



RESEARCH BRIEFING

March 2014 | Number 8

TAKING THE DOCUMENTATION APPROACH TO EARLY LEARNING INTO PRIMARY 1

KEY FINDINGS

Adapting documentation methods so that they are appropriate for the first class in primary school can help teachers to meet the needs of children and the expectations of the Curriculum for Excellence.

- > Primary school teachers can share the values and principles which underpin the documentation approach and use these ideas to shape their classroom practices.
- > Using documentation methods appropriate for primary school classrooms helps teachers to know about children's interests and motives and the individual competencies and funds of knowledge of the young learners.
- > Using documentation methods enables responsive planning and engages learners.
- > Documentation provides ways of assessing children's progress that can encompass a variety of types of learning. This extends the existing formal assessment processes.

INTRODUCTION

Documenting the process and outcomes of children's learning using a variety of methods is established practice in Stirling Council nursery settings. Documentation focuses on finding out about children's interests, recording their actions and thinking as they explore and solve problems and encouraging reflection on and talking about learning. This approach fits well with the expectations and goals for children in the Early Level of the Curriculum for Excellence. In the project reported here we set out to explore how documentation could contribute to classroom practices that facilitate learning when children move into the first year of primary school (P1).¹

RESEARCH PROCESS

Four teachers responsible for teaching children in P1 took part in the study. These teachers worked in three schools in the same local authority but they had different classroom contexts. In one case the participating teacher also had managerial responsibility for the school nursery class and shared classroom responsibilities with a colleague. Another of the teachers worked in a small two-teacher school and taught a composite class covering P1 – P3. At the third school two teachers (one with experience of working as a teacher in a nursery setting) had joint responsibility for the P1 class and worked alongside each other throughout the week.

The study was a process of cyclical guided enquiry carried out over a period of nine months. Each teacher selected and experimented with various ways of documenting the children's learning that made sense in the context of her

¹ This study was the result of collaboration between Stirling Council, four primary school teachers, Early Learning Associates and the School of Education at the University of Stirling.

classroom and the children for whom she was responsible. On three occasions during the study the teachers met the researchers to reflect on the approaches they were trying out in their classrooms and the implications of these methods for their practice and the children's learning experiences. Between the group meetings the university researcher visited each P1 class to observe the everyday implementation of documentation and to interview each teacher about her experience of documenting learning in P1. The teachers gave their consent to observations in their classroom, agreed to take part in interviews and to their shared reflections being gathered as research data and to the findings being disseminated. Each school informed the parents of the children in P1 about the nature of the study. We have maintained the anonymity of the teachers, schools and children by using pseudonyms throughout this briefing. The findings presented here are the result of analysis of the experiences and practices of each of the participating teachers and their shared reflections at the group meetings.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

1. *Primary school teachers can share the values and principles which underpin the documentation approach and use these ideas to shape their classroom practices.*

The ways in which the teachers who took part in this study thought about their role was characterised by openness to the perspectives of children, a view of children as active agents in learning and an understanding of learning as the result of experiences in formal educational settings and at home. The documentation approach is underpinned by a similar perspective on young children which sees them competent and resourceful, respects them as individuals and seeks to actively listen to and consult with them. When we discussed these values and principles with the primary school teachers we found that they already shared many of these ideas and were trying to act on them in their classrooms. For example, they were exploring ways to:

- > help children to share their skills and specialist knowledge with their peers
- > recognise the knowledge children bring to school with them and support them to learn collaboratively
- > help children to create rules and discuss plans
- > attend to individual interests
- > pay attention to verbal and non-verbal language e.g. body language, eye contact
- > take account of children's suggestions
- > allocate time to reflect and consult with children about their learning and progress.

For the study participants exploring ways of documenting and responding to children's learning became an important and satisfying part of the way they saw their role as a teacher. One of them talked about not wanting to teach in any other way once she had realised that she shared the principles on which the documentation approach is based. Nevertheless, they were all aware of the need to pay attention to the expectations and outcomes associated with the Curriculum for Excellence

and the expectations of parents. For instance, at White School the teacher talked about having to balance opportunities for children to explore their own questions and interests with the high priority that local parents placed on becoming a fluent reader. At Purple School parents tended to associate learning with traditional classroom activities so the teachers there were keen to document the ways in which the children were learning as they engaged in a variety of active tasks.

2. *Using documentation methods appropriate for primary school classrooms helps teachers to know about children's interests and motives and the individual competencies and funds of knowledge of the young learners.*

Each participating teacher developed ways of finding out what the children in her class knew, what they wanted to know more about and how they thought about their own learning. The methods they used were sometimes different from the ways in which nursery educators documented learning, reflecting the different practices of school and nursery and the practicalities of each classroom context. What worked in one of these classrooms might not have worked or been possible in the others but the focus remained on learning about the children, their ways of making meaning and the funds of knowledge they brought with them to school.

- > Taking time while children worked on group construction and problem-solving activities to talk to individuals about their drawings revealed depths of knowledge and capacities to weave stories about the characters depicted which was not evident in whole class discussions. The teacher at Yellow School recalled realising how many ideas a girl had when they discussed a drawing together.

'I was surprised [today] . . . especially [by] Maisie who had drawn an alien and developed a whole alien world. So far she would not share that in a bigger group.'

- > Completing mind-maps with small groups made visible what children already knew and gaps in their knowledge. Collecting their questions about a suggested project topic² gave insights into children's customary ways of thinking. One mind-mapping session at Purple School articulated the very local nature of children's understandings and the inability of one otherwise articulate boy to engage with different historic practices.
- > Observing children's choices and listening to their conversations and requests during 'soft start'³ or other times when they were free to make choices in the classroom gave teachers access to topics that were of current interest to the young learners and suggested future activities. For example, in soft start the teacher noticed children trying to building a beanstalk after listening to the story and developed this interest into a collaborative measuring activity.
- > Encouraging children to talk about their activities to their peers and discussing photographs of completed products or work in progress revealed emergent understandings which the teachers would not otherwise have been aware of, such as, individuals

² Project topics or learning contexts provide a subject focus for a range of cross-curricular learning activities in P1 classrooms.

³ Some P1 teachers begin the school day with a 'soft start' period where, in a practice familiar to them from nursery, children select an activity from a range set out in the classroom by their teacher.

beginning to identifying patterns and similarities and differences and funds of knowledge acquired at home e.g. about space travel.

- > Regular opportunities to review with an adult the outcomes from their own activities and to share in discussion about what their classmates had been doing developed children's confidence and ability to talk about themselves as learners and challenge ideas introduced by their teachers and peers.

3. Using documentation methods enables responsive planning and engages learners

Building on children's interests in nursery can enhance the process of transition to primary school but the information passed on to the P1 teacher has to be proportionate. The teachers taking part in this study decided to experiment with continuing a theme or project initiated in nursery across the summer holidays and into P1 in order to offer continuity in some areas of learning during the first weeks in primary school. In the summer term the educators in the nursery class at Yellow School had encouraged the children's interest in how castles were built and in the people who lived there. The P1 teacher chose to continue this interest by adopting castles in fairy tales as the context for activities to develop literacy, construction skills and problem solving. White School selected a topical theme for their transition project in 2012, inviting children returning to the composite class and those making the transition from two nursery settings to make scrapbooks about the Olympics. Discussions about this topic at the beginning of term revealed children's curiosity about the Paralympics and in particular the lives of the athletes taking part. This was the stimulus for looking at aspects of fitness training, food and health and stories about the lives of people living with disabilities. The teacher was comfortable about waiting for a topic for project work to emerge when term began but welcomed the opportunity to facilitate a topic about exercise, eating for fitness and disability.

'I had a feeling . . . that the context for learning was going to evolve into a 'health' topic but did not anticipate getting to disability via the Paralympics.'

However, the value of transition projects relies on provoking or continuing children's interest and while the move to a new school was an obvious topic for the teachers at Purple School it proved to be of little immediate interest to the children beginning P1 or their families. In these circumstances the teachers turned their attention to a whole school project at the beginning of term and re-introduced the move to the new school building as a context for learning later in the term when the change was imminent.

While they recognised the value of knowing what each new entrant to the class had been engaged by at nursery, the teachers were clear that passing on a selection of learning episodes was more valuable than an exhaustive account of all the documentation gathered over two years. Full profiles were described

as 'overwhelming', but looking through selected key pieces of evidence (particularly if done in dialogue with the child) made visible individual competencies acquired through experiences at home, in the community and at nursery and allowed the teacher to avoid 'taking everyone back to the beginning'.

Reviewing the information gathered by their documentation methods helps teachers in P1 to select the most engaging topic work. In nursery interest groups are usually formed in response to observations and children's conversations and questions but in primary school it has typically been the teacher who has chosen the project or context for learning. However, as the P1 teacher at Yellow School had found

'It's a challenge to start off a topic that is new to the children and when they don't know what you are talking about. . . so that raises questions about the relevance of the topic to their learning.'

Over the period of this study the teachers taking part evolved a hybrid approach which reflected their desire to draw on the children's interests and curiosity and their confidence that there was support in their school for responsive planning for project work and 'changing tack' when interest was not ignited, shifted or dwindled⁴. The teachers still took responsibility for selecting the broad topic area for project work but found ways of consulting with the children about what they already knew and what would excite their interest. As a teacher at Purple School explained

'We choose the topic but do a mind-map so we can see what they know (not so much what they want to know) and go from there. We are building on what they are getting from home.'

In one instance a mind-map consultation about Christmas revealed that a group of children knew little about the Nativity story, prompting the teachers to plan activities working with the religious aspects of the celebration theme. This broad theme of celebration had evolved from a variety of occasions which had captured the children's interest including the opening of the new school building, a class member attending a Hindu festival and another going to a wedding. At Yellow School the teacher noticed waning interest in the castles and fairy story theme but a growing focus in the children's conversations, questions and free drawings on the animals in the stories and in nocturnal creatures. When a story about an owl provoked further interest the teacher made plans to use night time and the night sky as the context for learning across the Curriculum for Excellence areas. At White School a history topic arose from the teacher's own interest in a historic event and her expectations about curriculum coverage over the year. However, beginning work on this topic by mind-mapping allowed her to construct a plan which she saw as being subject to fewer diversions than past plans and to capitalise on the children's desire to find answers to the specific questions each of them had raised, something she had previously managed as 'side-tracks'.

⁴ There were whole school expectations that children should make progress towards specific literacy and numeracy targets and the plans and timetables focused on these specific aims remained in place.

4. Documentation provides ways of assessing children's progress that can encompass a variety of types of learning. This extends the existing formal assessment processes.

For each of the participating teachers developing ways of documenting children's learning throughout the year followed naturally from their principles and values and their recognition of the advantages of this approach for the children, their parents and for their own role. Each school had a formal assessment and reporting process which created individual profiles across the school year. The teachers taking part in this study continued to complete these assessments as normal but also talked enthusiastically about what they had learned about individual children's understanding and competencies through the documentation techniques they had adopted. Methods such as photographing construction projects, charting progress with problem solving, recording children's perspectives and evaluations and collecting art work and mementoes of success did not replace formal assessments but did add to the teachers' understanding of the children's progress, extend the range of competencies which were recorded and, as the teacher at Yellow School found, they provided additional and engaging evidence to share with parents.

'For parents this is a great way to see the learning – they may just want to know how [their child] is getting on with numbers or letters but when shown these illustrations of progress this is really powerful.'

The children also benefitted from this broader and more formative approach to assessing learning. Opportunities to reflect with a teacher on significant episodes of learning, select pieces of work or the outcomes of activities for their portfolios or classroom displays and consider their progress against shared targets engaged the children in a process of recognising and evaluating their own learning and development, a benefit particularly valued at Purple School.

'We need to make it visible to them that they are learning. Documentation is as much for the children – making them see and be proud of what they can do – looking on the wall at what they have achieved.'

At White School children contributed through drawing and text to the regular review of targets set for literacy and numeracy. These targets were held in an evolving record which was later shared with parents. Importantly, reviewing targets also included one to one discussions between the child and teacher, allowing the adult an opportunity to hear the child's perspective on their own progress and giving the young learner experience of evaluating their work in class and responding to the expectations of others. The teachers

at Purple School made extensive use of photographs to document the range and significance of children's learning activities. Children were encouraged to take photographs of construction projects and other products of their activities. These images were later reviewed with a teacher and some selected for inclusion in each child's portfolio. The children were also able to add paper-based products directly to their individual portfolios as they had done in nursery. But this formative work did not preclude summative assessments too as one of the teachers at Purple School explained

'As we move on in some contexts we will choose an assessment exercise. The children won't know it is assessment but staff will note what they do/know and add that to their folder as soon as possible.'

Including children in the recording and evaluating of their own progress was extended to whole class activities too. At White School the children contributed to an audio book featuring visual images and recordings reflecting on their activities as a class and a video record of the year produced a shared record of the learning which went beyond 'pencil and paper work'. At Yellow School whole class talk-time before and after activities was used to review what children had achieved during topic work and for self- and peer-review. Whole class reviews of the learning children had been engaged in during free-choice and teacher-directed activity periods afforded the teachers at Purple School daily opportunities to introduce and model the use of language about learning, giving the children the vocabulary and practice needed to develop as competent commentators on their own learning.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are grateful to the teachers who welcomed us into their classrooms and found time in their busy schedules to take part in this study with such interest and commitment.

For more information about this study or to discuss the ideas in this research briefing contact Dr Christine Stephen, School of Education, University of Stirling christine.stephen@stir.ac.uk



**UNIVERSITY OF
STIRLING**

