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Right: RSD teacher Christina Nunez engages her students in hands-on activities that support language development.

Capitalizing on Community:
Using Data and Collaborating for Children's Language Instruction

By Martha M. French and Susan C. Searls

It's the end of a long school day, and members of the Early Childhood Center (ECC) at the Rochester School for the Deaf (RSD), in New York, are sitting down to talk about one of their children. Their focus is the child's language development. The ECC teachers, the speech-language specialists, and the authors—ECC program director Susan Searls and consultant Martha French—are present. The child's teacher begins with a presentation about the child, sharing assessment information and showing video clips of the child in different activities. After the teacher finishes, we ask questions and some in the group—those with previous or different experiences with the child—add new information, contributing to an emerging picture of the child as a young communicator. Our goal is to understand as fully as possible how this child understands and uses language, what motivates her to communicate, and when she is likely to shut down or tune out. Eventually we begin to discuss new strategies that the teacher might use to expedite the child's language development. The notetaker records the strategies we suggest. Later the strategies will be typed and disseminated to all the participants.

Photos courtesy of Martha M. French and Susan C. Searls
Forms courtesy of the Early Childhood Center at the Rochester School for the Deaf

These meetings are relatively new for the ECC team at RSD. They began in the fall of 2016, and since that time the ECC team has been having regular discussions—we call them Language Development Planning Meetings—to better use data from language and observational assessments. The decision to come together as professionals on a regular basis to discuss individual children arose from concerns that ties between assessment information and instructional planning could be and should be stronger. Further, teachers typically plan for the instruction of their students on their own, and we felt that the collective knowledge of the team was an untapped resource for planning.

Two concepts—that of "communities of practice" (Lave & Wenger, 1991) and of the descriptive review process (Carini, 2001; Himley, 2011)—guided these meetings, a central feature of our efforts to implement a collaborative approach in understanding the child and improving his or her language instruction.

Communities of Practice

The concept of communities of practice provides theoretical support for our discussions. Lave and Wenger (1991) define these communities as groups of people who engage in activities related to a shared purpose. For example, the ECC team at RSD is one community of practice; its members are involved in activities related to the education of young children who are deaf or hard of hearing. These individuals also belong to the larger RSD community of practice, a group of people involved in educating deaf and hard of hearing children from early childhood through high school.

What people *do*—their activities or "practices" within a community of practice—varies. At RSD, for example, while all staff members share the purpose of educating deaf and hard of hearing students, some teach, others administrate or offer support services, and still others cook and clean and engage in other activities to support student learning. Some members of the RSD community of practice are what Lave and Wenger (1991) call "old timers," with more

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Above: In a small-group preparatory meeting, RSD teacher Karen Windhorn (second from right) discusses her presentation for an upcoming Language Development Planning Meeting.

experience in the community. These individuals typically have valuable institutional knowledge based on their history and experience within the community. Others are newcomers who have less experience in the community and bring fresh perspectives and ideas based on experiences elsewhere. These differences, as well as differences in education, professional and personal activities, and personalities account for differences in the knowledge represented within a community. Accordingly, knowledge varies within the community of practice that is RSD and even within the small and relatively cohesive community of practice that is the ECC team.

Community of practice theorists explain that learning occurs among members of a community based on these differences in knowledge. As individuals within a community interact with one another, whether in formal meetings or in less formal conversation, they learn from each other. Intentionally and incidentally, members of communities of practice construct new knowledge through their interactions. Our intent with the implementation of Language Development Planning Meetings was to capitalize on the knowledge within the ECC community.

The Descriptive Review Process

The descriptive review process that we adopted was developed by Carini and others as a systematic way of thinking and talking about individual children to better support their needs as learners (Himley, 2011). The process is tied to observational assessment and "founded on the belief that the best people to generate knowledge about children are those closest to them." Although the descriptive review process relies partly on assessment, it requires looking at children differently from what might be viewed as a medical model of education; its purpose is not to "diagnose, treat, and categorize." Instead the descriptive review process requires that individuals strive to discuss the child without judging, making snap decisions, or labeling.

Avoiding talk that focuses on children's deficiencies makes space for seeing children's strengths and differences. As the name suggests, individuals in these meetings aim to collaboratively *describe* the child as fully as possible as the basis for generating new knowledge of how best to support the child's development. Each meeting focuses on one child.

Descriptive review process discussions are democratic and inclusive. Everyone is expected to contribute, and participants are not expected to interrupt or cross-comment. A circular or semi-circular seating arrangement reinforces the participatory, inclusive nature of the meetings.

The roles of three individuals—chair, presenter, and note-taker (Himley, 2011)—provide the focus of each meeting. The chair meets with the presenter prior to the meeting to assist in planning the presentation and then facilitates the meeting. The presenter describes the child and poses a "focus question" to orient the participants' discussion on a specific concern. Following the presentation, participants take turns asking questions and offering suggestions of strategies. The notetaker records the participants' suggestions.

At RSD: Our Language Development Planning Meetings

We adapted many elements of the traditional descriptive review process for our Language Development Planning meetings. For example, we use the roles of teacher/presenter, facilitator, and notetaker, and we follow an agenda that includes equitable turn-taking among participants. We avoid using labels and categories. We avoid talking about children in ways that focus on deficits and deficit-focused thinking.

In a slight difference from the traditional descriptive review process, our focus questions are standardized because our discussions are always aimed at language development and instruction. These questions and our discussion process are guided by three forms that we have developed: a teacher/presenter form, a facilitator form, and a notetaker form. These forms ensure we cover all basis of discussion in a systematic way.

Prior to the Meeting

Our Language Development Planning Meetings are scheduled once a month during a time already established for team meetings. Searls, as director of ECC, works with individual teachers to select the students who will be the focus of these meetings at the beginning of the school year. The students are selected according to those who have made the least progress in language development across the past two years. Typically, these are the students whose teachers would most benefit from a deeper understanding of their development and new approaches to planning their language instruction.

A week or so prior to each meeting, Searls and the facilitator meet with the teacher of the child who is scheduled for discussion, and they discuss the presentation following

guidelines included on the teacher form. These guidelines prompt the teacher to think through information that is important to describing the child's language development to the team. We use two important evaluation tools: the Kendall Communicative Proficiency Levels, or P-Levels (French, 1999), which provides information about the child's functional language development, and the Visual Communication Sign Language Checklist (Simms, Baker, & Clark, 2013), which provides information about the child's development of American Sign Language. This information allows us to determine the child's current levels of functioning and goals. It is shown as a visual in the meeting; other information, such as that which addresses the child's background and temperament

Above: Windhorn, left, presents information about one of her students during a Language Development Planning Meeting.

(noted in the teacher form), is generally used as a guide for describing the child. The teacher does not need to give scripted or written responses. The teacher form also includes the focus questions that will guide the participant's discussion of strategies. (See p. 42 for the teacher form.)

In our experience, these smaller planning meetings often have more than one outcome. Not only does the teacher receive assistance for her presentation, but related issues, such as poor attendance, are highlighted. These issues can be critical to supporting the child.

During the Meeting
The same person serves as facilitator for all our meetings and uses an established agenda as her guide. (See p. 42 for the facilitator form.) At the beginning of each meeting, she reminds the team of the ground rules for discussion, including the label-free way of talking about children. She also monitors

the time during the meetings, making sure that our discussions move along as planned.

The facilitator form is used as a reference; it is not displayed or given as a handout. Following the teacher's presentation, the facilitator guides the teams' discussion of the focus questions, which are displayed from the teacher's form. As the meeting concludes, the facilitator reviews the next steps which include immediate follow-up meetings with the teacher to support further planning and later a status report by the teacher on changes in her instruction and the child's progress.

Another ECC team member serves as notetaker for all our meetings and records the strategies that participants suggest in response to the focus questions. Following the meeting, these strategies are typed and disseminated to all participants electronically. Although the teacher/presenter is expected to modify instruction for the child based on the suggestions, she has flexibility in how she does so.

Recognizing Community, Structuring Practice
As members of a community of practice that share the goal of educating young deaf and hard of hearing children, we are confident that we have much to learn from one another. Although we do not have data on the effects of our Language Development Planning Meetings, these meetings clearly generate new ideas for supporting our teachers in planning instruction for students' language development. As Carini (as cited in Himley, 2011) points out, sometimes teachers become "frozen" in their ways of thinking and their responses to children in their classroom. A descriptive review process can unfreeze teachers and "allow them to see the child or situation from many points of view, to have new ideas and images to work with, to flesh out new meanings, to imagine possibilities—and so to get the teaching going again." The process produces knowledge that helps teachers and teaching move forward.

Moreover, the benefits of the process go beyond supporting teachers and individual students. In our meetings we practice a way of thinking and talking about children, language, and assessment that spreads to all we do. We learn to see children differently as we practice describing them in more detail and eliminating deficit terminology from our conversations about them. We learn to compare the results of two language assessments, to ask ourselves questions about these assessments, and to look for patterns or discrepancies in our data.

Perhaps most important, we practice thinking about how to tie assessment information to instruction. Using assessment for

Form-ing a Meeting

By Martha M. French and Susan C. Searls

FOR FAMILIES OF DEAF AND HARD OF HEARING CHILDREN AND THE PROFESSIONALS WHO WORK WITH THEM

These forms* were developed to facilitate the Language Development Planning Meetings:

1. **Facilitator form**—This form is what the facilitator uses as a reference for the Language Development Planning Meeting. It is not displayed or given as a handout.

2. **Teacher form**—The teacher uses this form to plan his or her descriptive presentation about the child. During the presentation, the assessment information (side one) is displayed. The focus questions are also displayed when the team is ready to discuss suggestions.

3. **Notetaker form**— The notetaker's work is shared with everyone after the meeting.

*These forms may be downloaded from French & Searls's article in the online 2018 issue of *Odyssey* at *http://clerccenter.gallaudet.edu*.

instruction becomes a concrete reality rather than an educational platitude. In this era of assessment accountability, when children are often reduced to test scores or categories, our Language Development Planning Meetings—based on the descriptive review process and the benefits of individuals functioning as a community of practice—help us to sustain views of our children as complex individuals, each of whom possesses core strengths upon which we can build.

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To view the forms in PDF format