

2011

Contextualizing the Teacher Work Sample: An Evolving Early Childhood Perspective

Karen Buchanan

George Fox University, kbuchana@georgefox.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/soe_faculty

 Part of the [Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Published in Brodsky and Rosselli (Eds.). "Connecting Teaching and Learning, History, Evolution and Case Studies of Teacher Work Sample Methodology." Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishing, pp. 139-148.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Education at Digital Commons @ George Fox University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications - School of Education by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ George Fox University. For more information, please contact arolf@georgefox.edu.

Contextualizing the Teacher Work Sample: An Evolving Early Childhood Perspective

Karen S. Buchanan and Mary Johnson

One of the beauties of the Teacher Work Sample (TWS) is that it employs a common framework that is applied across all licensure levels and specialty areas (Brodsky & Schalock, 2001). The one-size-fits-all structure, however, has potential to be problematic for programs committed to providing opportunity for their teacher candidates to demonstrate specialty competence. For example, candidates preparing to teach in Oregon's early childhood licensure level (age three to the fourth grade) receive specialized training that addresses the tremendous physical, cognitive, and social/emotional growth that occurs in young children. Teachers need to be well versed in child development and use that knowledge to select developmentally appropriate practices, learning goals, and age-appropriate assessments. Demonstrating this type of specialty competence is critical for our candidates and necessary for institutions seeking NCATE accreditation.

Arthur Wise, in NCATE's spring 2006 issue of *Quality Teaching*, set the expectation that teacher candidates must demonstrate content and content-specific pedagogical knowledge. He illustrates this point by stating that NCATE "expects science teachers to be able to teach according to the standards of the National Science Teachers Association" (p. 7). NCATE also expects early childhood teachers to teach according to specialty standards as defined by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) Standards for Early Childhood Professional Preparation in Initial Licensure Programs (2003).

At George Fox University (GFU), both undergraduate and graduate (master of arts in teaching—MAT) candidates recommended for initial teaching licensure are required to complete two teacher work samples in two different classroom settings. This program expectation is reflective

of Oregon licensure requirements. For most George Fox candidates, this requirement is met during each of their student teaching experiences, one at each authorization level. In Oregon, authorization levels are available in early childhood (age three to grade four), elementary (grade three to grade eight), middle-level education (grade five to grade ten), and high school education (grade seven to grade twelve). The intent of the licensure levels and the dual student teaching experience is to ensure that teachers have specialized knowledge and skills and demonstrate competence in working with children at each licensure level. The TWS is one tool that we use to document a candidate's ability to demonstrate the required knowledge, skills, and competencies at each authorization level.

At George Fox, the majority of teacher candidates are recommended for licensure in dual early childhood and elementary authorization levels. As early childhood specialists, we have a vested interest in ensuring that the candidates we recommend for licensure are demonstrating not only state standards but also NAEYC standards for initial licensure. Since the TWS serves as a key assessment tool for the demonstration of early childhood competence, we have taken the opportunity to carefully examine our expectations for candidates and their performance. The purpose of this chapter is to describe our journey studying and improving our practice as it relates to early childhood Teacher Work Samples.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

As we began to wrestle with the notion of the TWS allowing candidates to demonstrate specialty competence, we became curious if other colleagues in the field were dealing with similar struggles and found that this aspect of TWSM is in its infancy. Schepige (2006), a professor at Western Oregon University, talks about her journey developing science-specific TWS requirements for her secondary-level preservice educators. Her project grew out of the frustration she encountered scoring science work samples based on generic TWS requirements. Her candidates' lack of evidence around sound scientific pedagogy in their Teacher Work Samples inspired her current work in progress. Hegler (2003) describes the use of the TWS to evaluate his special education teacher candidates. The TWS requirements are designed to evaluate general education outcomes as well as special education outcomes. Ernest Pratt (2002) collected a sample of fifty mathematic work samples from elementary through high school teacher candidates that had been prepared with general TWS requirements. He was interested in whether the general TWS requirements were successful at encouraging candidates to apply the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM) national standards in their classroom practice. His study showed weak alignment with NCTM standards for all the work samples.

Pratt's (2002) work, coupled with anecdotal evidence from our own experience with early childhood candidates, inspired our inquiry project investigating whether George Fox early childhood Teacher Work Sample requirements in undergraduate and graduate initial licensure programs are adequate indicators of competence as defined by the NAEYC Standards for Early Childhood Professional Preparation in Initial Licensure Programs (2003). The NAEYC standards were created from a solid body of research regarding effective practices in early childhood education, and guide teacher preparation institutions seeking to align their program with early childhood outcomes. These initial licensure standards are organized around the five broad statements below; each standard is further defined by a set of accompanying key elements (NAEYC, 2003). Explanations of these standards are in appendix C.

Standard 1: Promoting child development and learning

Standard 2: Building family and community relationships

Standard 3: Observing, documenting, and assessing to support young children and families

Standard 4: Teaching and learning

Standard 5: Becoming a professional

EXAMINING GFU TWS TOOLS AND STUDENT OUTCOMES

Our self-study, conducted in three phases, began by drawing a convenience sample of fifty from a pool of eighty-five undergraduate and graduate early childhood Teacher Work Samples. The sample included eleven kindergarten, ten first-grade, ten second-grade, ten third-grade, and nine mixed-age work samples created and taught during the candidates' student teaching experience from 2003 to 2005. First, an alignment of the George Fox Teacher Work Sample requirements and NAEYC standards was completed. Missing NAEYC standards in the Teacher Work Sample requirements became variables of interest for further study. Second, a scoring rubric was created to investigate these variables of interest within the Teacher Work Samples. Third, the sample was examined for the variables of interest. Finally, results were analyzed reported, and recommendations for retooling our requirements and enhancing our course content were set forth.

Alignment of NAEYC Standards and GFU TWS Requirements

The first phase of the self-study aligned the key elements of each NAEYC standard with the GFU requirements for undergraduate and graduate Teacher Work Samples. Along with expectations of professionalism, cul-

tural proficiency, and technology, both departments divide the Teacher Work Sample into five sections:

- Section 1: Description of school, setting, students, curriculum, and self
- Section 2: Mapping, standards, and assessments
- Section 3: Lesson plans and daily reflections
- Section 4: Learning gains data
- Section 5: Final unit reflection

Departmental TWS handbooks provide guidance to all teacher candidates as they complete each of the five sections. These guidelines were created to be applicable for Teacher Work Samples from pre-K to grade twelve.

The alignment of TWS requirements and NAEYC standards revealed three categories of significant elements either missing or not reflective of the depth required by the NAEYC standards. These missing elements, which became our variables of interest, were especially evident in NAEYC Standard 1 and Standard 2.

1. Understanding and application of child development to learning
Standard 1: Promoting child development and learning: candidates use their understanding of young children's characteristics and needs.
2. Creating environments that promote learning
Standard 1: Promoting child development and learning: candidates create environments that are healthy, respectful, supportive, and challenging for all children.
3. Involving families and communities in children's development and learning
Standard 2: Building family and community relationships: candidates know about, understand, and value the importance and complex characteristics of children's families and communities. They use this understanding to create respectful, reciprocal relationships that support and empower families, and to involve all families in their children's development and learning. (NAEYC, 2003, p. 29)

Variables of Interest

During phase two, a rubric was created that included these three key elements of the NAEYC standards, as well as the work sample section where we would expect to find that element (the rubric is included in appendix C). For example, evidence of the understanding and application of child development should be found in sections 1 and 2.

First Key Element: Understanding and Application of Child Development

In section 1 of the TWS, we looked specifically for a candidate's ability to describe and reference developmental characteristics associated with the given age group. This could include references to cognitive, social, emotional, and/or physical characteristics that should be considered when designing a teaching and learning unit. Additionally, we expected to see descriptions of children whose development might differ from generic age group characteristics. In section 2, candidates demonstrate their understanding of development by selecting appropriate state benchmark and learning goals.

We expected to see evidence of the application of knowledge of child development in sections 2 and 3. In section 2, the rationale for why the unit is appropriate for this group of students provides an opportunity for evidence, as well as developmentally appropriate and educationally significant assessments. In section 3, the rubric investigates candidate lesson plans and lesson reflections for evidence of the application of knowledge regarding child development.

Second Element: Creating Environments That Promote Learning

A second missing element to be investigated was *creating environments that promote learning*. The rubric we created looks for evidence of this element in sections 2 and 3. In section 2 of the TWS, candidates have an opportunity to show how their unit plans address the use of/or modification to the environmental setup. In section 3, lesson plans and daily reflections, the rubric looks for ways candidates have planned to modify or enrich the environment through their daily lesson plans.

Third Element: Involving Families and Communities in Children's Development and Learning

The final missing element, *involving families and communities*, is examined in sections 2 and 3. In section 2, candidates have an opportunity to not only demonstrate ways that they have communicated with families about the learning in the TWS, but they also have a chance to show how they might collaborate with families in the learning process. Section 3 allows candidates to explain how they might involve parents and the community in the learning experience.

**INVESTIGATING VARIABLES OF INTEREST
IN TEACHER WORK SAMPLES**

The last phase of our project involved reviewing a sample of TWS using the rubric referenced above. We were interested to see if the variables of

interest, though missing in the guidelines, were present in the candidates' finished work. If evident, did they meet the target descriptors cited on the rubric? Fifty work samples, randomly selected from a pool of eighty-five early childhood work samples completed during the last two years, were divided between the two researchers, analyzed, and scored. To provide interrater reliability, the professors came together midway through the scoring and cross-scored samples, sharing supporting evidence for their scoring to date. Strong scoring commonality was revealed.

Results

Not surprisingly, table 11.1 shows that our teacher candidates clearly identify state benchmark standards as the foundation for their curricula design. Our program places great emphasis on students demonstrating knowledge of state benchmark standards. However, in their planning, our students did not explicitly talk about development regarding their student's age group or the development of individual children. When candidates spoke about individual development, it was typically in reference to a child's reading level, or they saw a lower level of development as a disability.

Daily reflections are required in section 3 of the TWS where candidates reflect on successes and failures in the daily teaching and learning process. Of particular interest were the reflections relating to development where candidates attributed their successes or failures to the developmental levels of the students. The ability to reflect in this way leads us to believe that our teacher candidates do, in fact, have the developmental knowledge that we have sought to teach them in their early childhood coursework. However, our work sample requirements did not encourage candidates to think proactively about their practice when they are planning for instruction.

In the second section of the Teacher Work Sample, we looked for *use of or modification* to the environmental setup in the planning of the overall unit. In section 3 we searched daily lesson plans looking for modifications made

Table 11.1. Understanding and application of child development

Evidence of understanding and application of child development	None	Evident	Target
Developmental stages	44	5	1
Describes individuals	22	24	4
Appropriate benchmarks	0	6	44
Rationale for these students	38	8	4
Appropriate/significant assessment	17	29	4
Lesson plans varied/balanced	14	28	8
Reflections relate to development	11	29	10

to alter or enrich the daily learning environment. Table 11.2 shows that in their overall unit plan, our teacher candidates rarely considered environmental setup. But greater attention was paid to modifying and enriching the environment in their individual lesson plans.

Still only about half of the candidates paid attention to this element. In our early childhood course sequence, we talk about the Reggio-inspired notion of the environment as a third teacher (Curtis & Carter, 2003). Teacher candidates do not seem to be translating this classroom theory into practice.

The third variable, involving families and communities, proved to be interesting. Table 11.3 clearly indicates that our candidates have included some form of communication with parents about their TWS content. This is not surprising, given the fact that our work sample requirements include a brochure or newsletter sharing the purpose and content of the Teacher Work Sample.

The NAEYC guidelines, however, reach far beyond communicating with parents to building reciprocal relationships with families and empowering them as partners in their child's development. The standard includes involving community as well. Only 20 percent of our samples showed evidence of this, and none of the work samples were on target.

IMPROVING OUR PRACTICE

This self-study project has convinced us that Teacher Work Sample Methodology can be an accurate assessment of "learning to teach" and "teaching to learn" in early childhood education. Our experiences have led us to improve our practice so that our candidates have the opportunity to document the learning and growth of young children in the TWS. Our improvements include retooling our TWS requirements and enhancing course content in our early childhood course sequence.

Table 11.2. Attention to environment

Evidence showing attention to environment	None	Evident	Target
Unit plan attends to environment	46	4	0
Daily plans attend to environment	20	28	2

Table 11.3. Involving family and community

Evidence involving family and community	None	Evident	Target
Family/community communication	7	42	1
Family/community collaboration	38	12	0
Family/community involvement	40	10	0

Retooling Teacher Work Sample Requirements

The work of our candidates shows they are receiving sufficient content regarding variable 1: *understanding and application of child development*. We want our candidates, however, to spend time in the planning phase of their lessons thinking critically about development. After teaching their lessons, we hear candidates reflecting on the developmental appropriateness of their plans. It is most obvious to them when their planning was not appropriate for the developmental age of the children. Therefore, we have taken steps to retool both undergraduate and graduate TWS guidelines to require candidates to focus on and preplan based on developmental considerations.

Variable 2 study results, *creating environments that promote learning*, were weak, particularly in how candidates planned to use the environment from a unit planning perspective. We chose to address this by retooling our TWS expectations in chapter 2 as candidates create their unit plan. They are required to write a section regarding how the environment will be created and/or modified to enhance and extend the learning of students.

Variable 3 results, *involving families and communities in children's development and learning*, indicated that candidates were fairly proficient at producing a communication piece for families describing the TWS content. This finding was not surprising since the TWS guidelines clearly required it. But NAEYC standards go far beyond communication to collaboration with families. Therefore, we retooled our expectations to require candidates to demonstrate collaboration with families and communities.

We have implemented these retooled guidelines for almost a year and a half. After raising our expectations and aligning with NAEYC standards, we see more consistent results demonstrating early childhood specialty competence.

Enhancing Course Content

The results of our study not only led us to retool TWS requirements, but also to reexamine our course content and delivery. A recent end-of-program survey revealed that our graduates did not feel prepared to work with families. This finding, combined with our TWS self-study results, troubled us because we had assumed that this content was embedded in coursework and that instructors even infused this content throughout all program coursework. Our data tells us that our assumptions were incorrect. We chose to redesign the module of our Early Childhood Education course focused on collaborating with families and communities. We even chose to teach it first, as a foundation for other course modules. When we begin with this key component of early childhood education, candidates tend to see it as a thread that runs through all early childhood content.

Variable 2 results challenged us, as instructors, to find ways to bring the environmental piece alive in our early childhood coursework. Previous course content had emphasized environment but had not helped candidates translate that theory into practice. We have enhanced our content by providing more focused experience in field observations, and we are experimenting with a collaborative project where candidates create a “model” early childhood environment on campus.

SUMMARY

Marilyn Cochran-Smith (2006), in her editorial “Taking Stock in 2006: Evidence, Evidence Everywhere,” reminds us that the current research, policy, and practice climate is focused on evidence. This inquiry project has not only helped our program take needed steps toward requiring our candidates to demonstrate evidence of their specialty competence, but it has also provided us with the stimulus to improve our own practice by redesigning our coursework and retooling our TWS requirements. Initial results from our piloted changes indicate that adjustments in TWS requirements around specialty competencies offer great promise for providing the evidence needed to certify competence in a specialty area. Our efforts will continue to be studied over the next few years as we seek to better prepare future teachers for the challenges of the early childhood classroom.

REFERENCES

- Brodsky, M., & Schalock, D. (speakers). (2001). *Teacher Work Sample Methodology: An introduction to connecting teacher work to P-12 student progress* (CD-ROM). Monmouth, OR: Western Oregon University.
- Cartwright, D. D., & Blacklock, K. K. (2003). *Teacher Work Samples and struggling readers: Impacting student performance and candidate dispositions*. (ED472395). Paper presented at the annual meeting of AACTE, New Orleans, LA.
- Cochran-Smith, M. (2006). Taking stock in 2006: Evidence, evidence everywhere. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 57, 6–12. Retrieved January 5, 2006, from jte.sage.com/current.dtl.
- Curtis, D., & Carter, M. (2003). *Designs for living and learning: Transforming early childhood environments*. St. Paul, MN: Redleaf Press.
- Hegler, K. L. (2003). *Evaluating the use of Teacher Work Samples to describe teacher candidate competence and PK-12 learning*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of AACTE, New Orleans, LA.
- National Association for the Education of Young Children. (2001). *NAEYC standards for early childhood professional preparation: Initial licensure*. Washington, DC: Author.

- Pratt, E. O. (2002). Aligning mathematics Teacher Work Sample content with selected NCTM Standards: Implications for preservice teacher education. *Journal of Personnel Evaluation in Education*, 16(3), 175–190.
- Schepige, A. (2006, February). *Generic or subject specific Teacher Work Samples as evidence of teacher effectiveness?* Paper presented at the annual meeting of AACTE, San Diego, CA.
- Wise, A. (2006, Spring). The role of research in NCATE accreditation. *Quality Teaching*, 14(2), 7–8.
- Wright, D. (2002). Teacher Work Sample Methodology in early childhood and elementary preparation: A case study. In G. Girod (Ed.), *Connecting teaching and learning: A handbook for teacher educators on Teacher Work Sample Methodology* (pp. 361–374). Washington, DC: American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education.