

# Empowering Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Children and Families

Mubina Hassanali Kirmani

When I first walked through the school corridors with my five-year-old son Nabeel on our way to his kindergarten classroom, we stood out. We looked so different, with me wearing *shalwar kameez* (traditional Indian dress with loose pajama-type trousers and a tunic). It felt strange being a member of a racial and ethnic minority. I was more nervous than my child. Will his teacher and classmates accept Nabeel? Will he learn to speak English like a native speaker? Will he forget his home languages, Gujarati and Urdu? How can my child get the best education in the American school system and keep his cultural traditions?

**THERE WERE MANY CHALLENGES** for Nabeel after that first day of school in 1991—and for me as a parent of Asian Indian origin, a Muslim, born and raised in Kenya, who immigrated to the United States in 1983.

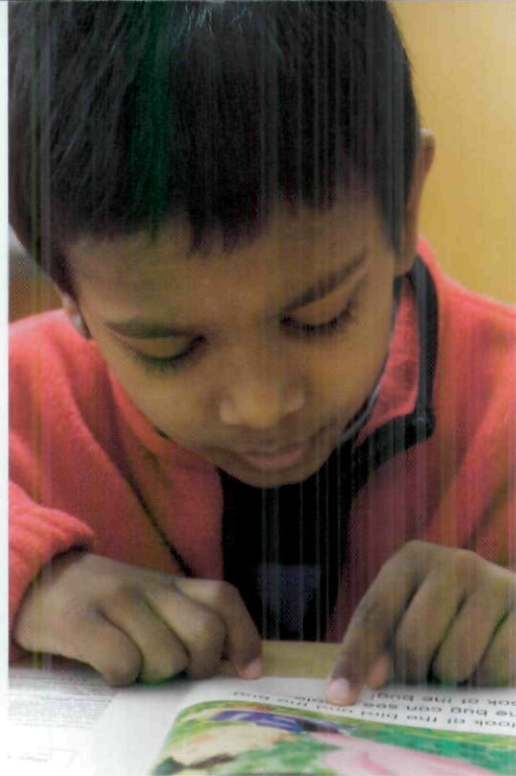
Mubina Hassanali Kirmani, EdD, is professor in the Department of Early Childhood Education at Towson University in Maryland. She has chaired the College of Education Diversity Committee and authored a book on Asian culture in East Africa. She presents nationally and internationally.

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These challenges ranged from protecting Nabeel's name and preserving his identity to promoting his mother tongue and culture. In order to function successfully in and out of school, we both needed to feel acknowledged for who we were and encouraged to feel comfortable within the school community instead of feeling alienated.

Helping children and their families develop self-esteem and a sense of belonging in their new school is important for success. I often discuss self-esteem and belonging with the students in my own classroom in my role as an early childhood teacher educator. Developmental theorists such as Abraham Maslow and Erik Erikson consider these elements essential to both learning and growth (Mooney 2000; Berk 2005).

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Children and families from diverse backgrounds entering an unfamiliar school can feel isolated and may require special attention (Kirmani & Laster 2001; Ramsey 2004; Banks 2006). If they are welcomed and acknowledged, they can be empowered to reach their full human potential and make positive contributions to the school community.

## Acknowledging a child's name

Names are important. Sometimes a name is given in memory of an ancestor or a religious figure or because the name has a special meaning. To preserve a child's sense of self-esteem, he or she has to be addressed correctly. During Nabeel's early years, one school official asked me if Nabeel could be called Bill. I had to refuse. Nabeel's name means *noble*. Shortening or changing his name would distort the meaning and deny his cultural heritage.

Educators need to understand the significance of each child's name and ensure it is treated with respect. Inviting parents to share the meaning and history of their child's name acknowledges both the child and the family.



## Promoting a child's home language

Families of young children whose home language is not English often face enormous challenges helping their children learn more than one language. Nabeel grew up with multiple languages. Apart from English, his primary language, Nabeel had to learn his home languages, Gujarati and Urdu—two related languages from India. In addition, he had to learn to recite the Koran and thus be literate in Arabic, in which the text is written from right to left.

The language of the home is the language young children have used since birth. They use this language to establish and maintain meaningful relationships within their families. Children also use their home language to construct knowledge and test their learning. For Nabeel, Gujarati and Urdu were essential in helping him develop

his cultural identity and communicate and bond with his grandparents, who spoke no English.

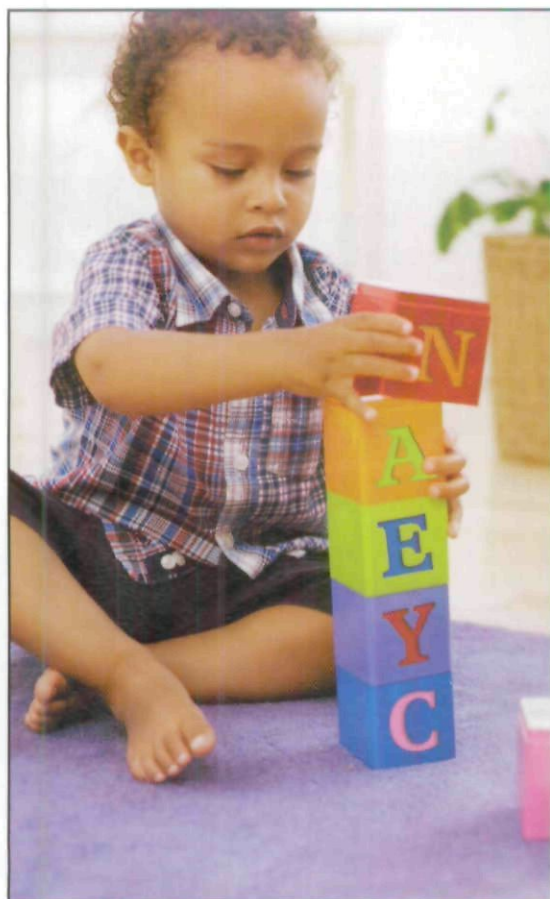
At school, the focus on English, which was critical to Nabeel's academic success, often resulted in a lack of attention to the rich traditions of his other languages. Because Nabeel's teachers never asked what languages he spoke or showed appreciation for his multilingual background, I felt a lack of openness on the school's part to honor Nabeel's home languages. Research supports development of the home language as the foundation for learning other languages (Gonzalez-Mena 2006). Young children have a natural ability to learn multiple languages and need opportunities to interact socially in different cultural settings to promote language development (Chomsky 2003; Fassler 2003; Kozulin et al. 2003; Yang 2006). Because the home language complements a child's overall development

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of linguistic abilities, cultural identity, and sense of self-esteem, teachers need to emphasize and support its use both at home and in the child's classroom.

## Creating culturally responsive classrooms

Families with linguistic diversity can be an important resource for classrooms. For example, families and children can participate together in



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hands-on activities to prepare greetings for display, using different languages like Sanskrit, Chinese, Hebrew, and Arabic script. Morning hellos and end of school good-byes can be varied, using the different languages represented in the classroom. Early childhood programs, primary grades, and elementary schools can welcome these opportunities to expose children to the sounds, scripts, and songs from other children's home languages. Doing so acknowledges multilingualism and enriches language experiences for all children.

To further enhance a sense of belonging and to recognize children as interesting and unique individuals, teachers can connect each child's family and culture to the classroom with representations of their heritage and family life. With teacher support, families and children can help personalize classrooms with family photographs, pictures of ancestral homes and traditions, and children's names displayed with translated meanings.

to a variety of materials that promote cross-cultural awareness.

Children can explore toys, games, books, and favorite stories from different cultures. Musical instruments such as maracas, Tibetan bells, gongs, gourds, bongo drums, woven jute rattles, wooden flutes, brass bells, conch shells, *kalimbas* (African thumb pianos), castanets, guitars, and wooden xylophones can enhance the music corner. Children can compare and contrast sounds and

## Including multicultural classroom materials

The classroom is an important place for young children to explore and learn about cultural diversity. According to Piaget, children learn by exploring and constructing knowledge (Piaget [1926] 1930). Early childhood classrooms are appropriate places to expose children

explore the instruments to create innovative tunes and rhythms.

The art corner can give children opportunities to explore and express themselves with realistic "people color" paints and crayons. Children can create self-portraits by exploring a range of light and dark paint tones to match their skin color. They can identify their skin using terms such as *gingerbread*, *almond*, *toast*, or *olive* or a mix of such colors rather than using stereotypical racial classifications (McGovern 1997).

Teachers can stock the dramatic play corner with traditional clothing from other cultures, such as *saris* from India, *kimonos* from Asia, *ponchos* from South America, *kaffiyeh* scarves from the Middle East, *kente* and *kanga* dresses from Africa, and European-style hats, so children can try on the clothing from countries around the world. Teachers can discuss with the children why, when, and where the articles of clothing are worn before offering them. It is important that children learn facts and not stereotypes concerning the ways people dress in different parts of the world.



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Housekeeping corners can include ethnic play foods, such as international breads, and Hispanic, Asian, Middle Eastern, and Italian food sets. Families can send in empty food containers (well washed and clean) representing the food preferences of the children enrolled in the program. Cooking utensils such as colorfully designed pots, mortars, rolling pins, tortilla presses, woks, and ladles can be used together with eating tools such as chopsticks, wooden bowls, light metal *thalis* (a flat dish from India), and teacups. Various eating arrangements such as low Asian-style tables and floor mats might also be included.

As children play with familiar objects that give them a sense of belonging, as well as unfamiliar objects that represent different lifestyles, they learn that all children and families make music, dress, eat, and spend time in activities. This awareness can lead to developing a true respect for cultural diversity.

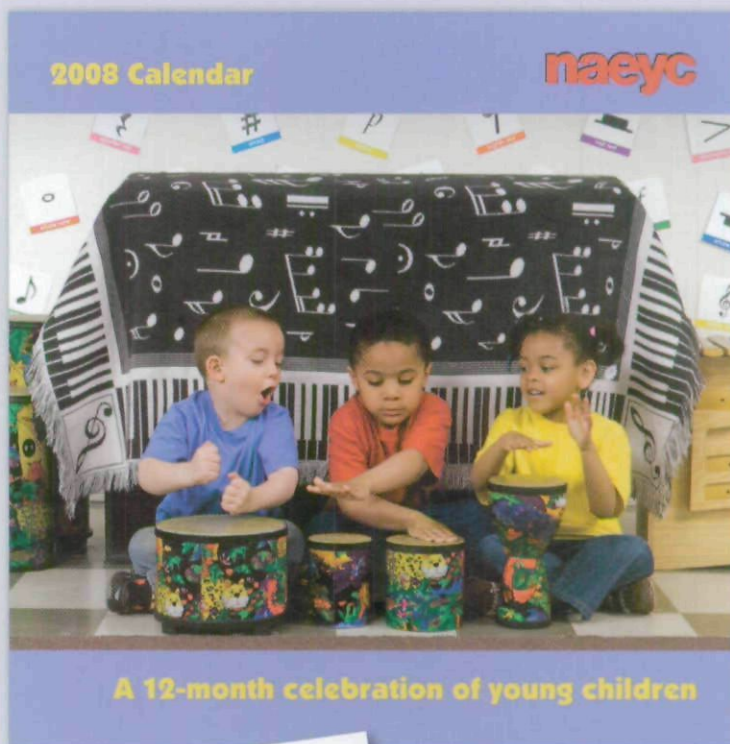
### Creating inclusive school spaces

Families need a sense of belonging too. Families of young children are the ones most likely to enter schools because they escort their children into their classrooms each morning. As a parent stepping into Nabeel's school for the first time, I was uncomfortable. The foyer and hallways had no familiar signs or symbols to make families from different cultures feel

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## Families from diverse backgrounds can be allies in creating a culturally inclusive learning environment.

connected to the school. There were no welcoming messages to encourage minority parents to get involved in their child's academic life.

Families from diverse backgrounds can be allies in creating a culturally inclusive learning environment. With school support, they could contribute artifacts to decorate the halls, acknowledging the variety of cultures in the school. They can bring magazine photos of people of different ethnicities, complementing them with world maps and flags to show their places of origin. Ethnic clothing adds colorful decoration to walls, and coins from different countries make fascinating displays. School announcements on the public address system can be followed by melodies from different cultures—for example, music using the *sitar* from India or the *nyatiti* from Kenya.

With encouragement, families can be empowered to transform the public spaces in and around the school to celebrate the diversity of the students.

## Building strong home-school partnerships

Families who have emigrated from other countries are often unsure about the expectations of the new school and may hesitate to join in school activities or become involved in school events. Language can sometimes be a further barrier for home-school communication. Although it may be difficult to find human translators, computer-based translations are accessible, and teachers can send notes and invitations home in several languages.

With a bit of creativity, teachers can use families as resources. Families might bring in and discuss cultural artifacts or traditional family heirlooms. For example, Nabeel's paternal grandmother, Zahra, with help from a translator (a family member who spoke English), proudly showed the shawl she made for Nabeel when he was a baby, knitted with shiny silk threads from India. She pointed to different colors, shapes, and patterns in the shawl while Nabeel explained their meaning. Then she sang a counting song and a lullaby in Urdu for all the children to enjoy.

Families can share special celebrations and teach songs and dances from their culture. When appropriate, they can share foods to give children different sensory taste experiences. If provided opportunities, families can become valuable partners in promoting diversity in schools.

It is important to recognize that schools are often the first places where families and children experience cultures that are different from their own. According to the NAEYC (1996) position statement "Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children from Birth through Age 8," the nation's children all deserve an early childhood education that is responsive to their families, communities, and racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds.

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## Conclusion

For young children to experience optimum learning, early childhood professionals must be prepared to meet children's diverse developmental, cultural, linguistic, and educational needs. Schools that create nurturing environments where children and their families feel accepted, and where their cultural and linguistic identities are acknowledged, are helping to empower all families to make positive contributions to children's learning.

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