

Findings

An Invitation to the Library

It was in May that we decided to open up the enrollment for the Chula Vista Public Library's first ever Kindergarten Boot Camp. Being a completely new program, my colleague Jessie and I had a million and one decisions to make, and fast. When would we start this program? Where will we set up? What will the structure of the program look like? How will families participate and register? How will we reach out to families that will have a child transitioning to kindergarten? It seemed that with each question we asked, there were ten more questions that we needed to answer. As we sat down to plan, we realized that our first priority to starting this program was finding participants.

Finding Families Through Outreach

In May, we created our first advertisement for Kindergarten Boot Camp (see [Appendix L](#)). We placed an ad on our library website and the library events calendar that is printed monthly and distributed from each of the three library branches. We still didn't have all of the details worked out, but we wanted to start spreading the word about this new program. Boot Camp was not going to start for another month, but we knew that many of the families that had attended library story times in the spring had children that were going to transition to kindergarten. These parents were eagerly seeking out programs for their children to attend during the summer. During the same time that many of our "regular" library users were seeking out programs, many of the local schools were holding parent orientation meetings for incoming kindergarten families. My colleagues and I were invited to two local schools to share information about the events and programs that were going to take place at the Chula Vista Public Library. Since we were meeting many families that were going to have a child begin kindergarten in the 2013-14 school year, we made extra efforts to highlight Kindergarten Boot Camp. To simplify our registration process, we allowed interested parents to enroll their children on the spot.

Our final outreach effort was made at the local recreation center's Tiny Tot program. I had learned from the center director that many of the students were "graduating" from Tiny Tots and they would be starting kindergarten. Again, this was an audience with potential participants, so I dropped off flyers and shared information with the parents as they were picking up their children. During these outreach sessions, we spoke to several families. Parents asked details about the program. They wanted to know what their kids would be doing. We let them know that at the program, their children would be able to experience what a kindergarten classroom might feel like. They would be practicing using classroom materials such as pencils, crayons, scissors and glue. We explained that we wanted the children to basically be able to "practice kindergarten." This explanation was enough for all of the parents that signed up. Aside from signing up for Kindergarten Boot Camp, parents were eager to sign up for library cards, and picked up information about the events that were scheduled during our annual Summer Reading Program. Word was getting out. Parents were starting to call, and parents at our outreach sessions were signing up.

Our final registration numbers showed the following:

- 81 families registered their children in Kindergarten Boot Camp.
- 63 children/ families actually participated. Of these participants, 47 students attended for 1 week, 9 students attended for 2 weeks and 5 students attended for three weeks.
- About 75% (47 students) of the participants were seeking out programs to attend during the summer.
- About 25% (16 students) of the participants were families that registered through our outreach efforts.

A Look at Participants Profile

In seeking to better understand our families, I asked parents to share their ethnicity, level of education, language primarily spoken at home and the typical child care that the child has had from ages 2.5 to 5. This data was only gathered on families that actually participated in the program. From this data, I wondered if a pattern would emerge of the “typical” user of this program. What would the breakdown of our users look like? Since the southern part of Chula Vista has a large Hispanic population, would we be working with a large number of Hispanic children? Were most of the children attending preschool, or being taken care of by a family member?

Of the 63 program participants, 57 parents (98% mothers) responded to this pre-survey. The breakdown of ethnicity of our participants was very similar to that of the City of Chula Vista as a whole. Table 3 helps to illustrate the ethnicity of the program participants as compared to the population in the City of Chula Vista. Hispanic, Asian and Black families were represented almost identically when compared to the population of Chula Vista. White families were slightly underrepresented (in comparison to citywide data).

Ethnicity of Participants Compared to City of Chula Vista		
	Program Participants	City of Chula Vista
Hispanic	58%	58%
White	11%	21%
Asian	16%	14%
Black	4%	4%
Prefer not to answer	6%	0%
Mixed/Other	5%	3%

Table 3: Ethnicity of Participants Compared to City of Chula Vista

In working at the library and at schools in the community I wasn't surprised by the breakdown in ethnicity of our participants. On the other hand, in looking at the education level of mothers (1 father), I was surprised at what the data revealed. As shown in Figure 2, I found that over 56% of the parents had completed their college degree, and of these 56%, over 18% of parents held a Graduate Degrees. Only 2% of the parents did not complete high school, and 21% of parents had completed high school, but did not attend college. The number of parents that had completed college is significantly higher than the population as a whole in Chula Vista. The CSAP (2012) reported that 82% of residents over the age of 25 graduated from high school, and 26% of residents over the age of 25 hold a bachelor's degree or higher.

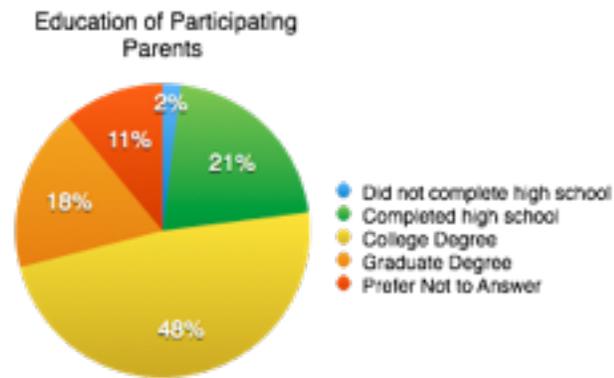


Figure 2: Education of participating parents

The final two pieces of background information that I was curious about were the language primarily spoken by the parent and child, and the child's primary type of child care for the ages of 2.5-5. The data revealed that about 75% of our families spoke English (of these 21% spoke both English and another language, primarily Spanish). The other 25% primarily spoke Spanish. In comparison, the population of Chula Vista has about 89% of people speaking English (50% speak English and one other language) and only 11% speaking another language. We were working with a significant number of parents and students where English was not their first language. The final piece of background data revealed that over 68% of the children participating in Kindergarten Boot Camp had been cared for primarily by their parent during their pre-school years. Of the 27% of the participants that had been cared for in a licensed care setting (home or center based), only 21% of these children attended for more than 20 hours per week.

In reviewing the information provided by the parents, I was beginning to gather an understanding of the families that we would be working with. The two data pieces that strike me are the large number of children that were cared for primarily by their parent and the high level education of the parents (mothers) that were going to participate. Were these families that had foregone working to care for their child? Was access to childcare not an option for these families? Since signing up and committing to bring their children takes a concerted effort on the parents behalf, should I be surprised by the high level of education of the parents? Though not surprising from my experience in the community, it is important to recognize and take thoughtful consideration that 21% of our families did not speak English.

A Deeper Understanding: Family Profiles

Before looking at background data, I had placed the participants in two separate categories: those who were already utilizing the library for resources (books, information, programs, etc.) and those who we were able to introduce library services to through our outreach. In further analyzing the background data, I soon began to realize that Kindergarten Boot Camp was drawing upon a variety of families with unique experiences and needs.

Looking at the group as a whole was informing me about the large picture, but by seeking to understand individual profiles, I began to get an even deeper sense of the families. The following individual profiles highlight the diversity among the families that participated. For example, Lyndie is Hispanic, speaks Spanish, and has been cared for by her mother who did not complete high school. Riley is Asian, speaks English and Mandarin and has been in private preschool for the past two years. Sean is white, speaks English and goes to daycare for 20 hours a week and then is cared for by his mother who completed high school. These brief profiles exemplify that each of the 63 families were coming to the library with unique prior experiences, and varying needs.

In a survey given to parents on their child's first day of Kindergarten Boot Camp, we asked in an open ended question, "What concerns do you have about your child to kindergarten?" By asking this, I wanted to gain a sense of some specific needs of our families. From 39 responses, I looked for themes and grouped parent comments into five categories. Figure 3 represents the percentages of responses in each of the categories. Following, are the five themes that emerged and examples of comments grouped into that category:

Academic-

- "I am not sure if she is printing letters up to her grade level."
- "He needs to practice spelling his name and alphabet without skipping letters."
- "I hope she can learn more of her alphabet, numbers, etc."

Social/Emotional-

- "Social Skills is my area of concern."
- "He is very shy and dependent on his twin brother."
- "I feel Jayvan is prepared for the learning/educational aspect. However, I feel he is going to have a hard time in a new environment. He has been with same provider since 18 months and just recently with grandma."

Physical-

- "My concerns are him adjusting to a new environment because he is autistic. Sometimes it can be hard to focus and may have a behavior while it can be just a yell or jumping."
- "Although she is able to wipe herself after using the restroom, I worry she will have a rash from not wiping herself properly because I am not there to check. That's the only

thing that I am concerned about because I visit her preschool often and I see how she is and she shows me she is ready.”

Attitude towards learning-

- “I am concerned he will not want to try new things.”
- “That she will pay attention and stay on task.”

No concerns-

- “We have been working with her so she could be prepared for kindergarten.”
- “Very excited to see her learn. I have no concerns.”

From wanting to socialize their children and to having more opportunities to practice academic skills, parents that were signed up were eager for their child to participate. But for some of our families, there were broader implications for seeking out Kindergarten Boot Camp. Through conversations with parents during enrollment and outreach events, I was reminded of how important a public library is as a resource to the community it serves. I was also reminded of the lack of resources or access that some families face prior to starting formal education.

Maddy and Liv: Searching for “pre-school” and Social Experiences

Within a few days of our announcement about this program, a mother named Maddy came to the library to sign her daughter up for Kindergarten Boot Camp. Maddy is Hispanic and completed some college courses at a community college. She is bilingual speaking both English and Spanish. Maddy explained that she had moved out to California from Chicago over a year and a half before. She was frustrated with the child care system in California. Her eldest daughter who is 12, stayed in Chicago with her Grandparents so that she could continue at a special school that she attends for a hearing disability. Her daughter, Liv, age 4, had been on a preschool waiting list since the day they arrived in California. Her husband is in the military and with their housing allowance, their family makes more than the amount to be accepted into the state preschools. Liv had attended preschool in Chicago, but since moving here, Maddy looks for free programs that she can take Liv to, so that her daughter can socialize with other children and have structured educational experiences.

Maddy and Liv lack access to the Early Childhood Education (ECE) system. Though Maddy wants to have Liv enrolled in a preschool program, she, like many other families are not adequately supported by the ECE infrastructure. Maddy is faced with a dilemma of purchasing childcare or providing care herself. Datar (2006) points out that, “Parents who choose not to purchase market childcare may have to reduce their labor force participation and/or hours to care for their child” (p. 133). Schulman (as cited by Datar) reported that the annual cost of child care for a 4 year old in an urban setting is more than the average annual cost of public college tuition in all but one state (2005). Because of the high cost of child care, and the limited labor market, Maddy has opted to forego working until Liv begins kindergarten. With this decision, Maddy seeks support in providing Liv with enriching and stimulating activities in and around the community. In particular, she recognized that the library is one such resource for support.

Yesenia and Maya- Searching for Academic Support

When we were leaving an outreach event, a van drove up behind my colleague and I as we were packing our supplies away. A woman named Yesenia rolled down her window and asked if she could enroll her daughter, Maya, in Kindergarten Boot Camp. She told us that Maya was going to go into the first grade, but she really needed a program where she could take Maya for support. Yesenia shared that she had very limited time to help support Maya because her attention and energy is divided with two older siblings that both have autism. On a parent survey, Yesenia shared that “she didn’t have the necessary resources to help her child be successful in school.” Yesenia completed college in Mexico, and prefers to communicate in Spanish. Prior to Kindergarten, Maya was only spoken to in Spanish, which her mother explained has made the transition to kindergarten “muy difcil” (very tough).

For Maya and her family, the transition to kindergarten was difficult. Language, health condition of family members and lack of resources are a few of the hardships that made it difficult for Maya to “keep up” with her peers. Olsen, Bhattacharya and Scharf (2006) explain,

When children from such households begin attending a preschool or elementary school where teaching takes place only in English, they must adjust to a whole new social and linguistic situation. They must learn new vocabulary and new conventions of communication. As young second language learners, they will take a different developmental path than first language learners (p.18).

Aside from language, many schools “have the standardized views of the proper role of parents in schooling” (Lareau, 1987, p.73). Lareau explains, “Home-school partnerships, in which parents are involved in the cognitive development of their children, currently seem to be the dominant model” (p.74). Often times “teachers’ methods of presenting, teaching, and assessing subject matter are based on a structure that presumes parents help children at home” (p.77). For Yesenia, this is particularly difficult to comply with, due to her responsibilities in caring for her other children. This leaves Yesenia in search of programs that can benefit Maya by supporting her academic needs.

Zoe and Abby-Searching for Extracurricular and Enrichment Activities

Zoe called to sign her daughter, Abby, up for our final week of Kindergarten Boot Camp. Zoe is Asian and completed college. She found out about our program at the library when she was signing her other daughter and nieces up for a craft class over the summer. A year ago, Zoe’s husband was deployed to Kansas. Zoe firmly wants her children to continue their education here, close to extended family for support. Her eldest daughter is enrolled in a dual immersion program, the same program that Abby is currently attending. As in the case with Maddy, child care costs would exceed income if Zoe were to work, so she is the primary caretaker for her children. Zoe also cares for her two nieces while her sister is at work. To provide enrichment opportunities for all the kids in her care, Zoe spends her days loading the kids up for school and any other programs (soccer, dance, etc.) that they have signed up for. She uses library programs

heavily during school breaks since all of the children in her care can participate in one program or another. The library serves as sort of a “one stop shop,” a single location where the children in her care can all participate in enrichment activities at the same time and together (crafts, all ages shows, play on computers, pajama story times).

In conversations with Zoe, her approach in child-rearing is consistent with what Lareau (2003) defines as “Concerted Cultivation.” In this approach to child rearing Lareau explains that “parents actively foster and assess child’s talents” (p.31). Daily life is organized by “child leisure activities orchestrated by adults” as opposed to “hanging out” (p31). Lareau (2003) explains, “Concerted Cultivation entails an emphasis on children’s structured activities, language development and reasoning in the home, and active intervention in schooling” (p.32). She further explains that “from the experience of concerted cultivation, they (kids) acquire skills that could be valuable in the future when they enter the world of work” (p.4).

Gladys and Bertrum-Searching for Emotional Comfort During Transition

Gladys called to sign Bertrum up for Kindergarten Boot Camp the day after it was announced. Gladys works from home and she explained that Bertrum is her baby. He is the youngest of three children. His older sisters are in high school and college, so he is usually around adults. His older sister uses him as a guinea pig for her college courses in Child Development, and his mom says that he is her personal secretary since he helps her at home with office work (faxing, copying, stapling, etc). Gladys’ biggest concern for Bertrum before school started was separation anxiety. She worried that since he was never away from her, he might have a tough time. She wanted Bertrum to participate in this program so she could see if he would feel comfortable saying good-bye on the first day of school (and vice versa). Gladys was worried that she too, would suffer from separation anxiety since this was her “baby”.

Key Findings

Outreach efforts bring new families to the library.

If you build it they will come, but, there are some lessons that I learned during the process of recruiting families. Outreach in the community is essential for attracting new families to the library. Without going to local schools, 25% of students would not have had access or been able to participate in Kindergarten Boot Camp. If we would have gone to more schools, community centers, or resource centers, would other families have registered for Kindergarten Boot Camp? Perhaps. But going out to more schools and marketing can be a tight on a library's already strained resources. Without outreach, or an invitation to the library and library programs, many families do not have equal access in finding out about programs in the community.

Providing access and drawing on a diverse group of families was a goal of reaching out to local schools. Now, I wonder if our outreach efforts were aligned with this goal. Knowing that our community has a large number of Spanish Speaking parents, and our outreach was done primarily in English, did our outreach efforts provide an advantage for English speakers? Though we did have Spanish speaking staff at the outreach sessions all of our flyers and printed information were in English. Aside from language, I wondered if the time of our program limited access as well. Our program times were at 10:00 am and 2:00 pm, typical hours that many parents and families are working. If our program was in the later hours or on a weekend, I wonder if the demographics would have changed. Were there other unintentional actions on behalf of our program that may have limited access?

All Families Should Have Access.

The transition to kindergarten can be challenging. The example of Maddy seeking out ways for Liv to participate in social settings before Liv begins school brings to light the fact that not all kids have equal access to preschool in our community. Maya and Yesenia are an example of challenges that families face during the first years of school when there are language barriers for both the parent and child. Zoe is in search of as many opportunities to foster the development of her children as possible within the community. Having access to another resource outside of school was a benefit for them. The fact that schools are closed during the summer highlights the need for places in the community where families feel safe and have access to the supports they need.

Not everyone who signs up, shows up. So be flexible.

In our grant proposal to fund this program, we had set out to serve about 120 unduplicated families. Within the first week of registration, our morning sessions were close to filling up, but the afternoon sessions were not as popular. For the first week, we cancelled our afternoon session. For the other two afternoon sessions, we allowed families that wanted to participate in more than one session to enroll in the afternoon sessions. Our final enrollment was as follows:

Date	11:00 am	2:00 pm
June 17-20	16 participants	cancelled
June 24-28	12 participants	16 participants
July 8-11	18 participants	11 participants
July 15-18	7 participants	

By the end of the summer, 78% of the families that enrolled actually participated in Kindergarten Boot Camp. Some families that registered but did not attend let me know through email or phone that they wouldn't be attending. Some of the reasons were:

- Lack of transportation
- Schedule conflicts with recreational activities
- Unable to attend the whole week

By understanding early on that not all families would attend, we were able to allow other families to enroll in a particular session even if we had deemed it "full". We were also able to allow families to enroll in more than one session (14 families took this opportunity). I was happy to say that for those who did sign up, no one was turned away because we were "full". In addition, we actually opened up a session that ran from July 15-18 for younger students that still had another year or two before kindergarten, since there was an interest for these "younger" children to participate.

Building a Classroom for Mixed Ability Learners

When we decided to offer Kindergarten Boot Camp our main goal was to create as close to an authentic kindergarten experience as you can get in a public library. When designing a program, there are so many choices to be made. Where were we going to build a “classroom” in the library? What would children even be doing, and how would they interact with the physical space? Earlier, during the spring we had added what we called “readiness skills” to our regularly scheduled story time. In addition to story time, children used pencils and crayons to learn to write their names. They also used scissors and glue when making a craft. This story time was a great way to get families thinking about getting ready for kindergarten, but we wanted to push the possibilities with Kindergarten Boot Camp.

To create and design our “classroom”, I worked closely with my colleague, Jessie. Since Kindergarten Boot Camp was in session during the summer, the options were limited. Our conference rooms were already booked for a free lunch and snack program for kids and for ESL classes. The story hour room didn’t feel contained enough for two staff to watch over 20 students. It was too open to be safe. The outside patios were contained, but too sunny and hot for 3-5 year olds. There was one final option, but it was going to take some work to turn it into a classroom. We determined that we were going use a closed down literacy wing of the building that was now a storage space for unused library items. Since this area is not a typical rectangular area, where you can visually see the entire area by standing in one spot, we had to think creatively about how we were going to use this space. But, before we could use this space, we had to remove all of the stored items that had accrued in the area. As we started to remove the hundreds of books, old chairs and office supplies from the area, Jessie and I wondered how we were ever going to turn the area into a classroom. Within a few days, we had promised that we were going to provide an “authentic classroom” experience. At one point, we started looking into other areas of the library that we could use, but with so many other programs going on at the library, there was no turning back. We rolled up our sleeves and emptied, cleaned and vacuumed the area. It was time to design our classroom. Figure 4 shows the condition of the “classroom” a



Figure 4: Pictures of “classroom” before set up.

week before the program began.

But what did we mean when we promised an “authentic classroom experience?” Those words leave a lot for the imagination, depending on what we each define as an “authentic classroom.” During the 2012-3 school year, I was able to go into several kindergarten classrooms and observe how teachers had structured their school day. Within these classrooms, I found many commonalities from the posters on the walls, to the various activities that children were engaged in. My takeaways from visiting kindergarten classrooms were that we wanted to create an environment where kids could look around and learn from the materials on the walls. This included displaying the alphabet, posters with colors, shapes and other concepts that are learned in kindergarten. Aside from visuals, I noticed how class time in all of the classes I visited had times where children were together as a whole group as in a class meeting or story time, working in small groups at tables or stations, and sometimes working independently at a desk or area of the room. Materials were placed out where children could instantly engage in the activity that was set for them or that they chose. The idea of children having the opportunities to work independently, with groups and in a whole group struck me. Knowing that the majority of our students were cared for primarily by their parents, allowing children to work with other children might be a new (and helpful) experience for some kids. In thinking about the space we selected, we wondered how this was going to be possible.

The physical design of the classroom was not an isolated thought. As we looked around the space, we had to imagine how kids would interact with the environment. Would they be comfortable? Safe? Able to learn? Designing the physical room became a simultaneous process as we were figuring out the structure of the program. To be able to figure out the structure of the program, we needed to identify what activities the children would be doing. With an understanding that we would be working with students with mixed abilities and needs, I came to understand that what I was calling an “authentic classroom” would take on the qualities found in a differentiated classroom. Carol Ann Tomlinson (2001) explains,

In a differentiated classroom, a number of things are going on in any given class period. Over time, all students complete assignments individually and in small groups, and whole-group instruction occurs as well. Sometimes students select their group size and tasks, sometimes they are assigned. Sometimes the teacher establishes criteria for success, sometimes students do....The teacher thinks and plans in terms of “multiple avenues to learning” for varied needs, rather than “normal” and “different”. The goal for each student is maximum growth from his current “learning position.” The goal of the teacher is coming to understand more and more about that learning position so that learning matches learner needs (p. 15).

The space that we were working in created some barriers, but also some unique opportunities to get creative. These barriers, which were physical walls that separated cubicles, would soon be

learning centers to encourage independent exploration and group learning. These “barriers” actually made it easier for us to design an environment where students would not be dependent on us for learning much of the time. Tomlinson (2001) describes that “differentiation doesn’t suggest that a teacher can be all things to all individuals all the time. It does, however, mandate that a teacher create a reasonable range of approaches to learning much of the time, so that most students find learning a fit much of the time” (p.17). Not only would this be an “authentic classroom setting” it would become a classroom that would foster learning, for all learners.

Though we didn’t know our students yet, we had a strong sense that children would be entering the door with varying degrees of abilities and skills. Along with varying skills and abilities, would be the task of working to support each of their individual needs. This inkling was further revealed in pre-surveys that parents responded to. Examples like Julie who shared that she was confident that her daughter Ava was “very ready” for kindergarten. On a survey she noted that Ava was “very ready” in adjusting to new places, focusing her attention, making new friends and doing things for herself. But Julie was concerned that Ava wasn’t “very ready” as far as identifying letters and writing her name. Like Julie, Liz was very confident that Roman was “ready to start kindergarten.” Liz shared that Roman was eager to go to school and learn, but worries that he needs to practice his alphabet without skipping letters. Vanessa shared that she is very confident that Zoe was ready to start kindergarten, but she worried about how Zoe will adjust to a new schedule and being in school for so many hours. Mina is only “somewhat confident” that her daughter Riley was “ready for kindergarten.” She doesn’t think that Riley was “very ready” when it came to “focusing her attention on a specific task,” “trying new things,” and adjusting to a new school or new adults.”

As my colleague and I began to read the information shared by their parents on this pre-program survey, it was evident that our participants had varying levels of skills, abilities and experiences coming into Kindergarten Boot Camp. Although we had expected a range in skills and abilities, it became even more clear that a “one size fits all plan” was not going to support our students. From comments that parents wrote on a pre program survey, we were learning more about our students. While some students would be comfortable being in a new setting, others would be reluctant. While we some students were reading words around the room, others were trying to figure out which way to correctly place a letter. While some kids were writing and drawing with a pencil, others struggled to comfortably hold the pencil. We were still working out the structure of the program. How could we possibly support all of the individual needs of each of our learners?

To guide our thinking about the structure and activities provided during the program, we looked to the literature to guide our thinking. Our design was also guided by what we were learning through various sources of literature about the skills and areas of development that should be supported to help get children ready for kindergarten. We wanted to share with families the importance of knowing and understanding that getting ready for kindergarten doesn’t just put a focus on knowing ABC’s and 123’s, it is about understanding that it is also important to foster

opportunities where children can develop socially, emotionally, physically, cognitively and develop an interest in learning.

Drawing from a New York State Parental Information & Resource Center brochure entitled Parent guide: getting ready for kindergarten (2009) We thought about the outcomes or experiences that we wanted children to have the opportunity to practice. During Kindergarten Boot Camp, we wanted students to experience a social setting where they could play and learn with other children. In working with other students, kids would experience taking turns, sharing supplies, and build relationships with both adults and other students. We wanted them feel safe and try new things. They also needed to have the opportunity to do things for themselves. Physically, we wanted children be able to challenge their fine and gross motor skills. Activities such as holding a pencil, learning to use scissors and beading could all help foster fine motor skills, while finding times to exercise during transitions could support gross motor skills. We wanted kids to have a chance to push their thinking and basic knowledge by counting, naming colors and shapes and by having time to interact with materials such as puzzles, or building. We also wanted to create a language rich environment where kids had opportunities to speak, ask questions, share their thoughts and ideas, and listen. Finally, we wanted to provide students the opportunity to interact with books and practice writing skills.

We were zeroing in on a plan. A final piece to the design puzzle was finding materials and supplies to support the learning stations and other areas of the program. Rummaging through our regular programming supplies, we started to gather materials that we thought might be useful. We found a colorful carpet and stools that we were not being used for story time. We found colorful magnet letters, pencils, crayons, glue and scissors in our supply closet. We borrowed board books from the library collection. With a few hundred dollars to spend, we went to Dollar Tree and found posters and educational supplies to place around the classroom. We purchased some pocket charts from a school supply company and began to look on the internet for ideas to set up learning stations that focused on different skills. One library staff even donated a play kitchen with play food for what was to become our imaginative play area, and coffee tables from

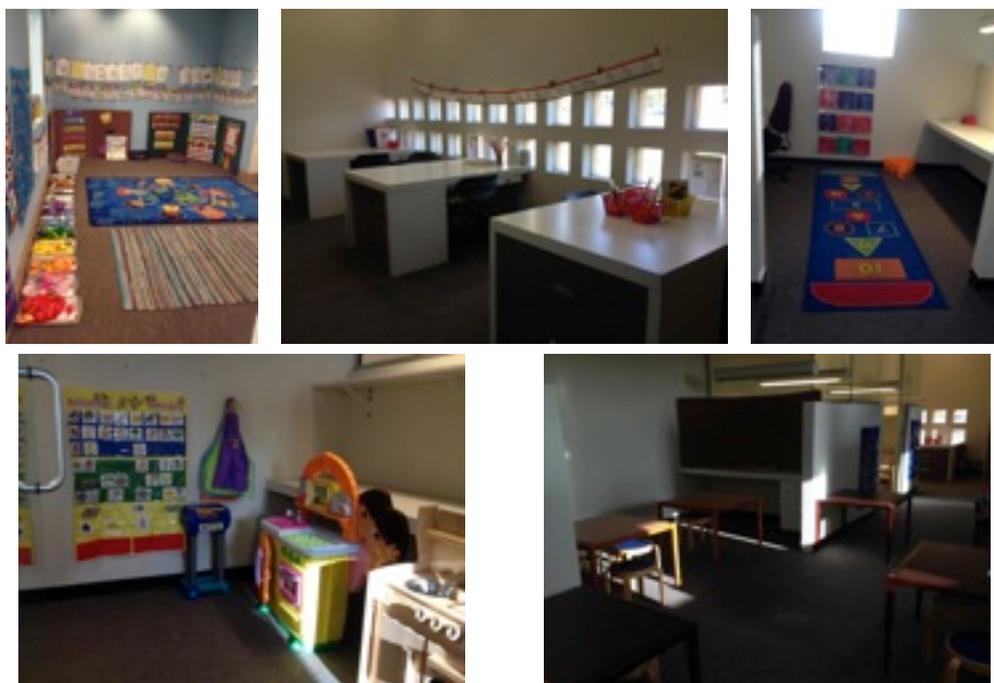


Figure 5: The transformed Kindergarten Boot Camp Classroom

within the library became desks for small groups of students. Our classroom was taking shape. The photos in Figure 5 highlight the Kindergarten Bootcamp Classroom.

Connecting the physical space that we were working with to the needs of our students, and the suggestions from literature about experiences or skills that are helpful in supporting students to get ready for the demands of kindergarten, we devised the following plan.

As students were dropped off, each child would sign in with a teacher at the door. They would find their name tag and choose an activity to explore. Activities would include drawing on a white board, completing various tasks with magnet letters, putting a puzzle together, etc. This opening activity allowed for students and staff to settle in. After 5-10 minutes we would move into our class meeting to take roll, meet new friends, and read a story.

After the story, it would be time to move to the back area of our room. In small groups of four, students would have about 15-20 minutes to work on a “table activity”. These activities included a chance for kids to write, draw, color, cut and glue.

After completing their table activity, children could choose one of the activity stations that were set up. In the “Gross Motor Area” children could play hopscotch, or exercise. In the “Imaginative Play” area children could play with the kitchen and fake food. In the “Reading Room” children had the opportunity to snuggle up with stuffed animals and “read” books. Other options were to create words with magnet letters, or to complete puzzles or lacing cards as they did at the start of the program. Children could freely move from one station to another as they pleased, and would

continue at these stations to “play” with their parents. For a more detailed schedule and example activities, see [Appendix D](#).

The classroom was transformed and we were proud and feeling confident about the set up of both the physical classroom and structure and design of the program. We were content, but was this going to work? How would kids respond to the different areas? Would they be bored or challenged? Would they be excited to hear stories? Were the activities going to be too easy? Too hard? After all of this thought, the first day of Kindergarten Boot Camp had arrived.

Differentiating Activities in a Mixed Ability Classroom

In planning and designing Kindergarten Boot Camp, I wanted students to experience the fun and joy in a classroom setting. A primary goal of the Kindergarten Boot Camp experience was to allow kids to explore and become comfortable using classroom materials and to be excited about starting kindergarten (if they weren't already). I wanted to push the skill levels of each child, but I didn't want to push too hard leaving children frustrated or feeling as if they were lacking in skills or abilities. To help support all of our learners with mixed abilities, we were going to have to shift our thinking as teachers.

Carol Anne Tomlinson (2001) explains, “when teachers differentiate instruction, they move from seeing themselves as keepers and dispensers of knowledge and move toward seeing themselves as organizers of learning opportunities. While content knowledge remains important, these teachers focus less on knowing all the answers, and focus more on “reading their students.” (p.16).

In the next sections, I will highlight the different components and activities that children participated in during Kindergarten Boot Camp. In these sections, I will highlight how we worked towards creating an environment where we sought to “read our students” and respond by “supporting and organizing learning opportunities.”

Initial Support for a Community of Learners

It's the first day of Kindergarten Boot Camp and Jacob enters the room. He quickly says goodbye to his mom and sister finds his name tag and immediately begins looking for magnet letters that spell his name. He's not shy to ask for help, and can easily express himself. A minute later, Mark and Roman enter. They say goodbye to their mothers and look around at the other kids on the floor. Their mothers take a quick picture, and leave the room. Roman and Mark sit next to one another and start placing letters on their magnet boards. They show each other the letters and name a few. With about twelve children in the room, James enters the room. He is clinging to his mother's side. As she says goodbye, he is crying. As she tries to walk away, James runs after her. His mother attempts a quick hug, when two boys that James knows walk up.

James runs to meet the other boys and starts to talk to them leaving his mom hanging, but he continues to ask for his mother throughout the first day of the program.

This was one of the first scenes that played out on the first day of Kindergarten Boot Camp. For the majority of kids, entering the classroom, finding their name tag and finding an activity was rather smooth. In a pre-survey taken on the first day of the program (parents asked children and completed the survey) how excited they were about starting kindergarten. From 63 surveys, 89% of the students reported that they were “excited” or “really excited” to start kindergarten. A few answered that they “didn’t know” and 8% of students were “not excited” or “just a little bit excited.” Similarly, 91% of students responded that they were “ready” or “really ready” for school. Whereas 7% responded that they were “not ready” or a “little ready” for school. When kids were asked how they felt when they thought about starting school, 87% responded that they felt “happy” and “really happy”. The remainder of responses were “not happy”, “a little bit happy” or they “didn’t know”. It made sense that we would have some students who would need more support as they entered the classroom. We needed to be aware of students that might experience some anxiety as they entered the classroom, and as they said goodbye to their parents.

To prepare for students that were apprehensive to entering the room or saying good bye, we ensured that a staff member was available to support the child (and parents) depending on their needs. Tomlinson (2001) shares, “A differentiated classroom should support, and is supported by, an evolving community of learners. Everyone feels welcome and contributes to everyone else feeling welcome” (p. 22). Keeping this in mind, sometimes we were able to ease students by getting down on their level, introducing ourselves, and helping them to find their name tag. Other times, a child may have found comfort by us introducing them to another student who seemed comfortable. We would offer something like, “This is John, and he is doing a puzzle. Would you like to work with him? John this is Jonah, can he help you with the puzzle?” Sometimes, it seemed best to give the child a bit of space and let them ease into an activity by themselves, but offering that we were there if they needed help. All of these factors, were intended to create a warm environment for all of the learners. Setting this tone was crucial to all children and families feeling welcome and supported, so that they could relax and learn through exploration of this new environment. On a post program parent survey, when asked if there was anything they wanted us to know about their child’s experience, five parents shared the sentiment that on the first day their child cried or was sad, but as the days passed s(he) felt better.

Choice for Children during Exploratory Activities

As students trickled into the classroom, a variety of activities were set out for children to choose to interact with. Tomlinson (2001) explains that, “We often define fair in a classroom as treating everyone alike. In a differentiated classroom, fairness is redefined. In this sort of environment, fair means trying to make sure each students gets what she needs in order to grow and succeed” (p. 23). Through preprogram surveys we were well aware that all students would not have the same needs. In planning a program, without having worked with each individual, we had to take our best guess that the materials we selected would benefit each child’s learning. Were activities too simple or too hard? The answer to this question is unique to each learner.

Tomlinson's (2001) strategy in beginning to explore differentiated teaching is to "look at the classroom through the eyes of two broad categories of students—those who are advanced and those who struggle" (p.10). While these two categories encompass many different sorts of students, they provide a place to begin to think about the "readiness of academically diverse learners and the range of needs they bring to school" (p.10). With this insight, my colleague and I provided opening activities where children could immediately engage with the classroom supplies. (while we selected the different materials that were set out, children chose the activity that they wanted to work with). For example, while Eva closely studied each shape of the puzzle and moved the piece around through a trial-by-error technique, Jackie completed the puzzle rather quickly. After completing the puzzle, Jackie shared with me the names of the shapes that he knew. Jackie began, "I know that they are all trapezoids, oh, I mean polygons."

"Ok, I responded. How do you know that?" I responded.

"Oh, I like shapes, and polygons have straight lines like this one."

"So since you already figured out the puzzle, and you know the names of the shapes, can you create a tessellation?" I asked.

"What is a tessellation?"

"Oh, it's like this, if I put one shape here, then I connect the other shapes around it, I can create a pattern, but all of the pieces have to fit together without any spaces. Do you think you can do that?"

Jackie went right to work, and I proceeded to help Eva figure out why her puzzle wasn't fitting quite right.

Other opening activities that allowed for multiple entry by students were the use of magnet letters with cookie sheets. For some children, using letters meant finding any letter and placing it on their magnet board. For others, it was finding the letters in their names, spelling a short word, sorting the letters by colors, or matching the letter they found to the letters up on the walls. As teachers, my colleague and I were available to engage in dialog with the kids, to answer their questions, and push their learning from where they started. By thinking about the wide range of users and learners, using materials like puzzles, blocks, and wipe boards allowed our students to interact and engage with the materials at a level that was fitting for them.

Sharing Our Voices During Story Time

While the opening activities lent themselves to kids working independently or with a partner, Story Time was an opportunity to learn from one another in a large group. The books that we selected usually set a loose theme for the following activity. For example the book *Pete the Cat: I Love My White Shoes* set a theme for learning about colors, or *Chicka Chick A,B, C* helped introduce letters and sounds to students. Story time provided children the opportunity to ask

questions, sing songs (if the book lent itself to a song), share what they were seeing in the illustrations and connect the book to something that they wanted to share. Story time had more structure than the other portions of the program, in that we were encouraging children to take turns “sharing the floor” and listening to what others wanted to share. From 218 child exit cards that were returned daily, over 30% of the comments from children were related to the picture book when asked “what did you learn today” and “what was your favorite thing today”. While some comments mentioned the concept (colors, counting, feelings) others mentioned the main ideas from the story. Story time proved to be a time where entertainment and learning came together for many students.

Working Through Tough Times During Table Time

After story time it was time to migrate to the small group tables. This is where students would have the opportunity to write, color, glue and cut. Doesn't this sound innocent enough? Again, we had to keep in mind the wide range of learners that we were working with and understand that while a task such as writing might be simple for many, others may still be developing fine motor skills to successfully hold a crayon, scissors and crayons. One day during table time, the children were decorating their folders with crayons. Children were drawing pictures and shapes and Jessie and I were walking around and checking on the groups at the different table. Suddenly Matt had tears streaming down his eyes. I prompted to find out what was wrong. Matt was frustrated. Next to him, Joe was drawing a dinosaur. Matt wanted to draw a dinosaur. This was a problem. It was going to be tough to get Matt to his goal. I tried to show a sample of what I would do to draw a dinosaur, but by then, it was probably too late. Tomlinson (2001) explains, “We know that learning happens best when a learning experience pushes the learner a bit beyond his or her independence level. When a student continues to work on understandings and skills already mastered, little if any new learning takes place. On the other hand, if tasks are far ahead of a student's current point of mastery, frustration results and learning does not” (p.8). From that point, Matt was too frustrated to try again.

For the most part, kids were pushed to the right level, whether they were writing their names, cutting, drawing or coloring. But Jessie and I were always on the look out for the handful of children who would need additional support or assistance to get started. By keeping a watchful eye, we wanted to support students, not frustrate them. When we were able to be proactive when a child needed assistance, we usually had positive results. One day, I watched as Jason struggled to hold a pencil. He fumbled with the pencil and was really uncomfortable. I approached him and tried a few techniques that I watched on the internet to see if it could help. I flipped the pencil into his hand, as I had seen. Nope, he was still uncomfortable, but he was still willing to try. I tried to move his fingers to grip the pencil. Nope! It still wasn't working. His hand kept creeping up to the top of the pencil. Lastly, I went to the crayon box and broke the tip off of a crayon. There is only pretty much one way to hold the tip, and it mimics using your fingers to grip a pencil. Jason was happy to see that he could hold the crayon like a pencil. He was proud. He continued to take his time to trace some line on his paper. What seemed like a small task we take for granted, Sean was showing me just how tricky this skill can be.

Kid Tested and Approved

As I mentioned, having a “one size fits all” plan was not going to work if we really wanted to support students in their transition to kindergarten. Taking careful consideration of the physical environment, the demands of kindergarten, the supplies, materials and the needs of the students, a differentiated approach to teaching was valuable in supporting student learning. In analyzing student responses on Exit Cards, I grouped responses by the basic themes that emerged from student responses. From over 200 responses, Figure 6 represents the breakdown of student statements.

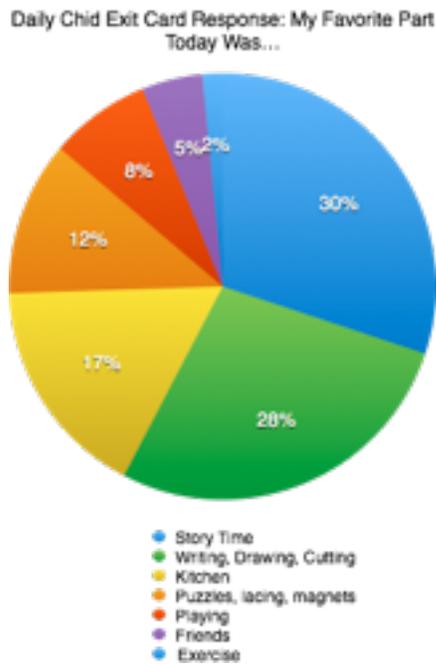


Figure 6: Children responses to favorite part of the day.

Children mentioned story time, over 30% of the time. Closely following, 28% of the time children reported the activities that were completed at the small group tables such as cutting, writing and coloring. The remaining categories can all be combined and grouped as the the openers and the learning stations after table time. The further breakdown of those activities highlights how popular the imaginative play kitchen area was. From this data (if the smaller categories are grouped as opening and learning stations) there is a balance when kids shared their favorite part of the day. I had wondered if there would be segment of the day that was liked more frequently, but that didn't seem to be the case.

Finally, information for a post program parent survey revealed that 100% of parents “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that “their child had a positive experience at Kindergarten Boot Camp”. Over 88% of parents also “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that their “child’s skills improved because of the program.” Over 97% of parents “agreed” and “strongly agreed” that they “thought this program helped their child to feel excited about going to kindergarten.” For such a positive response, I would conclude that taking a differentiated teaching approach to our “classroom” supported our learners. In what I witnessed and experience in our classroom, I would agree with Tomlinson (2001) when she explains, “Some educators say a “good” education is one that ensures that all students learn certain core information and master certain basic competencies according to a prescribed route and timeline. Others define a “good education” as one that helps students maximize their capacity as learners” (p.8).

Engaging Families & Building Community

Engaging parents was critical in achieving our goal to support families that were transitioning to kindergarten. Kindergarten Boot Camp was designed to not only have children participate, but also to have parents or primary caregivers engaged in program activities as well. After all, parents play a critical role in supporting their child's transition to kindergarten. Since one of our goals was to create an authentic kindergarten classroom experience for the children, we felt it was also important for parents to begin to experience what it might mean to support their soon-to-be kindergartner.

Vision of Parent Involvement

So what experience, role or involvement should parents have in Kindergarten Boot Camp? During a discussion in the design phase, my colleagues and I knew that we wanted to have students experience many of the boot camp activities as they would at school, that is, without their parents. On the other hand, we wanted parents to see first hand how their child might respond to the kindergarten experience and to support parents in transitioning their child to kindergarten. To satisfy this goal, we reserved the last 20 minutes of the program for families to enter the "class room" and participate in the program.

During this parent participation time, or as we called it, "Stay and Play", we had a vision that was similar to what we had seen at our local children's museum. Children could freely move around various activity stations with their parents. This could be a dedicated time for parents to devote attention to the activities and skills that their child was practicing. If a child chose to sit in the reading area, the parent could read a book to the child, or ask questions about the book. If a child chose to use scissors at the cutting station, parents could assess if their child needed assistance (hence practice), or if their child was able to do that activity alone. If a child decided to play in the imaginative play kitchen area, parents could observe how their child responded to other children during play. As staff, we could move about the room and answer any questions parents might have had, or share something that we observed or experienced with the children before parents had arrived. We could also share ideas on interacting with the classroom materials.

As lovely as the vision we had sounded, my colleague and I had some reservations about the parent interaction portion of the program. We had worked many story time programs in school and library settings, and have seen instances where parents become a distraction to the child or the program. We have seen children's behaviors change for better or worse when parents arrive during an activity. How would our students react once parents were around? As staff, we felt a bit vulnerable with several adults observing and watching our interactions with other students and families. As our list of fears and reservations continued to grow, we had to face that this portion of the program had the potential to really support the families that we were working with. "Stay

and Play” was a key component to include the families and offer support as their children transition to kindergarten.

A Work in Progress

On the first day of the first session, my colleague and I finished our planned activities with our students. We let the students know that their parents were going to be coming into the room and they could “stay and play”. We also let the children know that they could use the different materials and stations with their families. With the children spread around different areas, I opened the door and was met by a group of excited parents. All eyes were on me. They were ready. Ready to come into the classroom and see what their children were doing. I briefly explained to the parents that their children were working on different activities to reinforce different skills for kindergarten. I handed each parent an exit card to complete with their child before leaving, and invited them into the room.

Parents (and siblings) quickly found their child, but parents did a number of things. Some parents quickly completed the exit card with their child. They asked their child the prompts from the exit card, “What was your favorite part of boot camp? What did you learn today? What do you want to do here tomorrow?” and then left. Other parents left shortly after their child completed the activity that their child was working on. A few parents asked questions to my colleague and I to find out about their child’s actions during the program. By the actual time the program ended, there was a handful of kids trying out the different stations, as parents waited and watched their children. After all of the families left, my colleague and I sat down. We wondered what we could do differently to get more parents to become more engaged?

As we talked, we didn’t feel like the parent interaction portion matched the vision that we had discussed. It was messy. Parents looked rushed to pick their children up and go. We wondered if there was a way to get parents to stay so that they could share that time experiencing classroom material and activities with their child? Many of the activities that we set up had many extension activities or different ways to interact with the materials, but my colleague and I were not able to get around to all of the stations to share ideas with parents. We wondered what we could do or say differently to get a response that was closer to our vision: parents and children learning side-by-side and utilizing Kindergarten Boot Camp as a resource to get ready for kindergarten.

When we reviewed information from a pre-program survey, over 95% of the parents felt “somewhat confident” and “very confident” that they had both the skills and resources necessary to help their child be successful in school. Perhaps, since the majority of parents were feeling confident about their skills and resources, this portion of the program didn’t have the same significance or value to parents as my colleague and I thought it would. This thought crossed our mind, but my colleague and I were persistent, and still felt strong about this program component. Underwood and Killoran (2012) found, in an article examining family perceptions of early learning programs, that parents interactions with their own children has the greatest effect on student achievement. They add that, “For parents to engage directly with their children, it is important they are well informed about their child’s achievements and learning needs” (p. 2). We

wanted parents to be engaged. We wanted them to see how their child responded in this classroom setting, and to be aware of their child's areas of strength and growth. What could we do differently to engage and inform the parents?

Changing the Tone of Parent Participation

To see a change in parent behavior, we needed to clearly identify what we wanted from the parents. We identified that we wanted the parents to:

- Know what their child did during the program. For example: "Children practiced identifying and writing their names today." "We learned about different emotions and talked about how we feel at different times." If parents had a better idea about what their child had experienced prior to the parents arriving, then parents could reinforce the concepts or activities with their child.
- Learn different ways to interact with program materials to extend activity with their child. For example, if a child was putting one of our shape puzzles together and they completed the task, could the child now create their own puzzle with the pieces, or create a pattern with the shapes.
- Stay and Play. With a variety of classroom materials set out for kids to learn and play with, we wanted parents to take the opportunity to encourage their child to try new activities, if not all of the different learning stations.
- Feel comfortable asking questions, sharing information or responding to information that we might have presented.

Once we knew what we were looking for, it was easier to brainstorm ideas and actions that we could take to further engage the parents. We decided that it was important to be more explicit and detailed when opening the doors to parents. Here is what we decided to try:

- Meet daily with the parents as a group for five minutes before they reconnected with their children to share the concepts from the day, share samples of student work, share ideas that help support the transition to kindergarten, answer any questions, and to reinforce the importance in taking the opportunity to "stay and play" with their child.
- Make signs for the activity areas for parents. My colleague created these signs that highlighted the skills that were emphasized in each area, as well as activity variations and ideas for parents to support their child (see [Appendix M](#)).
- Initiate conversations with individual parents to answer questions, concerns, and to share information.

Since we would only be seeing the majority of these families for three more days (4 hours), my colleague and I were quick to implement changes. Over the course of the different sessions, we

did exactly what we had discussed. Did our changes help parents to become more engaged and involved during this time set aside for parents and children? Did our attempts shift parent behaviors in any way? From the difference we saw from the first day, to the end of the program, a shift in parent engagement did occur.

Shifting Parent Engagement

The 5-Minute Meeting

During the five minute meeting, there were exchanges of a variety of information. On behalf of the staff and program, we shared that we wanted kids and parents to become familiar using the materials and experience activities that are common in kindergarten classrooms. It was also important for us to share what the children had done that day. Each day, we shared the books that we read to their children and highlighted some of the discussions that emerged with the children. For instance, when we read the book *Countdown to Kindergarten* some children shared that they were excited about going to kindergarten, but others shared that they “didn’t want to go because the teacher would talk too much” or that they thought that “school would be too long.” When we shared book titles with parents and the topic as it related to school readiness (i.e. *Pete the Cat* (colors), *My Many Colored Days* (talking about emotions), *The Shape of Things* (identifying shapes), *Look Out Kindergarten, Here I Come* (talking about transition to kindergarten)) parents were introduced to new resources. (italicize all book titles) Parents responded by stopping to skim through books that were displayed and asking if we had the books available in the library. They would also ask about recommendations on books to borrow.

Aside from sharing books, we shared the activity that their child would be working on (writing name, coloring, cutting, etc.) as the parents entered the room. We would take this opportunity to share tips on helping children if they were challenged by the activity. One example of this was when children were practicing writing their names. Some students were uncomfortable with holding a pencil, so we were able to show parents how you can use the tip of a crayon to help children learn to grip and write, eventually feeling more comfortable gripping a pencil. Since different skills were highlighted each day, we were reinforcing the idea that it is important in supporting the children in all areas of development.

We weren’t the only ones doing the talking. During the 5-minute meeting parents began to ask questions of their own. Some wanted to know where they could purchase some of the supplies (games, flashcards, etc.). They were also interested in finding out about local schools and the different kindergarten programs offered. Since these children would be attending a variety of schools, parents were able to share their knowledge on dual immersion programs, charter schools, transitional kindergartens and full and half day programs. Parents also asked about ongoing events at the library and inquired about programs that would still be available after the summer.

On the last day of each session, we shared a “Get Ready for Kindergarten Passport” ([See Appendix N](#)) with the parents. During the first session, we intended to assess each child during the program and share the passport checklist to give parents an idea of their child’s strengths and challenges. We quickly learned that with such a limited amount of time, assessing each child was nearly impossible. It seemed that we could easily assess if a child knew their colors, shapes and letters, because you could just ask the child. Other items on the checklist such as “holding a back and forth conversation” or “playing along with others” were not as easy to “check off.” After the first week we realized that we didn’t want the passport checklist to be viewed as a report card or a list of things that kids could and couldn’t do. Instead, we continued to provide parents with the passport as a quick reference list. Since the list offered a variety of skills ranging from fine motor skills to social skills, the passport served as a way to communicate to parents that there are several areas to support their child during the transition to kindergarten. The checklist provided us the opportunity to share topics that aren’t always discussed, but are helpful for parents to think about. This included marking jackets and belongings with the child’s name, or ensuring that children can open food containers as they would when they are eating lunch at school.

A Look at Parents Engagement during “Stay and Play”

Another clue that there was a shift in parent actions was that parents began to stay for the entire 20 minute duration. Eventually, after the second week, we extended this “stay and play” time to 30 minutes because kids and parents were trying out the different activities. Through the various activities and stations, parents were able to see how their child interacted with different classroom materials, peers and other adults. Parents could see their children exploring and trying new activities and skills that would be encountered in kindergarten. They were able to gauge skills that came easily, and skills that might be a challenging to their child without support.

To help illustrate what was happening during “Stay and Play”, I will describe a moment that I captured in photos. As her two children, Riley and Joe are working on puzzles, Mina is filling out an exit card for her children (Figure 7). Mina is asking what the children did that day, and what they hope to do tomorrow. Their grandma is watching the children from across the table and asking each child about the colors and shapes that they are playing with. Immediately after this photo was taken, Riley and Joe took their mom and grandmother to see the writing and coloring work that they had completed before the parents entered the room. In the background, Mikaela is showing her mother a lacing card that she was completing. At the end, Mikaela’s mother demonstrates to Mikaela how to tie the ends together, breaking it down step-by-step so that Mikaela can try to tie it on her own.



Figure 8: Jane and her children practicing letter writing on salt trays.

A few feet away (Figure 8), Jane is sitting with her son and daughter. Jane watches her son and Jenna as they write letters and words with their fingers on the salt trays. Jenna’s brother shows Jenna how to draw a letter, and Jenna draws the letters that she knows. When she doesn’t know a letter, her brother demonstrates how to draw the letter in his board. Jane monitors the interaction between her children by using encouraging words as Jenna and her brother “play”.

Just around the corner in the front of the room (Figure 9), Isabella smiles for her mom’s camera as she proudly shows that she was able to spell her name with magnet letters. Her mom quickly quizzes her by asking, “How do you spell your name again?” Isabella replies, “I-S-A-B...(Pause) ...I-S-A-B-ELLA.” Her mom smiles and then then takes another photo. In the background, Crystal and another student are waiting to show Crystal’s mom where they need to place their name tags for the next day. In the corner of the picture, Ernie’s mom is crouching down to help Ernie find all the letters in his name. As she calls out each letter, Ernie searches to find the letter. His mom helps him when he struggled and mixed the “m” for the “n” and the “i” for the “e”. She was able to help point out the correct letters to spell “Ernie”.

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Figure 9: Isabella shares her work with her mother as Crystal and Ernie work with their parents.



Figure 10: Jocelyn with her brother and mother finishing a lacing card.

Jocelyn and her mother (Figure 10) and brother stop to smile as Jocelyn patiently finishes her lacing card. Jocelyn’s mother holds her brother as she talks to Jocelyn about her favorite activity at Kindergarten Boot Camp. After Jocelyn finished the lacing card, she and her mother played a game finding the numbers on the magnet tray.

To say “Good-bye” for the day (Figure 11), Ramon covers his face with the emotion cards that he was playing with with his mom. Ramon’s mom laughs as she watches Ramon pretend to be angry about going home. She tells Ramon that he can “do a few more faces” before they “really” have to go. Ramon gives his mom a smile, finds his friend, Mark, and then runs to find a new faces to make.

Each day, my colleague and I witnessed parents engaged in a variety of activities just like the ones mentioned above. Parents were taking the time to sit and work with their child. Children proudly showed their skills and had support from their family if they felt challenged, or couldn’t do something by themselves. Aside from parents “staying and playing” with their children, we saw parents reading the activity signs for new ideas with the materials. They were even forming relationships with other parents.

Connecting Families

During “Stay and Play” we noticed that this time provided parents the opportunity for parents to meet and speak to other parents. Parents conversations ranged from parents discussing the range of schools in the area to figuring out how they could get their child to eat more vegetables or to get their child to sleep earlier. Parents discussed different places to take their kids for other events such as the free museum Tuesdays at Balboa Park or using the New Children’s Museum Pass that was available for families to borrow from the library. Many of the families left Kindergarten Boot Camp together and continued conversations in a meeting room in the library that was offering free lunch and snacks for kids. One group of moms exchanged phone numbers on the last day of their session so that their kids could play together over the weekend.

Even when parents were not in the Kindergarten Boot Camp Classroom, parents were able to spend time in the Library with their other children. Parents were able to select books and DVD’s to borrow. They were able to sign their children up for crafts and other programs and even signed their children up to get library cards. Some siblings shared that it was nice to just sit and read while they waited for their brother or sister. One parent documented her experience at the library while her younger daughter was participating in Kindergarten Boot Camp on Facebook (see Figure 12). She summed up their experience by writing, “Anna got to take a free kinder boot camp class, Elsa got to read and work on educational games and then served free lunch. This is an awesome program. I encourage you all to come to the Chula Vista Public Library and take advantage of these free programs for your kids.



Figure 11: Roman poses for the camera as he shows his “mad” face.

				
“Anna is taking a kinder boot camp class at the Chula Vista library.”	“Elsa got her first public library card today.”	“Elsa at the library reading to her dad.”	“Elsa learning how to type on the computer at the library.”	“Free lunch after Kindergarten Boot Camp.”

Figure 12: Sequence of Facebook Posts by parent before, during and after KBC.

We were happy to see that families were using other resources in the library. Beasley (as cited by Nelson) found that involvement in “culture-related activities also has a positive effect on children’s cognitive development” (2005). In particular, she highlights the importance of libraries and their important role in helping parents provide a variety of stimulating experiences. From 64 post program survey responses, we found that after the boot camp, families continued to be involved in the library:

- 41% of families participated in the free summer lunch/snack program.
- 29% of families participated in making a craft.
- 53% of families participated in story times.
- 38% of families watched a show/performance
- 50% of families participated in the Summer Reading Program (reading books for incentive prizes)

On top of participation in other library programs during the summer, 98% of families (53 respondents) said that they would continue to bring their child to the library once school started. Of these families, 17% would visit less than three times a month, 60% would visit 3-6 times per month and the remaining 21% would visit 7-10 times per month.

Parent Post-Program Thoughts and Feelings

At the end of each session, parents were asked to complete a post program survey. We asked parents to identify if they “strongly agreed”, “agreed”, “disagreed”, “strongly disagreed”, or “didn’t know” how they felt about a range of statements after attending Kindergarten Boot Camp with their child. From 64 responses over 93% of parents “strongly agreed” and “agreed” that the “information provided through this program was helpful.” Ninety-three percent of parents also “strongly agreed” or “agreed” that they “feel better prepared for when (their) child begins

kindergarten.” Finally, over 88% of parents “strongly agreed” or “agreed” that they “have a better understanding of how they could help (their) child before they begin kindergarten.

In an open-ended question parents were asked to share any ideas on how the library could continue to support their family as their child transitioned to kindergarten. From 46 responses, the following themes emerged (exceeds 100% due to multiple ideas in comments).

- 52% of parents expressed the need to “continue and keep this kind of program.”
- 22% of parents shared that they would like to see the library provide this type of program, but for a variety of ages including supporting the transition to Jr. High.
- 20% of parents also expressed that they think this program should last longer (both daily and longer sessions).
- 11% want to see more library programs that include “families” in the program, not just “child only” or “adult only.”

These responses share the sentiment that parents appreciated and want to see more programs from the library (or community) that are fun, longer in duration, involve families and support education. I appreciate the comments that push our thinking about Library programming as a whole. In particular, I am intrigued with the idea of Libraries supporting major transitions for families such as the transition from Elementary School to Middle School, Middle School to High School and High School to College since these seem like times when families can relearn about services that would be relevant to them at different times.

Discussion

Including Families Benefits Everyone

Providing a time for parents to “stay and play” with their child was beneficial for both children and parents. The moments that I observed between children and their parents (even grandparents, aunts and uncles) not only helped the children to practice a new skill, but it helped families to understand how to help encourage or push their child. Time and again children were proud to *show* their work. Not just tell about it. Parents could see first hand what their child was doing instead of hearing about it from our observations.

It’s also worth noting that there were a few instances where interactions between parents and children were not as positive. For instance, a parent was a bit flustered when she saw her son struggling to hold and write with a pencil. She told him it was easy, which frustrated the child. I chimed in and focused on his strength of continuing to try to write and proceeded to share some ways to help her son feel more comfortable such as allowing him to practice writing with just the tip of a crayon. Frustrations were minimized for both the mother, since she had a new tool to try, and the child, since this technique was more comfortable than him using a pencil.

Engaging Parents is More Than Inviting

Simply inviting parents into a classroom does not mean that parents are going to “be engaged”, or know what to do. By sharing specific ideas, teaching them about the materials we used, the concepts we taught and sharing ideas to help support their child’s learning, parents seemed to feel more comfortable to take the time to try the activities with their child. The signs we incorporated on the learning stations offered more specific techniques or extensions of the activities so parents could build upon the existing activity on their own.

Connecting Families is Powerful

The Kindergarten Boot Camp drew families from around the community that had children that were relatively the same age, and would be entering into kindergarten. Because of this, the diverse group of families shared many of the same experiences, hopes, fears, and concerns in regards to the transition to kindergarten for their family. Kindergarten Boot Camp provided the space for families to connect with other families going through the same transition. Whether it was quick exchanges of information among parents, or exchanging of personal information to coordinate play dates, Kindergarten Boot Camp was a gathering place for families to connect with other families and expand their networks.

Being Mindful of Learning from all Families

As teachers and leaders, it is important to initiate conversation with *all* families. In working with parents and families, we noticed that for some parents it was easier for them to start up conversations, ask questions or get information that they wanted. On the contrary, there were also parents that were quieter, or may have not felt as comfortable asking for advice. For some parents, there was a language barrier or they were too timid to speak. By making it a point to initiate conversations with all families, more learning could be shared.

In being mindful of the families that we are working with, it is important to highlight the word “shared.” Sue Bredekamp (as cited Olsen, Bhattacharya, Scharf, 2006) warns:

When it comes to working with parents, we still tend to hold a one-way concept. We assume that we have all the knowledge and we need to tell parents how to parent their children. A certain power relationship is set up that is not right. Too much emphasis is placed on the educator’s point of view. It becomes easy to convince parents that there is something wrong with their children. Learning needs to happen in two-way communication that results in change on both sides (p.11).

Olsen, Bhattacharya, Scharf (2006) continue that if “not treated respectfully, parents lose a sense of their own power and competence— and school readiness efforts remain unbalanced and one-sided” (p.11). Stay and Play was a venue in which parents were not told what to do, but rather provided with a neutral location for exploring ways to support their child.