

Feature Articles

For Beauty, for culture, for memory, for storytelling: Building learning communities through pedagogical documentation

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Stefania is an Early Childhood teacher from Rome, Italy. She is currently a full-time PhD student, in receipt of a University Postgraduate Award, in the Graduate School of Education, The University of Western Australia. A recipient of the prestigious Creswick Foundation Fellowship for 2006, Stefania has recently returned from a unique six-month research internship in the municipal infant-toddler centres and pre-schools of the city of Reggio Emilia, Italy.

In Reggio Emilia, Stefania investigated research questions in dialogue with educators, children, and families. She observed how culture is created and learning communities are built through processes of pedagogical documentation. She is currently researching in dialogue with educators, children, and families at Bold Park Community School in Perth, Western Australia.



'What is a place?'

'A place is a city where I scared the birds, where there are fake lion statues.'

(Teacher and Sara, 3.9 years old: Dialogues with Places Exhibition, Reggio Emilia, Italy, 2006)

Sara thinks of home when she thinks of place: the small city of Reggio Emilia,

in northern Italy, was my home for six months in 2006 while I researched and experienced daily life in Arcobaleno Infant-Toddler Centre and Neruda Preschool.



The 'Reggio Emilia Educational Project' is strongly embedded in the cultural context of this small Italian city, in its history of participatory democracy and civic community Putnam, 1993, cited in Edwards et al. 1998a. The Reggio Emilia 'pedagogy of relationships and listening' (Rinaldi 2001a) is based on an image of the young child as a social being from birth; a competent, intelligent child who



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learns in relationship with others. Loris Malaguzzi, the educational theorist and founder of the Reggio Emilia approach, used to say 'your image of the child is where teaching begins':

It's necessary that we believe that the child is very intelligent, that the child is strong and beautiful and has very ambitious desires and requests. This is the image of the child that we need to hold. Those who have the image of the child as fragile, incomplete, weak, made of glass, gain something from this belief only for themselves. We don't need that as an image of children. Instead of always giving children protection, we need to give them the recognition of their rights and of their strengths (Malaguzzi 1994).

Pedagogical documentation, as practiced in the municipal infant-toddler centres and preschools of Reggio Emilia makes learning processes visible (Giudici et al. 2001). Documentation is: 'visible listening' (Rinaldi 2001a, p.83); a 'construction of traces'(Rinaldi 2001a, p.83); a 'social construction and an interpretation' (Dahlberg 1999a, p.32). It 'offers a research orientation, creates cultural artefacts, and serves as a collective memory' (Krechevsky 2001, p.259). Pedagogical documentation is a process of: listening to children; observing and recording their learning processes through notes, images, audio and video recordings; interpreting learning processes collegially; making the learning visible to the community. Documentation informs your practice, your future observations, and your future planning and evaluation, allowing you to be a reflective teacher and learner. Pedagogical documentation makes visible a strong image of the child, and an image of the teacher as researcher, learning and constructing knowledge with children:

Our job is to learn why we are teachers. It means keeping a distance from an overriding sense of balance, from that which has already been decided or is considered to be certain. It means staying close to the interweaving of objects and thoughts, of doing and reflecting, theory and practice, emotions and knowledge (Rinaldi 2006).

Documenting allows you to reflect on why and how you are a teacher; it allows you to view children from a perspective of uncertainty so that you can approach your teaching as the 'curiosity to understand' (Vecchi 2001), staying close to 'the interweaving of objects and thoughts, of doing and reflecting, theory and practice, emotions and knowledge'.

The Reggio Emilia Educational Project is not a model: the pedagogy views teaching, learning and development as cultural endeavours which are rooted in a historical and cultural context. The Reggio Emilia Educational Project is a provocation, a challenge for us to look upon our own cultural environments, our own assumptions, our own contexts; to develop our own educational projects, inspired by the continually evolving experience of a small town in northern Italy.

Reggio [serves] as a mirror in which we see ourselves and our traditions in a more conscious way' (Dahlberg, cited in Mardell 2001, p. 281).

In Arcobaleno and Neruda, I observed rich daily life with a focus on processes of documentation, to understand how documenting children's learning can support us in building relationships, constructing our schools as communities of learners within the wider community. I see documentation as that attitude and tool which can allow us to look through the Reggio Emilia mirror and see ourselves, to 'construct the meaning of school' (Rinaldi 2001a) for us in our own contexts, inspired by the work of the educators in Reggio Emilia.

Documenting begins with holding a 'valuing perspective' as they say in Reggio Emilia: 'an attitude that does not allow you to take anything for granted' (Mara, atelierista, Neruda Preschool). A valuing perspective is an attitude which allows you to see the extraordinary in the ordinary of daily life and to document it for the beauty, the culture, the memory, the narrative that it holds for you, your children and your families.

One day in May, during a conversation with the six-year-old children at Neruda preschool, their

teachers and I asked them: Why do we document? Why do we have panels on the walls? Chiara replied: 'For beauty'. So we asked them: 'what would Neruda preschool be like if there were none of the things that you do on the walls?' 'It would be ugly.' (Chiara, 5.9 years); 'You wouldn't understand anything.' (Alessia, 5.10 years); 'We wouldn't say the things that we said.' (Federico, 6.2 years). In reflecting on the meaning of documentation, the children realise that there is a connection, a relationship, between beauty and thought, between aesthetics and understanding. If there was no documentation on the walls the school would be ugly and we wouldn't understand anything. Reggio Emilia educators view beauty and aesthetics as a 'sensitivity to the structures that connect' (Bateson, cited in Vecchi 2006). Beauty lies in the relationships, in the connections.

In considering provocations from Reggio Emilia, we engage in the challenging endeavour of reflecting on our own cultural context and assumptions. Culture is a thread, a link, a relationship. Like aesthetics culture is 'sensitivity to the structures that connect'.

Culture is the way in which we relate to each other, it is a way of sharing meanings, but it depends on the fact that these meanings are constructed together in the same environment. [Authors translation from the Italian] (Bruner 1996d, p.17).

I asked a small group of parents of the four-year-old children at Neruda what meaning documentation has for them as families. Francesca replied: 'Documentation is culture.' Documentation is a way in which we relate to each other, sharing and constructing meanings together in the same environment. Observation, interpretation and documentation are processes through which we make meaning and, by making the documentation visible, we share meanings, experience, and values with the community, thus contributing to developing a new culture of childhood by sharing a strong image of the child and the teacher.

I believe that documentation is a substantial part of the goal that has always characterized our

experience: the search for meaning - to find the meaning of school, or rather, to construct the meaning of school, as a place that plays an active role in the children's search for meaning and our own search for meaning (and shared meanings) (Rinaldi 2001a, p.79).

When we asked the six-year-old children at Neruda why their teachers write notes and take photos all the time, they often replied 'as a memory'. We wished to understand this idea further, so we asked them: What is memory for? Federico reflected: 'To tell a story'.

This is Tommaso's story of the Ghost-Horse



Figure 1: *The Ghost-Horse (Tommaso 2006)*

... 'On top of his head he has a straight mane that goes all the way down his back; he needs it to keep the head and the bottom attached to his body. If he doesn't have it he dies. His legs are toothpicks, as long as sticks; his body is always fat and he always has hoofs. Otherwise he can't walk ... When he runs, all his muscles move, his mane waves, his legs bend and make a sound that is like the sound of drums ... His name is Ghost-Horse; he's male. I gave him that name because he likes death. He's a young horse, he's thirteen years old ... He always has to work; he always wants to go to school with his brother. He likes to have friends and jump obstacles.' (Tommaso 2006)

Tommaso's teachers listened, observed and documented his process of building a clay horse; they recorded his words and asked open questions about his work. For each child, they create 'a memory'. For Tommaso, this included images of his learning process; his words on the identity of his horse; his reflections on the challenges he encountered in the process of

building a clay horse; his drawings of horses; an image of the final product (the clay horse); and the clay horse itself.

So, at the end of the year Tommaso's mother brought home the ghost-horse (Figure 1) with the story; a story that holds within it the challenging process of building a clay horse and giving it life, a life which is related to Tommaso's own. How else would we have learned that the Ghost-horse needs his mane to keep his head attached to his body, that he makes the sound of drums, always has to work, and likes to go to school with his brother?

Documentation gives us a context for the process of learning: it gives us a story to share.

It is only in the narrative mode that one can construct an identity and find a place in one's culture (Bruner 1996a, p.42).

We come to know each other's minds, we develop 'intersubjectivity' (Bruner 1996a) through narrative, through the invention, telling and sharing of stories and, through intersubjectivity, we build communities of learners. Documentation is intersubjectivity; it is coming to know each other's minds; it is creating, believing in, and telling stories about learning, about adults and children learning in a community.

It is through an attitude of listening and observation, and through making documentation visible and share-able, that we can construct our schools as learning communities. In the words of the children, teachers, and parents of Reggio Emilia: for beauty, for culture, for memory, for storytelling, we listen, observe and document learning, to construct a new culture of childhood, a 'world of the possible' (Malaguzzi 1998a).

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