



Making Learning Visible Through Pedagogical Documentation

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“Documentation is not about finding answers, but generating questions.”

(Filippini in Turner & Wilson, 2010, p. 9)

We have always documented as a society – from cash register slips to medical records, family photo albums to report cards. But pedagogical documentation offers more than a record. It offers a process for listening to children, for creating artifacts from that listening, and for studying with others what children reveal about their competent and thoughtful views of the world. To listen to children, we document living moments with images, video, artifacts, written or audio recordings of what children have said, or other digital traces. These documented traces of lived experience, when shared with others, become a tool for thinking together. To hear others’ thoughts makes us realize there are many viewpoints.

Pedagogical documentation goes beyond the foundation of the developmental continuum to welcome both children’s perspectives and our study of their views. Here, for example, we see a child outside on a playground looking in a window. She has recently moved up from a toddler unit to the preschool room. She sees her former caregiver through the glass and puts her hand up to the window, as does her caregiver, the two of them matching palms, one large and



one small, through the glass. What does this moment tell us about this child's reality, her social and emotional world? What does it tell us about her former caregiver? What does it tell us about the person who took the image? When we lift such moments out of the flow of time, we can hold them still, study them, and consider a thoughtful, caring response.

*P*edagogical documentation was developed in the 1970s and 1980s by the educators of the infant-toddler centers and preschools of the municipality of Reggio Emilia in northern Italy and has spread world-wide (Edwards, Gandini & Forman, 2012). It supports educators in both including child development in their view but also looking beyond development to capture broader aspects of experience for reflection. Pedagogical documentation opens us up to relations and meanings that we have not thought to look for: this expansion of what we might learn to know and interpret is its gift to us.

How pedagogical documentation supports early childhood settings

Pedagogical documentation invites us to be curious and to wonder with others about the meaning of events to children. We become co-learners together; focusing on children's expanding understanding of the world as we interpret that understanding with others. We document not merely to record activities, but to placehold events so that we might study and interpret their meaning together. Out of that slowed-down process of teacher research, we have the potential to discover thoughtful, caring, innovative responses that expand our horizons. We discover what we did not yet know how to see. Pedagogical documentation inserts a new phase of thinking and wondering together between the act of observation and the act of planning a response. Rather than looking for what is known through assessment, pedagogical documentation invites the creativity, surprise and delight of educators who discover the worlds of children.

To see children as researchers working with others to make sense of the world, and educators as researchers bringing their curiosity to generate theories about children's social, intellectual, physical, and emotional strategies of communication is to view both children and educators in a new way – as participating citizens engaging their cultural surroundings in their full humanity: this process allows our humanity as thinking, feeling beings a richer place in our life as professional educators.

Learning to create pedagogical documentation

Educators learn new habits of mind in order to document (Wien, Guyevskey & Berdoussis, 2011). The first step is to make documenting a daily habit, in an ongoing process of inquiry. Learning to have the tools we need close at hand can take months of practice. Learning to choose what to document, because we see potential meaning

arising for children, requires practice, judgment and reflection. Here for example, an educator has noticed a boy bringing a pipe over to the bead stringing table. The educator is curious, and snaps a photo and notes these questions: “What does Miles want to know? What does he already know? Is this a place to begin a conversation with Miles about pipes?”

As the educator continues to observe, the child enjoys sending beads down the pipe and the educator notes: “Miles joyfully explores the combination of beads and pipes. He is able to peer down the length of the tube and see the bead he has inserted. He hears it skitter its way along the pipe” (Avery, Callaghan & Wien, forthcoming).

A second step in creating documentation is the willingness to share what we have noted and our curiosities with others. Educators “go public”, willing to show others their documentation and to be interested in others’ responses to it. We hold onto this stance of curiosity. What does this experience mean to this child? To other children? To parents/caregivers? To other educators? As we widen our frame of reference for reflecting on experiences, and share our practice with children, families, and colleagues, we strengthen partnerships, and open ourselves to new understandings.

Alongside these developing interests, educators develop visual literacy skills, gaining understanding of how the eye reads information. Removing clutter, selecting just the images that show what we are noticing, and offering documentation in amounts that can be absorbed by children, or parents/caregivers, visitors, and colleagues takes considerable practice. Educators grasp that documentation for children is highly focused with child-friendly text. For parents and visitors, documentation may be at adult height, with expanded text and commentary.

A leap in understanding occurs when educators grasp that documentation is more than a record or retelling of an experience that shows what children said and did – though this is indeed the starting point. Documentation offers insight into children’s thinking, feeling, and worldview. When we make their ideas and working theories about the world visible to others, we may then study those views with others to broaden our perspectives and our responsiveness. With Miles, we see a child delighted by his discoveries about beads coursing down a pipe and his educator notes: “there is something of beauty in setting a thing in motion and watching it go” (Avery, Callaghan & Wien, forthcoming).

It is when we have made children’s thoughts, feelings, and values visible that we can study the meaning of events to children, offering our thoughts collaboratively so that our own understanding widens, deepens, and takes in multiple perspectives. This process of group study of educators’ attempts to make children’s thinking and feeling visible is what makes documentation pedagogical. Documentation becomes pedagogical because the group study of documentation teaches educators about ways that children learn, and



ways that adults read children's learning. Our intent is to deepen empathy, to construct ethical relationships (Bath, 2012; Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 2006; Rinaldi, 2006).

What will we make of pedagogical documentation in Ontario? What will it become in our minds, hearts and hands, as we strengthen partnerships with families, value diversity and inclusion of all and support children's right to an empathetic childhood in which educators are willing to look at the meaning of life for our youngest citizens?

Questions to ask when studying documentation

- What are we trying to understand? What are we asking pedagogical documentation to help us look for?
- What do we see when we look closely and attentively at the documentation?
- What questions does this looking raise for us? What do we wonder about?
- What are our working theories about what we see?
- What does the documentation reveal about children's working theories, feelings, attachments and interests?

References

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