Please cite the Published Version

Flewitt, Rosie and Cowan, Kate (2021) The Power of Parent Observations. Tapestry.

Publisher: The Foundation Stage Forum Ltd

Version: Published Version

Downloaded from: https://e-space.mmu.ac.uk/630429/

Usage rights: © In Copyright

Additional Information: This is an article which appears in Tapestry, published by The Foundation Stage Forum Ltd. It can be freely accessed using the Official URL.

The Power of Parent Observations

by Kate Cowan and Rosie Flewitt

Parents and carers play a crucial role in supporting their young children's learning and development, but do they realise how important their insights are and how much early years settings value them?

In research funded by the **Froebel Trust,** we found that most parents and carers underestimated how important it is for them to share their knowledge about their children with educators and were reluctant to add their own thoughts and observations to children's early education 'learning journeys'.

In our study we looked at observation and documentation practices in three different early education settings in London – an early years unit in a primary school, a children's centre, and a private nursery. Two of the settings used paper-based learning journeys to document their observations of young children and one used the digital documentation system *Tapestry*. We interviewed educators and parents/carers in the three settings, observed classroom practice and looked through children's learning journeys with the children themselves. Our main aim was to understand what documentation systems were being used in each setting and whether they were working well for educators, parents/carers and children.

We found that early years settings have different approaches to documenting children's learning, reflecting each setting's ethos. Some systems were of greater use to educators than parents and children, whilst some found a better balance for all.

Across the settings we found that parents and carers:

- appreciated the fact that educators documented their child's learning
- enjoyed the insights their child's documentation gave into their development and how they spent their time in the setting
- found documentation useful for "bridging the gap" between home and settings and for helping to keep them "in the loop"
- valued their child's documentation as a future keepsake of their early years.

As one parent said, "I like everything I see in the book. I feel happy to know what he has been doing in school … and when the book is given to the parents at the end of the year, it makes joy for the whole family".

However, most parents and carers did not add to their child's documentation themselves. This was the case for both paper-based learning journeys, which were mainly stored in the classrooms, and for digital documentation that could be accessed at any time and added to from home.

In some cases, parents and carers had not been explicitly invited to add to their child's documentation and some did not realise they were allowed to. For instance, one parent said she had "never been asked to add comments or pictures to the book. I guess that's because the book is meant to tell us about what the child is doing in school, not in any other place!"

In one setting, parents and carers were actively encouraged to add their own comments and observations, and were asked to support children to access and add to them too. One paper-based learning journey included the following message to families:

This is your child's Memory Book. It belongs to them and is meant as a way of collecting thoughts and ideas that are important to them … If there is an experience, achievement or object that they would like to include from home, please support them to do this. This should prove a powerful link between home and school … and a valuable way of ensuring children's voices are heard when adults are planning and observing children.

Despite this encouragement, the documentation still mostly consisted of material added by the children and educators. Several parents said they did not know they could add to the books, did not have time when dropping off and picking up their child, or were unsure what they might say.

Although the *Tapestry* software is designed to make it easy for parents and carers to add observations, staff in the setting that used this system said only a few parents did so. One parent we spoke to (mistakenly) worried that her comments might be visible to all other parents and that this "would be irritating for them". Staff wondered if some parents might fear being seen as "showing off" if they posted information about their child's development. Concerns such as these

https://www.tapestry.info/2021/11/16/the-power-of-parent-observations.html

suggest that educators need to actively encourage parents to contribute to documentation, whether in paper or digital formats, explaining the confidentiality of digital systems, offering suggestions about what to add and reassuring them that parent/carer voices matter.

Parents and carers have unique knowledge about children, and their insights can be invaluable for educators. Sometimes, only a parent knows what matters to their child and why. For example, three-year-old Aran attended a nursery unit in a primary school where documentation took the form of a 'Special Book' with photographs of children's learning and short comments written by staff. At home, Aran spoke Kurdish and English with his family, but his educators found he was "extremely quiet" in their setting. When Aran shared his 'Special Book' with us, he was very quiet but studied the pages intently. When he came across a photograph of himself wearing a knitted Spiderman hat, he pointed and spoke to us for the first time: "That hat is mine". We could see that the hat was significant for Aran, but we did not know why, and he did not volunteer any more information. Later that day, we asked his mother about it, and she explained that she had knitted the hat for Aran herself after learning to knit at a parent workshop organised by the school. The documentation supported Aran to share something of importance with the setting, but it required input from Aran and his mother to help this be fully understood. The example of the Spiderman hat highlights that documentation is an important tool for recording things that are seemingly small but highly significant in children's lives, and that parent and child perspectives are often vital puzzle-pieces in understanding children's lives beyond the classroom.

Parent and carer contributions to children's documentation can help educators to bring children's home lives into the setting and help educators to teach in meaningful ways. For example, staff in one setting had noticed children's interest in jumping, so they decided to explore this as a topic for enquiry-based learning. They provided children with equipment to try out jumping from different heights, invited them to draw their jumping and looked closely at ways animals jump. The staff shared documentation of the project through the *Tapestry* system and invited parents/carers to contribute. One parent shared a video of their child jumping on a trampoline at home, recorded in slow motion. The educators watched this video back with children in the setting, prompting close attention and reflection on the movement. This inspired the educators and children to experiment with photographing and videoing children jumping in the setting.

Educators used long-exposure camera settings and glow sticks to make the children's movement visible in various ways, and together the educators and children extended their shared jumping enquiry. This small example shows how parental observations can add to children's learning in the setting and vice versa, forming valuable connections between children's experiences at home and in early education.

Digital documentation systems in particular offer rich potential for parents/carers and educators to share observations remotely and to add examples in forms beyond words or 'snapshot' photographs, including moving image and sound. When looking at documentation with children themselves, we found children were particularly interested in the photographs and video clips that had been added. They enjoyed seeing themselves and their friends and talking about their memories of what they had been doing. Since most young children do not yet read print independently, video and photographs offer important ways to make documentation accessible to children themselves. However, our research found that digital documentation tended to be shared mainly between adults (educators and parents/carers) and risked missing out the child's voice, unlike the paper-based learning journeys that were more often available for children to look through and add to independently. After we finished this study, we reported our findings to *Tapestry* who have since added a new **child login feature** that makes it easier for children to access and add to their documentation.

Documentation is clearly most powerful when the voices of educators, parents/carers and children are all included, offering a variety of perspectives on children's worlds and experiences. This helps educators to plan teaching and learning activities that are deeply meaningful for children. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, settings have found ways to stay connected with families, often working in partnership with them during periods of homeschooling and remote teaching. During this challenging time, many parents and carers have taken a more active role in supporting their children's learning than ever before, including sharing experiences from home with their child's educators. This increase in parental engagement could be the starting point for encouraging ongoing contributions to children's documentation, helping parents and carers understand that their insights matter, and supporting collaborative child-centred practice throughout the pandemic and beyond.

Further Links

The project 'Valuing Young Children's Signs of Learning: Observation and Digital Documentation of Play in Early Years Classrooms' was carried out by Dr Kate Cowan and Professor Rosie Flewitt with funding from The Froebel Trust.

- **Research Summary**.
- **Full Research Report**.

Guidance for Practitioners on Digital Documentation.

'Digital Documentation: Time to Think' – Nursery World Article.

'Digital Documentation in Early Years Education: Tactile Losses and Gains' – InTouch Blog Post.

Further projects by Kate Cowan

- **A National Observatory of Children's Play Experiences during COVID-19.**
- **Playing the Archive.**
- **Valuing Young Children's Signs of Learning.**

Follow the authors

Find Kate Cowan on Twitter **@KateCowan** and her **UCL profile**.

Find Rosie Flewitt on her **MMU profile**.

Kate Cowan and Rosie Flewitt

Dr. Kate Cowan is a Lecturer at University of Sheffield and former Senior Research Fellow at UCL Institute of Education. With a background in early years teaching, Kate researches children's play and communication from a multimodal perspective. Kate lectures on several education courses and has written for early years teachers, students and the general public in addition to academic books and papers. Rosie Flewitt is Professor of Early Childhood Communication in the Education and Social Research Institute at Manchester Metropolitan University, and former Co-Director of the Helen Hamlyn Centre for Pedagogy, UCL Institute of Education. Rosie specialises in young children's multimodal communication in a digital era.