

In Schools, Family Tree Bends With Times

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Time was when Linda Chu, a private-school teacher for 15 years in Manhattan, would not think twice about asking her students to create family trees, an almost universal elementary school project that encourages children to connect with their ancestors.

But several years ago, Ms. Chu noticed that the assignment was taking a toll on some of her third graders. She gradually realized why: the assignment was a drain for children from nontraditional backgrounds.

Some students and parents became upset, feeling they had to choose between charting the biological lineage or the adoptive one. Some had two mothers or two fathers, or one parent was estranged.

So, a few years ago, Ms. Chu made the project more flexible.

"I let them include whoever is important to them instead of demanding that they fill out the blanks for a mother and father who may not be there," said Ms. Chu, a teacher at Friends Seminary, a small private school in Gramercy Park.

With many families of the 1990's no longer fitting the nuclear family model of the 1950's, teachers like Ms. Chu are rearranging lesson plans and redrawing assignments long regarded as staples of the classroom. The revisions reflect the growing diversity of their schools, which include children from families created through international

adoptions, children of gay parents and those born through advanced reproductive technology, those in families broken apart by divorce and rebuilt with stepparents and stepsiblings, and children raised by relatives or foster parents.

The most entrenched and problematic of these assignments, teachers, school administrators and psychologists said, is the classic family tree, which requires pupils to trace maternal and paternal ancestral lines.

How the family tree became such a mainstay in schools is unclear. Some educators said it had its roots in the 1950's, when two-parent households embodied the ideal postwar American family. And the television miniseries "Roots" in the 1970's raised the consciousness of Americans, especially black Americans, about tracing one's family history.

Some educators have reacted to the evolving family constellations by scrapping the family tree altogether, while others, like Ms. Chu, have modified it. Teachers now assign family time lines, family orchards and essays that give children more freedom in telling their personal histories.

Some teachers have chosen to keep the assignment, saying it is still valuable. But many schools, including the Manhattan New School, a public school on the Upper East Side, now send notes home in advance, asking parents if the assignment presents a difficulty.

Donna Collymore, a single parent who adopted her daughter, Amara, 6, when the girl was 7 weeks old, dreaded the family tree project.

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"I had heard horror stories about it from other adoptive parents," said Ms. Collymore, who lives in White Plains and works at a management consulting firm.

In December, Amara, a first grader at Church Street Elementary School, received the assignment. The instructions were simple: make a family tree. So were the tools: a cutout tree and 10 leaves to be pasted with pictures onto construction paper.

After reviewing the matter with Amara, who has been told from day one that she was adopted, mother and daughter created a tree with all their loved ones, including Ms. Collymore's parents, Amara's birth parents, aunts and uncles on Ms. Collymore's side and even a best friend.

"We could have used 20 more leaves," Ms. Collymore said. "You weren't asked to place the leaves in any particular order or how the person was related to you. It gave us great flexibility, which is the way it should be."

In the past, family trees were sometimes painful experiences for certain families -- for example, those whose relatives were killed in the Holocaust, African-Americans whose ancestors arrived in America on slave ships and who often care for the children of relatives and friends through informal arrangements, foster children and children of divorce.

But the assignment and the issues it represents have recently been questioned more forcefully through the efforts of adoptive parents.

The impetus has been, in part, that adoptions are no longer shrouded in secrecy, a change related to the increase in open adoptions, and in interracial and international adoptions, psychologists and educators said. So children who in previous decades might not have known about their adoptions, and might have blithely completed these assignments, now know their adoption stories or have a relationship with their birth parents. These pupils may struggle with such an inflexible rendering of their complicated family histories.

For a Father and Son, A 'Terrible Experience'

John A. Schoonbeck, 55, a retired Vassar College administrator who is gay, adopted his son, Nicholas, when the boy was born in 1974. He recalled the family tree assignment as an "altogether terrible experience." Nicholas, now 25 and married with a daughter, 5, was assigned the project as a third grader at a public school in New Paltz, N.Y.

"Nicky came home from school with bright expectation and this colorful form to fill out for his family tree," Mr. Schoonbeck said. "When I told him we couldn't do our family that way, he was sure there had to be something wrong with us, not with the school's request. He was hurt and suspicious, and I was furious at the school."

Father and son completed only the paternal side of the tree and prayed that the teacher would not say anything. She did not.

In lectures to educators, Joyce Maguire Pavao, executive director of the Center for Family Connections and founder of the Pre/ Post Adoption Consulting Team, both in Cambridge, Mass., offers an alternative to the family tree: family orchards.

"A variation like an orchard or a wheel that shows everyone children are connected to is good," she said. "But it's a much more complicated assignment than people think for African-American children, relatives of victims of the Holocaust or some child who spent his or her first 10 years in a Romanian orphanage, because they can only go back so far."

But some teachers refuse to modify the family tree project, saying there is no substitute for traditional genealogical research.

Mark L. Waggoner, a fourth-grade teacher at Elmore Elementary School in Green Bay, Wis., is a family tree stalwart. The project is a major undertaking for him and his students, requiring parental involvement and document research. He and his students pore over records, including birth and marriage certificates, to find ancestors.

"I will not let the children do a family line on stepparents," Mr. Waggoner said in a telephone interview. "No matter how much they love the person, they are not part of a child's ancestry. It would not be a true family tree. If parents disagree, we usually reach a compromise by allowing the child to trace one of their parent's history."

Rigid Model Is Changed To Allow More Choices

The family tree usually falls under immigration or family studies in the third or fourth grades. Family trees are sometimes studied in middle school, high school and even college. But the agony of feeling different resonates more deeply for elementary school pupils, said Susan Davis, a child and family psychologist in Manhattan.

Dr. Davis and other child development experts say the family tree assignment endures because children love learning about themselves and enjoy interviewing relatives about the days before they were born. The assignment also helps children understand the continuity of generations. "But children need to have a choice," Dr. Davis said, "defining the family configuration that makes sense to them and doesn't limit them."

About 15 years ago, teachers at the Bank Street School, a private school in Manhattan, began moving away from the rigid family tree model because the school started to attract a more diverse student body.

"I've had kids talk openly about coming from sperm banks or having two moms," said George C. Burns, head of the middle school at Bank Street. "What tends to happen is that children pick up on how a parent or teacher talks about it. Do they use a tone of acceptance?"

Now, Bank Street permits students to incorporate whomever they wish into family trees, and gives them even more freedom to highlight significant events in their lives by creating time lines illustrated with drawings and photographs.

Teachers can avoid making children feel uncomfortable about their backgrounds, particularly when doing assignments about family ties, by assuming that most students come from complex families, said Ronny Diamond, director of postadoption services at Spence-Chapin Services to Families and Children, an adoption agency in Manhattan.

Ms. Diamond conducts workshops at public and private schools in the region, instructing teachers and administrators in how to handle issues of adoption, what language to use and how to make their assignments more sensitive.

More often than not, Ms. Diamond said, teachers unwittingly hurt adopted children's feelings through the family tree assignment, either by sending them out of the room under the guise of doing something special or by telling them not to do their "real" family, just their adoptive parents.

"I think the teachers are trying to make things easier," she said, "but it's all unnecessary if they allow a little flexibility and become more aware of their language."

Brenda S. Rogers, a single adoptive mother from South Orange, N.J., said she was flummoxed when her daughter, Kendra, now 6, came home with the family tree assignment as a 3-year-old.

Ms. Rogers, a friend of Ms. Collymore, the single mother in White Plains, said she had never told teachers at Kendra's Montessori school that her daughter was adopted, fearing the negative myths about adoption that people might attach to her child. How then would she list Kendra's father?

"I put my nephew in that slot," said Ms. Rogers, 46, a hospital administrator. "He is her godfather. Interestingly enough, no one in the school asked about it."

Making Literature Reflect Child's Reality

Cheryl Render Brown trains new teachers at Wheelock College in Boston, and she urges them to talk to parents and read students' records to help them create lessons that include all types of families. She also advises teachers to tackle family diversity through children's literature.

One children's author, Patricia Polacco, has carved out a niche writing books that highlight multiculturalism and show, in a nondidactic way, grandmothers and single mothers as heads of their households.

As a child of divorce herself, Ms. Polacco, 54, said she knows the importance of seeing nontraditional families in children's literature. "Teachers are not only aware, but they talk to me about it as a visiting author," said Ms. Polacco, who speaks in classrooms around the country. "They have parents who are gay couples, and they want students to see their faces on the pages. One of my best friends is an African-American man who said that when he was growing up, no one on book pages looked like him."

Teachers at the Trinity School, a private school on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, still assign the family tree project, but they see it as a lesson in diversity, and they try to avoid discomfort by informing parents about the assignment ahead of time, said Rosemary Milliman, principal of the lower school at Trinity.

If there are parents in two different households, "we send two different notes home," Ms. Milliman said. "If the kids are adopted, we talk to those parents as well."

She added, "It's a teaching tool to have kids realize that the stereotypic family is not really the rule anymore."

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