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BEYOND THE STORY-BOOK ENDING: LITERATURE FOR YOUNG CHILDREN ABOUT PARENTAL ESTRANGEMENT AND LOSS

megan matt

Transitions were difficult for four-year-old Aliyah. Requests to put toys away, come in from outdoor play, and sit for meals were often met with refusals, shouting, and even violence. At naptime she would begin by playfully testing us (three teachers and, occasionally, a social worker) to see how many toys she could sneak onto her cot without us “seeing,” gradually becoming louder and more disruptive until we finally approached. At this point, usually in tears, her body rigid, she would back away, sometimes hit or kick, and scream. No matter what words of comfort we offered or physical attempts to soothe her we made, she would scream at us in a powerful, grating voice, “Leave me!”*

At this time, Aliyah was living with an older cousin in kinship foster care, but had just recently been in the custody of her mother. Such trading off had already occurred over three times for her. In a Manhattan preschool class of fourteen three- to five-year-olds from low-income households, I would soon learn that this particular four-year-old was not alone in facing estrangement from parents and other caregivers. One boy had a father who was barred by court order from contacting him or his mother. Another had only known his grandmother as a caregiver from infancy and never saw or heard from his mother or father. Two girls had known their fathers when they were young but now barely saw them.

“Children need a story”

Like many new teachers in high-needs settings, as I taught the young preschoolers described above I was overwhelmed by their needs and by my obligation to meet those needs. The children were not merely in “nontraditional” families. They were in flux, their families in a prolonged transition, and no-one could know for certain how their parental relationships would evolve over time..

Eager to do the right thing, I searched everywhere for advice and resources

* Names have been changed to protect the identity of individual children.

to help these young children. In particular, drawing on the common wisdom of early childhood educators and of my graduate school faculty members, I sought stories. Glossy picture books by “experts,” would, I hoped, ground me and provide the right language to speak to Aliyah and others about the parental losses they were experiencing.¹

In my search for literature, I was also acting on the strong belief that all children need to see themselves and their families represented in stories. British psychologist Barnes (1999) remarks:

Children need story lines about a parent who does not form an ongoing part of their lives. In single-parent families where a mother still carries anger about a nonparticipating father this may be more difficult than in families where [single] parenthood has been chosen.

Although Barnes is speaking about the individual therapeutic practice of creating family narratives, his perspective also indicates the importance of creating *biblio-therapeutic* models for the population in general. Feeling angry or abandoned themselves, many of the caregivers who remain with a child might not be up to the challenge of addressing their situations. Books could potentially meet this need.

For this study I analyzed over thirty books for young children on the topics of abandonment, estrangement, divorce, and foster care. Many were referenced in *A to Zoo: Subject Access to Children's Picture Books* (Lima & Lima, 2006) under the heading of “divorce” (however, there were no entries under abandonment, foster care, single-parent families, or estrangement); others were listed in a 2006 subject-access search of the Bank Street College of Education picture book collection (all under “divorce,” with the exception of one under “foster care”); and still others were listed in “Recommended Books for Helping Children Deal With Separation and Divorce” (Pardeck, 1996). Further titles were identified and located by using

¹ The term “parental loss” is used to describe long-term or permanent separation of a child from a parent. In the context of this paper, the focus is on prolonged estrangement from a living parent.

the Worldcat database, which provides access to virtually every library collection in North America, using the search terms “foster care” and “divorce.”

In choosing books from these bibliographies, I sought titles that explicitly referenced parental loss or estrangement within their narratives. This loss might appear as an event within the story or as a fear articulated by a young child. However, I did not include texts that depicted stable single-parent or adoptive families where no other parent was ever known, let alone “lost.”

“Moms and dads never get divorced from their children”

Parental estrangement, loss, and long-term separation affect a large number of children in our classrooms. Recent figures suggest that about one third of all children live with either a single mother or father or with neither parent (Ray, 2005). And these numbers appear to be rising. Saleh et al. (2005) note that the proportion of children living in single-mother families has more than doubled in the last thirty years, to 26%, while Hetherington and Stanley-Hagen (1997) have found that the number of single-father families has tripled in that time.

By far the largest catalyst for parental estrangement is divorce or some other parental breakup. Studies have shown that nearly 40% of non-custodial fathers lose contact with their children following a divorce (Barnes, 1999; Hetherington and Stanley-Hagen, 1997). Although there is a vast selection of books about divorce, parental estrangement is virtually ignored within this genre. What’s more, the possibility of parental estrangement is often emphatically denied.

Indeed, constancy is the theme of most books for young children on the topic of parental divorce. Titles like *At Daddy’s on Saturdays* (Girard, 1987), *Saturday Is Pattyday* (Newman, 1993), and *Friday’s Journey* (Rush, 1994), or a character’s proclaiming “My daddy comes to get me every Saturday” (Caines, 1977), attest most clearly to a weekly routine. Other books suggest regular contact by assigning the child character a room or area in the new home (Ballard, 1993; Boegehold, 1985; Newman, 1993; Schotter, 2003; Schuchman, 1979; and Spelman, 1998); showing toothbrushes, pajamas, and other daily-use objects in both houses (Masurel, 2001; Hazen, 1978); establishing an ongoing project such

as a garden (Coy, 2003); or making specific references to a weekly visitation schedule (Caseley, 1995; Hazen, 1978). In various ways, these books depict the maintenance of continuity and parental connection, no matter what disruptions a family experiences.

Other texts explicitly emphasize the stability of bonds with an absent parent, with such claims as, “Moms and dads may get divorced from each other, but they never get divorced from their children.” (Schuchman, 1979). Although there are of course families for whom these books are representative, the repeated emphasis on consistency in parent-child relationships belies what so many children experience. Hetherington and Stanley-Hagen (1997) found that fewer than a quarter of children nationally even spoke to their non-resident parent on a weekly basis.

Another common theme in divorce literature for preschoolers is an emphasis on added treats, privileges, and possessions for children following divorce. In *Two Homes to Live in: A Child’s-Eye View of Divorce* (Hazen, 1978), the little girl proclaims:

“Having divorced parents means having two homes and two families. It means different ways of doing things and different kinds of Christmas trees. Having divorced parents means pajamas both places, and getting two sets of birthday presents. Last week on my birthday, I got a bike from Mommy and a kitten from Daddy.”

Other titles, including *Mama and Daddy Bear’s Divorce* (Spelman, 1998), *The Un-Wedding* (Cole, 1997), and *Priscilla Twice* (Caseley, 1995) likewise emphasize treats and parties following parental breakups.

Several other books focus on the idea that a child will have two homes following a divorce. The picture books *Gracie* (Ballard, 1993), *Priscilla Twice* (1995), *Mom and Dad Don’t Live Together Anymore* (Stinson, 1984), *My Mother’s House, My Father’s House* (Christiansen, 1989), and *Two Homes* (Masurel, 2001) all describe a child splitting his or her time exactly between two parents. In fact, *Gracie*, *Mom and Dad Don’t Live Together Anymore*, and *Two Homes* emphasize the

difference between a city home and a country home, almost as if divorce entails acquiring a country home. Again, these scenarios clearly reflect the reality for some children, but such books seem to deny the very existence of families where a father is neither a physical presence nor a financial contributor.

“Mommies Come Back, They Always Come Back”

As I searched for children’s literature on parental estrangement and loss and observed the disconnect between available literature and the experiences of young children, I became interested in the reasons for this discrepancy. I’m hardly cynical enough to think that children’s publishers and authors would wish to alienate young children intentionally. So why are books on parental loss so rare?

As an early childhood educator, I find that one clear obstacle to books on parental loss is the powerful tradition of emphasizing parental constancy in our classrooms. Using varying languages and methodologies, the key theorists of developmental psychology all tend to emphasize parent-child relationships in their work. This research has informed much of the thinking and practices of educators, caregivers, and writers for young children up to this day.

In preschool classes, separation and reunion between children and parents is a central focus and concern. Classroom libraries, songs (“Mommies Come Back, They Always Come Back”), and conversations are often crafted to allay young children’s anxiety that their parents will not return. And so it is little wonder that many of the children’s books reviewed here seem to place an emphasis on the stability of parent-child bonds following a parental breakup.

The difficulty is not that these books misrepresent the fears and concerns of young children. Indeed, they speak to one of the primary yearnings of young children in the aftermath of divorce (and of children in general, for that matter): to be told that they will not lose a parent (Pardeck, 1996). The difficulty is that, for very many children, the fear of losing a parent is not irrational. Very many children will lose a parent. The challenge to educators and those writing for young children is to support and reassure some students of the stability of their parental bonds while acknowledging discontinuity and rupture for others.

Too often, though, this balance has weighed against children experiencing

parental loss. In the interest of protecting some students from difficult truths, we have shut out the stories of others. But are we really creating a safe place for students if some, seeing their stories buried beneath accounts of stable families and consistently present parents, come to feel shame and guilt? The notion of “developmentally appropriate practice” in early childhood education comes into question when the lives of children cease to be “developmentally appropriate” according to traditional standards.

In the interest of advocating for all students and embracing relevant experiences, Silin (1995), Yelland (2005), and others have called for a move to reconceptualize early childhood education. Such a move is indeed necessary if we are to properly serve children affected by parental loss. Rather than abiding by old assumptions of what is appropriate in a school classroom, we must ask ourselves what is necessary and bring that to the children.

Moving Forward

Although as a classroom teacher I struggled to find picture books on the subject of parental estrangement, a more thorough survey of literature shows a small but growing body of work that deals with this topic head on. Mostly issued by smaller publishers or directed at professionals such as social workers (presumably because the stories of parental loss are thought to be too much for children and lay adults to handle independently), these books present possibilities for the future of children’s picture books that include uncertainty, rupture, and loss in the lives of young children.

One of the greatest challenges in discussing parental estrangement with young children is that the future of these relationships remains, for child and adult alike, ambiguous. This is particularly apparent in the lives of children in foster care, who typically retain legal ties with one or both parents while residing with another caregiver. The books *Kids Need to Be Safe* (Nelson, 2006); *Maybe Days* (Wilgocki & Wright, 2002); *Robert Lives With His Grandparents* (Hickman, 1995); and *Mama One, Mama Two* (Machlachlan, 1982) all pay special attention to the uncertainty of life for children in (and out) of foster care. They also present the complexity of feelings confronting young children in care. These books not

only assure readers that it is okay to be sad in such situations, but also remind children that being happy is okay, too, and that to be happy does not entail a betrayal of the estranged parent.

Within the genre of books on divorce there are also titles that embrace the complexity and variety of experiences for children of divorced parents. Children's author Judith Vigna seems particularly fascinated with the nuances of family life following divorce. Her books *Mommy and Me by Ourselves Again* (1987), *Grandma Without Me* (1984), and *I Live With Daddy* (1997) examine the subtle ways in which divorce changes relationships and shapes children's understanding of the world. They also dare to present parents with all their weaknesses as well as strengths, as loving and as capable of making mistakes.

The subject of incarcerated parents is consistently overlooked, however, in picture books for young children. Although there is a nonfiction book, from a series for young children on difficult topics, entitled *Let's Talk About When Your Parent Is in Jail* (Wittbold, 1998), the available storybooks on that subject tend to be for children in the upper elementary years and beyond. Considering the large number of children affected by the imprisonment of their parents—Boudin (2003) speaks of roughly two million children with one or more parent incarcerated—the available literature for young children is sorely inadequate.

But What is the Real Story?

Confronted with ever-changing family structures in our classrooms, we must respond to the young children we serve with creativity and sensitivity to their needs. As a classroom teacher, I have met children whose stories are largely unwritten and whose needs I've felt unprepared to address. The only solution then is to improvise, using the available resources. Classroom discussions, casual conversations, puppet shows, and stories improvised by a teacher all offer opportunities to expand children's notion of what "normal" is, to articulate the phenomena they otherwise see so rarely reflected around them. We can also find ample room to describe our own students' stories, to use their words and artwork to reflect what each specific class of children knows and believes about family.

But though a teacher can validate the experiences of young children and

reflect what is happening in the classroom, there is still, I believe, a need for literature, for more formal stories to meet the needs of children with estranged parents. In our media-saturated society, children learn very early to respect formal media and the authority of “experts;” my four-year-old students are quick to point out the difference between “real songs” and the impromptu ditties I might sing to encourage them throughout the day. They often ask if a folktale I tell is the real version or my own. As an educator, I hope I can make the children realize that their own stories are “real” and legitimate, no matter what messages they might encounter or fail to encounter in the media.

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