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ABSTRACT

A survey of 25 institutions of higher education was completed to identify strategies that are being used to prepare future teachers to help children and families of divorce. Ten individual strategies are discussed, including case studies, journal articles and reflective papers, use of children's literature, student teaching experiences, and discussion of divorce in courses such as Foundations of Education, Child Development, Social Studies Methods, and Urban Education. The data suggest that while numerous approaches are being used to address the topic of divorce, this is not a top priority topic among the many other pressing issues in teacher education. However, with the lives of more than half of U.S. children directly affected by divorce, it is critical that teachers be prepared to be supportive and effective in helping these children and their families. A resource list of children's literature, research literature, and films is included. (ND)

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Preparing Teachers to Help Children and Families of Divorce

by

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ABSTRACT

The growing number of children of divorce demands that future teachers need to be prepared for the associated problems that come along as children experience the break-up of their families. This study explores techniques for addressing this topic in teacher education programs. A survey of 25 institutions of higher education was completed to identify strategies that are being used to prepare future teachers to help children and families of divorce. A resource list of children's literature, research literature, and films is also included.

Preparing Teachers to Help Children and Families of Divorce

There have been a limited number of studies which have focused on preparing teachers to help children and families of divorce. Numerous studies have identified the possible effects of divorce on children. These effects include decreased academic performance, chronic maladjustment problems, and difficulties in peer relations (Frieman, B.B., 1993; Kurtz, 1994; & Portes, 1991). Other studies have indicated that some teachers and future teachers may be somewhat biased towards children of divorce (Fuller, 1986; Call, Beer, & Beer, 1994). Teacher educators must determine how to best prepare future teachers for the challenge of effectively dealing with children and families of divorce.

A recent survey was conducted of 25 teacher education institutions in Indiana, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey. The survey was designed to identify what techniques, if any, are being used to prepare future elementary education majors for dealing with children and families of divorce. All but two of the institutions surveyed were addressing the topic of divorce in some manner. The following descriptions provide a summary of the techniques and methods that were

identified from the survey.

Addressing Divorce In Teacher Education

1. Many of the institutions deal with divorce as the topic of families is discussed. The issue of divorce is often raised to develop an awareness of the diversity of family structures and the problems that may result from such a stressful life experience. The discussion of this topic seemed to come up in introductory courses such as Foundations of Education, Child Growth and Development, Educational Psychology, and Introduction to Education. Some programs also deal with the topic of families in courses outside of the teacher education program, such as in psychology or sociology courses. Needless to say, most of these courses do not explore the topic of divorce in much depth since there are so many other issues that must be addressed .

2. Case studies are used by some institutions to help future teachers study the specific problems and concerns that often occur when a child is experiencing the break-up of his/her family. The classroom effects are the focus of some institutions that use this method to study individual children's reactions to divorce.

3. Journal articles and reflective papers are used by some institutions to help acquaint future teachers with the possible problems associated with divorce. Many institutions use self-selected topics and

divorce is one that may be chosen by some students.

4. A few institutions address the topic of divorce in the Social Studies Methods course as topics such as families and diversity are explored. Some instructors utilize role-playing as a vehicle for developing understanding about this issue. This helps to develop a keen sense of awareness of the pain and reactions experienced by children of divorce. The students can role-play children's possible responses as the of divorce comes up in class activities and discussions.

5. One institution deals with divorce as part of a course in Urban Education. The students are required to participate in some of type of community service. Some students will participate in settings where they have the opportunity to meet and interact with children and families that are dealing with divorce-related matters. These settings might include shelters, soup kitchens, day care centers, etc. The course causes the students to think about how the classroom can be designed to best meet the needs of these children and their families.

6. A number of institutions deal with divorce through the context of children's literature. Bibliotherapy techniques are explored as a means to help deal with this sensitive issue, while also helping to sensitize future teachers to the challenges faced by children and families of divorce. There is a growing collection of children's literature that deals with the topic of divorce (See titles on resource list)

7. A few institutions address the topic of divorce as they study

parenting issues. Some institutions have a specific course devoted to this topic. This appears to be more common as part of early childhood programs. The parenting course provides opportunities for future teachers to discuss and practice skills needed to interact effectively with parents. These skills could include conferencing and communication techniques.

8. Guest speakers and support groups have been brought into some classes to expose future teachers to issues concerning divorce. This helps to provide a realistic picture of the struggles faced by those going through the divorce process. This discussion helps acquaint the audience with the financial, emotional, and social consequences of divorce. Students who have experienced divorce in their own lives are also encouraged to share their experiences with others to help them better understand this problem.

9. Some institutions deal with divorce most frequently during the student teaching experience when the students are faced with actual divorce-related problems. This often comes up in concerns about classroom management or parent-teacher relationships. The problems can be dealt with on a one-to-one basis in these experiences, or they may be brought to the accompanying seminar or practicum sessions where groups of student teachers gather to discuss their experiences.

10. At East Stroudsburg University in Pennsylvania, we use a number of the techniques that have been described as we strive to

prepare future teachers to deal with children and families of divorce. One of the most effective techniques that we have found is an option from a group of practical assignments used in the Child Growth and Development course. The students are asked to interview a college student who experienced the divorce of his/her parents during the elementary school years. The interview consists of a number of questions about the initial and long term responses to the divorce. This includes questions about custody issues, reactions to the break-up, and the type of support networks that may have helped them. The following comments from students who completed this activity speak to the value of this type of assignment in raising the awareness and sensitivity level of future teachers.

"I am glad that I did the activity, because I got a chance to realize just how difficult and troubling divorce can be for children."

"A teacher should be aware of the feelings that go on when a child has parents going through a divorce. It is a very traumatic period which affects both their school life and social interactions."

"When I become a teacher, i want to help my students who are going through divorce in any way possible and be sensitive to their needs."

Conclusions

While numerous approaches are currently being used to address the topic of divorce, it is evident that this topic is not a top priority since there are so many other pressing issues in teacher preparation. It is hoped that these ideas and the following list of resources may be helpful to those who choose to include this topic as part of their teacher training program. With the lives of more than half of the children in our country being directly affected by this trauma, it is critical that teachers be prepared to be supportive and effective in helping these children and their families.

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Resources on Divorce

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Wallerstein, J.S. (1989, January 22). Children after divorce - wounds that don't heal. The New York Times Magazine, 130-135.

Audio-visual Resources

Being a Single Parent, (19 minutes), Films for the Humanities & Sciences (800-257-5126)

Children of Divorce (28 minutes), Films for the Humanities & Sciences (800-257-5126)

Fatherless in America (26 minutes), Films for the Humanities & Sciences (800-257-5126)

Society's Problems in Children's Lives, (28 minutes), Films for the Humanities & Sciences (800-257-5126)

Curriculum

Banana Splits (peer support group program): Ballston Spa Central Schools, Ballston Spa, NY. (518) 885-5361.

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