

FALL 2019 SABBATICAL REPORT

Submitted by Michelle R. Moen, M.A.

March 29, 2020

The focus of my sabbatical was to research and document current early childhood education environments and local issues in the field of Early Childhood as well as to locate quality sites at which our students can complete their observation assignments for their child development class assignments.

The Early Childhood Education profession continues to grow at a fast rate. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (www.bls.gov) “Employment of preschool teachers is projected to grow 7 percent from 2018 to 2028, faster than the average for all occupations.” Growth is expected due to a continued focus on the importance of early childhood education. More highly qualified preschool teachers and sites are needed as a result of the increase demand. With the profession’s growth predictions, it is our job at the community college level to educate students about the indicators of quality work environments and how to search for, create, and/or maintain high quality early childhood education environments.

Our Childhood Education department on campus serves over 1,400 students each semester. We operate as a both an academic and vocational program. As a vocational program we work with students who are employed in the field and, as an academic program, we prepare students for transfer to earn bachelor’s degree. Providing students with direct practice in the field and/or opportunities to observe developmentally appropriate programs is imperative to preparing early childhood educators. Since the College closed the Child Development Lab School in 2013, we

rely solely on programs in the community to allow our child development students opportunities to visit and observe.

Part One: Observation Sites

The first part of the sabbatical project provided me the time to visit local preschools and secure sites for observation assignments required in five classes with a total of 15 sections per semester. Each of these classes is offered both in the fall and spring semesters and requires students to visit a site in order to conduct observations. The five classes are comprised of 15 sections with 35-50 students per semester for a total of 1,290 students per year. Many students currently locate a school on their own; others use an outdated list of sites provided by instructors. The sabbatical provided time to update this list. Quality schools were the target.

It was my intention to visit approximately 2-3 sites per week with the hopes of securing 30-40 schools for the various classes which require observations. In reality, I visited more than 2-3 per week (sometimes it was 2-3 per day), and connected with other sites with which we already have established a relationship. I have visited 43 sites, and spoke on the phone with (or left messages for) directors at over 20 additional sites. My list included 10 plus other sites that I hope to contact in the next year as well.

Quality Issues:

What I observed was rather disheartening. I found it increasingly difficult to locate quality sites in the general community area, so decided to expand my search to include a wider geographical area as well as increased site count. Out of the 43 local sites I visited, approximately 19% met our department's standard of quality. The percentage would increase to 28% if sites in Santa Monica and Long Beach were included.

One of the assessment tools used in our field is the ECERS (Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale). ECERS is a scale to rate the space and furnishings, personal care routines, activities and interactions that take place in the classroom, and how the program engages with families. Although I did not formally conduct any formal ECERS assessments, I am quite familiar with the ratings and used them to guide my observations as I visited the local sites.

Many of the sites I visited had environments which contained developmentally inappropriate materials, displays, and curriculum. Another disturbing trend is the movement away from play-based to early academic learning demonstrating that in spite of the overwhelming evidence that young children learn best in play-based programs, our society seems less concerned with the value of play and tend to over-emphasize academics. Many of the sites I visited place a high value on academics and this is of great concern to our department. Since I was not able to gather a large number of quality sites for this list, I want to inspire our students to think critically and compare it to what they are learning in class and apply it to what they observe at various observation or work sites.

Part Two: Current Practices

The second part of the project yielded relevant information regarding current practices, strategies, and effective policies in the field of early childhood education. The sabbatical gave me the time to interview local directors regarding quality environments and what struggles they are currently experiencing in the field (at their sites and/or at state or national levels).

The sabbatical also gave me the time to get back into the “trenches.” Being a full time faculty, I do not have much available free time to work with children. The sabbatical offered me the opportunity to volunteer a few hours at a local preschool (Trinity Lutheran Church Preschool.)

How the Sabbatical Benefitted Faculty Members, Students, and the Community

Students will benefit from my sabbatical as they will have access to local sites to complete assignments and get insights into working with young children. They will also benefit through my updated lectures as they gain understandings regarding quality environments and issues in the field. Updating my skills and being current in the field is crucial in maintaining the high level of quality instruction that El Camino College is known for.

The sabbatical has definitely strengthened connections between our department and the local schools. The sites now have relationship and easy access to a full time Child Development instructor. I have had several of the directors already contact me since my sabbatical ended. It is my hope that we are able to nurture these relationships over time by inviting them to events, as well as having time to visit their sites in the future, especially when there is a turnover of directors. I invited directors to share flyers (for me to post) should they be looking to hire staff. I also created an email list to invite them to the workshops and conferences that our department sponsors. Staying current and connected to the community is incredibly important to me.

Faculty in my department will also benefit from this invested time as I share my experience and findings with them. I have updated the list of sites for each class that requires an observation assignment as well as updated a page of observation guidelines for students to follow.

I am grateful to the Administration of El Camino College and the Sabbatical Leave Committee for the opportunity to work on this project for our department. I am also thankful for the assistance provided by my advisor, Janet Young, Ed.D. I believe the sabbatical provided the time needed to help me forge a path towards progress in our department and community. This sabbatical was an excellent opportunity to maintain the high quality of service our department

offers. El Camino College has always been a leader in the field of Early Childhood Education and I hope to help our department continue that legacy. Many thanks.

References

Bureau of Labor Statistics information retrieved from <https://www.bls.gov/ooh/education-training-and-library/preschool-teachers.htm#tab-6> on February 17, 2020.

Harms, T., Clifford, R.M. and Cryer, D. *Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale: Revised Edition*. (2005). New York: Teachers College Press.