

# Exploring Cultural Heritage in a Kindergarten Classroom

Lynn E. Cohen



**The National Center for Education Statistics** indicates that in 2005, minority groups made up almost half of the U.S. preschool population. Of these minorities—many of whom attended center-based programs before kindergarten—14 percent were African American children, 20 percent were Hispanic, and 9 percent were Asian/Pacific Islander (U.S. Department of Education 2007).

An estimated 34 million foreign-born persons resided in the United States in 2003, nearly 12 percent of the country's population, according to U.S. Census Bureau data. Only a small proportion of U.S. immigrants came from English-speaking countries. Most immigrants spoke their home languages and were learning English (Matthews & Ewen 2006).

**PRESCHOOL AND KINDERGARTEN CLASSES** in the United States are entering a time of unprecedented diversity and demographic transformation. Teachers must plan and implement curriculums that reflect, support, and value the varieties of cultural backgrounds, religious affiliations, socioeconomic classes, and language groups that children represent. This diversity will only grow in the foreseeable future, in all areas of early childhood.

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## How to meet the challenge

The challenge of early childhood educators is to provide programs that can meet the needs of a diverse population. When teachers promote opportunities for play and social interaction, they help children learn about culture and heritage. Play is sociocultural in nature and an important part of a child's learning and development. Children assume roles, act out pretend scenarios, and use conversation to plan and negotiate their play with others. The kindergarten children and families I describe in this article used their cultures, traditions, languages, and life experiences to create a play-based curriculum.

Most of the children in my kindergarten class in Great Neck, New York, spoke English; however, the children represented five additional home languages (Hebrew, Mandarin, Hindi, Russian, and Armenian). Because our classroom had established play centers, examining the children's cultures through play was a natural starting point for supporting children's sensitivity to and awareness of diverse cultures.

## Respect for cultural diversity

Beginning readers and writers start to connect letters with sounds when they can practice with familiar words, such as their own names. To help children learn to recognize their classmates' names and learn literacy skills, we began each morning by taking attendance using name cards. I would hold up a card with a child's name, pronounce the name, and the child would place his or her name card in a pocket chart. I continued this

routine throughout the school year to help children understand the functions of print, increase their phonemic awareness, introduce letter-sound correspondence, and foster word recognition. Within a few weeks, *most* children could read each other's names, except for Theba.

Theba never put her name card in the pocket chart. She would cover her face and sometimes cry during this activity. For several months, whenever we were studying names, Theba became gloomy. One day, I asked, "Theba, don't you like your name?" Alexander spoke up, "You're saying it wrong. We call her 'Theba,'" he said, using a short *e* sound. "Say 'Theba', Mrs. Cohen." I felt terrible that I had not taken the time to ask each family the correct pronunciation of their child's name before the start of school.

This was my first time teaching a class in which so many cultures and languages were represented. I realized I needed to provide cultural continuity between home and school to honor, celebrate, and validate the whole child. Teachers should always ask families how to pronounce a child's name and not assume they know. Nor should they create an "American" name for a child because they can't pronounce the child's given name (Kirk & Clark 2005). Theba's classmate helped me realize I had ignored the "funds of knowledge" (Moll 1994) children and families bring to school.

*Funds of knowledge* refers to the knowledge children and families bring to school from their homes and communities. It includes social networks, kinship, and friendships that families share, as well as work-related information and skills (Moll 1994). According

to Gonzalez-Mena (2007), teachers and families can better benefit and serve children when they work as partners rather than when they work separately. The teacher and the family see the child in different contexts, and both have insights to contribute.

To create a culturally diverse play curriculum using the children's funds of knowledge, I sent home to each family a survey (see "Parent Survey"). I then used the information families provided through the survey to launch a six-month project designed to celebrate the diversity of our kindergarten class.

## School-family partnerships

The families' survey responses provided enough information for me to plan a class study on cultural heritage. Katz and Chard (1998) note a distinction between culture and heritage. Culture involves daily experiences and environment, while heritage refers to historic and ancestral origins. To begin our study on cultural heritage, I asked families to participate in class presentations and celebrations. They shared their experiences, stories, artifacts, family recipes, and dramatic play props with the class.

### Parent Survey

Dear Parents,

We value diversity of cultures and family traditions and encourage you to enrich our program with your customs. Together we can help children view their similarities and differences in positive ways and experience a community of diverse learners working together. Please complete the survey below and return it to school as soon as possible. I will call you to arrange a classroom visit or to ask you to send some cultural materials to school for our play centers.

Your name \_\_\_\_\_ Child's name \_\_\_\_\_

Principal country(ies) of your family's heritage:

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

#### Please describe the following:

Any customs that are important to your family

Special foods your family eats

Eating and cooking utensils you use that are unique to your culture

Traditional plants or trees from your culture

Special or traditional clothing you wear

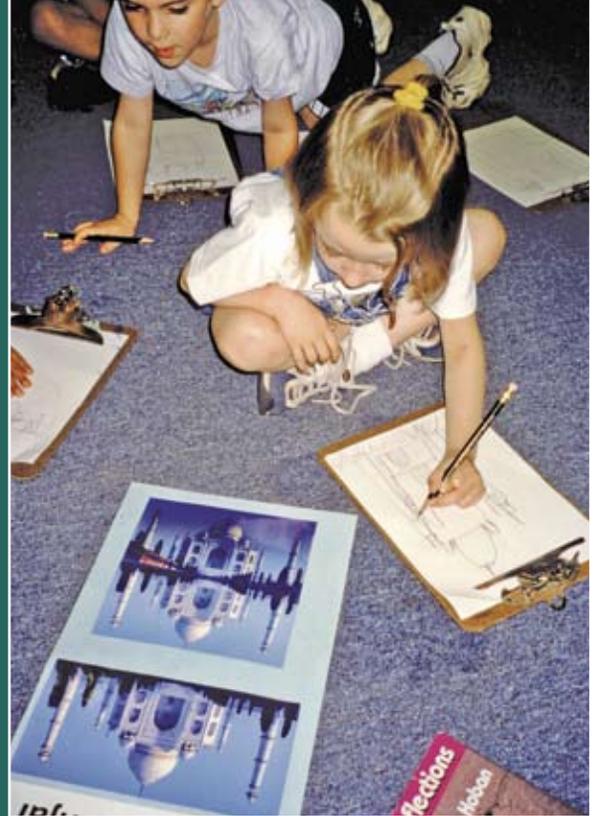
Words or cultural terms your family uses

Which language(s) is spoken in your home?

Which holidays specific to your cultural heritage does your family celebrate?  
Name of holiday(s) and date(s)

Sincerely, \_\_\_\_\_

**The teacher and the family see the child in different contexts, and both have insights to contribute.**



Mrs. Post, the school secretary, also agreed to participate to further children's understanding of Hispanic heritage and funds of knowledge. At Halloween, she visited our class to talk about the Mexican Day of the Dead celebration (*Día de los Muertos*) and to help us learn a few Spanish words. Offering the children opportunities to interact with people such as Mrs. Post, whose heritage was different from theirs, allowed the children to develop a better understanding of the many differences among cultures, including holiday celebrations.

### An international project with play at the center of the curriculum

We began our project with a study of Indian cultural heritage.

### Indian cultural heritage

Family members who were first-generation immigrants from India shared their funds of knowledge through stories and family recipes. Mrs. M. wrote children's names in Hindi.

I copied each child's Hindi name on index cards, and we practiced reading names in both Hindi and English during the morning routine. The drama center became an Indian restaurant with empty Indian food cartons, menus collected from families' favorite restaurants, and cooking utensils.

I enlarged and posted a picture of the Taj Mahal to inspire young block builders. Using clipboards and pen-

cils, a few young architects sketched the Taj Mahal for other children to use as they collaborated in building their version of this white-domed marble wonder.

Before moving on to learn about another heritage, I asked the children what they had learned about Indian heritage. Here are their responses:

**Alicia:** I learned how many people built the Taj Mahal . . . 20,000!

**Arian:** The Taj Mahal. It was a temple built for a ruler's favorite wife.

**Kataya:** I learned the clothing Indian people wear.

**Steve:** The food is good!

## Culture involves daily experiences and environment, while heritage refers to historic and ancestral origins.

**Theba:** We eat rice, chickpeas, puri, corn, and vegetables. My family is vegetarians.

**Ayush:** I do not eat meat.

**Max:** They speak lots of languages. The bird of the country is a peacock.

**Andres:** I learned about the Taj Mahal.

**Parth:** They play cricket in India.

**Jonas:** The festival of lights. What is it called? [I reminded him it is called Divali.]

**Dan:** Most Indians do not have TV. Mr. P. says he watches TV a little.

**Emma:** Long ago men in India had many wives.

### Mexican cultural heritage

Next, the children asked Mrs. Post to share her stories and knowledge of Mexico. She visited frequently during the course of the six-month project and read aloud nonfiction and fiction books about Mexican holidays, foods, people, and sports. She taught the children how to pronounce the days of the week and to count in Spanish. On one visit, Mrs. Post displayed the Mexican flag and helped us make tostadas with ingredients to match the colors

Mrs. Post showed the children how to make *ollas* (large pots used to cook in or to carry water) out of clay.

of the flag: green lettuce, red tomatoes, and white sour cream.

The children, having previously built the Taj Mahal in the block area, questioned Mrs. Post about Mexican architecture. She gathered photographs and books, and the children reconstructed the National Palace and an Aztec step pyramid—present and past Mexican structures. As an art project, Mrs. Post showed the children how to make *ollas* (large pots used to cook in or to carry water) out of clay.

The concepts and information Mrs. Post and the several families in my room shared with us from their life experiences and cultural heritage were the threads on the loom of our project, the content for critical thinking through play.

### Chinese cultural heritage

The project progressed with the upcoming Chinese New Year celebration. Two kindergartners were of Chinese origin and spoke Mandarin

at home. Their mothers indicated a willingness to visit and share their knowledge about China's heritage. To encourage the class to take ownership of their learning this time, for a few days I read aloud nonfiction books on Chinese history and culture to provide background knowledge. Supporting a better understanding of Chinese history and culture allowed the children time to consider and pose meaningful questions.

The children had been practicing interviewing skills over the course of the year as a way to find answers to their questions. We frequently took field trips to neighborhood stores and used these opportunities to interview postal workers, grocery store managers, and restaurant owners about their jobs and businesses. By the time we read literature and held class discussions on Chinese history, the children were able to generate interview questions before the mothers came to school to make their presentations (see "Child-Generated Interview Questions," p. xx). In an inquiry-based multicultural project, interviews help introduce children to family history and culture as well as foster greater appreciation of, understanding of, and tolerance toward others (Rogovin 1998).





### Child-Generated Interview Questions

1. What is origami? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
2. Why is yellow popular in China? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
3. Why do more people ride bicycles than drive cars in China? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
4. Why do Chinese people hang decorations outside their homes? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
5. What sports do you play? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
6. What is inside dumplings? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
7. Why are there so many Chinese holidays, and what are the holidays? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
8. Do you eat steamed buns (*bao*)? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
9. What kinds of flowers are in China, and what are they called? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

After answering questions on the first visit, the mothers shared their funds of knowledge by reenacting some events of the Chinese New Year celebration, teaching children to read names and numbers in Chinese, creating origami sculptures, and supplying our class with literacy artifacts and dramatic play props. These included rice bowls, chopsticks, a wok, red envelopes for lucky money, Chinese newspapers, a Chinese calendar, and authentic clothing.

As before, I asked the children what national structure they would like to build in the block area. They overwhelmingly agreed upon the Great Wall of China.

Once again, the children and I had rich opportunities to learn about another culture and language as well as the perspective of other class members. The children had much to say about their newfound knowledge

**Other children began to show an interest in sharing and integrating their funds of knowledge and cultural resources.**

of Chinese culture and described what they had learned.

I learned . . .

**Sheba:** How to make dumplings.

**Elianna:** About Chinese New Year.

**Alexa:** Origami.

**Andres:** About the Great Wall of China.

**Theba:** About the Chinese yo-yo.

**Josh:** About the sports—ping-pong and volleyball.

**Gabrielle:** The types of flowers in China.

**Katya:** That the color yellow means power.

As a result of learning about Mexican, Indian, and Chinese heritages, other children began to show an interest in sharing and integrating their funds of knowledge and cultural resources.

### Jewish, Armenian, Russian, and other cultural heritages

Some families were not available for class visits but were able to send photographs and artifacts to school with their child. In this way we learned about Jewish, Armenian, and Russian heritages by the end of our project. We also explored the idea that everyone has a heritage (Derman-Sparks 1989) and studied and invited American-born families to share their cultural traditions. The resources parents provided were invaluable in helping to offer knowledge and experiences that fostered children's learning through play.

### Benefits and learning

One benefit of project work is that children can summarize what they have learned through a purposeful culminating activity (Helm & Katz 2001). Our chance came at an annual May exhibit in Great Neck. The event is an opportunity for the whole school system to display children's learning and projects, sharing them with parents and the community. Our class decided to build models of historic



structures using blocks. After revisiting photographs of the structures, children worked in groups of five to plan, negotiate, and construct models of the Taj Mahal, the Great Wall of China, the National Palace, and an Aztec step pyramid as their concluding activity.

### Conclusion

Through play, children can assume active roles in learning important cultural-historical concepts. Families can provide important cultural information and resources, and it is important to identify and use these resources to support classroom play and learning. Perhaps this project can be best summarized by a snack-time event that took place during our investigation of the Jewish heritage: several boys simultaneously made a toast *to life* as they raised their cups and shouted, "*L'chaim!*"



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