

# Look! See How They Are Learning

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doc-u-ment-ed, doc-u-ment-ing, doc-u-ments (-mènt')  
2. To support (an assertion or a claim, for example) with evidence or decisive information.

*The American Heritage Dictionary  
of the English Language, 3rd ed.*

## Documenting Literacy

Many parents and educators are concerned about the problems some children are having when learning to read. They want to be sure that children are mastering these important skills. Literacy instruction needs to occur throughout the day, including direct instruction at the appropriate level for the age of the child, and in a variety of contexts besides project work. However, project work provides some unique opportunities for both literacy instruction and the practice of literacy skills. It is in project work that we can provide practice of literacy skills and observe whether these skills have become useful tools for a child. In other chapters in this book, Beneke, Gottlieb, Schuler, and Wilson provide many ideas for integrating literacy skills into project work and describe ways to maximize literacy learning in pre-kindergarten, kindergarten, and primary classrooms. An important part of increasing effectiveness of literacy learning in project work is to be sure that it is included in the documentation process.

Documentation enables the teacher to focus on the literacy learning occurring and at the same time help others see how that learning is occurring. There are many reasons that teachers document during project work. They document to facilitate decision making during the project process, such as to determine children's main interests, to find out what underlying questions they have, or to plan ways to deepen project work. However, in addition to guiding the project process, documentation also has the potential to inform teachers and others of children's knowledge and skills in academic areas.

By carefully collecting, analyzing, interpreting, and displaying evidence of children's learning, a teacher develops a deeper understanding of the learning occurring and communicates that learning to others.

## How Documentation Relates to Literacy

Just doing a project in a classroom does not guarantee that the classroom will become literacy rich and that the children will learn and practice literacy skills. To make sure that children learn and practice literacy skills requires teacher facilitation. Documentation is a tool for the teacher to use to make sure that this learning is occurring. Documentation relates to literacy instruction in the following ways.

### 1. **Good-quality documentation can enhance instruction in the area of literacy.**

Teachers are more effective when they document. Perhaps the greatest value of comprehensive documentation is its power to inform teaching. Teachers who have good documentation skills are more likely to make productive decisions when planning literacy experiences for their children. These decisions include how to incorporate literacy in the classroom, what to do next, what questions to ask, what resources to provide, and how to stimulate each child to apply reading and writing skills. The more information a teacher can gather to inform these decisions, the more effective a teacher is likely to be.

When teachers document children's learning during engaged experiences such as project work, they are

able to do a better job of moving children toward literacy. Documentation can provide the following:

- insight into the reading process when it occurs in complex learning experiences such as project work,
- a framework for organizing teachers' observations and recording each child's progress as they apply reading and writing skills, and
- evidence of how children are learning literacy skills through active exploration and interaction with adults, other children, and materials.

Documentation also can

- enable the teacher to assess a child's application of literacy skills so the teacher can increase the difficulty, complexity, and challenge of an activity as children are involved with it and as they develop understanding and skills, and
- provide insight into the children's feelings and emotions during literacy experiences and the development of positive dispositions toward reading and writing activities.

Lev Vygotsky's sociocultural theory explains the importance of teachers' decisions in maximizing learning. According to Vygotsky (1978), the teacher is most effective when teaching is directed toward a *zone of proximal development* for each child. Children learn easiest when teacher decisions result in learning experiences within that zone of development. The teacher needs to assess a child's skill, probe the child's thinking as he or she uses the skill, and provide learning experiences that will build a bridge or "scaffold" to higher level skills (Berk & Winsler, 1995). Often, the most helpful information for the teacher is data that reveal what the child partially understands, what the child is beginning to be able to do on an inconsistent basis, or what the child is trying to integrate into existing knowledge. As the teacher collects field notes and other information during project work, she can see how valuable this practice can be for children.

Documentation can also help the teacher make decisions about when additional support is needed for a child's literacy. For example, a teacher can observe when it is helpful for a child to learn how

to use indexes or tables of contents in books. If the teacher collects a child's work over a period, the teacher can see if the child is progressing as expected or if mastery of a skill is just around the corner. When the teacher does not see mastery or emerging skills, she can provide direct instruction and help during other parts of the day.

## 2. Children value what is documented.

Children in classrooms where teachers document their learning perceive that learning to be important and worthwhile. This is especially true of literacy. Extensive documentation of children's work helps children perceive that their efforts to learn are important and valued. Teachers who carefully document have observed that as they increased the attention given to documentation, children have become more careful about their work and more evaluative. When teachers document children's first, second, and even third attempts at a task, such as making a poster for a display, children begin to reflect upon their own skill development. Children also understand the effect evidence of their learning has on their parents through documentation. Even the youngest children can see the excitement that evidence of their emerging ability to read and write can generate in their parents.

## 3. Documenting children's literacy learning in a variety of ways enables teachers to respond to demands for accountability.

There has been an increase in demand for accountability. Schools and other early childhood programs are finding it necessary to do a better job of informing constituencies about how children are learning and the effectiveness of curriculum experiences. When parents see children's field notes, they see how the children are using writing for a purpose. When they see lists of words that children knew before a project displayed next to a list of words they knew at the end of the project, they understand how children's vocabulary has grown. When they see pictures of children using books to answer questions, they understand that children are developing an understanding of the value of books and reading. These experiences with project documentation can be very powerful and are often more memorable and convincing than test

scores or summaries of school improvement. It is difficult not to conclude that children are learning to read and write when right there in front of you are samples of their reading and writing. At the same time, the need to document literacy experiences to show others insures that the teacher will take the time to make sure that they occur for each child.

## Ways to Document Literacy

Most teachers doing projects with children have some familiarity with documenting children's learning. However, many teachers may not be fully aware of how many different ways there are to document (Helm, Beneke, & Steinheimer, 1998). The more familiar a teacher becomes with the variety of methods, the better the chance that the teacher will document meaningfully. To be most effective, teachers vary their documentation to match the learning experiences of the children. For example, a teacher who wanted to know what a child knew about a topic might collect the child's drawings about a topic but might not think to have the child write (or copy) labels for the parts of the item drawn. The teacher may assemble a bulletin board but not think to have the child dictate or write a narrative to accompany a photographic display. Knowing a variety of ways to collect literacy work also enables the teacher to do a better job of getting accurate information about a particular child. For example, a child may not attempt to read difficult words in fiction library books or reading texts but may put forth extended effort to decode difficult words as he tries to read the manual for a piece of equipment he is studying.

There are as many different ways to document learning as there are ways that active, engaged children try to make sense of their world. Here are some ways that lend themselves especially to the area of reading and writing. The appendix to this chapter lists types of documentation and specific ways this documentation occurs in project work.

### Project Narratives

A narrative statement, which tells the story or history of a project, is the most traditional method of documentation. Stories are a powerful way to

help others understand events and experiences of other people. Narratives can take the form of stories for and by children, narratives for adults in the form of books and letters, or displays that visually tell the story. They are usually written over a period and focus on evidence of change and growth in knowledge, skills, and dispositions.

To take advantage of the interest that comes from an evolving project, teachers can write narratives such as those that accompany hall displays and then continuously update the narrative as the children's work proceeds. Parents and children will look at the narratives.

### Products

Literacy products such as books, signs, graphs, charts, and narratives are the most obvious means of documenting literacy learning. Writing samples are, perhaps, the most familiar product perceived by adults as proof of children's learning to read and write. Labels on pictures, webs, songs invented and written down, construction signs, collections of data, and organization of materials and oral language samples are also categories that produce significant documentation. Lists of words on word walls can document vocabulary growth.

Group-constructed play environments also are sources of documentation of literacy skills. The children build what they know with the skills they possess, and they often include literacy-related materials in the environment, such as menus and signs. Children are also motivated to create literacy play objects such as order pads.

### Checklists

Observing and recording reading and writing skills and then recording what is observed on a checklist or into a structured portfolio is almost a necessity for the teacher to know exactly what knowledge, skills, and dispositions children are developing regarding literacy. These checklists may cover many areas of development including language and literacy development. The teacher may also use checklists that focus on the areas of reading and writing. In recent years, observation systems, such as the Work Sampling System (Meisels, 1993),

have been developed that coordinate checklists based on standards. The checklists are used systematically to document growth and development of skills over time. Project documentation can provide the evidence needed to mark these checklists. For example, observations of a child during project work will provide insight for the teacher to mark the item "uses print materials to find answers to questions." These checklists enable a teacher to reliably identify skills, knowledge, behaviors, dispositions, and accomplishments as they emerge; to support and encourage them; and to know when to provide additional direct instruction.

### Individual Portfolios

Documentation during project work goes beyond observations and checklists. Most teachers also gather data, write anecdotal notes, and collect children's work samples for portfolios. Data can be gathered and then recorded in individual portfolios. For example, a teacher might keep a list of which children were able to read the class-made project history book independently. Anecdotal notes about reading behaviors, such as asking for help decoding the name of a bird, also can be part of a portfolio. Teachers often collect children's writing during project work for the portfolios. The sources of these samples are many (see the appendix).

When the teacher systematically collects these samples of children's work over time, and from project to project, she is able to observe and document growth in writing. This documentation is more significant when it is linked to a "comprehensive and developmentally appropriate picture of what children can be expected to know and do across all domains of growth and learning" such as an assessment system (Meisels et al., 1994), which combines a standards-based checklist with a portfolio. Portfolio items can also be collected as evidence of a child's progress as measured on a checklist.

### Self-Reflections

Self-reflections provide the most accurate assessment of the child's emotional involvement with learning. Children will often make statements about how much they enjoy reading a book on a topic of a project. If dispositions are an important

part of project work, then documentation of dispositions is also important. Dispositions can be documented by collecting statements from the children, observing the amount of time that children spend doing an activity, or recording discussions. Dispositions can also be documented through photos, which capture children's emotions and involvement in project work.

### The Power of Documentation

In conclusion, documentation is a powerful tool to help teachers to do a better job of teaching reading and writing. It can also be a powerful way to show others how these skills are developing in a classroom.

### References

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## APPENDIX

## Types of Documentation for Literacy

Type of Documentation	Description and Literacy Knowledge, Skills, and Dispositions That Can Be Documented	Sources of Literacy Documentation in Project Work
<b>Narratives of Learning Experiences</b>	<p><i>Narratives are stories of learning experiences of individuals, small groups, or the whole class. Narratives in project work may be dictated or written by children.</i></p> <p>Narratives can be used to document</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Print-sound code (as children read)</li> <li>• Getting the meaning from print (Comprehension)</li> <li>• Conventions of print</li> <li>• Developing reading habits as they choose to read</li> </ul>	<p>Dictated stories of the project</p> <p>Child-written stories</p> <p>Displays on projects</p> <p>Books or explanations for parents of a part of a project (such as a field site visit)</p> <p>Books or stories written for children (such as a book on worms)</p>
<b>Products</b>	<p><i>Products of children are artifacts they create, such as signs, menus, notes, display labels.</i></p> <p>Products can be used to document</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Print-sound code (as children write)</li> <li>• Getting the meaning from written materials</li> <li>• Writing for a purpose</li> <li>• Using literacy</li> <li>• Phonemic awareness</li> </ul>	<p>Spoken language as collected in anecdotal notes or audio/visual tapes</p> <p>Written language as in signs and directions, captions to photos and drawings, letters, labels, child-made books</p> <p>Constructions with labels such as play environments, Lego or block structures</p> <p>Notes on drawn pictures or paintings</p> <p>Data collection forms and surveys</p> <p>List of words webs or other records</p>
<b>Observations &amp; Checklists</b>	<p><i>Observations are made by the teacher and recorded as specific knowledge or skills on a developmental checklist, curriculum checklist, or anecdotal notes.</i></p> <p>Observations and checklists can be used to document</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Print-sound code (as they attempt to read)</li> <li>• Getting the meaning (as they read manuals, books)</li> <li>• Understanding language (as they develop specific vocabulary)</li> <li>• Phonological and phonemic awareness</li> </ul>	<p>List of words spoken in reports and webbing</p> <p>Anecdotal notes indicating observed literacy knowledge, skills, and dispositions</p> <p>Behavioral indicators of dispositions regarding literacy (expression of interest in books, time spent on reading and writing, self-selection of reading-writing activities)</p>
<b>Child Self-reflections</b>	<p><i>Children's statements of understanding their own preferences of activity, enjoyment, or interest in content areas, pride in accomplishment, acceptance of need for persistence and hard work.</i></p> <p>Child self-reflections can be used to document</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dispositions toward reading</li> <li>• Dispositions toward writing</li> <li>• Dispositions to work hard to understand and to write and communicate</li> </ul>	<p>Child's statements of enjoying reading when interacting with project books and materials about the topic</p> <p>Child's enthusiasm about sharing reading and writing about the project</p> <p>Child's expressions of pride in accomplishment in project work</p> <p>Child's recognition of his or her own persistence</p>
<b>Individual Portfolios</b>	<p><i>Work is collected at specific intervals to show growth and to document unique and outstanding work of the child.</i></p> <p>Portfolios document</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Writing and reading skills over time</li> <li>• Print-sound code</li> <li>• Getting meaning</li> <li>• Reading-writing habits</li> <li>• Language use and conventions</li> </ul>	<p>Field site notes, thank-you notes to experts</p> <p>Captions for photos taken during project work</p> <p>Record of books read during project work</p> <p>Photographs of children using books as resources</p>

Adapted from Documentation Web. Helm, J., Beneke, S., & Steinheimer, K. (1998). *Windows on Learning: Documenting Young Children's Work*. New York: Teachers College Press (p. 36).