Ideas for Training Staff

Making Learning Visible

by Margie Carter

In recent years, "documentation" has become a buzz word in early childhood programs. When I first started working in child care, documentation was primarily a reference to keeping records of important incidents or activities related to liability or accountability issues. These included such things as reference checks on prospective employees, TB tests, accident reports, and meal counts for USDA.

Today, with a growing emphasis on individualizing for children, documentation increasingly refers to gathering observation notes and samples of children's work into portfolios for the purpose of assessment and planning. The Italian educators of Reggio Emilia have further influenced us to create documentation displays of children's project work using photos, transcripts of children's conversations, and teacher narration of the evolution and meaning of the children's thinking and activities. The traveling exhibit *The Hundred Languages of Children* has stunning examples of this and can be currently viewed at Mills College in Oakland, California, and will be brought to the NAEYC conference in Atlanta in November 2000.

My own thinking about documentation as a staff development tool initially took shape as I read the books of Vivian Paley and developed a dialog with Betty Jones. As part of a partnership project between Pacific Oaks College and the schools of Pasadena, California, Betty wrote lively descriptions of children she observed at play, including transcriptions of their conversations and sketches of things they made. She began to share these in newsletters and on bulletin boards. Betty's book, *The Play's the Thing,* co-authored with Gretchen Reynolds, offers a lovely picture of this. Creating "Master Player" bulletin board displays soon became a centerpiece of my on-site staff training work.

Prior to my work with Betty Jones, I had been trying to perfect my observation/feedback skills with classroom teachers. *My* observation skills were advancing quite nicely, but, alas, not those of the teachers with whom I was working. The obvious finally occurred to me: if I wanted teachers to be focusing more of their time on observing and planning for children's play, I should be modeling that when in their classrooms. With inspiration from Betty's work, I shifted my attention when working with teachers and began written documentation of the ordinary moments of children's engaged play, and posted this for the teachers and parents to see. This was a significant turning point in my effectiveness as a staff trainer. Not only did teachers become more at ease with my presence, but they, too, started to notice and eagerly share stories of children's play. (A fuller description of this experience can be found in my chapter "Catching the Teacher Being Good," in *Growing Teachers: Partnerships in Staff Development*, edited by Elizabeth Jones.

These experiences are currently on my mind as teachers everywhere tell me the pressure they feel to get children ready for school. The success I've had using documentation of children's activities as a staff development tool, along with further exposure to the role of documentation in the Reggio approach, have convinced me that one of our biggest jobs in child care programs is making learning visible.

How Does Learning Look?

Despite all our protest to the contrary, the public view of child care is baby-sitting. Parents and others outside our profession expect education to look very different from play. Indeed, some early childhood teachers make a strong distinction

between learning time and free play time in their rooms. My point of view suggests something different, with play and learning very integrated. I believe that children will investigate and learn about the world every chance they get, indoors and out. Our job is to continually provide a rich environment with a variety of experiences, carefully observe children's pursuits, and then offer more resources and scaffolding to deepen and extend their learning. Documentation can be a powerful tool in making this learning visible among the teachers themselves, the children, their families, and the wider community.

STRATEGY: Formulate questions to be answered through documentation

I've been encouraging caregivers and teachers to see themselves as researchers, eager to uncover new knowledge about children's developmental themes and better understandings of individual pursuits and learning. For instance, when teachers ask me about issues such as improving their playgrounds, why certain children might be fighting, or how to get a particular child involved in something, I suggest we formulate a related question and gather data through documenting our observations. To formalize it as a research project, I'll sometimes create a form to use for documentation.

After three or four weeks, I ask teachers to bring their documentation notes, transcriptions, photographs, and sketches to a meeting where we compare and analyze what we've heard and seen. This may lead to changes in the environment, some individualized planning, or further questions to research. I then try to work with someone on the staff to create a documentation display of our learning process as adults. This usually provokes more curiosity and motivation for teachers to learn through observation.

STRATEGY: Take the child's point of view

A good deal of inappropriate practice occurs when adults forget that children see and experience the world very differently than adults do. The more we can capture the perspectives of these young ones, the more likely we will plan and respond appropriately.

Observing from the child's point of view can be an eye-opener for adults. For an example of what this looks like, I read aloud excepts from Vivian Paley's books (most recently *The Girl With the Brown Crayon* and *The Kindness of Children*) or Daniel Stern's *Diary of a Baby*. These authors beautifully capture experiences from a young child's perspective and offer an example of how documentation can be gathered and written in that manner. We then practice this writing as a way of transforming our documentation to represent the child's point of view.

For instance, as we study photos and written documentation of a given activity, I ask teachers to tell me all the sensory words they would use to describe this child's experience. What do they think the child is discovering? Wanting to learn more about? Feeling about him or herself? I encourage the use of lively words, and we work to gather them into sentences which tell the story before us from the child's point of view. A documentation display of this sort provides learning for everyone who creates or reads it.

STRATEGY: Find and spread the learning story

Every day, observant teachers and directors can find children actively exploring and eager to learn. The more teachers plan the environment for discovery and allow time for children's investigation and inquiry, the more often the learning will grow and deepen. Because parents and visitors may expect learning to look like worksheets and teacher directed lessons, it is important for us to interpret for them the learning embedded in children's everyday investigations and activities. Turning documentation of what they say and do into visual stories is a way to reassure parents that their children are indeed learning what they need to be ready for school.

One of the most significant reminders the educators of Reggio Emilia offer us is to be conscious of our image of the child. A view of children as tremendously competent, creative, and worthy of respect permeates their planning, their interactions, and their documentation. I believe we need to cultivate a similar view in our work and communicate it widely in our conversations and bulletin board displays. The walls of our hallways and rooms should reflect visual images and stories that convey the value we place on giving children a vibrant childhood, full of opportunities to develop friendships, pursue interests, solve problems, and work through conflicts. Our documentation should tell these stories along with ones which highlight project work, children's developing theories, and efforts to represent their ideas. These visual stories can also be used to build connections between our programs and the children's families.

Stories are engaging when they are full of lively details. It's important to describe what is specifically happening in a learning process. Trying to do this not only enhances the learning of the children and teachers but makes it visible to

other observers or visitors as well. George Foreman described it this way in a dialog with someone on the Reggio Listserve:

We have found that "building with blocks" is not helpful, but "children discover the use of empty spaces in block building" to be more helpful. We have found that saying "the children learned to dance" is not helpful, but saying "the children learned the difference between the upbeat and downbeat through dance" to be more helpful. I think the more helpful versions give us more ideas about how to support and extend an activity and how to talk to the parents when they ask about the value of an activity. Instead of saying "the children are learning to cooperate by playing on the jungle gym," we would say, "the children learned not to dangle their feet in the face of the other children on the lower rungs of the jungle gym." While that is not the only way the children learned to cooperate, it presents the reader (since these are often documented on panels) sufficient specificity to actually be recognized the next time a parent or teacher is on the playground. This quality of "recognizability" has become a criterion by which we judge our documentation.

For them to appeal to and engage others, I believe our language in documentation displays needs to have the quality of a storyteller, rather than a clinician. I help teachers to first find the objective data in their observations and children's work samples and then to translate this into a captivating story so that the documentation process becomes exciting, rather than a tedious requirement.

STRATEGY: Document to extend the learning

A great way to grow curriculum projects, not to mention self-esteem, with the children and staff of our programs is to spend time with them reviewing pieces of documentation. When children have their words read back to them or are told a story and shown photographs of their activities, they are likely to use this as a springboard for further ideas and exploration.

Likewise, when directors take the time to highlight this kind of documentation with staff, they create a climate of respect for and excitement about children's activities. Discussions centered around observation notes and samples of children's conversations and representations promotes deeper thinking and collaboration among teachers. It encourages further planning, observation, and excited communication. What better use of our staff meetings?

The benefits of making learning visible through documentation stories are endless. I especially like how preschool teacher and skilled documentor Sarah Felstiner describes this in her unpublished thesis:

Documentation involves recording and collecting children's work, reviewing and analyzing that collection, building a curriculum based on that analysis and displaying that curriculum for others to see. Documentation, in fact, enables teachers to show and tell about the full scope of learning that comes from a curriculum with children at its heart. This is a new way to envision "show and tell" — not as a brief window of opportunity for children to bring their lives into the school, but as a way for teachers to make sure that those lives are always the focus of the school.

Margie Carter lives in Seattle and travels widely to do staff training and collect stories of fabulous play, learning, and teaching in child care programs.