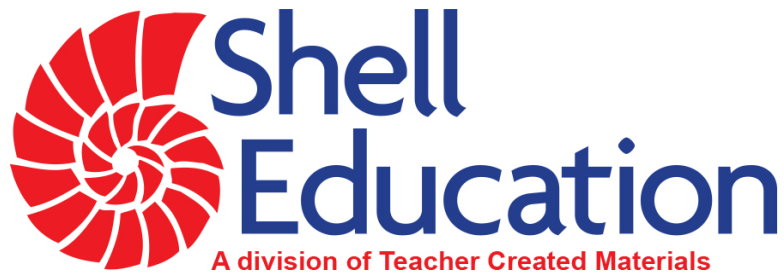


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The Gift of Playful Learning

A Guide for Educators

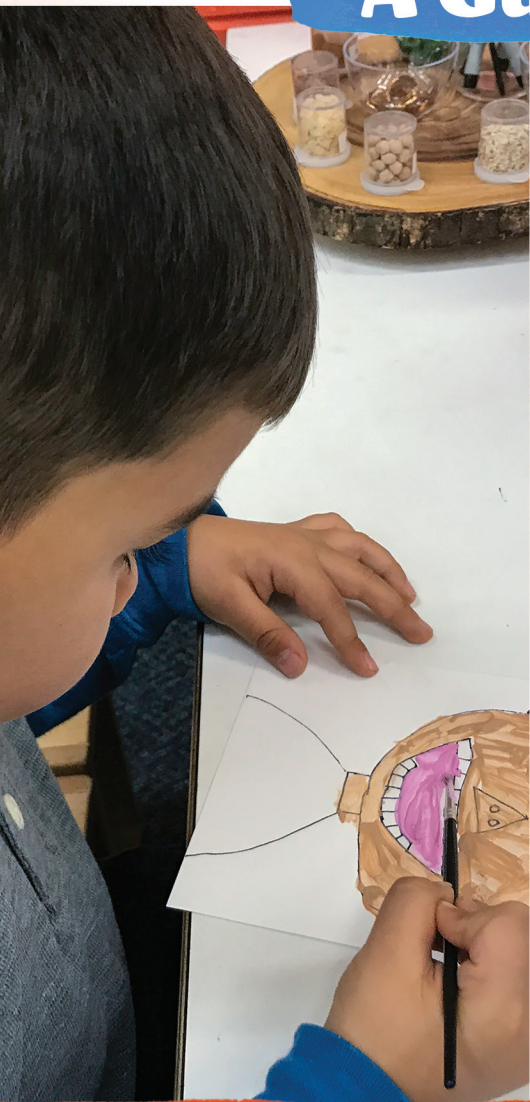


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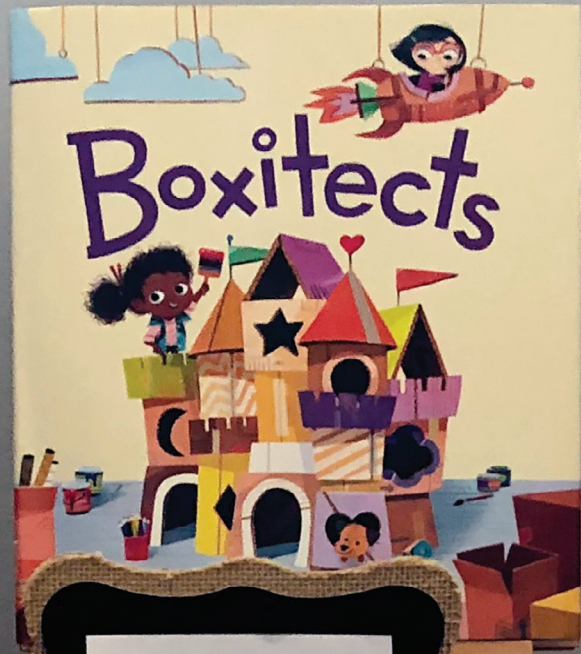
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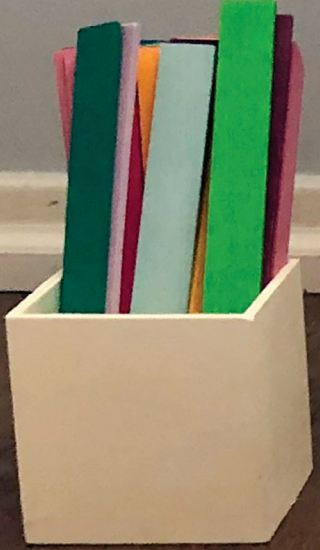
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What might you design?



Introduction

The Invitation

To those who honor children and view them as competent, capable, and curious;

To those who yearn to see themselves reflected and represented in the pages we turn and the spaces we share;

To those who value playful experiences that engage children;

To those who center themselves as risk takers in teaching and learning;

To those who are inspired to rethink and reimagine their teaching practices in ways that honor all learners;

To those who believe in thinking outside the box;

To those who love and are enchanted by learning—

We invite you on our journey as we unwrap the gift of learning.

Like a gift, the children we are entrusted with daily are precious and unique. And as they invite us to learn more about who they are and what they know through their actions, words, and thoughts, we too have opportunities to gift them with learning that is intentional, differentiated, and responsive to their strengths, needs, and wants.

This professional resource shares our journey with the children we have worked with and invites you to prepare gifts of learning inspired by the interests, curiosities, and lived experiences of the learners you work with. Gifts must be carefully selected and paired with intentional materials to uncover the possibilities of thinking and instruction. We highlight how you can plan and create these gifts through an exchange of learning and teaching that is deeply connected to the curriculum. We then guide you to invite children to unwrap these gifts, which are developed from their ideas, interpretations, and understandings.

Our own journey unfolded when we dared to dream and take risks in our thinking and learning. As we share this experience with you, we hope to inspire you to

- transform your learning environment to become a landscape for play;
- build creative spaces that speak to multiple identities, lived experiences, interests, and wonderings of learners, their families, and the community;
- design playful experiences that lend themselves to deep thinking and critical learning;
- gift children with opportunities that offer differentiated experiences;
- engage children in purposeful learning that is designed with intention to provoke thought, curiosity, and wonder;
- engage in dialogue with partners in learning; and
- respond to observations that draw on children's capabilities.

We hope this resource motivates educators across the world to value play-based approaches as a vehicle for learning and thinking in the early years, which for the purposes of this book refers to children who are three to eight years old. The strategies, experiences, and resources we share support educators in creating spaces that engage, motivate, and sustain the thinking of children. In addition, this resource serves as a tool to support educators in differentiating learning experiences for children with diverse needs. Through instructional methods that honor play, we create pathways that are responsive to learners, building on their strengths, meeting their needs, and nurturing the growth they require to be successful academically.

Responding to the Invite and Wrapping the Gift

At the beginning of our own journey, we were invited to respond to learners' desires, which led us to believe in the possibilities of play. The children in our spaces pushed us to think in an unconventional manner. To center these learners' needs, we had to reimagine our programming.

As instructional coaches teaching in diverse spaces across the city of Toronto, we witnessed children communicating their needs differently. Some children displayed dissatisfaction within their learning spaces by escaping the classroom or demonstrating apathy, tears, explosive

behaviors, or physical and emotional harm, which became normal conditions that made learning challenging. We realized these behaviors were the children's way of inviting us as educators to respond to what they were communicating about their needs for their learning environment. We were pressed to respond in one of two ways:

- *Accept* their invitation and work intentionally to make shifts in our pedagogical approaches to teaching
- or
- *Decline* their invitation and hold fast to traditional approaches that were limiting children's competencies, allowing the tensions in the classroom to fester and escalate

Accepting the Invite

We decided to accept their invitation and to support the classroom educators in understanding the need and purpose for a shift in their programming. Through our observations and interpretations, we saw a need for more open, honest discussion with educators that would allow them to engage in the self-examination and reflection required to better recognize and address barriers facing their learners and school communities. Educators also began to question how play-based approaches for learning and culturally relevant pedagogy aligned with effective instruction.

We then had to tap into our teaching reservoir and draw on the pedagogical approaches and strategies we used in our own classrooms. The theory of culturally relevant pedagogy coined by Gloria Ladson-Billings (1994) inspired our foundational beliefs as educators. This foundation led us to offer learning that promoted excellence and success through high-yield strategies. As we navigated our instructional practice, we leveraged children's lived experiences and identities to shape a culture of belonging and contributing. We taught our youngest learners to critically evaluate the world around them.

As coaches, we noticed that children were presenting challenges, which led us to identify a number of gaps hindering the pursuit of learning success. Through our dialogue with each other, we began to share how the experiences we were observing deeply replicated historical legacies that resulted in success for some and marginalization for others. In our very own households, as we grew up, our families held high expectations and encouraged us to strive for excellence and be proud of our Caribbean heritages. However, we bore witness to the duality of education when the pathway to excellence was completely different for us than it was for our siblings. While we were able to successfully navigate the traditional system through acts of memorization, performance, and compliance, the expectations and instructional approaches delivered to our siblings presented great challenges and constrained the ways in which they learned. These tensions in achievement were deeply rooted within intersections of social identities such as race, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, ability, class, religion, and more (Crenshaw 1989).

Our curiosity about these tensions in learning served as a catalyst that steered our course as coaches. We firmly believe that it is our moral obligation as educators to shift the trajectory for learners. While their paths may be different, those paths do not have to be difficult. All children have a right to and deserve to learn in environments that honor culturally responsive practice through playful approaches.

As we accepted this invitation to make intentional shifts, we set out to create a *culture of thinking* and unlearn what was once traditionally assumed. We sought to undo the “worksheet pedagogy” that drove our own learning experiences and instead co-construct thinking and transform our learning environments. These shifts encouraged engagement, increased student voice, provoked thinking, and fostered a culture of higher expectations that supported students’ success. Educators became more intentional in their instructional moves, were invigorated by learners’ responses, and were able to support and address learners’ diverse needs through differentiation. We then began to observe shifts in the behaviors of the children.

As we wrote this book, we faced even greater challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In a time of change, we were compelled to improvise, adapt, and adjust. We were provoked to reimagine a new normal, one that would change spaces of learning in equitable and accessible ways. As we have continued to prioritize play, we have gained great lessons from our experiences that we share with you. In this book, we also consider the transformational approaches required to respond to how this time of uncertainty has affected children. Now more than ever, our systems crave pedagogical pivots that lead to transformation. We challenge you to envision new teaching practices, and we invite you to lean into this discomfort and embrace the lessons offered by the pandemic to shift toward new possibilities.

Unwrapping the Gift

The goal of this professional resource is to inspire educators with practical strategies for supporting learners with differentiated opportunities. Educators can rethink and reimagine their classroom instruction and programming in ways that offer all learners multiple entry points using culturally relevant and responsive resources, open-ended materials, and play.

The Gift of Playful Learning

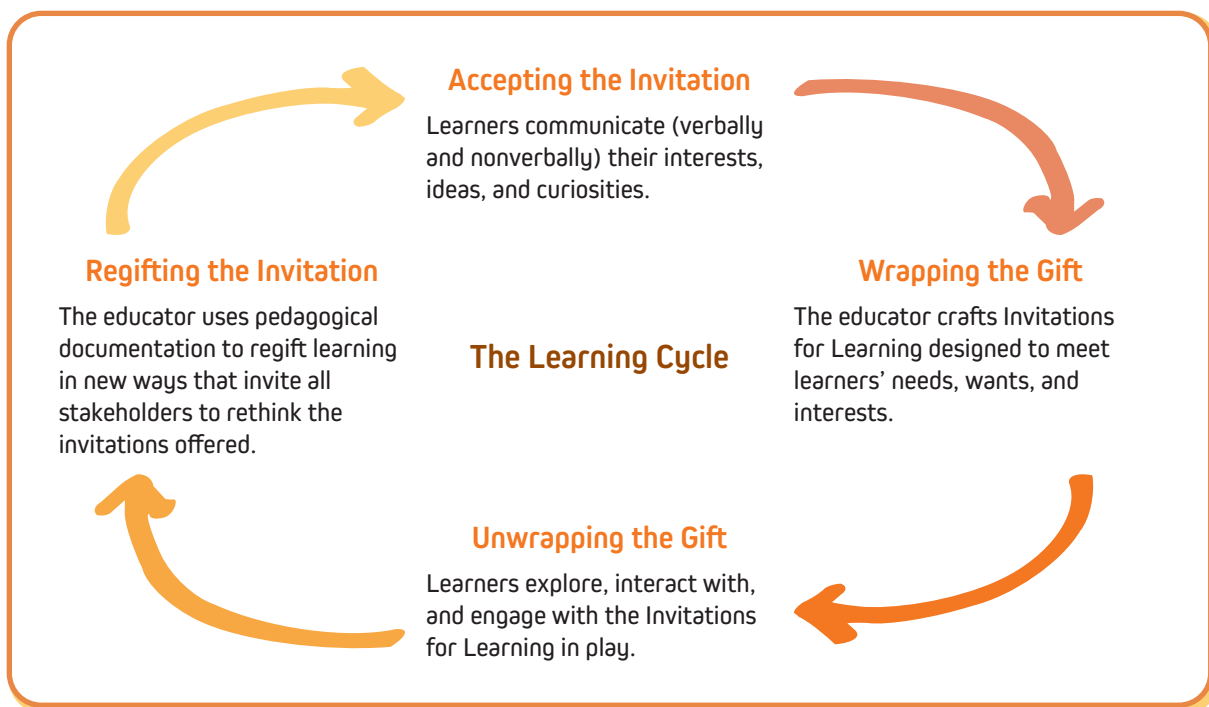
- offers practical steps and considerations at the end of every chapter to guide educators along their journey;
- embeds examples and experiences that share personal journeys, educator reflections, and photographs; and
- offers a variety of planning templates and graphic organizers to support educators as they journey in this new learning.

This resource is for educators who want to foster a love of learning through intentional play offerings that consider all aspects of the curriculum and yield academic success. Throughout our work, we endeavor to appeal to diverse learners through play-based approaches that are integrated with culturally relevant and responsive teaching. This equitable approach, which we explore in the book, engages learners in playful opportunities and encourages them to think deeply and critically. While this book offers a comprehensive guide specifically for educators working in prekindergarten to second grade, it supports learning beyond these years as well. This book can also benefit system leaders and administrators who are working to transform school cultures and create sustainable structures for learning.

How to Unwrap This Gift

The sequence of this text follows a cyclical process that sees teaching and learning as iterative and moving in a nonlinear fashion (see figure 0.1).

Figure 0.1. The Learning Cycle



The chapters reflect the four aspects of the process of learning:

- 1. Accepting the Invitation:** In the first portion of this text, we explore concepts that uncover how you can accept the invitations communicated by learners. Chapters 1 and 2 delve into the importance of play and the learning environment in connection to children's interests, ideas, and curiosities.
- 2. Wrapping the Gift:** Chapters 3 and 4 outline how you should carefully consider what learners have communicated as you design opportunities to meet their interests, wants, and needs. We closely examine the purpose of open-ended materials and how to offer these materials within learning opportunities.
- 3. Unwrapping the Gift:** In chapter 5, we offer guidelines for planning and strategies for unwrapping the gift of learning so that children can explore and engage with playful opportunities.
- 4. Regifting the Invitation:** Finally, chapters 6 and 7 prepare you to use pedagogical documentation to regift learning in new ways that invite children and families to identify goals and next steps to rethink learning opportunities and programming.

Chapter 1: Exploring the Landscape of Play

This chapter uncovers the importance of play in creating joyful and purposeful experiences for diverse learners and shows how aligning play-based experiences with the curriculum offers rich learning for children and educators. We frame a continuum for play that moves from unintentional opportunities to purposeful learning experiences. The chapter provides an understanding of how play offers equitable entry points for learning and presents examples of how culture and identities have shifted the landscape of play.

Chapter 2: Creating Spaces That Speak

This chapter explores the power of the environment as a third teacher and how the elements of time, space, materials, and relationships can create equitable access points for learning. In this section, you are invited to consider how your personal biases and assumptions inform what is offered in your learning space. We uncover how classrooms speak and transfer the values that educators honor most. This chapter offers strategies for inviting children to share who they are and for creating opportunities where joy and learning can intersect through play.

Chapter 3: Playful Pieces

This chapter focuses on the theory of loose parts and how these playful pieces provoke learners to foster a *culture of thinking*. We uncover the importance of open-ended materials and the value they maintain in creating sustainable engagement, as these playful pieces invite learners to share stories that are deeply connected to their identities. This chapter provides strategies for scaffolding the use of loose parts in relation to text and for fostering learning opportunities in meaningful ways. You will learn about schematic play and how to intentionally connect loose parts to schemas (repetitive behaviors in play) to unpack biases and assumptions. We also make connections to the importance of open-ended materials as we reference Bloom's taxonomy. The chapter considers how to implement conditions for learning that allow for safe and intentional use of loose parts.

Chapter 4: Inviting Learning

In this chapter, we identify the elements of an Invitation for Learning. We define the difference between an activity, a provocation, and an Invitation for Learning. We give examples of Invitations for Learning and how they deepen connections to the curriculum and play. We consider how documentation can support and strengthen play-based experiences and redirect learning in purposeful ways. The chapter also shares misconceptions around Invitations for Learning and offers strategies for revitalizing offerings for play to reinvoke and engage learners.

Chapter 5: Planning with Purpose

Our journey in learning continues as we explore key considerations for planning Invitations for Learning. You will gain a deeper understanding of how to plan Invitations for Learning that are reflective and responsive to children in an integrated and differentiated manner. We provide concrete examples, graphic organizers, and reflection questions to guide you in the planning process. We explore the worksheet continuum and revisit Bloom's taxonomy as it connects to planning Invitations for Learning, while considering how these invitations move children to think, analyze, create, and transfer skills.

Chapter 6: Playful Assessments

This chapter looks at protocols for pedagogical documentation and effective ways to record, collect, and analyze learning. We explore how documentation informs next steps in teaching practice through data gathered from playful classroom experiences. We also explore how to leverage documentation to consolidate learning and make connections to the curriculum. We reflect on how biases and assumptions inform our assessment practices and how to respond to, challenge, and extend thinking.

Chapter 7: Playful Partnerships

This last chapter explores the importance of partnerships and focuses on the power of engaging families as collaborators in learning. We consider meaningful ways to engage families in play opportunities that honor their lived experiences and capitalize on children's thinking. In this chapter, we uncover strategies for fostering partnerships that fuel play-based experiences. You will gain perspective on various forms of family engagement. We also offer practical ideas for inviting family members to serve as co-educators by noticing and naming learning to inform teaching practice.

As you navigate the chapters, key features within the text are included to support and inspire you in deepening your understanding of the material. Scenarios based on real classroom situations illustrate the implementation of key ideas in the text. "Playful Notes" share tips and strategies we have found helpful in our own practice. In addition, we have crafted questions to elicit deep reflection and discussion as you journey through the chapters. We have also included clarifying definitions and quotes that link to learning. And to help further recap ideas and connect them to practice, we include the following features in an **Additional Considerations** section:

- **Missed Invitations:** Here we present misconceptions or missed opportunities along the learning journey. We address how to move through these missed invitations to be more responsive.
- **Unraveling the Knots:** In our own practice, we have encountered tensions, challenges, or wonderings about the learning we have acquired and how it moves from theory to practice in seamless ways. This section unravels the knots that educators often contend with on the path to new discoveries.
- **Pursuing the Gift:** In this section, we offer practical steps for you to implement in your own practice that align with the gifts of learning. These can be considered next steps for your own learning journey.

We close each chapter with **Gifts of Learning**. Here we revisit key ideas and concepts explored within the chapter. We review learning goals and consolidate the ideas that have been presented.

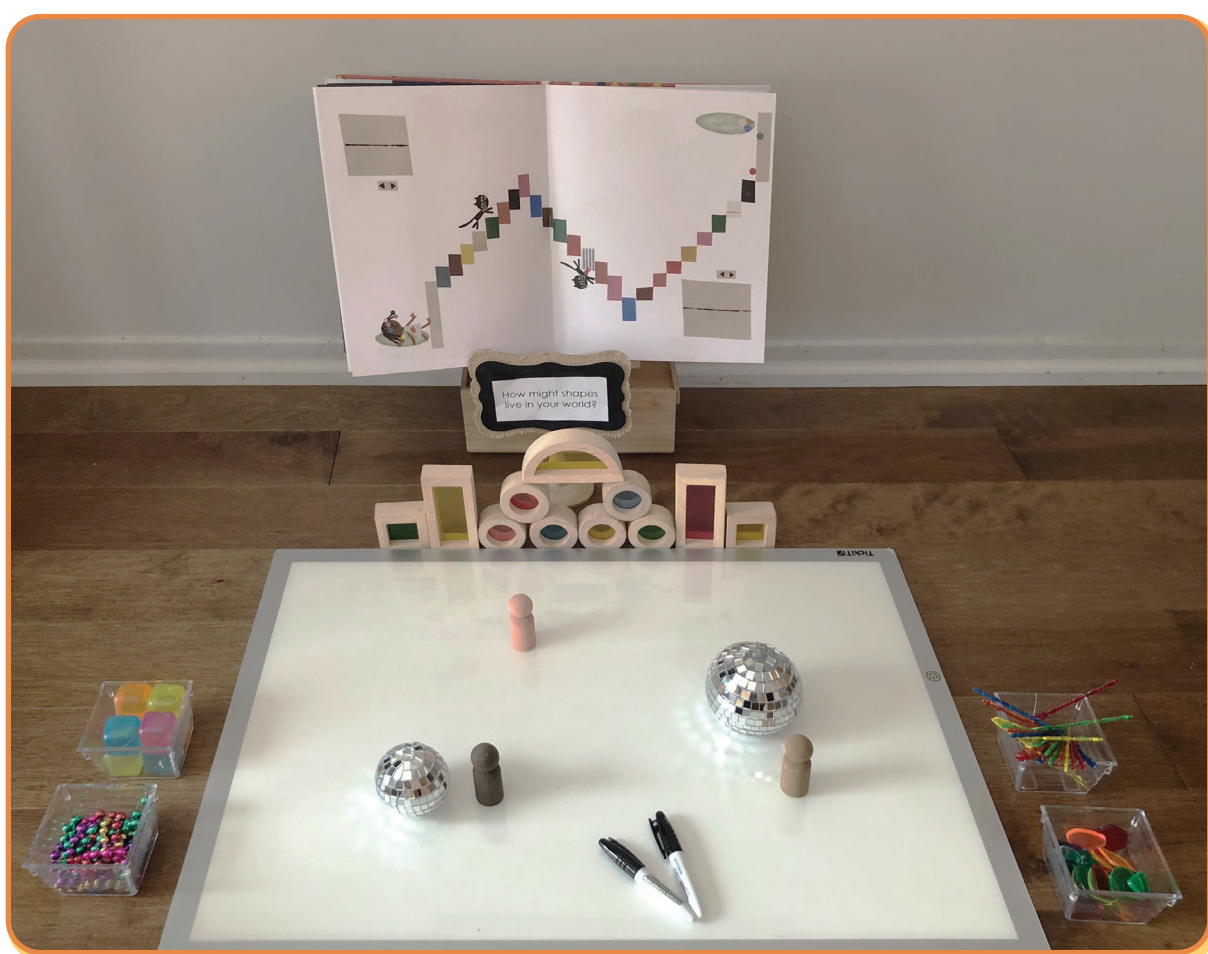
Join us as we unwrap the gift of learning.

What Is an Invitation for Learning?

An Invitation for Learning is a beautiful arrangement of playful pieces that are intentionally chosen to provoke children's curiosity as they make connections and discoveries to enhance their understanding of the world. We think of these as gifts that children unwrap to unleash the possibilities of thinking and learning through play, exploration, and investigation.

The Invitation for Learning in figure 4.1 includes the wordless text *Another* by Christian Robinson and features colorful transparent blocks, plastic ice cubes, bead necklaces, plastic rods, and transparent geometric pieces, along with wood peg people, small disco balls, and dry-erase markers placed on the surface of a light panel.

Figure 4.1. Sample Invitation for Learning: *Another* by Christian Robinson



The Invitation for Learning in figure 4.2 presents *Where Are You From?* by Yamile Saied Mendez, a book about a girl who journeys with her grandfather to learn about her cultural heritage. The invitation also offers blocks with arrows, rocks, sea glass, beads, peg people, wood pieces of various shapes, number cubes, clipboards, pencils, and paper, along with a coding board.

Figure 4.2. Sample Invitation for Learning: *Where Are You From?* by Yamile Saied Mendez



In the Invitation for Learning in figure 4.3, the book *We Sang You Home* by Richard Van Camp is offered alongside mirrors and materials such as a small disco ball, bells, bead necklaces, metal pieces, keys, peg people, and metal rods.

Figure 4.3. Sample Invitation for Learning: *We Sang You Home* by Richard Van Camp

