

Fostering Family-Centered Practices Through a Family-Created Portfolio

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Abstract

When a child has disabilities, families and professionals must communicate their concerns and goals for the child. Often these concerns are expressed as weaknesses within a deficits-based framework. The use of a strengths-based, family-created portfolio is a communication strategy for reconceptualizing a child from the family's perspective in terms of individuality, strengths, and motivations. This article takes a narrative approach to present one family's experience with a portfolio system in order to personalize the discussion and interpret the possible utilization of this family-generated portfolio as an aid for families communicating the needs of their child to educators. A family-created portfolio is a practice that gives families more control over their involvement by providing them with an opportunity to express their child's individuality beyond who the child is perceived as at school.

Key Words: family-centered practices, strengths-based, portfolios, children, disabilities, needs, transition, Kindergarten, special education, qualitative inquiry, family, families, early childhood, IEP, communication, home, school

Introduction

"I am so happy that you could be here tonight!" I (lead author) greeted Ms. Reese at the door, not realizing that I would also be greeting her daughter, her son, her mother, her grandmother, her brother, and her two sisters.

“Wow! You brought your whole family; that is wonderful.” I was surprised to see them all.

“Well, Ana told me to bring the family, and this is my family,” explained Ms. Reese.

“We had to all see this portfolio,” said one of Ms. Reese’s sisters.

“Yeah, I helped finish it you know. Look here, I did this page.” Ms. Reese’s other sister opens Shandrika’s portfolio and shows me a brightly colored page of all of Shandrika’s favorite things... “Song: I LIKE ALL MUSIC AND I LOVE TO DANCE; Games: JUMPING, GETTING TICKLE.” Further down the page next to the prompt “Favorite Pets or Animals” was a cut out photograph of a stuffed dog and a blue plastic monkey sitting on Shandrika’s bed with the words “Mommy will only do batteries” written beside it. (Note: all names used throughout are pseudonyms.)

When young children are receiving special education services, professionals and family members are required by law to meet to discuss the needs of the child. Often expressed through the child’s weaknesses and inabilities, these discussions may fail to acknowledge the child’s strengths and assets. This affects how early childhood educators perceive the child (Volk & Long, 2005). This article will discuss literature around communication between families with young children with disabilities and schools and an example of a possible remedy to deficit-based language.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) mandates that primary caregivers are invited to the Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings for their child, but beyond that, family participation is defined by informal interactions between school and family (Petr, 2003). IEPs are the formal documented source of communication between families and teachers. During IEP conferences, children’s scholastic information should be shared with the family members in attendance, but those family members should also have the opportunity to share information about their child at home and in other community settings (Adelsward & Nilholm, 1998). Although all IEP team members should feel welcome to participate in the decision-making process, often other factors (i.e., the culture of the school, values of team members) dictate who shares what information, when they share, and their level of influence on the final IEP document (Dabkowski, 2004).

Trivette and Dunst (2005) define family-based practices for early interventionists and early childhood special educators as those practices that “provide or mediate the provision of resources and supports necessary for families to have the time, energy, knowledge, and skills to provide their children with learning opportunities and experiences that promote child competence and

development” (p. 107). Family-centered practices such as those discussed by Trivette and Dunst (2005) and Wilson and Dunst (2005) have become the paradigm most utilized in guidelines for early childhood programs and services, although full application of these practices has not necessarily caught up with the evidence-based research (Blue-Banning, Summers, Frankland, Nelson, & Beegle, 2004; Campbell & Halbert, 2002). The paradigm shifts from child-centered to family-centered and from deficit-based to strengths-based viewpoints in special education (Petr, 2003) attempt to create a more positive and active experience for families who have a child with a disability.

Within an educational setting, such as an IEP transitional meeting, a family member may not feel comfortable speaking up due to cultural norms (Souto-Manning & Swick, 2006). For example, a family member may believe it is not his or her place to tell a teacher how to teach, or conversely, a family member knowledgeable in advocacy may come to the meeting with assumptions of inclusion when the school has not yet offered inclusive curriculums. These “social contracts—the expectations of rights and obligations” (Goodnow, 1995, p. 270) can dictate a family member’s level of participation in a meeting. After constructing a meaning for their rights and obligations within the education system, family members use their past experiences and the current situation to make decisions about the most appropriate action to take to introduce themselves and their child.

Families’ education experiences can be influenced by the inherent stereotypes that often follow a child’s disability label. Educators have a propensity for using deficit-based terminology in IEP meetings (Epstein, Rudolph, & Epstein, 2000). This is often not a conscious degrading of children with disabilities, but it does often take a conscious effort to move beyond limitations and see abilities as the place to start discussions (Grace, Llewellyn, Wedgewood, French, & McConnell, 2008). Teachers may form judgments of families during these demanding times of change which could “represent people’s best but very incomplete response to stress” (Souto-Manning & Swick, 2006, p. 187). Previous experience with a child with a similar disability (Campbell, Milbourne, & Silverman, 2001) or family type, for example, a single mother (Green, Davis, Karshmer, Marsh, & Straight, 2005), can also influence how a teacher’s beliefs and initial evaluations of a family are formed.

During transition meetings, IEP goals are established based on the child’s current level of progress. If the child is coming from another program or school, paperwork in the form of assessments and/or observations typically will follow him or her in order to give the new IEP team a starting point for supporting the child. Trivette and Dunst (2005) describe the importance for professionals to supply the family with all relevant information. This practice could be

transposed in order for the families to become more empowered in their children's education as well as to introduce their children focused from the family's (rather than a practitioner's) perspective.

Transition portfolios have previously been used to transfer information from one set of teachers to the next (Demchak & Greenfield, 2000). Although some portfolio processes have involved and supported parent input, most of the data in these portfolios have typically been classroom-based accounts of the child's progress (Hanson & Gilkerson, 1999). Teachers compile student work samples into a portfolio to share with others, including parents and future teachers (Demchak & Greenfield, 2000). Often these portfolios have been utilized as informal assessment tools or a compilation of multiple assessment tools to document a child's academic progress (Jarrett, Browne, & Wallin, 2006).

Morrison (1999) drew on a collection of work samples and pictures in a preschool classroom as a tool to introduce other students to a child with a disability. Mick (1996) used portfolios with preservice teachers to help them identify and connect with students with disabilities and to begin to understand the impact of disabilities on a family. Campbell, Milbourne, and Silverman (2001) attempted to alter the perspectives of childcare providers by having them create portfolios for children with disabilities already enrolled in their classes. No matter the media or facilitator, portfolios can be employed to assemble and share information in a more creative process than what is typically found in school assessment data.

Dodd and Lily (1997) described college students in an education class that developed a "family portfolio" as a "collection of information and artifacts unique to the family" (p. 58). The goal set for this educational tool was to document the interests of a child and the needs described by a family. Further, the students were encouraged to create meaningful home learning activities based on the information they discovered about the child and family.

Jarrett, Browne, and Wallin (2006) discussed the benefits of documenting a child's progress based on his or her Individual Family Service Plan (IFSP) goals. Jarrett and colleagues suggested that the portfolio assessment process be introduced to parents at the IFSP or early intervention meeting as a way to document the child's progress and to invite parental participation in documentation of the IFSP goals at home. Similar to this suggestion, family-created portfolios could be used in collaboration with other assessment portfolios in educational settings while also encouraging the family to have a substantial role in the IEP meeting. By completing the portfolio prior to the meeting, the parents or other family members are encouraged to share their viewpoints at the meeting and to provide family-centered information with the other team members.

The *Take a Look at Me* Portfolio System: A Communication Tool

The *Take a Look at Me* portfolio, developed by Mary Rugg and colleagues (Rugg, Alvarado, Stoneman, & Butler, 2006), is one particular type of family-created portfolio. A portfolio system such as *Take a Look at Me* sets itself apart from other educational portfolio systems in that it is family-created rather than completed by education professionals or students (see Thompson, Meadan, Fansler, Alber, & Balogh, 2007, for another example of a family-generated portfolio system). The *Take a Look at Me* portfolio is a 20-plus page book prepared with topics and prompts to share important information about a child and family (Institute on Human Development and Disability, 2007). Prompts include, for example, “My Family or Favorite People,” “These are some of my favorite activities,” “Here are some ways that help me during my daily routines (to see, hear, eat, play with friends),” and “Hopes and dreams for our child.” Most prompts are written from the child’s point of view. Families can decorate, add pictures or stickers, and write in words as they see fit in order to best communicate to others who their child is. Family-created portfolios such as *Take a Look at Me* contain information that can be useful in setting goals and making accommodations to environments and classroom activities and therefore could be influential within the context of a meeting preceding a child’s transition to kindergarten.

The purpose of this study was to document one family’s experience with creating and using a family-created portfolio and then to communicate that experience through a narrative data representation. To examine this issue, the following questions were asked: how did a mother and her family experience the process of creating a portfolio, and what was the mother’s perspective of using the portfolio during her daughter’s kindergarten transition meeting? Looking at one family’s involvement through interviews, observations, and analysis of their child’s portfolio, expected results included the beneficial effects a family-created portfolio had on both family empowerment and initiative in a child’s education. However, unexpected discoveries included implications that the portfolio process affected the informal network of the family members.

Subjectivity Statement

This particular project was established due to a request from a school system already using the *Take a Look at Me* portfolio system (Institute on Human Development and Disability, 2007) with high school students with disabilities in the county. Previous to this project, my (first author’s) experience with the portfolio system was working with youth (aged 4–21) living in institutional settings to create a portfolio for self-determination and/or as a community

transition tool. As an applied researcher, I have supported children with disabilities and their families in various formal and informal settings. Through my experiences with young children and families, I have learned about the importance of using an inquiry-based approach to building relationships. This means asking questions before providing answers when meeting a family. I strongly believe in the importance of strengths-based and family-generated knowledge as a source for teachers to build on when creating learning goals for children with disabilities and see this particular portfolio as a tool to assist in gathering that knowledge.

Methodology

Borrowing from ethnographic, case study, and narrative approaches, this study examined the story of one family's experiences with using their *Take a Look at Me* portfolio to represent their child. Blending multiple qualitative techniques provided the guide to analyze the data as well as to reduce the data into a narrative.

Data Collection

The study employed three ethnographic data collection methods to look at a case family's experience with the portfolio process. Case studies are a useful methodological approach to looking at one particular unit of analysis (Dyson & Genishi, 2005); in this instance, the social "unit" was a family with a child with a disability transitioning into kindergarten. While the primary perspective into this family's experience was through the mother of the child, using more than one ethnographic method of data collection provided me with insight into other family member's viewpoints as well as others involved in the portfolio process. As pointed out by Dyson and Genishi, "[t]he aim of such studies is not to establish relationships between variables (as experimental studies) but, rather, to see what some phenomenon means as it is socially enacted within a particular case" (2005, p. 10).

Through participatory observation, the family's social enactment of the portfolio process was documented in various situations. Field notes were collected across portfolio family meetings held at the family's school, and one particular meeting held at the family's school to celebrate the completion of family portfolios was videotaped. At this celebration, there were opportunities to engage family members in conversations one-on-one and in small groups over dinner. Further, the two facilitators were provided with the prompts for the group discussion and presentation segment of the meeting to complete a semi-structured focus group with family members and education professionals

present, including the focus family. In order to build on the observations (Dyson & Genishi, 2005), two semi-structured interviews were completed with Ms. Reese, the mother, which took place in the beginning of the school year following her daughter's IEP meeting. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. Finally, Ms. Reese provided a copy of the portfolio that she and other family members created.

Data Analysis

Data were reduced through an analysis of each set of data (field notes, interview transcripts, and portfolio) for content related to participants' perceptions of the portfolio, the process of creating the portfolio, and its uses within the focus child's educational settings. Narrative summaries were generated as a primary means of data representation based on the mother's story communicated through interviews and on observations at the family portfolio celebration (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009). A priori or predetermined categories based on the series of questions provided to the facilitators to prompt discussion at the portfolio celebration guided the deductive analysis (Ezzy, 2002). As the field notes were read and reread and the video-recorded portfolio celebration meeting was viewed multiple times, codes and categories were modified. These codes were then used to develop the questions asked in the one-on-one interviews. Engaging in descriptive coding, visual markers (Hubbard & Power, 1999) led to the categorical analysis which required modification and revision of the deductive codes created previously (Lewins & Silver, 2007). Thus, the story presented here is the situated representation of a phenomenon rather than the phenomenon itself (Dyson & Genishi, 2005).

Shandrika and Her Family

This study focused on one African American family's experience with the *Take a Look at Me* portfolio created for a young girl named Shandrika. Shandrika was a five-year-old girl who was transitioning into kindergarten the following academic year from an inclusive preschool classroom. One of Shandrika's aunts described her as a "sweet, loveable girl. She's not demanding and never fussy. She loves to jump, and whenever she's hungry, she says 'eat!'" This was a primary example of the positive nature and label-absent manner in which this family already described Shandrika.

When interviewing Shandrika's mother, Ms. Reese, in her home, she stated that she, Shandrika, and Shandrika's little brother lived in their subsidized housing apartment. While Shandrika was attending a nonprofit reverse mainstreamed early childhood program at the beginning of the portfolio process, she would be transitioned to public kindergarten in the fall (the next academic

year), while her little brother was to attend the county's Head Start program for prekindergarten. Only when prompted did Ms. Reese note that Shandrika's "diagnosis is autism, severe developmental delay..." During the interview, Shandrika was observed leaning on her little brother when she walked and vocally emphasized her preference to crawl.

Ms. Reese conveyed how important it was in her family to support one another including her daughter, "My family is so close in general no matter what we are all, we all stick together with everything, so it doesn't surprise me that they're like that about Shandrika." When Ms. Reese told her family about the portfolio and the final portfolio celebration, "Everyone said, 'Well I want to come, I want to come, I want to come.'" And even though they had to attend a funeral for another grandmother that same day, Ms. Reese smiled and noted, "Everyone still want[ed] to get up and come, supporting Shandrika; it really meant a lot to me."

As previously mentioned, the data represented through narrative accounts of the mother's experience with the portfolio is based on interviews and observations. The primary goal in using this representation is to "configure [the data] into a story using a plot line" (Creswell, 2007, p. 54). This approach was chosen to not only communicate the process of creating and using a strengths-based portfolio but to exemplify the family involvement practices of the Reese family.

Findings

The narrative was developed following the time line of events described by Ms. Reese and observed in interactions with the family at school. The following themes were discovered within the data: creation of the portfolio, use and evaluation of the portfolio, transfer of knowledge, and informal support systems. Unlike a more traditional approach to presenting qualitative data, the themes were interwoven into the story through examples and quotes from the family rather than presented theme by theme in separate sections.

Ms. Reese Creates Shandrika's Portfolio

The families of children with disabilities who were transitioning to kindergarten within Shandrika's school were invited to participate in a series of family engagement meetings or workshops. A letter sent home from the school's program coordinator and city preschool special education coordinator informed families that they would have the opportunity to learn about and start creating an individualized portfolio for their child.

Ms. Reese was immediately involved in the process from the first meeting. Two introductory meetings were held, one in the morning and one in the evening, to best accommodate various families' schedules. Ms. Reese, her mother, and one of her sisters attended the morning meeting. Because the morning meeting was less heavily attended, two of the school district's parent mentors, two special education coordinators and/or I were able to speak with families through one-on-one interactions. Due to the large Hispanic population in the school district, a parent mentor who spoke Spanish was present at each meeting to help with translating information. During the meetings, the families were given a blank *Take a Look at Me* portfolio. Families could choose a Spanish version of the portfolio (*Míreme*) if they preferred. Each family was given a disposable camera in order to take pictures and then return the cameras to the school to be developed so the photos could be put in their child's portfolio. The families were told that first looking through the book may be helpful in order to match some of the pictures with specific prompts from the portfolio. For example, the second page of the portfolio asked for "My Family or Favorite People," therefore participants would want to take pictures of family and friends to display there.

Over the course of three months, which included the December holiday break, there were four or five planned opportunities at the school where parents could work on their child's portfolio without having to worry about providing their own supplies. The school district's parent mentors and I explained to Ms. Reese (and other families) at the first meeting that the portfolio was a book that she could create for her child with the supplies provided for her at the school, such as craft scissors, stickers, colored paper, and markers. Ms. Reese expressed the importance of "having everything there for me" including childcare, when necessary, when she was working on her portfolio. Additionally, multiple examples of portfolios completed by other families were available so participants could get an idea of what a completed portfolio looked like. These were not in any way to provide a script for families to follow but just to get a picture of the myriad ways to begin their own child's portfolio. Ms. Reese and other families were welcome to stop by during these scheduled meetings to work and to receive help as needed. These meetings also provided an opportunity for families who were not able to attend one of the first introductory meetings to learn about the portfolio and still take part in the process. One of the city's preschool special education coordinators was dedicated to assisting families who were a part of her caseload in completing their portfolios. For example, she typed up some of the entries that Ms. Reese had written for Shandrika's portfolio to paste into the book. Many of the staff members within the school and district expressed their commitment to a family-centered process by their

regular attendance at the family events and their involvement in setting up the specifics of the meetings.

Ms. Reese and her family worked on the portfolio at home as well. So although the school provided opportunities for the families to work during scheduled events, most families found that they still needed to work at home. This was particularly true for the Reese family who all wanted to contribute to the portfolio's content. It was important to Ms. Reese that her family contributed to the portfolio because "they might have thought of something that I didn't think of at the time, so I wanted everyone to be sure to have their opinion on what was going on.... They may have seen something before I [had] seen something because she's just...with my family so much." Shandrika's entire family was involved in developing the portfolio. By viewing Shandrika's completed portfolio it was apparent that although she lived in a single-parent household, Shandrika was loved, taken care of, and had the support of a large family—something an educator may not have realized in an engagement activity that did not so readily accommodate multiple family members' participation and perspectives. Shandrika spent time with and in the care of many different family members regularly; therefore it seemed like a natural next step to involve these family members in her education to provide consistency across both education and home/community contexts.

The Reese Family Celebrates the Portfolio

The program coordinator at Shandrika's school and other city special education staff (i.e., special education coordinators and parent mentors) played a vital role in ensuring the potential success of the family meetings. Various staff took the initiative of providing families with opportunities to engage in the meetings by welcoming all family members, providing food for the meetings, and reminding families about the meetings through personal phone calls.

The final portfolio celebration was planned for an evening after typical working hours to accommodate families' schedules. It was this celebration that prompted seven of Shandrika's family members to come together around her. This family arrived at the school for the portfolio celebration having all read through and/or helped to create the completed portfolio for Shandrika Reese. Attending the final celebration with Shandrika and her mother were her grandmother, great grandmother, two aunts, her little brother, and her uncle. Shandrika's important role in each of their lives was evident not only through the number of family members in attendance, but also through the way they interacted with her. Her great grandmother paused and watched Shandrika's uncle tickle her belly, "This is my baby. This is my heart." Through her family's eyes that night, Shandrika was the center of attention.

One of the primary goals of the celebration was to provide families with an opportunity to share their portfolio in preparation for their child's upcoming IEP transition meeting. Families were also prompted to discuss their likes and dislikes of the portfolio in order to provide feedback for future family engagement projects. Families sat at tables arranged in a U-shape in the school's multipurpose room. Some county and city school staff wandered in and sat at the back of the room to observe the parents' reactions to the portfolio project; about 30 people total attended the celebration. Dinner, donated by a local pizza place, granted time for families to share with one another more informally and generate ideas for their own portfolios by viewing one another's.

As dinner wrapped up and some children left to play in another room, the facilitators of the meeting (a parent mentor and a county special education coordinator) began to ask families questions regarding the portfolio. Shandrika stayed with her family because this was her night. Facilitators asked questions, pausing for the Spanish-speaking parent mentor to translate. Ms. Reese was prepared to share the portfolio she worked so hard on, but others in Shandrika's family also wanted their voices and descriptions of Shandrika to be heard. While Shandrika's aunt wanted her contribution to the portfolio known, "I helped!" she exclaimed, Shandrika's great grandmother wanted to find out information on potty training Shandrika while there were multiple educational staff all in one place listening to her concerns for her great granddaughter.

As the facilitators guided the discussion back to specific thoughts on the portfolio, Ms. Reese responded to the inquiry about what she liked about the portfolio. "I like the questions," she stated, referring to the various prompts within the portfolio. One of Shandrika's aunts agreed; "What a great way to introduce someone. That's what I think." Other parents agreed with the Reese family's perspectives. A father noted that he and his wife worked on it together, while a mother confirmed, "My whole family enjoyed it." All emphasized what the Reese family already demonstrated—the portfolio was a tool with the possibility for bringing families together.

The Spanish-speaking parent mentor noted that she enjoyed looking at some of her families' portfolios because "[i]t really makes you think about those things they're asking the questions about. And those are not things I think we address in the lives of our children just on an everyday basis." Shandrika's aunt added that the portfolio offers an opportunity to "go back to it as a reference and look and see how much the child has grown since you did the portfolio." Her point emphasized the importance of not only showing a child's progress through work samples and developmental assessment tools, but through the growth and change seen at home. One of the other fathers of a child that attended Shandrika's school took this idea even further by thinking

about job opportunities and the future of his young child: "...it might seem like a small help right now that the child is small, but in the future, it's a great idea you're going to be needing for greater things, for interviews and that sort of a thing" (as translated by the parent mentor).

Some of the information communicated in the portfolio was seen as a necessity in any setting where someone was caring for young children. For example, Ms. Reese shared that she thought the portfolio contained "important ways of communicating health issues" to the teacher. She summarized some thoughts from her portfolio pages that indicated Shandrika's needs:

In the classroom, knowing things about the child like [Shandrika] for instance, a vibrating, if there was a vibrating toy, she can't play [with] a vibrating toy, she might have a seizure, and you know, things like that. And she can't have cheese and milk and things like that.

One of Shandrika's aunts referred to the helpfulness the portfolio could provide to teachers as well, stating "That...from the teacher knowing...it will help her to know the child better and then, like [the parent mentor] said, like when you have that first [IEP meeting] you can't think of everything, and say, I wonder what she thinks about this, and go back, there it is. It's in there [referring to the portfolio]. It has a lot in it."

Families' hopes and dreams were another key piece that the portfolio communicated to others. The final page read "Hopes and dreams for our child" followed by "Now" and "In the future." The parent mentor sitting with two Spanish-speaking families saw similarities between families' hopes and dreams. She said, "I looked at both portfolios, these are two very different families, and they have answered almost the same thing about what would you like the future to be for [their children], and they say to be healthy and to be able to help others." Shandrika's mother decided she also wanted to share her family's current goals for their little girl. Ms. Reese stood and flipped to the last page and read "Our dreams for Shandrika now are we would all love it if Shandrika was walking a little better without assistance and doing a little talking. And in the future, going to the restroom and self-feeding are two of the things I am going to continue to work on." The hopes and dreams portfolio page was an opportunity for parents to convey both their long-term goals for their child or focus on those things that affect their child's daily lives. These families exemplified different ways to think about hopes for children.

Ms. Reese Takes Shandrika's Portfolio to the IEP Meeting

When asked about whether her family members accompanied her to the IEP meeting, Ms. Reese acknowledged that it wasn't necessary: "They were really asking questions about her at school and things like that at the IEP...I had

this [*tapped the portfolio*] so I had all of what my family was going to say really about Shandrika.” Ms. Reese noted that “at that particular meeting, didn’t know what to expect, I’d never been to one. There were so many people there I couldn’t believe it!” In attendance at Shandrika’s transition to kindergarten IEP meeting along with Ms. Reese were “the principal, her kindergarten teacher, her preschool teacher...a nurse was there, a counselor; there were a lot of people there, her OT, a speech therapist.” With this many people at a meeting to talk about a parent’s child, it would be easy to become overwhelmed and uncomfortable, but Ms. Reese recognized the importance of having her voice heard through the portfolio she brought with her. She was excited that “everybody read it and talked about it” during the meeting.

At Shandrika’s IEP meeting, Ms. Reese felt comfortable in the fact that all the attendants including “principals, teachers, nurses, found out about [Shandrika] biting her arm, and they know why she’s doing it, know when she gets frustrated.” According to Ms. Reese, “She communicates differently than a lot of kids,” therefore it was imperative that the new educators in Shandrika’s life knew what her body language meant, that by biting her arm, she was telling them something. So even though arm-biting for children with disabilities may be seen as a stereotypical behavior or one that has a negative connotation, it was an interpretation of emotion for Shandrika, an important means of communicating frustration which teachers needed to recognize. In this light, behaviors Shandrika engaged in were not necessarily interpreted by social judgments, but were framed descriptively as a way to learn about Shandrika’s unique qualities.

This idea of communicating important information about Shandrika was evident in the interviews with Shandrika’s mom. She commented, “The portfolio could tell others about Shandrika; what works [best] for her.” Ms. Reese was not sure how well the meeting would have gone if she hadn’t completed the portfolio. She continued to say, “It made it easier to talk about her. I knew what to say and had it written out on paper. I could look at it while talking about Shandrika...it made sure that I didn’t leave anything out.” Ms. Reese noted that she was planning on updating the portfolio for Shandrika’s IEP meeting before the transition to first grade.

Ms. Reese recognized the importance that her teachers played in Shandrika’s life as well. She noted, “It was hardest for me to write about how she learns best.” However, during the IEP meeting, the teachers from her daughter’s preschool classroom were able to help Ms. Reese think about these while also communicating this information to those in attendance at the IEP meeting, such as Shandrika’s new teachers. Whether or not this particular topic would have been discussed without Shandrika’s portfolio cannot be predicted, but Ms. Reese’s experience with the IEP team was contradictory to what typically transpires in this type of formal education meeting (Rock, 2000; Taylor, 2000).

Ms. Reese Finds Other Ways to Share

It is important to reiterate that Shandrika not only had the support of her mom at the portfolio celebration but the support of seven other family members. During the interview with Ms. Reese, she noted that her family, specifically Shandrika's aunt and grandmother, actively participated in the creation of the portfolio. Therefore, it wasn't limited to Shandrika's mother's perspective but also encompassed the perspectives of other family members. In fact, when Ms. Reese allowed me to borrow Shandrika's portfolio, she commented that her mother (Shandrika's grandmother) was constantly asking when it would be returned. Ms. Reese was surprised to learn that some family members who cared for Shandrika did not know about her milk allergy, a vital bit of information that the portfolio helped communicate within their own informal circle.

Ms. Reese talked about how she was going to share the portfolio her family created for Shandrika with the physical therapist who comes to her home to support Shandrika. Although she noted that the therapist had been working with Shandrika for quite some time, she was interested in what the therapist may find novel in the portfolio.

A final unexpected result of Ms. Reese's portfolio experience was the connections it encouraged within Shandrika's preschool. Ms. Reese noted that she enjoyed completing the prompt, "At preschool, childcare, or school, I spend time with..." because "I liked taking the pictures of everyone, I went all over to get everyone's pictures." Ms. Reese went into her child's school with the disposable camera she was given because although the portfolio was focused on Shandrika's life in the community, school is an important piece of her life. Ms. Reese took pictures of Shandrika's teachers, bus driver, and friends at school in order to add them to the portfolio. Her presence in the school allowed for time to observe Shandrika in her classroom context and spend more time becoming involved in her daughter's education.

Conclusion

The Reese family's experience with the portfolio demonstrates their ability to communicate knowledge about their child, the importance of support of their family, and the usefulness of a family-created tool in Shandrika's IEP meeting and in other, less formal, experiences. Ms. Reese's interpretation of her experience with her portfolio at the IEP meeting demonstrates how just having a document to offer to the IEP team provided her with the confidence she needed to be a key participant at the table. When an educator empowers a family member to take on a guiding role in their child's educational process, the teacher is supporting the family's participation in creating goals for their child

and can further encourage the application of those goals outside the school setting (Dunst, Trivette, & Deal, 1994; Petr, 2003). Ms. Reese was the first attendee to share at Shandrika's IEP meeting, and most likely this was due to the fact that she, unlike many families at IEP meetings, had her own prepared, tangible information to share with the group.

The questions in the *Take a Look at Me* portfolio were created to engage family members and educators in a dialogue about the child that produces thoughts not always discussed in a school setting. Ms. Reese's story provided an unexpected implication for engaging multiple family members in conversations around their child's education. Reaching out to multiple family members can be accomplished by addressing invitations to family engagement events to "Family members of..." rather than "Parent(s) of...". In this particular case example, the special education coordinator was able to personally convey the information that all family members were welcome through individual phone calls. As Patrikakou, Weissberg, Redding, and Walberg (2005) remind us, "[t]he realization of children's potential depends, to a great degree, on the contexts within which they develop and learn, as well as on interconnections between those contexts" (p. 1). The portfolio can help bridge the contexts of home, school, and community.

The transition from early childhood settings to elementary school often carries with it a transition from more family-focused (IFSP) to child-focused perspectives (IEP). Thus, scholastic information tends to take precedence over all other goals. Perhaps Ms. Reese's insights into her experiences with the portfolio are useful in reminding educators and other service providers that families are key, if not *the* key, people in a child's life, at every age.

Future Directions

Readers should keep in mind that the portfolio does not create itself. Parents with young children are busy, and those with children with disabilities often have even less time for projects. Family members need to understand the purpose of the project and feel it is a worthwhile piece for their child's education. The Reese family, particularly Ms. Reese, believed that there was a need to prepare a portfolio to inform others about Shandrika. Educators and other practitioners have to believe in the benefits of a strengths-based approach in order to support families in a portfolio's completion and utilization. A more simplistic suggestion would be for educators to encourage families to prepare a shortened version of the portfolio or a brief statement recognizing their child's strengths and interests. Whether creating the full portfolio or something shorter, offering specific examples to families to encourage their contribution to an

IEP meeting can only increase their feelings of empowerment and create more equitable family–school relationships.

Currently, the *Take a Look at Me* portfolio is being utilized and evaluated on a larger scale within a Head Start program with an approximate enrollment of 280 families. Over fifty percent of these families speak Spanish as their primary language. So although the current study has demonstrated the potential of a family-created portfolio tool within early childhood educational settings, an evaluation with more families in various settings is necessary to continue towards the goal of providing evidence-based, family-centered practices.

The goal of this article was to illustrate one context in which a family was able to partake in an activity that honored their child as a whole child, more than her disability. Through the process of creating a family-implemented portfolio *and* the discussions around the information within the portfolio, this child was seen for her capabilities as well as her needs, in the context of her supportive family. As the voices and the perspectives of parents and families begin to be heard during transition meetings and other educational processes, it will be the responsibility of educational professionals to take this information and utilize it to benefit the child in the classroom.

Ms. Reese and I were wrapping up our second interview; I knew that my relationship with her family was most likely going to end after today.

I smiled as I mentioned, “I was so amazed with your...your family support and all. I mean it’s just not something I’ve seen a lot of.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know, my...you know, Shandrika’s physical therapist said to me after seeing [the portfolio], ‘I really wish that I was in your family.’ Cause she’s been with Shandrika for almost five years, and so she knows how close we are, and she knows my grandparents and my parents. And she knows the family, and just, it’s this supportive...I don’t know, it’s just in our blood.”

This conversation exemplified the Reese family and the support they offered each other. This piece of Shandrika’s story is one that both researchers and educators can learn from. By listening to a family’s story unfold through the creation of a portfolio, opportunities for sharing and comfortable contexts for authentic dialogue can emerge. Hopefully through the use of a family-created portfolio system and increased focus on family-centered practices in early childhood education, more of these powerful family voices can be heard.

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