

Becoming Planners: Finding Time and Insight

based on an interview
with Patricia Berl

Ask any director, stop any teacher, and he will tell you that planning *makes the difference*. With time to plan, chaos can become calm, tension can give way to decent relations, seat-of-the-pants classroom management can become quality education. But I'd take those testimonies a step further. I'd claim that it's only when teachers become planners that teachers, as well as children, develop.

A skeptic might point out that teachers are already *developed* — after all, they're full-grown adults. But when I speak of teachers developing, I am not talking about them being just successful activity planners or classroom managers. I am thinking of teachers developing their teaching into an art, reflecting a deep sense of personal values and style — as a composer who writes good music or an author who crafts his individual story. Only if teachers are given the time to plan their work thoughtfully can they become artists in this sense.

Narrow Vs. Broad Planning

What you notice about novice teachers is that their plans are often narrow, short term, and teacher dependent. They plan just for specific activities. By comparison, skilled teachers plan for the long term, for broad objectives, and in terms of children's activities. Consider the simple example of teaching children the concept of a triangle. Inexperienced teachers may put in as much — or even more — preparation time as skilled teachers do. The new teacher may make a large poster with the word *triangle* in large colored letters. She may make sheets on which children are to color in triangles. She may provide an elastic cord so that children, work-



Patricia Berl serves as vice president of operations for CorporateFamily Solutions in the DC/Baltimore area. She is known nationally as an expert in early childhood administration, is a regular presenter at national child development conferences, and has published extensively on topics including center management and staff supervision.



ing in threes, can make different triangle shapes at recess. But what she is creating is a set of activities about triangles, with no connection to children's earlier learning and no implications for what comes next. The next day it is on to squares and rectangles.

By comparison, skilled teachers plan in much more open and subtle ways. They start the year by setting up the block shelf so that the triangular shapes are in a different space from the cylinders and squares. Occasionally, they divide the block-building space into triangular wedges, rather than squares. They talk with children about how such working spaces turn out different structures. They make plans or photographs of the buildings children create. These records are placed in a book or a file that children turn to when they want ideas. When children paint wedges and pointed forms or build teepees or tents, experienced teachers talk about the *triangles* they have made. In other words, with skilled teachers, I am always aware of a *long arc* of planning. Those teachers are forever asking:

"Where might it go next?"

"What else might it connect to?"

It's conventional to think about the benefits of this kind of skilled planning for children — how it provides a richer classroom environment, a number of varied avenues for approaching basic concepts, developmentally sound sequences of learning. But I want to emphasize the benefits to teachers.

As they become skilled planners, teachers:

- **Cease being at the mercy of the moment.** They learn how to build on what they have done earlier and how to make what they are doing now pay off in the future. This gives teachers a sense of accomplishment. When they overhear children talking about the triangle shapes they see in the trees outside, they can take pleasure in having laid the groundwork well.
- **Buy time for reflection.** Skilled planning often involves making better use of what naturally occurs in the classroom (instead of scurrying to invent dittoes, cutouts, and teaching charts for every holiday and concept). In that way, skilled planning can actually free teachers from busy work and win them time to think about the *big* things they want to accomplish or change.

- **Win the right to selection.** One of the byproducts of reflection is that

teachers can begin to select the materials, the procedures, and the kinds of interactions that they believe in most deeply. Once teachers begin making choices based on their own experience and judgment, they are on their way to practicing teaching as an art.

Making Planning Possible

The question is, then, "How can schools create a climate in which teachers will be able to plan in these ways?" In my experience, there are a number of ways in which administrators and directors can create a climate in which teachers have the opportunity to plan:

- **Planning for planning.** Good planning does not occur when wedged in at the end of a day or in occasional night meetings. School administrators must make *planning for planning* a part of their calendar. I have worked in centers and schools where we regularly found substitutes for teachers so that they could have an entire morning to lay out plans for the next semester. I have also been in a center where the school closed so that the teachers could work together for a full day. We had to plan for that day a year in advance. We wrote families a letter explaining our purpose and asking for their support. We even found college students willing to baby-sit in homes.
- **Regularity.** Good planning can't take place in occasional blitzes. It is essential for every teacher to have at least 45 minutes a week to think ahead. The more responsible a teacher is, the more planning time he needs on a regular basis. I like to see my head teachers have as much as an hour and a half.
- **Group work.** It isn't enough to plan alone. After all, teachers often work together in classroom teams, and each is also a contributing member of the center. Using whatever means are at my disposal, I find all my head teachers time to meet together at least four times a year. It is equally essential for the head teacher, assistants, and aides from any one classroom to have time to think ahead together.

Over the years, I have brought the teachers in my school together for an evening. After supper, we brainstorm possibilities for the coming year in small groups. Then we look over all the ideas, evaluating them. That way everyone, from head teachers to the newest aides, has a voice. Those hours are very educational. Younger teachers see more experienced teachers modeling the kind of broad, subtle planning that comes with experi-



ence. Away from the demands of children and parents, teachers have the chance to talk through the issues of personal style and values that are at the heart of artful teaching.

- **Resources.** Teachers' ability to plan develops with experience and the opportunity to observe skilled practitioners. But time is expensive, so it makes good sense to help the learning process along. For instance, teachers can:
 - team up with still more experienced teachers (from their own or other centers) particularly when planning for extending or changing aspects of the curriculum.
 - visit other schools and centers to find out how that staff finds time to plan, what they plan, who works together in planning.
 - make use of courses at local colleges and universities. Teachers should explore the possibilities, talk with other people who have studied there, find instructors who are especially skilled at helping teachers gain insight into the goals they want to achieve and the way to pursue those goals.

Living Out Those Plans

It is one thing to plan, another thing to live by those plans. Based on what I have seen, there are not one but three secret ingredients: cooperation, evaluation, and flexibility.

- **Cooperation.** When it involves two or more teachers working together in classrooms, planning can be as complicated as working together in a marriage. It is particularly demanding when teachers have different personalities or philosophies: when one is assertive and the other is quiet or when one believes in strict instruction and the other supports a play-centered curriculum. It is critical that everyone put their cards on the table and participate in planning, rather than abdicate or sulk. Sometimes it is important for a director or a more experienced teacher to sit in. It can be that person's role to encourage everyone to put out ideas, to evaluate suggestions fairly, and to compromise.
- **Evaluation.** Just because plans are laid doesn't mean they should unfold willy-nilly. Instead, teachers should engage in a cycle of planning-implementing-evaluating. Suppose two preschool teachers have a population of children with poor language skills. They might plan trips to the library, visits from an

actor for a children's theater company, the purchase of a new set of puppets. But once these changes are underway, it is essential to take a long, hard look at whether what was planned is working. The teachers might find that all the coming and going and the novel equipment created more uproar than language development. By talking with other teachers working with similar children, they might learn that more concentrated in-class conversations and reading periods might be more effective. At that point, it is important to lay new plans, to try them out, and to evaluate again.

- **Flexibility.** I stand behind my idea of ensuring that teachers have significant blocks of time released for planning. All the same, there is nothing wrong with seizing the odd moment. Teachers can arrive 15 minutes early, use nap time or playground time, grab the 10 minutes they spend straightening up the room to chat about a favorite long-term goal. The point is to keep the planning spark alive.

