

Documentation Panels Enhance Teacher Education Programs

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Documentation of children's projects is advantageous to their learning process and is also a good method for student teachers to observe the process of learning. Documentation panels are a unique way to help student teachers understand how children learn. Completing a panel requires a student teacher to think through a process. Teachers must learn how to ask appropriate questions that reveal the progress of the project and then reflect the information onto a panel that preserves the growth of the child's thinking. Panels are an effective way to help student teachers convey their knowledge about young children and appropriate methods of teaching.

Innovations in Early Childhood Teacher Education: Reflections on Practice

A university child development laboratory should be an exemplary program that benefits young children and families. The program should provide a model experience for student interns. The supervising teacher must serve as a role model and mentor for the young student teachers. At the same time, the student teacher must have an opportunity to integrate their knowledge of how young children learn with their personal observations and experiences with the actual children. These goals must be realized concurrently; thus, this is often the last semester of formal training before graduation.

The challenges of directing a child development laboratory are numerous and varied, with each Lab School having distinct characteristics and governance that affect its organization and structure. The West Virginia University Child Development Laboratory (Nursery School) has been in existence since the early 1940's, and although the program has been altered over the years, the laboratory has served for decades as a training facility for child development and early childhood education students who need to work with 3-, 4-, and 5-year old children. The 3-year-old children attend the morning session, and the older 4- and 5-year-olds attend the afternoon session. One trained teacher serves as the head teacher in the morning session, and a second serves as head teacher in the afternoon session. The director of the nursery school, who is also a faculty member within the Division of Family and Consumer Sciences, supervises the university students as they conduct their observations, and complete their field placements and internships (student teaching) at the nursery school.

The Lab School program was designed for preschoolers in accordance with the guidelines set forth by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). At the same time, the director and head teachers have developed innovative curricula that are unique to the school. Introducing and teaching the new curriculum areas

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confirmed that change and creativity helped to spark the imagination of the student teachers, keep their enthusiasm alive, and provide enriching activities for preschoolers. For example, when student teachers think about literacy in early childhood, they hopefully will recall the "scrapbook project" that was conducted at the laboratory school. In this project, the young children created their own stories, published them, and acted them out with simple props (Warash & Workman, 1993).

The Birth through Pre-K Certification Program at West Virginia University requires students to complete over 300 hours of field placement, with half of the experience at the Lab School working with preschoolers. The students have three placements at the school: (1) an observation, which gives them an introduction to the behavior of children in a group setting; (2) a child development practicum; and (3) an internship, which is equivalent to student teaching. As the director of the Lab School and instructor of the practicum and internship are one and the same, the materials are designed so that the practicum and internship build on each other.

Students connect the information they are reading in the textbooks to the experiences they are having at the Lab School. In the practicum class, students learn about Developmentally Appropriate Practice and current issues in early childhood education. The students are scheduled to work at the Lab School one morning or afternoon each week. They design appropriate activities for an assigned curriculum area, based on the goals and objectives of the school. After the teacher and instructor review the lesson plans for the activities, the student conducts the activity with small groups of children. Having practicum students participate at the Lab School only once a week is a definite limitation. The building is small and located in a ranch style house, which limits the students' access to the facility. Early on, students realize that the facility is not ideal, but learn how to make the best of the situation.

Accessions to the Program

Attending a weeklong Reggio Emilia seminar piloted by the Merrill Palmer Institute confirmed that some desirable and significant additions to the Lab School program could have a positive impact on the young children as well as the students completing their practicum and internship. The change was not to make the Lab School a Reggio Emilia School, but rather to adopt some components that would enrich the program. Documentation was the key element of Reggio Emilia that could be beneficial for both the children and interns is however the college students would, need a better understanding of the importance of this trait. Consequently, this component of the Reggio philosophy would be applied at the Lab School.

According to Loris Malaguzzi, founder of the Reggio Emilia schools, documentation serves three functions:

1. It helps to give children a concrete and visible "memory" of what they said and will help them in the next steps of the learning process;
2. It provides the educator with a tool for continuous improvement; and
3. It provides parents and the community with information about what is happening in the school (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1998).

Carolyn Rinaldi, the current pedagogical director of the infant-toddler and preprimary schools of Reggio Emilia, goes on to say that through documentation we share the ways children learn and we preserve the most advanced moments of the teacher's professional growth. The documentation process permits an opportunity to analyze and formulate hypotheses and predictions that will consolidate thinking (Rinaldi, 1998).

Documentation assists the student teachers in revisiting the children's ideas as well as their own thoughts. Throughout child development and early childhood courses, students complete observations of young children and as their work becomes more advanced and they are in the classrooms with children, they are taught to write the child's dictations as demonstrated in the Language Experience Approach. But frequently it seems to stop here. Those dictations are printed on the child's paper and hung on the wall, put in the cubby to take home or become part of a portfolio. More extensive documentation, on the other hand, gives the child and teacher further support and the opportunity for the child to listen to and expand on their original ideas. Documentation invites discussion as it helps the child look at the process of his/her own thinking. If documentation does this for children, then it should have a similar impact on student teachers.

Project work and documentation activities at the nursery school began in 1995. The teachers and director went to various workshops and visited the Hundred Languages of Children traveling exhibit in Pittsburgh and Columbus. The teachers worked intensely on instituting projects at the Lab School and understood the effort to be a work-in-progress and a continuous learning experience. In 1999, the afternoon head teacher entered a project completed by the children in the College of Agriculture, Forestry and Consumer Sciences Poster and Paper Research Symposium. The project's extensive panels demonstrated to colleagues that young children also use the tools of research to investigate an interest. The children's hypotheses appeared on the panels with their conclusions on the subject matter. The detailed panels and documentation of the children's work were displayed alongside documentation of the work of other researchers at the College.

Following several years of training undertaken by the director and two head teachers and implementing projects at the nursery school, the practicum instructor/director introduced documentation panels as a class assignment for practicum students and interns. The instructor redesigned her courses to include the requirement that practicum students and interns must complete a panel with appropriate documentation. The head teachers were doing several projects with the children each year and, more importantly, they were using documentation procedures quite extensively. The afternoon teacher, who worked with the 4- and 5-year-olds, was proficient at asking the children good, open-ended questions, but she didn't stop there; she probed and helped children to reveal more in-depth thoughts. Documentation became a process that was not only associated with projects at the nursery school, but also with day-to-day activities. For example, a child brought a one-eyed frog to school one afternoon, so the teacher set up a center where the children observed and investigated the visiting frog. The teacher asked the children numerous open-ended questions, but with several very interested children she followed their answers with more questions. She documented their hypotheses about why the frog had a single eye, and these children had a good discussion that led to a story developed by the children about the frog. This did not turn into an extended project, but the documentation for that afternoon was extensive, and it was exhibited so that parents could review the events when they picked up their children. The interns and practicum students had the opportunity to observe the teacher using these techniques to help children to extend their thinking. Learning to ask appropriate questions at the opportune time is a skill the college students needed to observe and learn to do.

Implementing Documentation

Preservice teachers were given the opportunity to practice documentation at the Lab School. Most student teachers used note taking as their method, but several used tape

recorders to help catch the content of the child's thoughts. Teacher documentation of children's work and ideas is challenging, because student teachers have to learn what to write and how to extend the child's thinking. This is a difficult concept for the novice teacher to grasp. One way the student teachers acquired this skill was to practice and to observe the classroom teacher interjecting questions about the child's ideas. In Reggio, the child's ideas are respected. Children are viewed as competent and capable. This is a creative way to look at the child that values the thoughts and ideas of children. In teacher preparation programs, the process of learning to document children's thoughts can be further enhanced by access to an additional classroom, where student teachers could observe and record child dictations on a regular basis prior to their practicum. Observations have always been a part of child development practice, but extending these observations into formal documentation can magnify the teaching opportunities for the child and the student teacher.

In the instance being described, revamping the practicum and internship so that students could use documentation more extensively meant that some guidelines had to be provided. The curriculum for the practicum class was redesigned to include more cooperative learning activities, where the college students could practice with one other. Base groups were formulated where students who worked at the Lab School on the same day were placed in the same group, so that they could work together in class. The desired continuity was very difficult to achieve, because the practicum students were only at the Lab School once a week and in the lecture class for two hours each week. If students could begin talking about the activities they planned for the children and work as a group, then some communication would transpire. The base groups were given the assignment of choosing a project that integrated various curriculum areas and would also include the goals and objectives of the Lab School program. At the end of the semester, the students were to complete a group panel on their project that demonstrated the children's process of learning. They were to plan together for four weeks and to let their project emerge based on the interests of the children.

One of the main objectives of this exercise was to get the students to work together as a team that communicated, rather than planned in isolation. The students did not have to pick their topic until midway into the semester, so they could build a rapport with the children and each other. As they planned daily lessons, they wrote open-ended questions that they might ask children, hoping this process would help them when they began their four-week project. With the project, they were required to design activities centered on a common theme. Each student in the base group needed to include the goals, objectives, and procedures of their activity, as well as possible open-ended questions that would promote inquiry.

The Importance of Panels

After the students conducted their lessons, they were required to evaluate both their own lessons and the progress of the children. Together, the students in each base group would complete a panel of their project that would demonstrate the children's learning. They were required to use the KWL (know-want-learn) method (Olge, 1986) and to include the following headings on the panel: *What the Children Know*, *What They Want to Know*, and *What They Learned* about the subject investigated. Requiring these headings meant that the students asked probing questions. They recorded the children's responses for their panel. In addition, it was expected that the panel would include children's photos and dictations in order to show the process and progress of children's work. The practicum students needed to do extensive record keeping that documented the thoughts of the children.

The panel requirement was by no means a single, isolated assignment for the students. It would be carried out several times during their internship, each time more expansively and individually. The group project gave students the comfort of working together as a team and weeding through the process of jointly completing a panel, before they completed their own individual panel during their internship.

The group panel was also a good start toward having practicum students communicate on a project they were doing with children. It made it necessary for them to write down the child's ideas about the topic. So often young teachers plan activities around a topic that children may know a lot about, but they fail to use what the children know in their planning. They do not take into consideration the direction the topic should take. By listening, writing, and absorbing what children are saying, student teachers realize their lesson plans need to be flexible in order to incorporate the existing thoughts of children. In addition to writing a group evaluation of the panel experience, the practicum students shared their panels in class.

Students completing their internship at the Lab School are given more responsibility than the practicum students. Interns are at the Lab School three days a week, which offers them opportunity for more consistency in and depth to their work. Children are more familiar with the interns; and consequently, the interns are better acquainted with the children.

The interns design their panels on an assigned curriculum area, project, or theme. They collect material from the children over a 12-week period, and then put the panel together in an aesthetically pleasing manner. Sorting through the many available quotes, dictations, and artwork is a challenge for them. They must organize the material on the panel to show the ideas behind and direction of the project. Reviewing the material helps the intern assimilate the child's learning process. The instructor/director interviews the interns several times during the semester. This opportunity to talk with the instructor helps the interns to pull their thoughts together. The interns also write a reflection paper on their experience with the documentation panel.

The intern and practicum student panels are displayed during an open house for parents, children, faculty, and the community. This open house has been quite successful over the years. When parents come to pick up their child, the panels are arranged so both the parent and child can tour all the panels. The panels are filled with pictures, quotes, and children's work. Parents take the time to read them, and children review their work with their parents. The first time the panels were displayed in the classroom, there was no expectation that the children would examine them with their parents; but this has now become traditional. Parents, children and other extended family members walk through the display together, enjoying the dictations, photos, and artwork. Prospective Lab School parents also come to the open house and are quite impressed with the event. It has become a community "happening."

In sum, the panels serve multiple purposes at the Lab School. When students collect the dictations and other documentation of children over a period of 12 weeks, they begin to understand the process children go through in developing a concept, thus seeing that the dictation of children is a powerful tool not only to learn from, but also to examine children's thinking. The children's thoughts are used to help build the content of the project, and the ideas the children relay help the interns with the project's direction. Infact, the college students did not understand the nature of an emergent curriculum until they were required to complete a panel. They have learned that their lesson planning needs to be flexible in order to accommodate the children's thinking. Student teachers have subsequently emphasized in their evaluations that they now appreciate the child's dictations and

realize the power of documentation. They become excited when they review the children's words—evidence showing that the children are making connections and learning.

Results

The interns leave with sufficient experience with documentation and panels to do them on their own. They appreciate that completing one panel each year in their first teaching position is a wonderful opportunity not only to learn about the children in class, but also to share what the class is learning with parents. The interns saw this communicative potential of the panels firsthand when parents approached the students to commend them for their display at the open house. Parents were overwhelmingly impressed with the outcomes of the various projects.

Others too have noted that the panels highlight the classroom learning and help communication about families' various issues. The panels appear to support the home-school connection more smoothly than other mechanisms (Brown-DuPaul, Keyes, & Segatti, 2001). Thus, the experience of the young children and the student interns are intertwined through the use of panels to serve both constituents of the Lab School.

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