

Kindergarten Beginnings

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In my 26-year teaching career in kindergarten, I have experimented and altered how I start the year with my students. Since kindergarten is the first 'formal' school year for most children, it is usually handled differently than in other grades'. This has been my journey so far...

When I started teaching kindergarten, we usually had a 'Kindergarten Tea' in June, inviting the parents and children to school for a few hours during the day. The children would come with me to the classroom and the parents would meet with the principal to find out about the school policies. Then the children would stay in the room with the principal or some other adult, while I spoke to the parents. Basically going over the many aspects of the kindergarten day and curriculum. An extensive handout was part of the program, and I usually read through it.

After a few years, I began to question how useful this 'event' was, as many parents had not yet registered in June, or moved over the summer. I started to hold this parent meeting on registration day in the fall instead. The children were still invited to visit the classroom in June to meet me and to experience the classroom environment. It was a 'come and go' format for an afternoon, parents included. The parent meeting was held in the evening, without children. I would still go on endlessly about each small detail in my handout. There was little time for parents to interact with me or with each other. This took the place of the 'Meet the Teacher'

night that other staff held, mid-September. I always felt that I needed way more time than was allotted at that time.

Last summer I began my journey toward obtaining a Masters degree in Early Childhood. Our first classes were on Parent Engagement and Re-presenting Families. One assignment asked us to revisit a classroom practice regarding parents. The class focused on how *parent engagement* was different from *parent involvement*. Parent involvement often meant completing tasks for the teacher such as photocopying, attending field trips, and helping with projects in the classroom. Parent engagement is much more. It involves relationship and reciprocity, and focuses on student learning. It includes listening to parents and working with them more closely. It incorporates the concept of the classroom as a community rather than 'belonging' to the teacher and inviting parents in. I embraced this concept and went to work revising my 'meet the teacher' event once more.

Last fall, as the date had already been set for the parent meeting, I kept the same format but changed how I ran the evening parent meeting. Parents were invited to converse in small groups about their children. I asked them to brainstorm 'What kindergarten children are....' and to then share with the group. We then took these posters to the classroom to see how the environment would enhance their beliefs about their children. Nametags and snacks were a must, to foster connections among parents. I thought about parents who might be new to the school, and if they would sit alone at such events and not make any new connections. Often parents who have known each other from the neighborhood do not always include new parents into their 'circles'. My 'speech' to the parents

focused only on a few key items, such as my 'lenses' of Wonder & Exploration/Connections/Invitations; social justice literature; and a 'home learning album' concept that I wanted to initiate. A 'Hopes and Dreams' questionnaire was also given out, and I wanted them to feel that the classroom belonged to them and that they were welcome at any time. Other routines and details were clearly outlined in my parent handout (reduced greatly from other years), for them to read at their leisure. The invitations included opportunities for them to share photos and their children's learning at home, through the 'home learning album'. I want to show the value of the learning that takes place outside of the school landscape in some way.

I was disappointed that I didn't have 100% turnout. Many parents who had children in my class previously, or had attended the brief information meeting in January (somewhat of a school 'sales pitch' required by my board) didn't feel that they needed to attend. Many forgot about the meeting, which made me regret not making another phone call to invite them again. The message about the 'learning album', 'Hopes and Dreams' questions, and my learning lenses did not reach the absent parents in the same way as for parents who attended. Many brought their children with them, which made it hard for them to focus on the goals of the meeting. I was pleased with my change in format, however I didn't feel that the message reached enough parents that year.

This year, I decided to take another approach altogether. Our 'School Community Council' hoped that I could plan something different, as they felt that many kindergarten parents did not attend both my meeting and the later 'Meet the Teacher' event. They asked me to reduce the evening portion if I could. I asked

other teachers who also attended my Master's course what they were doing, and was sparked by the idea of a day when parents and students attended for a short time together. I 'tweaked' this idea, at the June 'Come and Go' afternoon, parents signed up for an hour session with their children on the first day of classes. About four to six families were in each session. The times were given to them in June, but reminders given on registration day (next year I will mail out a reminder in August). Since the children were attending with them, it became a priority for them to attend. Some came with two parents, and others with grandparents. I offered two sessions into the evening to accommodate work schedules. I scheduled a half-hour between the sessions just in case we needed a bit more time. I had 100% attendance!

During the hour, the parents helped the children put their school supplies away, and then I read a story (*Miss Bindergarten gets Ready for Kindergarten* by Joseph Slate) to parents and children together. During the story I asked the students many questions about the story and talked with them about 'kindergarten' in general. The children then set off to play while the small group of parents met with me in the classroom. I focused on only three areas: my 'lenses', the 'Home Learning Album' and 'family invitations'. Parents had a chance to get to know each other better in a small group, and I made stronger connections with the students and their families. It was casual and informative. I loved it! I can't think of one thing I would change for next year, except to offer refreshments. Again, nametags for the adults are important. The parents commented that they were pleased with this format. After teaching for 26 years, I've proven to myself that an 'old dog' can learn new tricks!

During my master's program I began to develop three areas that I wanted as a focus in my planning, interactions, and relationships in the classroom. This is a brief explanation of the three discussion topics:

Lenses:

Wonder/Explore is the development of an environment that invites the children to have questions and inquire, and for me to develop as a teacher and researcher, wondering and exploring what the children are thinking and learning during their play. This lens also encourages me to be a better observer and documenter.

Connections refers to the associations we make when we learn, between prior and new information, caused by interactions with others and with the environment. It also refers to the relationship building between children/teacher/ and parents.

Invitation has multiple meanings as well. I want my environment to be inviting to both families and children; and I want the families to feel part of our classroom community by inviting them to participate in their own way. This invitation also includes my new concept of 'show and tell', which is to send home family projects occasionally. These are optional and have no 'due date'. When, and if, the project is returned, the child shares it with me, and if they chose, with the class as well. Two examples of projects are: 1) a family 'shield' created at home, asking families to share information about them; and 2) a family tree where the family chooses what kind of tree they are and why, and then depicts this by creating a tree (such as an apple tree because they are 'sweet' etc...) These projects were all

very diverse and creative! Almost all families participated, and the formats valued diverse family compositions. I also have each child bring a family photo for display in the classroom.

Home Learning Album

The 'home learning' album is a 'portfolio' similar to the kindergarten 'school learning album' or portfolio, but it contains documentation of the learning a child experiences in their family environment. These came back to school twice (I'm aiming for three times this year). The first time, I looked through it and then asked the child to talk with me about some of the items. I also discussed it with parents at the first conference time, clarifying the project for those who had not returned it, while maintaining that it was an optional 'invitation'. The second time the album came to school, the child chose two pieces to share with the class. I scanned them so that they could be displayed on the Smartboard (but holding the item up would also work). I enjoyed the one-one-one time this discussion provided and the children enjoyed sharing their home experiences with one another.

Meet the Teacher Night:

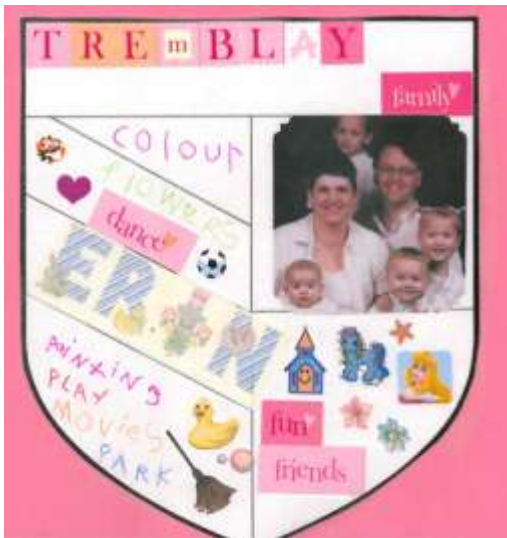
Last year, many of our teachers expressed their concern about attendance at the 'Meet the Teacher' night. This year we are combining this evening with the School Community Councils' 'Welcome Back BBQ'. Hopefully this will increase the attendance as well as offer a better opportunity for parents to connect with each other. The teachers will still give a presentation in their classroom afterwards. I plan on sharing three other initiatives with my families at this time. I have an extensive social justice literature program that I wish to explain and invite parent

participation (more information including a booklist is posted on our website www.saskecec.ca under 'Bulletin Board'). I want to highlight documentation as a form of assessment, and I will share with them the 'Storytelling Curriculum' (Vivian Paley) that I wish to incorporate this year. I hope to have good attendance, and will send a separate invitation to them so that they know what will be covered at this meeting.



Example:

Yazmin's Family: We are a *Saskatoon Berry Tree* because we are from Saskatoon and we are BERRY CRAZY!!



Family Shield

Invitation



A picture of Sarah taking swimming lessons.

Home Learning

Album Samples



Sharing Home Learning on the Smartboard