

Families and Diversity

by Margot Hammond

In November 1996, Margot Hammond, Director of the Bank Street Family Center, along with other members of the Bank Street faculty, presented at the annual meeting of the National Association for the Education of Young Children in Dallas, Texas. At the Bank Street preconference session, "Putting the Arts Back into Language Arts," she spoke about her work with young children and their families at the Center. Through a variety of means, including The Family Center Hello Book and The Family Center Collage (a wonderful patchwork of images contributed by each family that greets families and visitors when they come into the hall), children and families use the arts to learn about themselves and others. The collage was an outgrowth of the work of the Family Center's Anti-Bias Committee. Each family at the Center contributed a square about themselves.

FIRST AND MOST IMPORTANT in the lives of our youngest children are the relationships and experiences that they have with family members: parents, siblings, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, family friends, and extended family. Since family members are so central to the lives of young children, the earliest experience with family feeds the young child's imagination and provides the raw material and opportunities through which children develop the ability to communicate through language, express themselves, and make meaning of their experience through dramatic play, interaction with materials such as blocks, legos, and paints, and participation in artistic and expressive activities such as movement and music, as well as activities that remind us of home, such as cooking.

In a diverse school community, and at Bank Street, we are fortunate to have a community that reflects the diversity of New York City's population, each child's unique family experience needs to be explored, validated, enjoyed, and honored. Schools, child-care centers, teachers, and caregivers of the very youngest—one-, two-, and three-year-olds—must form trusting, solid, respectful relationships with families, so that families and children will feel comfortable enough to share their cultural and family traditions with the community. This will not only validate and honor each family's special uniqueness—the ways they are similar and dissimilar from each other—but will also enrich the individual and community experience of each of its members, and provide a wealth of meaningful experiences for children who are learning to express themselves through language, art, and play.

At the beginning of each year's orientation meeting for families, the Family Center staff extends the following greeting:

We welcome all kinds of families: single-parent families, adoptive families, foster care families, extended families, gay- or lesbian-headed families, families of diverse ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic backgrounds, and families of children with special needs.

When families are welcome and encouraged to spend time with children in class-

rooms, children can learn to think and talk about, not just their own, but each other's families. Family pictures on the walls bring each child's family into the daily life of the classroom. Conversations with teachers and peers can include naming relatives—Daddy, Poppy, or Aunt Bunnie—as well as descriptions of fun times together.

“Families: How They Look, How They Live” is one teacher's way of exploring, validating, and honoring the diversity of our community. This curriculum focuses on what families do together, and it provides children and adults with an opportunity to talk about human characteristics of ethnicity, race, family structure, and disability, while addressing a child's interest in action and experience.

The Family Center Help Book, which is published each year, provides families and staff an opportunity to introduce themselves to each other. A family photograph on each page is enhanced by a description, which, according to a family's preference, may or may not include descriptions of religion, race, ethnicity, special needs, family structure, and availability for play dates, or any other information or instructions that one family might need to connect better with another family. Children who are in the midst of learning language and developing a vocabulary are supported when adults put a name to things children are noticing about difference.

Morgan's family describe themselves as African American. Children can see from the photo that they are a family of color, and that their skin tones range from light to dark. Chris's gay-headed family has two dads: one likes to be called “daddy” and one likes to be called “papa.” Tiki is five years old. She lives with her Emma and Aba and teenage sister Leora. When Leora is home they play dress-up together. It's fun dancing with Mom while watching Tiki's favorite video. Tiki's therapists and teachers help Tiki to run, ride a tricycle, and learn. Sometimes she uses sign language to help other people to understand her words. This year, Tiki learned how to read all her friends' names in her class.

Welcoming, honoring, and celebrating families is one important way to build upon a child's first experiences of family, thereby supporting the development of both verbal and artistic expression. *The Family Center Collage*, a patchwork of images contributed by each family, provides Family Center folks with an opportunity to represent themselves and their families visually and artistically. Each family is given a foam core square to take home and decorate as they choose. Each square stands alone in celebration of one individual and/or one family. When assembled to look like a quilt, the outcome celebrates the richness of our community and clearly and visually defines what we value and honor.

For a Bright Idea!, see next page

BRIGHT IDEA!

In a Bank Street College of Education hallway, visitors find a “quilt” of families’ self-portraits hanging on a wall—some simple, some busy with mementos, some 3-dimensional. Special thanks to the Bank Street Family Center for this idea. Here’s how to make your own.

Materials: foam core squares 9” x 9”, long pins, a bulletin board or big foam core board

How to: Students take home a square and a letter explaining that each family should choose how to portray themselves on the square. They might use photos, drawings, sayings, fabric, even small objects. When students return their squares, mount them with long pins in a patchwork pattern. Be sure to document your work by photographing the finished family quilt.