



ROME

CITY SCHOOL DISTRICT

SPOTLIGHT STORY - January 2019

THE ROME CITY SCHOOL DISTRICT'S JOURNEY TOWARDS INQUIRY BASED LEARNING

What do you know about where you live, and what do you want to know? While this question may be easy for adults to answer with a quick Google search, it is challenging for a young child to answer without learning how to think critically and practicing the steps required to investigate a topic. The students of Mrs. Roberts' 4-year old Pre-K class at the Clough School are exploring these important life skills and building the foundation for school readiness.

While Mrs. Roberts' students are currently focusing on where they live, the larger unit that this is a part of introduces the students to Inquiry Based Learning. This learning model is a form of active learning that starts by posing questions, problems or scenarios for children to wonder about, investigate and begin to formulate their own learning. For Mrs. Roberts' class, the current essential question is "Where do the people and animals around me live?" Each interdisciplinary unit lasts approximately a month in duration with all lesson plans and activities built around how students answer the essential question. For example, since one child said she lives in Rome, the students may learn more about Rome or cities as a general topic. While another child said he has a backyard, the students may explore the difference between urban, suburban, and rural environments to learn why some people may or may not have backyards. Mrs. Roberts then extends the children's learning and connections through documentation such as mapping children's homes on the large map of Rome displayed near the block area, providing graph paper and blueprints for children to begin exploring



architectural design, and capturing children's understanding through dictation of stories.

The differences between the traditional Pre-K teaching model and the Inquiry Based Learning model are making a positive impact on students, according to Mrs. Roberts. According to her, the students are using the questioning process to develop many life skills, such as research, reading,

writing, and developing their social and emotional skills. A few students around the room could be seen writing on notepads as a part of their play. Learning through play is an important teaching strategy of the Inquiry Based Learning model for young children. In recent years play has had a negative connotation associated with the word. There seems to be a general misunderstanding around purposeful play as an effective teaching strategy for young children. It is not a free-for-all or an unstructured environment and curriculum, rather purposeful or guided play is work that requires a skilled teacher who can analyze and steer students through their play to spontaneous learning. Pre-K teachers strive to move children from their natural curiosity to fostering more executive function skills such as critical thinking, problem solving, persistence, collaboration, communication, and creativity which results in higher in engagement in children's learning and retention of essential skills and concepts. According to Mrs. Roberts, the students are very enthusiastic and show high engagement towards learning and answering the essential question. In the old model, students would be told to sit for long periods of time while they learned about the "letter of the week." This model was entirely teacher led and did

not give the students much choice in regards to their learning. The goal of introducing the Inquiry Based Learning model in the Rome City School District (RCSD), is to help students develop independence and self-help skills that they will need later in life.

Mrs. Roberts reflected on the shift of instruction by explaining the inquiry-based learning model allows the children freedom to investigate through purposeful play. Play becomes the child's work. The children use hands on tools to gain independence, confidence and enhance their language skills through the inquiry process. As a teacher it is so rewarding to observe children independently moving to a center of their choice all while interacting with their peers building on those much-needed social emotional skills. This new model also introduces more ways for families to be actively involved with their child's learning through daily communication, classroom visits, at-home projects that extend the investigations for each unit which all redefines the benefit and purpose of homework.

The Pre-K staff and Director, Dana Benzo presented their journey last year at the NY Association for the Education of Young Children (NYAEYC) Annual Conference to a packed room of educators and administrators from across NYS. Subsequent visits from the Watertown City School District resulted as they partnered in building the state's efforts to shift instructional practice toward inquiry-based learning as outlined in the new Next Generation Standards. The RCSD is ready to present again at this year's NYAEYC Conference on April 2 - 4 at Turning Stone Resort.

With this new learning model, RCSD is preparing itself for a future where students take control of their education by learning based off their interests long before they enter college. The students work cooperatively with their peers, their families, and the teacher which not only allows them to grow as human beings, but to enrich the Rome community as well. 😊 - Dana Benzo, Director of Pre-K/Elementary Programs

Being part of the Rome Early Childhood Program team and part of changing the educational practices for our students is exciting. Over the last year and a half, I have enjoyed waking up and coming to school to explore with my students. Watching their enthusiasm and growth is confirmation that our program is providing all students a strong foundation and preparing them to meet the demands of the elementary classroom. I am hopeful that our district will continue to develop the P-3 initiatives and teachers will have the freedom and support to be creative and embrace inquiry-based learning.

Denise Luczak, Teacher





As an Early Childhood Educator one of the quotes I've always kept with me was "children learn through play". Through purposeful play children learn the necessary skills to communicate with peers. Children can learn in their own direction as their curiosity leads them to finding answers. Students can also concentrate longer because they are having fun.

Vicki Linstruth, Teaching Assistant



