

# The Role and Responsibility of Documentation

## *The power within simple ideas*

*An important place to begin in our understanding of 'documentation' and how to develop it within our own practice, seems to be in establishing that the process itself is sustained by what Loris Malaguzzi has told us: 'All that we need to know about children for children is best learnt from children themselves.'*

**IT IS THROUGH OUR CLOSENESS** to children, observing sensitively with care and time that children's learning and thinking is revealed. Vivian Gussin Paley, (*see book review in REFJ 2. ed*) has spent her working life listening, watching and reflecting upon how children think and learn. She believes that the more children work to reveal their ideas and thoughts to us, the more we will be able to help them answer the questions they have. Given that children are born with an innate and powerful drive to learn, they soon become irrepressible in showing themselves as competent learners once they understand someone is interested enough to listen and watch them.

Accepting the underpinning simplicity of this idea is the first step in discovering that tuning in to children's thoughts and ideas is a more complex process than we might have imagined. The difference for us, as adults looking in on childhood, lies in the relative range of experiences children have to draw upon to make sense of their world. Though their frame of reference is smaller than ours, this does not belie their capacity to enquire, problem solve, reason and think creatively.

Once we acknowledge that children are competent thinkers we will need to take an imaginative step into their world, to explore with them the meaning of their logic. This undoubtedly leads us towards a much more complex interpretation of their learning experiences. Standing back, listening, and seeing what children offer us in their thoughts and actions, will require us to consider something else, the consequences of our own emotional and logical engagement, interpretation and choices.

### ***Subjectivity in learning and teaching***

We cannot experience anything without making it our own: our personality, emotions and acts of mind will necessarily shape our interpretation. Observation can only be a subjective process because we cannot distinguish between the sensory information we gather and the interpretation that we bring to it. Here is a wonderfully liberating thought for the world of education:

**'Maintain a readiness to change points of view so as never to have too many certainties.'**

LORIS MALAGUZZI

Documentation places before us possibilities for personal and professional reflection that could provide a catalyst for change - celebrating the craft-knowledge or art of teaching. It is liberating: we cannot be 'wrong' in how we do it nor in our own reflections. But at the same time we need to accept that we may not be absolutely accurate about our interpretations of what we have seen and heard.

This is how research develops and documentation can become a research tool for educators: interpretations of children's thinking develop into hypotheses and we find ourselves 'researching children researching their world.'

When we document children's learning and try to offer our own thoughts about what is happening, we are using 'research in practice'. In Reggio, documenting is the linchpin of continuing professional development, done with colleagues. New understandings are forged through this researchful practice and practitioners become confident and articulate.

### ***The role of the adult in places of learning***

Young children's flexibility of thought and ideas seems to lead us towards something that our education system may not yet be prepared for: learning is subjective, complex, cannot be mandated and needs us to reinterpret our role, becoming 'researchers in practice' rather than all-knowing teachers.



Our role in this context is to draw out the thoughts and ideas of children and to support their learning once we have first established what matters to them. Similarly, we can see just how much children seek out teachers themselves to support and lead them in their learning.

Documentation is thus deliciously unpredictable. It becomes multi-layered and challenging because it must reflect the unique, rich and abstract nature of every child's mind. The child is constantly acting upon the world with their drive to make sense, form connections, and develop their understanding. This requires us to acknowledge that we need to make choices about the best ways and contexts to develop, nurture and support children's lines of enquiry, with no guarantees that we have got it right.

So documenting the active learning that engages children's hearts and minds begins to mirror the complexity of learning itself. Documenting is a tool that helps make the learning process visible but also makes evident the unpredictability and complexity of the processes we traditionally think of as teaching and learning.

### ***Curious children require curious adults***

Documentation as an approach requires adults to be just as curious as children in 'researching children, researching the world'. If we believe in listening as a pedagogical tool, then it is worth considering why this is important. It seems that the key behaviour we are demonstrating to children is one of attention when we listen. Nancy Kline points out that it is the quality of our attention that will help determine the quality of people's thinking. When listening is of a high calibre, the human mind cannot help but be ignited.

'The best conditions for thinking, if you really stop and notice, are not tense. They are gentle. They are quiet. They are unrushed. They are stimulating but not competitive. They are encouraging. They are paradoxically both rigorous and nimble. Attention, the act of listening with respect and fascination is the key to a thinking environment...When you are listening to someone, much of the quality of what you are hearing is your effect on them. Your attention, your listening is that important.'

NANCY KLINE, TIME TO THINK, 1998

In Reggio, this listening approach leads to the development of experiences that challenge and further provoke children's thinking. Teachers write a 'declaration of intent' rather than prescriptive forward planning. This is described by practitioners in Reggio Emilia as a 'listening pedagogy'.

'If we believe that children possess their own theories, interpretations and questions, and that they are co-protagonists in their knowledge-building processes, then the most important verb in educational practice is no longer to talk, to explain, to transmit, but to listen.'

CARLINA RINALDI, REGGIO CHILDREN 1998

Documentation enables and requires the practitioner to take responsibility for understanding the process of children's thinking, not from a book or national initiative, but from the very children in front of them, with whom they share their time. Documentation in this sense becomes the most powerful and effective professional development tool available to us.

### ***Documentation as an approach***

Documentation is an approach to learning and teaching like no other. To document is to ascribe to every child their own place in the sun. It is a constructivist approach, rooted in the belief that learning is about the space between what we understand now and what we do not yet understand. The most favourable context for bridging this space is to be amongst others, for learning is an innately social process.

### ***The importance of relationships***

The quality of the learning relationships is the key to effective documentation. The power of children to learn from each other is often underestimated and we may, as a result, miss opportunities to make learning flourish. When we document what children say and do, we begin to value the way they learn from each other, recognising personal preferences, fields of expertise, knowledge bases, interests and schemas.

Children need to be valued and developed in the 'starring role' within the theatre of their own learning. They are, as Reggio reminds us, the protagonists. This leads us to consider the responsibility we are offering children in their own learning and the extent to which we both expect and enable them to use their own minds; to make choices; ask their own questions; construct their own meanings; understand their rights and responsibilities as active citizens in the school community. Do we value children as members of our democracy, no matter how young?

### ***Nothing ventured, nothing gained***

Through documenting, we become more tuned in to children, skilled at analysing and interpreting their actions and projecting possibilities for further enquiry. The uncertainty of it all is what makes it a dynamic learning approach for the teacher just as much as it does for the children. It rewards us in developing our own sense of agency as professional educators, in the best way that all bottom up approaches do. Unlike many of our professional edicts and experiences, there is nothing prescriptive about documenting.

Teachers are the agents of change; as such they are key to the success and sustainability of creativity measures.

DAVID MILIBAND, EX-MINISTER OF STATE FOR SCHOOL STANDARDS

Colleagues in Reggio are very keen to ensure that people understand their belief that we cannot teach if we do not learn at the same time. The sage at the front of the stage requires some re-modelling in the context of documentation. The act of teaching becomes contingent upon the needs and interests of those that are learning.

Documenting children's learning also challenges the traditional 'transmission model' of learning because it reveals the uncertainties in our own thinking about learning. It requires us to reflect about

what we have observed and project what might be going on inside the minds of the children in front of us. In this way, it validates confusion and doubt as learning opportunities for both adults and children. Carlina Rinaldi reminds us of the value of moving away from seeing doubt, confusion and error as moments of weakness to seeing them as rich learning opportunities. Learning itself can then be upheld, as subjective, dynamic, and constructed within the companionship of others.

### Open-eyed playfulness

Children never fail to surprise us in their own interpretations of the world, which so often have within them a logic of childhood that is more endearing or sensible than reality itself. This is important as it is one of the factors that make documentation professionally fulfilling. The children's interpretations of the world offer us once again the world through the eyes of the child, open to new possibilities, novelty and playful ideas. The playfulness with ideas that characterises children's thinking can become contagious. The warmth and closeness of relationships between both children and adults that follows the process of documentation can bring increased humour to the setting. This way of working nourishes the adults as much as it does the children.

### Partnership in learning

When we choose to take a leap of faith in children's capacities and use documentation as part of our everyday teaching, planning becomes acutely tuned to what the children think and understand and, therefore, where to go next. Documentation is an early years model of formative assessment at its most sophisticated and best. It supports the principles of and strengthens the current national focus on assessment for learning. Prior knowledge will be elicited and children involved in self-evaluation. Observation and reflection will be used as teaching tools, questioning will be related to genuine enquiry, children will be firmly at the heart of the process and assessment will sustain our planning.

Documentation also challenges the interpretation of learning as a passive process that is linear and cumulative. Sometimes known as the 'expert approach' Loris Malaguzzi refers to it as a 'small pedagogy'. Documentation, in contrast, promotes the idea of a partnership in teaching and learning relationships in which the child has an equal opportunity to ask questions, seek answers, generate ideas and delight with adults in the uncertainties of human knowledge and experience. The partnership approach is compatible with the ethos of Every Child



Matters, where the child's voice is not just limited to their membership of the school council, but requires listening in respect of their learning and their engagement in the development of the curriculum. Documentation thus strengthens children's entitlement to greater levels of freedom and creativity.

### Making choices and taking risks – evaluating what we value

Documentation entails taking risks in making choices to affirm our commitment to protect children's rights to learning experiences which are empowering and meaningful. It needs us to be strong, competent and skilful in supporting children's thinking and planning their next steps. It can be a transformational tool, deepening our own practice through opportunities for reflection and dialogue. In this way, documentation simultaneously scaffolds both the adults and the children's learning, supporting Vivien Gussin Paley's view that this is the process through which our own potential as teachers and educators can be advanced.

We need to re-consider the current practice of displaying children's work in schools and settings. Typically this involves either a teaching display with prompts and reminders for learning or a display of children's work (often perceived to be the best pieces of work), sometimes annotated with notes regarding aspects of the context. This could constitute display in Reggio terms, but often lacks informed adult reflection and analysis of the children's thinking, and projection about the future possibilities for their learning.





Very seldom do we consider displaying the work that was not fully understood or went wrong for a child, or a product that was not completed satisfactorily.

### **Starting small**

The passage from display to documentation can be started in a small way. Short cameos of children in group scenarios or as individuals can be presented as learning stories. What follows is usually a period of reflection related to resources, the environment and practices as we watch closely how children interact with the spaces and materials throughout the day. One cannot help but begin to generate questions from these observations: why do the children discard the plastic plates? What would happen if we used real china, glass or real vegetables? Why do the boys use the sand more than the girls? Why do we stop the children exploring the physical attributes of a big puddle? When a setting starts to document it becomes a very effective, relevant and personalised self-evaluation tool because it will generate questions about us. It acts as both mirror and lens for the school or setting.

### **Practically speaking**

Using photographs, children's drawings, their quotes, video, and learning stories are all useful remembering and re-visiting tools. They enable adults and children to look back at a previous moment, reconsider the significance of the experience and reconstruct their meanings. The notion of rapidly changing displays can also be re-assessed if they are replaced with learning stories that are constantly revisited by the children and added to when appropriate. Many children are adept at recalling from visual cues as they tend to have an eidetic memory (visual) and unlike adults can often remember which children were not even in the photographs!

Documentation panels can also be used to support transition and continuity for children as old panels can be moved into a new classroom. Children feel connected with their past and with the sense of the shared experiences and community of the class.

### **Children as allies**

Documenting will also give young children a strong message about their value. They quickly come to appreciate that what they have to say and offer is truly valued as they are kept as mementos of their life in the setting. The following are some thoughts from children ages 3-4 years when asked about why we documented.

These visual and written records of learning also become ways to communicate to others the ethos and approach of the school or setting. Documentation can be displayed on panels of card (and if laminated, displayed on the outside of the setting too for the community to see) and kept later in large art folders as an archive. This may be helpful when outside agencies visit or in sharing with families. More importantly, they can repeatedly be used with children. One cohort of children may well share a similar interest or point of fascination as previous children. If this is the case, the panels can become a great source of delight. Most children are fascinated by the work of other children. It offers different perspectives and ideas which create a sense of history and common purpose.

### **In dialogue with parents**

Documentation should be shared regularly with parents: documentation provides a forum for seeking parents' expert thoughts on their children and testing our hypotheses. Parents of children who are not featured that week, month or term, still see that when so much care is taken over other children, their own child is constantly valued in the setting.

'Sharing the first five years of a child's life is a serious responsibility for an adult, but it is also an experience rich with feelings of affection and discovery. It is an experience that strongly involves you because you feel you are weaving together something with a child that somehow, will go beyond the time you spend together. It calls for a generosity of attitude and a will to give back to the individual child and parents, the events, thoughts, feelings and ideas that tell the story of the days in the centre.'

LELLA GANDINI, 2005

- "To show everyone what we does do" TOMMY
- "Cause we like putting our pictures on the wall"
- "Who looks at it?" ADULT
- "Teachers, kids, mummy's and daddy's" KATIE
- "The photos show us what we are doing" CALLUM
- "So it doesn't get lost" KAYLEIGH
- "What doesn't get lost?" ADULT
- "The pictures of the children, they is learning" KAYLEIGH
- "So we can remember" LIAM



