Curiosity, Curriculum and Collaboration Entwined: Reflections on Pedagogical Documentation

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Abstract

Documentation is an essential component of the Reggio Emilia philosophy and is vital to the process of on-going professional development for educators there. It situates teachers in the position of researchers of themselves and of the children whose lives they share. It is this attitude which has prevented the Reggio Emilia philosophy from becoming stagnant or a replicable model. However, as North Americans begin to be inspired by this philosophy, they often find documentation difficult, wondering where to start or they find it difficult to move beyond seeing documentation as a form of assessment. Their vision becomes limited by what I have called the assessement or curriculum lens. Written from a reconceptualist perspective (e.g., Canella, 1997; Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 1999/2007; Iannacci & Whitty, 2009) and drawing from the current writing on documentation, this article will explore how the three themes of curiosity, collaboration and curriculum are entwined and comprise essential components of pedagogical documentation.

Introduction

Pedagogical documentation originates in the educational approach from the infant-toddler and preprimary schools in Reggio Emilia. It is a process of recording children's thinking through the use of written notes, videotaped and audio taped conversations, and photographs. These are organized to make the process of children's thinking visible to the children, educators and parents. Documentation has been described as a "search for meaning" (Rinaldi, 2006, p.63), a "curiosity to understand" (Vecchi, 2001. p.158) and "an attitude towards teaching and learning" (Tiziana Filippini quoted by Turner & Wilson, 2010, p. 6). I use the term pedagogical documentation as introduced by Dahlberg, Moss & Pence (1999/2007) because it places the documentation process in the middle of the educational relationship between teachers and students, not as a process removed from this relationship. I think this helps to distinguish this vision of documentation from the more common interpretation of documentation as creating a documentary, or telling a story. In an interview Filippini says, "Documentation is not about the reorganization and arranging of material with the aim of assembling a descriptive linear story. Rather documentation is a narrative pathway with arguments that seek to make sense of the events and processes" (Turner & Wilson, 2010, p. 8).

To be a researcher is to be curious. When educators start with curiosity and a search for meaning as an entry into pedagogical documentation, they may find themselves in a new, and possibly uncomfortable position as teacher-researcher.

In this article I propose to show how the three themes of curiosity, collaboration and curriculum interconnect and comprise essential components of pedagogical documentation. By examining each of these components, I hope to assist those who are new to pedagogical documentation to find their way to enter into this process. For educators who have some experience with documentation, I hope this discussion will deepen your understanding of this process. I share my thinking from the perspective of a university educator who has taught graduate courses in pedagogical documentation and worked with teachers and student teachers in schools who are beginning this process.

Curiosity

To be a researcher is to be curious. When educators start with curiosity and a search for meaning as an entry into pedagogical documentation, they may find themselves in a new, and possibly uncomfortable position as teacher-researcher. Teachers have said to me that they do not see themselves as researchers of children. They seemed to be uncomfortable with the title because to be a researcher in their minds came with implications of objectivity and academic rigor. To clarify this new vision of teacher-researcher that is possible within the context of pedagogical documentation, I will begin with a short examination of where these concerns for objectivity have originated.

There is a long history of child observation in the field of early childhood education. G. Stanley Hall brought the scientific method to child observation by systematically and objectively observing children with the intent of establishing developmental norms in the 1920s. The Child Study Movement had a major impact on programs for young children including the Institute of Child Study in Toronto (Mayfield, 200, p. 216). This form of observation continues. For example, a text written in 1994 (now in a third edition), *Through the Looking Glass: Observations in the Early Childhood Classroom,* (Nicholson & Shipstead) distinguishes between subjective and objective observation, with the goal of becoming more objective with experience. They present observational methods that include such strategies as running records, anecdotal records, checklists, and rating scales. The purposes of these observations are usually to assess whether a child meets a curriculum standard or developmental norm, and where the child might need extra support or remediation. This perspective places children within a hierarchal system with adult development, or a particular standard seen at the top and desired endpoint. In this way, children are viewed as not like us, and always in a deficit position in relation to the mature adult. This was very much part of my own training and my own experience as a teacher educator in the 1970s through 1990s. More recently, reconceptualist early childhood educators, such as Canella (1997), Jipson (2001), Dahlberg, Moss and Pence (2007), Iannacci and Whitty (2009) and Lenz Taguchi (2010) influenced by Foucault and other post-structuralist thinkers have challenged this perspective due, in part, to the deficit view of children that a child developmental model presents, and the singular view of child development and norms where western European theories of child development are seen as universals applicable to all children in all contexts worldwide.

Part of the reconceptualist critique lies in the assumption of objectivity in the scientific method as well as around issues of power and control that arise in the developmental model. Together these raise concerns about observation as a form of surveillance of children with all of the issues of power and control that this implies. The idea of documentation as beginning with curiosity opens up the purpose of the observation and moves it away from looking for the expected with a predetermined goal of how does this child or the learning demonstrated, fit with norms or expectations.

To use the term pedagogical documentation as Dahlberg, Moss & Pence (1999/2007) do is to bring the teacher and children into a relationship around the events of teaching and learning. They explain,

> When you document you construct a relation between yourself as a pedagogue and the child/children, whose thinking, saying and acting you document. In this respect the practice of documentation can in no way exist apart from our own involvement in the process. (p.147)

In this way the teacher is neither engaged in surveillance, nor is the teacher expected to be an objective observer. The act of documentation is a relational act in which the documenter is fully aware of his/her own subjectivity and participation in the event.

Les Back, a British sociologist, addresses subjectivity through the following analogy:

> The brilliant melancholic writer Theodor Adorno once commented that truth is like a handful of water. I think Adorno chose the right kind of analogy but perhaps his chemistry is wrong. Truth might be better viewed as a handful of sand. Most of the grains slip through our fingers, but something sticks and can be held in the palm. In a desperate attempt to hold onto these pure grains - and in the intense heat produced by our desire to know and understand - a lens is forged. It is made up equally of the grains of truth that form its elements and the hand that fashions it. (Back, 2007, p. 99)

Pedagogical documentation changes what we notice and pay attention to. It is about putting on new lenses (note the plural) and about being aware of the lenses you are wearing and the role that your own subjectivity has had in creating these lenses.

Here I would ask the reader to reflect a minute on the lenses that you bring to pedagogical documentation. What are the origins of these lenses? Consider the roles that your own educational experiences (including pre-service education), governments, school administrators, parents, and colleagues play in forming the lenses you bring to your work with children.

For teachers working in preschool or child care settings often it is a licensing or accreditation body that springs to mind. Licensing regulations frame how teachers think about such components as their physical environments including furniture, materials and equipment, classroom routines, safety, and adult-child ratios. In discussions about the Reggio philosophy, I have heard educators say, "I can't do that because licensing would not approve." Here we return to the issue of how institutions construct who we are as educators. In my experience working with teachers in public school settings, a strongly ground lens is created by mandated curriculum or standards which causes teachers to see children in terms of accountability for assessment purposes for reporting to parents and administrators. This accountability has been ingrained and becomes the assessment or curriculum lens. It is time to use Les Back's words to take up new handfuls of sand to form other lenses that help us consider new possibilities. Olsson (2009) cautions,

> When working with pedagogical documentation there is a great risk of just retelling and nailing down the story of the already obvious. There is a risk that we document that which we already know about children and learning and that by doing that we immobilize and close down the event. (p.113)

To create new lenses, formed by curiosity, is also part of the shift in relationship of the documenter to the situation being documented. It extends the idea of curiosity about children to being curious about your own role as an educator in relationship to the situation. Documentation is a process of making choices – choosing what to document from among many events. In the process of making the documentation public to ourselves, the students and other teachers and parents, we become aware of our own choices and values. Documentation serves as a mirror because what we choose to document reveals and reflects back to us what we consider important, as well as helps us to see ourselves as educators within the educational relationship.

Beginning to Document

"Where do I begin?" "What should I document?" are questions that I often hear in my classes and workshops on pedagogical documentation. Documentation seems overwhelming to teachers that with so much happening in a classroom they honestly wonder where to start. Here I return to the notion of curiosity. What do you wonder about? What do children wonder about? How are they making sense of their world? These are different questions from those generated by the assessment lens that asks questions about what does the child know, where is that child having difficulty? How does s/he measure up in relation to a standard or learning outcome that most educators, in my experience, use to view the children in their class? By assessment lens, I include curriculum expectations and what must be documented for reporting to parents. This is not to say that these are unimportant, but they limit what is possible. Sandra Piccinini, President of the Infant-Toddler Centres and Preschools of Reggio Emilia explains,

> One of the most common misinterpretations is to understand documentation as a strategy to teach better what we as teachers already know. Instead, documentation needs to be a way to get to know better what the children, in their own way, already know. (Turner & Wilson, 2010, p. 8)

Goldhaber (2001) draws parallels between documentation and research that she calls a "cycle of inquiry". The cycle begins with framing a question, collecting data and artifacts, organizing, interpreting data, reframing questions, and concludes with planning and responding that in turn leads into the cycle again (Goldhaber & Gandini pp. 134-138). Goldhaber cautions that the cycle of inquiry process is "neither linear nor tidy" (p. 135).

Taking time to watch a child engaged in a problem or exploration may open up possibilities for an extended investigation.

Carlina Rinaldi, President of Reggio Children and former pedagogista in the Reggio schools, calls on teachers to engage in listening to children that engages all of the senses (Rinaldi, 2006). Olsson (2009) suggests that the documenter pay attention to the full context of a situation including the environment, materials, people and interactions when undertaking documentation because all of these elements matter in the interactions taking place (p. 118).

One place to begin is in "ordinary moments" such as the sequence of photos, "The Watch's Tick-Tock" segment described in *The Diary of Laura* (Edwards & Rinaldi, 2009) and in *The Hundred Languages of Children* exhibit and book by the same title (Edwards, Gandini & Foreman, 1998). In this sequence a teacher is sensitive to a moment in time that is captured in photos and beautifully describes a one-year-old child as a theory-maker as she listens to the watch on the teacher's wrist and then places her ear to the photo of the watch in a catalogue lying on the table.

Taking time to watch a child engaged in a problem or exploration may open up possibilities for an extended investigation. An ordinary moment may provide the educator with deeper understanding of a child's abilities and interests. It may provide an opportunity to see how two or more children build on each other's interest. Can the lens of curiosity help us see beneath the obvious, into the child's thinking and theory-making? Does this help us see the child in a new way? How might we offer this back to the child through a visible record of the child's experience? How might this provide a mirror to reflect what engaged us, as well as the child? Given what we have observed, do we continue to watch and reflect, or does it seem to be the time to contribute in some way to the interaction? Do we ask a question? What might we offer in terms of a new provocation such as a new material or a familiar material in a new way so as to create an opportunity for children to inquire more deeply or to see a new point of view? From the stance of curiosity we are open to possibilities, rather than offering this question or material as a way to bring closure.

Another place to begin is at the beginning of a project or area of investigation. Again, looking through the lens of curiosity, what questions might we ask ourselves as we begin to document? What will the children find most engaging? How are they approaching this problem? What are the interactions between them? How are they constructing understanding between themselves?

Olsson (2009) suggests that we don't look for "the taken-for-granted qualities of things and persons in time and space" (p.119). Rather, she says, "Look instead for and construct the verb-form in the events; focus on that which is coming about" (p. 119).

She continues,

> Do not look for knowledge, look at learning processes, that is, look for and construct how the involved bodies join in a problematic field. Do not look for methods, look for and construct how the entire culture surrounding the entering of a problematic field proceeds; take into account thoughts, speech, actions, but also material and environments. (p. 119)

In a joint research project between Reggio Children and Project Zero, resulting in the book, *Making Learning Visible* (Giudici, Rinaldi, & Krechevsky, 2001), Project Zero educators, Krechevsky and Mardell write about the distinctions between the Reggio educator's interest in group learning and the North American preoccupation with individual learning which drives instructional and assessment practices, even when we include group work as part of the learning experience. One of the goals of pedagogical documentation is to shift the lens from the individual to how learning happens within a group, without losing sight of the individual.

Curriculum

Underlying this theme of curiosity and beginning pedagogical documentation has been a subtext concerning curriculum. Here I will use curriculum in the broad sense to mean what happens, both formally and informally in educational settings, whether it be early childhood programs or elementary school settings. There is often a tension between mandated curriculum or program expectations and how teachers and children with their own passions, desires, and skills want to live their lives together.

Pedagogical documentation can be a means to open possibilities for children and teachers. When documentation is constructed through the lens of curiosity rather than assessment, teachers, parents and children can together be more aware of a myriad of possibilities. Pedagogical documentation becomes a planning/assessment tool. This is not the assessment tool of the report card, although it certainly can contribute to the teacher's understanding of children which is very useful in writing report cards, but it goes deeper to becoming a planning process, and provides insights of what deeply engages children, or as Olsson (2009) describes it, the problems they create and recreate.

In my work with elementary teachers, it has been especially challenging to help them see beyond the curriculum lens and use pedagogical documentation as a way to see what the children have learned. My challenge has been to support them to use pedagogical documentation as a form of reflection and planning tool to help them support children to inquire and construct meaning together. It takes time to understand pedagogical documentation in this wider sense and to feel confident and comfortable in following children's interests when there is a curriculum document, standard, administrative, peer or parent pressure (real or perceived) watching over your shoulder.

Documentation is often understood to be a final product that is placed on walls designed to tell the story of an event (Rinaldi, 2006, p. 62-63). However, as Filippini has written, it is more than a linear narrative. It is a process and that should be made visible throughout a project, as a means to invite others, including children into their process. This also places it in a very different perspective from the surveillance model of observation. Children become participants in the journey, as do their parents and others. When the process of learning becomes visible, it can become an invitation to viewers into the work that opens up collaborative possibilities.

Collaboration

In my work with teachers, I have come to understand how essential collaboration is also pedagogical documentation. An example of this appears in "Supporting Imagination in Play through Pedagogical Documentation" (Tarr, Bjartveit, Kostiuk, & McCowan, 2009). As we describe in this article, it was clear to us that only through collaboration with others was it possible to see beyond the curriculum lens to see what was engaging children at a deeper level than the teachers' curriculum goals related to color and shape. This has been my experience over time in working with many different groups of teachers and students. Fyfe (Gandini & Kaminsky, 2004) reminds us that there must be multiple frames for analysis of documentation including developmental progressions, curriculum goals, and open-ended questions about learning and thinking (p.10). One of the questions that I ponder is that if a group of teachers does meet together around documentation artifacts, what will help them as a group see beyond the "curriculum lens"? In other words, if we look through the same lens, what will disrupt that vision to create other possibilities? Is it enough to say we need to look at these from multiple perspectives around such questions as what is going on here? Does this process require a pedagogista (curriculum consultant) as is present in the Reggio schools? Who within an educational institution can play this role? How do we avoid power relationships so that open discussion can occur and multiple perspectives respected? How is trust established so that conversations based on real curiosity can take place? What is needed to maintain a climate of openness so these conversations can be about the documentation and what the children are doing and thinking and not focused on one teacher's practice that may be threatening?

Teachers have asked some of the following questions which may best be addressed through the process of collaboration: "How can we find the founda-

tional themes that drive the work of children?" "How can we find ways to be more present when documenting?" "How does our image of the child relate to our lens when documenting?"

Collaboration is also important in creating documentation to share and invite others into the conversation. In my classes, I often have teachers select about six images from their larger collection that seem to them to distill the essence of the story they are telling. In a group we may discuss and debate the visual message and how we interpret these images as part of deepening our understanding of what is going on. We look at possible narratives. Whose perspective is represented? What has been captured that has engaged us? We "listen" to the text transcriptions that the documenter has collected to hear for what is truly engaging the children beyond what may appear to be on the surface of their conversations. We ask about context and what might be essential for us to know to help us make sense of the event. If it is not documentation of a completed project, we will ask where this might go based on what we have seen and heard.

Challenges

It is difficult for teachers to find time to share documentation within the course of a school day or school week. Many teachers work in the isolation of their own classrooms. Some who team-teach may have time to plan lessons but to discuss documentation as an essential part of this process is still something new or not understood by them. In some cases where teachers are working in isolated situations they have found collaborators in other settings to discuss their documentation, even sharing work in a secure on-line environment. To make documentation public, even within a small group of colleagues and to invite others into a conversation requires trust because it creates a place of vulnerability and a place not knowing. It means that one must be open to new possibilities. It may also require advocating to school administration to build in periods of time to support teachers collaborating on pedagogical documentation.

I have argued that pedagogical documentation must begin with an attitude of curiosity around children's becoming, rather than their acquisition of knowledge, and how standards or learning expectations make it difficult for teachers to shift their perspective to see possibilities other than this. And finally I have illustrated the essential nature of collaboration in the process of pedagogical documentation.

I think that Olsson (2009) has identified the largest challenge for those wishing to change how they live with children when she writes,

> The focus of work with pedagogical documentation must be on the processes of learning, not knowledge or goals to attain. Moreover learning must be treated as impossible to predict, plan, supervise or evaluate according to predefined standards. This presents a real challenge today, as we have seen throughout this study how much importance is put on the achievement of predetermined goals. (p.117)

As large as this challenge is, I believe that it is a tension that can be negotiated through pedagogical documentation. Pedagogical documentation is a means of advocating for children as active meaning-makers of the world around them, not as consumers of predetermined knowledge. This may seem like a large task to undertake, and it has not been my intent to make pedagogical documentation seem too difficult or too theoretical and to discourage those who wish to begin this process. To begin to document is to begin a journey of changing perceptions and changing actions. It is not a journey to be undertaken by those who are certain about what counts as teaching and learning. It is an exciting journey for those who are curious, open to living with some uncertainty and who believe in children's curiosity as well as their own.

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