Promoting a Sense of Identity
(TK – 6th Grade)

How Teachers Can Work with Families to Promote Children's Proud Sense of Identity, Connection to Home Culture and Heritage, Plus Respect for Diversity

At the heart of SEAL is the understanding that children learn and develop best where they feel safe, a sense of belonging, and that they are part of a caring community that embraces who they are and believes in them. Building a strong sense of self-identity and developing skills for social interaction and engaging respectfully with others are major goals of SEAL schooling. A safe, affirming classroom helps children understand and respect differences, learn vocabulary for social interaction, and value diversity. And, a classroom in which children see themselves and their families reflected builds a sense of pride and the conviction that "I belong here."

School, for young children, is one of the first communities they confront outside of the family and home – and school experiences are very influential in developing a child's sense of how they can expect to be treated and how they treat others in the world.

A major developmental task for young children is to construct a healthy, strong sense of identity, and to make sense of and develop skills to respond openly and positively to the diversity of human experience that they confront in the world of school. Children's success in achieving these developmental tasks is strongly impacted by the degree to which teachers understand the powerful role of school's curriculum (overt and hidden) in communicating messages of visibility/invisibility, normal/not normal, higher and lower status, superiority/inferiority.

For those whose home experiences, cultures, languages differ from the norms and expectations at school and from other children, the discontinuity has potential to either become a painful lesson in invisibility and shame or it can become an opening for positive recognition of human diversity and acquisition of skills to bridge across differences.

All children should have a chance to thrive and succeed in school. But what happens when children receive messages about themselves of disapproval or dislike for "people like you"? What happens when children do not see themselves or their families reflected and respected in a community, in a school, in the classroom or the curriculum? How do children make sense of information - accurate or biased - about people who are different from themselves?

Understanding how young children construct their personal and social identities, how they think about differences and absorb messages about prejudice and social advantage is key to building a learning environment and curriculum in which all children can thrive.

SEAL's World in the Classroom focus encompasses helping children make sense of those dynamics, respond healthily to that world of messages, develop proud and confident self-identities and feel pride about their families, respect human differences, recognize bias and

speak up for what is right. Children need tools to navigate the complex issues of identity, diversity prejudice and power in their daily lives. For the World in the Classroom, we focus on the skills, dispositions and habits that students need to live in a diverse and equitable world: a sense of fairness, skills to respond to seeing people treated unfairly and to inequities, empathy, compassion, and acceptance.

In a SEAL classroom, children are able to bring who they are and feel a sense of safety, belonging and acceptance. This makes learning more possible and powerful. Their prior experiences, cultures and life beyond the classroom become a foundation for new knowledge as well as a contribution to the class community's evolving understanding of the world. This requires that teachers use strategies to invite children to talk about their lives and bring their experiences into the classroom as part of developing understanding about the world - and strategies to ensure that their experiences are greeted with acceptance and respect. Children's lives have a place in the SEAL curriculum and in the physical environment of the classroom. Books are selected that mirror the cultures, family structures, economic class and experiences of the children.

For young children, understanding that there are diverse experiences and cultures in the world, that there are people who do things differently from themselves and their families is important. They have to think about how people are the same and how they are different - where there are commonalities and variations. Talking about each other's experiences and about what is the same and what is different occurs regularly in a SEAL classroom. Literature provides windows into experiences and worlds beyond their own. Curriculum is designed to ensure positive and authentic exposure to experiences that broaden children's understanding of human experience. The SEAL classroom focuses on building the social and academic tools and skills needed for living in a diverse world.

While much of this happens in and through the curriculum, there are also strategies used in SEAL classrooms that specifically highlight these issues, and that create opportunities for students to reflect upon themselves, express themselves, and bring their lives, experiences and beings into the classroom. They are avenues of self-representation and reflection, such as Self-portraits, Family Portraits, writing assignments that invite students to share their views of themselves.

Partnerships between families and teachers are crucial to ensuring that children are able to develop a strong and proud sense of identity, and to relate respectfully to people different from themselves. Teachers need accurate information about families - what they value, how they do things, their culture, their heritage, their family structures. This only occurs through dialogue and sharing. It is up to parents to educate teachers and be clear with teachers about who they are and what they consider respectful and "real" representations of their culture. Parents are essential resources for sharing with the other children and families in a classroom community - and for modeling respect, interest and open-ness to the other families who are different from them.

What You Should See in a SEAL Classroom

- Pictures, posters, books and realia that accurately and respectfully reflect children's culture, family structure, language and experience

- Pictures, posters, books and realia that accurately and respectfully introduce children to cultures, languages and experiences other than their own

- Explicit teaching of the language for expressing feelings, talking about identity, supported by opportunities to problem solve and interact respectfully with peers

- Facilitated discussions that focus on children's concerns, address social dynamics, and create forums for talking

- Explicit emphasis on the value of bilingualism and diversity

What Parents Can Do

- Offer information to the teacher about your family, your heritage, your culture, family structure and language - so she can be equipped to support your child to bring experiences into the classroom. Alert her in particular to things that are "different" from the majority of children in the class or school. And always speak up if you feel any aspect of your family's group identity is being represented in ways that are objectionable.

- Share songs, stories, and other things from your culture and heritage that can be used in the curriculum

- Recognize that your child is learning about people whose experiences, cultures, languages, religions, racial background and heritage are different from yours - and support your child in developing interest and respect for those differences. (For ideas, see the standards set by the Perspectives for a Diverse America)

- No one can help your child develop a strong understanding of their culture and identity, or a sense of pride about who they and their family are as well as you can. Talk to your children about what matters to you, your values, your religion, your culture, your family and your experience.

- Model for your child being open, interested and respectful of people whose cultures, religions, languages, family structures and ways of doing things are different from your family.

- Share books with your child about people whose experiences are like yours and your families. Share books about people whose lives are quite different from yours. Talk about issues of similarity and difference.