How has our inquiry been informed by policy documents and research?

The Kindergarten Program Document tells educators, that “the primary purpose of assessment is to improve student learning”. (p.28) In addition, it states that, “young children show their understanding by doing, showing, and telling. Early Learning–Kindergarten teams need to use assessment strategies of observing, listening, and asking probing questions in order to assess and evaluate children’s achievement.” (p. 28) The document goes on to say that, “information is gathered through observation over time and in a variety of contexts in the child’s daily activity and behaviour, in order to provide rich and rigorous evidence about the child’s early learning and development.” (p.28) These statements confirm what we already knew about assessment in the kindergarten classroom but how does this actually look in practice and how can it be done in a manageable way?

We understood as kindergarten educators that children come to us with a wide range of skills and knowledge and that children’s development happens at different rates and at different times. As the Full Day Early Learning–Kindergarten Program (2010) states, “Team members should recognize that, because of the many factors that influence both learning and assessment, the degree of individual children’s success in achieving the expectations will vary widely from child to child.” (p.29) It was important to us to make sure that all children were assessed based on where they were in their development and that student’s success and progress was celebrated no matter where they were on the developmental continuum. Dodge, Heroman, Charles and Maiorca (2004) help us with this, “When goals and objectives are clear and concise yet broad enough to allow children to attain them in many different ways, positive child outcomes result” (p.11).

We were also concerned about how we were collecting assessment information and what information we were collecting. In Knowing in the Doing (2002) Roskos and Christie state that
“Very young children’s declarative knowledge tends to lag behind procedural knowledge, since they can more easily act out what they see done with writing and reading than say what they know or theorize about literacy” (p.48) It makes sense then that observation should be the primary way of collecting information about young children.

We wanted to be able to better use assessment information being gathered to help students move forward in their learning and to help us plan for instruction. The Full Day Early Learning – Kindergarten Program (2010) tells us, “Kindergarten team members interpret and analyse the notes they have taken to document their observations and make plans for further instruction and learning based on their analysis. (p.28)

In reading The Power of Documentation in the Early Childhood Classroom (Seitz, 2008) we realized that the idea of pedagogical documentation might help us to make sense of all of the issues we were exploring in the assessment of young children. In the article Seitz asserts, “An effective piece of documentation tells the story and the purpose of an event, experience, or development. It is a product that draws others into the experience – evidence or artefacts that describe a situation, tell a story” (p. 88) This resonated with our need to make the learning visible in our classrooms and to celebrate student’s learning stories. Seitz explains further, “The children and the teacher revisit the encounter through the documentation and reflect on the experience, which helps the children continue their conversation and drives forward their interest. This back-and-forth examination of the documentation helps the teacher and the children negotiate a curriculum that is based on the children’s interests.” (p. 91) Documentation, then, could also help with our need to use assessment information in planning and also to involve children in their own assessment.

We were also interested in the idea of being partners with the children in making the learning visible in our classrooms. But we also know that our context is different from that of Reggio Emelia in the sense that we do have a curriculum with outcomes. Wein, Guyevskey and Berdoussis discuss the idea of adapting pedagogies to particular contexts in their article Learning to Document in Reggio-inspired Education (2011), “to use the term ‘Reggio-inspired’ in early childhood programs is to recognize that one does not ‘implement’ or use the approach as a ‘model to copy’… Rather, educators outside of Reggio explore and re-interpret -- for their own contexts and through their own understandings -- a number of processes for which Reggio offers useful reference points.” To this end, we used our present understanding of pedagogical documentation as a guide but made the pedagogy fit our own context and understanding. (See Documentation in Early Childhood Classrooms in the Learning Artefacts section)