adopted and will inform other children about the process of adoption and the positive impact an adopted child can have on families. Teachers can also use this book to address situations experienced by children in a variety of homes. Children who live in foster homes with parents of a different racial or cultural background, as well as children who were born in a country outside the United States, will be able to relate to this book.

Murphy's Three Homes: A Story for Children in Foster Care is a story about a dog named Murphy who has lived in several homes. Murphy deals with a variety of different emotions, including confusion, hopelessness, and solitude as he moves from home to home. Despite Murphy's

Table 1: Children's Books Featuring Diverse Family Types and Living Arrangements

Recommended Books Title Author (date)	Main Characters Nationality/ Race/ Ethnicity	Home Life / Family Situation					Parents/Caregivers					
		Divorce	Adoption	Foster Care	Homelessness	Parent in Prison	Extended Family	Single Mother	Same-sex	Deceased	Immigrant	Interracial
<i>A Shelter In Our Car</i> Monica Gunning (2004)	Jamaican				X			X		X	X	
<i>And Tango Makes Three</i> Justin Richardson & Peter Parnell (2015)	Animal Characters								X			
<i>Fred Stays With Me!</i> Nancy Coffelt (2011)	Caucasian	X										
<i>I Love You Like Crazy Cakes</i> Rose Lewis (2000)	Chinese		X					X				
<i>I Love Saturdays y Domingos</i> Alma Flor Ada (2002)	Mexican & European						X					
<i>Murphy's Three Homes</i> Jan Gilman (2008)	Animal Characters			X								
<i>Our Gracie Aunt</i> Jacqueline Woodson (2002)	African- American			X			X					
<i>Visiting Day</i> Jacqueline Woodson (2015)	African- American					X						
<i>Who's in my Family?</i> Robie Harris (2012)	Multiracial	X	X					X	X			X
<i>You Were the First</i> Patricia MacLachlan (2013)	Multiracial											X

inconsistent past, he is able to find a glimmer of hope when he is taken in and loved by one particular foster family. Murphy's experiences will be inspirational to children in the foster care system as well as those who have experienced any type of family instability stemming from situations such as family break-up or homelessness. The book will also help other children understand the emotions that coincide with such unstable living situations.

In *Fred Stays with Me!* a young girl gains comfort from confiding in her dog, Fred, during her parents' divorce. Fred provides a constant companion for the girl amidst the confusion in her life. Despite the trouble Fred causes at both parents' houses, he is a constant in the girl's life

and she is adamant that she will never let him go. Because divorce is such a common experience, most children will be able to relate to this story. Even though some children may not understand the concept of living in two different homes, the teacher can use this book to expose them to one type of family living arrangement in which the child lives with one parent separate from the other parent, and spends time differently with both parents.

You Were the First is written from the perspective of two parents who reminisce about different milestones they witnessed with their child. The story is full of first memories with their first-born and their adventures as a family. Reading this book can be beneficial for first-born

children, especially when they are preparing to welcome another child into their family. Even an “only child” will find this book appealing due to the bond depicted between the parents and child. Therefore, incorporating this book into the classroom can help students reflect on the memorable times in their early childhood and give them advice about how to celebrate new experiences with their siblings.

Visiting Day is a story about a young girl who visits her incarcerated father in prison. She makes this much-anticipated trip once a month with her grandmother. The story is told from the girl's perspective and the reader feels a sense of hope that her father will be home soon. Visiting Day will resonate with children who have a parent, relative, or close family friend in prison. Teachers can read the book to remind students that parents can still love their children even if they are not able to be with them. The story can also help children understand what their classmates with incarcerated parents or family members may be going through, which might lead to students receiving needed support from peers.

Our Gracie Aunt features a brother and sister whose mother is absent. A social worker comes to their house and takes them to stay with a distant aunt, Gracie. She takes care of them while their mother is away and treats them as if they were her own. Children who have been in the foster care system or are living with relatives can find comfort in this encouraging story of hope and family. This book is particularly useful because it does not explicitly state where the mother is, leaving the possibility open for children to explore different ideas of where she may be. Through students' predictions, teachers can learn about students' thinking and personal experiences.

I Love Saturdays y Domingos is a book that illustrates the bond between a girl and her grandparents. The grandparents are brought together by their grandchild, despite their different cultural backgrounds and language barriers. Several parts of the text are in Spanish and the teacher can encourage students who read Spanish to read the text out loud. Those with a cultural heritage similar to the girl's Mexican-American

grandparents will be able to make text-to-self connections and share common cultural traditions with the class. In addition, students who are living in multi-generational families can benefit from this story.

A Shelter in Our Car is about a girl and her mother who have come to the United States from Jamaica following the death of the girl's father. The story explores the challenges the family faces in adjusting to their new life in the US, such as eating the same thing every day and living in their car. In addition to children who are homeless, this story will be relatable to children whose families struggle to make ends meet or whose lives changed drastically after the death of a parent. The teacher can use this book to give students reassurance that they are not the only ones going through these struggles.

Who's in My Family? follows a family consisting of a mother, father, daughter, and son and their adventures on a day at the zoo. While at the zoo, the family encounters a variety of different types of families throughout the course of the day such as same-sex parents, interracial parents, and a single parent. This is a helpful book that highlights many different types of families that many students will be able to relate to. Unlike other books that predominantly focus on one family situation, this is a useful book to expose students to a variety of different family types.

Conclusion

Although children in schools across the country experience a variety of living situations and family arrangements, children's books that teachers read in classrooms for young children often do not reflect the family types and living arrangements of students. This situation presents a significant challenge to children who may have trouble connecting with the content of the curriculum. When teachers incorporate children's books that highlight diverse family structures and living arrangements, it can provide an opportunity for students to see themselves and others represented in their everyday lives. Through such books, students can gain a better understanding of themselves and their own personal experiences. Hearing the story read aloud and relating directly to the plot, characters, and setting can

give children comfort and reassurance, as well as create more personal connections to the text.

Securing diverse family-centered books not only allows students to feel individually accepted, but it also allows them to explore family dynamics different from their own. When the books are read in class, it can give children a chance to learn more about their classmates and friends. Increasing awareness of others helps to strengthen relationships in the classroom. Students may even find that another student in their class is going through the same situation as them. Additionally, it is important that children have access to materials that expose them to people from cultures different from their own. The key as a teacher is to not only teach children about different family styles and living arrangements, but also to increase their awareness about diversity in society. The sooner they understand this concept the better, and the more open-minded they will be about acknowledging others and their families.

Overall, there are a wide range of benefits that result from incorporating books representing various families into schools. Because of the similar family types depicted in traditional children's literature, integrating these diverse stories into the classroom can be stimulating for students. Incorporating a variety of books in the classroom helps students feel as if they are no longer in the minority. Students realize they are not alone and can make personal connections to the text while reading. Therefore, these books can be used as a platform for students to share their experiences, express feelings, as well as learn more about others in the process.

Even though my research yielded a selection of 50 books that would be appropriate for addressing diverse families and living situations in the classroom, one limitation of this research is that there are many situations that students experience that cross over many categories that may not be addressed in just one book. This makes it difficult for teachers to select one book that has broad appeal to students in the class. In addition, there are several common family situations about which there are virtually no books, such as books about a mother whose biological children are white and biracial. Another

limitation of this research is that I did not review children's books in a bookstore. Future research should explore a variety of retail outlets to explore a wider range of available children's books. It would also be useful to obtain recommendations from practicing teachers of books they have used with success. It would also be helpful for future researchers to read books aloud to students to determine responses to the books. After selecting recommended books, a suggestion for future researchers would also be to formulate some guiding questions that teachers can ask students while reading aloud.

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