

Documentation in the Early Years

Making Children's Learning Visible

Introduction

Imagine walking into a classroom and seeing a display of children's artwork hanging neatly on a wall.

You can see the finished product.

But can you see:

- The child's thinking?
- The questions they asked?
- The challenges they faced?
- The theories they developed?
- The conversations they had?

Probably not.

This is where documentation becomes important.

Documentation allows us to move beyond simply displaying what children have made and begin to understand how they learn.

In Reggio-inspired practice, documentation is often described as "making learning visible."

In the EYFS, observation and assessment help practitioners understand children's development and plan meaningful next steps.

Together, these approaches encourage educators to become observers, listeners, researchers, and reflective practitioners.

What Is Documentation?

Documentation is the process of collecting evidence of children's learning experiences, thinking, interests, and development.

Documentation may include:

- Photographs
- Observation notes
- Children's conversations
- Drawings
- Paintings
- Writing samples
- Learning stories
- Audio recordings
- Video clips
- Project work
- Reflections from children
- Teacher reflections

Documentation helps us understand not only what children are learning but how they are learning.

Documentation vs Record Keeping

Many educators confuse documentation with record keeping.

Although both are important, they serve different purposes.

Record Keeping

Focuses on:

- Attendance
- Assessment records
- Progress tracking
- Developmental milestones

Documentation

Focuses on:

- Learning processes
- Children's thinking
- Curiosity
- Problem-solving
- Relationships
- Inquiry
- Learning journeys

Documentation tells the story behind the learning.

Why Documentation Matters

Documentation helps us:

Understand Children Better

Careful documentation reveals children's interests, strengths, questions, and emerging understandings.

Make Learning Visible

It allows educators, children, and families to see learning that might otherwise remain invisible.

Inform Planning

Documentation provides valuable information for future experiences and projects.

Encourage Reflection

Teachers can revisit observations and gain deeper insights into children's development.

Strengthen Family Partnerships

Documentation helps families understand what and how their children are learning.

Documentation in the Reggio Emilia Approach

In Reggio-inspired settings, documentation is considered an essential part of teaching and learning.

Documentation is not something that happens after learning.

It is part of the learning process itself.

Teachers document:

- Children's questions
- Theories
- Conversations
- Investigations
- Problem-solving processes
- Project work

The goal is to understand children's thinking.

A Reggio Question

Instead of asking:

"What did the child make?"

We ask:

"What was the child thinking while making it?"

This shift changes everything.

Documentation in the EYFS Framework

The EYFS encourages practitioners to observe children in order to:

- Understand their level of development
- Identify interests
- Plan meaningful learning opportunities
- Support individual progress

Effective observation helps practitioners:

- Recognise children's strengths
- Identify next steps
- Meet children's individual needs
- Build a complete picture of development

Documentation can provide valuable evidence across all areas of learning and development.

Observation: The Foundation of Documentation

Before we document, we observe.

Observation requires us to:

- Slow down
- Watch carefully
- Listen deeply
- Remain curious

Effective observation focuses on:

What children do

What children say

How children interact

What captures their attention

How they solve problems

What they are trying to understand

Observation is the starting point of meaningful documentation.

What Should We Document?

Not every activity requires documentation.

Focus on moments that reveal learning.

Examples include:

Children's Questions

"Why does the moon follow us?"

Problem-Solving

Building a bridge that repeatedly collapses.

Collaboration

Children negotiating roles during role play.

Curiosity

Investigating insects found in the garden.

Creativity

Representing ideas through drawing, construction, movement, or storytelling.

These moments often provide the richest insights.

Capturing Children's Voices

One of the most powerful forms of documentation is recording children's exact words.

Example

Instead of writing:

"Arjun understands shadows."

Document the child's actual words:

"My shadow is running after me because it likes me."

This quote reveals thinking, imagination, and theory-building.

Children's voices should remain at the heart of documentation.

Learning Stories

Learning stories are narrative observations that describe significant learning moments.

They often include:

What happened

What the child said

What learning was observed

Possible next steps

Learning stories help teachers move beyond checklists and capture the richness of children's experiences.

Documentation Panels

Documentation panels are a common feature in Reggio-inspired classrooms.

They may include:

- Photographs
- Children's quotes
- Teacher observations
- Samples of work
- Reflections
- Evidence of project development

These displays help make learning visible for:

- Children
- Families
- Teachers
- Visitors

Documentation panels celebrate the learning journey, not just the final outcome.

Making Learning Visible Through Projects

Project work provides excellent opportunities for documentation.

A project may reveal:

- Children's theories
- Questions
- Investigations
- Changes in thinking over time

Documentation allows teachers to trace the evolution of learning.

Children can revisit earlier ideas and compare them with new understandings.

This promotes reflection and deeper learning.

Documentation and Assessment

Documentation should not feel separate from assessment.

Quality documentation naturally provides evidence of development.

For example:

A photograph alone may show a child stacking blocks.

A documented observation may reveal:

- Problem-solving
- Mathematical thinking
- Communication
- Collaboration
- Persistence

Rich documentation provides meaningful evidence of learning across the EYFS areas.

Involving Children in Documentation

Children should not be passive subjects of documentation.

Whenever possible, involve them in the process.

Invite children to:

- Reflect on their work
- Select photographs
- Explain creations
- Revisit learning experiences
- Share ideas about displays

This supports metacognition and ownership of learning.

Reflective Questions for Teachers

When reviewing documentation, ask:

What is the child trying to understand?

What interests are emerging?

What strengths can I see?

What surprises me?

What might be the next step?

How can I extend this learning?

Reflection transforms documentation into meaningful teaching practice.

Common Documentation Mistakes

Mistake 1

Collecting hundreds of photographs with no learning story.

Remember:

A photograph without context tells only part of the story.

Mistake 2

Documenting only finished products.

Focus on the process.

Learning often happens during creation, not after it.

Mistake 3

Writing only teacher interpretations.

Include children's voices.

Mistake 4

Trying to document everything.

Quality is more important than quantity.

Practical Documentation Strategies

Daily Observation Notes

Carry a notebook or digital device to record significant moments.

Capture Children's Quotes

Write exact words whenever possible.

Take Purposeful Photographs

Focus on learning processes rather than posed pictures.

Create Learning Stories

Share significant learning experiences.

Develop Documentation Panels

Showcase projects and investigations.

Reflect Regularly

Set aside time each week to revisit documentation.

Reflection Activity

Think about a recent activity in your classroom.

Answer the following questions:

1. What did the children do?
2. What did they say?
3. What learning was visible?
4. What learning may have been invisible?
5. How could documentation help reveal deeper thinking?
6. What might be the next step in learning?

Case Study

Scenario

A group of children becomes fascinated by rainwater collecting in the playground.

Over several days they:

- Observe puddles
- Jump in them
- Compare sizes
- Discuss where the water comes from

The teacher documents:

- Children's conversations
- Photographs
- Drawings
- Questions

This documentation reveals children's developing understanding of weather, measurement, scientific inquiry, and problem-solving.

The documentation then informs future investigations about the water cycle and weather patterns.

Key Takeaways

Remember:

- ✓ Documentation makes learning visible.
- ✓ Documentation is more than collecting photographs.
- ✓ Observation is the foundation of effective documentation.
- ✓ Children's voices should be central.
- ✓ Documentation supports reflection and planning.
- ✓ Documentation helps teachers understand children's thinking.
- ✓ Documentation strengthens partnerships with families.
- ✓ Documentation aligns naturally with both Reggio Emilia philosophy and EYFS practice.

Final Reflection

Before documenting your next learning experience, ask yourself:

"Am I documenting what the child did, or am I documenting what the child is thinking?"

When documentation captures children's ideas, questions, theories, and learning processes, it becomes a powerful tool for understanding and supporting development.

Documentation is not about proving that learning happened.

It is about revealing the remarkable ways in which children make meaning of the world around them.

As Reggio educators often say:

"Documentation is the visible trace of learning."

Documentation Challenge

Observe a child or small group for 10–15 minutes during uninterrupted play. Record:

- A photograph
- One direct quote from the child
- An observation of what the child is doing
- Your interpretation of what the child may be learning

- One possible next step

Discuss your documentation with a colleague and compare interpretations. This mirrors the reflective and collaborative practices found in Reggio-inspired settings while supporting the observation and assessment requirements of the EYFS.