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The Process of Documentation

Supporting a Strong Image of Children, Families, Educators and the Community

by Alison Maher



What does this sequence of photographs reveal about the child's process of learning?

What and how is she communicating?

What are her questions, hypotheses and theories?

What can we learn from what she is doing that can help us become more effective educators?

How can these photographs help us communicate the value of early childhood education?

Do these photographs speak to the child's right to actively participate in the world?

These are some of the many questions we use to frame our analysis of documented observations at Boulder Journey School. Boulder Journey School, located in Boulder, Colorado, is an educational setting for both children and adults that embraces innovation in the fields of early childhood education and teacher education. Both our school for young children and our graduate-level teacher education program (developed in partnership with the University of Colorado Denver and the Colorado Department of Education) are deeply inspired by our colleagues in Reggio Emilia, Italy, who have helped shape our understanding of the process of documentation.

"Documentation can be seen as visible learning; it ensures listening and being listened to by others" (Rinaldi, 2012, p. 237).

The process of documentation is dynamic and alive. This process, which includes observations, reflections and actions, is a part of the daily life at the school. We see documentation as an incredible opportunity for learning that educators can offer to children, families, community members and one another. Documentation helps us to better understand the process of children's learning, and thus better understand human learning, as well as the connections between teach-



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ing and learning. Documentation comes in many forms and serves many purposes for many audiences.

For the children, documentation is one way we show them that they are valued—in their ideas, their minds, their relationships and their emotions. By closely observing and documenting children, we are able to more fully appreciate and understand their capacity to learn. Observing children shifts our image of the child from one that is weak and empty to one that is strong and capable.

≡Sometimes you can fix your mistakes, and if you can't, it becomes beautiful art!≡

- Taylor, age 4 years

Documentation helps us fully understand young children's rights to participate in the world around them. We believe that children are born as community members, with irrefutable rights, including the right to participate within the family, within the school, and within the community. We think that children have a unique perspective on the world that is of tremendous value, if we are willing to listen.

≡It is easier to talk to your friends because sometimes you have to explain to adults what you are talking about.≡

- Cayetano, age 4 years

Furthermore, children's participation is not dependent on verbal language. We live in a world that places too much emphasis on verbal language, which can marginalize children who have not yet developed verbal language, children who speak more than one language, and children who may never have verbal language.

Through a process of observation and documentation, we are able to listen closely to the multitude of ways that children express and develop their thinking.

For example, by studying the photograph on the right, we can begin to wonder alongside the two infants, and aspects of their approach to learning are revealed. One infant reaches out to touch and

move a transparent, speckled ball, predicting that he can learn more by physically interacting with the ball. The other infant closely observes her classmate's actions in her effort to learn more. These two children show us that they have the courage to investigate something unknown and that they have the potential for high level research.

We also engage in a process of documentation so that we can offer children artifacts or traces from past experiences in order to support them in reflecting upon and refining their ideas. In one classroom, the educators photographed children's accomplishments, such as opening a lunchbox or climbing a ladder. They used these photographs to create books for children, hoping that each time they read these stories, it would reinforce a positive self-image in the children. They wanted to support the children in seeing themselves as people who could overcome challenges.

For the families, documentation allows them to share in critical experiences in their children's lives. It offers opportunities for them to see their children in new ways, in the context of school. Rather than sharing a list of classroom experiences in their entirety, educators use documentation to share the most significant learning moments, which are intended to be provocative and spark new thinking in others. In this way, documentation does more than tell the story of what happened—it makes a statement about children, teaching, learning, and the field of early childhood education. Documentation encourages discourse with families that is focused on co-constructing knowledge about the children's thinking and learning processes.

We engage in a process of documentation in order to better understand the families' perspectives. Educators observe and document the questions families ask and the stories they share in order to better identify their curiosities, interests, and passions. Families, including parents and extended family members, receive weekly communications about classroom experiences on classroom blogs. Blog entries include photographs, videos, work samples and children's words. Entries are accompanied by educators' descriptions and questions regarding the significance of particular learning ex-



periences. The blog format invites families to make contributions to classroom experiences by responding to entries. It is a form of two-way communication, a place to celebrate and ponder the learning unfolding in the classroom.

For example, a photograph such as the one on the right of two children building ramps may be used to explore the following questions with families:



- What science concepts are the children exploring?
- What other science concepts do you observe your children investigating at home?
- What are your earliest memories of formal science instruction in school?
- What do you think was effective and/or ineffective about the ways you were taught science?
- What is the value of science in contemporary society?

In this way, families can not only become increasingly knowledgeable about the work of the school, but their voices can have an impact on how that work is developed.

For the educators, documentation is the strategy we use to engage in reflective practice. Reflective practice is not something that happens on specific days, such as in-services or professional development days. Instead, reflective practice is how we teach and it is woven into every day. Educators observe and document using a variety of tools, such as photographs, video, transcribed conversations, charts, graphs and/or samples of work. They reflect on the collected documents in order to analyze classroom learning experiences, with the goal of better understanding how their teaching relates to learning.

“When teachers make listening and documentation central to their practice, they transform themselves into researchers” (Rinaldi, 2012, p. 244).

Documentation is an ongoing form of authentic assessment of both educators and young learners. Educators assess their teaching, including the various roles they assume within a learning experience, the design of the environment, their verbal contributions and their body language, the size and composition of the learning group, and so on. At the same time, they also assess the learning of the students, and make adjustments to their teaching based on what has been observed. In this way, assessment and self-assessment are integrated, occur regularly, and are used to immediately improve quality. We regularly make arrangements with educators and administrators in the school in order to be able to document our work. We support each other in this way because we know how much can be learned from making time to closely observe and document.

We recognize that human learning is complicated and multi-faceted. Thus, all educators have the right to the time, support and resources necessary to engage in a process of documentation related to numerous aspects of our profession. Our goal is to promote quality education for all. The process of documentation can help ensure that our approaches to education continuously evolve to meet the needs in our ever-changing world.

For example, we periodically photograph the environment and use the photographs to assess the learning spaces, the quality of the materials, and how the children are using the materials.

Educators also use the ongoing process of documentation to build a unique and challenging curriculum, one that is contextual and relevant. Observation and documentation of children's thinking is a critical component of curriculum planning because classroom experiences must connect with,



rather than interrupt, the learning processes of students. Using documentation to develop curriculum acknowledges that children have the right to participate in their own education.

We see educators as professionals, as researchers re-imagining the field of education in today's society. They are the experts who, in partnership with others, can determine how we best teach children now and in the future.

For the community, we share documentation of children's thinking and their process of learning in order to engage others. We consider the local, national, international and virtual communities in order to include a variety of people, from various backgrounds and with diverse points of view, in the process of documentation. Education is a social movement and documentation of educational experiences can be a form of advocacy. Documentation allows us to share learning experiences with the public, in provocative and tangible ways, through presentations, articles, exhibits and social media, with the hope of reshaping the image of children, families, educators, and the field of early childhood education into one that is powerful. By making children's thinking visible we are able to show the potential of children everywhere in order to advocate for quality educational experiences for all children.

Educators—both new educators and experienced educators, both classroom educators and directors—are change agents. We all are the leaders who can help envision, create, and shape a new image of education through a process of documentation. With that, consider what possibilities for documentation and advocacy exist in your context?

For more information on Boulder Journey School and the schools for young children in Reggio Emilia, Italy, visit www.boulderjourneyschool.com and <https://www.reggiochildren.it/>

Reference

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