## Sabbatical Report

### Documentation and the Use of Technology
### In the Study of Early Childhood Learning

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### What is Documentation?

Documentation is the process of record-keeping and collection of children's work at different stages of development and of making children's thinking and learning visible. Documentation is done for a variety of purposes such as guiding instruction, assessment of development, studying pedagogy, and communicating with others. Documentation (sometimes called "pedagogical documentation") guides instruction by **focusing** teachers on what children know, what they are interested in, and providing clues as to the best ways to reach and teach individuals and groups of children. Assessing the development of individual children is probably one of the most common uses of documentation. Documentation gives us a picture of a child or group of children at a point in time. It gives us an idea of how a child is forming knowledge. One of the least discussed purposes of documentation is that of studying pedagogy. It helps us to better understand learning and development-the "how" of teaching and learning. Understanding how children learn helps us to become better teachers. One of the uses I was most interested in was that of sharing and communicating children's learning with others through the development of documentation panels. I had seen many great examples of documentation panels and was very interested in learning how to do it in order to better see the value of the practice.

### Why Did I Want to Study Documentation?

Before taking my sabbatical, I had read about documentation and taught a little about it, but had not actually done it myself! I mentioned previously that I had seen several great examples of documentation in traveling displays, presentations at conferences and at meetings of the Illinois Project Group. Documentation was a skill that was not taught during my own education and I wanted to see what the true value of documentation could be for Parkland students and other early childhood professionals. Because the beautiful documentation displays that I had seen excited me and made me want to be with children again, I knew there had to be something special about it. I wanted to know first-hand why it seemed so important.

Documentation is an important part of developing "emergent curriculum" for young children. The formal documentation panels I viewed helped me see more about the actual process of developing emergent curriculum - content that is based on children's interests that arise from daily experiences and events in their own school and community environments. In addition to these experiences shared by teachers from other programs, I had personally seen students become even more aware and excited about children's development as they documented pieces of an individual child's development in a "portfolio", a requirement for several Child Development courses. I loved seeing students bring their photographs, work samples, and snippets of conversations to share with each other. These activities seemed to elicit some of the most thoughtful and meaningful discussions of child development and teaching that I had seen in the program. Students noticed things that they had not noticed before. They truly observed and began to understand children and the process of helping them learn.

Standards-based assessment is a major watch-word in educational settings. Unfortunately for young children, they are often being tested formally as a way to assess what they are learning. Much of what we know in child development tells us that we can see what children know by watching them play and

interact with others. The documentation process is an important part of what we call "authentic" or real, meaningful assessment. It involves looking at what children do in natural settings. It is more meaningful (or authentic) for a child to be able to count the five baby geese crossing Duncan Road with their mother than it is for them to be able to count five dots on a test paper. Geese have much more meaning to a young child-and we all know that children aren't always very good at doing things when there doesn't seem to be a good reason for doing it! The same child who can't seem to count the five dots on a paper may do a great job counting real geese, a much better (meaningful, authentic) assessment of the child's ability to understand mathematical concepts.

As an aside to actual documentation, I was also interested in studying new technologies in education. I wanted to learn to use video clips, digital media, and other technologies to enhance my classes both live and online. These are also tools for use in the documentation process.

### *Learning and Research*

I began my sabbatical with a two-day working conference, "Open Door", with experienced teachers and documenters (including many examples) and with Judy Harris Helm, a leader in the field of early childhood education. This was probably the most inspiring activity of my sabbatical! The first part of the conference was held at the Northminster Learning Center in Peoria, Illinois, a program that implements a "Reggio Emilia" philosophy (see http://www.reggioalliance.org/ for more information). Documenting children's learning and development is a critical element of this approach to early childhood education. It was incredibly interesting and informative to see how all stages of the documentation process were included throughout the program. I came home with a wealth of ideas on sharing documentation with others and an excitement for actually doing it myself! The second day of this conference was hands-on training in documentation itself. This segment was very practical and was held in a computer lab on the campus of Illinois Central College. Participants brought photographs and notes from a learning experience with children and were taught how to develop a formal documentation panel. Everyone went home with a copy of their panel, templates, and instructions on how to use Microsoft Publisher to develop these simple panels on our own.

The second major activity I participated in as I prepared to document was an online course with George Forman, another leader/teacher focusing on observing and documenting children's learning. Dr. Forman developed a series of "Videatives", short video clips that can be used to teach about development and practice. It was useful to me to see how he used these short clips both with the children and with teachers. I was also able to use his suggestion as to the type of video camera that is most easily used with children and for documentation. I appreciated seeing how another professor participated in the online learning process with those of us who were currently involved in the course. The Child Development Program purchased a series of the Videatives with guidelines for use in the classroom that I have since used in several courses.
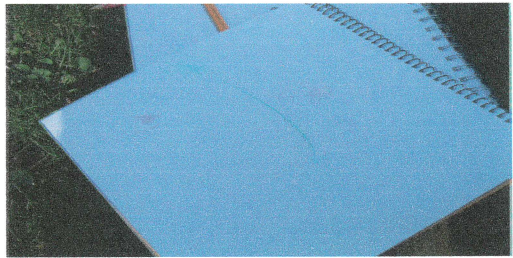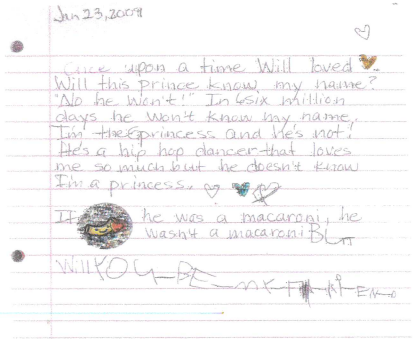
Reading and discussion with other teachers was also helpful to me in my study and practice. Nilsa Almenas, Parkland Child Development Center teacher attended the Open Door Conference with me and was a great help in sharing her classroom and real-life approach with me. I observed the documentation
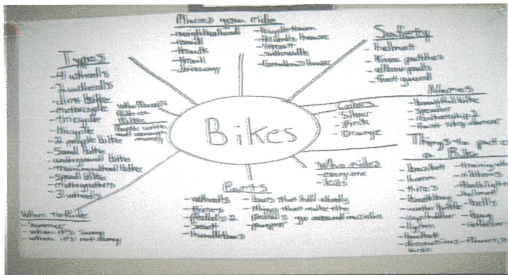
done at the University Primary School and talked with director, Nancy Herzog about their documentation practices.

## The Documentation Itself

When I first began my sabbatical, I thought of documentation only as the more "formal" documentation panels used mostly for communicating with parents and others about the end-products of children's activities. As I read and experienced more on the process of documentation, I found that there was actually much more to it than that. Formal documentation is created with "raw" documentation gathered as children are involved in the actual activities and learning. Raw documentation is the work samples, notes of conversations and comments made by the children, still photography, video and audio recordings. This is the true guts of documentation. Much more raw documentation is collected than is actually used in formal documentation panels and displays. Raw documentation is what is gathered and analyzed in order to make decisions about curriculum and development. I found that the analysis of what I collected made me dig deeper and required me to apply what I knew and to learn more about aspects of development and learning.
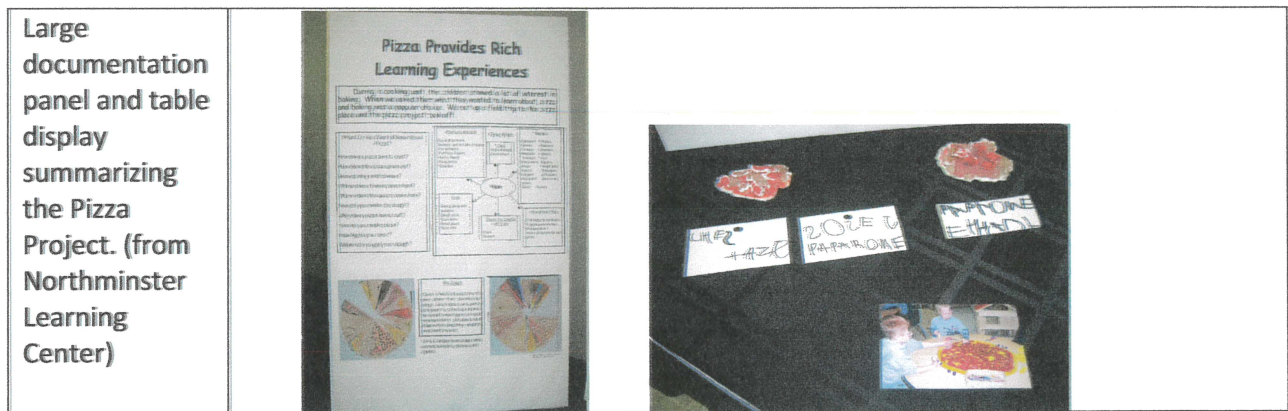
Some examples of raw documentation include:

| | |
|---|---|
| Work Sample: observational drawing of a young fern |  |
| Work Sample: dictated story |  |

| Topic web done with children |  |
| --- | --- |

Formal documentation could be more than just large poster-size documentation panels. It could be small panels that could easily be printed on a home computer and mounted in a picture frame, blog entries (which can also be analyses of raw documentation), experience books, table top displays with explanations, etc.

Examples of formal documentation:

| Camera word wall (example here from Northminster Learning Center) |  |
| --- | --- |
| Trip to the Vet book (page) |  |

| Large documentation panel and table display summarizing the Pizza Project. (from Northminster Learning Center) |  |
| --- | --- |

## What I Learned

Throughout my study, I kept hearing/reading over and over "TELL THE STORY". Formal documentation involves telling the story of what happened. It doesn't have to be fancy, it just has to be meaningful. One of the first books I read (Helm, Beneke, and Steinhammer, 1998) discussed the idea that documentation could involve three types or "windows on learning" - child development, a learning experience, and teacher self-reflection. I found this to be useful in organizing my experiences and in planning for student assignments in the future.

I learned several ways to make the process of documentation easier. First of all, you have to be organized. Have a plan for what, when, and how to document. In fact, I found that sticking to a simple black and white format when making panels saved me many hours of trying to be artistic in documentation. It also looks professional! I learned that formal documentation uses many of the principles used by museums. Not all raw documentation is used, just the parts needed to tell the story. The old KISS (keep it simple stupid) concept is important to keep in mind.

I completed a checklist and prepared portfolio pages for a child, just like I've had students do for years. As I looked for documentation of early science concepts, I had difficulty noting questions a child asked. This encouraged me to focus more on modeling questions when interacting with the child. As time went on, the child began asking more and more questions. It was great to have this new personal example to use in my teaching of how authentic assessment and documentation can be used in planning individualized curriculum.

I looked through an amazing window on child development after I noted a conversation a child had with another adult about her grandmother's funeral. She told the adult that the body in the casket was not her grandmother's **real** body, it was just **pretend**. This conversation stimulated me to learn more about children's understanding of death and how they conceptualize "real" and "pretend". It also cemented my belief in the importance of taking written notes on children's conversations.

While reflecting on raw documentation materials I collected, I had a several "aha!" moments. One came as I noticed that children were interested in photography. I teach an early childhood literacy course, so of course I went to the library and checked out several books on cameras, thinking we would explore

how a camera worked. The children were not interested in the books or the parts of the camera. Later, as I was reviewing photos, it became clear that the interest was in the photography itself. I saw pictures of a child lying on the floor shooting the ceiling (and the pictures of that ceiling!), arranging dolls for a portrait session, etc. The interest was in setting up shots and looking at things from different perspectives, not in cameras. This helped me to plan different types of activities, studying approaches for helping children learn to take pictures and safely use a digital camera. I prepared a photograph album for pictures taken by children. This album helped children reflect on the pictures they took and could be used as formal documentation of the study of photography (a window on a learning experience, both mine and theirs!). Dictation about the pictures taken by children and notes on how the photos themselves improved held many opportunities for learning and sharing information with parents and others.

I took video of children involved in activities and showed them. I learned that not all video plays on all computers. This was very frustrating for me-still is. I did learn that video (and still photography) is a great way to help children think and remember about what they have done. Their reflections do help them to revisit and **expand** on what they did and learned in the past. Two of the videos I took involved children of different ages playing with ice. These will be great to use in one of my college classes as we study actual child development.

I learned how to blog, how to post photographs and video on a personal teaching blog and how to limit who has access to that blog. It was interesting to get comments from another teacher and writing it helped me think more about what I was doing and teaching. This could also be a great way to share children's learning with families.

In summary, I think that what I learned most about was how useful documentation is in understanding and planning for children. I went into the sabbatical primarily thinking I wanted to learn about how to make documentation panels and video clips. I did learn to do this, but what was most important was how much the documentation helped me learn about children. Documentation helped me see through **children's** eyes, not just my own. That was awesome. One of my readings included the phrase "learning to document and documenting to learn". That was IT!

### *Next Steps*

Now that I've completed my sabbatical project, I plan to...

- Teach the observation class, CHD 125.
- Assign small documentation projects in several courses.
- Use videotaping with practicum students-for them **and** for me!
- Continue using photographs. Explore strategies for practice in reflecting on content.

**Note:** See an example of formal documentation at the end of this report.

### References & Resources

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STARNET Northwest Region I and III, Center for Best Practices in Early Childhood Education, Western Illinois University, Macomb, Illinois. APPLES (video)Magazines:

- 5/20/04: The Power of Documentation
- 2/17/05: Documenting Young Children's Learning Through Technology
- 1/20/05: Work Sampling Illinois

# WORMS!

On Thursday, October 30, Shikeena brought earthworms (with soil and a spray bottle of water) for the children to explore. She also brought magnifiers and rulers to aid in the children's investigations.
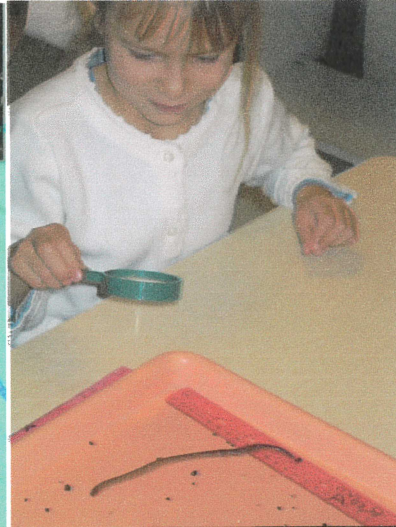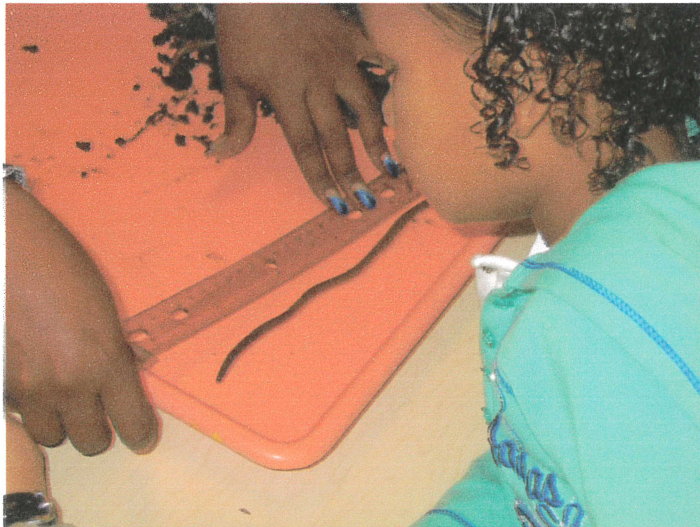
**Comments overheard from the children:**

*"I like worms"*

*"Only fish eat worms, right?'*

*"Worms are like snakes"*

*"I just touched one!"*

*"It looks different and bigger"*

*"Where did you find these?"*

*"I've never seen worms"*

*"Wanna look through my (sic) magnifying glass?"*

*"That one's dead."*

*"They don't even make noise."*


*Throughout this investigation, the children noticed several things including the ways that the worms moved, how they felt, how they responded to being sprayed with water, and how a magnifying glass works.*

## Questions to ponder...

1. What **prior experiences** have they had with earthworms?
2. What do the children **know** about earthworms?
3. What **new information** did the children gain from this experience?
4. What **interested** the children most about the earthworms? What interested you most about the children?
5. What DIDN'T they notice that you did?
6. What **new vocabulary** did the children gain from the experience?
7. How did the children use the **magnifying glasses**? Do you think they understood how a magnifier works? What do they know? What else might they learn?
8. Why is exploring earthworms a valuable experience?

# Illinois Learning Standards Addressed in this Experience:

### Science Benchmarks:

11.A.ECa. Use senses to explore and observe materials and natural phenomena.

11.A.ECb. Collect, describe and record information.

11.B.ECa. Use scientific tools such as thermometers, balance scales and magnifying glasses for investigation.

12.B.EC. Describe and compare basic needs of living things.

13.B.ECa. Express wonder and ask questions about their world.

### Math Benchmarks:

7.B.EC. Show understanding of and use comparative words.

7.C.EC. Incorporate estimating and measuring activities into play.

### Language Arts Benchmarks:

4.A.EC. Listen with understanding and respond to directions and conversations.

4.B.EC. Communicate needs, ideas and thoughts.

5.B.EC. Relate prior knowledge to new information.

5.C.EC. Communicate information with others.

### Physical Development and Health:

19.A.ECb. Engage in active play using fine motor skills.

### Social/Emotional Development:

31.A.ECb. Exhibit eagerness and curiosity as a learner.

32.A.ECa. Begin to understand and follow rules.

32.B.ECb. Begin to share materials and experiences and take turns.