Understanding and Supporting Children Just as They Are

Rethinking Introvert/Extrovert Characteristics

by Liane Nakano

A few years ago, James, a four-year-old new to our cooperative school in Seattle, hesitantly entered the classroom. Clutching the back of his father's shirt, he hid in the shadow of his dad, not wanting to be noticed. After a few minutes of transition, he was able to say goodbye but spent most of the morning under the table—what seemed to be his self-designated safe spot from peer and adult interactions.

Preschool wasn't a new experience for James. He had previously been at a school his older sister attended, which the family had loved. This school was bigger with more students and a larger class size than ours. After giving it a try, they decided to find a place that would feel more comfortable and thus manageable for James. They heard about our school from a neighbor and decided to enroll due to our small class size of nine students and home-like environment.

From the safety of his perch under the large drawing table, James observed and noticed all the happenings in the classroom—families coming and going, children playing with manipulatives and reading books, adults moving about the room guiding and helping as needed. He paid close attention to adult and child interactions. James was able to transition from one activity to another throughout the course of the day, emerging from the comfort of his spot under the table as needed for snack, meeting time, studio, outside time and lunch. James didn't say much the first few days and avoided eye contact—especially if an adult asked him a question.

Born and raised in Hawaii, Nakano has been in the field of early childhood education for over 20 years. Her work with 2 – 5 year olds began at The Early School in Honolulu, Hawaii before moving to Seattle, Washington. She is currently a teacher and parent educator at The Willa Playschool as well as a substitute (and former educator in the Sunlight Room) at Hilltop Children's Center. Nakano enjoys going on walks, playing the piano and 'ukulele and picking berries in the summertime.

As educators, we come across many "Jameses" in our classrooms. Often families of these children express their concerns. "Why is my child an introvert?" "Does being an introvert mean a lack of social skills?" "Is my child bored or unmotivated?" "Will my child make friends and succeed in school?"

As educators we must find ways to assure families that their children will be supported and understood by both adults and peers in the classroom and will succeed to their fullest potentials. But how do we do this? What goals and/or ideals do we need to share with families? How do we look beyond stereotypical labels (e.g. introverts/extroverts) as a means to measure success and assess development?

I believe the first goal is to see children just as they are and meet them where they are in their spectrum of development.

One way to achieve this goal is to understand the concept of The Image of the Child (Malaguzzi, 1994). How we view children guides our observations and interactions and thus serves as a foundation for the relationships we form with each child in the classroom. In building a strong image, we are able to see children as competent, strong, vibrant individuals—full of wonder and capable of framing their own learning.

In the story of James, we used this lens (Image of the Child) as a tool to understand, support and honor the ways he chose to be in the classroom as a new student. We also made sure parents helping in the classroom, and especially his

peers, were aware of and understood this image of James rather than seeing him through the lens of a label such as introvert, quiet, shy or withdrawn.

An example of how this played out in the classroom could be seen during James's first painting activity at studio time. We set out thick watercolor papers and watercolor ice cubes on the table. One by one, children began to experiment by feeling the ice cubes with their hands and moving them on the paper to discover the designs they made. James sat at his spot and briefly glanced at his peers—taking note of how they used the materials. He then looked at his green ice cube as it sat on his paper. He observed with his eyes for several minutes, with serious intent and purpose—squinting and turning his head to see different sides. Several peers took notice of James and asked questions:

Child: "Why is James not painting?'

Teacher: "James is painting."

Child: "But he's not touching the ice, like this—see?"

Teacher: "You are noticing James is looking at the paint cube with his eyes and not using his hands like some of the children. There are many styles of painting and this is how James is painting today. "

James listened carefully to our conversation with caution and weariness, ready to retreat to his safe spot under the table if needed. But he didn't. He continued to paint with his eyes for at least ten more minutes, and then explored in other styles (using his fingers and hands) during the remaining of studio time. Our strong image of James as competent and full of wonder strengthened his relationships with the environment, peers and adults, which resulted in a positive experience for him at studio time.

Another way to achieve the goal of understanding and supporting children just as they are is to embrace family culture as a lens to rethink labels and stereotypes. Family culture could include many facets—ethnicity, socio-economic status, life experiences, family make-up, language(s) spoken, and so on.

Kaira, a four-year old in our classroom, was excited to be at school every day. She seemed confident and moved about the classroom freely. Kaira enjoyed playing cooperatively with peers and spent most of her time engaging in pretend or dramatic play. In large group situations (meeting time, at the snack/lunch table), Kaira paid close attention to conversations and questions but chose not to participate in discussions. She rarely raised her hand to ask a question, shrugged her shoulders or replied, "I don't know" when asked a question, and she was shy and quiet and felt uncomfortable making eye contact, especially with adults. Several parents wondered with concern why Kaira was introverted and wanted to figure out ways to help her with large group dynamics.

It is common for educators and adults alike to place children into categories based on visible characteristics as ways to assess development. These categories are oftentimes defined by what ideals are valued by the dominant culture.

In the case of introverts/extroverts, if the dominant culture values being exuberant and outgoing, seeks attention and praise and emphasizes individual achievements, then having extrovert characteristics would be favorable over being quiet, shy and not wanting any attention to oneself. Would this mean introverts are lacking in social skills and extroverts have well developed social skills? Would using the lens of embracing family culture change this perspective?

In Kaira's story it did. Many cultures view the characteristics of being quiet and shy as a sign of respect. Eye to eye contact with someone older may be considered rude. In collective cultures, the emphasis is often group over self and thus individual achievement is less favorable. Without using this lens of family culture, Kaira's behaviors in large groups could be misinterpreted and her skills underestimated by teachers, adults and peers (Ramsey, 1998).

By engaging in open conversations with Kaira's parents and scheduling home visits, we were able to learn what cultural aspects are important to their family and how those aspects may resurface in the classroom. With this information, we were also able to figure out strategies to help her express her wants and needs, ideas and thoughts in a large group context. Using prompts (which served as a means of giving permission and reassurance to speak out in large groups) and having conversations in smaller group settings seemed to help Kaira feel comfortable and accepted. These strategies also helped to bridge the gap of cultural discontinuity (p. 65).

In recent articles and books, there seems to be a trend of describing how classrooms are becoming more diverse over time. But is this really true—are classrooms more diverse

Photo submitted by by Liane Nakano

today or have they always been diverse? Are we just now gaining awareness of the benefits of using multiple lenses to view behavior?

As educators, the challenge has been put upon us: to create a classroom culture of understanding and acceptance of all and move beyond labels and stereotypes that limit and/or define children and their behaviors. By weaving elements of The Image of the Child and using family culture as a lens into our pedagogy, we are able to have a better understanding of each child and family in our classrooms and thus support and honor them just as they are.

We must accept this challenge... now.

References

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