Capacity Building Series K–2

SECRETARIAT SPECIAL EDITION #30

Pedagogical Documentation

Leading Learning in the Early Years and Beyond

Across Ontario, educators are exploring documentation as a way to learn more about how students think and learn. In school teams, learning communities and ministry programs, such as the Student Work Study Teacher (SWST), the Collaborative Inquiry for Learning Mathematics (CILM) and the Early Primary Collaborative Inquiry (EPCI), they are experimenting with innovative ways to observe student learning, study student work and gain greater insight into effective instruction. This monograph shares one highly promising process – pedagogical documentation – that is being used increasingly as an assessment *for* and *as* learning strategy in early primary classrooms. Drawing on the research literature and the classroom inquiries of the Early Primary Collaborative Inquiry, it identifies the benefits of pedagogical documentation for students and educators alike and suggests tips for getting started that may be useful across the grades.

One of the greatest predictors of new learning is prior knowledge and understanding. William (2011) outlines how educators can harness this predictive power by eliciting and interpreting evidence of students' thinking. He suggests that assessing student learning for instruction has proven to have "unprecedented power to increase student engagement and to improve learning outcomes." Other researchers support this claim. Earl and Hannay (2011) suggest that through rigorous use of evidence of student learning for teaching, educators are becoming "knowledge leaders" pushing our understanding of teaching and learning to the frontiers of innovation.

Fraser (2012) echoes Earl and Hannay (2011) when she suggests that by engaging in pedagogical documentation, "teachers are becoming innovators in their own right."

Why document student learning?

"The teacher who perceives how children learn and who can help others see that learning can contribute signifcantly to the child's development."

(Helm, Beneke & Steinheimer, 2007, p. 7)

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Putting Learning at the Centre

Rinaldi (2001) describes pedagogical documentation somewhat paradoxically as "visible listening" – using notes, slides, videos and so on to reconstruct children's learning paths and processes. Gandini and Kaminsky (2004) similarly describe it as a "pedagogy of listening," broadening the notion of documentation to include the collection of many forms and types of text to make student learning visible and to create an authentic record for dialogue, reflection and analysis. Pedagogical documentation is not done at the end of a lesson or unit, as a summative assessment, but is ongoing – a cyclical process that facilitates growth and improvement. This multifaceted approach transforms understanding of teaching and learning in five strategic ways, each explored below:

1. Creates Shared Understanding



"My 'aha' moment about documentation was during my student-led parent/teacher conferences. The students were so articulate about their learning, showing parents what they had done, how they found the information and what they had learned. I was also surprised to hear how the students had carried their inquiries into their home life. Many parents spoke about how excited the children were about learning and that they wanted to pursue inquiries further at home."

– Educator, Early Primary Collaborative Inquiry

Stop the train ...

"Pedagogical documentation stops the train of standardized expectations and slows down our thinking processes to consider some topic with exquisite care."

(Wien, Guyevskey, & Berdoussis, 2011)

It is not only our students' thinking that becomes visible through pedagogical documentation, but our thinking as educators becomes visible as well, opening up the possibility for shared reflection on the learning process. Further, as educators ask, "How do I understand what I'm hearing?" and as students reflect on what they are learning, parents, too, are able to genuinely engage in the learning.

Children's understanding of the learning experience can differ dramatically not just from their teachers but from their parents as well. Parents, too, have experiences which result in different perspectives on what learning is or what they think it should be. Documentation enables educators to name what children are learning and to make links to the curriculum. At the same time, students can reflect on their learning. Such ongoing dialogue mediates perspectives – educators', students' and parents' – to facilitate understanding.

By constructing shared understanding, dialogue drives future curriculum in ways that are genuinely responsive to learning needs (Seitz, 2008).These conversations allow educators to further their "understanding of the concepts children are building, the theories they are constructing and the questions they are posing" (Fraser, 2012). Consequently, learning becomes a deeply personalized and engaging experience.

2. Celebrates the Rights of Individual Learners



"Using various forms of documenting student learning challenged us to see children differently. Different kinds of demonstrations of learning moved us all beyond what we had come to expect, and led us to a place of valuing each child's contribution. What was made visible was the learning process of children, their multiple languages, and the strategies used by each child."

– Educator, Early Primary Collaborative Inquiry

In a culturally diverse province, educators question their own ideas and biases embedded in everyday practice. Close consideration of individual students is leading

to discussions about social justice, equitable practice and the meaning of culturally responsive pedagogy. As educators examine their work and re-think their practices and beliefs, they are also reporting how the discomfort and uncertainty that often arises from this reflection is a necessary part of the change process. Many primary educators have discovered how rigorous reflection leads to "innovative programs that foster each child's learning potential" (Fraser, 2012). In many cases, educators are reporting a transformational shift in how they view young children as profoundly capable learners.

Documentation takes place within the natural flow of the child's day – during learning opportunities in the classroom, in the schoolyard and beyond. As a result, the evidence gathered relates closely to the child's ongoing thinking and shifts in understanding. Rather than focusing on assessing narrow skill development or learning products, educators are using documentation to learn more about their students and to personalize learning experiences according to their interests and learning needs.

Learning is a complex process impacted by many factors, including the feelings and emotions of the learner. In young children, feelings and emotions affect the learning experience in profound ways. As educators know first-hand, the relationship with a child can play a huge role in a successful learning experience. Documentation strategies deepen understanding of the child's interests and his or her learning and development needs, and so can help to strengthen this crucial relationship. Further, documentation encourages educators to step back to listen and allow the child to take the lead in the learning, inviting students into the learning process. Many educators are increasingly identifying student-led inquiry as a vehicle to strengthen the learning partnership.

3. Recognizes Students' Ownership of Their Learning

> "We document the learning journey through student eyes – the notion that students could take the responsibility for some of the documentation. We are looking at how we use our bulletin boards for the purpose of helping students to make the connections in their learning, to share the learning narrative with others, and to capture thinking."
>
> *– Educator, Early Primary Collaborative Inquiry*



K–2 educators in the Early Primary Collaborative Inquiry are discovering the importance of the sense of wonder instilled in children through the new full-day early learning Kindergarten program. Across the primary years, documentation is being used to help educators develop a better understanding of their students' interests and needs – of what sparks their wonder – in order to inform planning. As one early educator put it, documentation enables us to "include the voice of the child in our educational practices."

Many educators have found that as they give students "opportunities to seek answers to questions that are interesting, important and relevant to them, they are enabling them to address curriculum content in integrated and 'real world' ways and to develop – and practise – higher-order thinking skills and habits of mind that lead to deep learning" (Getting Started with Student Inquiry, *Capacity Building Series*, 2011). Dialogue with students using documentation provides an opportunity for shared reflection that supports both *assessment for learning* and *assessment as learning* practices. On the one hand, documentation provides educators with the "evidence" to provide timely, specific and descriptive feedback to move learning forward. On the other hand, it allows educators to go one step further, to help students self-assess, to "become directly involved in the learning process, acting as the 'critical connector' between assessment and improvement" (Earl, 2007).

Celebrate children ...

"Celebrating the rights of children is central to this approach … this process nurtures plurality of ideas and voices. "

(Turner & Wilson, 2010)

Through documentation, the potential for engagement and learning increases because students reflect on their learning throughout the process rather than at the end (Turner & Wilson, 2010). Students develop critical higher-order or metacognitive skills. Further, students are able to more fully understand the expectations and become partners in the process of determining how best to express their ideas and make their thinking visible.

4. Actualizes Shared Accountability



"Gone were the discussions of student behaviours, replaced with 'he is so smart when he is doing…', 'he is just so intelligent when …' The educators universally saw their students through the lens of capacity instead of deficit."

– Educator, Early Primary Collaborative Inquiry

Early primary educators want to find meaningful ways to show what their students are learning and offer opportunities for student accountability in an experiential program. Documentation can enable demonstration of both the learning and the types of experiences that foster growth in young children to colleagues, administrators, parents and the larger community. Krechevsky, Rivard and Burton (2009) identify three forms of accountability that documentation supports – namely, a) accountability to self, b) accountability to each other and c) accountability to the larger community.

As educators review and analyze the variety of evidence that they have gathered, they are finding that documentation increases their confidence in voicing their own professional judgments and so enhances personal accountability.

Delve deeply into learning …

"Learning is an emotional experience that cannot be fully engaged or understood through simple paper-and-pencil activities … Documentation moves us beyond an interest in outcomes and moves us to an exploration of the relationships and feelings that form the context and stuff of educative experience."

(Yu, 2008)

Collaboration through the process of documentation "deprivatizes" the work of teaching and learning and assists educators in understanding the importance of being accountable to one another. Early educators are finding that collaboration helps them look at their students' thinking and learning from different perspectives, fostering an asset-based or "capability stance."

Documentation is also being recognized as a means of responding to system, parent and larger community demands for accountability. Parents and community partners are authentically engaged in the language of education when the learning is made visible. The dialogue around pedagogical documentation builds public support for the type of experiential program that educators know is best for young children.

5. Provides Voice in Learning for Everyone



"Not only were teachers using videos to explore changes in student learning, but teachers were using the same photographs and videos with their students as a tool for student self and peer assessment. Feedback became daily and more meaningful when given by a peer. Students had a clearer understanding of the success criteria when they took on the role of the teacher. One teacher reported, 'I will never underestimate the power of peer assessment. It matters to the students'."

– Educator, Early Primary Collaborative Inquiry

Through pedagogical documentation, the roles in education are shifting; what it means to be a learner and an educator are being transformed. Students and teachers alike are demonstrating ownership of and engaging in teaching and learning. Consequently, pedagogical documentation is a vehicle for learning that bridges understanding of children and adults.

Rather than relying on mass-produced resources designed for all students, educators involved in the Early Primary Collaborative Inquiry are collectively using their professional judgment to plan programs that are personalized, address the needs of each child and are linked to the curriculum. A thorough knowledge of the curriculum, an understanding of the stages of development and responsiveness to students' interests are all critical for making effective instructional decisions. Educators report that taking into consideration perspectives from colleagues, students and others only serves to strengthen the inquiry. Further, providing all participants with a voice in the inquiry in turn enriches learning for all.

Capturing Learning When and Where It Happens

Researchers and classroom educators alike concur that to reap the benefits of documentation, it needs to become a habit of classroom practice (Wien, Guyevskey, & Berdoussis, 2011). To this end, they are finding that the devices they use for documenting (e.g., digital cameras, video recorders, audiotaping devices, notepads and other tools) need to be available at all times to capture learning when and where it happens.

As educators become more adept in the use of documentation, they embrace it not so much as a technical process but as an attitude toward teaching and learning. They understand the value of knowing their students and how they think so that learning is maximized. This transformational change moves the focus away from product and "becomes an approach of knowing, making it possible for the adult to be and know together with the child" so that the students' interests, thinking and understanding drive instruction (Turner & Wilson, 2010).

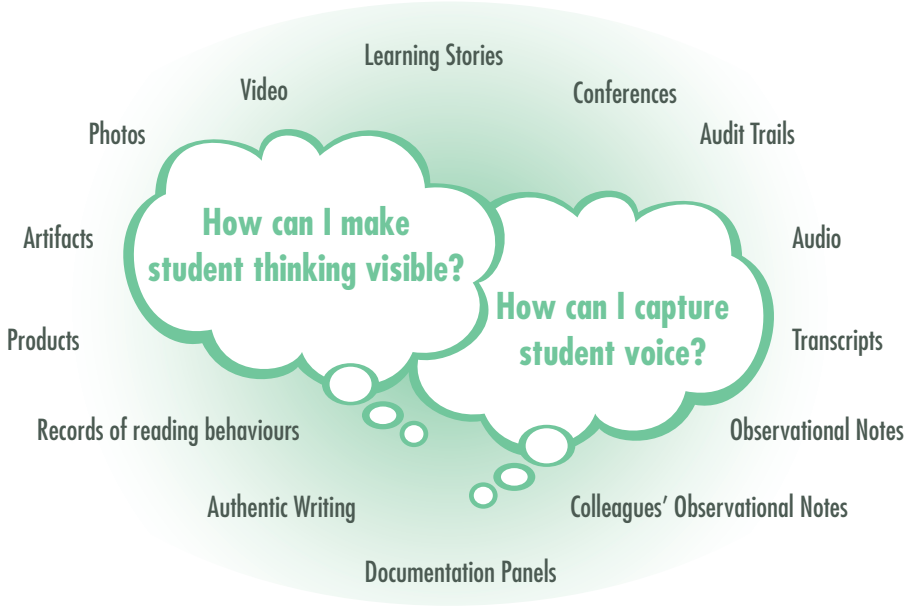
Many types of evidence can be used to document student thinking and learning. Some have found value in using a web or other visual representation to display the variety of options that are available for documentation. Images – photographs, video, paintings or other visual objects – are a particularly powerful tool because they provide a much different view of a child's thinking and learning than written materials. Other educators are exploring ways to capture voice in documentation. Both elements – voice and visual image – provide students with multi-modal representations to demonstrate what they know and how they think and expand our understanding of how students think and learn.

Make the shift ...

"The main shift in my focus has been how to make documentation more useful and interactive, not just something to do and finish with ... My thinking has become less rigid, and I find I am thinking about more creative ways to approach and use documentation."

Participant,
Early Primary Collaborative Inquiry

Ways to Capture Thinking



Tips for Getting Started

1. Use a collaborative inquiry approach.

Over 20 years ago, Short and Burke (1991) wrote, "We don't inquire to eliminate alternatives but to find more functional understandings – to create diversity, broaden our thinking and ask more complex questions." Since then the value of collaboratively looking at student work has has become widely recognized as an effective catalyst for professional learning. Today, in Ontario, it is a commonly held stance within professional practice (Hannay, Wideman, & Seller, 2010).

Collaboration is the fuel ...

"It is by engaging in the process of documentation that teachers are becoming innovators in their own right… Whereas documentation can be said to be the gears that allow the learning experiences to move in new directions, collaboration is the fuel that drives the process."

(Fraser, 2012)

Capturing and deeply analyzing diverse representations of student thinking and learning can be very challenging. In this context, the value of collaborative inquiry – of working in teams to study and record student learning and thinking – cannot be underestimated. While documentation provides rich descriptions of what students say, do and represent, it is the team's collective reflection on and analysis of the evidence which deepens understanding. The first step, therefore, in the process is to establish the team committed to placing documentation at the heart of learning.

2. Establish your primary purpose.

Educators who are interested in exploring pedagogical documentation may feel overwhelmed by the sheer amount of evidence they can collect and will ask, "Where do I begin?" Your primary purpose will both help you sift the evidence and serve as a lens for interpretation. Some key purposes of documentation are listed below:

- Studying children's beliefs about topics to be investigated, the reasons behind their interests, the sources of their current knowledge
- Engaging children in reflecting on their own learning
- Helping children develop theories that give meaning to events and objects in their world
- Helping children ask good questions
- Helping children self-assess

Once you have established the purpose, you may wish to identify one or two things to collect (for example, documenting one learning experience from beginning to end) and to set aside a certain time to observe each day, focusing observations on one child or on one area over an extended period of time (Helm & Beneke, 2007).

A Professional Inquiry

Some guiding questions may be helpful in provoking reflection on what you are choosing to study and why:

- Why did we collect this evidence/data? How might this be useful?
- What patterns/items of interest do we notice from this evidence/data?
- What are the limitations of this evidence/data?
- What further questions does this evidence/data generate?
- Based on this documentation, what are the implications for future learning for this child or this group of children for our teaching?

3. Think about your audience.

If student learning is going to be made public, it is important to decide on how to display it in a way that suits the audience and is meaningful to them, encourages dialogue and links learning to the curriculum. Displays of documentation will have different purposes and should be designed to reflect them. What is used for planning program, for example, may be different from what is displayed for students or parents on a bulletin board.

For students, Panels/Walls & Audit Trails, which pair photographs and learning artefacts with captions and conversations, need to be displayed at an accessible height inside or outside the classroom, whereas for parents they may need to be made accessible in more portable ways (e.g., in a scrap book or online). Portfolios are a documentation format that are typically used to capture individual student learning over time; for students, they will need to be made available for one-on-one conferences while for colleagues they may serve as a helpful resource when making instructional decisions. Learning Stories are another format which may need to be made available in a variety of ways for reflection on a child's or a class's learning process (e.g., in a letter/e-mail, newsletter, or blog).

4. Decide on your methods for collecting information.

The systematic collection of information facilitates analysis and reflection with students, parents and colleagues. So while evidence of student thinking is being gathered, it is critical to have a method in place for organizing it and, later, for identifying trends, patterns and next steps. Many educators emphasize the value of technology as a format for collecting information. "Technology allowed us to go back and examine our use of prompts," said one educator in the Early Primary Collaborative Inquiry. "We were able to reflect on the type of questions we were asking students."

5. Remember – There is no one right way to do it!

"Documentation is a tricky thing," reports an educator in the Early Primary Collaborative Inquiry. "In order for it to be effective, the method must resonate with the documenter. Some found that writing reflection journals was helpful, some preferred to use the journals and technology (i.e. flip cameras, ipads), and some used alternate strategies of documentation." Researchers reinforce the creative, multifaceted aspect of documentation. Seitz (2008) suggests, "the format that documentation can take can be as varied as the creator's mind permits." In all cases, however, the analysis of documentation is used to make intentional instructional decisions to support student learning; educators need to determine the documentation format that works best for them to support the learning of the children in their classroom.

Children's input is critical ...

"Children's input is critical to adaptations in practice. Approaching children's representations of thinking and learning with genuine curiosity is the first step in using children's feedback to inform teacher practice."

Educator,
Early Primary Collaborative Inquiry

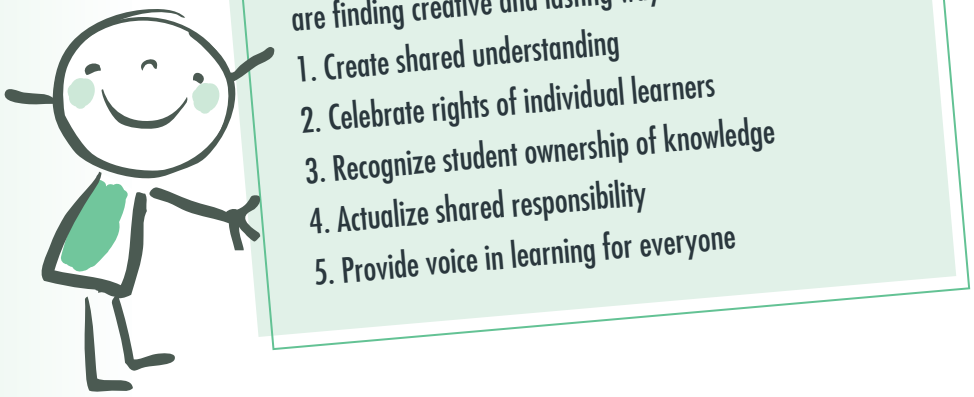
Going Beyond Early Primary

Educators who are experimenting with pedagogical documentation and placing it at the heart of learning are finding that it is more than a technical tool; it is a way to inquire into student learning that has the potential to transform education in the early years and beyond.

Engaging in careful, systematic and cyclical documentation of student learning yields many benefits. On the one hand, pedagogical documentation indicates to students that their teacher values what they are thinking and what they are doing (Yu, 2008); it engages them in an authentic learning partnership. On the other hand, the process enables educators to put students at the very core of their instruction.

The practice of pedagogical documentation resonates with four principles that guide the work of Ontario's collaborative inquiries. Collectively, Ontario educators are:

- Focusing on student experience
- Taking an asset-based approach to student potential and capacity to learn
- Being flexible and responsive to student needs as they engage in progressive learning experiences
- Engaging in knowledge building through reflective classroom practice



Resources

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Ontario Ministry of Education Resources

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Getting Started with Student Inquiry. (2011)

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