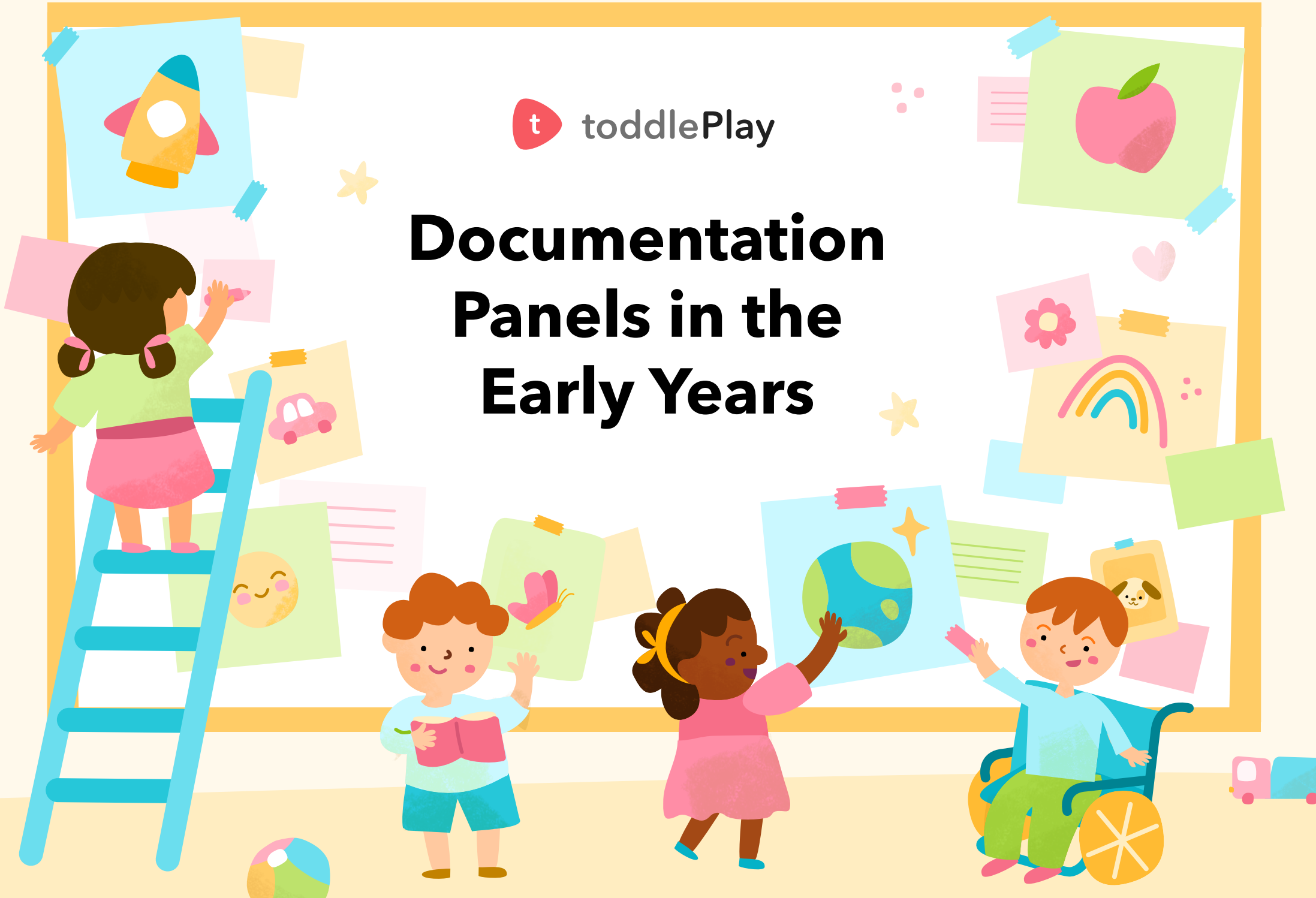








# Documentation Panels in the Early Years



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# Unveiling the learning journey - documentation panels

In early childhood education, the Reggio Emilia approach is renowned for nurturing a child's curiosity and creativity. Central to this method are documentation panels, **a powerful tool that captures the learning process and makes learning visible.**

These panels showcase the **collaborative nature of learning, demonstrating how individuals contribute to and draw from collective knowledge.** They offer educators insights into each child's abilities and challenges, guiding tailored interventions.

Beyond serving as records, these panels foster communication and reflection, enhancing metacognitive skills for children. They provide a **space for children to revisit their experiences, articulate their thoughts, and observe their growth** over time.

Additionally, documentation panels **bridge the gap between home and school.** The collaborative nature of these displays encourages family engagement, creating a holistic learning environment for the child.



# What might this look like?

A documentation panel is a **visually engaging and thoughtfully curated display** that incorporates mediums such as photos, artwork, and written observations. It's a collective narrative, showcasing a project's progression, inviting viewers into an intricate web of learning experiences. Think of it as a gallery that breathes life into the journey of each child. When viewing, you would see:



Photos of children in action



Chronological progression



Expression through art



Family contributions



Transcriptions of conversations



Engagement opportunities



Verbal expression



Aesthetic presentation



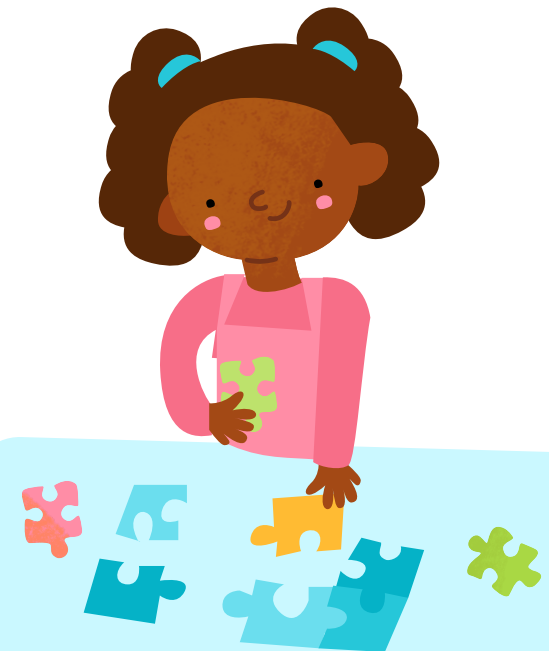
Artefacts and creations



Ongoing process



Reflections and interpretations



# Developing documentation panels

The holistic nature of documentation panels ensures a **well-rounded representation of the learning experiences within the setting**. Initiating this process can sometimes pose a challenge; breaking down the task into manageable steps or contemplating how to structure experiences for documentation can be initial hurdles. Leverage these aspects to craft **thorough and authentic documentation** that not only highlights the perspectives and inquiries of the children but also integrates adult insights and reflections seamlessly.

## Representing children's thinking and questions:



Look for instances where children express curiosity, ask questions, or engage in thoughtful discussions.



Observe their reactions to various stimuli, activities, or provocations, as these can provide insights into their thinking processes.



## Collecting information from children about their experiences:



Conduct interviews, discussions, or informal conversations with children to directly gather their thoughts and reflections.



Encourage them to share their experiences through drawings, verbal expressions, or written narratives, allowing for diverse forms of communication.

## Organising information to tell a story:



Identify key themes, patterns, or progressions in the information collected to create a cohesive and engaging narrative.



Consider chronological sequencing or thematic groupings to structure the information in a way that tells the story of the learning journey.

## Transcribing adult conversations about children's learning:



Capture discussions among adults, including teachers, parents, and other visitors, about the children's learning experiences.



Transcribe relevant portions of these conversations that highlight insights, observations, or noteworthy moments in the learning process.



# An educator's voice



Let's read how an early years educator developed understanding of documentation in early years and influenced a change of approach in the setting. **Taura Khongsat** is a passionate Early Years educator and leader who values playful inquiry while honouring children for who they are.

For fifteen years, Taura has worked in international schools while gaining inspiration from the Reggio Emilia approach where children are viewed as competent learners, each bringing unique gifts to the world. Taura's expertise is with four-to-six year olds and she has a special interest in documentation, the environment as the third teacher, and outdoor learning. She finds joy in building strong home-school relationships and in co-creating cozy and inviting spaces that foster creativity, connection, and belonging.



## Taura's notebook

Hello, I'm Taura and I want to share my journey of using documentation panels to make learning visible in the Early Years. By engaging in teacher research and carefully documenting children's ideas, questions and theories... beautiful stories evolve.





While visiting Reggio Emilia in 2014 during an International Study Group, like many, I was drawn into the learning spaces with wonder. I was intrigued by the way these **spaces communicated a deep sense of learning** through the use of documentation panels. They stood out to me as **a powerful way to showcase the voice of children** and the process of their learning while inviting others to participate through reflection and dialogue.



It was a **celebration of community** and the journey of young children making meaning. That trip to Italy was a turning point in my career as it empowered me to learn more about the work that goes into documentation panels.

I was left wondering:

- 1 Who was involved in these panels?
- 2 How much time was spent on these?
- 3 How do the educators organise their documentation?
- 4 How are meetings structured?
- 5 What systems do they hold to help guide the documentation process?
- 6 Who makes the panels?
- 7 Are there shared agreements between teachers, schools, and the community?

## An approach for highlighting learning

While I have developed the skills to document learning throughout my teaching journey, it wasn't until 2019 that I began creating documentation panels of my own. At the time, the EY team that I was a part of decided that the next step in our pedagogical development was to **make learning visible with documentation panels**.

While we were already making learning visible in various ways, there was still more we could do to enrich our documentation by incorporating research and reflection into our collaborative practice. **This was a shift from simply documenting what the children were doing by displaying photos, work, and captions to then questioning and analysing the artefacts brought to each meeting.**

We set off to focus on the role of the 'teacher as researcher', incorporating readings, engaging in reflective conversations, and using protocols to guide our interpretations of children's learning.

The documentation panels became a part of the learning environment, **allowing the surfaces to speak, bringing together community members from children to adults to dialogue about EY education.** It has proven to build confidence in our young learners and contribute to a sense of belonging.



## Creating documentation panels

While a documentation panel could be on an individual child, it is more common to be **based on a group of children through a process of learning**. This takes time - time for observation, time for meetings, time for response, etc. A panel can be worked on for weeks, months, even years. I like to start the process with **a big open space on a wall with the units of inquiry, along with skills and attributes that align with the curriculum**.

This offers a clear visual of the overarching curriculum requirements where I can easily **link observations that connect** and refer back to later with other documentation artefacts. **This is a space that acts as a timeline**, where I make notes of interests, questions, quotes, and add photos or QR codes to videos.

Once a big idea is identified, children can be engaged in many different ways and still **contribute to the learning and research of the concept**. For example, the documentation panel focusing on the concept of calm told a story about connections with family, friendship, nature, mindfulness, visual arts, music, and role play.



Documentation panels are **the work of all members of the community**. While the children's voice is highlighted, the teacher is the narrator. Children's quotes are woven throughout the panel alongside teacher questions and supporting research, highlighting changes in thinking and learning.

When I first began making panels, I used Google Slides to organise documentation collected. I then moved to using Canva, which was an exciting challenge in creative expression. Both of these platforms **allow for collaborative work**. During documentation meetings, we actively work on the making of panels as **we reflect and analyse the documentation presented** by colleagues.



## A process that informs pedagogy

When I began learning about pedagogical documentation panels, the team I was a part of spent a year deeply reflecting on our role as teachers. We read books and articles, watched videos, and analysed samples of pedagogical documentation.

There was a **great shift in beliefs and understanding of our role** during this time. As a team, we were open to this change, leading us to understand the **importance of flexibility while honouring each child** for who they are and what they bring to the group.

My image of the child laid the foundation to how I responded to **children's interests and actions**, **how curriculum was changed**, the ways **environments were set up** and how **time was spent throughout the day**, becoming more fluid and uninterrupted.

“Documentation is not about what we do, but what we are searching for.”

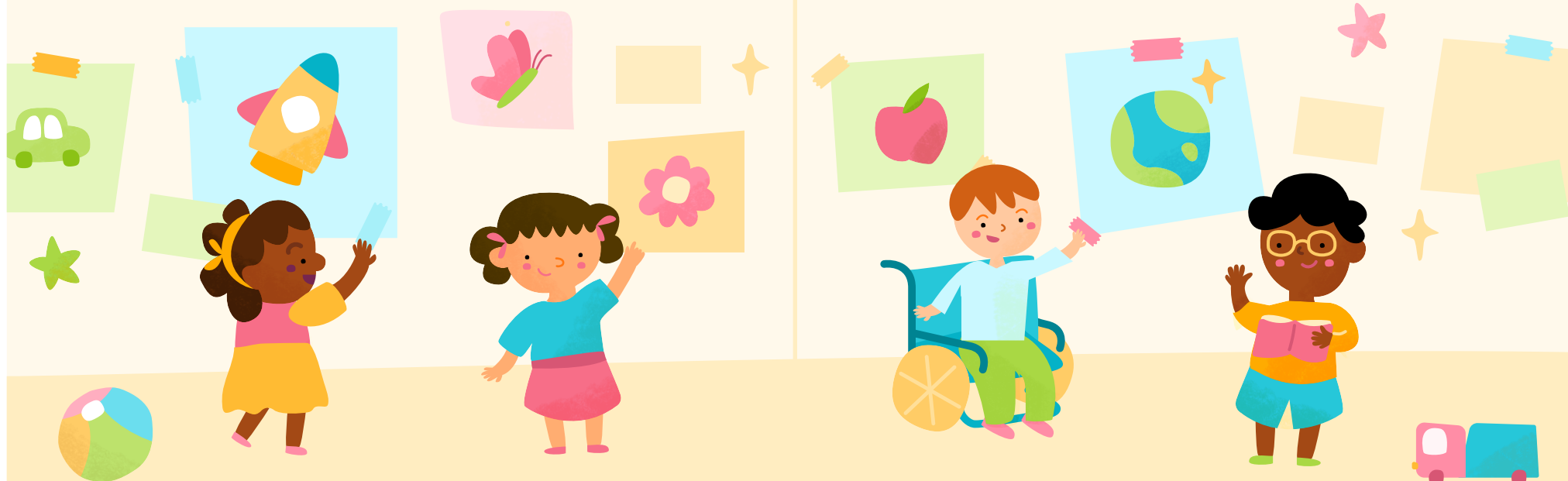
*(Carla Rinaldi)*





As a team, we meet regularly to share and support in our documentation journey. We met weekly to discuss and analyse documentation.

From these meetings, **next steps are planned, including provocations, environment changes, materials, and questioning**, as well as areas of research for us as teachers to help support the learning. Considerations are also made in regards to staff placement, parent or community experts.



## Making an empowered start to documentation panels

As this approach was new to us as a team, we came up with ideas around ways that we could **support one another with the use of protocols and a schedule**. In the beginning, it was difficult to narrow down ideas on what could be shared on a panel. We chose to have an overarching question (How does the environment foster creativity?) as a base for documentation research that first year. This question guided our focus on what and how we documented, while unifying the Early Years documentation panels.


Another area that can be challenging is organising documentation. We **created systems for collecting and storing documentation**, making sure that all teachers could contribute to the folders with photos and videos taken.

We regularly **scheduled time during meetings to reflect and discuss** shared readings about documentation panels. This helps identify areas to celebrate and next steps.



**Tried and tested tips for educators using, or wanting to try this process:**

- 1 Be okay with the unknown, **accept openness and flexibility** when creating a panel.
- 2 Allow time and an attitude of openness to get to **know the individuals in your group**. What will you do to uncover and develop the gifts of the children? Consider the environment, questions, and materials.
- 3 Develop **shared understanding and agreements** for your panels (aesthetic, colour, font, format). Include expectations to hold one another accountable through the process of making documentation panels.
- 3 Reach out to any photographers in the community that could possibly offer a workshop for your team. **Capturing emotion in photos** was an area that we worked on as a team.

- 
- 4 Know your curriculum so that you can easily **make connections** to your documentation.
  - 5 Choose a **collaborative platform** where all team members can have access to a shared document.
  - 6 Develop **organisation strategies** for photos, videos, children's work samples.
  - 7 Choose a **shared big idea** or something specific from the curriculum that you could focus on together as you try the process.







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