

Using documentation panels to communicate with families

by Judith Brown-DuPaul

Upon arriving at her son's classroom one afternoon, a mother noticed several other parents and children clustered around a table. The table contained a large, three-sided board filled with photographs, simple text, and some children's artwork. As the mother approached the group, she heard excitement in the voices of the children: "Oh look! That's when we tried to rub all the trees with crayons." "See, I'm in the picture where we put all the tree parts into piles on trays. " Finally, her son saw her and pulled her toward the large board. He said, "Look, Mom! The teacher finished the big board on all the stuff we did with trees!"

The large board that caused all of the excitement in the classroom is called a documentation panel. Such panels showcase class photographs and children's artwork and dictation, which are linked with educational captions, information from books and journals, and curriculum webs. Traditionally, many early childhood programs have used bulletin boards to display art projects and class photographs for parents to enjoy. One of the main differences between such displays and documentation panels is that the panels are a communicative tool (Tarini, 1997).

When teachers pair these materials with clear captions about the knowledge children are constructing, parents begin to develop an understanding of how children learn. For example, by linking art samples to captions describing color mixing, problem-solving, and creativity, teachers can help parents to understand the benefits of a hands-on, open-ended curriculum. The panel mentioned in the above vignette showed how, through many child-initiated and planned experiences, the class had been studying trees. The photograph on page 212 shows the documentation panel teachers created to share with families some of the activities and learning that had occurred during this tree project. The panel emphasized that learning occurs during everyday learning experiences, such as rubbing a tree with crayons and classifying all of the parts of trees.

Benefits of Documentation Panels

Teachers have always faced the challenges of developing communication between the home and the school, as well as of conveying their understanding about how children learn. Documentation panels are a unique way to highlight classroom learning; teachers can use them to communicate with families about a myriad of concepts and issues. The panels can effectively document learning in classrooms with students of all ages, from infancy through elementary school.

The web in Figure 1 details some common foci for panels. While many teachers choose to create panels about certain curriculum areas or projects, the specific topics will vary depending on the age of the children, that particular class's interests, parental questions or concerns, and the message that the teacher wants to communicate.



Figure 1

Teachers traditionally have communicated their educational philosophies to families through parent workshops or newsletters. These methods have their drawbacks, however. The barriers that limit attendance at parent meetings have been well-chronicled (Foster, 1994; Kieff & Wellhausen, 2000). Newsletters may be discarded or not read thoroughly; and those that are only written in English distance parents for whom English is not their home language (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1996).

Documentation panels, because of their interactive format, and because they draw parents into the classroom, are much more effective than newsletters. Parents are particularly attracted by the visual appeal of the panels, as well as of children's photographs and work samples. Furthermore, as the vignette from the beginning of the article illustrated, children will often prompt parents to look at the panels. Together, the adult and the child may discuss an art experience, classroom project, or field trip that is highlighted on the panel (Saltz, 1997).

Families who linger in the center reap additional benefits. They have the opportunity to observe teacherchild interactions, ask the teacher questions, offer feedback about curriculum or development, and meet other families. Family-school partnerships are strengthened when families are encouraged to spend more time in the classroom and offered more information about their children's education (McBride, 1999). Hence, viewing the panels in the classroom opens and supports homeschool communication more readily than does reading a newsletter at home.

Some researchers hypothesize that parents become more involved as their awareness of classroom learning grows (Carter & Curtis, 1996; Katz, 1994). After viewing panels, parents may feel more comfortable volunteering or offering suggestions for future projects. Family members also may choose to extend some of the learning experiences or projects at home.

This "search for common ground" between the home and school environment may lead to more successful family involvement programs (Coleman & Wallinga, 2000, p. 209).

Using Panels To Convey Educational Philosophy

Because information must be conveyed succinctly, documentation panels help teachers to clarify their understanding of how children learn. Carter and Curtis (1996) emphasize that "collecting stories of children's activities and broadcasting them through documentation displays offers a method and a motivation to pay closer attention to the value of children's play" (p. 17). This reflection should influence teachers' planning and help them to articulate their philosophy to families. This process is especially important in those circumstances when parents question the value of play or of emergent curriculum (Breig-Allen & Dillon, 1997) and, consequently, pressure teachers for tangible evidence of children's learning, such as dittos or worksheets. Documentation panels provide evidence that children are engaged in active learning. When parents see the panels, they may stop asking, "How could she be here for four hours and 'do nothing'?" or "All he ever does is play ... when are you going to teach him something?"

Integrating Visual and Written Knowledge Documentation panels educate parents through two distinct modes of information. One is visual knowledge, such as photographs of children building with blocks; the other is a written explanation. An example of written knowledge is a caption that describes the benefits of block play ("It stimulates children's creativity, teaches them cooperative problem-solving methods, and helps them learn about gravity, physics, classification, and shapes"). By exploring these concepts in more than one way, parents may develop a better understanding of the teacher's preferred teaching philosophy.

Photographs and visual aids are especially meaningful in centers with multilingual populations. Captions could be printed in more than one language, to provide a way for everyone to participate in their children's learning experiences.

Constructing Documentation Panels

Some guidance is in order to ensure that the documentation panels are educational and are not simply attractive bulletin boards (see Table 1 for ideas.) Initially, teachers need to decide what-through photographs, work samples, observation notes, and children's dictation-they hope to communicate to parents. Supporting information, such as curriculum webs or quotes from academic sources, can then be integrated with descriptive captions.

Paying attention to aesthetics will give the panel a professional, attractive appearance. The colors and materials need to catch the viewer's eye, yet should not detract from the purpose of the panel. Some consideration also should be given to achieving a balance of children's artwork, photographs, and text. See Carter and Curtis (1996) for specific recommendations on designing panels. As a culminating step, teachers need to take time to ask themselves guiding questions (see Table 1)

to ensure that the documentation panels are as engaging and instructional as they are attractive.

Table 1

Construction of Documentation Panels

Make a decision on what you want to communicate

- ✓ Projects or themes
- ✓ Special events
- ✓ Specific curriculum areas
- ✓ Learning environments
- ✓ Skill acquisition
- ✓ Child development

Collect materials for the panel

- ✓ Children's actual work or photocopies
- ✓ Observation notes / anecdotal records
- ✓ Information and quotes from books and journals
- ✓ Curriculum webs
- ✓ Quotes and dictation from children and teachers
- ✓ Photographs -various sizes (enlarge or shrink on a photocopier) -color, or black-and-white

Select the best items that represent the idea or theme of your panel

- ✓ Write an educational caption for each piece
- ✓ Use a type size large enough to be read from a distance

Layout of panel

- ✓ Determine where the panel will be displayed (on a table or wall?)
- ✓ Select type of panel: poster board (best for wall) or three-sided board
- ✓ Title the panel
- ✓ Select a strong image as the focal point on the panel
- ✓ Aesthetics are important
 - Matte work and photographs
 - Use colored paper to support, not detract from, the images
 - Less is best; too many items will distract the viewer
 - Remember that people tend to look at things from left to right and top to bottom
- ✓ Use the following Guiding Questions to check for changes:
 - Does the panel convey your intended message?
 - How many different kinds of documentation do you see?
 - What can you add now?
- ✓ Will this panel entice children and families to view it?
- ✓ Ask someone to give you feedback on the layout before attaching pieces to the panel
- ✓ Attach the items to the panel with glue or double-sided tape

Display

- ✓ Place the panel in a location where families and children may easily view it, such as the entryway into the classroom or near children's cubbies-

(Adapted from *Spreading the News* by Carter and Curtis, 1996)

Displaying Documentation Panels

These family education tools can be used in numerous ways. Panels may be posters mounted on walls, or they may be three-sided, free-standing boards used alone or with three-dimensional objects (Helm, Beneke, & Sternheimer, 1988a, 1988b). In some centers, panels are displayed for extended periods of time. Panels dealing with developmental issues provide an ongoing source of information for families. Panels can help prospective families or parents who are new to the center learn more about its philosophy. Some panels may be displayed for shorter time periods, or may be added to throughout the year.

To maximize exposure, centers often display panels in high traffic areas near the cubbies or in the hallways. When home visits are an option, teachers may bring small portable boards with them to foster home-school communication.

Panels provide a professional centerpiece for a parent meeting, and offer information for any family members who could not attend an event or workshop. Hand-outs may help teachers highlight key points from the panels.

Conclusion

A documentation panel is an innovative way to "document with our pens and camera the learning process of our children and adults" (Carter & Curtis, 1996, p. 8). The panels provide an opportunity for parents to become more fully aware of what occurs in their child's learning environment. For staff, creating the panels becomes part of the documentation of children's learning, a process that may lead to more activities that are attuned to each child's interests and skill levels. Finally, the panels promote parent-teacher partnerships by providing a springboard for discussion of best practices, projects or themes, classroom experiences, curriculum, and child development.

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