CHAPTER 6

Developing Culturally Responsive Family Partnerships in Kindergarten

Communicating About the Value of Play and Honoring Families' Funds of Knowledge

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Mr. Klien, a kindergarten teacher, had worked to adopt a play-based approach to learning in his curriculum planning. He had gained the support of the school's principal, but in conferences he was surprised and felt overwhelmed by families' perspectives and concerns about play and content learning. One family pressed for more rigor and academic learning: "When I ask my child what she did at school, all she says she does is play! I send her to school to learn to read, write, and do math, not to play. She can play at home. I don't want her to get behind in her learning." Others demanded *more* time for play and expressed concern that their children not be pushed into academics too fast: "They say kindergarten is the new first grade—and I don't agree with that. My top priority is for my child to learn to be a good friend and enjoy school. And I want him to use his imagination. Teaching reading, writing, and math can wait till first grade." Mr. Klien shook his head as he shared these comments with the principal, Ms. Ross. "I know that families have different values around education, and I respect that. But how do we reassure them that we all want similar things for their children and meet everyone's expectations?"

Integrating play and learning is an ongoing challenge for many kindergarten teachers who understand the strong connection between the two but must also address the academic expectations of formal schooling. Gaining principal support is critical to successful implementation of a play-based approach in the classroom. Even with this support, as Mr. Klien found, it can be challenging for families and educators alike when there are dissimilarities between families' beliefs and values and the expectations of the school.

Families' views on the role of play in learning are not only individually determined but also influenced by culture. For example, while children all over the world play, where, when, how, and with whom they play as well as when or if there is an age to stop playing is culturally determined (Mardell et al. 2023). Views on school as a place for playing are also culturally influenced; in some cultures, school is considered a place for serious, rigorous, and orderly learning, and play happens only during recess. Other cultures value exploration and open-ended thinking, and not only tolerate but appreciate the messy, unruly process of playful learning at school. Even within the educational system in the United States, the pendulum of national trends swings from skill-based to play-based learning and back, and varies greatly from school to school and even from classroom to classroom.

The tension between playing and learning is felt nowhere more than in kindergarten, as kindergarten is the introduction to formal schooling for children and families. Kindergarten teachers who strive to engage students in playful learning understand the connections between play and learning and are able to articulate these connections to families while being responsive to families' values and cultures. How? It begins with building trust.

DAPFocus_Kindergarten.indd 36 14/08/24 8:51 AM

Trust is a critical component of collaborative partnerships. Trusting, open partnerships between educators and families establish a foundation for each child to thrive in school. Teachers can develop a mutually respectful relationship with families by employing a culturally responsive family engagement approach. This approach involves "practices that respect and acknowledge the cultural uniqueness, life experiences, and viewpoints of classroom families and draw on those experiences to enrich and energize the classroom curriculum and teaching activities, leading to respectful partnerships with students' families" (Grant & Ray 2013, 4).

Two frameworks that are particularly helpful for addressing families' viewpoints about playful learning in a culturally responsive way are the funds of knowledge approach (Moll et al. 1992) and the practice of finding the third space in anti-bias education (Derman-Sparks et al. 2015).

Funds of Knowledge

Early childhood educators should see families as experts on their children and value their personal and cultural knowledge and experiences—what Luis Moll calls the families' *funds of knowledge* (Moll et al. 1992). The key idea of this concept is that teachers learn *from* and *with* families and incorporate families' knowledge into classroom experiences. The funds of knowledge approach "reframes family-school relationships to make communication, interactions, and curriculum development a two-way process" (Weiss et al. 2005, xxii). This is consistent with the emphasis on engaging in reciprocal partnerships with families that is a foundation of developmentally appropriate practice (NAEYC 2020a).

When teachers have a better understanding of the occupations and daily routines of the families within their communities, they can develop school activities and projects that are connected to the families' lives. For example, Mr. Klien might learn that many families in his school community love to garden and cook with fresh produce. Mr. Klien might design a playful community gathering connected to gardening, reading, and a math-based cooking project. Insights into what is meaningful in a community can have a direct impact on educators' success at connecting play and learning.

Educators make meaningful connections a priority in the learning experiences they provide each child. They understand that all learners, and certainly young children, learn best when the concepts, language, and skills they encounter are related to things they know and care about, and when the new learnings are themselves interconnected in meaningful, coherent ways.

Finding the Third Space

As the opening vignette demonstrates, it is not unusual for families and schools to have different perspectives about educational practices, policies, and learning goals. Often the child is caught in the middle. Conflict is often viewed as something to avoid; however, disequilibrium, tension, and conflict can be when real learning occurs. The goal of addressing conflicting views is not to have a winner or loser but to manage the conflict in a way that is inclusive.

Productive handling of differences begins before an actual conflict occurs. From the beginning of your relationship with a family, you should be building trust, working intentionally and proactively to create a climate in which disagreement is acceptable and problem solving supports positive outcomes. It is also essential to recognize that there are no perfect solutions for all situations. Some ambiguity and uncertainty are an inevitable part of this process. Rather, look for specific solutions for conflict episodes that make sense in terms of your program's values and context (Derman-Sparks, LeeKeenan, & Nimmo 2015).

In *Leading Anti-Bias Early Childhood Programs,* the authors discuss an approach called *finding the third space*. The third space is the intellectual and emotional place where people in conflict can come to a mutually decided agreement that goes beyond their initial viewpoints. Three steps can help you reach a third space: acknowledge, ask, and adapt (Derman-Sparks, LeeKeenan, & Nimmo 2015):

Step 1, Acknowledge: Recognize that a problem exists.

Step 2, Ask: Gain clarity about where each person stands on the issues and their desired outcomes. Respectfully share your own views and what you hope for. Be sure that everyone feels heard.

DAPFocus_Kindergarten.indd 37 14/08/24 8:51 AM

Step 3, Adapt: This is the solution step. Together, look for common ground and consider alternative ways to solve the problem.

Here is how Mr. Klien used these steps to work toward a third space with the families of his students, also incorporating their funds of knowledge.

Ms. Ross acknowledged that Mr. Klien raised an important issue: differing views on play and learning in kindergarten. These views reflected not only different opinions of the families in his class but also diverse values in the community. In some situations, these perspectives were in contrast to the school's views and practices. *(acknowledge)*

Ms. Ross encouraged Mr. Klien to consider the perspectives of the families from a strengths-based position and to find out more from them. How do they play and learn at home? What is familiar to them in their upbringing and cultural contexts? How can their knowledge and experiences contribute to the community of learners in his classroom? *(ask)*

To discover more from the families and explain his own approach to playful learning, Mr. Klien planned a math event for the families of his students. Families joined their children in the classroom one morning to learn about the math curriculum by engaging in activities together. Supported by Ms. Ross to make playful learning the focus, Mr. Klien selected some of the children's favorite math games from the curriculum, and the classroom was filled with excitement and laughter as the children and their families played together. Mr. Klien scheduled the event so that the children went to art class afterward, allowing him to discuss the experience with the families, share the key learning concepts, and answer questions. When Mr. Klien met with the families, he asked, "Did your children have fun? Did you have fun?" and more important, "What did your children learn?" Mr. Klien noted that the children enjoyed their learning because it was engaging, meaningful, active, iterative, and joyful (Zosh et al. 2022). The families identified many math concepts embedded in the games and recalled what their children said that showed their math understanding. As parents spoke, Mr. Klien wrote all the math concepts on chart paper and then showed how they matched the standards in their state math curriculum framework. *(ask)*

Mr. Klien took the discussion one step further to connect to the families' funds of knowledge and asked, "Did you play any games like these growing up, where you were learning and playing at the same time? What did you play?" This question prompted the sharing of many fond memories of favorite games from childhood—card games, board games, hopscotch, hand games, double Dutch (jump roping), and many others. Mr. Klien again took notes and concluded the meeting with an open invitation for the families to come into class and teach the children their favorite games. In addition to families who volunteered, Mr. Klien followed up on his notes and reached out to Imani's father to teach mancala, Chong-min's mother to teach Go, and Lorenzo's grandfather to teach dominoes. *(ask, adapt)*

As the families shared their games, the children proudly took on the role of expert and led their peers in playing. After each new game was taught, Mr. Klien discussed with the children what they learned, which often extended beyond math. These wonderful discussions were shared in newsletters to families. At the last family conference of the school year, many families shared anecdotes of their children playfully learning different subjects—math, literacy, science, history—at home, in the grocery store, and during family outings. "Many of them finally see that it's not play versus learning, but play *and* learning!" Ms. Ross said to Mr. Klien. "I learned so much from the families, and so did the children!" *(ask, adapt)*

Conclusion

"Effective parent involvement programs match the needs of school and community in creating a positive school climate" (Barrera & Warner 2006, 73). Trusting relationships are the foundation for developing culturally responsive partnerships between families and schools. When differences in values arise, honoring families' funds of knowledge while actively seeking the third space enhances trust in the relationship, opens genuine learning possibilities for both families and educators, and advances the mission and goals of the school and community.

DAPFocus_Kindergarten.indd 38 14/08/24 8:51 AM

Tips for Communicating the Importance of Playful Learning to Families

1. Display a chart in the room for visitors listing 10 things children learn from play. Share these in a newsletter or online. Reinforce the connections between center/station activities and learning.

2. Offer opportunities to illustrate the connections between play and learning.

3. Post images of children playing and learning—both indoors and out. Label them with information about what the children are learning.

4. Provide time for families to observe and engage in playful learning, ask questions, and reflect on play and learning together.

5. Become more comfortable talking about play and learning. Practice with a colleague.

Adapted from L. Bongiorno, "Talking with Parents About Play and Learning," *Teaching Young Children* (August/September 2018), 18–20.

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