It's Not All Objectivity and Development: Documentation Dilemmas and Discoveries in a Toddler Classroom

Emmanuelle N. Fincham

Emmanuelle N. Fincham is an assistant professor of early childhood education at Western Washington University. Building on over 15 years of teaching infants and toddlers, much of her scholarship focuses on toddlers and their teachers. She engages in critical practices of narrative practitioner research incorporating feminist poststructural and, more recently, new materialist methodologies as a way to reconceptualize understandings of practice, play, and young children's development and ways of knowing. Email: finchae@wwu.edu

This article seeks to explore a process of ongoing engagement with classroom documentation, returning to pieces of data and drawing on teaching experiences from a toddler classroom. In response to pervasive narratives in early childhood education that link practices of observation and documentation with accountability and assessment, a self-reflexive inquiry into the discursive forces that guide teachers' representations of children is taken up. Drawing at times on feminist poststructural theories and new materialisms, imaginings for more expansive possibilities for reconceptualizing documentation are discussed.

Key words: *documentation, observation, toddlers, teacher research, narrative research*

Steeped in traditions of developmental research, early childhood teachers are expected to be able to understand the experiences and development of young children through close observation (Jipson, 2008). "Best" practices of observation and documentation rooted in child study seek to represent some semblance of the child's reality: what they are doing, what they are learning, what they are thinking and communicating (Bloch & Popkewitz, 2008). In early childhood classroom settings, these methods inform understandings of children and also give families a window into their child's classroom life, but ultimately, these practices have been shaped in such a way as to serve neoliberal policies that prioritize assessment and predetermined developmental outcomes (Giamminuti et al., 2022). Moves to standardize early childhood education in recent decades have increasingly pushed for the datification of children, all in the name of "measurable outcomes" and "readiness" (Bradbury, 2020). Broad policy shifts that aim to support access to early childhood education increase government oversight of children and teachers, many of whom must now implement mandated curriculum and assessment systems meant to produce easily reportable data in the name of monitoring progress (Frazier, 2023; Kim, 2016). In Kim's (2016) study with Head Start teachers in the United States, teachers clearly named how the expectation to collect data within a mandated online assessment system limited their interactions with children. Further, teachers spoke of how their curriculum and documentation had shifted to prioritize the child outcome data, meaning that what was worth documenting was predetermined by the regulatory force of the assessment tool and its standardized developmental markers, leaving much of the child's experience going unnoticed and undocumented.

Thus, observation and documentation practices are historically and continuously enmeshed in assumptions of scientific realism (i.e., beliefs in an objective truth, established standardized developmental norms, and understandings of the world that exist independently of interaction and context) that serve to restrain children's development to the terms set forth by assessment ratings (Bloch & Popkewitz, 2008; Cannella, 1997; St. Pierre & Pillow, 2000). In the first part of this article, drawing on my own experience in the U.S. context, I illustrate some

ways in which the conventions of scientific realism and groundings in developmental science continue to have a stronghold on framings of documentation and its assumed primacy as a tool for assessment. In the second part of the article, I explore my ongoing attempts at reconceptualizing documentation and imagining possibilities for practice and teacher education. Finally, as this is an ever-expanding inquiry, I restrain from forming definitive conclusions but offer insights and ideas for my own future research and practice in early childhood education, while at the same time furthering a call to the field for continued pushback on policies and regulations that reduce children to outcome-based data.

Situating practices of observation and documentation in early childhood education

In the U. S. context, professional standards for early childhood teachers position observation and documentation practices firmly within a cycle of assessment (NAEYC, 2019). Specifically, observation allows teachers "to document developmental progress and promote positive outcomes for each child" (NAEYC, 2019, p. 9). Professional guidance tells us that observation should be ongoing and systematic and should highlight individual children's progress, strengths, interests, and needs. These standards for practice have been relatively stable since I embarked on my teacher preparation journey almost 20 years ago. I vividly remember instructions across courses and various versions of child-study assignments to gather observational data in order to make some meaning of a child's experiences. It was clear to me early on that observation was the way to know and understand a child, framed by the teacher's developmental and pedagogical knowledge.

Particularly in play-based, inquiry-focused classroom spaces for very young children, observation and documentation are considered to be key elements of practice (Cohen et al., 2016). Documentation serves as a powerful way to "make sense of playful learning" but remains framed within narratives of accountability and assessment (Albin-Clark, 2020, p. 140), all of which presumes the significance of developmental knowledge. In a field where the "teaching" is often elusive to those outside of early childhood, being able to "capture" evidence of children's learning and development in order to have data that shows their development over time is key (Seitz, 2008). The instruction I was given, and since have given preservice teachers for years in relation to documenting children's development, involved those positivist qualities of objectivity and detail. We are told that documentation is a way to more "authentically" assess children in these early years when things like tests and other developmental tools just do not show what the child can do. In the same light, we document to keep track, to make sure children are developing according to the parameters of the norm, and, if they are falling outside those boundaries and demonstrating "deficits" according to the norm, we have documentation to support our perception of their developmental needs.

During my many years of teaching in a toddler classroom and simultaneous work in teacher education, my perspectives on observation and documentation have shifted and been challenged as the ideas, theories, and philosophies that inform my understanding of teaching and children have expanded over time. In my early years of teaching, I stood by my learning that written observations should be "as objective as possible," often giving feedback on others' documentation that was "too subjective" or "too interpretive." While my own understanding of these practices has expanded, as I will discuss throughout this article, I cannot disentangle myself from these underlying assumptions of objectivity that now permeate my work with preservice teachers as I am tasked with teaching future early childhood educators to observe and document children's learning. Textbooks for teaching in early childhood contain guidance, often an entire chapter, on observing, documenting, and assessing children's engagements with their world (e.g., Gonzalez-Mena & Shabazian, 2024; Morrison et al., 2021; NAEYC, 2021). For example, in a text on teaching infants and toddlers, the teacher is positioned to understand the child through observation in the hopes that children reveal to us "their intentions, feelings, and ideas" (Maguire-Fong, 2020, p.

37). Further, effective observation is expected to present a clear, accurate account that is "descriptive and factual" (p. 39). Those working with young children are told that written anecdotal observations can be based on "anything that captures your attention" (Gonzalez-Mena & Eyer, 2009), but as I will explore throughout this article, there are deeply rooted assumptions about what that attention is primed to notice. When we are conditioned with understandings of children so heavily framed by the discursive context of development, how can we make space to see and understand outside of that frame? Orner, Miller, and Ellsworth (1996) describe these attempts we make to understand outside of educational discourses as "excessive," which begs the question: what might documentation look like in these spaces of "excess" as we try to allow them to remain unbounded and unknowable (Miller, 2017; Zembylas, 2005)?

Documentation and my crisis of representation

Often left unquestioned as the "true" story of what happened, classroom documentation is not recognized as a way to acknowledge the messiness of reality as pieces of documentation serve to "convert this mess into something smooth, coherent, and precise" (Coleman & Ringrose, 2013, p. 5). Just as questions of reality have influenced research since the "crisis of representation" (Marcus & Fischer, 1986), throughout my years of teaching I have increasingly confronted this impossibility of representing children's experience in classroom documentation, as these practices have been informed by "conventional" qualitative methodologies (St. Pierre, 2019). In search of new possibilities, my modernist constructivist views of children shifted as I brought feminist poststructural lenses to my teaching (Butler, 1990; Davies, 1994; Weedon, 1997). While still tied to the relentless pull of developmental progress, I have since focused my attention on the gaze through which I "see" the children, which is always filtered through discourses of gender, race, culture, development, and ability (Lather, 1993). This "seeing what frames [my] seeing" (Lather, 1993, p. 675) reveals how the meanings we make of children's experiences are not just representations of a reality but rather a highly mediated reality that is "historical, contingent, and contested" (Miller, 2017, p. 497).

Many classroom documentation practices inherently privilege the adult gaze and serve as a disciplinary apparatus, both for the children and for teachers, as they serve to normalize and regulate understandings of the child framed by accountability-driven regimes of truth that circulate within the act of observation (Foucault, 1977). The adult gaze is marred then with the normalizing lens of developmental theory that makes it the teacher's job to "know" the child in terms of their developmental capacities. Poststructural theories have offered a chance to resist this desire to "know," leading teachers to embrace a practice of uncertainty, observing without assuming to know what the children are doing or without needing to make developmental claims (MacNaughton, 2005). Thus, as documenters of children's experiences, teachers must lean into interpretive spaces that resist the assumption that experience is the way to "knowing" and understand that the interpretations teachers (and children themselves) make are never straightforward but always contested and political (Scott, 1991).

This is a big shift away from a certainty (i.e., objectivity) about children as we turn the interpretive lens towards our own subjectivities and how they affect our representations of children. Brown and Jones (2001) describe this as

> a move towards creating a space where we might articulate something of what it is to be "a teacher." We cannot presume to write what it is to be a child. What we can do, however, is write our way towards some understanding of our own complicity and culpability in relations of dominance against those that we would seek to empower. (p. 6)

Through our descriptions of others, we say a lot about ourselves. Drawing on Butler's (2005) theorizing of the subject, as teachers attempt to document children's learning they are also constructing themselves as a subject,

only existing in the encounter with the other. Drawing on Nietzsche, Butler explores the notion that we "start to give an account of ourselves only because we are interpellated as beings who are rendered accountable" (p. 10). In the early childhood classroom, teachers are accountable to the children, to families, to discourses of education and development, and to societal expectations at large. Even in "objective" documentation, teachers are giving an account of themselves and constituting themselves as a subject who sees children in certain ways.

This shift then brings into question the norms that frame these encounters among teachers, children, places, discourses, and things and the normative discourses that both constitute and contain our "knowing" of the other. As we observe children, therefore, we may not be seeking to "know" them but rather attending to how we "recognize" the child and by what terms we are allowed to recognize them, including how we make sense of their actions as agentic yet bounded forces in and of themselves (Butler, 2005). Thus, a reshaping of observation and documentation practices that fully engages an "uncomfortable self-reflexivity," as Pillow (2003) names it, opens those spaces of possibility and uncertainty we are not allowed in the "scientific" observation practices of the child-study days. This kind of self-reflexivity both engages and goes beyond interpretive practice, as one must deeply interrogate ingrained beliefs and practices around teaching young children and confront how taken-for-granted notions of teaching limit possibilities for representing children through documentation (Fincham, 2022). Thus, a self-reflexivity framed with feminist poststructural thought allows for the examination of how the teacher self is discursively constituted through standardized and regulating practices, as one also faces their own complicity in perpetuating normative understandings of children and teaching. This uncomfortable work requires attempts at unsettling the stable, humanist self as we situate knowing as unstable while critically reflecting on the doing of subjectivity and representation (Pillow, 2003; St. Pierre & Pillow, 2000). As I consider both written and visual narrative documentation, I will briefly explore how this shift helps reshape those common early childhood practices.

Speaking for the not-yet-speaking child in anecdotal observations

An uncomplicated approach to documentation appears to capture moments of classroom life frozen in place in order to attempt to comprehend them (MacLure, 2011). Just as researchers are inclined to do in the act of crafting "anecdotal observations" of children as data, writing classroom documentation often assumes an access to "truth." However, as Davies (2003) describes, "what one does with words is to make an event or experience understandable, something that can be told, something that draws on known concepts to order the myriad events" (p. 28). This constitutive process aims to produce clear and consistent storylines by neglecting other elements of experience, including knowledges that exist outside of established narratives of education (Svalastog et al., 2021). When we attend to our interpretations of experience, then we must let go of attempts to access any sort of "truth" in the moment and instead turn attention to the ways our interpretations and any understandings of experience itself are mediated through memory, discourse, and language (Britzman, 2000; Casey, 2023; Scott, 1991).

One aspect of this mediation of interpreted experiences is the governance of power relations inherent in the adult/child binary, which continually raises concerns around "representation" and "voice" in research with young children, and as such, classroom documentation (James, 2007; Yoon & Templeton, 2019). Jipson (2008) contends that we require a destabilizing of the adult/child binary, which positions the adult researcher as "mature, rational, and therefore 'knowing' as opposed to the "developing, 'innocent,' and disempowered child" (p. 176). Efforts of documentation, like many approaches to qualitative inquiry in early childhood, stem from a desire to "give voice" to young children in classrooms as they cannot "speak" for themselves in matters of their education and care (Facca et al., 2020; Spyrou, 2011), and yet, children are simultaneously constituted and marginalized by dominant discourses of development and progress that shape their educational and caregiving contexts. Interpretations then

of young children's more-than-verbal ways of speaking are always already mediated through an adult lens. Thus, these attempts at "speaking for the other" bring up a myriad of complexities, especially when we attempt to speak for those who do not yet speak.

Regardless of age, attempting to speak for others by storying their experience is an immense ethical responsibility (Meretoja, 2018) as we engage in "the act of representing the other's needs, goals, situation, and in fact, *who they are*," essentially producing them as subjects (Alcoff, 1991, p. 9, emphasis in original). This is a powerful position to be in as a teacher with control over documentation practices that garner the effects of discursive practices involved in speaking for another. With very young children, the impossibility of the adult gaze being able to represent children's experience is even more pertinent because the child's world is "only partially shaped by language" and its symbolic forms, meaning that as we attempt to put children's play into words, we (and also the children) cannot "find the words or concepts that would encapsulate the event" (Davies, 2003, p. 42). Further complicated by variations in communicative abilities (Gray & Winter, 2011; Komulainen, 2007), practices of narrative observation thus are limited by the adult gaze and the presumed necessity to represent children's experiences in systems of language and thought that cannot comprehend the extra-linguistic worlds of young children, even as we attempt to make record of their agentic shaping of their worlds. It is then up to teachers, observers, and researchers to attend to these impossibilities of representation in our attempts to document children's experience and engage in self-reflexive practices that interrogate the discursive and regulatory powers of developmental norms. Bringing these acts and apparatuses of surveillance into question is the first step towards transforming these practices.

The entangled lens of the classroom camera

A naive response to the dilemmas of text-based representations of children's experience leans on images as a way to capture a scene beyond words. Photo documentation can, and does, do more to secure children's actions in the moment, but this practice—and its inherent assumption of being able to understand the reasons that lead to children's actions—cannot go without interrogation, especially because it also gets taken up as a tool for assessment and surveillance. Just as with written documentation, teachers employ adult gaze(s) in attempts to *see* a moment, decide to *capture* it in a photo, and subsequently *read* the image. These photos contain theories that stem from the understanding of the person who chooses to frame the image, always already layered with some presumption of what to look at (Riessman, 2008). For instance, developmental theories are a major force that guide the teacher's gaze as mediated by the camera lens to produce images that serve as artifacts of children's learning and progress (Mitchell & Reid-Walsh, 2002). Another layer stems from discourses of "cuteness" that permeate the adult gaze towards young children, often inciting a desire to preserve a moment in an obtrusively voyeuristic way (Kind, 2013).

The camera as a tool for research and documentation has gone widely unchallenged in daily practice, and it is often assumed to be a nonintrusive element in children's play (Løkken, 2011). Once the adult gaze is challenged, however, it is not difficult to see how a teacher's and camera's presence in the space is incredibly intrusive while at the same time constitutive, undoubtedly affecting and effecting, creating the subjects of the teacher's and the camera's lenses as the camera itself has the "ability to act and produce particular effects" whether in the hands of adults or children (Kind, 2013, p. 439). The camera lens and what it can produce is thus entangled with/in circulating discourses, bodies, technologies, materials, theories, and so on (Hultman & Lenz Taguchi, 2010). Overall, in light of postmodern perspectives on knowledge, meaning, and experience, practices of observation and documentation, whether textual or visual, are in need of some reframing. When examined closely and critically, observation-based practices have been exposed as apparatuses for surveillance (Foucault, 1977) and the teacher's notebook and camera have not readily been examined as these surveilling tools (Sparrman & Lindgren,

2010). While such a reconceptualizing of documentation practices was not what I set out to do exactly, in the midst of a deep examination of my teaching practice, I ended up making self-reflexive shifts that interrupted my representations of children as I addressed my own complicity in framing their lives through these methods (Villenas, 1996, as cited in Pillow, 2003).

Documentation as data in self-reflexive teacher research

The explorations of classroom documentation that follow stem from a larger study where I engaged feminist poststructural theories (Butler, 1990; Weedon, 1997) to consider the ways teachers and children become classroom subjects. My methods were situated in feminist methodologies and engaged a self-reflexive narrative approach to teacher research (Fincham, 2022; Pillow, 2003). In doing so, I brought my own understandings of myself as teacher into question. This process requires recognizing how identity is performatively constructed through the signifying power of discursive norms (Butler, 1990), acknowledging the ways both teachers and children actively position and attempt to reposition themselves within discourses of teaching (Osgood, 2006). Bringing discursive norms into question thus exposes how classroom subjects become intelligible and, at the same time, act to resignify themselves as subjects (Butler, 1990).

Layered, self-reflexive narrative data was generated and collected over the course of six weeks in a toddler classroom in a university-based early childhood centre in a large city in the northeastern United States. At the time, I was one of two lead teachers in this classroom of 11 children ranging in age from 18 months to 3 years.[1] The pedagogy of the centre prioritizes children's play, holding large blocks of open play time in the daily schedule that also involve neighbourhood walks and trips to nearby public playgrounds. Documentation is also a major pillar of the centre's practice: Teachers produce large amounts of anecdotal and photo documentation each day that is shared with families and compiled as data for narrative summaries of children's development. The documentation was constructed by the entire classroom team, which included my co-teacher, assistant teachers, and practicum student teachers; however, I only gathered the written documentation that I generated but reviewed all photos as they were taken on shared devices and uploaded to an online sharing site for parents. Along with the classroom documentation, I kept a self-reflexive teaching journal and gathered several hours of classroom video. While my explorations of documentation that I share here were and are informed by my journalling and interpretations of the video data, I do not draw on that data directly in this article.

Analysis of data was ongoing and continues beyond the scope of that first study. It started from the moment I chose a piece of documentation to carry forward with me into meaning making, and even further, it involves the choice to document something I noticed in the first place. Early attempts at narrative-based thematic analysis (Riessman, 2008) helped me find some direction in the data, but I did not find my way until I shifted to a more postqualitative approach for allowing the "productive capacity for wonder that resides and radiates in the data," as MacLure (2013, p. 228) describes. Letting a sense of wonder spark my interest in and desire to explore pieces of documentation more fully brought me to unexpected discoveries and pathways into rethinking what documentation does and what it can be. Allowing for wonder repositioned the adult gaze and led to a more focused awareness of not just what frames my seeing but how those frames are entangled in relational-material assemblages as I encountered my data (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). Bringing the data together further, I engaged in collage work (Holbrook & Pourchier, 2014) to move out of spaces of traditional coding, combining images and text from my data as well as connections to sensory relations, memory, literature, and responsive-analytic writing that emerged during the process (St. Pierre, 1997). This collage work stems from and engenders wonder, which continues to draw me in new directions as I return again and again to these acts of classroom documentation.

Searching for new directions in documentation

The act of studying my own practice inevitably altered my practice. Working to expose and interrogate discursive powers at play in the choices I made as a teacher, I began to seek out opportunities to expand both my thinking and my practices around observation and documentation in ways that aimed to open up understandings of children that both challenged and went beyond the dominating knowledge of developmental discourses. Across my data and throughout my ongoing practice, I noticed new possibilities emerging as I looked back at my classroom documentation artifacts while also crafting documentation in new ways. The feminist poststructural gaze I brought to my research and teaching took me in directions that revealed discursive forces as even my attempts at "new" ways of documenting continued to foreground developmental understandings, such as prioritizing evidence of language development over sensory relations. This led me to further attend to the ways my documentation practices continued to reproduce certain expected classroom subjects of teachers and children (Butler, 1990). These self-reflexive moves, coupled with my growing interest in new materialist theories and the ways they are being applied in early childhood (e.g., Barad, 2007; Hackett et al., 2020; Hultman & Lenz Taguchi, 2010; MacRae, 2020), carved out new spaces to play with decentering the child subject in the ways I was attempting to make meaning through both visual and written representations of my observations of children's entanglement in the classroom and related spaces. At the same time, I found that I was experimenting with ways of decentering the developmental, adult gaze as well.

Efforts to disrupt and transgress the teaching gaze that is overwhelmingly guided by developmental knowledge and adult ways of seeing and sense making upend fundamental assumptions around knowing—and knowing about—children. There is discomfort in venturing into these unknown spaces, spaces that take shape in the moments where my ways of being with and understanding children permeate and slip through established developmental framings of teaching young children. I draw on a notion of excess here to make sense of these openings to other spaces of knowing. The expectation is not to fully transcend the developmental gaze, but rather, to move into these spaces of "excess" that are beyond the dominant developmental discourses that aim to contain subjectivities and delineate possibilities for ways of doing teaching, mindful that we must allow these spaces to remain necessarily unbounded and unknowable in order to honour the possibilities (Orner et al., 1996). In the sections to follow, I have selected some of these spaces where I found myself reaching to teach and document in the excess. As you will see, it was not a straightforward decision that resulted in new practice but a process of interrogation and imagination as I called my habitual acts into question, tried out new ways, and returned to these moments with ever-expansive questions of "what if?"

Telling different stories: A challenge to the ways we "know" children and choose to represent them

One of the most obvious areas, developmentally, where children change during the toddler years is in language. At 18 months, most toddlers are in the beginnings of spoken language. This is a time that excites adults because it is often assumed that now, very young children are finally able to start communicating in a way we can understand them (even though they have been competent communicators since birth!). In my toddler classroom, children often started with few words but within months were likely to be speaking in full sentences and able to carry on a conversation with great fluency. Such is the rapidity of development in the first years. Given this common and quite impressive phenomenon of human development, I was not terribly surprised to find that the vast majority of my documentation sought to provide evidence of children's language development in process, along with other markers of toddlerhood like motor refinement and pretend play.

Connor, paint, and paper

Connor sat down on his knees and used the long brushes to paint at the large paper covering the wall. As he made some dots and strokes, he said "paper … paper…" in a low, quiet voice. Then he squeezed his hand around the bristle end of the brush, squishing out the paint. He explored this for a while and once he had a good amount of paint on his hands, he used his hands to spread paint on the paper. (anecdotal observation 11.9.2)

This piece of documentation attempts to capture Connor's participation in the art experience offered that day. In the ways I chose to represent this moment, one can see where developmental language limits how and what I might write about children. In my teaching role, I chose to use this opportunity as a way to describe his use of language, labelling "paper" as he touched his brush to it. This recorded moment also offered evidence of his participation in an expected classroom activity and related skills, like painting on paper.

Remembering this and similar moments shared with children, I can recall my enjoyment in watching and documenting sensory and arts-based experiences in the classroom; however, my attempts to describe their engagement with the medium fall short. My fascination lies in those actions of "squeezing" and "squishing" and in that space of "a while," but I did not do it justice in the writing. My description of this encounter between Connor and the paintbrush is merely a pass-through to the assessable skill and productive act of spreading paint on paper.

Wondering about "yellow"

Noah noticed Emmy (author) *writing in her notebook and pointed to her pen and said, "black!" Emmy agreed that it was a black pen. Noah then said "yellow" and walked off. He returned a moment later with a magnifying glass, taking a close look at Emmy before handing it to her and leaving. Emmy walked across the room to put her notebook away and Noah followed. He was excited when he spotted the cup of pencils on the shelf and yelled, "Ah! Pencil!" Emmy wondered if that was the "yellow" he was looking for before, after talking about her pen … but we may never know.* (anecdotal observation 10.9.4)

As simple a statement as it is—"but we may never know"—it speaks loudly against the neoliberal influences of assessment-forward practices that make it impossible for teachers to work in unpredictable spaces that engage practices attempting to resist those narratives (Giamminuti et al., 2022). Judging this piece of documentation by conventional standards, the developmental evidence it is meant to suggest is not so obvious and could be read as an unnecessary observation. I do note Noah's language, his action, and some emotion, but only in engaging my own sense of wonder do I attempt to construct meaning. Settled in established humanist assumptions, we are programmed to want to know, to want to understand, to make meaning of this encounter, even as much as I wanted to remain in the unknown. What intrigued me most about this encounter with Noah was that I could not make sense of it, and yet I tried to. Much of this work in reconceptualizing documentation thus must involve an active attempt to *not* know and to *not* want to know—at least in the ways we are accustomed.

Noah's lament

A few minutes after we entered the playground, Noah found a long, thin stick to go with a bigger, thicker one he had found along our walk and carried with him. He held the bigger one upright with one end on the ground and used the other like a bow—in the style of a cello. He played a lament, moving the bow quite slowly back and forth while he looked down at his "instrument" with the unmistakable Noah-furrowed brow. (anecdotal observation 10.16.4)

In this representation of Noah, I felt the possibilities for constituting children differently as subjects, not to draw attention to the typical tenets of toddlerhood but instead to those aspects of their being that fascinate me. As is also evident in the piece of documentation that precedes this one, Noah was one of a few children who particularly

inspired me to expand my thinking about and doing of documentation. In assessment speak, I could have quickly written this up as "Noah pretended to play a cello using two sticks at the park"—a nice piece of evidence to tick off that symbolic play checkbox. Instead, I watched and I admired and I wrote in a way that sought to convey the scene as I interpreted it, positioning Noah as a budding musician who felt the music and was emotionally connected to his instrument. This forwardly subjective way of producing documentation feels like a far cry from my "as objective as possible" days in my early years of teaching. This approach is akin to methods of portraiture that shift attention to how the story constructs its subjects in certain ways given the choices made in crafting a narrative (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2008).

Attempts at decentering the child in documentation

My earlier work with poststructural theories prioritized discursive agency, serving to unsettle the power structures at play in my teaching practice, which, in turn, opened spaces for new ways of thinking about classroom experiences. One avenue that opened has led me to posthuman and new materialist understandings, which push back on the poststructural primacy of discourse while positioning its constitutive power as entangled with/in an assemblage of actors in the human and nonhuman world (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). This shift also decenters the human subject, which accordingly decenters narratives of development and progress as linked to the individual child. This does not serve to create yet another binary of child/other but rather upends the concept of centering altogether as the child then becomes an intra-active body in a more-than-human ontology (Barad, 2007) inextricably entangled relationally with human and nonhuman materialities. I find much inspiration for this work in the ways others have been grappling with this decentering while exploring agency in the material world in relation with children and teachers in classroom spaces (e.g., Hackett et al., 2020; MacRae, 2020; Pacini-Ketchabaw, Kind, & Kocher, 2024).

How a teacher views children's relationships with materials influences the choices they make in practice and in how those interactions get documented, and whether they get documented at all. Children often come to school with loved items, some with the same tattered bunny that has been in their hands since they first began grasping as infants, others with a slew of different items every day, all loved, all treasured. Traditionally, children's relationships with materials have been viewed in line with their emotional and cognitive development, as children are assumed to build attachment to transitional objects or gain cognitive skills through interactions with open-ended materials, for instance. Looking more closely at classroom materials and how I represented them in documentation, I explore the ways I have taken up children's relationships with materials in ways that both limit and expand how we can make sense of children and objects in relation (Kind, 2014; Pacini-Ketchabaw, Kind, & Kocher, 2024).

From exploitation to esteem

As teachers, we might value the relationships children have with objects but often take advantage of those for our own agendas—coaxing a child into diapering and toileting by inviting them to bring a preferred object that is then used to distract them from their own desires while going along with a required routine, for instance. Or, tethered to developmental framings, we might exploit that relationship in the name of teaching or assessing some developmental skill.

Shawn brought his stuffed dog to school today and had it with him at table for morning snack. He told Emmy "dog eat!" and he put some of his snack up to the dog's mouth. Emmy saw a piece of the play pizza nearby and showed Shawn. She said, "Maybe the dog wants to eat some pizza?" Shawn then took the pizza and put it near the dog's mouth and said "yum yum." (anecdotal observation 11.9.8)

Stuck in my search for Shawn's pretend play skills, which were just beginning to emerge, I took this opportunity

to benefit off of his relationship with his special stuffed dog to entice him to pretend to feed it with a plastic piece of pizza. It seems I was totally disregarding the knowledge he had of his dog's needs, as he was already sharing his snack with it and some force compelled me to guide him to a more "appropriate" object for his play, as well as "test" his abilities for that ongoing process of assessing his development.

I found another example of this on a day at the park with Max when he was sitting in the sandbox with a number of toy trucks. Between the teachers and his parents, we had determined goals for Max to engage in more varied play, namely, the big motor play that playgrounds were historically constructed for—climbing, sliding, etc. Often accompanied by small car or truck toys, Max preferred to sit and play with them, thus not engaging in that motor work that developmental growth and progress suggests. In one of these co-opting attempts, I suggested he take his trucks and put them on the slide, assuming we could start up some game of putting the trucks, and eventually Max, down the slide. It worked for a moment, as I indicate in this observation.

After Emmy suggested Max put his trucks on the nearby slide, he moved them one by one, placing each on the slide, at the bottom. Then, he climbed over the low side of the slide, scooting himself over to sit on the slide behind the trucks. He sat there looking pleased for a moment before pushing the trucks off the bottom of the slide and returning to the sandbox. (anecdotal observation 11.6.1)

In these and many other related pieces of documentation, I evidently wondered about children like Max and Shawn who demonstrated such seemingly intense ties to objects, as in the ways I often interpreted Max's connection with trucks to take priority over anything else in his time at school. As I called my own attention to these relations, I began to respect the ways children and objects were in relation, rather than see them as getting in the way of the children's classroom experiences. For Max particularly, the ways I interpreted his actions and interacted with him began to take on different qualities.

Max kept pretty busy with the little bulldozer for most of the morning. He stopped to have snack for a while and then went to find the bulldozer again. He took that and another small truck to the boat structure to meet Connor. He climbed in and sat across from Connor, holding his trucks and holding onto the boat at the same time as he swayed his body a bit to go along with Connor's rocking of the boat. (anecdotal observation 11.14.2)

In my daily practices of observation and documentation, I probably considered this a boring anecdote, one I likely wrote when I didn't have anything "interesting" to write about Max for the day, given that the story seems to lack action. However, refocusing my view to consider the entanglements of objects and bodies, I read this encounter differently in a way that features Max's relationship with the bulldozer, which remained by his side for most of the morning. In hindsight, I wonder what this documentation could have been if I had framed it around the relationship and sought to tell a story of Max and his favoured bulldozer spending their day together.

Materials as classroom beings

Furthering my curiosity about children and objects in relation, I have also started to inquire into the agential, performative aspects of objects in relation with children, not just the meaning of a material or the actions of the child on objects (Taylor et al., 2012). Bringing a relational-material approach (Hultman & Lenz Taguchi, 2010) to documentation, an object's ability to animate a child comes into focus along with the child's actings on material (Kind, 2014; MacRae, 2012; Pacini-Ketchabaw, Kind, & Kocher, 2024). Seeing objects in the classroom in this way positions those objects from home and preferred classroom items with power and a voice in the classroom, in turn shifting the ways in which I interpret children's actions with objects—and thus, document them.

Many times, I perceived an object to act on a child in a way that requested care. This could be a treasured stuffed friend from home, a favoured plastic horse figure that had to be rushed to the bathroom and washed when it got brushed with paint, or the unexpected bucket of chalk Max carried with him around the classroom throughout the morning hours of open play. My documentation from the day Max carried the chalk focused primarily on my many attempts at redirecting him to bring the chalk back to the chalkboard that was set up for the day or in trying to convince him to let some other children have a piece if they wanted to draw. In reflection on this experience and similar ones, I wonder what story I might have told had I perceived the bucket of chalk as acting on Max rather than the other way around. Positioning the bucket of chalk as a classroom subject that evokes a need for care, Max's actions on/with the chalk bucket tell a more intricate story of journeying together while keeping one another safe and secure.

There were other times where children and objects seemed complexly entangled in ways that children gave voice to objects in more obvious ways. While this can be interpreted developmentally as a play skill, I choose to look further and consider the connections children have with objects that allow them to speak for and sometimes through nonhuman material. One moment of conflict that I documented between Georgia and Shawn illustrates such a connection.

As Shawn crawled up to where Georgia was playing with cars with a train in each of his hands as he pushed them along the floor, Georgia yelled "That's my car!" Shawn didn't seem to be trying to take it, but his probably unexpected presence signalled Georgia to react. Shawn immediately picked up his trains and walked away from her. Georgia watched him, then turned to Emmy who was sitting nearby and asked, "What's Shawn doing?" Emmy explained that he probably left because she yelled at him when he came over to play. Her body language suggested she was maybe disappointed that he left, so Emmy suggested she ask him to come back if she wanted to play with him. Georgia called out, "Trains! Come back!" At that, Shawn immediately put his trains back on the ground and pushed them over to Georgia. They went on to push their vehicles alongside each other. (anecdotal observation 10.30.5)

I continue to wonder about Georgia's choices here and what brought her to call for the trains and not Shawn. It could indicate that, while we as teachers may have an agenda to push peer relations, the children may be looking at the situation completely differently. Was she yelling at the trains in the first place and not Shawn? I first interpreted a conflict between Georgia and Shawn, but maybe it was a conflict among objects—something the children may be able to see and feel, outside of our limited adult gaze.

Bringing this new way of seeing the agentic capacities of classroom objects to my observations of children and the more-than-human context of their daily experiences, I found that my previously established boundaries of what I was looking for in my observations and how I represented it were expanding.

Before lunch, Henry saw Harper's bunny on her mat and carefully laid his bunny down next to hers. On his way to wash his hands, he spotted Cece's fox on her mat and grabbed it, rushing back to Harper's mat to drop the fox there. The teachers told him to put it back for Cece, but Henry explained that "Cece's fox wants to rest with my bunny and Harper's bunny!" Once we heard this and saw how Henry had arranged them, it was clear that the animals wanted to have some time together. They all rested quietly while the toddlers ate lunch. (anecdotal observation 11.27.1)

In this recorded observation and in the photo documentation that accompanied it (a close-up photo of the three animals lying together on a blanket-covered nap mat), I was attempting to tell a story of a moment that acknowledged the agency of material as it acted on and with the children. Attempts like this brought with them much tension as I considered how others would read this. Would this help the teacher tasked with writing up an end-of-year portfolio-style assessment? Would the parents see any value in this being posted as the record of their

child's day? Even as my attempts to disrupt habitual practices and ways of knowing became more intentional, I continued to experience the pressure of the assessment narratives in which practices of observation and classroom documentation are deeply embedded.

Concluding thoughts and future directions for practice and research

After 16 years as an infant and toddler teacher, I have transitioned into a full-time faculty role in an undergraduate early childhood teacher education program. When students begin the program, I am tasked with instructing them during their first practicum, where they are expected to build their foundational knowledge of observing and documenting children's development and classroom experiences in infant and toddler classrooms. I continue to grapple with tensions I felt as a classroom teacher as I work to meet their needs as future early childhood educators. They are entering a field where they will be expected to gather observational data of children to align with developmental assessments such as *Teaching Strategies Gold*, which has been widely adopted in the United States and is the state-mandated tool in Washington (Zbyszinski, 2023), where our university is located and my students will likely teach. At the same time, my own journey through reframings of documentation, as I have explored in this article, instills in me a desire to help them see that there is more to it than developmental outcomes and evidence for assessments.

Part of this work is coming to terms with how intertwined practices of observation and documentation are with pervasive narratives of accountability and assessment that limit and label children in specific terms (Albin-Clark, 2020; Kim, 2016). The early childhood field has long grappled with the effects of developmental norms that neglect the experiences and identities of historically marginalized children and families (Bloch, 1992; Goodwin et al., 2008; Souto-Manning & Rabadi-Raol, 2018), which in turn regulates observation and documentation practices that expect children to fit standards not made for them. While there is usefulness in understanding development, when norms serve as the primary and often only tool for monitoring progress, many children are inherently named "at risk" (Swadener, 2010). The reality of the argument is that the early childhood field cannot rid itself of the powerful grip of developmental knowledge, but we might work to develop practices that challenge and go beyond it, practices that allow teachers to inhabit those spaces of "excess" (Orner et al., 1996) where they can leave things unknown and uncertain. We can acknowledge the limitations and boundaries of developmentally based understandings of children while seeing those boundaries as permeable, given that pedagogies of "what if" (Zemyblas, 2005) have the potential to lead representations of children, learning, teaching, and the more-than-human classroom in new and exciting directions that continuously challenge the expectations for teaching practices based in assessment-focused methods. As I have demonstrated in this article by putting my own process on display, engaging feminist poststructural theories is a way to reveal the discursive powers at play that frame our understandings of young children and teachers in bounded realms of care, gender, and growth (Cannella, 1997; Osgood, 2010). Once we see these discursive limits as malleable, posthuman and new materialist theories offer us provocative ways to make sense of the child in more-than-human entanglements (Barad, 2007; Hultman & Lenz Taguchi, 2010; MacRae, 2020).

As I mentioned earlier in this article, this is a journey that began when I first started to think about teaching and learning with young children; it has continued through my teaching career and now into my work in teacher education. Future directions for this work will include constant reimaginings of how to teach teachers to do documentation and forge ever-expansive spaces for these practices. I plan to move this research into the teacher education sphere, starting with my own program by examining students' documentation artifacts in ways similar to the ones from my own teaching that I shared in this article. This will go alongside self-reflexive study of my own teaching practices in the teacher preparation classroom. I end with a call to the field, especially in the United

States, where policies that designate practice hold strong to the accountability of teachers to both produce and show evidence for predetermined "positive" child outcomes. As a collective of early educators, we must maintain challenges to assessment-focused narratives, not to throw them away completely, but to make room to see the expansive possibilities when we ask and seek answers to the questions: What is beyond development? What other stories can we tell about children?

1 All families consented to the use of classroom documentation as data, though not all families consented to children's images being published. All names represented are pseudonyms. Data included daily classroom documentation, including written anecdotal observations and photographs.

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