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Supporting Teachers to Listen Closely to Our Children

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Published online: 25 Feb 2014.

To cite this article: Stephanie Cox Suárez (2014) What Does Your Child Really Know? Supporting Teachers to Listen Closely to Our Children, The New Educator, 10:1, 70-76, DOI: 10.1080/1547688X.2014.868252

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1547688X.2014.868252

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What Does Your Child Really Know? 
Supporting Teachers to Listen Closely to Our Children

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Close listening and observation of children as an alternative assessment is a powerful approach that can help balance an emphasis on standardized measurement. The tool of Reggio-inspired documentation is described for families with suggestions on how to advocate and support teachers who want to tell a story about children’s learning that highlights social language, collaboration, and problem solving and to serve as evidence in meeting required curriculum standards.

INTRODUCTION

Five kindergarten boys have been working all year using blocks and marbles to design the “best ramp in the world.” After several months of experimenting in the block area, they have decided with their teacher, Laura, to each draw their designs, to compare, and eventually to decide on one design. Here is part of a conversation between Laura and Sam as they look at photos of the boys’ past efforts (see Figure 1) in designing ramps with blocks:

Laura: If you were going to make this ramp again . . .
Sam: We would need a plan. I don’t know how to make a plan.
Laura: I can help you.
Sam: Okay. We just have to have these pictures to help us. This picture might help us.
Laura: What would you do differently?
Sam: Well, look at these plans that Joe did . . . he added that, that, this whole ramp, and bump.
Laura: So you like Joe’s ramp?
Sam: Yeah.

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This brief interaction illustrates how the teacher, Laura, is listening, asking open-ended questions and prompting the boys to listen to one another. Although Laura has a busy public inclusive classroom of over 20 kindergarten children, she finds a few minutes during block play to not only encourage but to model for the boys how to listen to each other, how to refer to each other by name, and how to build on each other’s ideas. This is one brief moment in a yearlong study — led by five boys who were 4 and 5 years old — toward their design of the best marble ramp in the world. Laura took a few minutes a few days a week to listen, to write notes, to take photos, and to video. She participated on the periphery and asked targeted questions to help keep the boys engaged. What could you do differently? Why did one marble move slow and another fast? The boys respond to each other to explain the marble’s path using language about shapes of blocks, the height of a ramp, force, and even speculate about gravity. These boys demonstrated a range of abilities in their language and social skills. One boy was a leader with strong social, language skills. Another boy had a very quiet voice and rarely spoke. Another had difficulty putting sentences together but had excellent hand skills to create intricate designs. The documentation that Laura collected over the one year helped her see progress across the boys’ language and social skills. When Laura reviewed all the documentation she collected, she had evidence with clear examples of how the boys had developed skills of problem solving, negotiation, and science concepts of height, movement, and force. As parents we often know what our children are capable of doing but these strengths may not be evident in a standardized test. As a skilled teacher, Laura used the boys’ deep and engaging interest in block play as an opportunity to collect documentation that also met critical kindergarten standards.
There is a growing effort by educators to focus on close observations and listening to more fully understand a child’s learning as an alternative form of assessment that may, in the end, complement what we learn from the standardized measures. This article was written for families and the public to persuade you to advocate and support teachers to find a balanced approach. The current push for the Common Core State Standards in English language arts and mathematics, although thoughtful and well written, requires new national standardized evaluations. There are benefits to a concerted focus to increase the learning of all of our nation’s children but at what cost? Not all children can meet all the standards and demonstrate their learning in a single standardized evaluation. We also know that twenty-first-century skills include collaboration, communication, critical thinking, and creativity (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, n.d.). Amidst the immense pressure on standardized testing, we need to consider how teachers can be given the flexibility to find the narrative — the story — about the learning that is happening in the classroom among individuals and groups of children.

The example of Laura and Sam’s exchange about a ramp design can be considered an alternative form of assessment on individual and group learning. Educators call this a tool of documentation — to understand a process of learning that is collected over time using photos, video, and written notes on the conversation between children and teachers. Teachers periodically review documentation, reread the notes, speculate and interpret the learning, show it to another adult for their opinion and, just as importantly, share the documentation with the children. Children catch on to the idea that the adults are listening closely when they see the camera and notes; they want to see what is collected and they are validated that both adults and children know that something important is happening in the classroom.

CAPTURING THE PROCESS OF LEARNING

Documentation helps to re-launch ideas; by reviewing documentation from a previous day, both teachers and children are reminded of ideas and can extend and deepen those ideas. For example, Laura might show photos or video to the boys on the camera or computer from a previous days’ block design; this documentation is especially important since the blocks are cleaned up at the end of each choice time period so the photos and video are the best way to capture the designs. As the boys get ready to get the blocks out she shares the photos, asks open-ended questions about what is important about a previous design and considers a provocation for pushing new designs — perhaps introducing a new block shape or larger marble or a question to increase the challenge (see Figure 2). In the case of this documentation example, Laura wanted the boys to move from block play to the use of drawing two-dimensional designs of a marble ramp. The
boys’ designs were eventually compiled into a single agreed-upon design and a father from the classroom helped the boys to create the ramp design in the school playground using plastic tubing and marbles. If just shown the final ramp design, then the viewer could not possibly appreciate the depth and range of conversations, explorations, social language skills, and problem solving that went into this yearlong conversation to reach the final design.

The photos, video, or phrases from a conversation illustrate progress such as one boy’s development of social language skills, another’s growth in new vocabulary, and another child’s ability to stay on task for longer periods of time. Laura may decide to publicly display this documentation or choose to share this with individual families. Skills of critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity are evident in the boys’ negotiation and redesigns. Laura can use the documentation to explain a child’s progress that highlights various domains of learning (such as social, motor, academic/science, language skills). Laura may also be required to give a standardized test (such as the Expressive Vocabulary Test for kindergarteners) but she can supplement the single test score with a narrative about the child’s progress, rich with the child’s own words, photos, and video. As children move into the higher grades, there are fewer opportunities for hands-on learning but a teacher interested in observing and documenting learning is someone who will find time to set up his/her classroom so that children can practice 21st-century skills as well as explore abstract concepts like height, weight, force, and gravity of moving objects. Project-based learning allows opportunities to demonstrate skills in an authentic and respectful manner that can enrich learning.

SCHOOLS AS A PLACE OF EXPLORATION: DOCUMENTATION ILLUMINATES LEARNING

The tool of documentation in classrooms is not new and is inspired by educators from the municipal infant toddler and preschools in Reggio Emilia,
Italy. Educators from Reggio Emilia have explored the tool of documentation for several decades and their public schools for young children, declared the best in the world, are in part due to their attitude on the importance of listening closely to children. Schools are viewed as a place of exploration and the youngest of children, infants and toddlers, are considered researchers. Children are encouraged to ask questions and to change the direction of an exploration and are pushed to go deeper in their learning. For example, when visiting the schools in Reggio Emilia, I watched as a 4-year-old painted a vase of flowers. Even after spending about 20 minutes on the work she was encouraged to persist — to add more details — to notice the lighting on the real flowers and to consider how she could add this to her painting. Children are pushed to reach high standards and time is given for children to fully complete a project or to continue where they left off from a previous day. This attitude towards teaching and learning resonates with many educators in the United States, especially when they feel the pressure of “covering” a required curriculum. Teachers want the opportunity to allow children to go deep in an area of interest, such as painting flowers or designing the best ramp in the world. Covering a set curriculum because it might be what is tested is not the only purpose of an education.

Families can support teachers in their effort to document the exploration of questions and ideas with children (see Figure 3). The actual documentation — the images and words — serve as a concrete way for a child to communicate his or her experience in the classroom.

SUPPORTING OUR TEACHERS: THE ROLE OF FAMILIES IN DOCUMENTATION

The following are a few suggestions families might consider that can encourage a teacher in one’s efforts to document classroom learning. First, families
can appreciate classroom learning experiences by looking at documenta-
tion of children other than their own, knowing that the teacher will work
to document each child when possible. Not all classroom learning expe-
riences can be documented. Thoughtful documentation takes time since it
includes interpretation, fine-tuning, and developing a story about learning
that is meaningful for a particular audience and purpose. Teachers may
select a project or idea to document and this project may include only a
subset of the children; decisions are made on which children to include
based on the children’s interests and questions the teacher wants to explore.
Secondly, families might provide feedback as to the location and format of
the documentation so that the teacher knows it will be noticed and viewed.
Developing the documentation to share in a public space either digitally or
on a classroom wall takes effort with attention to the visual design and lay-
out. Some ideas can be as simple as placing a “photo of the day” that was
taken by a child or teacher illustrating something exciting or interesting; or
perhaps a large documentation exhibit might be prepared for a school-wide
event. Creating a blog or Web site with a regular posting of photos and text
of individual and group learning is an excellent way to share documentation
— especially if a family member cannot regularly be at the school to see a
classroom display. Sharing the documentation publicly is a way to commu-
nicate, to validate, and to respect the teaching and learning in the classroom.
Getting input from interested adults about the documentation reinforces the
teacher’s efforts and opens possibilities for new perspectives and new project
ideas. It is not uncommon for a teacher who works hard on creating a docu-
mentation exhibit to question, “why bother,” if families do not take the time
to look at the documentation. Thirdly, families can help by bringing docu-
mentation (photos) from home. Perhaps the teacher is discussing the role of
a veterinarian and asks families to contribute photos of pets that can be used
to enrich the classroom documentation of this project. Contributions from
families such as old digital cameras or funds for purchasing ink cartridges to
print classroom photos would be welcomed. Finally, a family member can
volunteer to assist in the documentation of a classroom project by taking
photos, video, or writing notes. Having a second set of hands is helpful as a
teacher leads the activity while another adult documents.

PARENTS AS ADVOCATES FOR LISTENING CLOSELY

So how might families advocate and support teachers who want to listen
closely to the children in their classroom? For that matter, how can adults
support each other to listen closely to their children while at home? With so
many distractions in our lives, perhaps documenting a learning experience
could be encouraged not only at school but also at home — to practice lis-
tening and observing. Sharing documentation between families and teachers
TABLE 1. Questions Families Could Ask

☐ Are there other ways I can see how my child learns other than the standard report card and test scores?
☐ Does the teacher consider observations and documentation of learning when deciding on a grade for my child?
☐ How much flexibility are teachers given to allow children to work on projects?
☐ Are children given a chance to describe what they have learned?
☐ In what ways could documenting learning support a larger discussion in our school about children's learning?
☐ What funds are available to provide digital cameras to classrooms?
☐ How can I help?

has potential to open communication. A parent of a quiet child at school might share photos or video of the child engaging with a family member at home. Likewise, a teacher might share visual documentation with a parent who is an English language learner in order to describe the child’s progress that might be more informative than a written or oral report.

How can families advocate and support teachers in their effort to deepen learning and to observe and listen to children? Families might start by asking questions to school administrators and teachers (see Table 1). Working together, families and teachers can support each other to listen closely to children at home and school.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to Laura Shea, kindergarten teacher, and her students at the Curley Elementary School, Boston, Massachusetts.

APPENDIX 1: RESOURCES

Making Learning Visible, Project Zero Web site with samples of documentation and guidelines: http://www.mlvpz.org/
Making Learning Visible Web site with information on family engagement: http://www.makinglearningvisibleresources.org/
National Center for Fair and Open Testing Web site to advocate for alternative forms of testing primarily targeting educators: http://www.fairtest.org/