The Power of Documentation

in the Early Childhood Classroom

A parent eyes something on the wall in the hallway near her child's classroom. She stops and looks across the entire wall, as if trying to determine where to start. She moves to the left a bit and scans the bulletin board posted farther down. At one point she nods as if in agreement and mouths a yes. Another parent approaches and turns to see what is on the wall. He too is mesmerized by the documentation of what one child discovered about pussy willows by using an I-scope lens.

Hilary Seitz

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS might ask, "What is documentation?" or "Is this documentation?" They sometimes wonder, "Can my bulletin board be documentation?"

What is documentation?

Knowing what is documentation is the first stage of understanding the process. Katz and Chard offer this explanation: "Documentation typically includes samples of a child's work at several different stages of completion: photographs showing work in progress; comments written by the teacher or other adults working with the children; transcriptions of children's discussions, comments, and explanations of intentions about the activity; and comments made by parents" (1996, 2).

Effective communication

An effective piece of documentation tells the story and the purpose of an event, experience, or development. It is a product that draws others into the experience—evidence or artifacts that describe a situation, tell a story, and help the viewer to understand the purpose of the action.

When used effectively, consistently, and thoughtfully, documentation can also drive curriculum and collaboration in the early childhood classroom setting.

Formats that work

A bulletin board can be a form of documentation, but there are any number of other possible formats, including a presentation board containing documentation artifacts and/or evidence (documentation panels), class books, portfolios, slide shows, movies, and other creative products.

The format that documentation takes can be as varied as the creator's mind permits. Because documentation should provide evidence of a process with a purpose, whatever the format, it should fully explain the process, highlighting various aspects of the experience or event.

Hilary Seitz, PhD, is the early childhood coordinator in the Department of Teaching and Learning at the University of Alaska in Anchorage. Her wide range of early childhood experiences includes teaching in child care centers, a public preschool, and elementary schools. hilary@uaa.alaska.edu

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Audience and purposes

Successful documentation formats reflect the intended audience and purposes. In addition, the format selected will depend on the individual preparing the documentation and how the children are involved in the experience.

For example, if one teacher wants to highlight for families and administrators how the class is meeting a particular math or science standard, she would use examples of children participating in experiences that align with the standard. As evidence, she might include photographs of children measuring plant stems with a ruler, children's comments about measuring the stems, background information about how the children learned about measurement (or plants), and the specific learning standard the children are meeting by participating in this experience. To best combine all of these elements, the teacher may choose a documentation panel as the format to help the audience understand how children are learning.

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If children in the class are the intended audience, however, and the purpose of the documentation is to help children reflect on their math and science learning and connect them to future lessons, then the teacher would select different artifacts and evidence. A documentation panel could again be appropriate, but different artifacts and evidence might include a web of children's ideas: for instance, why an elephant should not live at the Alaska Zoo, children's comments about the elephant, and questions for further exploration, such as, "Where should an elephant live?" Add related photographs and work samples.

Again, an explanation about where the learning began and where it is intended to go will help any audience better understand the documentation. In both cases, the quality of the end product will depend on the teacher's understanding of children, the curriculum, and the standards, along with his or her effective use of technology and observation.

What should we document?

A variety of experiences and topics are appropriate to document, but documentation should always tell a complete story. To stay on track, carefully select one topic and explore it to the fullest rather than trying to do a little of everything. For example, if the class is learning about plants (and studying plant parts, how to grow particular plants, types of plants, and so on), it would be best to document fully just one aspect of children's learning.

Choosing a focus

The teacher might choose to document only the children's study of plant parts, for example, and could start by providing a learning spark, such as a new plant in

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Documentation Artifacts and Evidence

- Teacher's description and overview of an event/experience/skill development, such as photographs and descriptions of a field trip

- Photographs of children at work—for example, conducting a science experiment

- Samples of children's work, like a writing sample from the beginning of the year

- Children's comments, such as "All the rocks have sparkles in them," in writing or as recorded by the teacher

- Teacher or parent comments about a classroom event—for instance, "It was really fun helping the children measure the ingredients for playdough"

- Teacher transcriptions of conversations during small group time when children are exploring a new topic, such as why snow melts indoors

- Important items or observations relating to an event/experience/development, such as "Johnny can now write his own name on his work"

Possible Topics to Document

- Individual child growth and development, such as language development progression

- Expected behaviors (at group time, in using a certain toy, while eating together)

- Curriculum ideas or events (field trips, presentations, special activities, celebrations)

- Curriculum projects, such as learning about plant life cycles

- Families and relationships (different types of family structures and characteristics of the families in the classroom community)

- Evidence of meeting learning standards (by posting work samples)

- Questions and answers of the children, teachers, and families about such topics as classroom routines (like how to wash your hands)

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the classroom (Seitz 2006). As children comment on the plant parts, the teacher can create a web to record what they know and to help them formulate questions. The children might also draw and label the various plant parts.
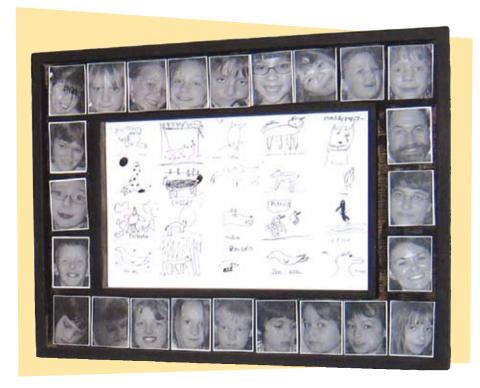
Presenting the topic and learning

The teacher can combine all of these pieces to make a documentation panel. This panel would illustrate the children's knowledge and understanding more thoroughly than a panel displaying every child's worksheet on plant parts, all of their watercolor paintings of a plant, and every brainstormed list of vegetable plants. Offering specific examples of how children came to their understandings about just one aspect of a lesson—in this case, plant parts—achieves more than offering an overview of several experiences.

Showing developmental progress

One important and common topic for documentation is individual child growth and development. As previous examples have shown, the documenter is a researcher first, collecting as much information as possible to paint a picture of progress and outcomes. Documenting individual growth requires a great deal of research, as the teacher must observe each child in a variety of areas of development (such as social-emotional, cognitive, language, and motor) over a substan-

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tial length of time. Only then can the teacher create a documentation piece that tells an accurate story about each child.

A teacher should be careful to avoid displaying private or confidential information in public forums. There are times when documentation may be more appropriately shared in other, more private venues, such as a portfolio.

Portfolios used for individual assessment of children make a particularly good format for documenting developmental progress. Teachers select several domains to research. They then collect evidence of a child's interaction with other children (photographs and written observations), record the child's reflections about their friendships and cognitive abilities in interviews or group discussions, collect work samples, and tie the documentation together by writing a narrative describing the child's abilities (not deficits) in the selected domains. Even though the portfolio focuses on a child's abilities, teachers may want to consider sharing the documentation/portfolio in a private setting, such as a parent/child/teacher conference, so that parents do not feel compelled to compare their child to others in the class.

Why should we document?

There are several important reasons for using documentation in early childhood classrooms.

Showing accountability

Accountability is one reason for documentation. Teachers are accountable to administrators, families, community members, and others, and documentation helps to provide evidence of children's learning. In addition, documentation can improve relationships, teaching, and learning. Use of this tool helps educators get to know and understand children, and it allows them to reflect on the effectiveness of their teaching practices (Kroeger & Cardy 2006).

Extending the learning

Consider the following example of how one thoughtful teacher could use documentation to prolong and extend an unexpected learning opportunity. A group of children finds some miscellaneous nuts and bolts on a playground, and their teacher, noting their curiosity, carefully observes their responses and listens to and documents their

conversations (by using written notes, photographs, and video). She listens to learn what the children know about the items and what they wonder, such as "Where do these come from?" Then she facilitates a conversation with the children to learn more about their ideas and theories behind the purpose of the nuts and bolts and how they came to be on the playground.

Later the teacher incorporates the initial comments, the photographs, and the conversations in a documentation source (panel, notebook, PowerPoint, or other creative product). The children and teacher revisit the encounter through the documentation and reflect on the experience, which helps the children continue their conversation and drives forward their interest. This back-and-forth examination of the documentation helps the teacher and children negotiate a curriculum that is based on the children's interests (Seitz 2006).

Making learning visible

When expected to provide evidence that children are meeting learning standards, documentation is a natural way to make learning visible. Helm, Beneke, and Steinheimer (1998) call this idea "windows on learning," meaning that documenting offers an insight into children's development and learning. Moreover, they observe, "When teachers document children's learning in a variety of ways, they can be more confident about the value of their teaching" (1998, 24).

How should we document?

The documentation process is best done in collaboration with other teachers, parents, and, in some cases, children soon after the experience. The information and product become richer when two or more teachers, children, and parents work together to understand an event. Collaboration

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also helps build a classroom community, which is important because it engages teachers, parents, and children in thinking about the process of learning.

When two or more people discuss an event, each brings a different perspective and a new level of depth. The photo below shows two teachers discussing a possible change to the classroom environment. They have discussed aspects that are necessary and that work and things they would like to change based on the children's needs, such as repositioning the furniture. Together they share how they have observed young children using the space. This environment plan would look very different if just one individual had created it. Carlina Rinaldi discusses this notion of working together and building community: "To feel a sense of belonging, to be

part of a larger endeavor, to share meanings—these are rights of everyone involved in the educational process, whether teachers, children, or parents...working in groups is essential" (1998, 114).

Stages of the documenter

First and foremost, documentation is a process that is learned, facilitated, and created in stages. I would even go so far as to say that documenters go through their own stages as they learn more about documenting and using documentation to support their ideas. Many early childhood educators already document children's development and learning in many ways, and most communicate a variety of messages in diverse formats to families (Brown-DuPaul, Keyes, & Segatti 2001).

There are six stages that most early childhood educators, including college students and practicing teachers, move through both individually and collaboratively (see "Stages of Documenter Experience"). Educators who collaborate to learn more about documentation tend to have more positive experiences than those who work on their own.

Stages of Documenter Experience

Stage	Experience	Value
1. Deciding to document	Documenters ask, "What should I document?" They collect artwork from every child but at first tend to create busy bulletin boards with too much information. Concerned with equity, many include every item rather than being selective.	Documenters show pride in the children's work.
2. Exploring technology use	Documenters explore how to use equipment and photographs from various events and experiences. Most of the photos are displayed on bulletin boards or inserted in photo albums. The video clips are placed in slideshows or movies and shown to children and parents.	Documenters work hard to learn more about technology. They show pride in the children's actions by displaying photos and video clips.
3. Focusing on children's engagement	Documenters learn to photograph specific things and events with the intent of capturing a piece of the story of children engaged in learning.	Documenters become technologically competent and able to focus on important learning events and experiences.
4. Gathering information	Documenters title the photographs, events, and experiences and begin to write descriptions that tell the story of children's learning.	Documenters begin to connect children's actions and experiences.
5. Connecting and telling stories	Documenters combine work samples, photographs, descriptions, and miscellaneous information in support of the entire learning event. They tell the whole story with a beginning, middle, and an end, using supporting artifacts.	Documenters continue to use documentation artifacts to connect children's actions and experiences to curriculum and learning standards.
6. Documenting decision making	Documenters frame questions, reflect, assess, build theories, and meet learning standards, all with the support of documentation.	Documenters become reflective practitioners who document meaningful actions/events, explain why they are important, and push themselves and others to continue thinking about these experiences.

Conclusion

Documentation can be a rewarding process when educators understand the value associated with collecting evidence and producing a summary presentation, whether in a bulletin board, panel, video, or other format. To become a documenter, one must first understand what to observe and what to do with the information collected. It takes time and practice to learn which experiences support effective documentation and how to collect artifacts and evidence.

Next, as documenters learn why the information is important, they begin to understand the value of documentation for different audiences and come to recognize why certain aspects of child development are important to assess. In addition, documenters learn that administrators and parents value this information, yet it also has value to the children and the teacher

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in planning authentic curriculum that meets children's needs.

Finally, the documenter learns how best to interpret and display the information gathered. Often the documentation provides insights into children's thinking and helps drive the future curriculum. Deepening children's learning is the ultimate reward of documentation.

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