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A Picture Literally Is Worth a Thousand Words! Using Documentation to Increase Family Involvement

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Research conducted over the past two decades indicates the predictive nature of family involvement in children's education to child school and life success (Jeynes, 2005). Beyond factors such as socioeconomic status and parental education, the extent to which families are involved in children's education at home and at school has been shown to have the strongest relationship to student academic success (Henderson & Berla, 1994). The roles and relationships in family, school, and community and in the transactions that occur between these settings are powerful influences on children's development. Establishing roles and relationships and engaging families in the process of involvement and advocacy early in a child's education sets the stage for future success.

Research documents a multitude of benefits when families are involved in children's education (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Children whose families are involved in home/school partnerships evidence higher test scores, better attendance, higher rates of graduation, and more attendance at college (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Additionally, when involved in children's education, parents report more sensitivity to children's social, emotional and intellectual needs, and more confidence helping children with school work at home. The earlier this involvement begins in children's educational experiences, the more positive outcomes are realized (Kreider, 2002). Additionally, the higher the level of involvement, the greater the opportunity for maximal benefits (Henderson & Mapp, 2002).

In a meta-analysis of parental involvement and student achievement, Jeynes (2005) found that forms of family involvement showing the most significant outcomes for children occurred at home, as opposed to attendance at school functions or volunteering. Specifically, communicating with one's child *at home* surfaced as a primary form of parental involvement yielding the highest benefits for children. Considering the promise of family involvement for children's future success, teacher education institutions have both the opportunity and responsibility to equip candidates with both the skills and dispositions through which to realize this potential.

Dauber & Epstein (1993) reported that the extent to which families are involved in children's education is directly linked to teacher practices encouraging such involvement. Furthermore, the attitudes teachers hold regarding family involvement inform the extent to which they attempt to implement family involvement programs (Swick & McKnight, 1989). To this end, the ability to foster positive attitudes toward such partnerships and facilitate the development of strategies to achieve such collaboration is paramount.

Project Snapshot

With the intention of encouraging family involvement in the home, and promoting the dispositions of teacher candidates toward an ethic of appreciation and support for family involvement in education, Project Snapshot was developed and piloted in the spring of 2009. A partnership between Burriss Laboratory School A.M. Kindergarten, Ball State University Teachers College Department of Elementary Education, and Ball State University's Institute for Digital Arts and Animation (IDIAA), Project Snapshot began as a revision of the traditional, junior level practicum experience. The experience was transformed through a focus on observation and documentation of student learning, with the intention of increasing family involvement in education.

For a 16-week semester, seventeen (17) teacher candidates spent Monday, Wednesday, and Friday immersed in the kindergarten classroom, planning, preparing,

and implementing experiences for the children. A grant from IDIAA afforded the purchase of five (5) digital cameras through which to document student learning. While candidates taught lessons to small groups of kindergarten children, candidate peers observed the lesson, completing written documentation of student questions, comments, and interaction with the lesson content and materials. Simultaneously, other candidates engaged in photo documentation, capturing children's affect and engagement throughout the learning experience.

Using templates from the MERLOT (Multimedia Educational Research for Learning and Online Teaching) website (<http://www.merlot.org/merlot/index.htm>) candidates prepared web-based documentation pages for each of the lessons they taught throughout the semester. Using their peers' written and photo documentation, candidates reconstructed the experience, highlighting the salient aspects of teaching and learning. These web pages proved to be significant tools through which candidates could reflect on the interplay of their teaching and student learning. Following the development of a page, candidates would share their documentation with the children, allowing them the opportunity to revisit and tell the story of their own learning. These interactions were instrumental in planning subsequent lessons as candidates carefully considered the students' reactions to the experience, which informed future directions to support children's continued discovery and inquiry.

A webpage showcasing the emerging collection of lesson artifacts was created in order to share the project with families (<http://rhuffman.iweb.bsu.edu/BurrisK>). As candidates constructed additional pages throughout the semester, they were added to the collection. On the homepage of the website, an invitation was issued to families to view and discuss the documentation pages with their children. A survey was also housed on the site in order that feedback on the family / child experience could be obtained. A letter explaining the project was given to each family. As a further measure to promote family and child interaction with the photo documents, a bookmark was printed with the message "See What I'm Learning!" along with the website address. Teacher candidates personally distributed the bookmarks throughout the semester, inviting families to participate in discussions with their children.

The process of documentation has multiple benefits for children, teachers, and families (Katz & Chard, 1996). It is more than a record of what has been done and said, rather, it provides a means through which to make thinking visible. Documentation can be displayed, revisited, and reflected upon by children and adults. It promotes metacognition on the part of adults and children, as they relive and have the opportunity to retell the story of their teaching and learning. Such rich documentation provides valuable opportunities for assessment within the classroom, as students review and reconstruct their learning, retelling the processes and understandings gained through the experience.

As a means of increasing family involvement and investment in children's education, such documentation is equally valuable (Brown-DuPaul, Keyes, & Segatti, 2001). Through regular opportunities to view such documentation, the classroom doors are opened, and families develop an understanding of how children are learning at school. These documents promote an understanding and appreciation for hands-on, open-ended learning, as they showcase children's emerging discovery and continued inquiry. More than a bulletin board or newsletter, such documentation makes learning come alive and engages children and families in meaningful conversations about learning. According to Helm (2003), "Documentation has enormous power. We have seen it reach parents and

families in ways unlike any other teaching method. We have seen parents moved to tears as documentation revealed the growth in knowledge and skills of their children” (p. 101).

Reflection

Project Snapshot was powerful in the extent to which there were multiple benefits for all parties involved. For the children, the ability to revisit learning and articulate their experience extended the lessons beyond the confines of time-based limitations. They were able to verbalize their processes and continue their lines of inquiry. Their protracted “wondering” was then translated into a new and shared experience through which to extend discovery. Helm (2003) suggests that children benefit greatly from revisiting documentation of their learning. They “see themselves as learners”, and become aware of their competence in “working with others, problem solving, and doing things independently” (p. 100).

Teacher candidates grew immensely through their experiences with the children. They found great value in documentation, and its capacity to support themselves as reflective practitioners. Additionally, documentation was embraced as a means through which to assess students and encourage their metacognition. In viewing and discussing the documentation with the children, they learned things about the children as learners, and themselves as teachers. According to Forman & Fyfe (1998),

when teachers document children’s work and use this documentation as part of their instruction with the children, the net result is a change in the image of themselves as teacher, a change from teaching children to studying children, and by studying children, learning with children (p. 240).

Candidates expressed the value of creating such documents frequently through written journals throughout the semester and rated this activity as the most valuable in their course evaluation. Specifically, they noted:

As a practicum student, these pages allow me to thoughtfully review and reflect on my lessons. I consider what went well, what didn’t go as planned, and new ways to improve in terms of materials, content, and procedures.

When I create my documentation pages, I see things that I never noticed while I was teaching. These are making me think a lot more about how to plan for the next time.

Sharing these pages with the children tells me so much about how they processed the experience that I planned. I am learning what they remember, how they remember, and the questions they still have. I am seeing the children in a new light. They are teaching me how I can best teach them.

Families expressed great satisfaction regarding their interaction with the documentation pages, and their subsequent dialogue with their children about learning at school. Many commented on the value of seeing the children’s learning throughout the semester, and the extent to which their knowledge and investment in their children’s

education could increase through such interaction. Specifically, a majority of families returning the survey indicated that the pages initiated “a lot” of conversation about learning at school between family members and children, and that the pages would “definitely” help families talk with their children about school.

The use of photos as “visual retrieval cues” is supported in the literature as a means through which to trigger memory in young children and increase the extent to which they can recall experience (Aschermann, Dannenberg, & Schulz, 1997). Families reported overwhelmingly that the documentation pages served this function, dynamically shifting both the quantity and quality of verbal description of the daily school experience. Additionally, families related that the pages offered a new strategy beyond “What did you do at school today?” to begin conversations about learning. Parents provided compelling testimony into their experience with their children, including:

This has opened so many doors for conversations! Now when we see things outside of school that relate to one of the lessons, I can help “tie it” all together!

Sometimes a project comes home and I get some little snippet of information from [my child]. Having the website is a FANTASTIC way to give parents a broader picture of the lessons so we can have more meaningful, in-depth conversations.

My child takes great pride in telling me about the lessons and showing me what he has learned. I can’t begin to tell you how much more I know about his day, his friends, and his experience by seeing these pages.

The lessons I see on the website involve a great deal of creativity and hands-on experiences with lots of great opportunities for discovery. They are giving me some wonderful ideas for summer projects!

It is obvious how much time went into these lessons and the development of this website. Thank you so much for all of your effort in so creatively communicating what is happening at school.

[Our daughter] can’t wait to share new pages on the website with us. It has become part of our family routine to have her “show and tell” what is happening at school.

Project Snapshot provided a means through which to vision and accomplish a novel project in a truly collaborative fashion. The partnership between the University Laboratory School, Teachers College, and Institute provided a means through which mutual goals could be realized. In a similar vain as the teacher candidates, faculty were challenged to take risks, work outside of their comfort zone, and support teacher candidates in the development of a novel project through which to increase family involvement in the kindergarten classroom.

As its mission, Burriss Laboratory School provides the development, demonstration, and dissemination of effective and innovative teaching practices, offers an exemplary pre-service clinical program for teaching majors, accommodates research, and

operates an educationally sound instructional program for its K-12 population. Project Snapshot exemplifies this mission through the *development* of a means through which to further family involvement, the *demonstration* of this project for teacher candidates, kindergarten children, and their families, and the *dissemination* of this effective and innovative practice through professional presentation and publication. We believe this project is evidence of exemplary research based pedagogy for teacher candidates, with great potential for replication throughout the school and in subsequent educational institutions.

Implications for Teacher Education

While research supports teachers' ability to effectively involve families as principal to children's success, a review of state teacher certification requirements reveals that a majority of states neither encourage nor require teacher preparation in family involvement (Shartrand, Weiss, Kreider, & Lopez, 1997). In a national study of teacher educators, 88.5% of professors surveyed suggested that preservice teachers in their program did not receive sufficient information about how to work with families in ways that promote effective communication between home and school (Wright, Daniel, & Himelreich, 2000). The authors report, similarly, that 57% of teachers responded that they did not receive sufficient information about how to work with families in their preparation programs.

A growing body of research supports the effectiveness of specific preservice preparation in encouraging both positive attitudes toward family involvement, and in supporting the development of a personal perceived efficacy in beginning such work (Zygmunt-Fillwalk, 2006; Garcia, 2004; Katz & Bauch, 1999). Although research suggests that intentional teacher behavior is a principal factor in encouraging family involvement (Dauber & Epstein, 1993), many teachers underestimate their responsibility in this area and feel unprepared to initiate such partnerships (Morris & Taylor, 1998; Zygmunt-Fillwalk, 2006). In the absence of preparation which emphasizes the role of partnering with families as integral to child, teacher, and school success, teachers are left on their own to either self-learn, or adopt strategies of their peers, many of whom likely lacked family involvement curriculum in their undergraduate sequence. As research suggests the tendency of teachers in their first years to focus on survival strategies (Katz, 1972), it is even more critical that their foundational repertoire includes strategies to develop such partnerships.

When family involvement coursework is integral to the preparation sequence, preservice teachers report that practices to involve families are not only important, but are *feasible* (Katz & Bauch, 1999; Zygmunt-Fillwalk, 2006). When this belief is present and teachers feel well equipped with a toolkit of strategies to begin their work with families, they are much more likely to hit the ground running, considering this work as integral to their teaching (Garcia, 2004).

Bronfenbrenner (1990) asserts, "The effective functioning of child-rearing processes in the family and other child settings requires establishing ongoing patterns of exchange of information, two-way communication, mutual accommodation, and mutual trust between the principal settings in which children and their parents live their lives." (p. 36). It is through such support that child and school outcomes can be best realized, and through which teachers and families can best develop new ways of knowing and

supporting the developing child. In short, through such relationships, the doors of new realities emerge which were previously unopened. The potential then remains limitless.

Caspe, Lopez, & Wolo's research brief (2006) summarizes the latest evidence base on the linkage between family involvement and outcomes for children. Integral to this brief are recommendations for policy, practice, and continued research as we refine what we know and what we must subsequently do to encourage the involvement that affects change. While the roles of the family and child are pivotal in this equation, the schools that elicit involvement are built with teachers whose preparation, readiness, and commitment to families are the variables upon which success will be fostered, or opportunity will be squandered. Indeed the success of Project Snapshot holds great promise for our teacher candidates, their future schools, and the children and families whose lives will be enriched through such partnerships.

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