The Life of a Website:

An Inquiry into Parent-Teacher Communication

by

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to document and examine the use of technology to facilitate communication among the three protagonists of learning – parents, teachers, and children in an early childhood education classroom. Specifically, the process of the co-construction of a website, by parents and teachers and subsequent use of the website for information exchange and parent involvement was documented and examined by the researcher using ethnographic methodologies. The study provides a description of the process of co-constructing the website. Through this description, the researcher came to better understanding of developing a website, parent-teacher communication, children and their learning, and herself as a teacher-researcher. The study includes examples of the website pages as well as recommendations and implications for future use of a classroom website.
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Parent involvement in the education of children has become increasingly recognized to be a key aspect in children’s learning. Research has found that a high level of parent involvement in children’s education is connected to improvement in children’s school performance (Epstein, 1992; Henderson, 1987; Kelley, 1990; Tesfamical, 1999). In certain school districts and states, policies and legislations have been enacted to enforce parent involvement with their child’s education. For example, parents may be fined or punished for inadequate involvement in their children’s education (see for example Tesfamical, 1999 and Tennessee legislation). This trend seems to highlight the growing awareness of the importance of parent involvement in children’s education. Although there is a general agreement on the effects of parent involvement, the quality ways to enhance this relationship are still unclear. There is a need to find better ways to encourage parent involvement using multiple strategies. Due to the increasing availability of computers in homes and schools there is growing interest in exploring the use of technology as a tool for communication between home and school. The purpose of this study was to explore the possibilities of using technology as a means of reciprocal communication between the parents and a teacher and how it may influence parent involvement.

Theoretically, the involvement of parents in the educational process has been studied from many different perspectives. One model that has been particularly influential in thinking about the connections between parents and schools is Bronfenbrenner’s Bioecological Model of human development. Bronfenbrenner’s theory is based on a systems approach where the smallest unit is a ‘microsystem’. The microsystem involves the relationship that a developing person has with their environment in a major setting (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). The school and
the family are the two major microsystems that impact young children. The interrelations of the two microsystems produce a ‘mesosystem’ (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). The family-school relationship would be viewed as a ‘mesosystem’ within which the child or family interacts (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). Bronfenbrenner proposed that the development of children would advance when the family-school mesosystem interconnections were enhanced (Powell, 1989). Bronfenbrenner suggested that increased interactions between home and school, a wider community of common relationships, and more frequent communication between home and school would help to establish these important interconnections (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; as cited in Powell, 1989). Understanding the importance of a positive family-school relationship is essential in the most effective education for young children.

Originally founded by parents, the schools of Reggio Emilia, Italy stress the importance of the role of the family in the early childhood education. Influenced by the works of Dewey, Bronfenbrenner, Piaget, and Vygotsky, the schools of Reggio Emilia have effectively put its philosophy into practice (Edwards, Gandini and Forman, 1998). Thus, the practice in the schools of Reggio Emilia is grounded in a social constructivist perspective. Social constructivism emphasizes that knowledge is socially constructed, in that a person plays an active role in the learning process, through interacting with others. Due to their harmonious blend of theory and practice, the educational system in Reggio Emilia has been identified as one of the best school systems in the world (Newsweek, 1991).

One of the major principles of teaching in Reggio Emilia is an “education based on relationships” where “the concept of relationships means that we must recognize each individual as a resource with his or her own culture and abilities” (Municipal infant-toddler centers and preschools, 1999). In the schools of Reggio Emilia, the child, teacher and family
are the three major protagonists in a child’s development (Malaguzzi, 1993). The family is valued as a major player in the education of the children. The image of participation in the schools involves a job not belonging exclusively to the teachers, emphasizing a strong co-responsibility of all those involved (Municipal infant-toddler centers and preschools, 1999). This conceptualization of co-participation challenges the current trend in home-school relationships in the United States, where parent involvement consists mainly of a one-way information giving line—from the teachers to the parents.

Historically in the United States, little attention and opportunity have been given to enhance parent involvement in the schools from a reciprocal, co-participation perspective. Communication with families regarding their child’s performance at school is “often intermittent and negative” (Kelley, 1990). Teachers may send a note or make a phone call home to inform parents of their child’s problems. The purpose of this kind of communication seems mainly to inform the parents of what the teacher perceives as “a problem.” Few steps are taken to work together to help the situation. This type of communication seems to undermine parents as the experts on their children, capable of contributing to the education and development of their children.

Different groups have attempted to find ways to engage parents in the education of their children through home-school communication. For example, the National Adult Literacy Database identified the following eight critical characteristics of successful collaboration: communication, adequate resources, proper planning, shared values and goals, participation, leadership (to take initiative), flexibility, and finally trust and respect (Padak and Sapin, 2001). Rogoff’s community of learners theory states that, “learning occurs as people participate in shared endeavors with others, with all playing active but often
asymmetrical roles in sociocultural activity” (Rogoff, 1994). The schools of Reggio Emilia have taken this idea one step further in expecting all three protagonists to participate, “not only by taking part in something but by being part of it, its essence, part of a common identity, a ‘we’ that we give life through participation” (Rinaldi, 1998; as cited in Valentine, 1999). This idea of reciprocal communication implies that parents do not just receive information about their child from the schools, but could also provide valuable information and insight about the development of their child (Henry, 1996; as cited in Yelland, 2000). This change in the expectations of family-school communication reflects a new respect for the dynamic roles of all the three protagonists in the education process. Children might benefit when education is based on a complex system involving active participation of all combinations of the three protagonists, children, teachers and parents. This principle of practice that values a community of learning far exceeds the one-sided, receptive impression that is often practiced in school systems in the United States today. In order to encourage parents to be more involved in children’s education, we may consider adopting this principle of practice from the schools of Reggio Emilia (Municipal infant-toddler centers and preschools, 1999).

Developing and sustaining a more reciprocal and balanced relationship between parents and teachers involves meaningful communication that fosters the development of positive relationships. Typically, home-school communication consists of formal meetings, such as parent-teacher conferences, and informal communication, such as notes or phone calls between parents and teachers usually pertaining to the behavior of an individual child (Powell, 1989). Families could benefit from more substantial information about the total learning environment of the classroom. One way to inform the families of the events of the
classroom is through documentation. Documentation can be viewed as a verb or a noun. As a noun, documentation in the schools of Reggio Emilia, “typically includes samples of a child’s work at several different stages of completion; photographs showing work in progress; comments written by the teacher or other adults working with the children; transcriptions of children’s discussions, comments, and explanations of intentions about the activity; and comments made by parents” (Katz and Chard, 1996). While this is what documentation looks like, the process behind the product becomes the valuable piece needed for understanding the learning process. Documentation as an action implies and makes visible the process-oriented nature of the work as seen through the “cycle of inquiry” (Gandini and Goldhaber, 2001). The cycle of inquiry involves: framing questions, careful observation, recording and collecting of artifacts, organization of observations and artifacts, analyzing and interpreting observations and artifacts, reframing questions (which renews the cycle), and planning and responding (Gandini and Goldhaber, 2001). Understanding the didactic meaning of the word documentation inspires the teacher-researcher to continue on a quest for understanding, documenting the process along the way.

While serving many purposes in the classroom, documentation can be used to support the home-school relationship. Documentation of children’s experiences can serve as the content for interactive communication by being focused on a common goal. Teachers can use documentation of children’s experiences to provide a focus for discourse between teachers and parents (Forman and Fyfe, 1998). Awareness and understanding of the daily happenings in the classroom may engage the parents, if even for a brief moment, to think about their child’s educational experiences. Katz and Chard (1996) stated that when parents have the opportunity to examine the documentation of their children’s’ project in progress they can
think of ways to participate and contribute their time in their child’s classroom (Katz and Chard, 1996). Hence, the process of reflecting on documentation lays the foundation from which to build a strong family-school relationship. The public display of children’s experiences provides a means to connect parents to their own and other children’s work (Kristovich, et al., 1998). In this process of reciprocal relationships a sense of community among all the participants may be promoted. This sense of community, with strong links between home and school, encourages continuity in the children’s lives, the creation of a reciprocal network of communication, participation by all involved in the life of the school, and feelings of ownership by all involved (Valentine, 1999).

Though the importance of a home-school relationship in education has been recognized, the literature on ways a school could go about establishing that relationship is limited. There is a call for research to explore different tools and approaches that can be used for establishing a healthy home-school relationship (Barbour, 1997; Powell, 1989). It has been suggested that as teachers begin to recognize children’s different learning styles, they may begin to understand the different communication styles of parents (Barbour, 1997). Given the limited research on effective forms of communication, the literature is restricted to a mere few articles that look specifically at technology as a tool for communication in the schools (Kristovich, et al., 1998). According to Bauch (1990), technology can be used for building partnerships with parents by offering new possibilities for communication (as cited in Swick, 1992). It is assumed that technology coupled with the process of documentation could provide insight into how to develop relationships between schools and families of the 21st century.
The flexibility and capabilities of technology lends itself to the development of meaningful documentation in an early childhood classroom. The immediacy of digital images has provided a new spin on the observation and reflection process of working with young children. The multimedia nature of technology has the potential to provide the visual context in which words, their inflections, the accompanying gestures, and other nonverbal communication such as their surrounding action are represented to the viewer as a whole (Rose and Meyer, 1994; as cited in Eagleton, 1999). This form of communication affords a plethora of diverse communication styles. The medium of technology coupled with the documentation process provides a catalyst for sparking parental interest in the classroom. “A parent faced with photographs of their child deeply involved in the creation of an interesting piece of artwork will want to discuss it with their child, look at the work and talk with the teacher” (Valentine, 1999). Furthermore, using technology to document children’s learning processes could promote dialog among the three protagonists of education. When documentation is made visible to parents through the use of technology, parents may share in the excitement of the moment, celebrating the learning in the classroom (Kristovich, et al., 1998). This appreciation for the learning process can help to stimulate and sustain the relationship between home and classroom, thus improving the quality of education for the child.

**Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to document and examine the use of technology to facilitate communication among the three protagonists of learning – parents, teachers, and children in an early childhood education classroom. Specifically, the process of the co-construction of a
website, by parents and teachers and subsequent use of the website for information exchange and parent involvement was documented and examined by the researcher using ethnographic methodologies.

**Significance**

This study was an attempt to respond to an identified need for more effective forms of communication to spark parent involvement in children’s education. This study explored intimately the interactive communication and parent involvement between parents and teachers in an early childhood educational setting through the use of a website. Thick description of one group’s communication process through the use of a website provided valuable clues as to the types of interaction that families value. The reciprocity of communication that this research strived for sets the stage for the development of a new form of communication between home and classroom.

Technology can be used as a tool that encourages reciprocal communication, which appears to be lacking in current efforts to establish home-school relationships. The co-construction of the website may provide valuable insight for new methods of establishing home-school communication. Utilization of technology in this endeavor may provide new ideas to connect our families of the 21st century by using a medium they are familiar with for communication and accessing information.

This study focused on examining the use of technology in the development of home-school relationships. The researcher believed that by involving the parents in the entire process from developing the website through utilization of the website, the parents may have felt more vested in the project. The idea of co-construction implies that the parents have just
as much responsibility as the teacher to be actively involved in meeting the goals of the project, using the website as a communication tool. The effects of a home-school relationship as a function of this project encouraged parents to carry this relationship into their children’s future school experiences.

The content of the website focused on documenting the process of young children’s learning experiences. Educators may gain understanding in how technology can help teachers document different stages in the process of learning; i.e. through the cycle of inquiry. This attention to process may also allow parents to gain insight into what and how children learn in each situation their child encounters. In short, this study attempted to enhance parents’ interest in their child’s education, as well as provide educators with suggestions on how to accomplish the feat of establishing and maintaining a positive home school relationship.

Questions to Guide this Study

How can the documentation made visible through the use of technology, i.e. a website, facilitate communication among the three protagonists of learning – parents, teachers, and children in an early childhood education classroom?

- How do the protagonists contribute to the development and utilization of the website?
- What factors influence parents participation in the development of the website?
- How do I, the researcher, provide information for and make revisions to the website, that are in response to the parent’s expressed interests?
Chapter Two: Designing a Website for Learning

Overall Approach and Rationale

This study was designed from a qualitative perspective using ethnographic methodologies. The researcher was interested in understanding the intricacies of communication between parents and teachers through the use of technology, specifically the use of a website. While the use of technology as a communication tool is recognized in the literature, the use of technology specific to this proposed study is innovative, thus the study was exploratory. Within the qualitative paradigm, the researcher employed ethnographic methods to gather, organize and interpret multiple sources of data including participant observation, group meetings, dialogic interviews, running record of involvement, and the development of the website. As a member of the research group, the researcher was a participant observer, fully engaging in the activities of the group, while observing and documenting the process.

The research was also conducted from a social constructivist lens. Just as the researcher views children as capable of constructing their own knowledge, so is the case with adults. Inviting the parents to play an active role in the construction of their understanding of their child opens the door to more reciprocal communication. This active stance coupled with the group environment produced a community of learners, reflective in their inquiry into the role of parents in the early childhood classroom.

The Setting

The study was conducted in one classroom of a child development laboratory school located on the campus of a public university in southwest Virginia. The school is used as a
training facility for the undergraduate students enrolled in early childhood education (ECE) program at the university and a research site for faculty and graduate students. The ECE students serve as the assistant teachers of the classrooms, along with one graduate student as a supervising teacher. The school’s philosophy and practice to teaching is social constructivist and inquiry based, inspired by the Reggio Emilia approach. A negotiated curriculum is implemented based on the children’s interests and guidance from the teacher. The director of the school states the purpose and practice of the school as follows:

The philosophy of the Child Development Laboratory School is grounded in social constructivist theory. This theoretical view holds that knowledge and understanding are constructed through social interactions. Classrooms are inherently social places wherein teachers and children negotiate the curriculum together. Our aim is to construct a teaching and learning laboratory in which children, students, and teachers are given opportunities to make decisions, pursue authentic questions and concerns, connect what is known to the unknown, and be successful as they explore, test ideas, and discover through play, informal learning activities, and projects. Guided participation in the activities of children is the primary role of the teacher, and play and the expression of ideas through interactions with adults, peers, and the environment are the primary business of children. Because we believe the parent-child relationship is the most important social context for learning and development, we strive to maintain close connections between home and school, and value the cultural and individual perspectives that families bring to the program. (Personal communication, Stremmel, 2001)

As evident in a recent publication (Hill, Fu, and Wells, 1999), the school continues in its efforts to establish effective home-school relationships.

**The Population**

The preschool classroom targeted for this study served 16 children (ranging in age of 4 years 2 months to 5 years) and their families. The participants in this study were 32 parents of the children and the head teacher, who was also the researcher of this study.

Due to the nature of the school, there were many other participants indirectly involved in the process. The preschool was open 3.5 hours each morning, five days a week. The head
teacher, the researcher, was present four days a week and was responsible for the main curriculum development and organization of the classroom. A floating teacher assumed the head teacher role on the fifth day. This floating teacher also worked with the children throughout the week on selected projects. The assistant teachers consisted of 12 undergraduate students who participated at the school as part of their course requirements. These students assisted in observation and collecting data for the study.

Figure 2.1 summarizes pertinent information about the children and the families in this classroom.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No</th>
<th>Father’s Job Status</th>
<th>Mother’s Job Status</th>
<th>Ordinal Position of Child</th>
<th>Previous relationship with researcher</th>
<th>Relation to University</th>
<th>Child Enrolled Gender</th>
<th>Child Nation of Origin</th>
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<td>6</td>
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<td>U.S.</td>
</tr>
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<td>9</td>
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<td>Yes</td>
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<td>Female</td>
<td>India**</td>
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<td>Yes</td>
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</table>

* Father has 2 children from a previous marriage  
** Child was born in US, parents first language is Hindi

The 32 parents are the natural parents of the 16 children involved, all living together in two-parent homes. Of the 16 families, 13 children are the youngest or middle child in the family, thus providing the parents with previous early education experiences. Thirteen
children had been enrolled in the laboratory school in previous years, including seven families who were part of the head teacher’s class last school year.

Within this classroom, a multitude of communications strategies were already in place. Prior to the start of school, the head teacher visited each child’s home for at least 30 minutes to meet the families. The lab school setting provided the opportunity of observation through a two-way mirror. Parents often observed the classroom activities through this mirror. Each family is provided with a mailbox to exchange written communication, including a weekly classroom newsletter was published to inform the families of events in the school. Occasionally, the parents used electronic mail to notify the teacher of daily changes in routine or sickness of their children. Twice a year, during a parent-teacher conference, a portfolio chronicling the child’s experiences and development was used as a vehicle to engage parents in conversation about the child’s development and progress. Throughout the year, there were a few other planned gatherings, such as potlucks, seminars, and parent meetings, which allowed the parents an opportunity to get to know each other and the school.

Data Gathering Procedures

In qualitative studies, triangulation of data involves the use of a variety of data sources in order to gain an in depth picture of the group being studied (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 1998). This method provided the researcher with many sources from which to analyze, as well as providing the audience with as much information as possible from which to draw their own conclusions. In attempts to establish triangulation, the researcher gathered data from a variety of sources, including participant observation, group meetings, dialogic interviews, running record of involvement, and the development of the website.
Participant Observation

In the study of relationships, the researcher cannot ignore the knowledge gained from establishing personal relationships. For this study, the researcher’s role as the head teacher of the classroom may have provided insight into the home-classroom relationship that could not have been achieved by an outside observer. In the topology of Atkinson and Hammersley (1994), the researcher would be perceived as a “participant as observer” (Atkinson and Hammersley, 1994). As a teacher in the classroom, the researcher was a fully active participant in the study. The insight gained through previous relationships with both the children and the parents assisted the teacher-researcher in her role as the main developer of the website. The researcher collected data formally and informally from the families and used this information to revise the website to accommodate the needs of the classroom. The teacher-researcher served as the Webmaster, managing the content and overseeing the maintenance of the website.

During meetings and discussions, the researcher took scrupulous notes using hand written notes as well as transcription from tapes. The detailed paper trail left by the researcher was beneficial in the analysis phase of the study. During the process the researcher referred to observation notes as well as parents’ comments, input and questions to make appropriate adjustments to the website in order to be responsive to the community’s need. In addition to taking notes, the researcher kept a journal of the study to have a chronological document of the development of the relationships formed.
Group Meetings

During the course of the website development, there was be a series of meetings with the members of the research group. There were three scheduled meetings within the process. The first meeting addressed the content of the website, followed by a navigational meeting to access the website, and a final meeting that discussed the entire experience of co-constructing and utilization of the website. During these meetings, the group had an open dialog about the website including topics of interest, relevancy, usefulness. The researcher took careful minutes of the meetings including some exact dialogue and transcription.

Dialogic Interviews

Prior to the group meeting, the researcher participated in dialogic interviews with members of the research group. True to the participant observer stance, the researcher talked with the participants together to create an in depth understanding of the process (Rossman and Rallis, 1998). These interviews were open-ended in nature, in order to collect a wealth of information about the process. Questions posed during these interviews reflected the experiences with the website as a communication tool. More specific questions that guided the interview emerged during the process. The researcher attempted to interview each set of parents as a couple to compile this information. However, due to reasons beyond the control of this study, some modifications were made. The interviews were recorded and transcribed into rich dialogue about the process.
Archive of Web Design

The researcher kept an archive of the website site pages throughout the semester. This documentation served as a visual representation of the reciprocal relationship created as well as a catalogue of the process. The researcher accessed this archive to gain a further understanding of the trends throughout the process.

Running Record of Involvement

The parents were asked to respond to questions posted on the website. These included questions about the children, the website itself and other classroom issues. The researcher kept a record of all of the input received off the website. All of the entries were anonymous but recorded by date. The researcher used the content of the entries to guide the development and revision of the website.

Procedure

A detailed timeline of this study can be found in Appendix A. The study began in early December, prior to the winter break at the university.

Survey

Prior to the first meeting, the researcher surveyed both parents of each family to gain an understanding of their use of technology prior to the study. The questions included demographics about the number of computers that the families use and questions pertaining to the use of computers in the parents’ daily life. Of the sixteen families surveyed, all of the families had at least one computer at home, with the majority having two or more. All of the
parents noted that they use computers at home, with 81% using them daily. However, two parents do not ever use websites. (For the complete results please refer to Appendix B) The results gave me a better understanding of how my sample uses computers.

First Meeting

During the first week of December, the researcher invited the families to a meeting at the school. This first meeting was a Content/Information Sharing meeting. The purpose of this meeting was to provide the participants with an opportunity to discuss the research for the upcoming semester. The researcher introduced the study proposing a co-constructed website pertaining to the classroom as a new way of communication. The researcher attempted to gather answers to questions such as: What would you like to see on the website? In what ways do you feel you can contribute to the website? How often do you anticipate interacting with the website? During this meeting, the researcher gathered data about perceptions of the website in order to help in the initial construction of the website. Confidentiality was ensured in anticipation of questions about access to the website. The group discussed and came to a consensus about who can access the site and what its purpose would be. The research group then discussed the informed consent as an assurance of confidentiality (see Appendix C). At the conclusion of the first meeting the research group set a date for the second meeting in January 2002.

Construction of Website

In the weeks following the first meeting (winter break), the researcher took the information gathered from the parents and used it to construct the first draft of the website.
Second Meeting

Upon returning from winter break in January the group had its second meeting. The purpose of this meeting was to present a draft of the website to the parents. During this meeting the parents also learned how to navigate the website and where they could access it. During this meeting the researcher illustrated how to find the website, login and viewed the different options. The parents were also shown how to communicate through the website. At the conclusion of this meeting, the parents were again asked the questions from the first meeting stated above. The group also made a plan for encouraging an active role with the website. At this point, the researcher discussed with the group the interviews that were to be conducted and the details of the final meeting.

Interviews

Throughout the process the researcher collected many forms of data to gain an understanding of the process of the website development. Nearing the conclusion of the study, the researcher interviewed the parents about personal experiences with the website. The purpose of their interviews was to hear personal reflections prior to the final group meeting.

Final Group Meeting

The group met one last time to discuss the process of co-constructing the website. The group reviewed the previous websites and changes in order to come up with recommendations for using technology to develop a parent-school relationship.
Data Analysis Procedures

Due to the developmental nature of the study, the process required constant, on-going analysis of the data to inform the next steps. The continuous analysis followed the Cycle of Inquiry (Gandini and Goldhaber, 2001) previously stated. Throughout the process of the study, the researcher gathered all of the different forms of data described above. The researcher then organized the data according to the initial research questions and to questions that emerged during the study. The researcher then made low-level inferences about technology as a tool for parent-school communication. The researcher also made recommendations for future research and implementation.

Reflexive Narrative

As a social constructivist teacher, my role in this research reflects my belief that people are active in the construction of their knowledge within a social context. My experience as a teacher of young children has influenced my outlook on the learning process. I have been teaching children for the past nine years in a variety of settings. Since coming to the laboratory school, I have come to appreciate certain aspects of the profession that continue to further my development, both as a teacher and a person.

My primary role in the classroom is a teacher as researcher. In order to accomplish this quest, one must be reflective in her endeavors. A reflective teacher always attempts to see the bigger picture. What does this tell me about the child? What does this tell me about the family? What does this tell me about me? Being aware of your own learning process is extremely important in teaching. I firmly believe not only does a person learn something every day, but also they can learn from any situation. I try to learn something from everyone
that I meet, regardless of age. I think that this quest for understanding contributes to my
disposition for teaching. I feel that I have as much to learn from children as they have to
learn from me. If nothing else, children can teach you about themselves, and what they wish
for in life. This in itself can teach volumes. I feel as though the same goes for parents. While
teachers are seen as the experts on the field of child development, it is the parents who can tell
you the most about their child. This understanding helps me to recognize that a relationship
with families is essential to a classroom environment.

Working at the Lab School for the past few years, I have established relationships
within the community of the school. I attempt to build a community through my interactions
with the families. This may be through a formal network, such as home visits, or with daily
conversations at transition times. The most important thing that a teacher can convey is that
she honestly cares about the children. With this groundwork of trust, children and families
will be more likely to respect the work that you do in the classroom. Starting this year, I
made an effort to establish a strong network within my classroom. From this initial
relationship, I hope to enhance the sense of community. Using technology is a personal
strength that I can use to foster this relationship.

I have been using computers my whole life. I began with programs in the school
system and continued at home. I was always the family member responsible for setting up the
computers and figuring out new programs. Once arriving at this university, I learned about
new ways in which technology can be applied to everyday living. I began to communicate
best through technology in my classes and my personal life. Since this time, I have attended
conference sessions and seminars with a technology focus in mind. Technology makes sense
to me and I see it as a viable communication tool. However, I understand others’ fears of
technology and recognize that these reservations coupled with my proficiency may influence the process of the website development. I hope to be able to work with the families to encourage a comfort with technology and help to explain its potential. I truly feel that the best time to really learn about a subject is to explain it to someone who does not understand. Through hands-on experience, we can further understand and apply our acquired knowledge. Therefore as a social constructivist teacher and a member of this project, I hope to gain some understanding of technology, the community, and myself throughout this process.

**Ethical Considerations**

The website was a closed, password protected website in order to ensure limited access. The website also had an encrypted address that the parents could bookmark on their personal computers. This meant that the address of the website was long and not easily ascertained. After addressing all of these issues, the group devised an agreement on how the images of children would be used and who was allowed access to the website. The consensus of the group was achieved before we proceeded with the website.

The researcher group was provided with an informed consent agreement (See Appendix C). Any writing as a result of this study will include aliases to protect the families’ confidentiality.

The lack of universal access to the internet is an issue that was considered for this study. While all of the participants in this study had access to the internet in their homes, it is acknowledged that in other situations families are not afforded this luxury. The findings of this study could serve as another point of justification to close the gap of the digital divide by providing computer access to all families.
Chapter Three: The Story: Documenting, Communicating and Tinkering

The process of co-constructing the website with the families of the classroom is documented in this chapter. The purpose of this study was to document and examine the use of technology to facilitate communication among the three protagonists of learning - parents, teachers, and children in an early childhood education classroom. Specifically, the process of the co-construction of the website, by parents and teachers and subsequent use of the website for information exchange and parent involvement was documented and examined by myself, the researcher, using ethnographic methodologies. It was my intention that through explaining the process in detail, it would paint a picture of way that the website impacted the classroom community. The influx of data for this process was complex. In my effort to make sense of the data, I divided the chapter into the following sections: The Chronological Development of the Website, The Challenges Encountered, and The Concluding Interviews.

The Chronological Development of the Website

First Meeting: Pitching the Idea

In early December we had our first meeting of the research group that was comprised of the 32 parents and me, the researcher. We met in the children’s classroom to introduce the website project. Ten parents were present representing eight of the 16 families. I began the meeting by introducing the purpose of the site and then I opened the floor for suggestions about what the families would like to see on the site. Parents asked for documentation of themes and ongoing activities in the classroom to be showcased on the site. As expected, parents also requested a “business area” to post information such as the Snack Menu, Fieldtrips, and the Lab School schedule. Many unexpected ideas were generated in the
dialogue amongst the families. One mother requested a place for families to share information with each other. This conversation resulted in two concrete suggestions; a section for families to post information about events in the community that they would like to invite the other families to attend and an “Our favorite websites” section that would inform families about other websites that are appropriate for children. The possibility of a place for children to communicate with each other was also noted.

The next issue on the meeting agenda was the issue of confidentiality pertaining to the site. This conversation was prefaced by the assurance that we would have to arrive at a consensus that fit all families’ comfort level before proceeding with the project. I informed the parents of the precautions that were taken to ensure the security of the site. These included an encrypted web address and a password protection on the site. While some families found comfort in that assurance, a long discussion followed before we came to a consensus.

For the purpose of this study, we decided to limit the access to the website to the research team - the 32 parents of the children in my classroom, the researcher(me), and the three members of the researcher’s advisory committee. The only time that others were allowed to view the website would be in the presence of a member of the above list. For example, if grandparents came to visit the family, they could view the website with the parents. However, distributing the website address and password was not allowed. There was also a restriction placed on printing the pictures from the website. At the conclusion of the discussion a parent reminded us that, “This is a three-month study, and in order to make everyone comfortable, we should limit the access to the website to the list.” It was also mentioned that access by other family members might be an option that could be added in the
future. At the conclusion of the meeting, we reviewed the responsibilities of the research team and the Informed Consent. We set a time for the second meeting and departed.

**Getting Everyone Onboard**

The following week I sent letters to all the families about the research process. For the families that attended the first meeting, I sent a summary of what we discussed and a self-addressed stamped envelope to return the Informed Consent forms. To the families that were not in attendance at the meeting, I sent a cover letter explaining the process, the summary of the meeting, Informed Consent forms, and a self-addressed stamped envelope to return the forms. Inspired by the parents’ suggestions, I spent the next month developing a first draft of the website.

Upon returning to the school in early January, 22 of the 32 Informed Consent forms sent had been returned. The first week that the school reopened, I sent home Informed Consents to the five remaining families. To my dismay, I still had not received all of the Informed Consents by the time of the navigational meeting. Therefore, I could not include pictures of the children on the website at it’s debut.

**Second Meeting: Navigating the Website**

In the third week of January, we conducted our second group meeting to debut and navigate through the first draft of the website (See Appendix E). Thirteen parents were present, representing 11 families. The meeting was held in a computer lab at the university to allow all of the families access to an individual computer to navigate through the website. We revisited some of the major points from the last meeting. I introduced the password system to
the families. This system involved a login screen set up on the homepage. When a person attempted to access the website, they were prompted to enter a username and password. If they could not produce a valid password, they were denied access to the website. The families associated with the university used their existing university accounts. We decided on a simple username and password for the remaining families that did not already have an account through the university. Next, we all accessed the website together. I took them through the process slowly to make sure that all of the families understood how to access the site. When a parent came across a “dead link”, a section of the website that did not work, I informed the parents that they should email me to notify me of such errors. Accessing the website together alerted me to some format problems with the first draft. For example, many families attempted to click the bullets next to text instead of the text itself. Observing the parents’ first experience with the website allowed me to adjust the website according to their natural inclinations.

Viewing and exploring the website generated new suggestions and questions from the parents. Some parents asked about the updating procedure. They intended to use the pictures as a conversation piece to engage in dialogue with their children. One parent mentioned that the documentation could be simplistic in form, for example, just a few pictures of a project in progress, to be updated every few days. Another parent requested the posting of activity plans that would be occurring in the classroom. Still another parent mentioned, and several agreed, having the classroom newsletter online would be beneficial. A father, who was not present at the first meeting, asked about video and audio feed. While we decided that the video feed was too involved for this project, we kept audio feed open as a possibility.
I then asked all of the families to enter the “Question of the Week” section and answered some questions about their initial reactions to this section. The parents were asked to comment on their first impression of the site, the layout, additional features to be added, how they might contribute to the site, and how often they anticipate interacting with the site. The general reaction to the site and the layout was overwhelmingly positive. Some reactions included, “Great tool for interaction on a regular basis,” “very simple, but elegantly so, nice friendly open format,” and “The layout is clear and intuitive.” Some new suggestions that arose for additions were birthdays of all the children, a chat room, biographical sketches and pictures of the children/teachers, and of course photos. In addition to providing their feedback, some parents felt they could contribute to the website through suggesting events for the calendar, offering recipes, and organizing a chat room. One mother saw many possibilities stating, “maybe managing/structuring a section, taking pictures to upload, drawing fun icon things, writing things the kids say…” This reaction and the reaction to anticipated access were very encouraging. All but two families said they would access the website a couple times a week, with many replying daily. The additional responses were “once a month” and “unsure due to the tax season” (parents are accountants). After answering the questions, one father made the suggestion that he would like to have access to these and other questions throughout the process. We agreed to always have access to the first three questions and to make a previous questions page to provide access to all the questions.

After the meeting, two parents approached me about ways that they could contribute to the process. The first mother wanted to speak to me about a section of her personal website that allowed for open dialog. She explained how the families could have a real-time chat on
the website and she offered to help with it. I expressed to her my concern with previous experiences with open email dialog between parents and how a conflict on the forum can overshadow the original intention. While I recognized her suggestion, I was weary of attempting it in this project. I felt as though that aspect could be an exploration of its own. The other parent wanted to post a section of “cool links” that parents could visit to find appropriate links for children as suggested by other parents of the classroom. This section would include Internet learning resources and other websites of interest to kids. She mentioned websites such as pbskids.org and the National Museum of Art. We discussed some logistics of it and she offered to design and maintain the page. We made a plan to meet later in the week to link the pages together.

The involvement of parents in this manner was not something that I had anticipated. However, it was a possibility that truly excited me. I thought that it spoke volumes about the community. The parents were taking an active role in a project that was an effort to increase communication among the class community. The offering of ideas and time evolved into a parent-initiated section of the website. This was a step to give parents a true sense of ownership of the site that I had not considered previously. It was a notion that I embraced and hoped to encourage.

Getting Ready to Launch

After the second meeting, I made some revisions to the structure of the website and began to put together the first documentation. I added a January Calendar and an event form where parents could post an event, as requested in the first meeting. I wanted to be ready to post pictures of the children engaging in activities as soon as I received the Informed Consent
from all the families. I also started my first attempt at developing documentation for the website. The following was my reflection from the reflexive journal about the ongoing process:

*I chose to document the process of making a snowman. We did this activity prior to dismissal last week. The children really enjoyed it and I thought it would be a rewarding first venture. This would probably be my easiest documentation on several levels. First it was a definite process lending itself to a story-like description. It was also one of the few activities where everyone was involved.*

In this process, I discovered a way to make a template that made it easier to insert images. Although the process of updating the website seemed simple, sorting through all of the pictures taken daily to select those that are most meaningful and that best represent the current explorations in the classroom was time consuming. However, I felt that it was the only way that I could organize all the pictures that I would need to make the website meaningful and the study successful. While the website documentation of the snowman project was a tedious process, when I looked at the final product, I was overcome with emotion. When I completed the documentation, I ran a test to make sure that all of the links worked correctly. When I looked at the whole document, I could see how each part linked to a bigger whole that was representational of the learning in the classroom. I reflected in my journal, “When I came to the final page I had a sense of accomplishment and pride that brought tears to my eyes.” I saved the new format of the site to my home computer and eagerly awaited receiving the last Informed Consent forms so that I could share in this moment with the parents.

**Week One: Launching the Website**

On the Monday following the Navigational meeting, I distributed the website address and password to the families that were not able to attend the meeting. I put each piece of
information on separate pieces of paper intentionally to ensure that an outsider could not find
the website with the password lying around and access the site.

On the following day, I received the all of the Informed Consent forms and was able to
post pictures on the website. After school, I immediately posted the snowman explorations
that I completed previously. There were some format glitches that I had to repair, but overall
the launch was successful.

**Documenting the Process and Keeping the Promise**

On the day of the launch, I began to make a book that would chronicle the process of
coco-constructing the website. I would print each page off the Internet and compile them
chronologically in a binder to be placed outside the classroom. This book was an attempt to
keep my promise to the parents that the website would not replace, but to compliment any
communication that existed between teachers and parents prior to this project. Considering
that this book would be displayed outside the classroom in a public venue, I chose to remove
the URL address on the bottom of the pages in order to protect the security of the site. I
placed the book outside the classroom on Wednesday and it immediately sparked
conversations with families.

On this day, I was also able to meet with the mother who was designing the outside
links page. She showed me the draft that she had compiled (See Appendix F). After
discussing the different update and management options, we decided that the site would
remain on her home page and we would provide a link on the class site to her page entitled
“Linky Links”. She had already listed her son’s favorite sites and had conversations with
other families about adding new links. Again, this component and the possibilities it held was an unexpected addition to the site.

**First Feedback**

During lunchtime of the third day after launching the website, I received my first written response to the website. Interestingly the family who posted did not attend any of the previous meetings. This indicated that the low attendance at the meetings might not have been an indication of a lack of interest, but possibly a convenience issue. The mother posted a response to every question on the site. In reference to the snow documentation she said, “Very good documentation. To plan each step and capture it with a picture is impressive.” She also added, “This is my first but not last time.” This feedback was very encouraging to me. By the time I came home that night, there were 10 new hits to the site. While this display of interest was truly exciting, the fact that only one out of the 10 hits responded in writing was an indication of the pattern that would emerge throughout this process.

**Week Two: Gaining Momentum**

I began this week by posting documentation about our exploration of color and a trip to the duckpond. Both projects reflected a change in format in order to make the site more user-friendly. One parent responded to the change stating, “I also noticed that whoever is doing the layout is getting more inventive and creative.” I began to receive more submissions about not only the new documentation, but also the snow exploration from the previous week. One family wrote about how they have extended the color exploration at home. “We have started a color tree at home and every day the clothes are coordinated even though the color
week is over.” I also heard about other family conversations involving color experiences from school to home and to also take inspirations from home and include them in the curriculum. As one mother stated, “Listening to (our son’s) comments and being exposed to what he does in the classroom has provided us with the opportunity to continue his explorations and interests at home.” With the intention of bridging the gap in mind, I posted a planning page. I explained that since we practice a negotiated, emergent curriculum, our plans are only provocations that we intend to offer the children throughout the week. With this precursor, I posted the potential plans for the week to give the families advanced notice of experiences that their children may be engaged in during the week. In addition to posting the plans, I posted a set of questions that attempted to make that link between home and school experiences more emerging. These questions asked, “What has your child said about some of the plans this week?” and “Are there any ideas for planning that your child had mentioned or explored at home?” This questionnaire did get receive an immediate response, but created an interesting dynamic in the weeks to come.

During the second week, I engaged in many face-to-face conversations with parents about the content of the website. Many parents applauded my efforts and explained how useful it was in their home life. One parent, who worked at the school, began encouraging other parents to access the site with her at the school and talk about it. I was beginning to see that the word was spreading and the number of people accessing climbed. That weekend there were 20 hits to the website. From the responses I identified that 10 different families had accessed the site at least once in the first two weeks. Unfortunately, that weekend only five responses were posted, three of which came from one family. The challenge for me was to make this website truly reciprocal.
Week Three: An Inside Look

In addition to the now routine postings of the snack menu and plans, I added a newsletter and two explorations about the mapping that was going on that week. The newsletter was one of the original forms of communication prior to the website. Therefore, I put a hard copy in each of the family’s mailbox while also posting it on the website. The mapping documentation was more difficult to construct than the previous documentation. The children had begun this exploration of mapping. This activity had branched off into many different aspects of exploring mapping. I did not feel comfortable minimizing the importance of each avenue of exploration by combining it into one documentation piece on map making. Each exploration was far from over, yet I needed to respond to the families need for new documentation. If I posted a project and decided to add pictures to the documentation later, I did not feel that families would give it a second look. So I decided to post one aspect at a time starting with the current week.

In this week I began to get responses from the parents to the planning questionnaire. It was beneficial to me as a teacher, to hear from the parents what experiences their children enjoyed. The comments included the aspects that the children liked best as well as what more they would like to. One mother wrote, “Bob had his brother make a shop in the living room and he used real money to buy a battery and a magnet.” This was very exciting for me because the shop was not an activity that I highlighted on the website. This meant that the child was going home and talking more about the things that he was doing at school. In addition to comments about the current curriculum, through their parents, children were able to tell me about new ideas they would like to explore. One mother wrote, “Bob would like to draw caves or make one from boxes. He also would like to draw space.” Another child
wanted to create a zoo, including a wide range of animals. I think that the children could feel really empowered by voicing their wants and needs and seeing that they are reflected in the curriculum. I also think that this was a way for the families to have a feeling of ownership in the curriculum. The one constraint that I stumbled upon was within the system of the school. Being a teacher education lab school, part of the mission is to help student teachers with their experience. The students had begun to plan the curriculum in the classroom. How could I respond to the parents’ ideas to make them feel validated without interfering with the undergraduate student’s planning experience? In a different system, I would receive the planning input from the website at night and be able to alter the planning in the classroom to reflect the suggestions within the next couple of days. This proved to be an irreconcilable dilemma for this study.

After reading the responses about the families’ experiences with their child involving the website, I became curious about the details of those moments. Earlier in the process, one mother posted about how she was using the site with her whole family. “We look at it with all our children in the evening. It’s a good way for our child to share the day with the siblings.” Incorporating other children in the viewing of the site was an aspect that I had not previously considered. I became interested in reading about the interactions occurring at the computer at home. I posed a new set of questions to the group about the family’s use of the site. The questions asked, “Have you viewed this site with members of your family, including your children?” and “Have you used the images on the website to spark conversation amongst your family?” After each question, I asked an important follow-up question about what happened at that moment. This question prompted specific examples that allowed me to visualize the experiences with the website. One family mentioned that, “(Our son) sat on my
lap and enjoyed the show along with me!” Imagining this situation allowed me to feel as though the website could encourage communication between a parent and child. The intimacy of those moments was articulated by one mother, “I told Maggy how much I loved her treasure map, and she was little embarrassed by my excitement. She did allow me to give her a high-five, however.” The responses to these questions allowed me to share in the moments with the family.

By the end of week three, the interaction level had begun to increase a small bit. However, I still felt that the experience was not truly reciprocal. I was receiving a lot of comments that were reassuring to my self-esteem such as, “You did a beautiful job” and “Magnifico”. However, I still wondered if I was asking the right questions to fully understand the families’ experiences with the website. Since I was not receiving the interaction that I anticipated, I also began to brainstorm ideas about how to encourage increased interaction through the website.

**Week Four: Publicity Push**

I began this week highlighting another aspect of the mapping exploration and documentation about our experiences creating pair portraits. I also decided to try to “advertise” the site to encourage more interactions. I sent out an email to all the families to explain some of the new features as well as some quotes from the parents (See Figure 3.1). I also put a flyer in each family’s mailbox to encourage some families that do not normally communicate through email to check it out.
Please Check Out

ORANGE AM WEBSITE

Features include:

Upcoming Plans
Explorations of the Children
Snack Menu
Calendar of Events

Parent who have visited have said:

“Thank you for helping bring parents “into” the classroom!”

“Magnifico!”

“We look at it with all our children in the evening. It’s a good way for our children to share the day with the siblings.”

“It’s so wonderful to see these pictures of all they accomplished there.”

If you haven’t visited the site, please check it out!
If you have seen it, please continue to respond to the many changing questions posted. Your input is crucial during this process.

I did notice an initial jump in the responses after the publicity push. However, it appeared that I did not get many new families to access the website. While I was very appreciative of the families who continued to access and write, I was also looking for a new perspective from the families who were not accessing as frequently. I did notice that one family was revisiting explorations that they had already looked at it. The family had already given two responses to the color exploration, and now three weeks after I first posted the color exploration, they posted the following response, “Bob was so proud to show all of us his part in color week. His brothers especially liked his blue tongue. When the image of his plastic paint experiment appeared, he jumped and said, ‘See, that’s the one I made!’" This entry was
important on many different levels. First it was able to explain how the family used the site all together with siblings. It also gave a great description of how the child became involved. And finally, I was able to understand the purpose for revisiting when I received an email from the mother. She explained the following situation, “The minute I pull up the site, they all come around to see and to read every word. It’s especially nice for (Bob’s father) because he rarely involved in the goings on at school.” Keeping parents who do not usually come to school involved is a powerful aspect of the website.

**Week Five: A New Perspective and Format to Encouraging Reciprocity**

After the publicity push in the previous week did not seem to drastically alter the response level, I began to think about how the families were using the site. From casual conversations I knew that certain families were accessing the website, but they were not responding to any of the questions. So I decided to design a series of questions to try to understand exactly how the families were using the site. The charts on the following page summarize the seven responses I received to an inquiry into how the families were using the site.
The Usage questionnaire provided me with a clearer picture of how the families were accessing the site. A very useful suggestion that came from this question was in response to the questions that asked what would encourage the families to interact more. One family suggests, “multiple choice or fill-in-the-blank vs. open-ended questions. Some days, I just can’t compose a coherent thought on paper and it’s just easier, you know?!” This response may have provided insight into the reasons why there was limited interaction with the site.

Around the same time that I posted the usage questionnaire, I began to think of other ways that I could encourage communication through the website. My advisor and I thought about the idea of snapshots, single pictures with very little words. Instead of the documentation with many pictures and an explanation, the snapshots were followed with a few questions that encouraged the parents to engage in conversations about learning and curriculum. The motivation for the introduction of the snapshots was more purposeful than just a response to the parent’s request for more pictures. The snapshots were an attempt to get the parents to think at a higher level about their children’s experiences at the Lab School. During the first few days after I posted the snapshots, I received two responses to the questions. I immediately re-posted the responses to the site below the pictures (See Figure 3.2).
### Other Parent’s Thoughts

"good way to show the process and result. Love documentation because the expression on their faces conveys the pride the children feel—"especially" "G"."

### What are the Children Learning?

"How to express themselves in a unique way (they make their own books) and in a permanent way. A book is somehow very special to "M" because he knows there is some important process in getting a book onto a library shelf. Now he can do it."

"The experience of making books brings together just about everything that is great about child development and the lab school. That is, art, imagination, small motor coordination, a bit of reading perhaps, self-expression, peer-teaching—IS THERE ANYTHING NEGATIVE ABOUT MAKING BOOKS?! NO! This is the ultimate kid-brain-enhancing experience. Kuddos!"

### In What Ways Can We Extend This Activity?

"Since I do not know the full extent of the experience, I would say that something that "M" participated in two years ago comes to mind. When she picked up a book with no words (just pictures), she started giving words to the pictures and one student-teacher immediately got pen and paper and took down what "M" said for each page. Then, they scanned the book and put her words on the pages, plasticized each page, put a spiral spine on the book and turned it into her own version. Maybe along those lines, there could be sort of "additions" or "commentary" or "the Blacksburg Times Review of Books" wherein other kids’ comments about each book are printed up and put on a book jacket. Like "Four Stars!!" raves "F", etc. Do you have plans to scan the books and put them on this website? It sounds like a lot of work, but might be worthwhile."

"Wouldn't it be neat to make a class book in which everyone contributed?"

### What are your thoughts?

In was my hope that when parents saw the responses of other families, they would be inspired to respond. This was the closest thing we could have to an online chat about the class. I thought that the parents could hear what other parents thought about the activities and the learning happening in the classroom. Through this section, I thought that the parents could identify what they felt the children were gaining from the experience, and could maybe gain a new perspective from reading another parent’s thoughts. I also hoped for face-to-face dialogue about the children’s learning involving the parents and me.
As a teacher, I also was anxious learn what the parent’s thought their children were gaining from each experience. This could be an indication to me of their thoughts on the curriculum. It would also be a gauge of how well I had made the children’s learning visible. The possibilities appeared endless and encouraging. So I anticipated the next responses with great impatience.

**Week Six: Wrapping Up**

At the beginning of the sixth week, I was beginning to see new possibilities arising with the change in format. I decided to extend the project two more weeks to allow the budding possibilities to unfold and take shape. The week started out positively. I posted some new snapshots, the plans and sent an email and flyer asking families to share what they were doing over spring break. I thought that this could be a way to encourage families to get together over the break. One family posted an event about a playgroup at a local elementary school in the upcoming months. I had a conversation with another mother about her son’s interest in kites. She mentioned that her family was going to the beach to fly kites over spring break. I asked her to send me pictures of her family at the beach (the family has a digital camera) and told her that I could use them to spark an interest in kites with the children. She also wrote about her son’s kite interest in the planning section of the website.

These two responses early in the week seemed promising. But to my dismay, the first two responses to the snapshots happened to be the only responses I received. This provocation did not encourage the kind of dialogue among families that was my hope. Also, the Spring Break invitation did not produce any additional responses about what
families were doing. At this point I began to get discouraged about the slump in interaction. After the week off school, I decided to end the data collection on the website. I had so many questions to be answered about the process, so I began to formulate my questions for the couple interviews.

The Challenges Encountered

Throughout the process there were many ongoing challenges. These challenges began with gaining and sustaining interest and also entailed many technical complications. In this section, I wish to inform others of these challenges.

Gaining and Sustaining Interest

When I initially proposed the idea of having a classroom website, the feedback was overwhelming positive. Families were excited; my peers found it interesting and the majority of conversations I had indicated that the process would be well received. Unfortunately, once I committed to this project, the enthusiasm seemed to fade. My first obstacle was the university system. The process of putting images of children on the Internet aroused concern from the agency that approves research. While the concern was well grounded and informed, getting the research approved began a pattern of skepticism.

My next hurdle was to get all of the parents excited about the project. The attendance at the meeting represented about half of the families in the study. While the second meeting had an increased attendance, there were several families who did not attend either meeting. This translated into a difficulty in obtaining signed Informed Consent forms from every member of the research group. Waiting for the Informed
Consent forms resulted in a weeks delay for the official start of the website. Once the families were comfortable with the project, the next step would be getting them interested and involved.

Unexpected complications also emerged from the student teachers. Early in the process the parents requested our Childcare Provider list and other information about the students to be posted on the website. When I asked the students for permission to post this information, a conversation erupted about their restriction to accessing the website. Per the first meeting, the student teachers were specifically excluded from the list of people who were allowed access to the website. One student exclaimed, “It is not fair that they expect our personal information to be put on the site, but we can’t look at it.” I assured the students that they were more than welcome to access the website with the parents or myself. They just were not allowed to have a personal password. At the end of the conversation, each student agreed to his or her information being shared on the site, but some did request that a close-up picture and biography not be posted. The decision was confirmed that pictures with the student teachers engaging in activities with the children could be included on the site.

Even with the attempts to have everyone gain initial access to the website early, there were still families who were not accessing the website. In the weeks following the Publicity Push, I had three families access the website for the first time. These came in the fifth, sixth, and seventh weeks of the process, which was essentially the end. In the fifth week, a mother asked me personally for the website address. Then in the sixth week, a father called the school and told me he was accessing the website for the first time, and was having difficulties. Finally, over the Spring Break, I received a response to
a question from a third family who mentioned it was their first time to the website. These situations reminded me that lack of access is not always attributed to lack of interest.

There were other complications that attributed to some of the decreased activities on the website. The father who called in the sixth week also informed me that his family would be leaving the country for the entire month of March. Obviously there would be no activity or response from that family, although, I did suggest they could look at the site from Korea and write to us. Another family had two family crises back to back during the study. These two complications, in addition to many family computer malfunctions effected the activity on the website.

**Technical Difficulties**

Dealing with the temperamental nature of technology requires patience. Embarking on a thesis that revolves around technology involves understanding that glitches will occur. While I anticipated having some complications, the specifics of each situation tended to be frustrating.

In the development phase of the first draft of the website, I worked entirely on my home computer. Since this was my first attempt at creating a website, a lot of it was trial and error, and error, and error. The software that I used to create the website, *Macromedia Dreamweaver*, was rather user-friendly, however, as anyone who has attempted their own website knows, the end product never looks how you intended it. After countless revisions and format changes, I was finally content with how the first draft of the website appeared on my home computer. It was at this time that I attempted to upload it to the server. (Uploading is the process of transferring all of the information
about your website to a server which holds the information on the Internet for everyone to access.) On my modem connection, the process was painstakingly slow. It became even worse when I began to upload images. However, I felt a sense of accomplishment knowing that even though it was slow, the process seemed successful and manageable. Little did I know that the speed was the least of my concerns.

The next morning, I pulled up the website at school to see how it looked. To my horror, there was virtually nothing on the website. The text managed to appear but no icons or buttons. In addition, most of the text that linked to a new page did not function properly. For the second time during this process, I was in tears, but obviously not in “overwhelming pride” as before. After some minor panicking and thumbing through several sections of the manual, I discovered that every image, icon, and button that I wanted to appear on the website must also be uploaded to the site. I corrected the glitches and reloaded the website. Many other incidents occurred resembling this situation, however, each time I became swifter in correcting them.

During the first week of the website interaction, I had a parent e-mail me about the potential for a logout button. He felt that if families were accessing the site on a public computer, there could be a potential for a security violation. In response, I added the button that would take the user back to the initial password protected page. However, the effectiveness was not as intended. I informed the father that the system seems to remember the identity of the user and does not require a password to reenter the site. This feature is what allows the parents to move about the site without have to reenter the password at each new page. However, this capability made it impossible to have a logout button without further technology. He posed the question to his department and I posed it
to the web development team at the university. They informed me that they were working on having the logout technology available, but currently it was not an option. I conveyed this response to the father, and never heard a response from his contacts. Therefore, I assumed that he was satisfied with the current security measures and did not investigate the matter further.

The above situations were unexpected dilemmas that I encountered during this study. While they complicated the process, I don’t feel that any of them overshadowed the overall positive experience of co-constructing the website.

The Concluding Interviews

After seven weeks of data collection, I began the interview process. The original intention was to have couple interviews with each family to gain their perspective on the entire process of co-constructing a website. Due to schedule constraints, I could only interview four families as couple. I interviewed 8 mothers and 3 fathers individually. I was not able to interview one family at all. The majority of the interviews were about a half hour dialogic conversation that was tape recorded and transcribed. However, due to multiple reasons, the interview procedure had to be altered for a few families. First, two of the mothers did not have time for a formal interview so instead had a casual conversation about the website. One child was out of the country with her mother, so her father submitted his answers through email. After an interview with one mother who was not accessing the website, I sent the interview questions home with her to give to her husband, who had been accessing the website while traveling for business. Although the
process was not what I originally conceptualized, I feel as though I was able to collect enough data to gain an understanding of the families’ perception of the process.

The interviews were dialogic in nature, which implies a conversational tone. Therefore, the questions asked in each interview varied both in content and order. However, all of the questions asked involved one of four themes. The first involved the general reaction or comments about the process of co-constructing a website. The second theme revolved around the access of the website. The third theme attempted to describe relationships, both at home and with the school. The remaining questions evoked technical information that would be helpful in future recommendations. True to the dialogic method, some other noteworthy topics emerged in some interviews. Two interviews were with participants who had never accessed the website, so naturally the questions were altered and the main focus of the interview was allowing them an opportunity to access the site.

**General Reaction**

I began each interview asking for the participant’s general reaction to the process of developing a co-constructed website. Every response was positive. Parents commented on their opportunity to see an “inside perspective” on their child’s day. The parents appreciated the time that was put into the site and noted that the website exceeded their expectations. One mother called the website, “A gift of another realm” in the ways that it has allowed her to get in touch with her daughter’s life. Others commented on the effectiveness in communicating with their children. One father called it, “an improved supplement for talking to your kids”, in comparison to the newsletter previously used in
the classroom. In reference to the communication with the school, two parents appreciated the change from receiving papers in the family mailbox. Both mothers specifically mentioned that paper memos from the school usually sit on the front seat of their car and are overlooked. However, for some parents, both the paper and electronic communication was needed. Another mother raved, “You have just taken communication with the families to an exponential level beyond what there was before!” While these responses were encouraging and validating, I was excited about the more specific themes of the later interview questions.

Accessing

The access questions were simple and clear-cut. The first involved how much the family accessed the site, the second asked what deterred them from accessing the site, and the final one asked what could have encouraged them to access more. The access ranged from “daily access” to “never accessed”. Both extremes surprised me. The majority of people were accessing 1-3 times a week. Others accessed 2-4 times throughout the total process, which equated to a little over once every two weeks. This level of access was obviously not as frequent as expected, and two mothers commented on that. Both stated that their access was not as much as they would have originally thought. Two other families revealed that their access has been down drastically since Spring Break.

The next question that comes naturally is, “Why?” What could have deterred the families from accessing the site as often? The answer for many involved time. For many, their work interfered with their time, including one mother starting her own
business during the study and a pair of accountants that were in prime tax season. We also had 4 fathers working on dissertations in the prime weeks of the study. Another mother admitted her own discomfort with computers as the cause for her limited access. Her husband also mentioned that because their son was their third child, they were not as concerned with his schooling. He felt that if it was their first child, they might have looked more often. This was interesting to hear because I had not considered that birth order could have an impact on access. Another perspective that I did not previously consider was related to the overuse of computers. I originally thought that the website would be a useful tool for communication with parents who are constantly on-line. However one father mentioned, “I spend incredible amounts of time on the computer already and I want to get away from it as soon as possible.” The two previous thoughts were insights that I don’t think I would have gathered without the interview process.

After looking at what discouraged families from accessing the website, I then asked what could have been done to encourage them to interact with the website more. Many families response was nothing, because I could not control the major deterrent time. I specifically asked the families about two suggestions that I had received from parents earlier in the process. Parents had mentioned that if there was a specific day that they knew the website would be updated, or email notification, they may have been more inclined to look. During the interviews the reaction was mixed. Six parents thought that having an update day would have been helpful. However, one mother summed up the opposing side stating, “I get to it when I get to it. I don’t think that day would have made a difference.” The response to the email notification was a little more convincing. While eight parents definitively agreed to an email notifying them of an update, the majority of
the other parents considered it as a potential option. The mother who made the “I’ll get to it when I get to it” comment reconsidered her position adding that she may be inclined to visit more if prompted by email. A few parents mentioned that including the actual address in the email would have made it more productive.

A few parents had additional suggestions about how to encourage them to interact more. One parent mentioned dating the questions on the site and survey-based questions versus open-ended ones may have encouraged them to respond more. When asked what could have encouraged more interaction, one mother wittily replied, “Winning prizes, ‘the sixth person of the day gets a free Coca-Cola’.” She then refined her answer saying, “each time I accessed it there was something new as a reward. That is enough incentive to go on.” From this statement, I deduced that frequently updating the site could encourage families to access the site, but inspiring them to interact with the site was a different story.

Relationships

The basis of the research was a study about relationships. I felt that the website could possibly be a tool that could effect the building of relationships both within the home and between home and school. My next series of questions attempted to understand how accessing the website did just that. I originally intended to look at how the website effected the relationship amongst the triad of two parents and a child. An aspect that I did not consider was the effect that website could have on the whole family system.
The effect on the parents’ relationships with the children came in two forms. First there were about six families that accessed the site with their preschool child. They commented on increased meaningful interactions among them at the computer. Throughout the process, some parents had described the intimate details of their moments accessing the website with their child, including emotions and facial expressions. The parents mentioned that the website allowed them to engage in conversations with their children about their day. Some commented on the depth of their conversations explaining that looking at the pictures with their child shows them what they did. The next step becomes asking what it was like. This extension allows for a different kind of conversation. One mother states, “All of a sudden the typical, ‘How was your day? It was OK’ turns into so much detail about how they were thinking.” This further understanding of children occurred with both the parents who accessed the site with and without their children. A father who did not access the site with his child said, “It really helped me understand our kid better and the whole story behind what she was talking about.” This interest into children’s thinking was a welcomed outcome of the process. Other parents mentioned that the photos were a way to initiate conversations with their children that were not really happening before.

An unexpected outcome of this process was the effect that accessing the website would have on the entire family unit. Not only were families commenting on the interactions with their child that was in the classroom, they began to describe situations with their other children. One family spoke of their oldest daughter actually typing the responses into the website. This family also mentioned that their daughters would talk to their brother about his time at school. Another family used the site at a common time.
The mother explained, “Most of the times when I wanted to look at it when I knew the kids were around, because that was the time when it was most fun.” For some families accessing the site became a family event. Not only did they look at it together, the siblings engaged in actions that were a direct result of viewing the website. One mother describes a time after viewing the mapping exploration, three of her sons got together and starting making maps at home. It is these types of interactions with the whole family unit that bridge the gap between home and school.

Aside from general conversations, there did not seem to be an increased interaction among spouses. A few families said that they spoke to each other about the website, but it was mainly about the interactions with the kids. An aspect that did surface was the power of the website to connect the school to fathers that were not involved in the daily activity of the classroom. For a few families the mother is the parent who regularly takes the child to and from school. Therefore, the father does not feel a connection with the school. For three families, the fathers specifically commented on the effect that the website has had on their involvement in their child’s education. One father explained that viewing the website with his son was a nice way to “catch up” on what his son was doing. One mother explained her husband’s interaction with the site as, “a way for him to be involved without being there.” I felt that these were powerful statements about the feelings these fathers had prior to this study. One final situation I stumbled on became an interesting benefit to the website. One of our fathers traveled from Monday-Friday every week. This was a complication of a new job that the family was coming to terms with. The father admitted to accessing the site at least once a week from the road. He reflected, “It was a way for me to stay in a little closer touch with my daughter.”
could see and read about her activities. It just made me feel a little closer to home. THANKS!” I never imagined that the website could be so meaningful to a parent in this way. It made me consider what implications the website could have for other traveling parents or possibly families of divorce.

In addition to the impact that the website had on the home relationships, some families felt that it altered their relationship with the school as well. Some simply stated that they felt more connected, while others went into more detail. One mother mentioned she felt that the website was able to spark conversations amongst the parents. She commented that the interaction between parents has changed, though not as much as she would have hoped. A few parents noted how the website affected their relationship with me. One mother said, “I think it’s definitely brought the parents more into the classroom, and it’s made us appreciate you a lot more!” Other parents felt that the website provided an “open window of communication.” Another mother explained her experience, “I think throughout this, I felt more comfortable coming to you. I felt like you are asking something of me directly and it made me feel more comfortable being open with you. If someone is asking me for something then it means they are interested in my opinion.”

This was the intention of the process; reciprocity. This project was not only about making the parents feel informed, but also about making the parents feel involved and valued. This comment made me realize the value in merely asking a person for their opinion.

It should be noted that other parents did not feel that the website impacted their relationship with the school. However, all of those parents also commented that a positive relationship with the school was in existence prior to this study.
Technically Speaking

The final questions revolved around technical issues of the website. I asked families what current aspects of the site they found most useful and interesting and also asked what additions they could think of. There were a few families that mentioned that aspects such as the snack menu, the childcare provider list, the plans, the newsletter and the interesting websites were useful to them. Four families mentioned the calendar as a useful tool. One mother even admitted that she had to check the calendar to find out what day we returned to school after Spring Break.

However, every family responded that the pictures were the most useful and interesting aspects of the website. One mother speculated that the pictures were most exciting because they encouraged interaction with her child. Another father reminded me that, “A picture is worth a thousand words.” I began to ask the families for some specifics about the pictures. I reminded them about the switch in the middle of the process from the explorations to the snapshots. I asked them to explain their preference between the two. All but one of the parents responded that they liked the explorations better. The mother who enjoyed the snapshots simply stated that she liked that they were posted more frequently. The other parents cited the attention to detail and explanations as their main enjoyment of the explorations. One mother explained, “You showed first how you talked about it, then you planned it, then you went and built it.” When posed with the choice between posting an exploration once a week and posting snapshots three times a week, almost all of the parents opted for the explorations. One mother worked with me to develop a solution to the dilemma between showcasing in-depth, thought provoking documentation and the push for more pictures on the site. We decided that
every day, I could put up random pictures from the day without words or much thought behind it. Then I could make it a goal to post an exploration once a week. She thought of the random pictures as more of a “scrapbook” to appease the people that just want to see more pictures of the children and the explorations to serve as the piece that provokes thought.

In addition to the proposal about pictures, many parents had ideas about new aspects to try with the site. As in each of the meetings earlier in the process, several families mentioned the idea of video and audio feed. Some families were interested in a live update camera to see the activities of the day. Other parents mentioned the capabilities of video segments serving the same purpose as the exploration images. One father mention, “If a picture is worth a thousand words, I think that one segment of video is worth more than one thousand words.” This same father asked if it was possible to have families just speak their responses to the questions into a microphone to track their thoughts as they looked at the explorations. It should be noted that attempts were made to include audio clips on the website, but none were successful.

Another popular suggestion was the previously noted discussion list. From the inception of the study, parents had been asking for an open discussion list. One father suggested a website that uses a program that has an ongoing discussion list. Each time a person posts a comment, it stays on the site in a chronological sequence for the next person to read. He explained a capability to monitor the posts and censor comments that may be offensive. This technology may have been a solution to the response for an open discussion board on the site.
Some other ideas that were mentioned include:

- Online portfolios
- Online newsletter
- A suggestion box
- More information about child development and parenting
- Information about how the parents can help in the classroom
- Security of website
- Equity of kid’s pictures
- Usefulness in an elementary school setting
- Reassurance that the school was the right choice for their child
- Seeing a new aspect of the child

All of the suggestions were noted and deserve consideration in the next phase of this research.

Final Meeting

The final meeting was a conversation between two mothers from the research group and me. Though the attendance was minimal, the conversation led to concrete suggestions about how to improve the content of the website. The format suggestions are included in Figure 3.3 on the following page. In addition, examples of website pages can be found in Appendixes F, G, H, I and J.
Format Suggestions

1. A rotating Picture of the Day or Week that would change as you accessed
2. Adding child development knowledge to the documentation
3. Including a section that listed interesting websites about parenting
4. Change words to "Provocations of the Week"
5. Change words to "To add an event to the calendar"
6. Flashing Arrows or a different color text to signify new additions
7. Guest Book- a moderated chat-like forum
8. Suggestion Box- a place to make general anonymous comments
9. Clickable icons - as opposed to text
10. Sharing the work - uploading and updating to be shared with student teachers and parents
11. Rollover images - an explanation of what you will find in each section would appear as you rolled the mouse over the word
The entire process of co-constructing the website produced a plethora of information from many different sources. While the overall response to the website was positive, I still learned volumes about what parents look for in communication. I think I was able to address some of their requests and was forced to table some for later investigations. Reflecting on the process of this research, my belief that attempting to involve parents is a trying, but vital piece to a successful classroom community is affirmed.
Chapter Four: ReVisiting: Lessons Learned

In the end, the process of co-constructing the website with the parents brought me mixed feelings of accomplishment and questioning what else I could have done. The overwhelmingly positive reception of the idea was inspiring and validating. I was satisfied knowing that the website served its purpose, to impact communication with the families about activities in the classroom. There was also an unsettled part of me, always wondering what I could have done more. In this chapter, I will discuss my initial research questions, what I have learned as a webmaster about the process of co-constructing a website, and what I learned as a teacher about communication with families. It is my intention in this section to synthesize the information that I have learned and hopefully inspire other people to embark on a similar journey, whether it is with technology, parent-teacher communication, or potentially a combination of both.

Initial Research Questions

How the parents contributed?

My original intention was to look at how the three protagonists of learning contributed to the development and utilization of the website. I learned quickly that I needed to study one aspect of communication closely instead of communication in general. I decided to focus primarily on how the parents interacted with the website. Throughout the process I saw varying degrees of participation and utilization of the website. Some families visited the site practically daily, answering every question I posed. Other families viewed the website only a few times during the process in an attempt to gain additional information about their child’s day. The parents gave life to
the website by making suggestions, answering questions about the process, and investing themselves in this project. Without the involvement of the parents, this project would have been about the website as a way to distribute more information from school to home. However, with the support and active role the parents took in the development of the website, this project embodied the true meaning of communication: Reciprocity.

What factors contribute to parents’ participation?

Most of the factors that influenced the parents’ participation in the process were extraneous to the control of the study. For some families, this form of communication was not part of their lifestyle. For the majority of families the factor that most influenced their interaction with the website was time. Throughout the interview process the parents commented that the reason they did not interact with the website more frequently was because they did not have time. Essentially this element was out of my control. The only thing that I could do was to make the website something that was interesting enough to make it worthwhile for the parents to visit the website. The additional factors that influenced the parents’ interactions with the website involved gaining initial access, encouraging them to revisit the site when new sections were added, and making the opportunities for input more accessible and more inviting.

How do I, the researcher, provide information for and make revisions to the website?

While this process revolved specifically around revising a website, it was more about my efforts as a teacher to enhance parent-teacher communication. I quickly realized that my role was that of a teacher-researcher. Throughout the process, I was
constantly gathering information about the children, analyzing and organizing it, and presenting it as documentation that not only captured the children’s learning, but also posed questions to the families about the process. While the medium that I chose to represent with was technology, the Cycle of Inquiry (Gandini and Goldhaber, 2001) is universal in any classroom. A teacher-researcher’s role is to collect data and present them in a way that provokes the thoughts and dialogues that allow the learning to continue.

**What I learned as the Webmaster about the Process of Co-Constructing a Website**

_Eager to Try Again_

From the conception of this idea, there has been a buzz of encouragement from parents and faculty that not only inspired me to attempt constructing a website to enhance communication between home and school, but also motivated me to continue it. The excitement was not just from parents in my classroom. News quickly spread about the website and soon other parents in the school were inquiring about the process. Midway through the study, a parent approached me to find out more about the site. She expressed her interest in having the site for the other classrooms. A parent also mentioned the website at a Parent Advisory Committee Meeting, stating how helpful it has been with communication. Immediately, the room began to buzz with statements from other parents such as, “We’re jealous!” “Where’s ours?” “Are you going to leave it for next year?” This excitement was very encouraging for future use of this idea. While the idea of a classroom website was exciting and new to many, the pressure was on to make the reality live up to the expectations. At times during the study, I began to wonder if I was
doing enough to sustain the interest in the study. The concluding interviews brought me assurance that I was somewhat successful in this task. One father commented, “The things I saw were really much better than I expected.” At the conclusion of the study, many parents requested that the website stay online though the end or the year. One mother said, “It makes me wish it had been around longer, that someone would have done it before you did.” Another mother added that she would like to see it continued next year with her younger daughter. These comments assured me that while I have not figured it all out, the idea of using a website for this type of communication was a success. As more families gain access to the internet, technology, including websites will become a viable tool to enhance parent-teacher communication in many settings.

**Recommendations for Future Considerations and Utilization of a Classroom Website**

While this process was successful in the end, there were lessons that I learned throughout the study that could make future endeavors of this kind a bit easier. From the countless mistakes and lessons learned I made and the suggestions from the parents, I am able to make some technical and privacy recommendations about ways to develop a classroom website.

- **Security**- It is important to ensure that all of the parents are comfortable with images of their children being used on the website. There are several steps in addition to the actions taken in this study that can help to secure the website.

- **Layout**- The layout of the website should be clean and user-friendly. In any population, there are differing levels of experience with websites. One mother explained that she could not access the website unless her husband set it up, while a few other parents have designed their own websites. It is important to be sensitive to both extremes as well as the wide range of experience levels in the middle.
• Updating- Updating the website often is crucial to its success. On average the parents in this study were visiting the website once a week. It is my recommendation to add new pictures at least two times a week. The goal is to have something new each time a parent accesses. For the parents who access the site daily, that expectation can be difficult. However, the suggestion by a parent of posting random pictures daily and an exploration once a week seems to be a manageable solution.

• Upload the website on one computer- The uploading process is too complex to attempt to make revisions on two computers. I attempted to update the site from my home computer and the computer at the school. This led to missing links and images on the website.

• Opportunities for input-Make opportunities for input from the families plentiful and noticeable. On each new page have a response link for the families. This is beneficial in establishing reciprocal communication.

• Availability of computers- Making computers available at the school for families who would like assistance with accessing the website. This may also help to provide access for families that are not able to access the Internet at home or work.

I also have discovered concrete ways that the website can help to enhance the relationship between home and school. The main suggestion is to start the process early in the school year. Many parents mentioned that they wish we had more time.

Introducing the website at the beginning of the school year could provide many benefits to the success of a website. First I would construct a rough draft of a website for when you pitch the idea to parents. Many families have trouble truly seeing your vision and what is to be expected. A father who did not view the site until the concluding interviews said that if he had seen it earlier, he would have definitely visited often. An example of your intentions could help gain initial parental access to the site.

Having the classroom website could provide a great catalyst for discussing your teaching philosophy with the parents. At the end of the study I had many families that
still did not understand the inspirations for my teaching. The documentation on the website can show how the classroom operates which can provide the parents with insight into your philosophy. One mother revealed, “Before (I saw the website) I thought the kids over there just play, they just play…and now I understand why.” The documentation allowed her to understand our motivation for using play as an avenue for learning and teaching. In reference to planning, another mother said, “I never gave suggestions from home because I thought you had the year already planned out.” These pieces of documentation became great opportunities to discuss our negotiated and emergent curriculum. Introducing the website and having these conversations earlier in the year would have helped us to all be on the same page.

A final noted benefit to introducing the website early involves the number one deterrent for the families in accessing the site: time. If the website was introduced at the beginning of the school year, the families could have made accessing the website part of their family routine. Increasing their frequency of access would then make it easier to get responses from them later in the process.

**What I learned as a Teacher About Communication with Families**

In addition to the technical suggestions for co-constructing a website, I also began to learn more about my teaching. Through the Cycle of Inquiry, this study allowed me to gain further understanding of the parents, the children, and myself. I now have a better understanding of the three protagonists of learning. This knowledge will help me in enhancing communication between home and school in my future classrooms.
What I learned about the parents

Through the co-construction process, I came to a better understanding of the parents in my classroom. Through the patterns of interaction with the website, I gained an appreciation for the complicated lives of the families that I serve. I learned that lack of input and/or involvement does not always equate to a lack of caring. As one mother stated in the interviews, “I tend to provide feedback when it’s negative. When things are status quo, I don’t say much.” Another mother alluded to the power of simply asking her opinion. She explained that she was not the type of person to offer her opinion, but when she was asked she had a lot to say. While I originally had preconceived notions about why I didn’t hear from certain parents, after asking the families I realized that the reasons were complex and individualistic to each family. I realized that it was part of my job as a teacher to ask questions that evoke a response, whether it be on a website or in person.

From the interactions with the website, as well as the interviews, I have come to a new understanding about the sense of connection that these parents felt with the school. In my previous relationships with the families and working through this experience with them, I came to some understanding about their comfort level in the classroom. Through casual conversations, expressions of interest, and involvement in the daily activities of the classroom, I loosely grouped parents into two categories, intensely connected to the classroom and not as connected to the classroom. For the parents that were not connected to the classroom prior to the study, the website became an opportunity for them to understand the daily experiences in the school and feel connected. The parents who were already intensely connected to the school at the beginning of this study were the parents who consistently interacted with the website and provided responses. Since these
families already felt connected to the school, the website lent itself to more reciprocal communication. At the end of the study, both groups felt more connected to the school.

What I learned about the children

This experience required a lot of documentation of the children’s learning. Through this process of constant documentation, I learned a lot about the children that I taught. I began to understand what it meant to truly listen to the children, the thoughts they said, the ideas they created, and most importantly the thoughts and ideas that they didn’t verbally express. Attempting to understand the ideas in their heads, their theory of mind, was what afforded me the opportunity to make suggestions and offer provocations to continue their learning. The constant analysis of pictures, transcripts and experiences put me in touch with the intricacies of the children’s days.

Through the documentation of this process, I also began to understand children’s learning better. By nature of this study, I was constantly documenting the children’s learning for the website. While making the learning visible to the parents, I also gained an understanding of the children’s learning. I began to recognize learning in ordinary moments and strived to capture those moments with words, pictures and artifacts. This process made me a better listener, documenter, and teacher.

What I learned about myself

In addition to what this experience taught me about the children and families that I serve, I also learned a lot about myself as a teacher. I began this journey on a quest for enhancing communication with the parents in my classroom. I quickly realized that the
majority of the initial responsibility relied on me. It was my job to make the classroom inviting. It was my job to create the documentation that inspired dialog. It was my job to ask the questions that provoked thought. I realized previous efforts such as stating that “your input is always welcome”, “you can always come visit,” or putting on a friendly face at the door did not bring me any closer to my goal. If I wanted true communication in my classroom, I had to make the initiative with the parents to understand what they truly think.

I also realized in this process that taking on the goal of encouraging reciprocal communication is an act of courage. If you ask the parents what they think about the classroom, the curriculum, or even your teaching, you have to be prepared to truly listen to their responses. It takes courage to open yourself up to evaluation from the parents. Inevitably, you are going to hear some comments that hurt your feelings. In my case, I put my heart and soul (as well as all of my time) into this website and to have someone give me constructive criticism or ask me to do more was a little hard to take. But I had to remind myself that I had asked for this. I wanted the parents to feel comfortable expressing with me their joys as well as their concerns. When they responded, I needed to take their thoughts into consideration and do my best to address them. While I cannot accommodate everyone’s requests, it is extremely important that I validated the parents’ suggestions by acknowledging them and attempting to explain why I chose not to include them in the website. While this task was a hard one, it was necessary in establishing reciprocal communication.
Final Thoughts

Throughout this process I have learned volumes about communication between home and school. I gained a better understanding of the process of co-constructing a website, of the parents and children that I work with, and of myself as a teacher. The wealth of information that this study produces gives me a sense of accomplishment in my goal to impact communication between home and school. If I need more assurance, I can look to the words of my partners in this exploration: the parents.

“This is like a gift of another realm.”

“You have just taken communication to an exponential level beyond what it was before.”

“Thank you for helping bring parents into the classroom.”
References


Newsweek (1991, December 2). The 10 best schools in the world and what we can learn from them, pp. 50-59.


