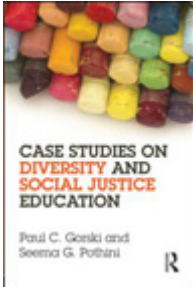


Case Study 9.4: Two Moms



Written by Paul C. Gorski (gorski@edchange.org) and Seema Pothini (sg1515@hotmail.com) for their book, *Case Studies on Diversity and Social Justice Education* (Routledge, 2014). Check out the book for this more than 30 additional school- and classroom based case studies on issues like race, class, (dis)ability, gender, sexual orientation, and religion.

Synopsis: A second grade teacher, noticing that a student who has same-sex parents is being teased, decides to read a book to the class about a child who has two moms. Parents complain to the principal.

Ms. Ribiero, a second grade teacher at Gibson Elementary School, was no fan of controversy, but she was very attuned to her students' needs and equally committed to building authentic community in her classroom. So when she learned that Denise, who lived with her two mothers, would be in her class, she did some research and found two highly-recommended books that depicted families with same-sex parents to add to her classroom library. She had no intention of teaching a lesson on same-sex partners or reading the book aloud or anything that might upset some of her other students' families. She just thought as a simple matter of inclusion that the books ought to be available to Denise and her classmates. She mentioned this to Denise's moms at Back to School Night. They appreciated her thoughtfulness.

A couple months into the school year, Ms. Ribiero noticed a few students picking one of those books up and looking it over before putting it back and choosing something else to read. Then, one day in mid-November, she noticed Denise reading one of the books. Julia, one of Denise's classmates, was sitting next to her. "What are you reading?" Julia asked Denise.

"This," Denise replied, showing her Julia the book cover. "It's called *Emma and Meesha My Boy: A Two-Mom Story*."

"What's it about?"

Without skipping a beat Denise replied, "A little girl who lives with her two moms and they have a cat." Ms. Ribiero, overhearing their conversation, walked slowly toward them.

"Two moms?" Julia asked, voice elevated, eliciting the attention of other students who were reading nearby. "You mean she has two moms who live together? That's weird."

Brandon, another student sitting nearby looked up at Ms. Ribiero and, as if telling on her, pointed to Denise and said, "*She's* reading a book about weird people."

"OK Julia and Brandon," Ms. Ribiero interrupted, "focus on your own books and let Denise focus on hers."

Immediately Ms. Ribiero was dissatisfied with her response. She was uneasy, as usual, about doing anything that might seem controversial. She definitely did not feel comfortable trying to teach a lesson on same-sex partners on the spot. She agonized that evening over what to do. She knew she needed to do *something*, not as a matter of marriage rights or explicit advocacy for lesbian or gay people, but as a simple matter of accuracy. Families with two moms *do exist*. Plus, although as far as she knew, Denise was the only student in her class with same-sex parents, others lived in one of many other family structure scenarios.

Despite her uneasiness, Ms. Ribiero decided to read *Emma and Meesha My Boy* aloud to the class the following day. She wondered for a moment whether she should wait and maybe

even send home notices so families could opt their children out of the activity if they wanted to do so, but she figured, because she was using the book to begin a conversation about family diversity rather than “gay marriage” or “gay rights,” the controversy would be averted.

She was thrilled the next day to see how open and curious her students were about the book. “So your family is like that?” Julia asked Denise.

“Yes. Two moms, and no dad” Denise replied, holding up two fingers.

As other students began asking Denise questions, Ms. Ribiero felt tempted to stop the conversation and remind them that there are many forms of family diversity. But she paused, proud of how respectful the students were being with one another and how empowered Denise appeared as she answered their questions. They did go on, after a while, to talk about other forms of family diversity, about living with grandparents, single parents or guardians, extended or joint families, and a foster family. Ms. Ribiero was thrilled with how well it went.

She was thrilled, that is, until the next morning, when she learned from Principal Hernandez that several parents had called him complaining that she was teaching about “homosexuality” and “gay marriage” in class. “You know me and controversy,” Ms. Ribiero said, “and you know I was not teaching about homosexuality or gay marriage.”

“I know, I know,” Mr. Hernandez responded, “but several of these parents apparently talked with each other and are coming by the office after school today. Some already have asked to have their children moved to another class.”

Filled with anxiety, Ms. Ribiero explained, “All I did was read a book about a little girl with two moms. Denise is in my class and her classmates had questions. In a year or two those questions are going to turn into bullying if we don’t do something now.”

“Well, I know you’re the last person who would purposefully start a firestorm. And I know you need to get to your classroom before the students start arriving. Come down to the office right after school today. The parents are arriving around 3:45 and I would like you there. That will give us about half an hour to talk about a strategy.”

“OK, thank you,” Ms. Ribiero said nervously before heading to her classroom.

Questions

1. How else might Ms. Ribiero have responded when she saw Julia and Brandon giving Denise a hard time about reading a book about a child with two moms?
2. Other than reading that book to the class, what might Ms. Ribiero have done to engage her students in a conversation about diverse family structures? How might she have engaged them in a more direct conversation about families with same-sex parents or guardians?
3. During her conversation with Mr. Hernandez, Ms. Ribiero made the point that the students’ questions will turn into bullying if the school does not find some way to address those questions. What responsibility do teachers and administrators have to educate students about diverse family structures such as families with same-sex parents or guardians? What responsibility do they have to educate students about discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation?