A "Walking" Report Card in Preschool

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From the Editors

Every effective teacher of young children recognizes the value of communication with families as a means of establishing links between home and school. The authors in this issue of Focus on Pre-K & K demonstrate that such communication can take a variety of formats, from written notes and letters to planned classroom visits and conferences.

Julia M. Lee and Ouida McDougal discuss strategies for written communication with families of young children. They remind us that Education Goals 2000 places the responsibility on teachers and schools to increase and improve partnerships with parents. They also provide examples of specific types of written communication, followed by guidelines and recommendations.

Genan T. Anderson describes a “walking report card” that she and a colleague devised as an alternative to traditional end-of-year conferences at her preschool. She takes readers through the planning steps and continued on page 2...

A “Walking” Report Card in Preschool

Sharing children’s progress with parents is an important element of early childhood programs. In seeking ways to showcase the growth of children throughout the school year, we have tried a variety of techniques. A logical extension of our project-culminating activities was an end-of-the-year performance report card, or “walking” report card.

A walking report card provides the opportunity for a parent (both parents, a grandparent, uncle, aunt, or other important adult) to walk with the child through a series of centers where the adult can observe the child’s performance in various activities. Having seen such an assessment used in early childhood programs in public schools, we decided to test the response of our preschool children and parents to this form of assessment in our two classrooms for 4- and 5-year-olds.

Preparation for Parents

We invited the parents to bring their child for either the first or second hour of the 2 1/2 hour program. Three weeks before our activity, one teacher simply notified the parents of their child’s assigned time; the other teacher gave the parents a choice of times by inviting them to sign up during drop-off or pick-up for either slot. Both systems worked well in splitting the groups equally and meeting the parents’ time parameters.

With two classrooms in our program, we chose to prepare our materials independently because we wanted to see two different perspectives and have the performance assessments reflect the individual characteristics of the two programs. (While both classrooms follow the same basic philosophy, there are differences...
in personal teaching styles. In addition, a different community of children gives each classroom a separate life of its own.

Two Ways of Reaching a Common Goal

The approach taken by one teacher was: “The more information you give parents the better.” The second teacher took the route of simplicity. The simpler approach proved a little more realistic. In the first room, we tried to stay with our philosophy of child choice by providing at least two possible alternatives to demonstrate the assessed skill in each center. Some of the children only wanted to choose the activity they did first. Since there was not enough time to do all 16 activities in one hour, both parents and children felt rushed. In addition, the detailed handout provided more information than the parents could handle while they were trying to focus on their child’s performance. The extra materials may be valuable, however, for later review and synthesis.

The second classroom limited the offerings to six tasks and then pulled the group together at the end for the children to share some favorite music. Fewer activities contributed to a more relaxed atmosphere. Although few sets of parents and children were “finished” when they were asked to make the transition to the music time, the formal ending nevertheless provided a nice closure.

Interaction of the Parents and Preschool Child

Many parents came either alone or as couples to focus solely on their preschool child for the hour. Others brought one or two, even as many as four, of the child’s siblings. One parent who brought two younger children expressed her appreciation at being able to include them because she felt they gained something from the experience. We had to decide what was of greatest importance: the preschool children’s opportunity for one-on-one time with their parents, or the overflow benefits to the entire family. It was a hard question that we never answered definitively.

Parent Evaluation of the Performance Report Card

Parents’ assessment of the activity varied according to their personal expectations, participation, and perceptions. Some common threads from the parents’ responses were that the activity allowed them to see their child “in action,” and illuminated the child’s interests for them. Others saw it as a good review, while some found it less than helpful because their child seemed too shy to participate while they were watching. The most frequently identified favorite part of the activity was seeing their children’s excitement, and watching them hold the power to decide, demonstrate, and teach.

Many parents who answered our questionnaire stated that they missed the evaluation form, and interaction with, the teacher that typically occurred at a traditional parent conference. While half our respondents expressed a desire for the performance report card to become a part of our
program, most were very clear that they did not want it to replace parent-teacher conferences. While parents varied in their assessment of the amount of information they gleaned from this evaluation compared to the traditional conference, several noted that they learned different things from each format. One helpful suggestion from a parent was to use this evaluation format for their parent workshop at mid-semester, and continue with the traditional conference at the end of the year.

Summary Evaluation
We had mixed feelings about the walking report card. We were gratified that every child had at least one parent participate. On the other hand, we were disappointed to find that the sheer amount of print overwhelmed some parents. With so much of ourselves invested in making the materials instructive and helpful, we hoped the parents would enthusiastically embrace them. As we watched the children confidently "show their stuff," we hoped the parents would see the same growth and progress we had observed. Without a comparative benchmark, however, few actually did. Such a comparison could be found in the portfolio that included anecdotal assessments, which they took home a few days later. Unfortunately, without a teacher to pinpoint demonstrated growth, much of it may have been overlooked.

While no form of assessment provides a complete picture of a child, we believe that adding the walking report card to portfolio and anecdotal assessments and twice-yearly parent-teacher conferences helped us share an accurate assessment of each child with their parents. Replacing this last parent-teacher conference offered the added benefit of relieving some end-of-the-year stress for the head teacher. Because it worked well with our workload, we hoped it would be just as great for the parents. Unfortunately, many parents did not believe the benefits were an adequate exchange for a one-on-one conference with their child's teacher.

How We Would Do It Differently
Will we do it again? Definitely, but with some modifications. The reading and math assessments could be done as activities sent home in a bag with all the materials and instructions. They could go home on different weeks and be returned with the parent's evaluation of the child and the activity. We would not try to have the children interact with one another in a dramatic play situation with a parent present. Most children were not able to initiate or focus on peer interaction when the parent was nearby. We would include four assessment areas (large motor, block construction with labeling, creative/science, and observational drawing) and gather the children for a brief music time at the end. With about 45 minutes for those activities, we would let the children then eat a snack and read with an assistant teacher; meanwhile, we would split the parents into small groups in an adjacent room to meet with an assistant or head teacher to complete their evaluation form and have an opportunity to ask questions and gain feedback.

Given 20 children morning and afternoon, we would plan to run one session in the morning, one in the afternoon, and another in the evening to give parents several choices. Also, we would send home full instructions and directions for the activity a week in advance for parents to consider and use as preparation. There seems to be no ideal blueprint here, but our commitment to parent and family education prompts us to keep trying.

Related Reading

Note: The handouts and instructions that we used are on our Web site at http://fiss.byu.edu/infed/preschool/PreschoolNew.html for any who would like to look at them. Two separate sets of materials—one under Dorie and the other under Genan—represent our independent approaches.