INTRODUCTION

What did you learn today? This simple question is repeated by many -- from teachers and parents to various community members -- each conducting their own assessment of the learning process in a particular school. Teachers are concerned about job performance assessments, parents are worried about the school’s performance in their children’s education, while policy makers and community members are concerned with the reputation of their neighborhood schools and the impact that the reputation can have on their neighborhood and value of their property. There is a presumptive solution to these issues: standardized tests, which provide us with a big picture of what is going on in the classroom, how well teachers have structured and delivered their lesson plans and how the school rates among other schools across the country. However, standardized tests do not answer all the questions about learning in schools. For example, do standardized tests really tell us how much our children know, or how well the teachers are doing their jobs or whether or not it’s a “good” school? In this article I will discuss the evils of standardized testing in early childhood classrooms and the negative consequences that test scores may have on educators, parents and students. Second, I will discuss the process of documentation as an appropriate alternative to standardized tests and a better way to get an understanding of what a child is learning.

In the first section of this paper, I will begin with a brief discussion of standardized tests. Next, I will provide arguments against standardized tests in the early childhood setting -- including the consequences of negative test scores and the inappropriate use of the tests. In addition, I will introduce the process of documentation as an appropriate alternative to standardized testing in the early childhood setting. I will begin the discussion on documentation
with a brief description of the Reggio Emilia approach to early childhood development, followed by a description of what documentation is all about and end with a discussion pertaining to the stages of documentation.

To begin, standardized tests are any form of test that requires all test takers to answer the same questions, or a selection of questions from a common bank of questions, in the same way. It is then scored in a “standard” or consistent manner, which makes it possible to compare the relative performance of individual students or groups of students. Standardized tests can be used for a variety of educational purposes and administered among students ranging from kindergarten through twelfth grade. For instance, educators may use the test to determine a child’s readiness for kindergarten, to identify students who need special-education services or specialized academic support, to place students in different academic programs or course levels, or to award diplomas and other awards. Standardized tests have long been used as one measure of a student’s progress in core subjects and if used for these purposes and appropriately, standardized tests can be a helpful tool in the process of evaluating a child. Standardized tests, unfortunately, do have inherent defects that make them dangerous as assessment tools.

THE EVILS OF STANDARDIZED TESTING

Not all people take comfort in the use of standardized tests. Those opposing standardized tests feel these tests create high stakes, question what the tests actually tell us and feel these tests are not fair or helpful evaluation tools. They argue that the tests do not measure the ability to think deeply or creatively and that their use encourages a narrowed curriculum, outdated

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1 Standardized Test. Available at http://edglossary.org/standardized-test/.
2 Id.
3 Id.
methods of instruction, and harmful practices such as grade retention and tracking.\(^5\)

Furthermore, opponents argue that the tests don’t take into account significant differences among children, but instead have the goal of sorting and ranking students and schools.\(^6\) Moreover, since data from test results are used for the purpose of demonstrating program accountability, the test does not provide information about what individual children have learned that could help to inform the teacher with instruction in the classroom.\(^7\)

Additionally, opponents of standardized tests argue that the high stakes involved in standardized tests lead to inappropriate use of the tests.\(^8\) For example, in response to state and federal policies aimed at improving teacher and school performance, standardized tests have been used in public schools when focusing on reform and improving student achievement.\(^9\) Such practices put teachers, administrators, students and parents under pressure to produce favorable results. This leads us to the issue of accountability, which is one major concern of parents, policy makers and community members as they hold schools and educators accountable for educational results and student performance. In this context, scores are used as a measure of effectiveness; and low scores may result in consequences for school and teachers ranging from job loss to less government funding towards a particular school, where federal funding hinges on test results.\(^10\) Low scores can prevent a student from advancing to the next grade or lead to school closings and teacher dismissals while high scores factor into tenure decisions and continued federal funding.\(^11\) For example, President Bush’s No Child Left Behind Act requires


\(^{6}\) Id.


\(^{8}\) Id.

\(^{9}\) Id.

\(^{10}\) Id.

states to rate schools based on test results in order to receive federal funds. This puts schools under significant pressure to perform well in order to receive federal funding and results in teachers structuring their lessons around scoring high on standardized tests. Consequently, this brings us to several questions-- are our children being properly assessed, and are parents provided with an accurate snapshot of what their children are learning or are these tests used as a means to an end as public schools compete for federal funding? Are schools structuring their curriculum around the core concepts that are tested on state-required standardized exams in order to achieve higher results? If so, this would serve as an example of schools using standardized tests in an inappropriate manner, in order to achieve an underlying purpose -- receiving federal funding -- instead of properly educating our children with diverse concepts and topics required to succeed in the future.

THE NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES OF STANDARDIZED TEST SCORES

The use of standardized test in early childhood education settings can have multiple negative effects on teachers, parents and students. First, teachers are limited in what they can teach because they are cornered into focusing their lesson plans and the classroom environment to the topics tested. This “narrowing” of the curriculum and heightened attention to standardized tests forces teachers to ignore content or even entire subjects that do not appear on the tests. Otherwise, they risk the chance of their students scoring poorly, therefore resulting in lost opportunities for promotions or even job loss. Second, parents are given an unreliable assessment of their children. Even though each test has the identical questions, children may not perceive the question the same way, some may just not be talented at taking multiple choice tests and some might not be as strong as others in the specific topics tested. Additionally, providing

12 Id.
parents with test scores is not very helpful to parents and doesn’t tell them much about their child in terms of their strengths, weaknesses or how they process information. Lastly, students are judged by educators and parents based on their test scores. A child who scores low might become labeled a slacker, or a child who isn’t as smart as their peers -- which may not be the case at all. And, vice versa: children who score well might be treated as smarter than their peers where they might just be talented test-takers or stronger in the particular topic tested.

**DOCUMENTATION: A BETTER WAY TO MEASURE LEARNING**

Fortunately, there are alternatives to the practices of testing and instruction for very young children.\(^\text{14}\) Assessment should be based on the way that young children learn and the way they are able to demonstrate their knowledge and skills.\(^\text{15}\) Appropriate assessment evaluates children not in relation to other children, but in relation to how they progress through developmental stages.\(^\text{16}\) Alternative methods for measuring children’s progress should: a) be based on actual observation and samples of the child’s work; b) include information gathered over time from various classroom projects and experiences; c) indicate a child’s broad progress in basic skills, conceptual understanding, problem solving, and reflective thinking; and d) display the motivation a child exhibits towards learning and school in general.\(^\text{17}\) Additionally, assessments should be based on an understanding of developmental sequences and individual styles of learning and be geared toward providing information that aids a teacher in teaching each child.\(^\text{18}\) One commonly used measurement for assessment is documentation, which comes from the Reggio Emilio approach to childhood education.


\(^{15}\) Id.

\(^{16}\) Id.

\(^{17}\) Id.

\(^{18}\) Id.
The Reggio Emilia Approach is an innovative and inspiring approach to early childhood education.\textsuperscript{19} It values the child as strong, capable, resilient and rich with wonder and knowledge.\textsuperscript{20} Every child brings with them deep curiosity and potential and this innate curiosity drives their interest to understand their world and their place within it.\textsuperscript{21} There are a few fundamental principles to the Reggio Emilia approach. First, children are capable of constructing their own learning.\textsuperscript{22} The idea is that children are driven by their interest to understand and know more.\textsuperscript{23} Second, children form an understanding of themselves and their place in the world through interactions with others.\textsuperscript{24} There is a strong focus on social collaboration where children investigate and problem solve together.\textsuperscript{25} Third, children are communicators - meaning communication is a process of discovering things, asking questions and using languages as play.\textsuperscript{26} A fourth fundamental principle is that the environment is the third teacher.\textsuperscript{27} The space in which a child is learning should be open space, which encourages collaboration, communication and exploration.\textsuperscript{28} Finally, the adult is a mentor and guide.\textsuperscript{29} The Reggio Emilia approach is child-led, and projects emerge based upon a child’s interest.\textsuperscript{30}

Next, there is an emphasis on documenting children’s thoughts. This is about making the children’s thoughts visible in many different ways including photos, transcripts of children’s

\textsuperscript{19} What is the Reggio Emilia approach? Available at: \url{http://www.aneverydaystory.com/beginners-guide-to-reggio-emilia/main-principles/}.
\textsuperscript{20} What is the Reggio Emilia Approach? Available at: \url{http://www.aneverydaystory.com/beginners-guide-to-reggio-emilia/main-principles/}.
\textsuperscript{21} Id.
\textsuperscript{22} Id.
\textsuperscript{23} Id.
\textsuperscript{24} Id.
\textsuperscript{25} Id.
\textsuperscript{26} Id.
\textsuperscript{27} Id.
\textsuperscript{28} Id.
\textsuperscript{29} Id.
\textsuperscript{30} Id.
artwork and visual representation of the learning taking place.\textsuperscript{31} Lastly, there are the hundred languages of children.\textsuperscript{32} This is the belief that children use many different ways to show their understanding and express their thoughts and creativity.\textsuperscript{33}

Documentation is a collection of a child’s work that inherently shows us a child’s progress throughout a school year. Specifically, documentation includes samples of a child’s work at several different stages of completion: photographs showing work in progress; comments written by the teacher or other adults working with the children; transcriptions of children’s discussions, comments, and explanations of intentions about the activity; and comments made by parents.\textsuperscript{34} Most importantly, documentation provides the intended audience (whether it be parents, administrators, community members or policy makers) with a clearer picture of a child or group’s developmental progress.\textsuperscript{35} Teachers serve as researchers, collecting as much information as possible to paint a picture of progress and outcome.\textsuperscript{36} The teacher’s job requires observation of individual children in a variety of areas of development -- including social-emotional, cognitive, language and motor -- over a long period of time.\textsuperscript{37} When expected to provide evidence that children are meeting learning standards, documentation is a natural way to make learning visible to the relevant parties.\textsuperscript{38}

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31 Id.
32 Id.
33 Id.
35 Id.
36 Id.
37 Id.
38 Id.
There are no mandated templates or programs for documenting children’s learning or educational experiences.\textsuperscript{39} Templates are helpful in many situations, however there is the risk that templates can be limiting.\textsuperscript{40} Documentation is not about filling in blank boxes; it’s about observing, planning, reflecting and evaluating a child’s learning experience.\textsuperscript{41} There are many ways to document children’s learning. For example, reflective journals, photographs, videos, children’s work, observations, portfolios, narratives, and learning stories.\textsuperscript{42}

The process of documentation can be done by one or more teachers. However, collaboration with other teachers or parents yields the best results.\textsuperscript{43} When two or more people discuss an event, each brings a different perspective and a new level of depth.\textsuperscript{44} This collaboration provides a lot more insight than a standardized test could provide. It is more than a score or a ranking; it is a look at what goes on in the mind of a child.

THE STAGES OF DOCUMENTATION

There are six stages of documentation that most early childhood educators move through both individually and collaboratively.\textsuperscript{45} The first stage is deciding to document.\textsuperscript{46} Here the documenter collects artwork from every child and displays such artwork in areas throughout the classroom or on bulletin boards just outside the classroom.\textsuperscript{47} The value in this stage is that by displaying all the artwork, the documenter is showing pride in the child’s work.\textsuperscript{48} The second

\textsuperscript{40} Id.
\textsuperscript{41} Id.
\textsuperscript{42} Id.
\textsuperscript{44} Id.
\textsuperscript{45} Id.
\textsuperscript{46} Id.
\textsuperscript{47} Id.
\textsuperscript{48} Id.
stage is exploring technology use.\textsuperscript{49} In this stage, documenters explore through the use of
equipment and photographs.\textsuperscript{50} The photos are usually either displayed on bulletin boards,
inserted in albums, or are placed in slide shows or movies and shown to the children and/or their
parents.\textsuperscript{51} Here the documenter works to incorporate the use of technology by proudly
displaying or creating a story with the child’s artwork.\textsuperscript{52} The third stage involves focusing on
children’s engagement.\textsuperscript{53} Here documenters learn to photograph specific situations or
experiences in order to capture a piece of the story of children engaging in learning.\textsuperscript{54} At this
stage, documenters become technologically competent and able to focus on important learning
events and experiences.\textsuperscript{55} The fourth stage involves gathering information.\textsuperscript{56} In this stage,
documenters title the photographs, events, and experiences and begin to write descriptions that
tell the story of children’s learning.\textsuperscript{57} Documenters begin to connect children’s actions and
experiences.\textsuperscript{58} The fifth stage is connecting and telling stories.\textsuperscript{59} Documenters combine work
samples, photographs, descriptions, and miscellaneous information in support of the entire
learning event.\textsuperscript{60} They tell the whole story with a beginning, middle, and an end, using
supporting artifacts.\textsuperscript{61} Documenters continue to use documentation artifacts to connect
children’s actions and experiences to curriculum and learning standards.\textsuperscript{62} Lastly, the sixth stage
is documenting decision-making. This stage is where documenter’s frame questions, reflect,

\textsuperscript{49} Id.
\textsuperscript{50} Id.
\textsuperscript{51} Id.
\textsuperscript{52} Id.
\textsuperscript{53} Id.
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\textsuperscript{58} Id.
\textsuperscript{59} Id.
\textsuperscript{60} Id.
\textsuperscript{61} Id.
\textsuperscript{62} Id.

The Power of Documentation in the Early Childhood Classroom. Available at:
\textsuperscript{58} Id.
\textsuperscript{59} Id.
\textsuperscript{60} Id.
\textsuperscript{61} Id.
\textsuperscript{62} Id.
assess, build theories, and meet learning standards, all with the support of documentation. Documenters become reflective practitioners who document meaningful actions/events, explain why they are important, and push themselves and others to continue thinking about these experiences.

CONCLUSION

The process of documentation is a more valuable and helpful measurement tool in the early childhood setting than standardized testing. It provides all relevant parties, including educators, parents, policy makers and community members, with a visible picture of the learning process in the minds of young children. Documentation creates meaningful relationships between teachers and students and allows for the involvement of parents in the child’s education. Lastly, documentation provides us with a more authentic and accurate way to hold schools accountable unlike standardized tests, which are often times driven by incentives for federal funding and do not provide a reliable picture of what transpires in the early childhood classroom. Documentation serves as an appropriate alternative approach to standardized test during the early school years where children speak one hundred languages, learning through play and exploration. Consequently, educators, parents, policy makers and community members would be wise to appropriately consider documentation as an alternative to standardized testing.

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63 Id.
64 Id.