Gender Identity and Expression in the Early Childhood Classroom
Influences on Development Within Sociocultural Contexts

Jamie Solomon

Voices of Practitioners: Teacher Research in Early Childhood Education, the online journal of the National Association for the Education of Young Children, has been published since 2004. Voices editor Gail Perry passed away in the summer of 2015, and her presence, expertise in teacher research, and deep knowledge of early childhood education are sorely missed. Starting with this issue, a Voices of Practitioners article will be published in each issue of Young Children as well as online.

Voices of Practitioners is a vehicle for dissemination of early childhood teachers’ systematic study of an aspect of their own classroom practice. Deeply involved in the daily lives of children and their families, teachers provide a critical insider perspective on life in their classrooms through communication of their investigations, the results, and their reflections.

Visit NAEYC.org/publications/VOP to learn more about teacher research and to peruse an archive of past Teacher Research articles dating back to 2004.

Jamie Solomon, MA, worked in the early childhood field for over 10 years, teaching at the preschool and college levels in San Francisco. Her teacher research projects have focused on gender development and emergent curriculum. Jamie has recently relocated to Southeastern Michigan.
During the past 10 years of teaching in the early childhood field, I have observed young children as they develop ideas about gender identity. I soon came to understand gender expression as a larger social justice issue, realizing how external influences were already at work inside the preschool classroom, impacting children’s interactions and choices for play and exploration. This matter became a great priority in my professional life, leading me to look for ways to advocate for change. Some of this eagerness stemmed from my own frustrations about gender inequity and how, as a woman, I have felt limited, misunderstood, and pressured by societal constructs. These personal experiences inspired me to help further discussions about gender development within the early childhood field so that, one day, young children might grow up feeling less encumbered by unfair social expectations and rules.

Teaching preschool for six years at a progressive school, I was able to engage in ongoing learning opportunities, including observation and reflection. The school’s emergent curriculum approach required me to pay close attention to the children’s play in order to build the curriculum and create environments based on their evolving interests. Early one semester, while on a nature field trip, I noticed great enthusiasm coming from a small group that consisted mostly of girls. They attempted to “make a campfire” using sticks and logs. After observing several other similar play scenarios and listening to their discussions, I began building a curriculum based on the children’s evolving interests. I started by offering opportunities to encourage this inquiry—for example, through drawing activities and providing tools to more closely explore the properties of wood. Several weeks later, I was gratified to see that among those most deeply engaged in our emerging curricular focus on wood, fire, and camping, the majority continued to be girls. The girls’ behavior and interests involved characteristics historically categorized as masculine: joyfully getting dirty, doing hard physical work (in this case with hand tools), and being motivated by a perceived sense of danger acted out in their play—for example, pretending that a fire might erupt at any moment. These exciting observations prompted me to investigate how a particular curriculum might encourage and support children to behave outside of society’s gender constructs. My understanding of gender influences built over time; each year I noticed the power and presence of these influences in the classroom. These questions guided my study:

- How can I offer a curriculum that provides children with more opportunities for acting outside of traditional gender roles?
- How can I encourage and support children who wish to behave outside of traditional gender roles?
- How can I foster increasingly flexible thinking about gender among 4- and 5-year-old children?

The following study highlights excerpts not only from our major emergent project on camping and firemaking, but also from examples drawn from all of my teaching experiences that spring semester.

**Literature review**

Young children are continually making sense of their world, assimilating novel information and modifying their theories along the way. Most influences in the lives of
young children—both human and environmental—reinforce existing stereotypes (Ramsey 2004). Without prominent caring adults helping them consider perspectives that challenge the status quo, children, left to their own devices, tend to develop notions that conform with stereotypes (Ramsey 2004). If children are regularly exposed to images, actions, people, and words that counter stereotypes—for example through books, photographs, stories, and role models—they are likely to modify and expand on their narrow theories (Brill & Pepper 2008). Thus, educators of young children should offer their students different perspectives, including those that counter society’s confined constructs, to allow children access to a range of roles, expressions, and identities (Valente 2011). Without such efforts, we stymie young children’s development, keeping them from realizing the extent of their potential.

During this teacher research project, I found many examples of girls crossing traditional gender role boundaries but only a few examples involving boys. Some researchers believe this phenomenon, a common finding in gender studies, results from our male-dominated culture, in which being male or having male characteristics is associated with power, opportunity, and prestige (Daitsman 2011). Many young boys demonstrate awareness of these desirable qualities and perhaps worry about losing such advantages if they were to cross gender lines. Accordingly, educators must take an active role in providing both boys and girls counternarratives, and helping children question the status quo. Forman and Fyfe (2012) show faith in our human capacity to evolve, describing our understandings of the world as malleable. They write, “We hold that knowledge is gradually constructed by becoming each other’s student, by taking an inquiry stance toward each other’s constructs, and by sincere attempts to assimilate or reconcile each other’s initial perspective” (247).

My goal is that this research will prompt educators to work on softening the system of gender rules that surrounds and governs our children. As Brown and Jones (2001) explain, “Changes in attitudes will not be achieved until certain fundamental dichotomies, which currently regulate aspects of classroom life, have been shifted” (143).

Methods

This study took place at a progressive San Francisco Bay Area preschool offering a full-day, year-round program. The school serves 2½- to 5½-year-olds. I conducted the study in my classroom of twenty-one 4- and 5-year-olds.

The children were from diverse backgrounds racially, culturally, and socioeconomically and represented a wide range of family compositions. While all 21 children in my class were observed during the research process, particular children and groups of children became more visible in the data for various reasons. Some children stood out to me as particularly conforming or nonconforming to traditional gender roles, as compared to their peers. Alternatively, I also focused on cases where I felt I had witnessed a child break from their typical role or gender expression. I was the lead teacher and worked alongside and collaborated with two coteachers.

During the spring semester when this study was conducted, the children spent most of the morning hours in unstructured play time with the choice of working indoors or outdoors. We also spent at least one hour of every morning engaged in more
structured activities, including circle time. The afternoons also included choices for indoor and outdoor play. Weekly field trips had long been integral to the school's program, so my class left the campus each Wednesday to embark on a local adventure together.

Beginning this study in the spring, I benefited from having established relationships with the children over the first five months of the school year. By the time I began this teacher research, I had met with their parents during fall conferences and spent countless hours observing the children, connecting with them, learning their idiosyncrasies, and building trust. In fact, I had already come to know many of these children the year prior when preschoolers from various classrooms intermingled while playing in our shared yard.

My data sources included field notes and reflective notes, video and photos, and weekly journaling. The field notes generally consisted of my observations, which were recorded during natural discussions and spontaneous events. After leaving the classroom I revisited the field notes to fill in contextual holes or other missing information. Fully detailed, my field notes offered vivid samples that I could use to effectively recall experiences for analysis. I believe in many cases I reproduced conversations accurately. At other times, I captured more of the flow of an event. Excerpts from my field notes, in the upcoming Findings section, reflect this range of detail.

My analysis uses a theoretical lens suggested by Rogoff (2003), which holds that human thinking and behavior should be understood within its particular sociocultural context, that is to say an environment greatly influences those who live and learn within it and vice versa. Thus, the data is viewed in consideration of situational factors such as structured versus unstructured play, children's varied personalities, and larger societal influences like the media. My analysis also includes self-reflection, as I continually questioned my views on gender, knowing that my data had been gathered through my personal feminist lens.

The data collected—notes and images capturing young children's expressions, behavior, and interactions—was examined for evidence of gendered thinking and possible influences that caused it. After first organizing my data chronologically, I proceeded to go through it, jotting down one to five words to describe each data sample. Moving slowly, I regularly returned to previous samples, making comparisons between records and reevaluating the descriptions I was making. As new words or "codes" came to mind, I again returned to previous data samples to determine whether this concept was visible throughout the data. Thus, the process continued, moving forward and backward to compare, reevaluate, confirm new patterns, and then review. Next, I studied my list of codes and pulled those that seemed most encompassing to serve as overarching themes. The three themes that resulted, in relation to gender, were (1) influences of materials and teacher expectations; (2) children's desire and search for power; and (3) expressions and behavior illustrating children's state of mind and development. In the following section I explore these themes, illustrating each with supporting data excerpts and my analysis of them.

Findings

Influences of materials and teacher expectations

Many factors influence children's learning experiences in the early childhood classroom. This first theme examines how the available materials—whether closed or open-ended—might
guide the children’s work and interactions with one another. I primarily focus on the props and tools that I, the teacher, provided the children, the intention behind the materials offered, and my expectations on how they might be used. Of course other compounding factors should be considered here as well. For example, how our school’s philosophy plays out in our classroom, the physical environment, and the emergent curriculum topics we teachers have chosen. Such factors combine to create a stage upon which the children and teachers act.

Data collected on two different days revealed contrasting behavior among the children.

The first excerpt focuses on two girls exploring new materials inspired by our emergent unit on wood, camping, and fire. During this play they assume less conventional female roles. In the second sample, the subjects of my observation include three boys whom I observed handling baby dolls—props available throughout the year in our classroom—in a manner congruent with stereotypical gender norms. Also included in this excerpt is a girl who was seeking to interact with me while I watched the boys. The first data sample stood out to me during analysis and I have included it for the reader because it caused me to consider how some curricular materials might offer children opportunities for acting outside of traditional gender roles. In contrast, the second sample made me think more deeply about the types of materials that we typically offer children (e.g., baby dolls), how many of these play props have strong associations with only one gender, and how open-ended materials might be less limiting for a child’s self-expression and learning. (See “Field Notes, February 12, 2014.”)

When the children approached the camping activity table, I gave very little instruction. Instead I explained I had seen them working with wood recently, and I wanted to give them more time and tools for their investigation. Whenever I

Field Notes | February 12, 2014

While on a field trip, a co-ed group of children worked together gathering sticks to build a fire. Several of the girls led the effort, directing others to gather more grass, sticks, and small logs. Meanwhile, the group discussed their theories about stoking a fire. Several days later, I observed many of the same children using trowels to chip away at bark while trying to “make fire” in the school garden. Thus, I decided to offer the class different types of wood, child-safe saws, and sandpaper during small group time in the classroom and see who was interested. I stayed close by to ensure that the tools were used in a safe manner. Four children, Stella, Caitlyn, Anna, and Robby, joined the activity when I invited them over, and I was pleased to see the three girls in this group so enthusiastic to use the tools and experiment with the wood.

Photos capture the children’s intensity and concentration and, thus, their interest in the activity. Stella and Caitlyn focused intently on the wood as they worked solidly for over 35 minutes and stopped only because they were asked to clean up for lunch. Before leaving the table, Stella exclaimed, “I’ve never done anything so serious!”
share such observations about children's work and express curiosity, it seems to validate their interests and encourage their exploration. The group readily experimented. The activity was approachable, open-ended, and afforded a safe place to try out new ideas, actions, and roles.

The girls appeared empowered and stayed with their work for as long as possible. Their verbal expressions resembled those I had heard more often from boys in my classroom.

For instance, Caitlyn and Stella deepened their voices noticeably as they loudly delighted in each discovery, saying, “OHHH” and “WHOAI!” Apparently, this natural wood paired with carpentry tools served as entry vehicles into the vigorous roles that the girls assumed.

The logs were like those they had been gathering on our field trip when they tried to make fire, while the hand tools suggested new ways to transform the wood. Something about this scenario obviously captivated them, as the girls’ interest in working with wood and dramatic play related to campfires and camping continued over the next several months.

In organizing this activity, I had expected more boys to be drawn to the wood and hand tools. On reflection, I see these expectations were based on my own gender-biased assumptions. Instead, this activity attracted more girls, providing them the opportunity to further explore an interest outside of traditional female roles. Such traditional roles are reinforced when girls role-play motherhood, princesses, or female characters commonly found in popular movies and other media—activities far more common in my classroom than these girls’ work with wood.

On a separate occasion, much later in the school year, I found myself drawn to a group of three boys working in the dramatic play area—Robby, Peter, and Mason—during unstructured play time. I noticed that they had picked up the baby dolls, and I was intrigued, as I hadn’t seen them use the dolls before. They had also brought over a roll of tape. Perching on a nearby stepstool, I grabbed my camera, a notepad and pen, and began recording. Meanwhile, I was slightly distracted by Ella standing next to me, as she simultaneously began sharing her future plans for motherhood. (See “Field Notes, April 11, 2014”—the following dialogues are presented side by side, as they took place.)

These data samples stood out to me because of the coincidence of these two concurrent stereotypical portrayals of gender roles. While observing the group, I had perceived Ella’s dialogue as disruptive, unrelated to what I was in the process of capturing. In the moment, I was not fully focused on her thoughts and did not
Field Notes | April 11, 2014

Robby (R), Peter (P) and Mason (M) gather around a small table in the dramatic play area, while I, teacher Jamie (J), watch. Mason watches with interest while Peter and Robby play with the two baby dolls, which they have brought over.

R: Rip the head off.

P: No—you do it.

J: Pause and think, you guys. [They all look up and over, now realizing that I’m watching.]

P: We’re not actually strong enough. Shiiiiing! [P pokes a stick into the doll’s eye.]

R: Watch this. [R bangs the plate on the baby and then proceeds to tape the baby to the plate. P follows his lead. The two boys fly the babies around the room, having connected them to the plastic plates, which seemed to serve as the dolls’ wings.]

consider them significant to the situation. When I later reflected, however, I realized that Ella had noticed I was observing this group of boys and their rough play with the dolls. Looking to connect with me, she offered her perspective on babies and caregiving.

Upon reflection, the boys’ behavior reminded me of teacher researcher Aaron Neimark’s description of his preschool boys playing what he called “basketball babies” (2012). Through his studies, Neimark (2012) noticed how young children often use objects in silly ways that diverge from the expected or intended use—for instance, pretending that basketballs were babies—and that this sense of creativity and comedy is an important component of peer culture. While there seemed to be an element of humor as the boys played with the baby dolls during my observation, I further wondered about possible gender-related influences that may have caused them to interact with the props in this way. Though connecting the babies to plates and flying them around was a creative idea—a divergent one from how I had expected children to use dolls—I felt that their gender role expressions guided their actions more than simple imagination. The girls in my class didn’t play with the dolls often, but when they did, their play was typically nurturing and gentle. I wondered if the boys had a tacit understanding that playing with dolls in a school setting is only acceptable if it is clearly distinct from the typical female version of such play (Brown & Jones 2001).

I find myself caught between a feminist perspective and that of the progressive teacher I sought to be: one who embraces each child’s unique interpretation of an activity or idea (Brown & Jones 2001). The gender roles that children assume, as defined by our culture, affect their play, from determining their interests to deciding how to play and how to make use of props (Meier & Henderson 2007). The data

Field notes | April 11, 2014

Ella (E) leans in close to me (J), ostensibly wanting to chat, as she so often does. She shares the following idea with me, while I try my hardest to focus on the group of boys. After a couple of minutes, I realize how similarly meaningful Ella’s monologue is to my study on gender.

E: I’m gonna be a mommy when I grow up.

J: Oh yeah? [I raise my eyebrows, hoping that my response won’t provoke her too much, as I try to return my focus to the other children.]

E: I’m gonna have one baby, because it’s hard to carry 120, 120, and 120 babies!

J: [I smile]
samples in this section suggest that the type of materials offered to children may provoke them to assume roles that are more or less stereotypical and could thereby influence their social interactions and learning. For instance, because baby dolls are socially constructed as feminine toys, they are less accessible for young boys. With an understood purpose for caregiving role-play, young girls can feel comfortable behaving in line with their stereotypical gender role while playing with dolls. Boys, on the other hand, are perhaps implicitly excluded from using these toys, lest they should act outside of their traditional gender role. If they do use such materials, I have observed that their play usually deviates from the expected purpose. As a result, I find such gendered toys to be limiting for both young girls and boys. In contrast, materials that are less gendered and more open-ended—for example, natural materials such as sticks, pinecones, shells—encourage more creativity, stimulate imagination and allow for endless interpretations. Accordingly, open-ended materials are more likely to further children’s cognitive, physical and artistic development (NAEYC, n.d.).

**Children’s desire and search for power**

This second theme explores the human desire for control and power. I noticed that the children sought and expressed power, for example, using it to exclude or include others, to influence a situation in their favor, or to feel strong. As with the first theme, the key data samples occurred on different days. I chose examples that involved one child across two similar events: first in a position of subordination and then in a place of power. The first event took place at school and the second on a field trip. Both events occurred during structured playtime and both observations involved a group of three children—two had already established their play when a third approached and tried to join in. As teacher researcher Chris Taaffee (2012) found, such triangulated situations often prove challenging for the third child. The excerpts from the two field notes (See “Field Notes, February 24, 2014” and “Field Notes, April 9, 2014”) demonstrate complex desires for power and how children learn approaches for exercising control.

In the field notes from February 24, Violet used her knowledge of gender constructs and her understanding of her friend Cora’s somewhat conforming gender expression to control the situation. Violet did not offer Cora any role, like a sister or mom role, other than a monster. She knew that playing the monster is a less conventional option for a girl, and thus, a choice that Cora would probably not accept. Cora seemed to be penalized here for acting within her predictable gender role, which I found thought-provoking, as acting within one’s gender role is frequently considered desirable and
Field Notes | February 24, 2014

Ella and Violet, 4- and 5-years-old, respectively, are playing house. It’s clear that they want to maintain their harmonious two-person play, as Violet tells Cora, “I just want to play with Ella right now.”

Usually, I would have respected the wish of two children to play alone, but because Violet and Ella spend the majority of their time playing together, without the inclusion of others, I decided to push and see if they could find a way to include Cora. “Can you think of a way for Cora to play?” I ask.

Violet offers, “She can be the monster.”

Cora immediately rejects the offer; she wants to be the baby. But, according to Violet, there are no babies in this game and the only possible role is that of a monster. Cora resigns herself to finding a different playmate, and Violet and Ella continue their game, uninterrupted.

Field Notes | April 9, 2014

Cora and Eddie are playing together while on our field trip in a wooded park. They walk closely side-by-side, talking quietly, every so often looking behind. Lillian follows after them and no matter how many times they change course, she remains several feet behind them, yet not really making her intentions known. Finally Eddie bursts out, “You can’t play!” and Cora adds, “Stop following us!”

I move closer, intending to ask Cora and Eddie to tell Lillian their feelings in a kinder way. As soon as Cora sees that I’ve noticed the conflict, she quickly offers Lillian an alternative: “You can be the monster.”

Lillian smiles and begins contorting her face and body to assume the role. Cora adds, “And you can chase us!” Lillian shows them she’s ready by creeping forward just as Cora and Eddie take off in the opposite direction, screaming happily!

Eddie were completely open to her involvement. While Violet’s intentions in the first scenario seemed clear to me, I was uncertain about Cora’s motivation. I had observed that unlike Cora, Lillian assumed nonconforming roles on a regular basis. If Cora really didn’t want Lillian to join the pair, she would have had to make a different kind of proposal.

Both scenarios demonstrate the complexity of young children’s interpersonal relationships within the sociocultural contexts influencing their lives. I and many other teachers have observed countless interactions involving a small group of children trying to protect their harmonious play from outsiders who could potentially disrupt the often fragile unity of young friendships (Neimark 2012; Taaffe 2012). I have witnessed children employ various strategies to exclude others and now realize how frequently they use their understanding of gender and culture to successfully block others from the play and determine who is permitted membership to the group (Brown & Jones 2001). Like Cora, some children can be understood as behaving from within a dynamic process that includes learning from peers and the media, experimenting with ideas, and making sense of gender roles and relationships.

Conducive to acceptance. Yet in this case, Cora’s preference to express female gender conventionally gave Violet an easy way to exclude Cora.

More than a month later, on April 9, I was fascinated to see Cora try a similar tactic with Lillian. This time, however, the interaction played out quite differently. Lillian readily seized the opportunity to become the monster, and I was pleased and surprised that Cora and
Expressions and behavior illustrating child’s state of mind and development

I have noticed that around the age of 4, children can become resolute in their thinking and uncompromising on their theories about the world, as they try to organize experiences and concepts into neat, often dichotomous categories. The following data sample typifies the kind of shortsighted perspectives children might adopt. Left unchallenged, these early views may be reinforced and become more permanent convictions. (See “Field Notes, February 25, 2014.”)

Addie has two younger brothers, one of whom is a very active 3-year-old and, according to Addie, “causes a lot of problems.” I thus attributed Addie’s concern mostly to her experiences at home. Still, I wondered about her belief that boys don’t like her. Where did this conviction come from? Teddy quickly disavowed Addie’s notion, and I noted how eager he was not to be implicated in an unfair assumption made about his gender.

In an effort to counter such gender stereotyping, my coteachers and I began implementing activities to acquaint children across genders, such as coed lunch seating arrangements and partnered projects. We also began performing child-authored plays in which cross-gender roles were common (Paley [1984] 2014).

Discussion and implications

I began this study wondering how I might offer young children more opportunities to act outside of traditional gender roles. In the end, I realized that the children were working through complex ideas about the world. Our curriculum on fire and camping had encouraged some girls to step outside of gender roles, but it didn’t have a widening effect on all children—no single approach would. My findings showed that we needed a broader approach to advance children’s ideas about identity. Accordingly, I selected the following strategies to modify my practice and undertake future teacher research:

- nurture flexible thinking across all situations
- find opportunities for children to step outside their comfort zones in regard to activities, peer relationships, and personal challenges
- foster advocacy skills in oneself and others

If people have the capacity to consider unconventional ideas and bend their thinking, our interactions with one another might look very different and be healthier for individual identity development. Furthermore, I realized that exploring and
understanding gender identity shouldn’t be concentrated on the experiences of a select few, such as the girls who were so interested in the camping project. Rather, my goal should be to expand everyone’s mind, thereby making more room for children to express themselves individually across the identity spectrum.

While this research provides insight into the processes of children’s identity development, my findings are based upon one study I conducted independently over a spring semester. My feminist lens and personal perspectives influence all areas of my study—from gathering data to analyzing for interpretations, and deriving conclusions. However, such subjectivity is inherent in teacher research and considered an advantage of the methodology, as it offers an honest insider’s perspective of a practitioner in action (Meier & Henderson 2007).

Conclusion

According to Meier and Henderson (2007), “Since early childhood is the foundation for young children’s views and experiences with getting along with one another, and with understanding and taking a stance toward the world of relationships, a focus in teacher research on social justice will deepen our character/social curriculum” (178). I began this research project to take action on a social justice issue, but, over the four months of this study, most of my work focused on first making sense of what I was seeing. I ended up generating more questions than answers. Yet, it was this process of questioning that helped me to deduce some useful ideas for how best to continue identity work with young children. I hope this study encourages other early childhood teachers to question gender issues that they might have otherwise accepted at face value. Looking critically at gender can allow teachers to have broader perceptions and interpretations of daily classroom events, thereby allowing children more space as they develop their gender identities. My data shows the complexity of this topic, including compounding factors, influences, and considerations. It also demonstrates how pervasive socialized ideas about gender roles and expression are in our lives. While my findings need to be considered within the study’s limitations, I feel that I have successfully achieved a personal goal of sharing my feminist thinking with a larger audience within the field of early childhood education. Accordingly, this study gives voice to an important issue, and its value lies in my efforts to question the world, ease rigid thinking, and counter oppressive constructs (Valente 2011). Hopefully my teacher research “charges and challenges us to renew our commitment to an active, inclusive feminist struggle” (hooks 1994, 74).

Thoughts About the Article

Gender is an element of identity that young children are working hard to understand. It is also a topic that early childhood teachers are not always sure how best to address. It’s not surprising, then, that Jamie Solomon’s article is the third teacher research study Voices of Practitioners has published that focuses directly on gender, joining articles from Daitsman (2011) and Ortiz, Ferrell, Anderson, Cain, Fluty, Sturzenbecker, & Matlock (2014). Jamie Solomon’s teacher research demonstrates how pedagogy that takes a critical stance on gender stereotyping is a social justice issue because the performance of femininity still maps directly onto disparities in opportunity within our society. Further, she suggests how the male/female gender binary remains a default perspective and suggests how a more inclusive view of the gender spectrum can enhance and inform our practice and worldview. Her work interprets instances that arose naturally in her teaching, and it displays how teacher research is simultaneously a study of our professional and our personal selves.
References


Many thanks to Voices coeditor Barbara Henderson, executive editors Frances Rust, Andy Stremmel, and Ben Mardell, and the Editorial Advisory Board for their continued support of Voices and teacher research. Read more Voices articles at NAEYC.org/publications/VOP.
In today’s climate of standards-centered learning, early childhood educators must find innovative and engaging ways to approach curriculum. It is important for educators to create integrated, meaningful curriculum that is responsive to children’s interests while addressing the full range of learning goals. Integration makes children’s learning more contextualized and robust (Kroeger & Cardy 2006). Thoughtful, deliberate documentation is the key to integration and should be a standard part of classroom practice.

**What is documentation?**

The approach to early childhood education developed in the municipal preschools of Reggio Emilia, Italy, is recognized worldwide for its methods of presenting children’s ideas (Fleet, Patterson, & Robertson 2006). With the Reggio Emilia approach early childhood educators have made significant contributions in the use of documentation to make learning visible (Fleet, Patterson, & Robertson 2006). Documentation such as daily anecdotes, monthly developmental journals, and curriculum documentation are tools teachers can use to view children’s learning and development. They vary in frequency of use and in detail, depending on the type of information conveyed.

Documentation is a means of communication. It allows teachers to highlight children’s experiences and initiate dialogue and reflection among its audience—parents, teachers, administrators, social workers, interventionists, pediatricians, and children. Italian pedagogue Carlina Rinaldi explains, "At its core, documentation seeks to develop new relationships . . . and [this] is done best when educators reveal through stories who children are, not just what they know” (Turner & Wilson 2010, 7).

**Three forms of documentation**

In this article we describe three types of documentation that foster learning in early childhood programs—documentation sheets and anecdotes, developmental journals, and curriculum documentation—explore the purpose of each, and how they benefit children, teachers, and families.
Daily documentation

Daily documentation, such as individual forms used to track children's routine care and record anecdotal notes describing their behaviors and activities, provides a snapshot of a child's day. Completing daily care and activity sheets for each child keeps teachers attuned to children's individual needs, thus strengthening teachers’ ability to provide responsive care. (See “Example of a Daily Care Sheet and Anecdote.”) Teachers can look for patterns that emerge in daily routines over time—for example, eating and sleeping patterns. Understanding these patterns can help parents and teachers adapt schedules to suit children's needs. Teachers can use the individualized forms to address children's specific needs when necessary (e.g., Trevor needs moisturizer applied every two hours). The daily sheet includes a brief anecdote detailing some aspect of the child’s day. The anecdote should relay a positive observation about the child, such as a new interest, an interaction with another child, or a quote that offers insight into the child's thinking. For example, during a daily walk around the campus, one of the children, Aiko, spent much of the time watching fish swim in a pond. The teacher wrote about this experience in the daily anecdote. At pickup time, her mom read about Aiko’s interest in the fish and asked her about it. Aiko elaborated on the colors of the fish. Her mom then expanded on this learning.

Example of a Daily Care Sheet and Anecdote

Parent Section

Child’s Name: Lucas Soja  Date: 1/8/2016
Slept: 8:00 pm to 7:00 am  Diaper/Toilet: 7:30 am wet
Sunscreen: 9:40 am

Notes: Please apply moisturizer to his face.

Teacher Section

Sunscreen applied: 11:20 am  Brushed teeth: 12:30 pm

Meals:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Offered</th>
<th>Ate</th>
<th>Teachers Initials</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9:00 am</td>
<td>Cream of Wheat</td>
<td>½</td>
<td>DP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Watermelon</td>
<td>All</td>
<td>DP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Milk</td>
<td>2 oz</td>
<td>DP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11:30 am</td>
<td>Udon</td>
<td>Some</td>
<td>DP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fruit</td>
<td>Most</td>
<td>DP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Water</td>
<td>2 oz</td>
<td>DP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3:25 pm</td>
<td>Yogurt</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>AP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Oranges</td>
<td>Some</td>
<td>AP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pears</td>
<td>1 oz</td>
<td>AP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Milk</td>
<td>All</td>
<td>AP</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Naps:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Asleep</th>
<th>Awake</th>
<th>Teachers Initials</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10:45 am</td>
<td>11:15 am</td>
<td>AP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2:50 pm</td>
<td>3:20 pm</td>
<td>DP</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Diapering/Toileting:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Notes</th>
<th>Teachers Initials</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9:40 am</td>
<td>BM/Wet</td>
<td>DP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11:20 am</td>
<td>Wet</td>
<td>DP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1:20 pm</td>
<td>Wet</td>
<td>DP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3:25 pm</td>
<td>Wet</td>
<td>AP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5:30 pm</td>
<td>Wet</td>
<td>AP</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Daily Anecdote: Lucas experimented with sight as he repeatedly put a light scarf over his eyes and took it off while walking around the room.
by connecting it with the time they visited the aquarium. Anecdotes help bridge a child's school and home life by providing a starting point for conversations between child and parent (Kroeger & Cardy 2006).

**Developmental journals**

Another form of written documentation, the developmental journal, captures more in-depth observations of children's activities, explorations, and discoveries. (See “Example of a Developmental Journal Entry.”) Each child's journal, updated once or twice a month, focuses on the child's development and can include pictures of the child during observation, a written summary of the observation, and the teacher's interpretation of the child's learning. These developmental journal entries are printed, labeled with the child's name and date, and placed in his personal binder in the classroom.

A child's binder is always accessible to that child and to his family. Parents and children are invited to peruse and contribute to them regularly. The journals can easily go back and forth between home and school. Teachers can bring them to parent–teacher conferences and can also let parents know whenever new documentation has been added. Upon graduation from the program, the binders are given to families as memory books of their children's growth and time in the program.

Programs with limited financial resources may find electronic journals or simple notebooks more cost effective than printing out hard copies in color. Teachers who lack the time for individual documentation can focus on documenting children's group work, highlighting children's collective experiences.

Referring to criteria from the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) Early Childhood Program Standards and Accreditation Criteria (www.naeyc.org/academy/primary/viewstandards) or to developmentally appropriate teaching practices (DAP) (Copple & Bredekamp 2009) can help strengthen assertions teachers make in documentation about children's development and learning. The journals can also serve as data for supporting evidence when applying for NAEYC accreditation.

### Example of a Developmental Journal Entry

**Meeting NAEYC Accreditation Criteria**

**Child's Name:** Mazzy, 29 months

**NAEYC Accreditation Criteria:** 2.C.01, 2.J.02, 2.B.01

**Date:** February 1, 2016

**Areas of development:**

- Physical development: fine motor—balancing pinecones
- Cognitive development: symbolic play—designating pinecones as mother and children
- Socioemotional development: maintains attention—20 minutes in focused, self-initiated play

**Intention:** A simple invitation to play was set up on the nature table: pinecones gathered from the park were placed upon the table. Natural things are often offered here to enhance children's connection to the earth and nature.

**Observation:** Mazzy used the pinecones as props in her pretend play.

**Interpretation:** To most adults, offering children a collection of pinecones to play with may not seem a thoughtful or engaging invitation to play. On the contrary, these “toys” vary in height, width, and color, which led to several play ideas. Mazzy gathered the smaller pinecones around the largest pinecone and identified it as the mama. She tipped a smaller pinecone into the larger mama pinecone for the baby pinecone to breastfeed.

Pinecones have a complexity and texture not found in conventional plastic toys. Balancing the pinecones on their uneven bases was in itself a gross motor challenge. Furthermore, because play with pinecones is open ended, Mazzy could implement several play ideas with the same materials. Mazzy placed the family of pinecones on the floor, and with this change in location came a change in her ideas. She commented, “These are my pedals. I'm driving my car.”

In observing Mazzy's play with the pinecones, I was surprised to learn that she had a schema for driving a car. Her play revealed that she has some understanding of what driving entails.

Mazzy was able to further explore pinecones without an adult agenda (the last time Mazzy wished to look at pinecones, she wasn't able to because teachers were focused on taking the class on a walk). Also, although she did not speak of the differences in relative sizes of the pinecones, her observation of these differences is reflected in her play by the separation of big and little pinecones. I hope that Mazzy also learned something about the value of the natural world.

My decision to offer pinecones as playthings is the result of the teaching principle that children should use playthings across situations. That is, pinecones can be played with on a walk, in the yard, and in the classroom—different ways children might use them when they are supported in their ideas.
Accreditation of Programs for Young Children, for use in classroom portfolios, or for completing assessment tools such as Desired Results Developmental Profiles (DRDP) (www.cde.ca.gov/sp/cd/ci/desiredresults.asp), a formative assessment instrument from the California Department of Education. By streamlining the documentation process so that a monthly journal could be used for multiple purposes, teachers can more efficiently share information with the various stakeholders they serve.

**Ongoing documentation (curriculum documentation)**

Curriculum documentation is the teacher’s story of the children’s process of understanding and should be added to monthly or quarterly. It includes a description of what the children are doing, reflections made by the teacher or children, and theories developed by the children. This type of documentation is typically created on large panels and includes pictures and the children’s own words. The design should be simple so as not to distract from the content, and the flow should enable the reader to follow children’s progression through the learning process. Using curriculum documentation to observe and reflect on children’s work as it is evolving helps teachers, parents, and children understand the children’s learning process (see “Curriculum Documentation—Drawing Technique”). When children engage in experiences, either child initiated or teacher initiated, teachers have opportunities to understand children’s thinking more deeply. Curriculum documentation offers families greater insight into the intentions behind classroom activities and other decisions teachers make regarding materials, setup, and provocations—that is, invitations for children to explore or express themselves (Schroeder-Yu 2008). It is visible in the classroom and may be posted on bulletin boards so parents and other visitors can follow the learning and development occurring in school. Curriculum documentation provides meaning and identity to all that children do, highlighting children’s attributes, abilities, and attitudes, so that parents can readily see and value their experiences.

**Enhanced learning through documentation**

Intentional documentation of children’s work and ideas improves the quality of learning for children and their families. This section examines how documentation serves as a pedagogical and professional development tool for teachers and analyzes the role documentation plays in children’s construction of knowledge. Finally, it explores documentation’s role in helping families contribute to their children’s learning.

**Fostering teachers’ pedagogy and self-reflection**

Curriculum documentation facilitates teachers’ ability to deconstruct the process of teaching and learning by fine-tuning their observational lens (Kroeger & Cardy 2006). Turner and Wilson (2010) view documentation as “not just a teaching tool, but a pedagogical philosophy of knowing and valuing children” (5). When the teacher listens attentively, observes, and takes notes as part of the documentation process, she can discover the contradictions or errors in children’s developing theories. Questions that probe a bit deeper invite children to consider their assumptions, thus fostering their critical thinking. For example, the day after a rainstorm Ben noticed that the puddles were gone and commented, “The tree got thirsty and drank all the water.” Teacher Caroline responded, “I wonder how the tree took the water from the cement.” Children will often reformulate their theories to adjust for contradictions or mistaken assumptions that have been identified. Teachers can then provide experiences that enable the children to test their new theories. Ben

---

**Curriculum Documentation—Drawing Technique**

Jared’s instinctive holding of the crayons is reminiscent of how artists hold charcoal while sketching.

Jared stood at the art table and chose to use a crayon in each hand. He held the crayons in a loose grip, mostly focusing his attention on the marks being made by one hand. He alternated between using the point of the crayon to make thin lines and laying the crayon flat against the paper to make “rubbings.” With the latter technique, he drew with both hands at once.

I wonder if Jared would hold other tools like this (e.g., paintbrushes or skinny crayons) or if there is something unique about this medium’s shape that lends itself to being held this way.
clarified, “Maybe the water went through the cement into the dirt, and then the tree sucked it up.” Teacher Caroline and Ben then devised a way to test this theory. They placed a cement block on a thin layer of soil and poured water on top to see if the water seeped through the cement block.

Documenting this process through photographs, sound recordings (which are later transcribed), videotapes, or observational field notes is an invaluable way for teachers to understand and illustrate children’s evolving thinking. This is essential for a child’s learning process and for her discovery of something much more important: her individual voice. Documenting a child’s voice recognizes and validates the child’s presence in the classroom and demonstrates that her voice is valued. This empowers the child and encourages her to continue expressing her thoughts.

Documenting a child’s voice recognizes and validates the child’s presence in the classroom and demonstrates that her voice is valued.

As teachers undertake the process of documentation, implementation, and reflection, they gain immediate and concrete insight into children’s learning without having to rely on fallible memory or incorrect perception. For example, when asked about the benefits of observation notes, toddler teacher Shireetha stated, “I was convinced that Micha was constantly biting his friends, but after reviewing my notes I found it was occurring less frequently than I had originally thought. I guess I must have inadvertently [and] incorrectly labeled him as a biter.” The teacher’s recollection differed from what actually transpired and had been recorded. The documentation process “increases the knowledge of the teacher, her knowledge of children’s learning styles and behaviors and, perhaps most importantly, her relationship with the child” (Turner & Wilson 2010, 6–7). Developmental journals offer ongoing opportunities for teachers to authentically reflect and develop a deeper understanding of each child, improving their relationship, boosting the child’s morale, and enhancing the teacher’s ability to meet each child’s individual needs, customizing rather than standardizing learning. Documentation encourages teachers to address multiple aspects of children’s intelligence because it depicts and highlights children’s varying interests and queries that may otherwise go unnoticed. It also encourages teachers to expose children to different teaching styles as teachers reflect on their teaching practices and identify what works for each child. All of these processes give children learning opportunities that go beyond the basics of academics.

Ongoing self-reflection is an extremely valuable component of professional development. Through self-reflection, teachers “report that they experience new ways to make meaning through perceptual transformation in how they view themselves, their work, and their relationships” (Rousseau 2010, vi). This personal and professional transformation occurs during the documentation process, which compels teachers to regularly revisit experiences and consider their impact. Ideally teachers should take time to reflect on documentation weekly, both independently and collaboratively with colleagues. As the previous example illustrates, documentation allows teachers to uncover their assumptions, critically explore their beliefs, and modify their practices while increasing their mindfulness of each child’s learning. Qualitative research on reflection practices in education affirms that “introspection leads to heightened awareness, change, growth, and improvement of self and our profession” (Ryan 2005, 5).

Enhancing children’s learning and development

Mr. Calder places a jar of paper clips on the light table. Robin pours them onto the table, and children explore the paper clips. Eventually, Tariq brings a magnet to the table and discovers that the paper clips cling to it. This leads to a long-term exploration of magnets, which the teacher documents and displays in the classroom. Several weeks later, Margiela has a question about how stickers stick to things, and the children go back to the documentation panel about magnets to see if they can draw connections.

Developmental journals should be kept on low shelves so they are accessible to children throughout the day. Capturing children’s experiences in photographs gives them a sense of their recent history and potentially reignites a previous interest. Viewing
images of themselves with others helps children see their connections to others, which contributes to their sense of belonging (Schroeder-Yu 2008). As one teacher reflected, “Whenever I put a new piece of documentation on the bulletin board, children are immediately drawn to it. They point out the pictures of themselves and stand there discussing their experiences.” Preserving students’ work by collecting or photographing it demonstrates respect for their efforts. It also allows children to reexamine past projects and build upon them, adding depth and complexity to their experiences, further solidifying their knowledge. Loris Malaguzzi explains that children “become even more curious, interested, and confident as they contemplate the meaning of what they have achieved” (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman 2011, 46).

Both developmental journals and curriculum documentation help enhance children’s learning by providing a tangible account of their abstract thoughts. For example, schematic diagrams drawn by the children (such as the process of how rain falls from the sky), provide them with another avenue for expression. These diagrams are vital to scaffolding children’s thought processes and illustrating them to others. Documentation provides a developmentally appropriate, tangible record of children’s work, and research has found “children as young as two years of age began to use documentation not only in revisiting earlier experiences but also in inviting others into their learning” (Moran, Desrochers, & Cavicchi 2007, 86). The power of visibility can be extremely influential in scaffolding children’s learning and can lead to collaborative discourse across all ages—one thought may ignite another, beginning a conversation with infinite possibilities.

In a mixed-age classroom of children 2 to 5 years old, three children (Simon, a 2-year-old; Lithika, a 3-year-old; and 5-year-old Darryl) are playing separately in the block area. Simon, who is building with wooden blocks, becomes frustrated because his structure keeps falling.
Lithika, nearby, notices and asks Simon what he is trying to do. Simon says he's trying to build a tower. Darryl overhears this exchange and directs Simon and Lithika to a nearby documentation panel about the time he built a replica of the Eiffel Tower. The three of them look at the documentation together, sharing ideas about why that tower was successful and how Simon can improve his creation.

Creating dialogue between families and teachers

Family members are children’s first teachers; therefore, teacher communication with families is critically important, and documentation is key in ensuring this occurs effectively. Because young children often lack the verbal skills to share specifics about their time at school, daily documentation is essential for keeping families informed of their child's daily experiences. As one parent asserts, “Because my spouse picks up our son, the daily sheets help me feel more connected to the program.” Research suggests that “documentation often results in strong home–school relationships, reducing the distances between parents and children and parents and teachers created by work and time constraints and socioeconomic, linguistic, and cultural barriers” (Kroeger & Cardy 2006, 391). Documentation establishes a foundation of trust between parents and teachers as they use various forms of documentation to communicate different aspects of children’s development. Families are urged to participate by adding their own documentation (such as pictures of experiences at home or snippets of conversations) to their child's portfolios or binder. Instead of a teacher monologue, this establishes a family–teacher dialogue, which is integral to creating culturally, ethnically, and linguistically responsive pedagogy. Moreover, all documentation is most effective in a family’s home language; when this is not possible, it is best to include many photographs that clearly depict concepts through visual sequencing.

Conclusion

The fundamental power of documentation lies in its ability to generate dialogue among children, teachers, and families and illuminate the means by which children gain an understanding of themselves and the world around them. Carlina Rinaldi stated, “These narratives about young children are not singularly about their development, but rather are about the image of children as citizens, as actors in society, and coconstructors of culture” (Turner & Wilson 2010, 6). Documentation in all its forms forges relationships between teachers, children, and families and unites them in a collaborative effort to enhance children’s learning.

References


About the author

Ani N. Shabazian, PhD, holds a dual appointment at Loyola Marymount University (LMU), serving as an associate professor in the LMU School of Education and as the director of the LMU Children’s Center. ani.shabazian@lmu.edu

Photographs: p. 78, © NAEYC; p. 73, © iStock

Copyright © 2016 by the National Association for the Education of Young Children. See Permissions and Reprints online at www.naeyc.org yc/permissions.