Making learning visible

Documentation is an invaluable tool when generating emergent curriculum. It enables teachers to make visible traces of children’s work, teachers’ thinking, and the learning experiences that have taken place. The process of documentation reveals the experiences that children and teachers have engaged in to create shared meanings or develop new understandings. Documentation is a way to explain the development of ideas, share the story of a project as it unfolds, and share the ordinary or challenging moments that reveal insights into children’s thinking with parents, families and colleagues.\(^1\)

In addition, documentation of the learning that is happening in the kindergarten setting provides evidence of the connections between the program and the focus for learning identified in the Queensland kindergarten learning guideline learning and development areas. Documenting children’s learning experiences in a way that is accessible and readily explained also helps teachers to address concerns of accountability while using a child-focused approach.

Documentation not only makes learning visible, it is a fundamental aspect of intentional teaching practice. Teachers document their intentions for teaching and learning before they implement their plans, they also document emerging teaching and learning plans retrospectively. The process of documenting helps clarify the purpose of decisions and makes plans visible to children, families, colleagues and other partners who support learning. Documentation is a central feature of teachers’ daily work and is linked with each aspect of the teacher’s decision-making process: planning, interacting, observing, monitoring, analysing and assessing learning, and reflecting (see Figure 2, Queensland kindergarten learning guideline, page 18).

Documentation for reflection about children’s learning

When looking through the artefacts, photos and notes collected, teachers engage in a mental sorting process as they attempt to determine what is important to document and communicate with others, how it should be presented and why. During this process teachers explore how an idea developed, what the process involved, who participated and how new understandings were constructed by individual children and between children. This sorting process helps teachers to reflect on the learning that has occurred, to look for patterns in the learning, and consider new directions and possibilities for further collaborations. It also challenges teachers to dig deeper as they engage in interpretation and analysis of the learning experiences that have been recorded and gathered.

Documentation for teacher professional development and growth

Documentation makes visible teachers’ thinking. It challenges teachers to become more reflective: to question and evaluate the quality of their work, the learning that is taking place and the quality of their interactions with children and their families. Documenting teacher thinking becomes a source for critical reflection and, in turn, informs future teaching practices. Documentation of teacher decision-making processes also enables teachers to reflect on their practices and, with experience, to improve their skills. By engaging in regular reflection about decision making, teachers are able to make more informed, relevant and effective decisions about children’s prior knowledge, skills and dispositions towards learning.

Documentation for teacher accountability

Documentation can be used to provide a detailed account of the events that have happened in the kindergarten room. It enables teachers to show parents, directors and other partners the kinds of learning that children are engaging in and the progress they are making in learning and development. Documentation produced by children can also show how children are able to work together, negotiate ideas and persevere with a challenge, and can build connections between prior and new learning. Making children’s learning visible to them sends powerful messages about how children are valued and contribute to the learning community. When documentation is written from a strengths-based perspective it describes what children can do and is, therefore, likely to be more accessible and meaningful to parents and family than other forms of recording tools, such as checklists.

Documentation for communication with children, parents and other partners

Documentation helps share ideas about children’s learning; to understand their theorising and problem solving; to see evidence of interesting questions that may arise during the course of an investigation; and to become aware of the directions for future learning. It sends strong messages to parents and the wider community about the active nature of young children’s learning, the importance of a collaborative approach to teaching and learning, and the value of working from children’s emerging interests. For parents who may not have opportunities to spend time in the kindergarten setting, evening meetings or a group email that shares evidence of documentation can support links between home and kindergarten settings. When parents have insights into what is happening at kindergarten, they have a means of continuing conversations at home with their child. Inviting parents and other partners to contribute feedback can help promote a collaborative approach and forge deepening relationships between children, parents and teachers.

Characteristics of kindergarten documentation

While documentation serves many purposes it does not have to be beautiful, large, computer-generated (though this does make it easier to use in multiple ways) or time-consuming. The look and feel will vary considerably depending on the intended purpose; however, it usually contains information such as:

- names of participants
- date
- learning context
- ideas
- comments and conversation related to the learning experience
- links to the QKLG
- space for children, parents and other partners to contribute ideas and responses.
Examples of documentation in kindergarten

Daily communication book to share with parents

Poster of several children’s designs for a pirate trap

Poster-sized documentation of children’s experiences using clay