

8.6 Respecting Diverse Cultures and Languages: Sharing a Favorite Poem, Song, or Story of an Individual from Another Culture and Language

Janis Strasser

Connections to *Developmentally Appropriate Practice*

- Chapter 6: Creating a Caring, Equitable Community of Learners
- Chapter 7: Engaging in Reciprocal Partnerships with Families and Fostering Community Connections
- Chapter 10: Planning and Implementing an Engaging Curriculum to Achieve Meaningful Goals

Case Overview

This case focuses on the importance of early childhood educators' actions to engage and collaborate with young children and their culturally and linguistically diverse families in the educational process, including "getting to know each child well, understanding each child as an individual and as a family and community member, . . . seeking information from the family," and understanding that each child's differences include their "various social identities . . . cultural experiences, [and] . . . family languages" (NAEYC 2020, 7).

Ms. McNeal's third grade class consists of 20 students. Among them are four children whose families are from China, Latin America, and Poland. To help her students become a community of learners, in the beginning of the school year, Ms. McNeal gives her students a homework assignment in which they will record and share aspects of their families' unique languages, cultures, and funds of knowledge. She has read and reflected on the examples to consider for primary grades in Chapter 6 of *Developmentally Appropriate Practice* (Wright 2022) and knows that each child's home language "embodies valuable cultural capital and is an integral part of a child's identity; it mirrors who she is, where she came from, and where she is headed" (Nemeth 2014, 64).

Learning Objectives

1. Articulate ways that early childhood educators can design classroom activities and discussions that include opportunities for sharing and learning about diverse family backgrounds.
2. Analyze ways that early childhood educators can collaborate with and learn about culturally and linguistically diverse families.
3. Identify opportunities to design learning opportunities that reflect children's and families' lives and cultures.
4. Describe opportunities for students to listen to a variety of languages and learn about diverse customs and cultures that are represented in the community.

Case Narrative

Before the Learning Activity: The Interview Assignment

One of Ms. McNeal's students, Michelle, speaks Chinese with her grandparents and both Chinese and English with her parents. In addition, two students in Ms. McNeal's class speak mostly Spanish at home and another student speaks Polish and English at home. To find authentic ways to share with the class

the languages and cultures of these children’s families as well as those of the other families, Ms. McNeal creates a homework assignment in which all the students interview someone they know (a member of their family, a family friend, a neighbor, or a member of the community) who speaks a language other than English.

For the assignment, students ask the individual to share a poem, story, or song in their language and explain the significance of it. Ms. McNeal discusses the assignment with families at Back to School Night and posts the assignment on the school website. Additionally, she compiles and posts a list of people from the neighborhood and the school community who speak other languages for students who don’t have access to anyone to interview. The students previously learned how to interview and record an interview using a phone, an iPad, or other electronic device.

After interviewing the individual in English or in a mutually understandable non-English language about their favorite poem, song, or story, the students ask about the meaning and significance of it to, in turn, share it in their own words. Ms. McNeal suggests that the students use note cards during their presentations to help them remember the important points to share. To respect differences in the students’ pace and ability to communicate information orally, Ms. McNeal does not set a time limit for each presentation.

During the Learning Activity: Students Sharing Interviews

Michelle is the first to share her interview with the class. She says, “My grandma shared her favorite story with me. In English, it’s called ‘The Frog in the Well.’ It’s about a frog who lives in the bottom of the well and has never been outside it. One day, a sea turtle passes by and the frog wants to show off his well, so he tells the sea turtle how happy and comfortable he is living at the bottom of his well and invites the turtle to see it. The sea turtle goes in and sees the bottom of the well. He then tells the frog about all the great things he has experienced while living in the ocean and how he is proud to live in such a magnificent place. The frog is shocked to hear about all the great things outside of his well that he’s never seen before and gets embarrassed that he thought he knew everything about the world. Grandma said she picked this story because it was her favorite story growing up. She also said it teaches a very important lesson to never think that you know everything.”

Michelle plays the recording of her grandma sharing the story in Chinese on her phone, which was allowed in this classroom for educational purposes. As the other students hear her grandmother speaking, a few start laughing. Michelle’s smile fades and she blushes.

Ms. McNeal says, “Let’s remember to be respectful to our classmates. Sometimes when we hear a language we have never heard before, it sounds new or different.” This gentle reminder helps quiet the laughing. She refocuses the class on the discussion at hand by asking, “Who has a question or comment for Michelle about the story she shared?”

Kristin: That’s cool. In first grade, we read *Frog and Toad*.

Jackson: Was the story in a book, or did someone make it up and tell it to her?

Michelle: I think it’s a story everyone knows, and the grown-ups tell the children.

Devon: It sounds really complicated to speak Chinese. Is it hard?

Michelle: I don’t think so. I just learned how to speak it when I was a baby before I learned how to speak English.

Mia: Can I go next? My Grandma Halinka shared her favorite song in Russian. It’s called “Kalinka.” She said there’s a dance that goes with it. The words are “Little red berry. Little red berry of mine. In the garden is a little raspberry. My little raspberry.” We found a YouTube video of it in Russian with the dancing. My grandma grew up in Poland, but she had to learn to speak Russian because in school, she was not allowed to speak her language, Polish. That’s why the favorite song she picked was in Russian. I couldn’t believe

that her teachers wouldn't let her speak her language or she would get punished. But I don't like it when my grandma speaks Polish to me when we are in the supermarket or other places where no one else speaks Polish. I don't want people to think she doesn't know how to speak English.

Llaoli: My mom always wants to speak Spanish when we are at the mall. I hate that too. I ask her to only speak Spanish to me at home.

Olivio: I don't see what the big deal is. Sometimes my dad speaks Spanish and sometimes he speaks English. Who cares?

It is time to go to lunch, so Ms. McNeal explains that they will continue their discussion this afternoon and Mia will share the recording of her grandmother's song.

Takeaways and Next Steps

This case focuses on the teacher's commitment to supporting the home languages and cultures of the students in her class and the broader community. As her students begin to share their interview contents, Ms. McNeal realizes that there are sociopolitical nuances and personal struggles facing individuals who speak a different language other than English (for example, Mia's grandmother was prohibited from speaking her home language in school; two students express discomfort with having family members speaking their home languages in public). The teacher is demonstrating an "ongoing interest in each child's unique knowledge, skills, and cultural and linguistic experiences and recognize[s] these as assets for learning" (NAEYC 2020, 15).

Ms. McNeal realizes that she needs to think more about how to use and extend her students' family and cultural experiences to broaden the children's understandings about the world. She will contact Mia's family to explore the possibility of inviting her grandmother to come in and talk to the class about her feeling of not being allowed to speak her home language in school and its impact on her life.

Ms. McNeal also thinks about the comments Mia and Llaoli made about how they feel when family members speak their home language in public. She postulates that if she has more group discussions that honor and support the home languages of her students, maybe it will help them feel more positive and comfortable with their family members speaking their home languages. It will also help to prepare the students to listen respectfully to new, unfamiliar languages without making fun of them. In this connection, Ms. McNeal will talk with Michelle privately during lunch to make sure her feelings weren't hurt when the children laughed at how her grandmother sounded when she shared the story in Chinese. Reflecting on the complex issues that emerged during the classroom discussion, Ms. McNeal realizes that she needs to go beyond fostering students' respect for linguistic and cultural differences and help them appreciate the value of speaking more than one language.

Ms. McNeal's reflections demonstrate her understanding that "young children are developing multiple social identities that include race, language, culture . . ." (Wright 2022, 119), and she is committed to honoring "the perspectives, experiences, and realities of children and their families from culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse backgrounds" (119–20). Through intentional teaching, she wants to ensure that she avoids the types of stereotypical cultural sharing and assumptions that do not reflect the actual experiences of the students in her class.

Case Discussion Questions

1. How does the interview activity reflect guideline 1 of the position statement on developmentally appropriate practice?
2. How else might the teacher address, in developmentally appropriate ways, her concerns regarding Llaoli's and Mia's negative comments about their family members speaking their home languages in public?

3. Besides inviting Mia’s grandmother to visit the class, how might Ms. McNeal incorporate elements of guideline 5D.2 of the position statement on developmentally appropriate practice?
4. How are this interview assignment, the teacher’s reflections, and her next steps related to guideline 4B.2 of the position statement on developmentally appropriate practice?
5. Do you think Ms. McNeal’s response to the laughter that occurred during Michelle’s presentation was effective? Why or why not? Why might she have chosen to only briefly address the behavior rather than to have a deeper discussion with the whole class? How might she have used that teachable moment to build empathy, understanding, and awareness as a learning community? What are some ways she can follow up at a later time?
6. What might be a developmentally appropriate follow-up activity for the class to learn more about how children and adults who speak more than one language use those languages in different settings?

General Discussion Questions

1. What are other ways for educators to foster children’s respect and appreciation for linguistic and cultural differences?
2. What are some ways educators can support cultural sharing without introducing or reinforcing stereotypes? What should they consider?
3. Considering the notion of “fair and equitable pedagogy” (Wright 2022, 119), how can a teacher avoid the tourist approach in inviting students to share their home experiences throughout the school year?

References

- NAEYC. 2020. “Developmentally Appropriate Practice.” Position statement. Washington, DC: NAEYC. www.naeyc.org/resources/position-statements/dap.
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