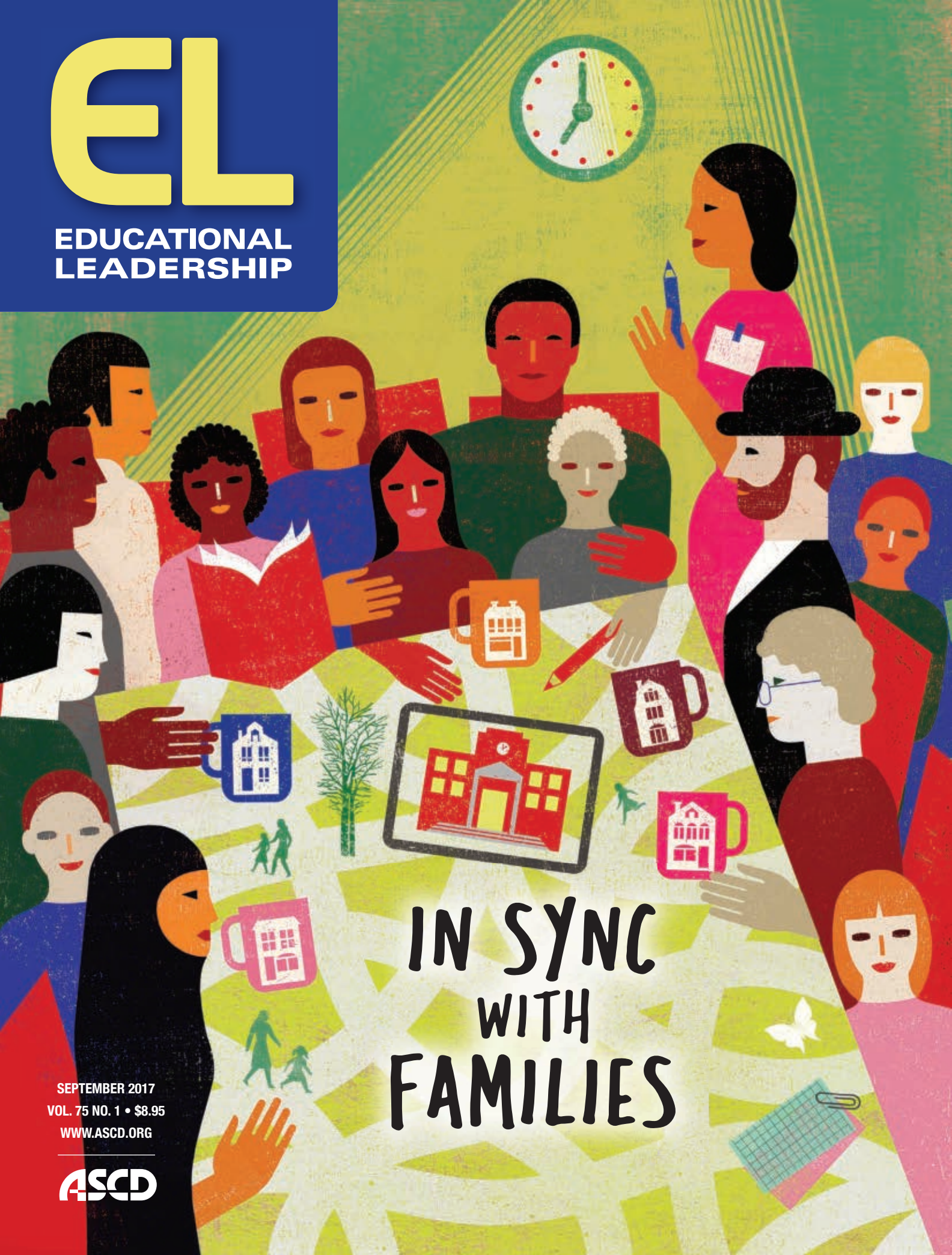


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## IN SYNC WITH FAMILIES

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# Families Are CHANGING— And Staying the Same

*A sociologist says educators need to understand complex family structures while celebrating the common values that underlie family relationships.*

**Philip N. Cohen**

When my daughter was in preschool, one of the other girls in the class lived with her mother and her mother's partner. Her mother was separated from a previous partner, who was the girl's other mother. In our tolerant community, people sometimes tried to be inclusive by referring to the mother and her partner as two "mommies," in keeping with the title of the children's book *Heather Has Two Mommies* (Candlewick, 2016). However, this was awkward because the girl did not call her mother's current partner "Mommy"; she did have two mommies, but she only lived with one of them. This was a new wrinkle in the old problem of when (if ever) to call a stepparent "Mom" or "Dad."

I think of this case when, as a sociologist and demographer, I wrestle with the issue of diversity and language in family life. The names and labels we use, especially with children, carry great emotional and psychological weight. These labels help define what behaviors and relationships are appropriate and desirable. Families are social units defined by their boundaries—who's in, and who's not. Children need



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boundaries, but the rules that determine those boundaries are up for negotiation.

As families become more diverse, with varied forms and structures, the terminology we use and the mental maps we form become more complicated. But the basic emotional and social needs of our children haven't changed: loving care, security, acceptance, intimacy, and sustenance (for starters!). It matters less what I call the responsible adult who provides your loving care than that I acknowledge the importance of that relationship and its role in your development.

That's why, to best serve the needs of today's students, educators must be able to talk about "the family" without imposing a narrow definition of family structure. As educators learn to recognize and respect the complex family stories that students bring with them to school, it's also essential to highlight the value of the relationships that all students need.

### **Acknowledging Increased Diversity**

My research career has been shaped by the challenges we face in defining family relationships. My first assignment as an analyst at the U.S. Census Bureau in 1998 was figuring out how to count unmarried couples using surveys that didn't ask about such relationships. More recently, I consulted with the Bureau on its efforts to count same-sex couples (which may come to fruition in the next census, depending on the political



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Family diversity, like other kinds of diversity, can be a source of strength within a school community.

winds). Like K–12 teachers, we social scientists often find ourselves working with people and life stories that never quite fit the concepts and labels we have just finished revising.

From these experiences and my studies based on data from the Census Bureau and other sources,<sup>1</sup> I can summarize three aspects of growing family diversity relevant to the lives of students in today's schools:

■ *Structures.* Most children are living in families that don't fit the 1950s ideal of one father working outside the home and one stay-at-home mother. Single parents, parents cohabiting outside of marriage, blended families, and multigenerational





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families have all grown more common in recent decades.

■ *Trajectories.* That diverse set of structures is related to the increasing diversity in the sequencing and timing of family formation and other events. For example, some people have children when they're teenagers, whereas some have a first child in their 40s; many people have children before marriage and then get married later (often to a different partner).

■ *Roles.* The increase in mothers' employment has been accompanied by an increase in the time fathers and other caretakers spend with children, creating new roles for parents and others involved in children's lives.

Figure 1 shows the nature of this multifaceted change. In 1960, two-thirds of children lived with married parents—

In 1960, two-thirds of children lived with married parents—a stay-at-home mother and an employed father. Now only 22 percent live in such families.

a stay-at-home mother and an employed father. Now only 22 percent live in such families. But rather than view the last half-century of change as just a dramatic drop in the prevalence of breadwinner-homemaker families, it's helpful to notice how the categories have fanned out so that no one category dominates anymore.

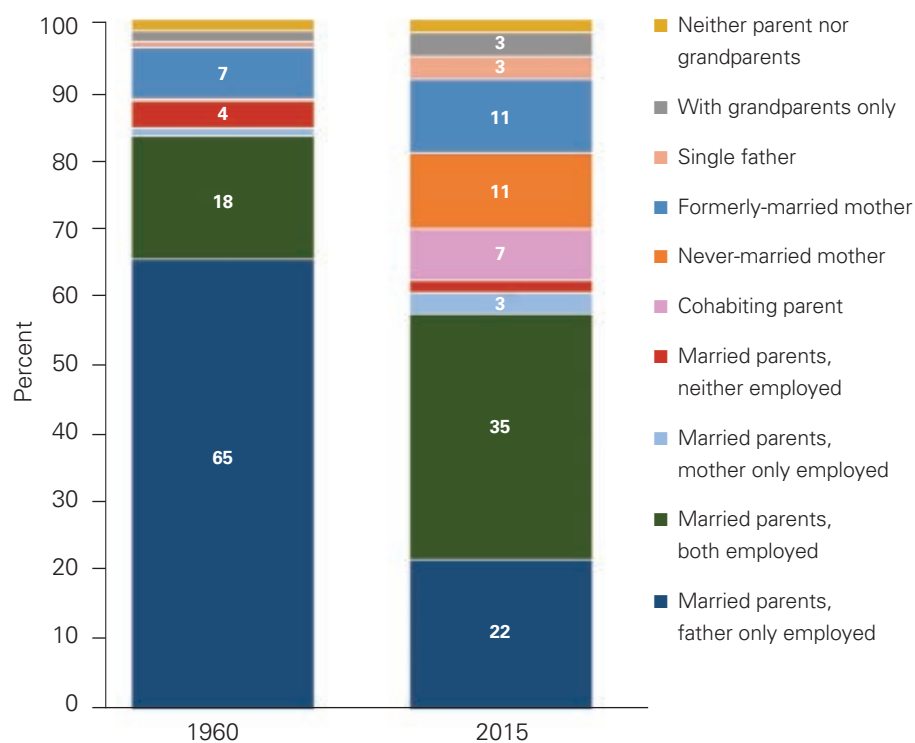
In 1960, the average teacher could have guessed that a given student lived with two parents who were married to each other, and that teacher would have been right 88 percent of the time. By 2015, that teacher would be right only 62 percent of the time.

The teacher from 1960 would also commonly assume that if a child were not living with two married parents, something had gone very wrong—a rare divorce, widowhood, or a scandalous “out-of-wedlock” birth.

Today, teachers need to have a more inclusive mindset that recognizes the diversity of family structures. Although there are reasons for concern about some of the changes shown in the data, the driving factors have often been positive. For example, changes in family roles reflect increased educational and occupational opportunities for women and greater gender equality within families. Fathers are expected to play an active role in parenting—and usually do—to a much greater degree than they did half a century ago.

The decline in marriage itself represents both good and bad outcomes. On the one hand, people tend to enter (and leave) marriage more freely, which could result in higher-quality relationships. Further, although family change and transitions are difficult for many children to weather, the incidence of family violence and child abuse has declined markedly since the 1990s, partly because mothers are more able to leave abusive men. On the other hand, the decline in married couples may also reflect the poor job prospects and high incarceration rates for some men, which make them less available and desirable as marriage partners for women.

**FIGURE 1. Work-Family Living Arrangements of Children (Ages 0-14), 1960 & 2015**



Source: Author calculations from the 1960 U.S. Census and the 2015 American Community Survey, with data from IPUMS.org. This figure updates data published in *Family Diversity Is the New Normal for America's Children (Brief Report)*, 2014, Austin, TX: Council on Contemporary Families. Note that fewer than two percent of children in 1960 lived with never-married mothers or single fathers, and cohabiting parents were not identified in 1960.

## Universal Language

Diversity is the condition of differences in a population—different experiences, different characteristics. There are no diverse individuals, only diverse groups. For teachers, the implication is that they should not categorize students' families as “normal” versus “different”; instead, they should recognize the differences among *all* students and find ways to balance individual support with universal language and concepts that apply to everyone.

The key points of diversity in family experiences that teachers should watch for are family *structure* (such as who the student lives with), family *trajectories* (the transitions and changes in family structure), and family *roles* (who cares and provides for the student). Using principles

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from universal design, teachers can promote language and concepts that work for all students. Done right, this is an opportunity to broaden the learning experience for everyone—to teach that care, intimate relationships, and family structures can include people of different ages, genders, and familial connections.

This can be very simple. For example, instead of asking something about a student's mother or father, consider asking first, "Who do you live with?" Then, depending on the answer, ask the follow-up question using the name or title the student applied. And although it's not necessary to avoid discussing "parents," there may be times when a question is really about an adult in the household ("Who cooks dinner?"). In these cases, you can use those universal terms instead.

It's important to remember that teaching about difference does not mean focusing on students with "different" families. Focusing on the details of students with "normal" families can be a powerful signal that everyone has an interesting and valuable story. In the case of ethnicity, for example, simply giving voice to the fact that even members of the majority group have ethnic identities helps put everyone on the same level; the same should be true of family types.

For example, when meeting parents for the first

time, a teacher might ask a student, "Is this your mother?" (even when parent and child look alike, instead of only in cases where they look different). Or, when discussing a family vacation, a teacher can make a point to ask who went along on the trip even if it seems likely it was the mother, father, and biological children.

Family diversity, like other kinds of diversity, can be a source of strength within a school community—or a path to conflict, exclusion, and subordination. Tipping that balance in the right direction is a major challenge for today's schools. **EL**

<sup>1</sup>See Cohen, P. N. (2014a). *The family: Diversity, inequality, and social change*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company; and Cohen, P. N. (2014b). *Family diversity is the new normal for America's children (brief report)*. Austin, TX: Council of Contemporary Families. Available at <https://contemporaryfamilies.org/the-new-normal>.

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