Between Teacher & Parent

Helping the child whose culture and background differs from her classroom peers’
by Adele M. Brodkin, 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. Brodkin’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

Adele M. Brodkin, Ph.D., is a psychologist, consultant, and author of many books, including Fresh Approaches to Working With Problematic Behavior. In addition, she has written and produced award-winning educational videos.