Cross-Cultural Teamwork

An interview with
Guille Lopez and
Sadie Cunningham
by Margie Carter

As part of our work in early childhood we want children to know that our communities, country, and the world are very diverse places, whether or not that's true in our own program. Those who embrace anti-bias curriculum always have our antenna up for teachable moments. If we're fortunate enough to work cross culturally, we'll find many opportunities to deepen our understandings about other cultural perspectives and the role of racism, gender, linguistic, and socioeconomic biases. When we work at understanding institutional as well as personal biases, we can move closer to honest, respectful, and equitable relationships.

I was delighted when a colleague, Fran Davidson (Pelo & Davidson, 2002), co-author of *That's Not Fair: A Teacher's Guide to Activism with Young Children*, suggested I meet Guille Lopez and Sadie Cunningham to learn about their work at University District Children's Center in Seattle. Fran described these toddler teachers as "most enthusiastic about their love of the children, their love of the work, their love of each other, and their love of how well they've figured out how to work deeply and richly together. It is infectious to be around them! I think they are great models of what cross cultural reflective practitioners can be about. I think their story is important to share." Needless to say, I was eager to meet and see these women in action.

Guille Lopez moved to Seattle 12 years ago from Puerto Vallarta, México, and began working at University District Children's Center (UDCC) ten years ago. Her daughter, Betzy, is bilingual in Spanish and English and attended UDCC for five years. They are so happy to be part of the UDCC community. Sadie Cunningham has lived in Seattle her whole life and found her home working at UDCC three years ago. She is excited that she and her husband are part of this community as they begin to grow their family! Margie Carter is an author, ECE consultant, and regular contributor to Exchange. Visit www.ecetrainers.com to learn more about her work with Harvest Resources Associates and www.udccenter.org to learn more about Guille and Sadie's workplace and vibrant community.

Guille and Sadie's Story

Guille and Sadie crafted a lovely story to describe their work together. I offer it here as an inspiration for all educators. In it you can see how attention to the small details, as well as the bigger context of a cross-cultural working relationship, can be an exciting learning journey.

MC: From your experience, what gets a cross-cultural working relationship off to a good start?

GL and SC: Getting to know each other as regular people has made the professional communication between us easier and more effective. We are humans first, and then we are co-workers. In the environment of early childhood education where the most essential lessons we teach children are how to be socially competent humans, recognizing our inherent humanity is essential to our ability to translate culturally-sensitive, anti-bias lessons to them.

We come from two different backgrounds and it's important to share our cultures with each other, just as we learn about the culture of each family with whom we work. Guille is from Puerto Vallarta in México. Sadie grew up five miles from our school here in Seattle. Our cultures influence our approaches to many parts of the day, such as mealtimes. Discussing which foods we like or don't like and our values around sharing food helped us develop the mealtime routines in our classroom. For example, in Guille's culture, food is to be shared with all those present for a meal. The concept of *your* food and *my* food was foreign to her. This attitude towards food influences the way Guille interacts with the children during mealtimes. Conversely, Sadie's food culture is one of sharing tastes of *my* food and *your* food.

MC: Can you highlight an example of how your relationship is a role model for goals you have for the children?

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Goals of an Anti-Bias Curriculum

Goal 1: Each child will demonstrate self-awareness, confidence, family pride, and positive social identities.

Goal 2: Each child will express comfort and joy with human diversity; accurate language for human difference; and deep, caring human connections.

Goal 3: Each child will increasingly recognize unfairness, have a language to describe unfairness, and understand that unfairness hurts.

Goal 4: Each child will demonstrate empowerment and skills to act, with others or alone, against prejudice and/or discriminatory actions.

Source: Louise Derman-Sparks & Julie Olsen Edwards (2010). A*nti-Bias Education for Young Children and Ourselves*.

GL and SC: Throughout the day, there are things that we both like and things that we disagree about, but there is one thing we have in common that helps us create compromises in our classroom: we both love what we are doing! Our friendship grows as we share stories about our lives, share our emotions, and help the children of our community have the experiences that make them strong, successful, and happy. The children are able to see us first as humans and feel the emotions and care that entails. Our environment is one of mutual respect for all involved.

Identifying and utilizing our individual strengths is a strategy we use to accomplish these goals. When we effectively use our skills, we are able to achieve greater productivity. Each of us has different styles for learning new information and different strengths to contribute to the classroom. We delegate what each of us will do to accomplish our daily tasks quickly and to follow through with our long-term projects.

For example, as an auditory learner, Guille learns about behavior coaching by discussing situations face-to-face with a co-worker. Her visual and spatial skills combine with her natural ability to produce brilliant interior designs to create calm and engaging classroom environments.

Sadie is a visual learner with a love for reading and writing. She retains information easily and excels at communicating with multiple teachers. These qualities make her a strong mentor and team builder.

How do we put our strengths into action? Well, while writing the rough draft of this article, Guille was talking very fast while Sadie was typing very fast! We were laughing and telling each other stories to make sure we each understood what the other person was trying to say.

MC: Well, that's a delightful example of your work together. Using stories to clarify your thinking can be so helpful. This brings to life ideas that can otherwise be vague or a bit abstract, leaving room for misunderstanding. You seem really appreciative of each other's strengths and share the joy of laughter together.

GL and SC: In the classroom, Guille makes quick visual observations of the environment and body language of the children, while Sadie focuses more on making written observations and detailed stories of the children's learning. Each of us has grown adept at noticing and making meaning about interactions between people, adults, and children alike. We take time during nap and team planning sessions to share our observations, thus creating a more complete description of the class and individual children.

One day, we went to visit another school and we agreed to meet there. When we saw each other, we started laughing so hard. Without prior planning, Sadie had brought a notebook and pen and Guille brought only a camera. We collected a ton of information with the pictures Guille took and the words Sadie wrote. By using our strengths, we capture more information with less effort.

MC: How do you see yourselves as mentors to new teachers?

GL and SC: A value integral to our nature as teachers is the constant desire to share our knowledge with everyone who enters our classroom. We embrace the notion that everyone is part of the team. After working in early childhood education for several years, many practices seem obvious to us that are not obvious to someone who has just begun her career.

For example, when new teachers are assigned to bathroom duty, we share information with them on how to manage a transition smoothly. A child is always eager to move and learn, right? So if you ask a child to wait while a friend is sitting on the potty, more likely the child is going to be running, poking a friend, or trying to climb somewhere. On the other hand, if you keep the child busy by playing a game such as "Simon Says," the time of waiting will be more pleasant and can be used as an opportunity for learning.

We divide the task of training support staff by understanding our different skills. Guille spits out information in the moment to other teachers in the classroom at that time. She looks for and uses the 'teachable moment.' Sadie retains information and follows through with communicating in detail to the whole teaching team.

Maintaining consistency in our routines is a proven method for helping children feel secure and in control of their lives. For example, when new teachers bring the children outside, we make sure they know our transition songs. When we all work together implementing the strategies that work in so many ways and on so many occasions, we create a predictable, reassuring flow throughout the day.

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Also, when children are going through strong emotional times and experiencing sadness, frustration, or anger, they need the adults in their lives to provide consistent responses. Parents and all teachers need to be in constant communication to create that consistency for the children.

This is why we like to communicate with our assistant teachers about the activities and emotions taking place in the classroom on a daily basis. Another important part of communication is informing our support staff about our expectations: what we need to get done, how, and the reason why we do things the way we do. Sometimes concepts and routines make sense to one person, but not to another. So we always want to make sure everyone understands the whole picture.

We had to work hard to get in the habit of informing support staff about what was going on in the classroom as soon as they walk in to assist. This constant communication with support staff helps the children to continue with what they are trying to figure out, even when we are required to step away from the action.

MC: These are great examples of how you are very conscientious about teamwork, not only between the two of you, but with your co-workers as well. The attentiveness you give to careful communications is important not only on behalf of cross-cultural relationships, but in building the kind of responsive curriculum you want with the children.

GL and SC: A huge part of making the day run smoothly is to ensure that the children have the resources they need for their studies and projects. We also want them to have people available to support them in various ways. All the adults involved in the child's care need to be on the same page with scaffolding their learning. They need to know what questions to ask the children, and what materials or equipment are needed in the moment.

As a teaching team, we have trained ourselves to communicate and share information with each other as often as possible. For example, we will make comments about what we are observing the children creating, discovering, and feeling during free play time, then return to these observations for reflection at a later time. Conversation and a shared curiosity are central to us maintaining communication all day long. Times when the children play, walk, sleep, and eat are all small, essential moments we add to our weekly planning time.

Communication is a skill that takes practice and often we find barriers that make the information given and received lose its real meaning. Speaking different languages and having different communication styles can be challenging. We frequently find ourselves talking about the same idea in different ways. By explaining ourselves in other

words, we often realize we are both saying the same thing!

One thing we have always perceived is that even when we both are observing the same things or the same child, we tend to derive different meaning from our observations. Trading information allows us to develop a more accurate and complete report about the children's development. We each identify ourselves as co-learners (co-researchers/co-creators). By recognizing the fact that we don't know it all and are always seeking to take our own learning to the next level, we create an environment of shared discovery.

MC: The way I hear you talk about your work brings to mind Vygotsky's idea about 'socially constructed knowledge,' which I think comes easier to those who have a cultural framework of 'we' thinking rather than 'me.' New understandings emerge when you draw on each other's perspectives.

SC: Many people from my culture tend to think of 'me' before 'we.' However, in many Latina cultures, 'we' comes before 'me.' My tendency to think in terms of 'we' is unusual in my culture and I see this trait in myself as one of the main reasons why Guille and I work so well together.

GL: You might be more 'we' than many people from your culture, but I also notice some ways you talk about 'me.' You talk about visiting 'my mom's house.' When I go to see my mom, I talk about going 'home to my house.'

GL and SC: In the classroom, we both view the Butterfly Room projects as 'our' projects and knowledge gained is to be shared, not kept to yourself. For example, the messes made do not have to be cleaned up by the teacher who made them. The messes the children make belong to everybody and everybody helps to clean. When a teacher gains insight into a particular behavior, she does not say, "Only I can deal with that child." She shares the insight and her plan with all the teachers.

One of the reasons we say 'we' is that people do not grow up by themselves. Someone helped you learn to eat, walk, talk, and so on. To reword Vygotsky's idea, each person is constructed in a social context.

With food, the view in Guille's culture is to bring food out of the fridge and ask the person with you, "Do you want to eat?" Guille notices many people here get their food out of the fridge and say, "I am going to eat." In my culture, we do things together and share. Part of this comes from there being more poor people and you might not know if the person next to you is hungry.

MC: Any last thoughts you want to share?

GL and SC: As a reader interested in building the type of relationship we have found to be so effective, you may ask how it is we know that what we are doing works. To answer that question, we turn to the methods we know best: observation, documentation, and reflection. Forming deep relationships with each child in our care is key. By communicating teacher to teacher, we are able to form a more complete picture of the whole child. We work to understand what each child wants, needs, and cares about. When we are able to meet the individual needs of the child in an environment where competing needs exist, we know that our relationship with each other is working.

We use the same methods to grow ourselves as we do to grow our children: observation and reflection. Observation is the base from which all our future work grows:

- When we see that all the areas and materials are being used consistently and productively by the children, we know that the environment we have created is working.
- When we see the children using their burgeoning social and emotional skills to build and maintain relationships, we know that we are modeling effective communication skills.
- When we see the children caring for each other and demonstrating empathy towards the emotions of others, we know that we have created an environment that nurtures and respects.

MC: Now those are unmistakable 'measurable outcomes'!

References

Derman-Sparks, L., & Edwards, J. O. (2010). Anti-bias education for young children and ourselves. Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.

Pelo, A., & Davidson, F. (2002). *That's not fair: A teacher's guide to activism with young children.* St. Paul, MN: Redleaf Press.

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Teamwork to Support a Dual-Language Learner

by Sadie Cunningham and Guille Lopez

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To transition a child into our room from his previous group, his primary lead teacher showed us his portfolio and described his strengths and goals. She also explained where he was with his dual-language development and her difficulty in forming a relationship with his parents, partially because of the language barrier. She was looking forward to this dual-language learner being in our classroom since Guille is a native Spanish speaker, just as his parents are.

As this 2 ½-year-old boy entered our classroom, we quickly made the same observations as his previous teachers. He was developmentally ready for our classroom, with an exuberance for brief, direct social interaction and lots of parallel play. When excited about a friend or a toy, he was impulsive, as many two-year-olds are. He had long periods of calm, engaged play with sensory activities, mainly the water table. He became frustrated with the language barrier when he knew what he was trying to communicate, but didn't have the English to be understood.

One of our assistant teachers often became reactive when this child had loud or physical outbursts from his frustration with communication. She asked Sadie why the boy had been transitioned into our classroom before a girl who was the same age and "had *way* more words." We explained how dual-language learners will often understand many words in both languages before they begin speaking. We gave her an example of another child she knew who was a year older, to show her that child's timeline of language acquisition. After this conversation about understanding the child's learning process and our efforts to make sure the boy received the coaching he needed, she was able to become part of his coaching team.

This boy continues to demonstrate confidence every day. Because we were immediately able to establish a connection with his previous teacher and his family, he had a smooth transition into our classroom. He is continuing to make friends and is an inquisitive explorer with an infectious smile!