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When Great Minds Dream Together

Marie Shaw Dunn Child Development Center

by Nancy P. Alexander

My first experience with the program that became the Marie Shaw Dunn Child Development Center at Northwestern State University (NSU) was as a graduate student taking classes for kindergarten certification. Following a visit to the center, the instructor made some statements that resonate with me still today, greatly influencing my philosophy on working with young children.

“How does a child learn about an orange?” she asked us, passing around several oranges for us to explore to make her point. We handled oranges, examining the rough texture, and

smelled them — even tossing one to each other. Our instructor followed up on the experience by explaining how we understood the concept of orange, not from a worksheet or coloring book page, but by our firsthand experiences of handling, smelling, and tasting, and exploring the orange with our senses. “Only then,” she explained, “does a young child truly understand the concept of orange. And without that experience, the word *orange* (she wrote on the chalkboard) has no meaning!”

Today, I rarely eat an orange without that influential lesson replaying in my memory.

A String of “Firsts”

The center began as a nursery school in 1935, the first laboratory nursery school for a child development program in Louisiana. As needs changed the program became the Child Development Center in 1971, coinciding with a new master’s degree program in early childhood education. About the same time, it became the first in the state to offer a full-day program for children. Then in 1992, it was renamed the Marie Shaw Dunn Child Development Center in honor of a revered faculty member and head of the Department of Home Economics, now the Department of Family and Consumer Sciences. Dr. Dunn, the center’s namesake, had initiated the child development program at



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NSU and established the first nursery school laboratory in Louisiana to involve college students.

“What If” Conversations

During the '90s, then director Cheryl McBride recognized that current trends in education, as well as changing times, meant that student teachers needed experience with children from diverse backgrounds. Because the center operated primarily on parent fees, children from lower-income families were few, and many college student parents were unable to take advantage of the program. She saw that this gap meant a missed opportunity for the parents, the students, and, most of all, the children. Additionally, working on approval from the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) for the university degree program, she was looking for ways to strengthen the field experience for students, to better

prepare them for the programs in which they likely would be employed.

At that same time Pat Taylor, a forward-thinking head of the local Head Start program, was attending NSU and supporting her employees in working toward degrees. This was at a time when most Head Start programs only required a Child Development Associate (CDA) credential, well before the federal mandates for associate's or bachelor's degrees. The two directors had become friends, sharing the common concerns, challenges, and goals of program administration.

Over a cup of coffee between classes, the need for more diversity in the center was broached in a casual conversation between the two. The conversation led to the realization that the Head Start program expected to receive some additional funds to expand, examining the possibility of adding two classrooms

— but they needed a location. The two began one of those “what if...” conversations that so often start off as a dream, but can become reality if the right people are asking “what if.”

“What if we could put a Head Start program in the space across the playground from the Child Development Center? What if the children could share the playground and the teachers could share professional development and other resources? What if eligible students could enroll their children right there on campus, as conveniently as in the Child Development Center, but at no cost? What if it could be a model of collaboration between the two entities: the University and the Head Start program?”

A Shared Vision

It seemed a clear direction for the two, who quickly set about the work of helping others see their shared vision. The process of bringing the Head Start program to campus took about two years, a relatively short time considering that two complex organizations were being challenged to do something that to everyone's best knowledge had not been done before. In addition to educating many decision makers to the value of the idea and receiving numerous approvals, a ruling from the Attorney General was required. As part of the negotiations and planning, the college president issued a requirement that the teachers in the program be degreed and certified, a requirement that gave Pat Taylor help in her own efforts to promote degreed teachers at a time it was not required at the federal level. Not only did she employ degreed and certified teachers, but she was able to hire teachers with master's degrees and use the experience as leverage to increase salaries for staff. In 2010, under the leadership of then director Jana Maggio, the center became one of only a handful of programs in north Loui-



Photograph by Nancy P. Alexander

siana to be accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children.

Traditions and Change

A major emphasis of the program is the need to balance the needs of the children, the families, and the staff. Respecting those needs informs the decisions made daily. The current director, Amanda Lagrange, continues the many traditions of the program, leading it during the many changes occurring in the early care and education field today. One of the projects focuses on Louisiana animals through a child-driven, emergent curriculum aligned with NAEYC standards as well as the Louisiana Early Learning and Development Standards. She also leads the center through changes in the state to upgrade and expand the availability of quality early care and education programs. By observing, conducting case studies, and participating in the child development center, students are able to bridge theory and practical implementation to be better prepared to work in the field of early care and education.

The center has always had a strong developmental approach, emphasizing objective and accurate observation as a key to understanding child development. Child development students kept journals of their observations as a key component of their work in the center. The many benefits of the journals were highlighted when the unfortunate death of a college student led her family to establish a fund for playground improvement after reading her journal and seeing how much the experiences at the center had meant to her and influenced her planned career.

A Sense of Place

The Child Development Center is located on Northwestern State University's main campus in the town of

Natchitoches, in northwest Louisiana. If you've seen the movie "Steel Magnolias," you've seen Natchitoches, the hometown of the author and site of the filming. The town is steeped in history as the oldest settlement west of the Mississippi River with a heavy French influence.

The town's Mardi Gras tradition is a popular part of the center's curriculum. Mardi Gras beads, tossed from floats and collected at parades in vast numbers by children and adults alike, are often used for collages and other art projects. They are handy for numerous sorting, measuring, and classifying math activities, and even used in sensory tables. Playground parades of decorated tricycles and wagons and created costumes outdoors or shoebox floats indoors are always a highlight. The town's culture is the catalyst for many children's projects including when small groups of children make their own version of King Cakes, while learning measuring and food preparation.

A popular treat, the Natchitoches meat pie, is the focus of an annual festival, which children recreate in the classroom, setting up a meat pie booth and selling meat pies and other treats. In the

process, they are learning money and other math concepts, language, and even work concepts. Such group activities not only develop academic skills, but the very important social skills of cooperation and collaboration, important abilities for success in school and in the workforce of today.

Following Reggio Emilia's inspired curriculum, these activities can easily expand into projects lasting weeks or more. As the center worked initially toward implementing the project approach, a cluster of stray chickens took up residence on the campus near the center and became the focus of one long-running project. Known affectionately as the "chickens on the hill," children drew, painted, read books, and recreated their experiences watching the daily activities of the roaming chickens. Now, many years later, artwork that grew out of that project still graces the walls of many former teachers' and parents' homes.

Children thrive within this framework where opportunities for making choices, planning, and materials support inquiry and self-discovery. It's how children learn about an orange.

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