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Family
Celebrations



Celebrating Children's Everyday Lives

Everyday Rituals, Extraordinary Learning: Spontaneous Celebrations Across Cultures

Rituales cotidianos, aprendizaje extraordinario: Celebraciones espontáneas a través de los grupos culturales

Rituals in the Home: The Role of Family Celebrations in Childhood Socialization and Development

Inclusive Family Celebrations and Classroom Connections

Celebrating Children's Work: Engaging Families through Culturally Responsive Preschool Projects

SECA

**Southern
Early Childhood
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Inclusive Family Celebrations and Classroom Connections

Lindsey L. Wilson and Josh Thompson



Once upon a time, a long time ago, in a small town not far from here on the Texas Gulf coast, a six-year-old child loved going to school. Here are some of their stories.

The Invitations: All Means All

Gilbert was so excited! He ran into the classroom, telling his First-Grade teacher all about the invitations in his brown paper bag. "They are for everyone. They're invited over to my house for my birthday party!" Mrs. Bowman smiled at his excitement. "I will keep them here on my desk until the end of the day, and then you can pass them out." The class giggled, boys and girls alike, because they already knew. Gilbert had been talking about it all week.

At the end of the day, Gilbert took the bag from Mrs. Bowman and started to hand out invitations, reading each name out loud: "Mary Kaye, Tommy, Shelley, Eddie, Stone, . . ." until he emptied the bag, but there were still two children left. "Mrs. Bowman, there's some missing? I know I wrote an invitation for

everybody in the class? Oh no, where did I lose the last two, 'Alejandro' and 'Jazmyn' invitations are missing?" "Well, I thought I should talk to your family about the rest of the invites to be sure they meant to include all of your classmates," responded Mrs. Bowman. It was 1961 in the Deep South of the U.S., and the school had only just been integrated. While Mrs. Bowman understood the new laws regarding schools, she didn't think that meant to integrate social events. "But all means all, Mrs. Bowman," cried Gilbert, near tears.

Mrs. Bowman looked at Gilbert, one of her favorites, even though she hadn't quite figured out how to teach this

left-handed child how to write yet. "What are you saying, child, 'all means all'?" "Well, like you taught us when we say our prayer and the pledge, 'wid liberty and juffice for all.'" Gilbert had developed quite a lisp with three front teeth missing. "Oh, there they are! You found them for me! Thanks, Mrs. Bowman!" as he picked up the last two invitations off her desk. Even though his handwriting was poor, his reading was emerging strong. And just like that, all the invitations were sent out, families were notified. A party at Gilbert's house was coming up soon. All were invited.

Classroom Connections: All Means All

This experience wasn't a one-time event. It was part of Gilbert's and each one of his classmates' lifelong lessons. Celebrations, shared experiences, and traditions are opportunities to practice understanding, belonging, empathy and inclusion. "ALL MEANS ALL" wasn't just a simple rule for one event or day; it was a value that Gilbert's family held dear to them and that transferred into his experience in the classroom. Gilbert had interpreted Mrs. Bowman's teaching of "liberty and justice FOR ALL" from the perspective and world view

of his own home life. While Mrs. Bowman remained committed to the integration of the classroom, it was clear that an ongoing commitment to building an inclusive classroom—one that recognized, respected, and celebrated every family's unique traditions was still under construction.

One Family's Reaction: A Child's Reckoning

All the invitations were sent out, but not all families were notified immediately. Alejandro was confused about what happened that day at Mrs. Bowman's desk. He had watched Gilbert hand out invitations, and each child received theirs with excitement. But he had been excluded, again, even though, down in his heart, he knew that his friend Gilbert wanted him to come. Why wasn't there an invitation for him when Gilbert said there was, and then why had Mrs. Bowman said something about maybe the family didn't want ALL of the children to come over to their house? Mrs. Bowman had looked over at Alejandro as she kind of emphasized the word "ALL." So many questions for a kid to wonder about.

Ah, he knew what to do. When he got home, Alejandro typically first spent time in the kitchen with his momma as she prepared the evening meal. There he talked up a lightning streak of words, telling his momma and his baby sister all about school that day, though at home all his daily lived experiences were expressed in his native Spanish language. Except not today. Yes, he did stop by in the kitchen to put his lunch box down, and yes, he did a swirl around the room with his baby sister. "¡Baila, más baile!" [Dance, more dancing!], she cried for more dancing as he scurried out to the workshop where he knew he would find his grandfather.

"¡Hola, hijo! ¿Que tal? How is my scholar today? Read any good books? Solve many great problems? Play with your friends today?" Grandfather always knew what was really going on in his young grandson's life.

"Abuelo, yes, it was a good day at school. But then, at the end, something strange happened, or maybe not so strange, because it seems like I've seen it happen before. Remember that time at the park, where the carousel man gave the white boy many turns, but then when you paid for me, I only went around two times? The way that man looked at me, yeah, it was something like that." He explained how Mrs. Bowman had looked at him when she emphasized the word "ALL".

Abuelo pulled his beloved grandson close and asked him, "So what do you want to do about it? Now you've seen how some people act, and you can never truly know how they really feel when they do something like that. But you can always choose how you want to react. So, what do you want to do?"

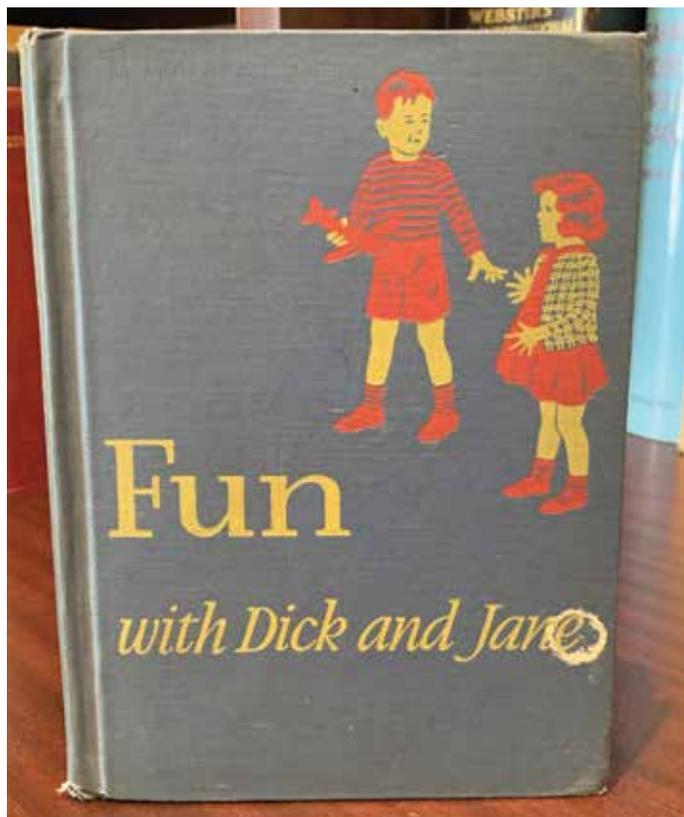
"I want to go to Gilbert's party. I know how he really feels because I see it in how he acts everyday, always kind, and kinda goofy." Alejandro pulled out the invitation from his pocket and ran to tell his momma about going to Gilbert's house.

Classroom Connections: A Teacher's Reaction

Throughout those next few weeks of school, Mrs. Bowman continued with her same old usual routines, which included numerous opportunities for families to participate: send a favorite object from home to school, include a note explaining special foods included in the children's lunches, and, of course, sign the reading log and homework checklist. The most ubiquitous curriculum of the mid-twentieth century was the Dick and Jane series (see **Figure 1**) published by Scott Foresman. Mrs. Bowman was experienced, confident in using these stories, not just to teach reading, but to exemplify the hegemony of Americana as white, middle class families, cis-gendered intact marriages with 2.3 children. Dick and Jane had a father working outside the home and a mother working in the home (Moran, 2013). These basal readers utilized the "Look Say" method developed in the 1930s by William Scott Gray, the Dean of Education at The University of Chicago, along with William H. Elson and Zerna Sharp. Illustrator Eleanor B. Campbell did most of the early illustrations (Tandy, 2003). The changes ahead for Mrs. Bowman in the 1960s included a complete revision of everything she knew about teaching children how to read (Beston, 2006), plus everything she knew about teaching children how to be learners in modern America. To truly transform, she would have to learn to help children become World Citizens in a new historic episteme (Foucault, 1966).

Mrs. Bowman would need help to introduce simple yet impactful lessons that linked the personal stories of her students to the classroom environment. She didn't yet know how to foster inclusivity and create space for families to be partners in the learning process or connect the dots between their family traditions and their classroom experiences.

Figure 1. Dick and Jane, basal reading series of the mid-twentieth century, published by Scott Foresman.



RSVP

“Good morning, Mrs. Rogers.” Mr. Gomez had seen Gilbert’s mom come into the library while he was cleaning. Working at the same school where his son was in First Grade was complicated, but more often a blessing than a problem.

“Hello,” Mrs. Rogers answered. “You are Mr. Gomez, right?” She had seen him around the school, as she had children in different grades here, and often stopped by the library to pick up books for them. She was looking that day for a pirate book for Gilbert’s birthday, a new interest of her emergent reader. She had selected Robert Louis Stevenson’s *A Child’s Garden of Verses* (1885) and bookmarked “Pirate Story” and “The Land of Counterpane.”

“Yes, I have a son in the same class as your son, Gilbert, Mrs. Bowman’s First Grade. Alejandro brought home this invitation to your son’s birthday party, thank you for including him.”

“Certainly,” Mrs. Rogers replied. “Gilbert was so excited to invite all his friends.”

“I wonder, if it would be okay with you, may I offer to bring Gilbert and Alejandro over to your house to the party after school? I wouldn’t want to disrupt your plans, but it would mean a lot for my son to be hospitable to his friend and offer him this favor.”

Classroom Connections: Family Communications

Families are raising their children, together, in a community. Yes, they identify school as a place for education, but there is so much more there, so much more possibility waiting in the wings. Mrs. Bowman had experience promoting community among the families through sharing school events and introducing families to one another. As neighborhood schools swell with increasing numbers of students from diverse ethnicities, languages, and cultures, the role of the school as a community bridge builder grows ever more important. Curious educators can utilize resources like the National Association for the Education of Young Children 2019 book *Advancing Equity & Embracing Diversity in Early Childhood Education: Elevating Voices & Actions* (Alanís et al., 2019), or search recent articles in their online repository on diversity (see www.naeyc.org/resources/topics/diversity). Many authors devote considerable ink to diversity and equity. Louise Derman-Sparks, Debbie LeeKeenan, and John Nimmo collaborate on revising and updating work that has long been a staple in diversity education (2023). Their website (www.antibiasleadersece.com) guides early childhood care and education leaders as we work on our own transformative education. Resources like these can help us process the shifts that someone like Mrs. Bowman must have had to navigate on her own, if at all.

With many children having siblings in the school, it is sometimes helpful if families hear about school events and community activities that they could choose to join. When some families take initiative, say to start a fishing club or a nature center, community-mind-

ed teachers can let other families know about these opportunities and remind them of the value to their child’s education through such community bonding experiences. The library is often such a space, where all come to learn and grow.

Back to Mrs. Bowman’s First-Grade class, she helped in her own way when Mr. Gomez’ father-in-law, Gilbert’s Abuelo, was giving a lecture on Mayan art and architecture to be presented to school and community members in the school library. He had majored in Anthropology years ago as an undergraduate student at Tecnológico de Monterrey, in Nuevo Leon, Mexico. Mrs. Bowman helped get the Spanish translation of the event announcement copied and disseminated throughout the school. That was a step, a truly big one for her in the 1960s. Some administrators insisted on English only at their school (some even into this millennium), but there was Mrs. Bowman, a pioneer, because a child had challenged her to think about liberty and justice for all in an inclusive way.

A Truck Ride

On the day of his birthday party, Gilbert dressed up, spic and span. He giggled all through morning prayers and pledge. He almost sang during reading lessons, and laughed out loud all during lunch and playground. Right in the middle of afternoon math class, his favorite, the classroom loudspeaker crackled, “Mrs. Bowman?” It was the school secretary. “Yes?” Mrs. Bowman answered. “Gilbert Rogers will go home with Alejandro Gomez today. His mother just stopped by to let me know.” “Thank you,” answered Mrs. Bowman. The class lit up with laughter. It was going to be a great party.

At dismissal, Gilbert didn’t get in the bus line, but moved over to the carpool line, to stand with Alejandro. Together, they walked out to where the carpool riders were getting in cars. Across the way, bus riders were lined up for their different bus routes.

“Gilbert, get over here. Our bus is number 10.” His big sister, Mary Beth, didn’t know about the announcement over the loudspeaker, or the special ride to his birthday party.

Together, Alejandro and Gilbert climbed up into Mr. Gomez’ truck. It was an older model, a classic almost, painted with a shiny green custom paint, not like usual car colors. The inside was just as fancy, with custom seat covers, and nice decorations on the dashboard. Brighter still was the joy and delight on Mr. Gomez’ face. He sure was proud of his truck. But even brighter was his delight in seeing his boy, and meeting his child’s friend.

Classroom Connections: Celebrations Come in All Colors

Everyone has a birthday. Some families celebrate each birthday with family rituals and traditions, others use the lunar calendar to mark time: everyone begins a new year on this earth at the start of the new lunar year, so they ‘become’ a year older, all together. Many people light candles, one per year. Some save up for big days like ‘Quincineras’ for fifteen-year olds, or ‘Golden Birthdays’ when



their age matches the date of their birth. One traditional ‘Happy Birthday’ tune, the most popular song around the world, actually (Brauneis, 2008), was written by two American sisters, Mildred Jane Hill (1859-1916) and Patty Smith Hill (1868-1946) who were active progressive educators, honored for their work at the Louisville (KY) Experimental Kindergarten School (Brauneis, 2008). Mildred composed the tune, and Patty wrote the lyrics, “Good Morning to All.” Patty Smith Hill later went on to found the National Association for Nursery Education in 1926, which became the National Association for the Education of Young Children in 1964. Whoever wrote the lyrics “Happy Birthday” is unclear, though some credit Preston Orem and Mrs. R. R. Forman with coining the text. A different song within a whole different racial and cultural context came out in 1981, a pop hit by Stevie Wonder. It has become popular among some African American communities, even a standard as a celebration song for birthdays.

Mrs. Bowman continued to learn about various rituals, routines, and traditions in the homes and families of these children. Varia-

tions in birthday celebrations was just the beginning. She learned more about how Muslim students kept their Sabbath typically on Fridays by paying attention to the Adhan, which is the call to prayer, and the Aqiqah, a ceremony celebrating a child’s birth. Mrs. Bowman connected with Alejandro’s Abuelo and others to create a Children’s Sabbath Celebration (Children’s Defense Fund, n.d.) to recognize the commonality of their faith experience through celebrating the diversity of faith expressions.

Developmentally Appropriate Practice: All Means All

Change is inevitable, growth is optional. – John C. Maxwell

Mrs. Bowman was confronted by a change in the system. How she responded to that change created growth opportunities for her, and benefited the children of her classroom, their families, and the larger community.

The current iteration of *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children from Birth Through Age 8*, has changed over four decades, as has the field of early childhood education (Thompson & Stanković-Ramirez, 2021). The eyes of the profession have widened to a more intentional inclusion of all, a welcoming of diversity that expands the community. Watching an experienced teacher like Mrs. Bowman navigate changes in her well-worn habits and biases reveals a transformational view of teaching – and not just for the children.

The three core considerations of developmentally appropriate practice (NAEYC 2022) center on the child as an individual, as a developing being, and as a member of a family, culture, language, and class (See **Table 1**). Acknowledging, understanding, and celebrating the variety of ways of being that children develop opens up a world of opportunities for teachers to leverage their differences as lessons to learn and grow.

Right on page 10 of the latest DAP Position statement (2020) is a simple line: “the notion of “stages” of development has limited utility; a more helpful concept may be to think of waves of development that allow for considerable overlap without rigid boundaries.” This perspective has led researchers into a multi-national, interdisciplinary collaboration project that investigates a shift in how teachers describe typical child development. Many are moving from the traditional “ages and stages” framework

to a more dynamic concept of “waves of development.” This is known as “Developmental Cascades” within the field of Developmental Psychology. A preliminary review of common education journals revealed no recent references to this concept (Walker, et al., 2025).

Among the nine principles of DAP, a number of them resonate with a goal of sustaining respect and honor for children

Table 1. Three Core Considerations of Developmentally Appropriate Practice (NAEYC, 2022)

Three Core Considerations of Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP)	
1. Commonality	- current research and understandings of processes of child development and learning that apply to all children, including the understanding that all development and learning occur within specific social, cultural, linguistic, and historical contexts
2. Individuality	- the characteristics and experiences unique to each child, within the context of their family and community, that have implications for how best to support their development and learning
3. Context	- everything discernible about the social and cultural contexts for each child, each educator, and the program as a whole

and their families, their ways of knowing, their communities of practice regarding celebrations and traditions (**Table 2**). Together with Mrs. Bowman, we can call on the children to lead us, to show us the way to welcome all, ‘wid library and juftice’, because “All Means All.”

Table 2. Nine Principles of Developmentally Appropriate Practice (NAEYC, 2022).

Nine Principles of Developmentally Appropriate Practice

1. Development processes reflect an interplay between biology and environment.
2. Domains of development both support and are supported by the others.
3. Play promotes joyful learning.
4. Variations due to cultural contexts, experiences, and individual differences matter.
5. Children are active learners.
6. Children’s motivation to learn is increased when their learning environment fosters their sense of belonging, purpose, and agency.
7. Children learn in an integrated fashion that cuts across academic disciplines or subject areas.
8. Development and learning advance when children are challenged to achieve at a level just beyond their current mastery.
9. Technology and interactive media can be valuable tools for supporting children’s development and learning.

A Child’s Birthday Party

All this happened a long time ago, and this storyteller doesn’t remember anything else about that 7-year-old birthday party. But that time he got to ride home in Alejandro Gomez’ daddy’s truck is something he will never forget. And now you know the story, too.

Dr. Lindsey Wilson is an Early Childhood Specialist, licensed counselor, and published author with 14 years of experience of centering inclusive practices in early education. Her research centers on fathers of color, and she leads community-rooted strategies addressing race and class. She has trained 1,000+ professionals and served in Early Head Start leadership.

Dr. Josh Thompson is Professor of Early Childhood at East Texas A&M University, where he researches DAP, developmental cascades, playful learning, men in education, and equity. His wife and he grandparent 13, newborn to teenagers. His passion is to promote and protect childlike wonder and love of learning through play.

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