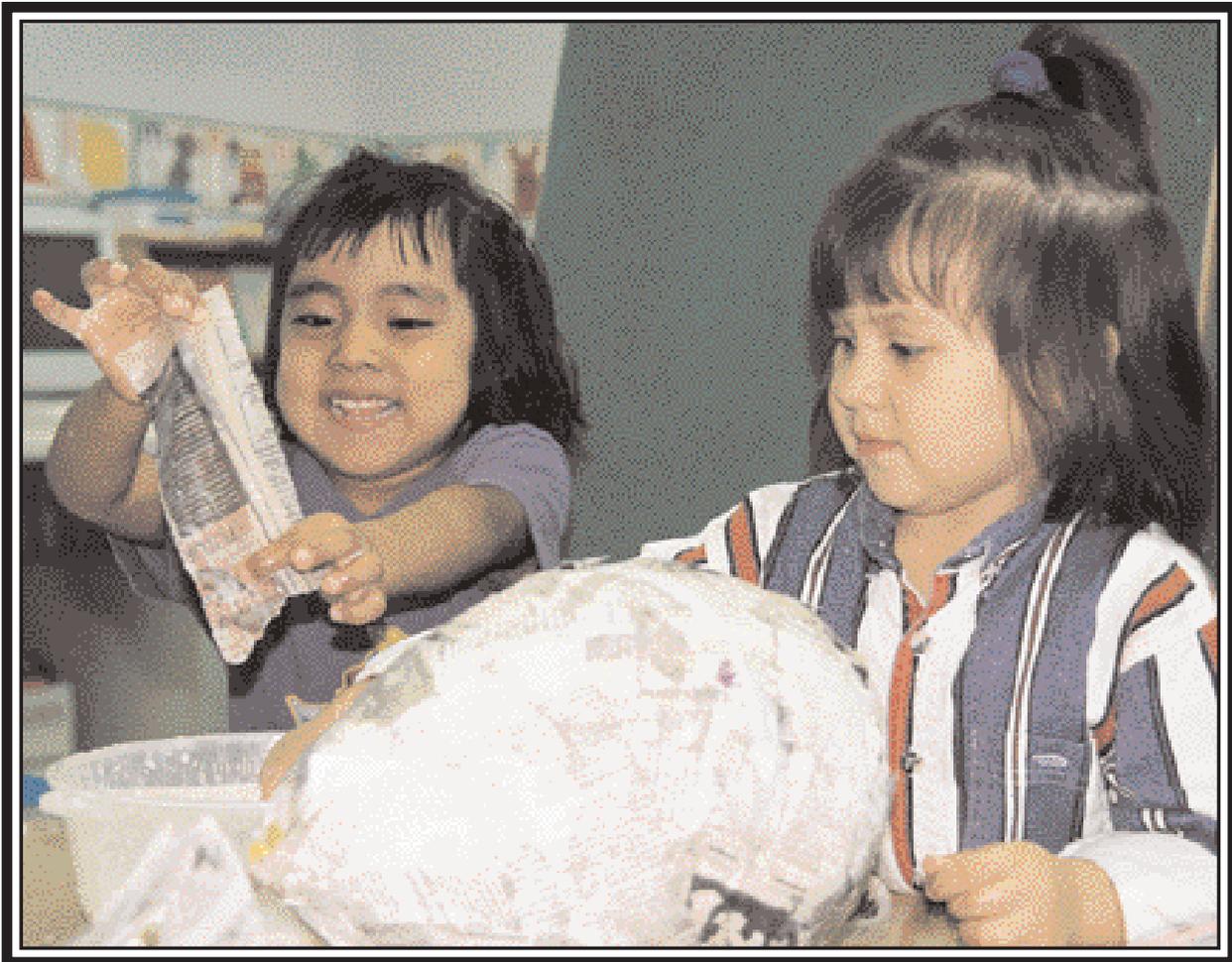


# ► Play and Culture



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# Play and Cultural Differences

**C**ulture — a people’s way of behaving, being in and understanding the world — is learned by each new generation through a process of enculturation. A culture’s solutions and life strategies are acquired by children as they watch and listen — and reinvented as they imitate, talk, and play. Language, including both words and art forms, is central to the unity of a culture.

In the first five years of life, children learn to talk their people’s language and play their people’s daily life scripts — homemaking and going places, talking to friends and buying and selling, making and fixing, singing and dancing, and storytelling and celebrating rituals. Children’s imitative and playful grounding in their culture is the foundation for identity development and for trust in the world as a predictable and meaningful place.

For many children, this learning process is disrupted by racism and other biases that devalue their

home culture, or by sustained discontinuous experiences that ignore it. A child in out-of-home care will be aware both of differences and of the unspoken values attached to these differences: Are my language, my hair and skin, my games — myself — welcome here? Am I expected to change in order to be acceptable? Child care can be an alienating experience — or an affirming one.

If no one in the child care program speaks the child’s language, if none of the toys recreate home, if no familiar adult is present in a caregiving role, the young child is thrust into the confusing but all-too-common experience of *stranger care* — of long days in a setting which doesn’t resemble home and whose people will have no lasting relationship with the child’s family. In such a setting, it’s hard to play and learn.

To some extent, stranger care is the experience of most children in professional child care settings in contemporary America. But children seek out reassuring resemblances even in encounters with strangers: Do you talk

by Sharon Cronin and Elizabeth Jones

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like my Daddy? Do you look like my Mama? Do you sing the songs my Grandma sings to me? What are we having for lunch?

Some community child care is almost like relative care — an extension of the family and its culture in a program where adults and children do share language, behaviors, and values. For children of the dominant culture, such settings may reassure them of the “rightness of whiteness” and the irrelevance of other folks’ lives in *their* privileged scheme of things. For both adults and children in some communities of color, there is work to be done in recapturing partially lost traditions and making them directly available to the children — through artifacts and song-games and stories — for incorporation into their play.

## Enculturation: Providing Continuity of Experience

The younger the child, the more crucial it is for healthy development that child care be a familiar place. How is this possible in settings where staff and children don’t *match*? To provide continuity in children’s experience — to reinforce identity development — it is important to provision for and support imitative and dramatic play reflecting the home experience. Here are four practical suggestions:

- Hire staff from the children’s cultural/language backgrounds.
- Learn everything you can about children’s home cultures.
- Provide representations from children’s home cultures as regular aspects of the play environment and group times.
- Avoid isolating a child.

**Hire staff from the children’s cultural/ language backgrounds.** Whatever any of us can learn about another’s culture and language is only a small part of what is learned through early enculturation. The caregivers able to provide the clearest affirmation of a child’s culture are those who grew up in it — who know from the heart its rhythms, its ways of being together, its assumptions, and its games, and who will share those regularly with children. *How did you play as a child?* is among the most powerful questions in alerting early childhood staff to the meaning of play for the children in their care. *How do we play?* is most readily answered for a child by the members of his own cultural group. And so a child care staff should reflect the cultures of the families enrolled.

**Learn everything you can about children’s home cultures.** Develop a relationship with the community from which the children come, being sensitive to the things community members are and are not willing to share with an outsider. If invited, visit children’s homes and neighborhoods. Learn phrases from their language. Read about their culture, listen to music, attend celebrations. Visit their grocery stores. Invite parents and grandparents to share something of their lives with the whole group of children, thus introducing more *scripts* for play.

**Provide representations from children’s home cultures.** If children are to play their home-culture experiences, familiar props are needed. Do the baby dolls look like our babies? Can I carry the doll babies the way my mama carries my little brother? Can I fix a meal for my family and serve it in a familiar way? For some families from the Caribbean, a coffee strainer is a necessary piece of equipment in the kitchen; in a Vietnamese child’s kitchen, a wok may be the first necessity for cooking. And who wants to serve breakfast cereal out of boxes with unfamiliar labels, when cereal boxes are among children’s first reading experiences? Do the block accessories include animals and vehicles like those the children know? Do the dress-ups match what is worn by the men and women the child knows best? Do the tools match those used by workers in the child’s community?

**Avoid isolating a child.** A child who is the only member of her language or cultural group in a child care setting has no one to share her familiar language and play scripts with, and thus has little choice but to assimilate. Assimilation is another possible outcome of the enculturation/acculturation sequence. It asks the individual to leave her home culture behind and try — typically with only partial success — to become a member of the majority group.

The burden of being a *token* is too great for a small child. If there are just a few children from a culture in a program, try to place them all in the same classroom, with at least one familiar staff member. If there is only one, recruit more.

## Acculturation: Providing an Introduction to the World of School

In the school years, children learn the expectations of the larger community. And so early childhood programs typically include preparation for school among their stated goals. All children growing up in societies not isolated from the larger world — and there are few

isolated societies any more — must become acculturated to the unfamiliar. Going to school is always an acculturation process — but it is a very different experience for some children than for others.

There is the relief, for some five and six year olds, of discovering that school is a lot like home. The books and toys are familiar, used carefully, and put away *where they belong*. Behavioral expectations are familiar, and teachers even play the same kinds of games with words and numbers that their parents do. These children are perceived by teachers as smart and well behaved; their identity is confirmed.

In contrast, those children for whom very little is familiar and who don't speak standard English (or, perhaps, any English at all) are often perceived as deficient, troublesome, and in need of *fixing*. Their identity and competence, unperceived by adults, become at risk.

Child care can be thoughtfully developed as a bridge toward acculturation or it can simply introduce the anxiety of *going to school* at a younger age. In child care, children experience large groups, persons called teachers, and the things that schools think are important. Tasks that can be completed while sitting at a table reassure adults that education is happening and children are under control; children who attend to such tasks help teachers feel competent. But there are other messier and more active things to be learned in preschool, too — painting, block building, woodworking, digging. Many modern children don't have these experiences at home and may lack skills in carrying them out.

Children learn to play through interactions with more experienced players; in age-grouped child care, these are usually adults. If adults have forgotten how to make believe, or if the preschool has materials they have never played with themselves, then staff inservice training should include hands-on play sessions in which adults explore open-ended materials without children present. "Teacher as player" (Jones and Reynolds, 1994) is an important role for adults working with young children learning to become competent players; by modeling and suggesting, adults teach children how to play and learn.

## Supporting Bicultural Competence

For many children and adults, cultural competence implies bicultural competence — the ability to *code switch*, to move with confidence between two or more languages and sets of behaviors, and to recognize

which is appropriate at any given time. From very early childhood, children are capable of complex differentiations — between friend and stranger, between public and private behaviors — even between different languages. Biculturality, when successfully accomplished, creates greater flexibility and sophistication about the possible ways of being human. These are useful skills to cultivate in a diverse and changing world. (Chang, Muckelroy, and Pulido, 1996)

Homogeneous groups — composed of *people like us* — are easier to live and work in; no translations needed. Hiring staff from diverse backgrounds will increase misunderstanding and conflict. *Culturally appropriate* may not match others' understanding of *developmentally appropriate*. Language differences — and values differences — make every interaction a challenge. (Gonzalez-Mena, 1993) Teaching staff find themselves experiencing some of the same frustrations experienced by children and parents encountering the differences between home and child care. How can quality programs be created if staff can't communicate?

But this is the world we live in. We are not all alike. We have to learn to communicate, hard as it is — to problem solve, respectfully, with people different from ourselves. We have to learn to play together — with children, with each other — rather than to fight. We have to *use our words* — especially difficult when we speak different languages.

As early childhood professionals, we are committed to value each child, to create a small world in child care where every child's identity is valued and reinforced. We have to practice valuing each other, too. Children who miss that validation in early childhood — which is where it must happen, in the sequence of healthy development — are far too likely to grow up a danger to themselves and others, emotionally if not physically. Child care respectful of diversity and identity development, where children are able, through relationships and play, to learn who they are and who those other folks are, too, can make a difference in the creation of a healthier society.

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# Play in a Classroom of Iu-Mien Children

Most of the children in my kindergarten classroom are members of the Iu-Mien tribe, a people who came from the highland provinces of Sichuan in China and Laos. During the Indo-Chinese wars, the Iu-Mien soldiers fought first with the French and later for the United States armies. And so, after the wars, they had to leave their country. The United States government relocated them to American inner-city neighborhoods and provided them with welfare and low-income housing assistance. And the lives of the people have been transformed and disrupted in very profound ways.

In observing the children at play, the cultural differences are obvious. It is not unusual to see two or three boys collaborating with very little conflict to build one car out of Legos. It is rare to see a child playing alone. In fact, a Mien child's performance on the standard kindergarten assessment tool — draw a person — could alarm an American teacher interpreting it without understanding the cultural context. Until a Mien child has been at school for a while, any self-portrait will be a drawing of the child surrounded by others.

Unfortunately, many teachers appear to be unable to grasp a cultural context where sharing, taking turns, and cooperative effort are the norm and don't have to be taught at school. Teachers in the higher grades complain about how the Mien children chatter constantly, are unable to work independently, *cheat* by giving the answer to children who are having difficulty. These are just some of the ways the values of the tribe are undermined by the institution of school.

The challenge for me is to provide the children what I can of “the culture of power” (Delpit), while supporting them to retain what is beautiful and useful about their home culture. The greatest of these challenges centers on literacy. The Mien people have no written language. On the land, education involved teaching children the work of the tribe, the traditions, the stories of the people, and spiritual beliefs. The teaching method used, from my observation of the ways the children approach new learning, must have been lots of watching and chatting among themselves about how the task was to be done and attempts at the task when one feels confident to try without failure.

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by Kathleen Evans



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Kathleen Evans began her career as a teacher-director in a private early childhood school. She has directed public and private early childhood programs, taught kindergarten and first grade in urban schools, and is currently a literacy support teacher for Oakland Unified School District in Oakland, California. Kathleen is also involved in teacher training and staff development for the school district, as well as being adjunct

The prevalent belief in our educational system is that good readers come from homes where they have been read to for a minimum of 1,000 hours before entering kindergarten, that literate children come from homes full of books and magazines and the mystery of print has been explained to them. This leaves very little hope that children from the Mien culture will succeed as readers and writers. Rather than give in to this deficit model, I have tried to support the literacy strengths I see embedded in the culture and to build on those. I see a group of children that have a rich oral tradition, the ability to memorize long and complicated stories. I see children whose involvement in art and music and with math materials indicates a complex understanding of pattern and the ability not only to recreate it but also to create it. I see a group of children who can work together well, so that a strong foundation to create a community of readers and writers already exists.

I value these competencies, and I try to teach in ways that reflect the way children learn at home. I try to create in the classroom the environment of a literate home, where children can talk and play in ways familiar to them, while introducing them to the skills of *the culture of power* as well. Through observation, chats with the children, group discussions in the classroom, my alliances with Mien adults, and my own reflection, I search for ways to include the children's home culture in my classroom without violating the sacred things that do not rightfully belong outside the boundaries of the home and the tribe.

We began the year with the familiar — with a walk to each child's house and a variety of storybooks and poems about houses. I observed the children's art and block play, where I saw how groups building isolated structures evolved into their connecting their structures with roads and walls and passages. Paintings of houses, which began as rectangles with triangular roofs and chimneys, evolved into more and more details as children looked at and thought more about different kinds of houses. And as they played, painted, and drew, their conversations included more and more words and concepts about houses than when we began.

The hospital is a dramatic play center that I include each year after the third month of school. Most of the children have had fairly significant experiences with hospitals, either their own experiences or those of a sibling. Our local children's hospital has developed a full service clinic to deal with the pediatric health problems in the Mien community. Most parents still use tradi-

tional forms of healing along with these services, so children have an array of issues to resolve about the hospital. Usually dolls are transported from the house to the hospital with a great deal of commotion, discussion, and excitement.

Each of the play activities served as a rich opportunity for children to use language, slipping fluidly between English and Mien as the play warranted. This talk is more important to the children's development of bilingualism than any other activity or lesson I could have provided.

As I watched and listened, I discovered children's recurring cultural themes and confusions. For example, from drawings, dictated stories, and chats, I found out how important fishing was to the families. In the water table, I included fishing poles, magnetic fish, rubber sea creatures, rocks, shells, and tin buckets. This became an engaging and important place to play. Unfortunately, it only had room for three children, and many more wanted to fish. So they invented fishing poles — the long deep sea kind — from construction toys. On the pillows which functioned as the bank, they fished, laughed, and joked for all of play time.

The way I set up and stocked the play house provided me with some interesting insights into the children's culture. Without thought, I included a high chair, although I have never seen a high chair in a Mien home. Before I knew it, the children, not the dolls, were sitting in the high chair. Before I thought to remove it, it was as broken as the wee bear's chair.

More successful accessories in the house were the Chinese dishes. Toward the middle of the year, a group of children had taken to carefully arranging the dishes, the flowers, and artificial fruit into a shrine, and kneeling to pray. They did this without self-consciousness in a most natural way. But the issue of making the sacred profane did come up for me, although I kept it to myself because the children were completely unaware that my teammate and I had noticed them.

The bookstore was another emergent idea. Each day in our class began with *reading on the rug*, a time when children may choose to look at a variety of books, use the flannel board stories, and listen to story tapes. Each day, a small group of children would take nearly all the picture books from the low shelf and arrange them on a round table. There would be a great deal of chattering and discussion in and out of Mien and English, with children leaving with several books and returning within a few minutes to get another stack. Observing during this time for *literacy behaviors*, I did not see the

children as particularly *engaged in books or reading-like behaviors*. That is, not until I asked just what they were doing. “We’re having a bookstore,” they responded and asked if we couldn’t have a bookstore for a dramatic play center. I am quite certain that very few of them have ever been in a bookstore, and there aren’t many bookstores on TV. I’ll never know the seed for this idea; but it was a rich learning opportunity for several weeks, not only in literacy but in math, counting and making change.

Ghosts and spirits, fishing, sewing, caring for babies, cooking, and building have all emerged as areas to include as home culture. The office, the bookstore, the hospital, the shampoo factory, the space toys have all emerged as pieces of the larger culture. Reading and writing (which for me in kindergarten include artistic representations) have become ways to explore, document, and preserve these activities.

When I think about what the very best kindergarten might be, I think it would have the natural rhythms of a home but more toys and kids. With this ideal, I have structured the environment and the day to enable the children to work and play for extended periods without adult intervention.

Closely observing the richness and depth of play has provided me with many more ideas of what can be included in the classroom for meaningful play. As I search for ways to help my children to develop literacy as a powerful tool to support their culture and as a means to become bicultural, I hope in some way to demonstrate that both traditional beliefs and the skills for living in, and critiquing, modern culture can co-exist in the same person.

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# The Culture of Play: A Personal Perspective

Some time ago, I was approached by a concerned teacher who wanted me to observe a child who, she said, was not engaging in dramatic play. The child, an African-American girl, was five; she was enrolled on a scholarship in a program attended primarily by dominant-culture, upper-middle-class children. The staff had been try-

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by Cheryl Greer Jarman

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ing to find ways to connect the child with the environment and the other children.

When I observed, I saw most of the girls involved in housekeeping play — cooking, cleaning, taking care of the baby. Meanwhile, the child I was observing wandered around, picking up several different items for a few minutes, scanning books, and keeping an eye on the high level of activity. When she finally noticed me, she gave me *the look*. After a few moments, she came closer to me. I smiled and introduced myself. That was the icebreaker. She and I engaged in a lively conversation. I read a story to her, then another. We put a puzzle together. A few children asked me if I was her mother, and I proudly answered, “No, I am her friend.”

When we talked later, the teacher was surprised at how open and involved this child had been with me. She had felt that the child was lacking in social skills. Taking a risk, I asked her, “Have you ever considered that housekeeping may not be play for her?” There was silence. I described some of the information the child had volunteered in our conversation; she described a home life that included many of what we call adult responsibilities. She had many tasks, which sometimes included child care roles. I suddenly realized that housekeeping wasn’t play to her, it was work!

What a powerful thought, that every child does not view play through the eyes of her teacher! This scenario raised several issues for me regarding play: (1) What is play? (2) Who decides that it is play? (3) What is normative play? And, lastly, (4) Whose values are honored as play is carried out?

It seems clear to me that what the teacher had interpreted as play was defined by the child as labor. It yielded no significant product. There was no optimism. That makes perfect sense to me! The real issue was that the teacher had an expectation, according to her value, that play should replicate something, that being in the housekeeping area was normative and being out of the mainstream activities was not. And because this child had a different concept, she was labeled as being deficient, unsociable, and needing *help*.

In an article I have written entitled “Caught Between Cultures,” I describe the disequilibrium that I experienced when I started school. Let me share with you a glimpse of my early school days.

“Space and boundaries were defined in a broader sense at home than at school. We, at meals, watched television, did homework, and entertained friends — all in the same room. Outside, it was not unusual to find a baseball game (using a broom handle and a tennis ball), hopscotch (drawn with a brick), bike riding, hand jives, and relay races concurrently happening in the space outside of my home called the street. We were all in it together, but it was your job to find a space for you and to watch out for cars.

At school, in contrast, I was reprimanded if I squeezed myself in on someone else’s space. There were lines that told me where to go and where to play; everything was supposed to be done in a certain way. Games with already set-up rules were given to me as *play*. If we ran out of balls, I couldn’t throw something else, even though there was plenty of sand. What are the rules of the school game?” (Greer, 1993, p. 61)

When I got to school, I knew how to play, but I *chose* not to play, until I found *my* play group. The activities that others were involved with, in a class in which there were only a few African-American children, didn’t appeal to me. When I tried to involve myself in their play, I was often excluded or relegated to a menial role. I knew that I wasn’t really wanted; I recognized the cues and body language that I was taught at an early age to be adept at identifying.

After a while, though, I found my group. Because they were Black like me, I assumed that we knew how to

play together. In those days, almost every little Black child went to church. When you met someone, the first question was *What church do you go to?* Our play was initiated by that shared experience. In a Black Baptist church, kids saw a lot of things that tickled them — old ladies shouting “Thank you, Jesus!,” preaching, weddings, funerals. But when we played church on the school playground, we got in trouble for all that shouting. There was always something wrong with us, something to be reprimanded for, something to stop doing, something for the teachers to be worried about.

Are we concerned when we see a group of children who are white playing together? Do we carefully watch their play? Do we assume that they don’t know how to play if we don’t see them with other children? Do we stop or question their choices of activities? Does their play give us comfort or make us feel uncomfortable?

James Banks has identified culture as having two main sections. Macroculture is our commonality; we share some national views and beliefs simply by all living in the same country. Beyond that, there is microculture, which is shared by specific group members. All of us belong to many other groups; and within the privacy and security of those groups, we are likely to view and interact with our world in a culturally appropriate manner. Thus, the task is to learn to function successfully and cooperatively within the macro and microcultures (Banks, 1989, p. 11) — to become bicultural.

What does this mean to children? I have described my confusion in my introduction to school. I had been very adept in playing in my own microculture. My play had been innovative, sociocentric, and fun. But when my microculture collided with the macroculture (and many school systems are structured around macroculture values), I did not fit. I was often punished for living, creating, and being myself.

In a working paper entitled “Children Learn Through Play,” Betty Jones states:

“Observers in several parts of the world have described economically disadvantaged or minority-culture children as deficient in play skills. But there is evidence that children in unfamiliar settings both play and speak less freely. Spontaneous play and spontaneous language imply underlying knowledge of the ‘rules of the game,’ broadly defined. Children are competent in play when they are on familiar ground, using familiar

words and materials and sharing a common set of expectations. Because all children are growing up in a multicultural world, play opportunities at school need to reproduce some of the diversity of that world and offer all children contact with both the familiar and the unfamiliar. If the school reflects only one culture and one language, then people not raised in that culture and language will be disadvantaged at school, and children who are raised in that culture and language will get no teachers' help in understanding the unfamiliar. It is important that teachers' help be given *in a play mode*, because that is how young children learn." (Jones, 1987)

Earlier, I cited some questions that I struggle with regarding play. They were my questions and now I would like to make them yours. How do you define play in your setting? Who decides that it is play in your setting? What is normative play in your setting? And whose values are honored in the play that is acceptable in your setting?

As educators, we have a responsibility to truly meet the needs of children, at *their* starting place. I am avidly against the deficit approach in teaching, which implies that children who are enacting their world in the context of their microculture in a macroculture setting need to be *fixed*. It is a model that I have often seen as I visit and observe in schools. Children who do not play within a DAP context, children who have ideas that are not valued, children who have not experienced and internalized the specific macroculture of school structure receive adult disapproval rather than support. It is a model that is sometimes used in parent/family work, primarily with parents and families who are considered minorities.

Our goal should not be *to fix*, our goal should be *to include*. Inclusion means provisioning and enriching the environment in a manner that fosters familiarity and unfamiliarity for each child. It means having an environment that helps children to *feel at home*, materials that they relate to, toys/games that have meaning for them. It supports play that they can invent, play that is valued because it was their choice. It is much easier to manipulate the environment than to manipulate the child.

Inclusion means abdication — giving up your vested power as a teacher and becoming a learner. I love watching children at play; I learn so much from them. Yet I feel a need to extend my knowledge beyond what they show me. If I want the environment to be familiar to them, then I have to know what they are familiar with. What is the cultural context of their play? How do

they use the environment? How do they interact with each other? What do I know about their culture? Besides Erikson and Piaget, what theorists have I studied who have written about cultural and play patterns of non-European children? And lastly, have I viewed all children's play by the same standards? Whose play is assertive and whose is aggressive? Whose play is creative and whose is destructive? Whose play is individualistic and whose play is cooperative? Whose names always come up in staff meetings?

In summary, I challenge you to broaden your definition of developmentally appropriate practice. DAP means age appropriateness. DAP means individual appropriateness. But DAP includes cultural appropriateness — creating an environment that takes into account age, individual, and culture — the way a specific group views and interacts with the world. And that will truly be an environment that strives to meet the needs of all children.

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# “But They’re Only Playing”: Interpreting Play to Parents

**G**ood practice in early childhood education, as defined by the progressive educators whose voices dominate the profession, emphasizes the role of play in a child’s learning. This concept of play-based education is in conflict with the ideas that many parents have about the kind of education their children should have. Parent perspectives on play vary and are largely based on their own educational experiences, social class, and cultural norms and values.

African-American parents typically have very fundamentalist values when it comes to the education of their children. Both parents who were successful and those who were unsuccessful in school themselves are skeptical of educational innovations that appear trendy or lacking in substance. School is for work; and if you work hard, it can help you get ahead.

Immigrants from Mexico, Central America, and South America often share a view of “the *educación* of their children, that is, raising them to be responsible members of society as they understand it.” (Valdés, 1996, p. 180)

School, in this value system, is not for playing around. It is where you practice obedience, respect, and the work ethic. In both African-American and Latino cultural models, play is considered an amusing part of childhood; but it isn’t viewed as part of the learning process.

In an increasingly hostile nation, parents from oppressed groups are suspicious of anything that may reduce their child’s competitiveness in the job market. In families that view play as *messing around*, there is scant acceptance of play as a legitimate part of curriculum. (Cooper, 1996, p. 94)

For good reasons, parents from one cultural background may be uninclined to trust a teacher from a different background to have their child’s interests at heart. “How can she really know what’s best for my child?” It takes a leap of faith to trust a teacher who tells you that play is important but can’t demonstrate why this is so, or how play will benefit your child in the future. If you want parents to trust you as an educator, you’d better be able to demonstrate the importance of play in a convincing manner. This requires strong curriculum building and planning, designing play environments that support learning and then explaining to parents how they work. (Cooper, 1996, p. 94)

Strong observational skills are crucial. As a teacher, I often stood next to a parent as we observed her

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by Renatta M. Cooper



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child, discussing what we were seeing in terms of problem solving, motor skills, or language development. Parents were often enthralled; I was a trained observer, they were not, and initially they didn't see what I saw. However, as I shared my observations with them, they began to develop a new appreciation for play skills and to see play with new eyes. As a result, they not only began to trust me as an educator, as someone knowledgeable about and committed to their child's growth, but they also began to understand their child's learning process. Parents' own memories tend to recall school as important but boring. If they can discover learning as fun as well as substantive, they will be willing to accept a play-based curriculum.

They will accept it with more confidence if some of the trappings of school are present, even in classrooms for four and five year olds. A writing center which offers spontaneous practice with school tools — paper, pens and pencils, crayons and markers, scissors and staplers — can include letter and number stencils, *key word* cards, blank books to create stories in, note pads, and clipboards, and an attentive adult ready to listen to children's stories and write them down. Manipulatives with built-in shapes and colors, puzzles, even simple worksheets that can be used to *play school* without having to meet too-demanding expectations for accuracy — these things look like school. Books, too, are familiar parts of school, and children to whom adults read often will also *read* to each other playfully, practicing page turning, left-to-right sequencing, and story memory as they do so.

More vigorous play may require interpretation to parents in terms of skill learning. When children are exploring sand, water, woodworking, blocks, what skills and concepts are they developing? A teacher can report her observations to parents, adding details about language development and social problem solving and cooperation. Pay attention to what parents value and look for examples of those behaviors by their child, in order to assure them that this school supports their values and values their child.

This isn't always easy. As one example, adult-child ratios may make it easy to ignore individual children, especially those a teacher finds unrewarding for reasons of language, appearance, cultural or personal style. It is difficult for most teachers to admit that they are *put off* by certain children entrusted to their care. Teachers are human, however, and they are products of a society that targets certain groups with abundant negative stereotypes. It is healthier, and more accurate,

to be open to the idea that you have been affected by such negative stereotypes and biases. Once confronted, biases can be changed. Bias that is denied continues to develop.

The jockeying for position and friendship that goes on in any peer group may work against a child from a non-dominant cultural group who doesn't know the rules of their *game*. Some children simply withdraw; others do whatever is necessary to get attention from other children and from adults. As children try to establish themselves in a peer group, showing off is frequently an effective strategy to get other children to pay attention to oneself. Teachers may disapprove — but even negative adult attention can be more satisfying than no attention. Some children are more noticed by teachers when they misbehave than they are when they are doing what they should do.

A strategy I used in the classroom, that was a concrete useful way to monitor the type of interactions I had with the children I worked with, was to have a set of index cards with a child's name on each card. At the end of the program day, by myself or with my co-teachers, we would go through the cards and determine whether this child was interacted with today. What kind of interaction was it? Instructive? Corrective? Collaborative? This system helped us ensure that each child got quality, pleasant interactions from everyone. This can be done quickly, or with a long discussion focusing on each child in depth when you have more time.

Differences in cultural and physical styles often create misunderstandings. Everyone's memories of school include an emphasis on being still and quiet. Few young children are capable of still and quiet, nor do they learn much without being physically and verbally engaged. And four year old boys may represent the height of human activity levels! Hale, in her book *Black Children* (1986), has reminded us of the high kinesthetic skill levels typical of African-American young children:

"Harry Morgan (1976) points out that Black children are motorically precocious. They are more active and have more physical energy to expend than white children. Morgan maintains that the schools do not support the natural energy level of Black children. He suggests that Black children need an active environment for successful learning, particularly lower-income children whose grandparents emphasize survival skills rather than conformity, docility, and quiet manners — more typical of middle-class child-rearing." (Hale, 1986, p. 75)

Middle-class African-American mothers may downplay their children's motoric precocity and not seek to extend

The following strategies may help in supporting both children and parents:

- Observe children as they play, to *catch them being good* — to identify their individual strengths and interests. Give them attention that acknowledges these assets.
- Interpret children’s accomplishments to their parents. Find out parents’ goals for their children and emphasize children’s growth toward those goals in your conversations with parents.
- Keep learning about the development of language and literacy in early childhood — since literacy is at the heart of the elementary school curriculum, the next challenge your children will encounter. Provide many activities for open-ended exploration of language and all the forms of literacy — drawing, building, dramatizing, as well as writing and reading.
- Share with parents, and children, your own belief in the value of education and in their ability to succeed in school. Some working-class parents may not know anyone who has been helped by going to school; you do. What success stories can you tell?
- Be upfront about the rules of the “culture power” (Delpit, 1988). I admire a colleague, Molly Scudder, who featured *playing first grade* in the second half of her kindergarten year. Following rules didn’t replace the critical thinking and problem-solving characteristics of her class; rather, it became a new topic for lively discussion, as she asked children to practice lining up, complete with boys’ and girls’ lines, and being “so quiet that nobody hears us coming.”

“Why?” asked these children, and the question was taken seriously and brainstormed. Learning conforming behaviors because they please people in power, because those things are important to some people, gives children an important set of survival strategies to be consciously exercised if they choose to do so.

it because development in this area might interfere with their children’s school behavior and performance.

But active Black children, especially male children, often have female teachers who are not Black and who have been subtly socialized to be alert to possible aggression from Black males. The likelihood is very high that teachers will be especially aware of, and unconsciously expecting trouble from, the few Black children in a primarily white or otherwise mixed group.

The likelihood that these children, when in need of guidance, will receive mixed messages is also very high. White middle-class women aren’t supposed to act angry even when they are. They’re supposed to stay sweetly reasonable with children. Children accustomed to clearer messages and firmer rules may not understand *soft* discipline and keep pushing to discover where the limits really are in this strange place. (“If you’re my teacher, can you keep me safe?”) Cynthia Ballenger is an experienced European-American preschool teacher who found herself incapable of effective group management (“The children ran me ragged.”) when she began working with Black children from Haiti, whose culture was unfamiliar to her. To become effective, she had to learn to listen to the Haitian adults in their effective interactions with the children. (1992)

We all have much to learn from each other. Effective teaching, when cultural differences make us stumble, requires very close attention to understand what’s going on with a child. Most teachers aren’t open to looking at their own hidden expectations. There is more safety in avoiding children (and parents) whose language we don’t speak, whose cues we don’t catch. When the children catch us at avoidance and make us pay attention, we are likely to overreact and blame the child — or his parents.

The discrimination inherent in our society enables us to stay unaware of these patterns, unless we work at becoming aware of our own biases. The basic focus in early childhood education — identify and build on each child’s strengths — can serve us well here. By observing children at play, we get to know them.

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# Understanding Culture Through Play

"Let's play here," says the eager Christian, taking my hand. As an infrequent visitor to Tungasuvvingat Inuit Head Start, I am glad that a child invites me to join his play. I enjoy relating to a child in such a fascinating medium, and I am comfortable taking the role of player (Jones and Reynolds, 1992). I am also curious to find out if in his dramatic play Christian will generate symbols that express understanding of his expanding knowledge of Inuits' northern lifestyle. Here are my observation notes, recorded soon after playing with him:

*I quickly discover that my companion is a capable pretend player. In the short time we play together, Christian switches roles easily — he is a daddy, mommy, baby, and fish, and he encourages me to play multiple roles as well. Christian's play reveals knowledge of traditional Inuit lifestyle and, with the encouragement of his teacher, he uses some Inuktitut vocabulary.*

## The Tungasuvvingat Inuit Head Start

*... urban areas present special challenges for the survival of aboriginal cultures. These challenges come in part because many of the traditional sources of aboriginal culture — contact with the land, elders, aboriginal languages, and spiritual ceremonies — are difficult to maintain in cities at present. Moreover, aboriginal people are continuously exposed to perceptions, either consciously or unconsciously held, that cities are not where aboriginal cultures belong and can flourish. (Peters, 1996, p. 321)*

by Gretchen Reynolds

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The Tungasuvvingat Inuit Head Start Program has been open for almost two years. Funded by Health Canada under the Aboriginal Head Start Initiative, its mission is described this way. "The retention of the Inuit culture and Inuktitut language is paramount in this program. Curriculum activities and materials, special events, daily snacks, parent education and parent resources should reflect the Inuit culture whenever possible. Inuktitut will be considered an official language of the program and will be promoted throughout all activities during the day. It is also the policy of the program to employ Inuit staff as much as possible." (*Parent Handbook*, 1997, p. 2)

The Inuit were formerly called Eskimo people. They traditionally live in the Arctic regions, although now there are many Inuit dwelling in urban communities in Canada. There are approximately 500 Inuit living in Ottawa, a populous, industrialized city thousands of miles away from the environment that is indigenous to their culture. The children's parents speak one or both of Canada's two official languages, English and French; but many do not use their primary language, Inuktitut, because families and individuals have gradually relocated to cities for employment, and the experience of residential schooling has contributed to the loss of ethnic languages. They want to retain their culture and their primary language, and so they believe this program is an important beginning for their children. Liz Lightford, the program coordinator, tells me, "I think being in the south is a heartache for some parents. For Inuit, family is important to them, and home is important. So when they're away from home, even though they choose to be in Ottawa, the homesickness that they feel is a real heartache. So they want their kids to have some of home in the city, and it's a way of passing on themselves through their kids even though the children can't be in the north learning it traditionally." (Lightford, 1997).

## Children Learn Culture by Playing It

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of learning suggests that children construct knowledge within a cultural context through social interactions with adults and peers. The result is particular skills and learning that is valued by a culture. The theory also emphasizes the concept that symbols — all the various ways that meaning is represented by human beings, including spoken language — are the tools for conveying meaning and influencing the

surrounding environment (Berk and Winsler, 1995). Dramatic play is a symbol system that young children use naturally and comfortably.

According to Vygotsky, imaginary play is the child's growing edge — in play, the child is stretched to behave a head taller than him or herself. Imaginative play is the most effective context for stimulating a young child's cognitive development because he or she uses symbols to communicate meaning to other players (Berk and Winsler, 1995). In play, the child recreates experience by using symbols that reflect the cultural milieu. Play is socially constructed and dynamic, as children negotiate meanings "seamlessly" from within the frame of the play.

Can children learn culture through play? What is the role of the teacher? These questions are the motive for my visits to the Tungasuvvingat Inuit Head Start, where I discover how teachers in a setting for urban Inuit children are using a rich environment, thoughtful teaching interventions, and quality play to cultivate children's knowledge of their Inuit roots.

## The Play Environment

Liz is a European Canadian from Ottawa. In speaking to her about the issues for teachers wanting to implement cultural curriculum, Liz articulates their concern. "One of our challenges is to replicate culture authentically in every part of the curriculum. How can we ensure that all the components of the program, including curriculum, room arrangement, behavior guidance, and transitions, are not a token acknowledgment of culture, but are real, authentic, and meaningful?" (Lightford, 1997)

The environment at Tungasuvvingat Inuit Head Start contains some familiar early childhood education equipment. There are blocks, Legos, puzzles, supplies for writing and drawing, and a wheelchair for dolls. The new computer is ever popular, for one child or several children working side by side.

My eye is attracted to the array of materials and objects suggestive of northern themes and/or used by Inuit people. The book corner contains a shelf filled with children's books in Inuktitut (a few have English translations) and stuffed animals commonly found in the Arctic. Duller ulus (women's knives) are available at the play dough table. In the block corner, a child helps herself to several miniature rubber seals, a dolphin, and a whale, which she carefully arranges on a child-sized kamutiik (Arctic sled) and pulls across the middle of the room. Looking towards the dramatic play area, I see dolls with brown skin, dark hair, and dark eyes; a child-

sized amauti (a traditional baby-carrying parka); kamiik (Inuit boots); and caribou skins. In the music corner, the children play Inuit drums or they can listen to aiyaya songs and throat singing on tape. Inuktitut syllabics decorate the walls and a set of colorful homemade alphabet blocks. The children's names are in Inuktitut and English in their cubbies. A water table contains sea green water, a large rock and pebbles, a sea turtle and dolphins, and several big clam shells.

## Child-Teacher Interactions

Ina Kuluguqtuq is the children's Inuk teacher, and her first language is Inuktitut. Eight or nine children gather with Ina on the rug. She has a small blue and white crocheted bag in her lap. "This was my favorite game when I was a little girl." Ina ties a long piece of nylon rope to form a loop at one end and pokes the open loop into the bag. She pulls the drawstring, closing the bag tight. Engaging a ritual, she shakes the bag, chanting, "Sha la la la la!" The children watch, fascinated. Then Ina hitches the nylon rope tight, pulling out a handful of small bones caught in the loop.

"Let's see what kind of friends I got!" Separating them and naming them one by one, according to size, Ina exclaims, "I have anaana (mom). I have panik (girl). I have another girl. And this is ataata (dad). Three girls, a baby girl, and an ataata."

All the children are eager to have a turn, and they wait patiently as Ina gives every child a chance to play the bone game. Whenever someone shakes the crocheted bag, children merrily join the incantation, "Sha la la la la!" The energy for the bone game wanes, but it is left out for children to play with during the morning.

## A Head Start in Inuit Identity

My documentation of the play at the Tungasuvvingat Inuit Head Start is a small window on many things Inuit children are learning about their indigenous culture. Children's curiosity is stimulated in an environment containing an array of strange and wonderful objects from the culture and toys suggestive of Inuit lifestyle. Children have access to people with a history of living with the objects and who want to explain and demonstrate their use.

*Ina takes out a big piece of dried caribou sinew. "What's that, Ina?" the ever curious, four year old Christian wants to know.*

*It's a thread for making clothing," is Ina's reply. Christian watches as Ina breaks off a long, thread-like piece. She*

continues, "You know what, my dad used this to clean his teeth. He goes like this." Holding the thread close to her mouth, Ina makes exaggerated flossing motions. They giggle.

Christian imitates his teacher's flossing gesture and then asks for a try with the real thing. Christian experiments for several minutes to make the hairy, distasteful piece of caribou sinew work in the spaces between his teeth.

Ina describes how the opportunity to work with children to learn about Inuit traditions is bringing back many memories:

... today, when I am trying to plan, trying to think about our Inuit ways, my grandma is coming back. They (memories) are coming back to me since we started this program, gradually they're coming back.

Ina explains the tremendous pleasure for her in using her native language every day:

To me, the language is everything. If I don't speak my language for about a week, let's say I speak only English, I'm craving for something, and I know exactly what I'm craving for, speaking in my mother tongue. When I speak Inuktitut, I just relax again, my muscles were all uptight. It's very important, my language. It's always in me, I always speak it, especially around here, and when I see other Inuit I feel more special, especially living down south. When I'm in an English setting, I feel smaller. I feel like I have two sides, one side in English, and one in Inuktitut. That's why so many of us Inuit are losing our language. When we've been down here for long, we're just stuck in English, because we don't hear Inuktitut anymore. When I'm speaking my mother tongue, I feel strong. (Kuluguqtuq, 1997).

Elaine, the children's other aboriginal teacher, says, "I don't speak Inuktitut, but I'm feeling very soothed that it's around me because it's a sadness in my heart that I don't speak. Especially in the Ottawa area, no one speaks enough of their own language, so there's sadness over that. So when I hear it here, I know it's one big strong community. And now the children are feeling very comfortable with it." (ShIPLEY, 1997)

The children have an exceptional opportunity here to develop a sense of themselves as special, different, and uniquely Inuit. Derman-Sparks (et al., 1989) suggests that the first task in classrooms with children of color is to build their sense of personal and group identity. Phillips emphasizes that the transformation to self-identity cannot be assumed by outsiders. People "... of color work toward reclaiming and affirming their racial group identity, and therefore themselves, where the new identity is based on their group's definition of themselves, not the

dominant group's definition" (Phillips, 1998, p. 58). Immersion in their culture for several years is assurance that these children will have a head start in the development of a strong Inuit identity. A play-based curriculum supports that goal because good play empowers young children.

At play, both children and adults are challenged to invent new solutions to problems within flexible rules and rapidly changing scripts. Playing together, they practice negotiating their varied worldviews to create mutually satisfactory and increasingly complex understandings of their lives. In so doing, children are mastering skills and dispositions that they will need throughout their lives. (Jones and Reynolds, 1995, p. 45)

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