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Transforming the Ordinary into the Extraordinary: The Role of Documentation in Early Learning Settings*

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ABSTRACT: Early childhood experiences are composed of countless "ordinary moments" that encapsulate a child's unique ways of thinking and interacting with the world. These moments, though seemingly small, hold profound potential for fostering deeper understanding and meaningful dialogue about children's learning processes. Documentation, as a reflective practice, elevates these moments, making children's learning visible and enabling a child-centered and culturally responsive approach to early education. This paper reviews the significance of ordinary moments and their transformation through documentation. It explores the definitions, benefits, and implementation strategies of both concepts and discusses how documentation can turn ordinary moments into extraordinary insights. Practical implications are provided to guide educators in leveraging these strategies to enhance early learning environments.

Keywords: *early childhood education, documentation, pedagogy, ordinary moments*

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Introduction

A child's experience in the early learning setting is a series of 'ordinary moments' that occur each day. Early childhood environments are filled with ordinary moments, such as playing with materials, eating a snack, greeting a friend, and walking down the hall. These experiences may seem routine, but they represent meaningful instances where children engage with their surroundings, express curiosity, and form relationships. The ordinary moment, while small, encapsulates a child's way of thinking (Forman et al., 2001). The documentation of these moments through various techniques opens possibilities for

dialogue and reflection on children's learning (Alaçam & Olgan, 2021) and can make these 'ordinary' moments extraordinary by revealing the depth, creativity, and intentionality behind a child's actions. Ordinary moments are important because they allow for a deeper understanding of children's lives and thinking processes, and can allow for meaningful conversations with children (Forman et al., 2001).

On the other hand, the notion of documentation is important as documenting children's experiences promotes a child-centered and culturally responsive approach to early learning and makes children's learning visible (Rintakorpi, 2016). Together, these topics are significant because ordinary moments constitute the present moment in a child's story and documentation opens the doors for dialogue and reflection on these experiences (Seitz, 2008). In this paper, we will provide a review on the roles and implementation of ordinary moments and documentation in the early learning setting. We will first define ordinary moments, review the benefits of appreciating ordinary moments, and describe how ordinary moments can be turned extraordinary. Then, we will describe what documentation is, followed by the benefits of documentation and how it may be implemented. Finally, we will describe how ordinary moments can be turned extraordinary through documentation, and implications for practice to consider.

Ordinary Moments

Ordinary moments are the experiences that occur on a day-to-day basis that are grounded in children's genuine actions and initiatives. While a single ordinary moment appears small, these moments collectively form the fabric of a child's everyday life and reveal the way children think, feel, and engage with the world around them (Forman et al., 2001). Children's daily lives are lived through stories and moments, and the recognition of these moments allows us to better understand children's unique interests and capabilities (Du et al., 2016). Specifically, from a learning theory perspective, ordinary moments show how children construct knowledge and apply that knowledge to other settings (Forman et al., 2001). As it can be easy to get caught up in pedagogical practices and routines in the early learning environment, which can make ways of acting and responding less thoughtful, focusing attention on ordinary moments allows for presence in the current moment and an increased understanding of children's learning processes (Berger, 2015). This value on the ordinary allows for joy, reflection, and dialogue to emerge from authentic, daily moments, rather than only focusing on more formal or performative events, such as scheduled presentations or milestone celebrations (Karjalainen et al., 2019). As a whole, the recognition of ordinary moments is the appreciation of a child in that moment (Forman et al., 2001).

However, recognizing and appreciating ordinary moments also requires specific skills and dispositions from early childhood educators (Allen, 2015). This involves being attuned to the subtleties of children's actions and interactions, maintaining an open and curious mindset, and engaging in intentional observation and active listening (Davies, 2014). Educators must be able to pause and reflect, setting aside predetermined outcomes to truly see the significance of what is happening in the moment (Mills, 2020). Moreover, creating a culture in early learning environments that values these small, yet profound events is supported by professional development, reflective supervision, and time for collaborative dialogues within teaching teams (Roberts & Pruitt, 2008)

The recognition of ordinary moments can be beneficial in numerous ways. First, going deeper into an ordinary moment allows for a broader understanding of children's learning experiences and new perspectives on how children are thinking (Forman et al., 2001). This can support the image of a child as someone who is strong and competent – not in the sense of independence alone, but as capable of complex thought, meaningful interaction, and intentional action. This image is created by educators and caregivers to guide respectful and responsive pedagogical approaches, and it is meaningful because it challenges deficit-based views of children as passive or incomplete.

Second, valuing the ordinary can give educators the confidence to let stories unfold and the time to slow down and experience the present moment. This attitude of curiosity and patience allows for dialogue, reflection, and new meanings of 'success.' Rather than conflicting with the image of a strong and competent child, this perspective complements it by emphasizing that strength includes vulnerability, exploration, and the capacity to grow through relationships. Third, being in the moment with a child fosters longer and higher-level conversations with children that can focus on children's theories and assumptions. Rather than focusing on children's completion of tasks, educators can focus on children's understanding of concepts and extending their thinking. Further, this can inform pedagogical choices based on children's current understanding of concepts, creating a reciprocal relationship between children and educators. Altogether, ordinary moments allow for a better understanding of children and how they construct meaning (Forman et al., 2001).

The ordinary moment can be turned extraordinary through various approaches. The first step to making the ordinary extraordinary is learning to recognize and appreciate ordinary moments. To do this, educators can practice identifying the concepts children are practicing in ordinary moments (Forman et al., 2001), revisit ordinary activities through multiple representations (Neessen & Akpovo, 2018), and observe moments to find areas for reflection (Forman et al., 2001). Observation is also a skill to be developed,

and can involve sitting and watching events unfold (Atkinson, 2012), listening to children (Neessen & Akpovo, 2018), and even stepping away from the early learning setting to refresh one's mindset and see ordinary moments as special again (Atkinson, 2012). Pausing the day to recognize an ordinary moment and reflect on it also gives each day meaning and purpose (Berger, 2015).

The ability to recognize and transform ordinary moments also requires professional competencies and training. Educators benefit from training in observation and documentation methods, as well as a deep understanding of pedagogical theories that value children's everyday experiences. Critical reflection, interpretive skills, and the capacity to engage in documentation as a collaborative and dialogic process are essential to ensure that the transformation of the ordinary into the extraordinary is grounded in pedagogical integrity. This idea of pausing to take notice of children's ordinary moments and reflecting on them leads into documentation, which promotes a culture of inquiry and dialogue around ordinary moments and their meaning (Forman et al., 2001). As a whole, being able to find meaning in the ordinary builds a sense of self that makes each moment feel extraordinary (Atkinson, 2012).

Documentation

Documentation in early childhood education and care (ECEC) encompasses a broad range of practices, including both standardized, legislation-driven documentation such as individual education plans, and more interpretive, pedagogical forms of assessment. Documentation, in short, is a strategy of recording the events and activities in children's lives (Alaçam & Olgan, 2021). This paper focuses specifically on pedagogical narration, a type of documentation grounded in the Reggio Emilia tradition, which describes a full process where educators document and share narratives about pedagogical occurrences in the early learning setting (Berger, 2015). An accepted definition of this type of pedagogical documentation is that it is an approach to assessment that adapts to the needs of children and focuses on children's thoughts and feelings (Alaçam & Olgan, 2021). Pedagogical narration is important as it presents pedagogy as generative and relational, which is reflective of the complexity that exists in early learning (Hamm, 2017). This approach also challenges exclusionary Westernized approaches to education (Hamm, 2017). Some of the core tenets of pedagogical narration include that the documentation is co-created between children and educators (Hamm, 2017), the process involves continual reflection and critical dialogue (Alaçam & Olgan, 2021), and the approach resists exclusively focusing on universalized and privileged views of early learning (Berger, 2015). By emphasizing children's agency and the relational nature of learning, this tradition of documentation differs substantially from more bureaucratic or

compliance-based approaches and highlights the pedagogical possibilities embedded in everyday moments.

In the early learning setting, documentation often takes form through the creation of portfolios, presentation of children's artwork, and the taking and collating of photos (Alaçam & Olgan, 2021). However, documentation is much more than simply recording and displaying children's experiences; it provides a window into children's learning and development (Seitz, 2008) and promotes a child-centered approach to education. This type of documentation, often referred to as pedagogical documentation, focuses on the child's learning journey and supports reflective, interpretive engagement with children's experiences (Rintakorpi, 2016). Making learning visible creates opportunities for dialogue about early learning (Rintakorpi, 2016), creates accountability between educators, children, and families (Seitz, 2008), and supports a better understanding of how children learn and thrive (Reynolds & Duff, 2016). Ultimately, documentation is a process of record-keeping that makes learning visible (Reynolds & Duff, 2016), and pedagogical narration is an approach to documentation that focuses on making these records open to reflection and interpretation (BC Ministry of Education, 2019).

There are numerous potential benefits of documentation, including the fostering of partnerships with families, cultural responsiveness, supporting the image of a child as someone who is inherently competent and capable, and the creation of opportunities for advocacy and curriculum change. To begin with learning partnerships, documentation can be a powerful tool to transform the early learning setting into a collective space for partnerships with families and communities (BC Ministry of Education, 2019). The involvement of families and communities in the early learning setting is important as it supports children's sense of self and belonging (Alaçam & Olgan, 2021). Research proposes that families are a child's first teacher, and children learn in the context of their communities (Reynolds & Duff, 2016). Therefore, connection between the early learning setting and children's homes strengthens bonds, increases children's confidence, and positively impacts learning outcomes (Reynolds & Duff, 2016). This can be especially valuable in culturally diverse early learning settings where perspectives on learning and childhood may vary (Purcell-Gates et al., 2014). However, it should also be recognized that not all cultures value home–learning centre partnerships, and some families and communities may not be interested in getting involved (Reynolds & Duff, 2016). Documentation has been shown to be a beneficial tool for establishing and maintaining this connection between educators, children, families, and community members (Alaçam & Olgan, 2021).

Research has shown that documentation acts as a starting point for families to begin conversations in the early learning setting (Reynolds & Duff, 2016) and helps families feel connected to their child (Alaçam & Olgan, 2021). The act of documentation and sharing back creates partnerships between children, families, and educators, as families are invited into the pedagogical decision-making process and the construction of learning experiences (Reynolds & Duff, 2016). Documentation can also foster a sense of pride for families who are able to see their children's development and learning processes, which often leads to further sharing with the broader community, bringing children's work to the forefront of early learning and images of childhood (Reynolds & Duff, 2016). As a whole, the sharing of documentation with families and communities creates a powerful connection between an early learning setting and a child's home environment (Reynolds & Duff, 2016).

Another significant benefit of documentation is how it can be a culturally responsive and inclusive approach to early learning that can also honour Indigenous worldviews. First, documenting and reflecting on experiences in the early learning setting can allow educators to examine their values and identify potential biases (BC Ministry of Education, 2019). The intentional dialogue that documentation promotes also opens space for discussion about what knowledge is privileged and marginalized (BC Ministry of Education, 2019). In the context of British Columbia, it is especially important to consider the impacts of Westernized norms on learning, and how this may not be reflective of the diversity of the community. Some Indigenous perspectives value a common worlds framework that emphasizes how learning occurs from a range of experiences and the relations between them (Hamm, 2017), and documentation can be a way to honour the meaning and interconnection of all experiences. Documentation also makes the tensions, complexity, and ethical considerations of living on unceded land visible, and recognizes that not all questions have a definitive answer (Hamm, 2017).

In addition, documentation promotes a participatory and equitable learning environment where the individual needs of children are considered (Alaçam & Olgan, 2021). As children's experiences are collated, educators can reflect on learning processes and make appropriate changes (Reynolds & Duff, 2016). Ultimately, documentation can allow for early learning environments to be responsive to children's cultural and community contexts (Purcell-Gates et al., 2014). At the same time, it is important to critically reflect on how documentation can sometimes unintentionally reinforce dominant norms or obscure exclusionary practices. For example, Miller (2014) discusses how documentation in a diversity project concealed racializing dynamics, highlighting the need for continuous, critical engagement with how documentation is used and interpreted.

In addition to inclusion, documentation can support the understanding of children's experiences and the image of a child as a full person. Many early learning environments focus on theories of growth, and specifically, Developmentally Appropriate Practice (Atkinson, 2012). Developmentally Appropriate Practice can be a valuable approach, and documentation can be a helpful tool to understand what the diversity of growth and development looks like through continual documentation and reflection (Atkinson, 2012). The documentation process makes learning visible, bringing forward interpretations and possibilities to see ways of learning differently (BC Ministry of Education, 2019). Through continuing reflection, educators are positioned as researchers who can gain a better understanding of what children know and are interested in (Alaçam & Olgan, 2021). In addition, as documentation is often created in partnership with children, children are able to take ownership over their work and learn to work with others, which promotes a view of children as capable and competent (Schulz, 2015). Overall, documentation can be a tool to understand and respect the capabilities and interests of children (Alaçam & Olgan, 2021).

Lastly, a major benefit of documentation is the creation of opportunities for advocacy, leadership, and curriculum change. Documentation brings the competencies and capabilities of children out of anonymity and into the public sphere, where children can become the focus of dialogue and decision making (BC Ministry of Education, 2019). As documentation and reflection can allow for the questioning of long-held beliefs, there are opportunities to generate dialogue about new approaches and advocate for change (Atkinson, 2012). When documentation and critical reflection are brought into public view, the dialogue of childhood is broadened to include diverse perspectives (BC Ministry of Education, 2019).

In addition, documentation demonstrates how educators act as researchers and critical thinkers, promoting a more complex and representative view of early childhood education in the community (BC Ministry of Education, 2019). As the early childhood education sector has been gaining political attention and is moving closer to a formalized education system (BC Ministry of Education, 2019), documentation can be an opportunity for educators to become active participants in change (Berger, 2015). In addition to advocacy, documentation can provide night to children's needs, which can then influence decisions in curriculum planning (Seitz, 2008). Research has shown that documentation can also support an emergent curriculum, as documentation can be an information gathering tool for informing early learning planning and development (Alaçam & Olgan, 2021). Altogether, documentation allows for more complete stories of children's lives to be told, which better informs curriculum change and advocacy initiatives (Mardell et al., 2009).

The implementation of documentation and pedagogical narration is diverse and multifaceted. First off, the approach to documentation can be chosen based on the setting and purpose (Alaçam & Olgan, 2021). It can be beneficial to select and focus on one topic and use that focus to tell a complete story, rather than documenting in a scattered way (Seitz, 2008). From there, an educator can record moments and combine them into a portfolio that illustrates children's progress and the outcomes of their work (Seitz, 2008). The British Columbia Early Learning Framework proposes an approach to pedagogical narration that is cyclic (BC Ministry of Education, 2019). In this approach, the process begins with collecting traces of moments with children, such as photos, drawings, and field notes during children's activities. Next, an educator can reflect on these moments, questioning why they are interesting and what they say about children's learning. From there, an educator can make documentation visible by sharing the pedagogical narration with others and inviting comments and interpretations. In this step, it can also be important to explore diverse ways of sharing that are inclusive, such as offering translations to different languages, using closed captioning, and making displays available in braille.

Lastly, an educator can then make pedagogical choices about how this pedagogical narration will impact their daily practice, before starting the cycle over again. This approach recognizes that pedagogical narration can take many forms, and it is never complete (BC Ministry of Education, 2019). While templates can be helpful, they should be used with caution, as they can limit the ability of documentation to reflect the nuanced and complex nature of children's thinking. Research by Elfström Pettersson (2013) in the context of Swedish preschools similarly highlights how standardized templates, though widely used, can narrow educators' focus and constrain more holistic or creative interpretations of children's experiences. Instead, documentation can be positioned as a lively record of what has occurred and an invitation to discuss it (BC Ministry of Education, 2019). As a whole, the implementation of a documentation practice is grounded in recording moments with children and making them visible.

Integration of Ordinary Moments and Documentation

A powerful impact of documentation is how it can turn ordinary moments extraordinary. The documentation of ordinary moments gives meaning to each moment of practice (Hamm, 2017). By documenting an ordinary moment, educators are observing intently to children's experiences, making the ordinary moment richer and creating invitations for new provocations (Atkinson, 2012). As documentation requires an attunement to ordinary events in the classroom, this allows for educators to notice the joy and surprise of an ordinary moment (Alaçam & Olgan, 2021) and mitigate thoughtlessness and the

mundane feeling of routine (Berger, 2015). The documentation process also allows educators to let go of predetermined outcomes and focus on being open to children's diverse experiences, which highlights the beauty of every step of learning (BC Ministry of Education, 2019). Importantly, this process requires intentional training and a supportive professional culture. Educators must develop the ability to approach documentation as a reflective and co-constructed practice, moving beyond technical recording to see it as an opportunity for dialogue and pedagogical growth. Supportive leadership, time for professional development, and a culture of collaboration can enable early years education services to foster these professional competencies and create environments where the ordinary can be transformed into the extraordinary. Altogether, the documentation of ordinary moments provides insight, highlights complexity, and opens the doors for the unexpected, making each moment extraordinary.

At the same time, there are potential pitfalls to consider. If documentation practices become overly standardized, they may risk losing the richness and spontaneity of truly ordinary moments. Educators may, consciously or unconsciously, gravitate toward documenting moments that align with dominant norms or expectations, leaving out children whose expressions or perspectives are less familiar or more difficult to capture. This raises important questions about bias in what is considered 'worth documenting,' and whether certain children's voices may be underrepresented. Additionally, the technical demands of documentation, taking photos, writing reflections, curating portfolios, can become time-consuming and burdensome without adequate structural support. These pressures can compromise the depth and intent of documentation. To mitigate this, it is important for early learning environments to consider structural factors such as manageable documentation expectations, protected time within educators' schedules, and access to collaborative reflection spaces. Ultimately, if we want to embrace the transformative power of documentation, we must also attend to the professional, cultural, and structural conditions that shape how it unfolds in practice.

The results of this review have several implications for practice in the early learning setting. In addition to the evidence behind the benefits of recognizing ordinary moments and engaging in documentation, it may also be important to consider the challenges of implementing these approaches and ways these challenges may be overcome. In the documentation of ordinary moments, it has been found that many educators focus on children's joy rather than children's learning processes (Alaçam & Olgan, 2021), so educators may need to be intentional about recognizing a wide range of ordinary moments, rather than only those where children are happy. In addition, it has been found that educators often report that the documentation process is time-consuming, technically challenging, and effort demanding (Rintakorpi, 2016). This highlights the

importance of structural supports such as dedicated time for documentation, access to user-friendly tools, and professional learning opportunities that build documentation skills. In addition, many early learning centres do not have advanced documentation procedures or resources for educators to reference (Alaçam & Olgan, 2021). While clear guidelines can support consistency and accessibility, there is also a risk that highly standardized procedures may reduce the flexibility and responsiveness of documentation, limiting its ability to reflect children's diverse ways of knowing and being.

Furthermore, educators have also reported challenges with engaging with families (Rintakorpi, 2016) and choosing priorities for documentation (Alaçam & Olgan, 2021). This indicates a need for more support and resources for educators to engage in documentation. Strengthening collaboration, offering multilingual or culturally responsive documentation formats, and clarifying shared goals between families and educators could help address these gaps. Overall, turning attention to ordinary moments and documenting them is a process that requires time, effort, and resources (Rintakorpi, 2016), and this is important to consider in its implementation in the early learning setting.

As a whole, ordinary moments are important because they allow children and educators to find joy and meaning in every day and uncover children's understanding of the world (Forman et al., 2001). Documentation and pedagogical narration are important, because they create opportunities for partnerships, inclusion, reflection, advocacy, and change in the early learning setting (BC Ministry of Education, 2019). Together, the documentation of ordinary moments turns the ordinary extraordinary, making each moment richer and more meaningful. Ultimately, honouring children's stories by taking interest in their day to day lives and documenting them to create space for dialogue is a meaningful way to respect children's rights and diverse ways of being.

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