Co-constructed Pedagogical Documentation in Early Learning Settings: A Parent Perspective

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Abstract

In this study, parents were asked for their thoughts on the documentation provided to them by early childhood educators (ECEs), which focused on their young children’s learning experiences in early learning settings. Forty-five parents completed questionnaires focusing on their understandings and experiences with documentation. Seven parents were interviewed at the beginning and the end of the six-month research period. All parents stated that pedagogical documentation contributed to their understanding of how their children learned through play, saying that, among other things, it provided insight into “the mystery that is my child’s day” (parent participant). This was true, as well, for the parents who had children with a diagnosed or suspected disability. Although parents saw pedagogical documentation as adding value to their experience as parents of children in an early learning setting, they noted several challenges in accessing this documentation. This article explores pedagogical documentation from a parents’ perspective, with an emphasis on how the process of accessing documentation has the potential to build relationships between parent and educator and parent and child. The implication that this has for the successful transition of children from early learning settings into school settings is explored.

The purpose of this study was to examine the use of co-constructed pedagogical documentation in early learning settings from a parent perspective. Specifically, parents were asked about how this method of documentation influenced their understanding of their child’s play-based learning and whether it had an effect on their relationships with their children and/or their child’s early childhood educator (ECE). For the purposes of this study, co-constructed documentation was defined as documentation that was
generated with children and for the children, with the children being considered the creators as well as the primary audience, allowing them to review, reflect on, and revisit their experiences. This type of documentation differs from a more traditional approach to documenting children’s experiences—one in which an educator creates the documentation with an adult audience in mind, using adult interpretations of the event in order to make children’s learning visible.

**Pedagogical Documentation Defined**

Pedagogical documentation involves the combining of texts, photos, transcripts of conversations, audio tape, video, drawings, and other media to make learning visible to children, educators, parents, and the public. It serves as a “historical record of past events and provides us with ideas for future experiences as well as a means for sharing evidence with family members or others” (Bowne, Cutler, DeBates, Gilkerson, & Stremmel, 2010, p. 49). Documentation typically includes samples of a child’s work at several different stages of completion; comments written by the educator or other adults working with the children; transcriptions of children’s discussions, comments, and explanations of intentions about the activity; and, in some cases, comments made by parents (Katz & Chard, 1996). Parent comments are not necessarily a common element of pedagogical documentation; however, learning stories, as described by Carr, sometimes reserve a section for “Parent Voice,” inviting parents to add their reflection on the learning story once it has been developed by the educator (Carr, 2001; Carr & Lee, 2012).

Constructing pedagogical documentation provides early childhood educators with the opportunity to reflect on children’s interests, questions, activities, strengths, and needs and to then plan accordingly and intentionally, using an emergent curriculum approach. In addition to this primary benefit, it provides visual evidence to parents of how and what children are learning in early childhood settings. As well, pedagogical documentation, when displayed at children’s eye level or in an easily accessible portfolio format, can act as a learning provocation for children, providing them with a visual recollection of their own or other’s ideas and activities. Educators, for the most part, recognize the value in pedagogical documentation; however, they often cite difficulties in being able to produce documentation, mostly due to time constraints or a lack of experience in knowing what to look for and how to best present the documentation (Kroeger & Cardy, 2006).

**Pedagogical Documentation and the Developmental Perspective**

According to Turner and Wilson (2010), “documentation … carries the promise of altering pedagogic focus away from solely summative and standardized measures of student achievement toward more qualitative, formative understandings of student learning” (p. 6). It is about trying to see and understand what is going on in the work of a child and what that child is capable of performing without pre-set expectations or norms (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 1999). Removing these pre-set expectations allows educators to look for children’s unique interests, interactions, and discoveries when documenting children’s experiences, thereby broadening the scope on how adults, including parents and other family members, perceive children, including those with exceptionalities.
When children are viewed from a traditional, mid-20th-century developmental perspective, in which milestones become benchmarks and teachers focus on assessing whether or not a child is meeting developmental norms, children are seen as “not like us, and always in a deficit position in relation to the mature adult” (Tarr, 2010, p. 11). Tarr described the notion that when documentation is done with an attitude of curiosity, the purpose of observation shifts from one of surveillance of children, in which the educator is looking for pre-set learning goals, to one in which the educator is open to learning about the unique interests and talents of individual children (Tarr, 2010).

The developmental perspective in the 21st century has evolved from its “ages and stages” and “benchmarking” reputation in part due to the understanding of underlying neurological development that reinforces the enormous and varied potential for learning and development. As Gramling (2015) noted, “The developing brain of the child during early childhood is constantly processing information faster and with greater complexity of thought than could possibly be predicted by means of performance objectives” (p. 19). Educators with a solid grounding in inclusive practices, child development, and early learning recognize the wide variation among children and the profound impact of context, which, in effect, moves constructivism closer to a socio-cultural approach to early learning. Educators who appreciate how each child learns and who recognize the value of positive interactions between children and adults as a means to support brain development, language skills, self-regulation and socialization can use documentation as a means to understand the many and varied contextual factors of the situation. In this way, the educators are not limiting their experiences to ones in which they are seeking specific indicators of behaviour. This view widens their lens to see the unexpected complexities of children’s interactions and activities, providing them with the opportunity to truly create an inclusive environment for all children. When adults imbue themselves with a curiosity of what is happening and why, the process of pedagogical documentation can allow both parents of children with and without disabilities and educators to see the competence and creativity of the children as they explore, predict, hypothesize, and reflect on their experiences and the world around them.

**Pedagogical Documentation: Influences and Origins**

Our current understanding of pedagogical documentation is influenced greatly by practices seen elsewhere, such as the learning stories described by Carr and Lee from New Zealand (Carr & Lee, 2012), the documentation of long-term projects as seen in the Project Approach (Katz & Chard, 1996), and emergent curriculum, first described by Jones (2012) in the late 1960s. For the most part, however, pedagogical documentation is seen as an innovative practice that originated as one component of the educational approach applied in the infant-toddler programs and preschools in the municipality of Reggio Emilia in northern Italy.

Much of what has been written about Reggio Emilia concentrates on the practical aspects of documentation, focusing on describing specifically how projects are completed and how documentation forms an integral part of the ongoing project work (Grieshaber & Hatch, 2003). However, perhaps one of the most significant influences that the educators of Reggio Emilia have had on the field of early childhood education, and one that is
embodied in the Reggio practice of pedagogical documentation, is how the child is considered in the documentation process. Rinaldi, a prominent educator from Reggio Emilia, emphasized that “Reggio Emilia is a pedagogy that considers the child an active subject with rights … a protagonist, collaborator, and communicator” (Rinaldi as quoted in Buldu, 2010, p. 1440). This belief in children having a sense of agency influences how children’s activities are documented within the Reggio Emilia system, which views documentation as “a standard part of the early childhood teaching practice, with its key function to provide children with a concrete and visible memory of what they said and learned in order to serve as a jumping-off point for next steps in learning” (Buldu, 2010, p. 1440). In this sense, documentation is written for a child audience and in collaboration with children. This democratic and participatory approach to documentation is evident in Sweden, where the Stockholm project beginning in 1988 used the Reggio Emilia experience as a model and inspiration to deconstruct and revise that country’s early childhood pedagogy (Dahlberg et al., 1999); and in New Zealand, where the ECE curriculum, Te Whāriki, situates the child as citizen and co-constructor of knowledge identity and culture (Mitchell & Carr, 2014). These approaches are in direct contrast to the experience of children in some other countries, such as Britain, where research explored the experiences of 3–5-year-old children in early learning environments. This research suggests “the documentation of children’s achievements in many English ECEC settings is predominantly constructed and aimed at adults” (Bath, 2012, p. 192).

**Pedagogical Documentation and Parent Perspectives**

Pedagogical documentation helps parents to understand what ECEs cannot always articulate—specifically, how their child is learning in a play-based environment. By making children’s learning visible, documentation helps to depict the complex problem solving that happens when children explore their environment through play. It is the documentation of “ordinary moments” (Tarr, 2010) that provides adults (parents and educators alike) with a deeper understanding of what a child can do. Reynolds and Duff (2016) found that pedagogical documentation viewed by parents created a “constructive trajectory in fostering conversations about their children’s learning” (p. 98) and that these conversations provided both immediate and extended family members with a “more profound understanding of children’s ways of knowing, which resulted in stronger family connections” (p. 98). So it appears that documentation has the potential to change a parent’s perception of a child—helping them to see these ordinary moments through new eyes, which can lead to a greater understanding and appreciation of their child’s early learning experiences.

**Sharing the Story: Parents’ Level of Participation**

Parents choose to enrol their children in early learning programs for a variety of reasons, recognizing that high quality, inclusive, early education environments support children’s overall development and, at the same time, facilitate workforce participation. Parents of children with disabilities see additional advantages of enrolling their child in a “mainstream” early learning program or child care centre. In a review of the literature, Blackmore, Aylward, & Grace (2016) described these perceived benefits for children
with disabilities as “improving (the child’s) independence; providing opportunities to learn by observing typically developing peers; building self-esteem; improving functional day-to-day living skills; providing opportunities to participate in creative and interesting activities; and improving community understanding and acceptance of children with disabilities” (p. 14). That being said, most parents of young children are busy and find it logistically difficult to discuss their children’s activities and interactions with their early childhood educators in the run of a day. In a research study examining the predictors and correlates of communication between staff members and families at child care centres, Perlman and Fletcher (2012) emphasized that “strong, supportive partnerships between families and school settings have been shown to enhance children’s learning and decrease behaviour problems” (p. 540). However, this same study showed that parents spend, on average, 63 seconds in their child’s classroom during the morning drop off (p. 539). It is difficult to imagine that parents can have any meaningful discussion with educators during these 63 seconds about their children’s latest discoveries and interests or the learning progress noted in the classroom setting. Nor would they have time to ask about the pedagogical practices of the centre and how these practices are helping their children meet learning goals that parents may see as desirable, for example, “How is your program helping my child prepare for school when all she seems to be doing is playing?”

When parents are viewed as welcome partners in their child’s early learning experiences, they are able to bring their own ideas, abilities, knowledges, and experiences to the table, thereby enriching the experience for the children, the educators, and the families. “In contemporary society, families from all backgrounds have a desire to be involved in their children’s learning” (Reynolds & Duff, 2016, p. 93). In an exploration of parent perceptions of the developmental advantages of inclusion in mainstream early childhood education, Blackmore et al. (2016) described how parents of children with disabilities value suggestions from ECEs on how to “communicate with their child; manage their child’s behaviour; teach their child self-care routines; and deepen their own understanding of child development” (p. 16).

Educators from Reggio Emilia have long recognized the importance of parental involvement in their schools and have systematically integrated many ways to support this involvement, with pedagogical documentation serving as one of the essential methods for involvement and communication. By viewing documentation and becoming more involved in the children’s program, parents are “provoked to revise their image of the child and understand childhood in a richer and more complex way” (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 2012, p. 154).

Pedagogical documentation can facilitate communication with and within families. It can draw them into the classroom and can act as a springboard for conversation (Kline, 2008), bringing the exchange beyond the “hellos and how are you?” described in the Perlman and Fletcher study (2012). Reynolds and Duff (2016) found that documentation displays helped parents initiate conversations with their children about their learning explorations at the centre, acting as a provocation to ask more in-depth questions, and at times, leading to an extension of centre-based experiences at home. As well, documentation displays promoted dialogue among family members, “triggering conversations at home, particularly between the parent who had little contact and involvement with the early learning centre and with siblings” (Reynolds & Duff, 2016, p. 96).
Documentation offers parents the opportunity to consider the richness and diversity of their children’s experiences and to celebrate their often unnoticed achievements (Goldhaber & Smith, 1997). Malaguzzi declared that documentation introduces parents to a “quality of knowing that tangibly changes their expectations [where they] take a new and more inquisitive approach toward the whole school experience” (Malaguzzi, 1993, p. 64, as quoted in Katz & Chard, 1996, p. 4).

Children who attend child care for more than a few hours a week are there because both of their parents work or a single parent is employed, meaning that any time available for parent involvement is very limited (Zellman & Perlman, 2006). Compounding this is the fact that the primary caregiver for the child who is present at the centre at the morning drop off time will likely not be there at the evening pick up due to shift scheduling, meaning that the ECE who sees the parent at pick up time has not spent most of the day with that parent’s child. This limits the opportunity for meaningful dialogue between parent and educator regarding the child’s day. Because of these time and scheduling factors, making pedagogical documentation more accessible can help to engage busy parents in their child’s early learning experiences.

The Digital Generation

This is the first generation of adults who have always had computers in their lives (Ray, 2013). They are more likely to be connected to the internet at either work or home and are accustomed to having information come to them through digital means. Many parents today turn to social media and the internet to look for and create communities of like-minded souls. Teachers and ECEs are currently using this to their advantage through the development of photo and video sharing sites as well as interactive classroom blogs (Parnell & Bartlett, 2012). A recent study conducted in Australia highlighted the growing use of digital technology for observations, reporting, and parent communication, with 14 of the 17 centres (82%) involved in the study using commercially available software for communicating with parents and 96% of the 74 ECEs reporting that they owned a smartphone (Dwyer, Jones, & Rosas, 2019). Digital applications in the classroom enable educators to document children’s learning experiences in real time, sending information to parents directly as it happens. This tendency to turn to technology is being explored further by some child care centres to bring the advantages of pedagogical documentation to parents in ways that are meaningful and useful to them (C. A. Wien, personal communication, October 14, 2013).

Although the temptation is there to go completely digital with documentation, it would serve parents and programs well to ensure that documentation can also be viewed in person. There are certain advantages to encouraging parents to linger in the hallways or classrooms, viewing documentation displays. When parents linger, they have the opportunity to observe adult–child interactions, talk with educators, ask questions, meet their child’s playmates, and spend time with other parents (Brown-DuPaul, Keyes, & Segatti, 2001). Either way (virtually or in reality), pedagogical documentation is an effective means of inviting parents into the dynamic conversation that occurs when children’s learning becomes visible.
The Present Study

This design-based research study examines parent perceptions of co-constructed pedagogical documentation in early learning settings. Specifically, parents were asked whether they were familiar with and aware of pedagogical documentation, and, if they were aware of the documentation, how this co-constructed documentation contributed to their understanding of children’s developmental strengths, needs, and interests.

For the purposes of this study, *co-constructed documentation* was defined as documentation that was generated with children and for the children, with the children being considered the creators as well as the primary audience, allowing them to review, reflect on, and revisit their experiences. The co-construction of documentation between child and educator gives children voice and agency in describing or retelling their own play experiences. There is often an imbalance or asymmetry in the power dynamic between children and educators, with children experiencing challenges in having their opinions and desires recognized and respected. This is especially true for children with special needs (Åmot & Ytterhus, 2014). By actively involving children in the retelling and interpretation of their play experiences, this balance in power shifts, recognizing children’s right to participate and be heard by both educators and parents.

Design-based research is situated in authentic contexts with a focus on the testing of a significant intervention and is characterized by a collaborative partnership between researchers and practitioners (Anderson & Shattuck, 2012). Therefore, this methodology was determined to be appropriate for this qualitative study. Because design-based research is an iterative process, participants were able to continually advance their thinking and their practice as they reflected upon their relationships with documentation and with children throughout the research time period. This ongoing examination of practice resulted in a rich analysis by the participants of their experiences with co-constructed pedagogical documentation.

Methodology

To examine the factors associated with the co-construction of pedagogical documentation from a parent perspective, seven early childhood educators, located at three early learning settings (age group 3–5 year olds) in Nova Scotia were asked to co-construct pedagogical documentation with the children in their classrooms over a six-month period. Parent participants (parents whose children attended the three research sites) and ECE participants were asked to complete questionnaires during the study period. All seven ECE participants were interviewed regularly throughout the six-month research period. As well, seven parents from the parent participant group were selected to participate in two semi-structured interviews; one at the beginning of the study and one at the end (14 parent interviews in total).

Participants

All participants were selected using a combination of snowball and criterion-inclusion sampling. For the parent participants, the selection criteria required that they were parents/guardians of children (3–5 year olds) who regularly attended one of the
three research sites and that they were willing and available to participate in telephone interviews at the beginning and end of the six-month study. In total, 63 parents out of a possible 84 from the three research sites signed consent forms to be involved in this research study. Participation in the project was voluntary; and parents were informed, through an information letter, that their choice to participate or not would not influence their future relations with me as researcher, the director, and/or the staff members of the participating centre, or their role within the child care centre.

Of the 63 parents, 45 completed initial questionnaires, and 26 of these 45 completed final questionnaires. The initial questionnaire asked respondents to indicate whether they were willing to be contacted by me for a follow-up interview. Thirty-two respondents indicated a willingness to be contacted. I contacted respondents individually until seven participants agreed to be interviewed, ensuring that there was a relatively equal distribution of parents per classroom, meaning that at least one parent from each participant’s classroom was selected for the interview. The seven parents interviewed included two fathers and five mothers. Not all the parent participants had children who participated directly in the co-construction process during the course of the six-month study (because not all children in each of the sites created documentation with the ECE participants during the study). Parents indicated that they had varying levels of understanding and awareness of pedagogical documentation, although documentation was present at each of the research sites.

Procedure

The purpose behind this research study was not to develop a specific protocol for co-constructed pedagogical documentation. Because of this, there was no prescribed process for participants to follow and no specific training provided to participants on how to co-construct documentation. The ECE participants—who had confirmed that their usual method of constructing documentation was educator-led and designed for an adult audience of parents, educators, and administrators—were challenged to rethink their practice and were given the simple directions to create documentation with the meaningful involvement of children. Each site was also presented with a book as a gift for participating. The book, entitled Documenting Children’s Meaning: Engaging in Design and Creativity with Children and Families (Avery, Callaghan, & Wien, 2016), was given to the director at each site for use by all staff members at the centre. This book served as a provocation as well as a resource for participants and their colleagues; however, participants were not required to read it, nor were they asked about it during the research study period.

Each of the ECE participants was familiar with the process of documentation, although there were no provincial regulations requiring centres to include documentation in their programs. Their understanding of documentation was gained through their post-secondary ECE training, in-service training, or through their own direct experiences creating documentation either with colleagues or own their own.

The ECE participants were asked to continue to photograph children’s activities as they had in the past; but instead of interpreting the children’s experiences directly, they were asked to sit and discuss the photos with the children and then, adult and child
together, to document the experience from the child’s point of view. The ECE participants were provided with suggested reflective dialogue prompts to assist in their conversations with the children. An example of a prompt would be, “What do you want others to know about this photo/your work/this experience?”

This lack of a prescribed process was deliberate. Although I have been involved in the field for almost 30 years, I have not participated directly in the practice of co-constructed documentation, and I have not witnessed it in practice. My questions about the process were authentic; I did not hold any preconceived ideas about how the process would work. If I were to prescribe a particular process for the participants to follow, it would be one that was not informed by experience and would likely not take into consideration the realities and nuances of everyday practice. As a result, the participants and I learned together about the various supports, obstacles, influences, outcomes, challenges, and surprises that occurred when children and educators co-constructed reflections and documentations about specific events during the six-month period of study. This non-prescriptive approach is supported by educators in the field, who emphasize the open-ended quality of co-construction with children. Pelo, as quoted in Quinn and Rodriguez (2019) stated that

there is no right way to approach any work of co-construction with children, but it is, nevertheless, a skill that can be honed with practice. Each time we enter the “thicket” of collaboration with children—each time we engage in our reflective practice in order to decide what questions to ask, what structure to provide, and what resources to offer—we get a little better at navigating this thicket. (p. 22)

Data Collection Tools

Parents completed two questionnaires—one at the beginning of the study and one at the end. The initial questionnaire contained a combination of open and closed questions as well as questions that provided demographic and contextual information such as age of child, how long the child had attended the centre, and who does the drop-off and pick up of the child at the centre. The majority of the questions used a Likert-type five-category scale (strongly agree to strongly disagree), along with some multiple choice questions and questions with yes-or-no responses. The yes–no questions asked the parents to elaborate on why they answered either yes or no, where appropriate.

The topics covered in the initial questionnaire included the parents’ understanding and awareness of their child’s play activities and how documentation supports or strengthens this understanding. The questions asked for information on parental engagement in the child care settings as well as engagement with the early childhood educators. Parents were provided with the opportunity to add their own comments at the end of the questionnaire. The final questionnaire was administered at the end of the study period. This questionnaire began with some general demographic questions, similar to the first questionnaire. The remainder of the questions focused on documentation, asking whether the parents noticed new documentation over the past six months and how this documentation influenced their understanding of their child’s play activities. As with the initial questionnaire, parents were provided with space at the end of the questionnaire to add their own comments. A sample of an open question in the questionnaire would be,
“Please explain how documentation is useful to you as a parent, or, if you think it is not useful, please explain why.” An example of a multiple choice question in the parent questionnaire would be, “I think the best place to post documentation of children’s activities so that I will notice it and be able to look at it is: (a) hallway; (b) cubby area; (c) in the classroom; (d) in the entry-way; (e) on Facebook page or website; (f) other (please specify).”

In addition to the questionnaires, seven parents participated in semi-structured telephone interviews at the beginning and end of the study. The initial interview focused on parents’ prior experiences with documentation as well as perceptions related to their child’s favourite activities; their thoughts on how their child learned or benefited from their play; and how they learn about their child’s day. The final interview focused on their understanding and awareness of documentation, their perceived value of this type of documentation process, obstacles or challenges to engaging in and accessing documentation from a parent’s perspective, and an opportunity to talk further about any questions or comments about the study and the topics being discussed.

ECEs in the study also participated in individual semi-structured interviews throughout the six-month study period, at monthly intervals. As well, the ECE participants completed three questionnaires—one at the beginning of the study, one at the midpoint, and one at the end of the study period.

The ECE participants’ semi-structured interviews contained questions that were pertinent to what educators were experiencing with respect to the co-construction of documentation at various points throughout the research period, i.e., the specific questions varied from one interview to the next. The semi-structured interview format allowed for and required flexibility for me, as interviewer, creating opportunities to ask follow-up questions and to build on the participant’s responses, all of which yielded rich data filled with reflection, insight, and specific relevant examples.

The ECE questionnaires contained a combination of open and closed questions based on the broad categories related to the research questions (co-constructed pedagogical documentation, reflection, intentionality, children’s interests, metacognition, parental engagement and understanding). The closed questions consisted mainly of Likert scale-type questions, written with either five or seven category response choices. The open-ended questions asked respondents to elaborate on their responses by expressing their thoughts, opinions, and experiences relating to the focused areas of research included on the questionnaire. Sample open-ended questions included, “How have you involved children in the construction or creation of pedagogical documentation?”; “How are parents informed about activities that are happening in your playroom?”; “How are children’s ideas and interests incorporated into the planning process?”

**Data Collection Procedure**

At the beginning of the study and during the last (sixth) month of the study, parent questionnaires were distributed and collected, and semi-structured telephone interviews were conducted with parents at a time when parents had indicated that they were available for the interview. Parent interviews lasted between 30 minutes and 45 minutes.
The focus of these interviews was to determine whether parents’ awareness and understanding of pedagogical documentation had changed over time. As well, parents were provided with the opportunity (with both the questionnaires and the interviews) to contribute their own observations, comments, and suggestions related to documentation.

The semi-structured interviews with ECE participants were held at their work place throughout the study, at a time that was convenient for them. Interviews lasted between 35 and 60 minutes. During these individual interviews, the ECE participant would share copies of co-constructed documentation and discuss their experiences and thoughts on the co-construction process. As well, ECE participants completed three questionnaires during the study period, which were collected by me during my site visits.

All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Interview participants were provided with the opportunity to review these transcriptions for both accuracy and clarity. All participants were provided with the opportunity to member-check or validate the accuracy of their transcribed interviews; and all those who were contacted affirmed that the transcriptions, which formed the basis of the data collected, were accurate reflections of the conversations.

Analysis

A thematic analysis of the data collected over a six-month period led to a distillation of three major themes that provided a framework to identify the factors associated with the parents’ perspectives on co-construction of pedagogical documentation in early learning settings. “Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). Once transcribed, the data from all interviews and questionnaires were imported into a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis program (MAXQDA 12) to support the coding process. Once I read and re-read the transcripts and the data from the questionnaires and identified a set of initial codes, the MAXQDA software was used to organize the data as a next step in the coding process. The coding was an iterative and recursive process, with various clusters being identified and coding groups being defined and then, at times, discarded, based on a continuing process of comparison and analysis of data. My close relationship with the data allowed me to uncover links between and among the information provided by the participants.

Results

The three themes of Value and Validation, Reflection and Relationships, and Processes and Practicalities resulted from the specific patterns and themes that were identified through careful examination and subsequent coding of the data collected.

Value and Validation

During the initial interviews and from their comments in the questionnaires, each of the parent participants stated that they saw value in the creation and display of pedagogical documentation in early learning settings. Parents spoke of the practical value of documentation in terms of how visual displays helped them remember or understand
an event better than if the ECE simply told them about the event. Each of the parents spoke of how little they find out about what happens during the day from their children and, consequently, how visual displays of their children’s activities help them to fill in these gaps.

Two parents went further in describing the value of pedagogical documentation. One parent, a father of a four-year-old child who has been diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), talked about how photographic evidence of his child’s activities during the day helped to broaden his overall expectations of his child’s capabilities which, although the educator might have told him about verbally, he had difficulty imagining until he saw it for himself via documentation. The story he recounts is one in which his child found a worm in the outdoor play area, picked it up, and then showed it to the other children:

There was a note in the book but there was also a picture of him handling a worm—no kidding! Don’t get me wrong, I’m not doubting the teacher but it’s a visual and, to me, that is a really big deal—in terms of interaction, in terms of communication, in terms of sharing, in terms of many, many things. (Parent, initial parent interview)

A second parent focused on the sharing of memories and the storytelling that can emerge when parents and children view documentation together. He felt that it was important to encourage this type of recalling and revisiting, creating what he described as “a shared past” between parent and child, providing them with something tangible to return to:

All this documentation, too, is evidence of a story that may jog their memory or re-form, or re-cement an idea because that’s how the memories are formed and that’s how learning is accomplished through revisiting, repeating, and re-digesting it in a different format. (Parent, initial parent interview)

This parent’s analysis of the value of documentation is consistent with research examining conversations between parents and children about the day’s events. According to Carr (2011), research on mothers reminiscing with their young children has “highlighted that revisiting or reviewing event stories can contribute to the children’s meaning making and autobiography” (p. 259). Research on the relationship between maternal discourse and children’s ability to comprehend the feelings of others (theory of mind) has indicated that when mothers and children reflect on children’s perceptions of events, mothers can enhance children’s understanding by providing different perspectives and information about the mental states, feelings, thoughts, and motives of others (Ontai & Thompson, 2008). In a later meta-analysis examining the relation between parents’ mental-state talk and children’s social understanding, Tompkins, Benigno, Kiger Lee, & Wright (2018) found that when parents elaborate on pictures and photos when looking at them with their child, they may be encouraging the child to reason about abstract ideas such as mental states that are not necessarily included in the actual photo or picture.

Each of the seven parents interviewed spoke of how documentation assisted them in discovering their children’s interests outside of the home, or as one parent described it, “The mystery that is our children’s lives.” They spoke of the context that documentation brings to their children’s comments, how it validates the learning that happens in play-based environments, and how pedagogical documentation provides them with ideas on
how to prompt discussions with their children. As well, parents stated that the documentation gave them some insight into the children’s circle of friends.

**Reflection and Relationships**

**Reflection.** As part of this research study, parents were asked to reflect on their understanding and experiences with pedagogical documentation. Of the 45 parents who responded to the initial parent questionnaire, 21 (47%) indicated that they were aware of documentation displays that included their own child at the centre over the past month, and 24 (53%) indicated that they did not notice any documentation displays including their child in this same time period. Documentation displays were defined as “pictures or stories about a particular adventure/exploration/activity that your child was involved in at the centre over the past month.” Five of the seven parents interviewed said that they were aware of documentation; however, only three mentioned that their child was featured in any of the documentation displays. Parents were mostly aware of documentation that was contained in portfolios or “binders” rather than displays. They spoke of the lack of time that they have during pick-up and drop-off to look at displays, and more than one parent talked about how, because the displays were so seldom changed, they became more like “wall paper” and therefore were not noticed.

Documentation displays are designed, in general, to provide insight to their audience on what children are doing and learning when they engage in various play activities. With this in mind, parents were asked to describe their current understanding of what their child learns through play; and then, in the final interview and questionnaire, they were asked again about their understanding of play-based learning. In terms of understanding what their child learned through play, 40 of the 45 initial questionnaire respondents (89%) agreed or strongly agreed that they understand how their child learns through play, although, 32 respondents (71%) stated in a follow-up question that they would like to have a greater understanding of how their child learns through play. The seven parent participants interviewed for the study spoke at length of the benefits of a play-based program for their child, citing many examples of what their child is learning including communication skills, patience, learning how to make mistakes, creativity, imagination, problem-solving, independence, and playing well with others. Several parents spoke of the important social aspects of play, especially when it comes to children who do not have siblings or whose siblings are much younger:

He is the only child, and no matter how much my wife and I try, we will never behave like a three-year-old, let alone 12 three-year olds, so that environmental richness is something that is hard to provide at home. (Parent, initial parent interview)

At the conclusion of the study, 19 of the 26 parent respondents (73%) to the final questionnaire said that they had noticed documentation that featured their child over the past six months (study period). When asked whether the documentation displays increased their understanding of what their child learns through play, 20 of the 26 respondents (77%) answered in the affirmative. Fourteen respondents (54%) said that they were aware of their child being involved in the co-construction of documentation, and 18 respondents (69%) noticed an increase in the number of photo displays (documentation) at the child care centre during the study period. One of the parents
remarked that she “uses the activities and ideas demonstrated in the documentation to have conversations with my son. It seems to pique his interest and helps him to recall past events. He loves to discuss his ‘work’ at school” (Parent comment, final parent questionnaire). Another parent stated, “It gives me a view to their day and how they are interacting with others and what they are learning. I’m able to carry on discussions and experiences outside of daycare” (Parent comment, final parent questionnaire). Four of the seven parents interviewed stated that they noticed a difference in the amount of documentation at the centre. The other three said that they had not noticed documentation over the six-month study period but mentioned that this might be because of the rush that they were in at the end of the day. One parent who did not notice additional documentation did state, however, that her child was telling her more about what happened during the “run of the day,” although she wasn’t sure if this was a result of the co-constructed documentation process or if it was more a function of her child’s development over the six-month period. Because the study ended in June and the weather was warmer than when the study began, parents indicated that the children were generally outside when they were picked up and, therefore, the parents went directly to the outdoor area to collect their child and their belongings. This means that if a new documentation display were inside the centre, the parents would not necessarily have seen it.

**Relationships.** Mitchell, Haggerty, Hampton, & Pairman (2006) described the importance of parent–teacher relationships by asserting that “constructive working relationships between teachers and parents/whānau can enhance adults’ knowledge and understanding of children and children’s learning opportunities, and so contribute to children’s learning and wellbeing at home and in the ECE setting” (p. 3). It appears that these working relationships between parents and educators are influenced, in part, by the co-construction of pedagogical documentation. At the onset of the study, ECE participants described how they shared information with parents about the program and about their child’s day. They indicated that they posted programming plans and notes for parents in the hallways and on the front door; and they talked with them briefly at pick-up time, although all participants (parents and ECEs) remarked on how busy drop-off and pick-up times can be. The ECE participants mentioned curriculum nights (once or twice per year) as times when parents found out about programming, and all ECE participants stated that parents are always welcome to drop by the program and that they are encouraged to contribute to the program in whatever way they can. Educators at two of the three research sites mentioned a parent Facebook page as another way that parents can see what happens at the centre.

ECE participants discussed how the co-construction process was strengthening the relationships between parents and educators and between parents and the program. Strong relationships between parents and educators have been shown to result in better outcomes for children, nurturing both a sense of pride and a sense of well-being (Reynolds & Duff, 2016). This sense of pride was evident as one ECE participant described how children began to draw their parents’ attention to the displays of co-constructed documentation.

The children involved in the documentation would show their parents photos they were in and talk to them about it. This helped to involve parents more in their child’s learning. Some parents and children were interested in taking the documentation home so they could
discuss it more, because there is often not enough time at the end of a busy day to really look at the documentation pieces. (ECE, third ECE interview)

Another educator confirmed that parents were noticing the new documentation and noted how this documentation led to new conversations with the parents about similarities between what is being seen in the documentation and what is being seen at home. She described the significance of one of these connections:

They [parents] have noticed some of the documentation in the playroom with their children. For example, the building that “N” has done. We’re noticing that he likes to build large and he likes to take risks. So, with that, in the conversation with his parents, we were able to have that discussion and [we found out that] this is what they’re seeing at home and this is what he’s doing all the time here. So, this allowed me to trust him, as a risk taker, a little bit more. (ECE, fourth ECE interview)

This same ECE described how one piece of documentation (Figure 1), which shows a four-year-old girl playing with playdough, is viewed often by both the parents and that child.

*Figure 1. Playing with Playdough: Co-constructed Pedagogical Documentation*
She remarked on how the parents read this documentation to their child each time they see it. She described how children are looking to other children’s photos and documentation for ideas “to do something” (ECE, fourth ECE interview). Another ECE underscored the value of co-constructed pedagogical documentation as being a way to engage with parents. “Children are the link to parents, not educators, and so this approach involves parents more in their child’s learning” (ECE, fifth ECE interview).

Although the ECE participants appeared unanimous in their beliefs that co-constructed documentation supports the engagement of parents, there were some parents who indicated that they rarely saw examples of documentation that featured their child; and most parents stated that they had a limited amount of time at pick-up and drop-off to view documentation or to notice whether new documentation had been posted. One ECE participant expressed that it had been frustrating when parents showed dismay over not seeing their own child represented in the documentation.

The lack of representation of individual children in the classroom documentation can be a source of tension in the relationships between parents and educators. ECEs often struggle with time constraints imposed by working in a busy play environment with little time available to construct documentation that features each child in the room, and parents understandably struggle when they do not see their child’s play experiences included in the classroom documentation.

**Processes and Practicalities**

Choosing how and where to display documentation influences who sees it and how it is used. Parents commented that they are not always sure where to look for displays or whether a new display has been posted:

> It doesn’t always jump out at you, and if you don’t go in the room and see that there is a new display on the wall—you might just happen upon it two weeks later, and you’re not sure if it was there for three months or just put up yesterday. (Parent, final parent interview)

ECE participants spoke of how they tried displays in various places, including the children’s bathroom or in the hall leading to the bathroom. “It’s on the child’s level—it’s where they wait for their bathroom turn so it gives them something to reflect on or interact with or just look at” (ECE, fifth ECE interview). One ECE noticed that when she moved a documentation display, it would renew interest in the children, who would revisit the display and talk about it with their parents and friends. All participants agreed that the documentation needs to be posted in a conspicuous place for both children and parents, which was generally the hallway or close to the children’s cubbies and, interestingly, in the bathroom, where parents would take their children before they left the centre at the end of the day.

Parent participants had concrete and practical suggestions related to their ability to access documentation. As mentioned earlier, parents described drop-off and pick-up times as being busy and chaotic, with not much time to notice or examine documentation displays. Several parents, however, suggested that if they knew there was a new display posted, they would make an effort to arrive a few minutes earlier to see the display. They felt that a well-timed email or a Facebook post alerting parents to the presence of a new
display would make a difference. Another parent remarked that the co-constructed pedagogical documentation could be presented and discussed at the regular parent–teacher meetings. Two other parents suggested that the documentation be completed in a format that is shareable with parents electronically, so that they could take their time to view it while at home.

**Discussion**

There are many ways to build relationships between families and educators in early learning settings and, according to the data collected in this research study, the parents at all three research sites spoke passionately about their positive relationships with the educators. This indicates that educators at the three research sites have demonstrated an ability to build positive relationships with parents and families prior to their involvement in the study. An overwhelming majority of parents stated that they have a strong understanding of how their child learns through play, backed up by many examples from the interviews and questionnaires that indicate this understanding. Because most parent participants noted that this understanding had increased by the end of the study, the evidence suggests that the co-construction of pedagogical documentation influenced this awareness. The main factor that appears to influence this increased awareness is how the co-constructed documentation acts as a catalyst for discussion between educators and parents as well as between parents and children.

At the end of the six-month study period, some parents noted a difference in the amount and type of documentation being displayed, while others either did not have the time to notice when new documentation was displayed or were not aware of these new displays. Parents who were able to see the displays expressed their enjoyment at sharing documentation with their children and looked forward to new documentation being produced. However, as one of the educators indicated, parents can be disappointed when they do not see their child represented in the documentation displays. Managing expectations for parents is key. As part of a parent orientation session, the process of documentation can be described, acknowledging that it is not possible or practical to feature all of the children in the room within a short time frame, but assuring parents that all children will be featured at some point throughout the year. Educators must take note of this as well, making an effort to represent all children in the documentation displays within a specified time frame.

Recognizing that parents are enthusiastic consumers of co-constructed documentation and that this documentation helps them to better understand how their child learns through play-based learning places an emphasis on the need to make this documentation more accessible to parents. Various suggestions were made by parents about how this can be done, but the simplest message to educators from parents was to just let them know when new documentation was being displayed and they would make the time to see it.

Parental involvement in the co-construction process during the research study period was primarily relegated to that of consumer of the documentation, rather than contributor. During the study, the ECE participants did not directly incorporate the voice of parents in their documentation, although they did share parents’ comments with me, as researcher,
during our monthly interview sessions. As educators and parents become more familiar with the co-construction process, and depending on parents’ availability to be involved, educators could consider offering the possibility for parents to participate in the co-construction process directly, for example, creating a space and a place for parents to contribute to the documentation through their comments, their photographs, or their involvement in the program. This is similar to the learning story format described by Carr and Lee (2012) in which comments from parents and other family members are included in children’s portfolios, with parents and family members, at times, contributing photographs or even learning stories that they have constructed at home. This has the potential to provide educators and families with even more opportunities to share insights with each other on children’s activities at home and at the early learning setting, which, in turn, could deepen trust and appreciation for the perspectives that each bring to the learning environment.

In addition to enhancing the ECEC experience itself as noted above, co-constructed documentation has the potential to facilitate children’s and families’ transition from ECEC to school. This transition between an early learning environment and a formal school environment is an important development milestone for children with disabilities as well as for their typically developing peers. According to Harper (2016), “nearly half of typically developing children experience difficulty with the transition to school in the absence of any significant risk factors and children with disabilities are at even greater risk for successful transition” (p. 654).

For children who are identified as being vulnerable or as having complex needs, research has provided evidence that “contemporary ECE, with trained early childhood educators, strong curriculum frameworks, delivered through play-based pedagogy, optimizes child development and offers protection against special educational needs” (Philpott, Young, Maich, Penney, & Butler, 2019, p. 13). The process of co-constructing pedagogical documentation can support educators in their effort to be reflective in their practice and in their wish to involve both children and their parents in discussions regarding the child’s play-based experiences. Syslová (2019) linked reflective practice and quality of care in a study that demonstrated that educators whose performance showed high quality also showed a high level of reflection and, conversely, that educators who performed poorly showed very little reflection in their practice. Reflection and intentionality in practice leads to the type of care that can buffer the need for later learning supports. Åmot and Ytterhus (2014) discussed how children with disabilities or special needs ordinarily have limited opportunities to participate in making decisions pertaining to their activities and routines. Paananen and Lipponen (2018) showed that, in reference to children with exceptionalities, “pedagogical documentation has a dual role in building a more participatory and equal ECE (setting)” (p. 85). Therefore, in early childhood classrooms where children have a voice in identifying their own ideas and experiences and then share this through the documentation process with educators and parents, the capability and curiosity of the children is recognized and supported, setting the tone for future educational experiences for the child and the parent.

Therefore, educators’ commitment to the co-construction process and parents’ understanding and involvement with pedagogical documentation in an early learning context has the potential to aid in the successful transition of children from early learning
settings into school settings. As consumers of documentation, parents are able to see authentic examples of their child’s unique strengths, personalities, and learning experiences in play-based environments. This can provide them not only with an understanding of how their child learns but also with the vocabulary to share this understanding with others, including the child’s future teachers within in the school system. The bond that is formed between early childhood educator and parent, using documentation as a conduit for discussion about the child’s development and learning, helps to create a template for parent–teacher relationships that can continue into the formal school years. Finally, the documentation itself can be provided to parents, who can, in turn, share it with their child’s future teachers to provide a fulsome picture of the child’s strengths and dispositions for learning and discovery.

Limitations

One possible limitation to this study was the emphasis on parents of one specific age group of children, that is, children ages 3–5, and on one type of early learning setting—a regulated child care centre. Future research could be done with parents of either younger or older age groups in inclusive programs to see whether the research findings hold true in situations involving children of various ages, developmental levels, and learning support needs. As well, research could be done in other types of early learning settings, for example, kindergarten classrooms, regulated family child care homes or family resource centres to see if the possible benefits of co-construction of pedagogical documentation can be applied to other early learning settings.

Conclusion

To engage in co-construction requires an openness to wonder and a curiosity about and appreciation for children’s perspectives. It demands an appreciation of the journey with its many twists and turns. It is about being comfortable with a process in which the adult is not in complete control. It is about sharing the power. It requires patience, confidence, and a willingness to showcase attempts at the process, recognizing that the product may not turn out as expected. It requires a respect for a child’s right to participate and a child’s right to not participate, recognizing that children express dissent in a myriad of ways. “Just like adults, children have a right to privacy. Expressing dissent may well be an exercise of that right to privacy” (Dockett, Einarsdóttir, & Perry, 2012, p. 253). It means looking for small opportunities and “ordinary moments” (Tarr, 2010), not only to document but also to discuss and reflect upon. These moments create a climate in which children recognize that their voices have power—they are “voices of knowing” (Hohti & Karlsson, 2014).

This attitude extends toward parents and families as well. Educators must recognize and appreciate parents’ desire to know and their limitations in asking. Parents are busy, operating under tight time schedules that leave little room for chatting in the hallway (Perlman & Fletcher, 2012). This is especially true for parents who have a child with a disability. Parents have expressed, however, their need and appreciation for the small moments in their child’s everyday life away from them in the “mystery that is our child’s lives” (Parent, initial interview). There is a need for an organized and consistent way to
inform parents and families of newly constructed documentation displays and a commitment to provide each child with an opportunity, at some point, to participate in authentic discussions about their work as part of the co-construction process.

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