

# Staff Development Resources Right Under Your Nose

by Margie Carter

I find myself smiling when a director or teacher educator requests permission to use a photo story of mine for a staff meeting or workshop. But, of course, that's why I put them out in the world. Children and teachers have been incredibly generous with me as I gather such stories, and I am eager to see these stories spark deeper thinking in others. My smile comes from knowing that there are hundreds of these stories right under the nose of every director. Well, right under the nose of every director who ventures out into the daily life of your program. Surprisingly, though, directors tend to look in their file drawers, on their bookshelves, or the web for staff development resources. You might want to try a different approach, with a note pad and camera in hand.

Gathering stories of children has several benefits. The process gives you a closer look at what the children in your program are actually doing. You get a taste of what you are asking teachers to do. (An itty bitty taste because you aren't trying to simultaneously manage all the responsibilities of classroom work.) Your notes and photos can be used to provoke dialog, new insights, and planning ideas. And, your stress level slips a few notches as you get back in touch with what you love about your job.

## Gathering stories for staff development

The most typical reasons directors take pen and paper to classrooms is for some kind of assessment. Perhaps there's a child of concern, a teacher needs a performance evaluation, or you are using a rating scale to improve quality in your program. What I'm proposing is something of a different stripe. Rather than looking for a problem, I suggest seeking out examples of children's activities that you want to illuminate for some reason. Perhaps you want your staff to see more details of children's competencies. You may spot children engaged in something intriguing that might spark further inquiry and get teachers looking more closely. Maybe you are aware of families who could benefit from a story about their children. Any of these possibilities and more can serve as worthy reasons for you to take 20 minutes to hang out with a group of children.

### Strategy:

#### Make your presence uneventful

If the teachers or children aren't used to a visitor hanging around with a camera in hand, you'll need to ease into this practice of gathering stories. If you are a director, you aren't just any visitor, so be explicit about why you're there. "I'm going to start visiting more and

watching what kids are doing. I'll write down some things I see and read them to you if you'd like. I only take pictures of kids at play or work, not of kids posing for pictures." Make it clear to the teachers that you are focusing on the children, not them, and then be true to that intent. A teacher may become part of your story, but not with any intent to critique his or her performance.

### Strategy:

#### Involve children in the documentation process

Contrary to keeping your presence uneventful, you may choose to take advantage of children's interest in your visit. In today's digital world many children know that their pictures can be instantly viewed, and you should plan how to handle their possible interest. Showing children your photos might actually prompt some useful conversation, or it could divert the children's attention away from what they are doing. Assess the value of and possibili-

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### Right under your nose: Observation stories Jesse's investigation

Noticing Caroline had sat Jesse on a blanket with toys and a propped up mirror, I was curious to see what he would be most interested in. At first he mouthed some toys, but then I captured this series of photos. In sequence they seem to illuminate an unfolding investigation.



When he first caught sight of himself in the mirror, Jesse's face lit up with a grin slide. His arms were raised at the time and he then looked directly at his left hand, and moved it toward the mirror, shifting his eyes again to the mirror. Is he exploring how his hand looks in the mirror when he moves it?



Is he practicing the wave he and his mom exchange when they part each day?



Next he lowered his left hand and moved his right one to the mirror. The expression on his face, eyes bright and lips slightly upturned, seemed a cross between quizzical and satisfied.



I was amazed to see what Jesse did next. He leaned all the way forward, nose to nose at the mirror, eyes wide open. Then he closed his eyes and slowly opened them again.



Is this an exploration of object permanence? Is he playing peek-a-boo?



Does he think the image in the mirror is another person or does he recognize himself? When do children start having a self image of themselves?

How could we find out more about the meaning of this experience for Jesse and what he might be on the threshold of?

ties for their interest in what you are doing. When children consistently leave their play to look at my camera screen, I typically shift my focus to some other

play. If some children remain at my side, I narrate what I am seeing and wonder aloud about its meaning. Children's ongoing engagement with

your focus might result in something worth documenting in and of itself. Again, you have the opportunity for a little taste of the constant decision

## Showing children your observation stories

Today I observed several girls at the sensory table with worms and dirt. Though the worms have engaged the children in the room for weeks, Rukia said this is the first time these particular girls had approached the table. They were initially tentative, scratching around on the surface of the dirt. To give them some idea of what others had discovered with the worms, I grabbed a couple of printed photo stories and brought them to the girls. They really latched onto ruler and measuring work they saw in the pictures and instantly decided to try and replicate it. We got out the ruler and Uma called for a white tray. "You have to put the worms on the tray so you can measure them. See, you stretch them out and count the numbers. You have to be very gentle so they know you are a friend." Animated discussion followed comparing the sizes of the worms, not only with the ruler, but with the size of the worms in the photo. Shannon took a handful of curled up worms from the dirt and one by one began stretching them out along the ruler.



I wonder what's at the heart of this intense focus on measuring. Do they think the worms actually grow and shrink and wonder about this process in their own body?



With their constant return to the photographs, would they be curious about how a picture actually represents the worms in a different size?

Do all the adults and children agree that it's okay to play with worms as if they are pets?



Should we explore ethical considerations embedded in this activity?

Are there other clues in earlier documentation that reveal the "big ideas" under this play for the children?

making teachers are engaged in as they gather documentation.

## Using documentation stories for staff development

Rather than creating a polished piece of documentation, bring your rough observation notes, printed photos, and possibly some work samples to a team or all staff meeting. You can use your stories in different ways, depending on how experienced and confident your teachers are in studying documentation. When I'm in the early stages of using documentation stories for staff development, I typically think through the following questions before we meet.

- Why did I choose this child (or these children) to observe?
- What do my notes and photos specifically describe the child doing and saying?
- What am I most curious about?
- What questions might guide the teachers in making meaning out of this story?
- Can this story be integrated into any required paper work for the teacher (i.e., curriculum plans, work samples, assessments, learning standards or domains)?
- How could I use this story to work further with this child's teachers?

This initial self-inquiry helps me engage in a more productive process to foster our collaborative inquiry and learning when we meet. (See **Jesse's Investigation** and **Showing Children Your Observation Stories** for examples of using stories in this way on the following pages.)

### Strategy:

#### Play the role of provocateur

If you are working with teachers who already have a solid practice of observing and documenting children's

activities, you can offer some new challenges as you examine their stories. For example, listen to how Susan Stacey describes her efforts to nudge along a teacher's development when she was directing a campus child development program.

"Among our staff, there's been a tendency to respond to an observation story with an idea for next steps, rather than de-constructing what happened and thinking deeply about it. What has helped us is to use our documentation for teacher research. We have come up with burning questions about what the children are doing, and thought of ways that we can find the answers (what our profession calls action research). This involves more teacher actions to not only take the children's work to a different level, but also to help the teachers answer their own questions. It has taken time, but has resulted in team meetings that are not only about deciding what to do the next day, but that result in some bigger questions for the staff. Teachers have become used to the idea that they will leave meetings with more questions than answers, and are feeling comfortable about that. My role as director is to act as the provocateur, and indeed, to slow people down to really think about what I call the missing middle. That is, the analysis, rather than an immediate response with a curriculum idea.

"For instance, I suggested we explore what we could learn about children's interest in and ability to use different materials to make the same thing from different materials. So, in the block area, for instance, their teacher Katie decided to ask the children to re-represent their block buildings in another "language"—graphics, manipulatives, clay, etc.—just to see what would happen. The results surprised us. Some four year olds had a really hard time with this, while others breezed through this challenge. As we studied this further over the coming months, I provoked the teachers to

consider the idea of starting this process of representation much earlier; for instance, in the toddler room where we noticed the children interested in the cardinals feeding outside. What if we put red paint at the easel nearby and encouraged children to paint? We have always used paint and other graphic materials in completely open-ended ways with toddlers, but what would happen if an invitation like this were made? Would our current thinking about developmentally appropriate practice change or be confirmed?

"We brainstormed how every day we could have a special table like this with something pertinent to these toddlers to represent, like an invitation to draw, such as a rock a child has found, a new bud, a twig with an interesting shape, and so on. And the teacher in that area could get involved to scaffold their learning. We would still have all the usual art choices available, but the teachers could provide an opportunity for toddlers to do representational work like this and it would be relaxing and would build confidence. I pointed out that if it's done on a regular basis, it would provide an opportunity to notice development. We could display the daily drawings together and teachers and children could revisit them together at the end of each week. What I was after here was to provoke a shift in thinking about the role of the teacher, encouraging children to represent in a way that involves more adult intervention than we associate with developmentally appropriate practice or emergent curriculum."

If you are wondering how you will ever find time to add another 20 minute activity into your day, consider this as a strategy for doing something different, not something more. Try making a quick assessment of how you currently focus your time on staff supervision activities. On an average, how many hours a week do you typically spend on hiring,

orienting, and meeting with teachers? How much of that time do you think really impacts their ongoing growth and development? If your time with teachers is primarily spent going over regulations, schedules, and announcements, this isn't really about professional development. How much of your time each week is spent observing, evaluating, and giving feedback to teachers? Now, this is getting closer to a staff development process, but it isn't helping you build an organizational culture of learning together by discussing the unfolding activities the children are engaged in. What shifts could you make in how you focus your time with staff to take advantage of other possibilities that are right under your nose?

## Reference

Curtis, D., & Carter, M. (in press). *Learning Together with Young Children*. St. Paul, MN: Redleaf Press.