

Between Teacher & Parent

Helping the child whose culture and background differs from her classroom peers'
by Adele M. Brodtkin, Ph.D.

“I am different”

The Teacher’s Story

Katrina is a newcomer to this country, as well as to our classroom. Each morning, she drifts in tentatively, wearing one of her hand-sewn dresses with matching high wool socks or leotards. Both her mom and her grandma are seamstresses who make all the children’s clothes. Katrina’s have intricate, colorful patterns that intrigue many of the girls. I have heard from a few moms that their daughters now plead to wear dress-up clothes because Katrina does.

Katrina seems to feel self-conscious. She’s hesitant to engage in physical play and gets upset if her dress gets wrinkled or dirty. Most of the time, Katrina just stands by my side when we go outdoors.

Katrina appears to feel awkward when it’s time to slip into a smock and work at the easel or engage in other projects indoors. Her English vocabulary and understanding has grown by leaps and bounds over these several months, but she still feels uncomfortable trying to communicate in English. A number of the boys glance her way with expressions that translate to “What???” before going on their merry way. Some of the girls still stare. Others ask about her “costume” or “party dress.”

Sadness about standing out from the rest may explain Katrina’s quiet tears during rest time. But like most 3 1/2 year olds, Katrina gets no joy from being perceived as different. How can I comfort her and help her to feel accepted?

The Parent’s Story (translated)

Three generations of our family came to America together five months ago. What good fortune that we have relatives who helped us with everything—getting here, finding work, and a nice place to live. Our neighbors have a similar background and speak our language, dress like us, and prepare similar food. So, we are quite at home—but not our children. They are all struggling socially, but the one who worries me the most is Katrina. She goes to preschool every day wearing one of the dresses that my mother or I had made for her or her older sister. But since she has been in school, Katrina has seemed sad. She comes home upset and immediately wants to change her clothes and get ready for bed. We’re wondering if the problem is how she dresses for school. Although Katrina usually picks out the dress she wants to wear, none of her clothes are like the ones worn by the other girls. Do you think we have to buy her a whole new wardrobe to fit in?

Dr. Brodtkin’s Assessment

Fitting in and being liked by peers is important to children of all ages. And it’s unrealistic to expect such a young child to be satisfied with national or ethnic pride, at the price of having close friends. In the best school situations, children achieve a realistic balance between feeling they belong with their peer group and retaining pride and loyalty to family.

What Can the Teacher Do?

If it's the case that the parents and grandparents are not fluent in English, the teacher and administrator should arrange for a translator to join them in a get-together. It should be informal and the school staff should be prepared to listen and learn. This first meeting should be about getting to know the family and learning more about Katrina. No advice should be offered unless requested.

Once a rapport is established, subsequent meetings can become planning sessions—figuring out together how to help Katrina feel at home and make friends, without losing the richness and pride in her own culture. The adult family members might be invited in to cook a special native dish and share it with the children. While it might help Katrina to have a few school outfits similar to those of her classroom peers, she should also be encouraged to feel comfortable wearing handmade clothing.

What the Parents Can Do

This family is facing a dilemma shared by generations of immigrants whose customs and manner of dress may differ from those they find here. The dilemma is how to enable children to make friends and fit in, while at the same time retaining pride in their national/ethnic origins. Building a new, complex identity is easier for children than adults. But they need their parents' permission and guidance to feel loyal and respectful while they do so.

Katrina will probably learn to speak English quickly, because she is learning this new language from peers and teachers at a very young age. She will also be able to retain her native tongue and move between both worlds, so long as she has her parents' blessing and her teachers' respect. ECT

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