

# **A World of Difference**

**Readings on Teaching Young Children  
in a Diverse Society**

**Carol Copple, Editor**

National Association for the Education of Young Children  
Washington, DC

*A World of Difference* was provided as an NAEYC Comprehensive Member benefit in May 2003. Besides having all the benefits of Regular NAEYC membership, Comprehensive Members receive 5 or 6 new books a year as these are released. For more, see [www.naeyc.org/membership/benefits.htm](http://www.naeyc.org/membership/benefits.htm) or call 800-424-2460 and ask for Member Services.

Front cover photographs © Jean-Claude Lejeune; back cover © Jonathan A. Meyers.

Copyright © 2003 by the National Association for the Education of Young Children. All rights reserved. Second printing 2004. Third printing 2008.

Check the copyright notice that appears at the end of each selection. Contact the copyright holder indicated for any permission inquiries.

National Association for the Education of Young Children  
1313 L Street NW, Suite 500  
Washington, DC 20005-4101  
202-232-8777 or 800-424-2460  
**[www.naeyc.org](http://www.naeyc.org)**

Through its publications program the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) provides a forum for discussion of major issues and ideas in the early childhood field, with the hope of provoking thought and promoting professional growth. The views expressed or implied are not necessarily those of the Association. NAEYC thanks the contributors.

NAEYC would like to thank Elizabeth Jones for her able assistance in crafting the "For Reflecting, Discussing, Exploring" section.

Library of Congress Control Number: 2003103873  
ISBN 978-1-928896-09-8  
NAEYC #261

Printed in the United States of America

# Contents

## About This Volume vii

*Carol Copple and Natalie Cavanagh*

### I. Teaching in a Multicultural, Multilingual Society 1

- 1 **Holding On to Many Threads: Emergent Literacy in a Classroom of Iu Mien Children** / *Kathleen Evans* .....3  
A firsthand account of a teacher's experience with children and their families who are immigrants from a tribal society in East Asia.
- 2 **Responding to Cultural and Linguistic Differences in the Beliefs and Practices of Families with Young Children** / *Lynn Okagaki and Karen E. Diamond* .....9  
Illustrates how cultural differences in parents' beliefs and practices affect children's adjustment to early childhood settings, and offers suggestions for helping children transition between home and the classroom.
- 3 **Respecting Children's Home Languages and Cultures** / *Eugene Garcia* .....16  
Suggests five practical applications teachers can use to acknowledge and respond to children's home language and culture.
- 4 **What Early Childhood Educators Need to Know: Developing Effective Programs for Linguistically and Culturally Diverse Children and Families** / *Patton O. Tabors* .....17  
Covers different types of classrooms and teaching methods appropriate for children learning English as a second language, as well as information on the developmental sequence of learning a second language.
- 5 **Growing Up with the Contradictions of Race and Class** / *Patricia G. Ramsey* .....24  
Reviews the research literature on children's awareness of and feelings about different aspects of race and class so research-based understanding can inform teaching practices.
- 6 **Teaching the Third Culture Child** / *Martha M. West* .....29  
Challenges teachers to prepare for the composition of classrooms in the twenty-first century, which will increasingly include children raised in more than one culture.
- 7 **Supporting Multiracial and Multiethnic Children and Their Families** / *Francis Wardle* .....33  
Urges early childhood professionals to empower and serve multiracial and multiethnic children and families and provides a list of basic steps for programs to take.
- 8 **Diversity and Infant/Toddler Caregiving** / *Janet Gonzalez-Mena and Navaz Peshotan Bhavnagri* .....35  
Using reflective dialogue a caregiver can learn the cultural reasons for a family's different practice and seek creative solutions that satisfy both sides.

### II. Forging a Caring Classroom Community 39

- 9 **Communicating Respect** / *Jeannette G. Stone* .....41  
Children learn to respect others when adults model respect toward them.
- 10 **Using Class Meetings to Solve Problems** / *Emily Vance and Patricia Jiménez Weaver* .....43  
Class meetings offer a forum for group problem solving and promote community.

<b>11 Creating an Antibias Environment through Visual Materials /</b> <i>Louise Derman-Sparks and the A.B.C. Task Force</i> .....	45
Offers suggestions for creating a diverse classroom environment where all children feel at home.	
<b>12 Do Young Children Understand What Others Feel, Want, and Know? /</b> <i>Angeline Lillard and Stephanie Curenton</i> .....	46
Encouraging pretend play and discussing thoughts and feelings helps young children understand others' thinking, and this development of perspective taking and empathy promotes cooperation and other positive interactions.	
<b>13 Resolving Conflict /William J. Kreidler and Sandy Tsubokawa Whittall</b> .....	52
Offers advice and strategies on developmentally appropriate strategies for conflict resolution.	

### III. Building Relationships with All Families 57

<b>14 Resolving Contradictions between Cultural Practices /Sue Bredekamp</b> .....	59
Contradictions in practices and perspectives between families and teachers can be an opening for dialogue and communication, leading to new understanding.	
<b>15 Skills for Working with All Families /Heidi Osgood Kaufman</b> .....	61
Stresses that respect and clear communication are key to success in building home-school partnerships.	
<b>16 Working with Lesbian and Gay Parents and Their Children /James W. Clay</b> .....	64
Focuses on how early childhood programs can work with lesbian and gay parents and their children.	
<b>17 "She Is So My Real Mom!" Helping Children Understand Adoption as One Form of Family Diversity /Julie Greenberg</b> .....	67
Offers strategies to convey awareness, openness, and acceptance of adoption, thus helping instill in all children respect for others and a sense of belonging.	
<b>18 Creating Parent-Teacher Dialogue: Intercultural Communication in Child Care /Connie Sturm</b> .....	69
Discusses how a group of teachers facilitated communication with families when the teachers realized that some of their assumptions clashed with the cultural backgrounds of the children in their care.	
<b>19 Who's in the Family? /Guy W. Jones and Sally Moomaw</b> .....	74
Teachers need to recognize the importance of family structures and that they may vary across cultures.	
<b>20 Partnership-Building Strategies /Ann Pelo and Fran Davidson</b> .....	75
Describes strategies to foster family participation, especially when children are working on projects to bring about change.	

### IV. Regarding Social Class and Family Circumstances 81

<b>21 Be It Ever So Humble: Developing a Study of Homes for Today's Diverse Society /Karyn Wellhousen</b> .....	83
By recognizing that children live in a variety of homes depending on their families' social class and circumstances, teachers can counter stereotypes about housing.	
<b>22 The Stress of Poverty /Patricia G. Ramsey</b> .....	86
Economic insecurity as well as societal attitudes about people living in poverty often profoundly affect young children and their families.	
<b>Valuing Different Kinds of Work /Kay Taus</b> .....	87

<b>23 The Migrant Child</b> / <i>Georgianna Duarte and Donna Rafanello</i> .....	88
Describes the situation for children of migrant workers and their families, and details what services and strategies teachers can use to respond to children’s cultural and linguistic needs.	
<b>24 Overcoming the Ill Effects of Poverty</b> / <i>Judy Harris Helm and Jean Lang</i> .....	94
Offers practical teaching strategies to benefit children of poverty.	
<b>25 Growing Strong Together: Helping Mothers and Their Children Affected by Substance Abuse</b> / <i>Kathleen Fitzgerald Rice and Margot Kaplan-Sanoff</i> .....	98
Presents issues relating to children whose mothers are substance abusers, including the mother’s addiction and recovery, the impact on children, what educators can do, and how mothers can find support.	
<b>26 What Schools Are Doing to Help the Children of Divorce</b> / <i>William A.H. Sammons and Jennifer M. Lewis</i> .....	104
Teachers can help divorcing parents to understand how their children’s behaviors and play reflect inner struggles, shape strategies to support these children, and model strategies to parents.	

## V. Promoting Gender Equity, Respecting Gender Difference 107

<b>27 Gender Equity in Early Childhood Education</b> / <i>Nancy L. Marshall, Wendy Wagner Robeson, and Nancy Keefe</i> .....	109
Outlines classroom characteristics, teacher behaviors, and curriculum features that support gender equity.	
<b>28 Gender Learning in Early Childhood</b> / <i>Teaching Tolerance Project</i> .....	114
Provides a brief overview of the stages of children’s developing gender awareness, and offers guidelines to help teachers incorporate a nonsexist model of teaching that rewards the abilities of both girls and boys.	
<b>29 Developing Concepts of Gender Roles</b> / <i>Kent Chrisman and Donna Couchenour</i> .....	116
Outlines reasons for assisting children in understanding that neither girls nor boys should be limited by gender roles.	
<b>30 Expanding Awareness of Gender Roles</b> / <i>Louise Derman-Sparks and the A.B.C. Task Force</i> .....	118
Offers strategies for expanding children’s awareness of gender roles, and raises issues to consider regarding respecting diversity while countering sexism.	
<b>31 “Can Tommy and Sam Get Married?” Questions about Gender, Sexuality, and Young Children</b> / <i>Betsy J. Cahill and Rachel Theilheimer</i> .....	120
Addresses questions of comfort and discomfort with issues of sexuality; children’s developing sexuality and gender awareness; teachers’ responses to children; and teachers’ interaction with families.	
<b>32 Using Children’s Literature to Debunk Gender Stereotypes</b> / <i>Lisen C. Roberts and Heather T. Hill</i> .....	125
Presents books that challenge society’s gender role stereotypes.	

## VI. Creating an Inclusive Classroom 129

<b>33 Collaboratively Addressing Needs of Young Children with Disabilities</b> / <i>Keith W. Allred, Raquel Briem, and Sharon J. Black</i> .....	131
Suggestions for developing, implementing, and maintaining an Individualized Family Service Plan for a child with a disability.	
<b>34 The Other Children at Preschool: Experiences of Typically Developing Children in Inclusive Programs</b> / <i>Karen E. Diamond and Susan Stacey</i> .....	135
Examines research on the development of children’s ideas about people with disabilities, and offers suggestions for practice.	

- 35 **A Letter to Teachers of Young Children** /*Jeanne McDermott* .....140  
 A parent encourages teachers to emphasize kindness and respect for everyone even as they address children’s natural curiosity about differences, and advises teachers to maintain open communication with parents.
- 36 **Including *Everyone* in Outdoor Play** /*Linda L. Flynn and Judith Kieff* .....142  
 Presents guidelines on multisensory experiences, independence, and cooperative learning groups for inclusive outdoor play, as well as considerations for developing appropriate adaptations for individual children.

**VII. Educating in a Religiously Diverse World 147**

- 37 **Faith Foundations for All of Our Children** /  
*Barbara Kimes Myers and Mary Pat Martin* .....149  
 Provides a framework for professionals to explore questions of faith and institutionalized religion in early childhood, and suggests ways that issues related to faith can be appropriately addressed in nonsectarian early childhood programs.
- 38 **Holiday Activities in an Antibias Curriculum** /*Louise Derman-Sparks and the A.B.C. Task Force* .....155  
 Presents guidelines and suggestions for celebrating holidays within an antibias framework.
- 39 **Creating Culturally Relevant Holiday Curriculum: A Negotiation** /  
*Karen Neubert and Elizabeth Jones* .....157  
 Describes a celebration of the Mexican holiday of the Day of the Dead, in which children learn caring as a value; discuss the experience of death and spirituality; and learn to respect differences, others’ traditions, and the memory of loved ones.
- 40 **Bridging Differences** /*Daniel Gartrell* .....163  
 Offers a teacher’s perspective on a positive experience with a family that had previously encountered difficulty with school programs due to their religious beliefs.

**VIII. Growing as Culturally Responsive Educators 165**

- 41 **Cultural Influences on the Development of Self-Concept: Updating Our Thinking** /  
*Hermine H. Marshall* .....167  
 Presents research on cultural values and argues for recognizing the profound effects of the cultural context on our perceptions and our work.
- 42 **Markers of Multicultural/Antibias Education** /*Louise Derman-Sparks* .....171  
 Presents two sets of markers teachers can use to consider the level of multicultural education in their preschool programs.
- 43 **Developing Antibias, Multicultural Curriculum** /*Louise Derman-Sparks* .....173  
 Offers information on curriculum development within an antibias framework.
- 44 **Preparing Teachers to Use Their Voices for Change** /*Carol Brunson Phillips* .....179  
 Discusses the commitment to racial and cultural diversity in early childhood and offers recommendations for orienting teacher preparation for empowerment.
- 45 **Weaving the Pieces Together** /*Annette Unten* .....185  
 A teacher reflects on her journey toward culturally responsive practice.

**For Further Reading 187**

**For Reflecting, Discussing, Exploring 190**

# Holding On to Many Threads

## Emergent Literacy in a Classroom of Iu Mien Children

Excerpted from *The Lively Kindergarten*

All but seven children in my classroom were members of the Iu Mien (ee-mee-EN) culture, a tribal people from the highland provinces in South China and Laos. Looking over my class list before school began, I realized that this new year, working with children from a culture so far removed from postindustrial influences, would require my making some adjustments in the classroom.

The name list was unlike any I had ever received. A few different first names were repeated in a variety of ways; nearly all last names began with the prefix *Sae*. There appeared to be six or seven different root surnames. Although a naming system was apparent, it didn't seem to be based on gender. Naming became the first of many Mien customs I would learn about from these children and their culture.

### Beginning with children's vision

During the first days of school, I invited parents to stay to help ease the children's adjustment to school. De-

spite a few children's tears and my gesturing to extend this invitation to Mien parents, none of them came inside. Later in the month at the back-to-school night, the parents stood in the middle of the room smiling at me. The younger-age parents, those who have been educated in this country, helped translate my description of what we were doing in the classroom and the questions other parents had about what the children would be learning. My assistant, who is Mien, explained to me that most parents, because they have not been to a school, feel unsure about their roles in the classroom and at meetings.

I didn't speak the language of the Mien parents, and they didn't speak mine. I quickly learned that written communication to most parents was ineffective. Any message I had to get to the class was efficiently transmitted if I asked my assistant or one of the English-speaking Mien parents to stand at the door and relay it to the parents when they came to take the children home.

As a group, the Mien children, who seemed at the first to be unnaturally quiet and compliant, stared up

at me from the rug, and I wondered just how I was going to provide a curriculum that engaged and stimulated all the children. I had a lot to learn about them, what they were interested in, and what they thought about. I wondered how I could create a curriculum that would reflect their culture and provide a supportive transition into American culture—a completely different way of looking at and being in the world.

In reflecting on that beginning, I realize there had been the option to carry on and conduct a traditional type of class. This was the kind of structure the children's big brothers and sisters had prepared them for. I'm sure the children would have been good and also happy about doing worksheets and coloring pictures. I had observed Mien children in other classrooms, with the teacher as the center and the children appearing to work happily in whole-group activities and doing what they were told when they were told.

But I had never taught this way, and I felt that the spirit of these children—or any child—was too precious to waste on meaningless, empty work. The group of

Mien children in my class seemed so curious and thoughtful. I was confident they would thrive in a classroom in which action, talking, and thinking were expected.

## **Becoming culturally aware**

The Iu Mien families I was learning to know were undergoing a drastic acculturation shift, given the differences between village life in Laos and an American urban setting, plus the trauma of life as refugees and their adjustment to inner-city, northern California living in general and an urban public school in particular. To me it seemed very important to have a classroom that both reflected Mien cultural values and prepared the children as much as possible for success in school beyond kindergarten.

Because the Mien culture's language is spoken, not written, I felt I needed to be clearer in my mind about how the Mien oral tradition and other cultural practices could support literacy learning. The children still lived in group settings in which families shared childrearing, food preparation, and religious ceremonies.

Hence I felt I must be very conscious of the ways my teaching promoted collaboration and cooperation and be careful not to undermine cultural values by creating unnecessary competitiveness. The broad differences in Mien and American traditions and values as well as the fragility of the Mien culture as foreign within a hostile, dominant culture, made me wary of any undermining actions on my part. A Mien colleague, Tom Schao, wrote to me, "The Mien have really just boarded a train that carries a technological and educational advancement that is at least two hundred years ahead of their time, and they are beginning to feel a bumpy, but progressive ride toward an American destination."

Through Mien culture classes offered by the school district, my associations with Mien teachers (two in the district at that time) and instructional assistants from the Mien community, attending all cultural functions I was invited to, and reading whatever I could find, I learned about the culture of the children I was to teach.

## **Who are the Iu Mien?**

The Iu Mien, the Hmong, and other hill tribes have been referred to as Yao ("outsider" in Chinese) in China and Laos, where their status has been not unlike that of Native Americans in the United States. In Asia the Mien were slash-and-burn farmers most noted for their elegant dress and intricate cross-stitch needlework. During the Indo-Chinese wars, Mien soldiers were collaborators, first with the French and later the United States. They were fierce, brave fighters whose acts of courage won their commanders' great respect.

When it became impossible for the Mien people to continue inhabiting the regions of Laos where they had settled, they crossed the Mekong River into refugee camps in Thailand. Later the U.S. government, designating the Mien as "guests" in gratitude for their help in the war, relocated them to the United States and provided welfare assistance and low-income housing in inner-city neighborhoods. In some ways this level of support eased their transition from tribal life to a wage economy. In many more ways, however, the lives of the Mien people were transformed and disrupted profoundly.

## **Bringing Mien culture into the classroom**

Mien storytellers believe that in the days when the Iu Mien lived on the land, the elders would go into the

forest to commune with the spirits before selecting a site for a new village in order to decide if the children would be safe in that place from evil spirits. So it is with ghosts that my classroom story here begins.

Around the time of Halloween, in most kindergartens across the country, there is much talk of ghosts. Artwork, stories, and conversations often center on ghosts. Each year at our school a rumor would develop among the first- and second-graders that a ghost resided in the custodian's closet next to our classroom. Bloodcurdling screams and the scampering feet of the older children escaping from the closeted ghost often interrupted us.

At circle time one day following such a ghostly visitation, I asked the children what they would do if a ghost came into their houses. "No problem," said Sarn, one of the Mien children. "All we have to do is call the priest." Thereafter, the children attributed any unexplained occurrences to the spirit world. A cloud passing in front of the sun and casting a shadow on the rug was noted as a significant event. Likewise, a classroom problem was often given a spiritual or supernatural explanation. When one of the favored penlights used for chart reading turned up missing, the children, sensing my distress, suggested that I imagine the missing light and then I would surely be able to locate it. "Do you really think this will work?" I asked. "It might," they offered.

Once when a great flood was prophesied by the shamans, each Mien child wore an amulet to protect her from danger. My assistant thought perhaps I might find this custom strange. But I told her I came from a very devout Catholic family, and I brought in the brown felt scapular my mother had given me at age 7 to protect me from harm. As a child I had an unwavering belief in my guardian angel, and I still pray

to St. Anthony whenever I lose my keys. The beliefs of the Mien children resonated with my own recollections of being 5 and still secure in the protection of my mother and her saints.

Near our school is a beautiful park, rich in the history of our city and named after the patron saint of lost keys—San Antonio. In California's early days there was a corrida for bullfights. The trees are old, and the gentle slopes provide for views of the bay, the freeways, the trains, and the downtown skyline. In the morning the Chinese elders come to the quiet of the park to do tai chi chuan. On weekends Spanish-speaking soccer leagues hold matches from dawn to dusk. There is a Head Start program and recreation center as well as an organized tennis program.

But some of the bad things happening in the neighborhood also went on in the park—drug deals, drug users shooting up in the bathrooms, homelessness, violence, sex. Over the years the children have told me stories of the bad things they've seen happen there. It seemed reasonable for the community's elders to believe there were evil spirits in the park, for indeed there were. Still, the children navigated these streets every day. The park was part of their world and belonged to them. If we went there in a large enough group, we could be safe from the evil. So we did go to the park as often as we could, usually with many parents and even many of the elders.

On one trip to the park, Donna ran out of the bathroom shouting, "There's a monster in the bathroom." I went in with her to check, hoping to reassure her but being aware that it was certainly possible someone might have eluded our careful surveillance and slipped in unseen. Finding the restroom empty and remarkably tidy, I said, "See, Donna, there's no monster here." "No, Ms. Evans, it wasn't really a

## *The beliefs of the Mien children resonated with my own recollections of being 5.*

monster. It's a ghost." I certainly was not about to deny the existence of ghosts to someone as convinced as Donna. About this time Kao and Scott entered our conversation. Kao said, "There is a ghost. See, it is moving your hair." "But, Kao," I said, "perhaps it is just the wind." In an instant he licked his forefinger, raised it, and pronounced gravely, "There's no wind." An imperceptible breeze moved the swings ever so gently. And Scott, without saying anything, pointed to them.

In a way, the children in our Room 2 lived in a world not so unlike the one I inhabited at age 5, one full of spirits, both good and evil, guarding our safety *and* tempting us into dangerous places. Last year when one child's preschool-age sister was killed by a car, the children said, "It was not that lady's fault. The spirits put their hands over her eyes, and she just couldn't see Linda."

But urban public schools are not very magical places. And more and more American children are pushed to abandon magical beliefs for the sake of efficiency, technology, and progress. In contrast, spiritual life is a strength and one of the special gifts the Mien children brought to our school. Holding on to it is one of the struggles they must take up to survive in this society.

### **A conflict of visions**

When I observed the Mien children at play, cultural difference was obvious. It was not unusual to see two or three boys collaborating, with very little conflict, to build one car out of Legos. Children rarely played alone. And until a Mien child had been at school for a while, he would not

draw himself alone on a page but always depicted a child surrounded by others.

Unfortunately many teachers appear unable to grasp a cultural context in which sharing, taking turns, and cooperative effort are the norm and don't have to be taught at school. Teachers in upper grades complained that Mien children chattered constantly, were unable to work independently, and cheated by giving the answer to children who were having difficulty. The children saw many problems as having an explanation in an unatoned past bad deed or perhaps a curse.

American concepts of blame and fault are not considered in resolving issues. The Mien reach decisions through the consensus of wise people, following discussion that continues until most can accept the reasons. A vote about which nearly half the group is unhappy hardly seems a very sensible way of determining rules for living together. Membership is regarded as the benefit one receives from living in accord with the customs of the community.

So many of the discipline procedures in schools, such as stickers and points for good behavior, would seem quite silly to the Mien community, for whom rules are clear and simple. The community decides on the rules, which mutually benefit the members. If a member is unable to abide by these rules, the community is offended. The offending member must fix the problem if he or she wishes to continue to enjoy the reward of living in a supportive community.

As I learned more about how the Mien community works, I saw more clearly the obvious and subtle ways in which competition is inherent in

our schooling in this country and how destructive winning and losing can be to developing a community of learners. Most non-Mien children who came into our group fit naturally into this cooperative way of being in the world.

## Into the world of print

The challenge for me was providing children with what Lisa Delpit (1995) calls “the culture of power” while supporting them in retaining what is beautiful and useful about the Mien home culture. The greatest challenge centered on literacy. Historically, since the Mien people had no written language, the priests, who traditionally were the only ones to read and write, did so in Chinese. According to legend, however, the Mien language once was written, but because of Chinese domination the women hid the writing in their needlework where its form was lost or forgotten.

In the Mien’s homeland, education involved teaching children the community work of the tribe, the traditions, the stories of the people, and spiritual beliefs. From my observation of the ways the Mien children approached new learning, the teaching method children experienced before must have consisted of watching, chatting among themselves about how the task was to be done, and attempting the task when feeling confident to try without failure. The body of knowledge taught by the Mien has effectively withstood years of oppression, domination, war, and dislocation. For the Mien it maintains a strong, vibrant bond with the past, strengthens their solidarity today, and provides a common foundation as they look cautiously to the future.

Reading and writing is something very new for the Mien people. Many parents can only sign their own

names, and they do this with great difficulty. After I posted the class chart of children’s names (our main tool for teaching beginning phonics), including each child’s picture, Yang Ta’s mother spent each morning practicing the names of the letters in her child’s name, so she would be able to help Yang learn to write it.

Nai Chow’s struggle to learn to write her name illustrates the Mien approach to learning. On the first day of school Nai Chow’s older sister made it quite clear that she wanted me to get the spelling of Nai’s name corrected—the office had Nai Chao instead of Chow. Next she brought up her concern about Nai’s letter reversals and mirror writing. It was obvious to me that every person in Nai’s family was working with her on name writing. One day I observed Nai at the name chart very carefully tracing and retracing her name with her finger. By December she had perfected her name.

## Cultural conflicts

Supported by family values, quite a few younger Mien parents have graduated from an American high school and have attended community college. A very few have university degrees. But young children’s strong sense of place in the family more often is eroded as Mien youth move into middle and secondary school, where dropout rates are very high. Within families and the community some divisions develop as Christianity, materialism, loss of respect for elders, and exposure to rational, logical beliefs about the cosmos become more widely accepted by the young people. Disaffection with school and the estrangement of adolescents from the tribe—“bicultural ambivalence” (Krashen 1993)—are serious problems in the Mien community. I wondered, given these influences and forces of

change, if literacy was a positive or destructive force for this culture, for my students?

Further confounding this dilemma of acculturation are widely held popular beliefs that good readers come from homes in which they have “spent over a 1,000 hours actively engaged in some kind of reading and writing” (Cunningham & Allington 1994, 22) before entering kindergarten; that literate children come from homes full of books and magazines; and that the mystery of print has been explained to them. Since these conditions are seen by many schools as the only way children become literate, this leaves little room for children from the Mien culture to become members of the community of readers and writers.

Rather than give in to this deficit model of needing more, I tried to support the literacy strengths I saw embedded in the Mien culture and to build on those. I saw a group with a rich oral tradition, and children with the ability to memorize and recall long and complicated stories. I saw a group of children whose involvement in art and music and with math materials indicated a complex understanding of pattern and the ability not only to re-create but also to create. I saw a group of children who worked together well, so the strong foundation necessary to create a community of readers and writers already existed. Valuing these competencies and taking care to plan my instruction in ways that reflected how children learn at home, I tried to re-create in the classroom the environment of a literate home. In this way I was able to dispel literacy beliefs built on a deficit model.

Many of the activities we engaged in during this school year focused on the importance of the children’s Mien culture, the stories about home and family transcribed in their journals and class-made books, their descriptions of activities on the docu-

mentation boards posted in the halls outside the classrooms, the little rituals at the ends of our themes, and the big performances to celebrate special events. These all served as cultural bridges. Such passages back and forth between the culture of home and the culture of school—the Americanizing institution—demonstrated that both traditional beliefs and the requirements of modern culture can coexist in one person. I believe a curriculum that is generated from the cultural values of the community and that offers insight and skill necessary for survival in the dominant culture supports young people struggling to find ways to become bicultural.

### **Creating curriculum— The threads are time and structure**

How is it that seemingly opposing needs and demands became coordinated in a meaningful program for 5- and 6-year-olds? The clearest way for me to explain how this happened is through the idea of an emergent curriculum. Through my observation of the children, chats with them, group discussions in the classroom, my alliances with Mien adults, and my own reflections, I searched for ways to bring both the children's home culture and the skills of empowerment into my classroom. An added challenge was doing this without violating sacred things that rightfully do not belong outside the boundaries of home and tribe.

The beginning of the year, even the beginning of a new phase in the school year, started with reflection, chats, and a review of observation notes, children's portfolios, and other work samples. I also considered the developmental scales and district curriculum expectations, which are part of my practice. To me it seemed most logical to begin with



© Kathleen Evans

the familiar and move into the exotic as the children became more grounded and better skilled.

Veteran kindergarten teachers begin by focusing on the child and family, moving to the larger community, and then finally exploring larger topics such as ocean life or dinosaurs. The validity of such practice is in needing to create a functioning community of learners, and to do so it is essential that each child feel valued for his or her unique contribution to the community. Even children whom the class may view as troublesome feel they have talents and skills to contribute.

If my Mien children were going to view membership in the tribe/community as worthwhile and if the rest of the tribe/class were to accept them, then all had to spend time getting to know each other. I had found this practice of moving from familiar to exotic even more useful in working with English-language learners whose vocabulary and usage were constantly evolving from the everyday things they were able to name to the more abstract subjects they would yet learn.

When planning any curriculum, I now have a rule for myself: proceed

thoughtfully and very carefully. Before I followed this rule my teaching was harder work and less successful. Once I would brainstorm elaborate webs around interest areas, with many activities in every subject area and all selectively and obviously connected to each and every other activity planned for the week. My knowledge of every topic I covered during the year was great in breadth and depth. My theme boxes and binders bulged with materials and content. But I was so exhausted and the children so overwhelmed that the joy of learning was lost.

Planning became more of a shared process with the children, although probably not as obvious as when a group would ask, "This year can we learn more about snakes?" Although at times I chose the theme, planning was shared in the sense that I divined a topic that seemed of great interest through observation, chatting, and reflection. I field-tested ideas by putting out a tub of books on the subject, reading aloud other books on the subject, and displaying pictures or posters and watching for a response. If there was enough conversation (in Mien or English or both), if there was noticeable curios-

ity or interest, then perhaps this could become a community project. After this preliminary engagement, I began the planning process—still checking responses, extending invitations, and making adjustments for the best fit.

## Creative emerging ideas

Ghosts and spirits, fishing, sewing, caring for babies, cooking, and constructions all emerged as curriculum areas to include that reflected the Mien children's home culture. The office, bookstore, hospital, shampoo factory, as well as space exploration, all emerged prominently as aspects of learning to share in the culture of power. Our reading and writing, including even children's artistic representations as sign systems, became ways for us to explore, document, and preserve Mien cultural activities. As I watched and listened to the children and collected documentation, I decided what were the recurring cultural themes and confusions.

## Fishing

From Mien children's drawings, dictated stories, and chats with the children, I found out how important fishing was to the families. At the water table I added fishing poles, magnetic fish, rubber sea creatures, rocks, shells, and tin buckets. This became an engaging, important place to play. Unfortunately it only had room for three, and many more wanted to fish. So, from construction toys the children invented fishing poles—the long, deep-sea kind. On pillows, which functioned as the bank, they sat, fished, laughed, and joked for an extended period of time.

## The playhouse

The way I set up and stocked the playhouse provided some interesting insights into the Mien children's

culture. I had included a high chair, even though I had never seen a high chair in a Mien home or a Mien child sitting in one. I just didn't think this through. Before I knew it the children, not the dolls, were sitting in the high chair. And before I thought to remove the chair, 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 then kneeling to pray. They did this without self-consciousness, in a most natural way, completely unaware that my team teacher and I had noticed them.

## Sewing

This was something I initiated, and Mrs. Saelee, my assistant, supervised the activity. On small burlap squares the children drew designs, which they then stitched by hand. I had observed the Mien mothers using this same sewing technique as they did traditional stitchery—something they often engaged in as they chatted with each other and watched the children.

At first this was an activity chosen by girls, although the non-Mien boys also chose it. After a few of these boys risked trying, some of the Mien boys thought it might be interesting, though none pursued the sewing very long. The mothers were very pleased with the small, fine stitches the children made. I was truly amazed at the fine motor skills they demonstrated and the beauty of this first needlework. Mien mothers fear that the younger generation will lose this skill, and they appreciated this connection between home and school. I regret that I didn't take the opportunity to discuss why the boys had abandoned the activity so quickly.

## Conclusion

The only way I saw for our classroom to manage the very complicated challenge of acculturation was to provide an emergent curriculum. The Mien culture sustained its people for a very long time through some very difficult struggles, but Mien children needed to learn how to function in modern America. They needed to become fluent in English; they needed to read and write well. Most of all, I believed it was best if they continued speaking their native language.

So the question becomes, Who owns the learning process? If teachers and children bridge cultures carefully and thoughtfully, if the curriculum emerges from the needs, questions, and requirements of the individual situation, then it is the learner who owns the learning. As teachers we can still meet standards and expectations and work within guidelines and frameworks. But the topics, ideas, and questions we pursue must emerge from the community of learners, grow out of the interactions among children, and expand between teacher and students. This is the only curriculum that can be culturally relevant.

## References

- Cunningham, P.M., & R.L. Allington. 1994. *Classrooms that work: They can all read and write*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Delpit, L. 1995. The silenced dialogue: Power and pedagogy in educating other people's children. In *Other people's children: Cultural conflict in the classroom*, 21–47. New York: New Press.
- Krashen, S. 1993. *The power of reading*. Englewood, CO: Libraries Unlimited/Children's Books.

---

Adapted from K. Evans, "Holding On to Many Threads: Emergent Literacy in a Classroom of Iu Mien Children," in *The Lively Kindergarten: Emergent Curriculum in Action*, E. Jones, K. Evans, & K.S. Rencken (Washington, DC: NAEYC, 2001), 59–74. Copyright © 2001 NAEYC.