

Insights



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Chapter Four

The Disposition to Document

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Like many small child care programs in the United States, Hilltop rents space in a Church—in our case, a large Lutheran church with brick walls and a copper roof. Hilltop Children’s Center is a private, not-for-profit program offering full-day care for children aged three to five, as well as after-school and vacation care for those aged six to ten. There are about 70 children enrolled at Hilltop and most of them are preschoolers. Since 1971, Hilltop has been located on the top of Queen Anne Hill in Seattle, Washington. The seven small rooms on the top floor of the church house our classrooms and art studios for preschool aged children as well as our program’s administrative office. The ‘Big Kids’ use one large room in the basement of the church.

Ann, Sarah and Laurie

The majority of families and staff at Hilltop Children’s Center (with a handful of exceptions) reflect the dominant European American culture of the urban neighbourhood in which the center is located. The parents at Hilltop are mainly professionals, working full-time in law offices, architecture firms, computer software companies, and other high-income fields. They are typically politically liberal, religiously unaffiliated, and ‘culturally hip’.

Ann Pelo and Sarah Felstiner, core teachers at Hilltop Children’s Center, have been incorporating elements of the philosophy from Reggio Emilia into their teaching practice for nearly ten years. Ann and Sarah have both participated in study tours to Reggio Emilia and have engaged in independent study of the ideas from the educators of Reggio Emilia. Inspired by these ideas, they have developed their own style of documentation, a style that is culturally relevant for their own community. During their years of documenting children’s work, they have created an extensive collection of project history books detailing various investigations and experiences. Ann and Sarah are frequently asked to share their teaching experiences with other educators in North America.

Laurie Kocher has been a teacher of four, five, and six-year-olds in the Canadian public school system for over 20 years. After first encountering the work of the preschools of Reggio Emilia, she also was inspired to adapt many of the principles of the approach into her Kindergarten program. Her doctoral research is based on taking a close look at the practice of pedagogical documentation at Hilltop Children’s Center, and specifically at Ann’s and Sarah’s work.

In this chapter, as we three weave our thoughts together, we’ll discuss our understandings of pedagogical documentation from a theoretical perspective, and then move into a description of what documentation looks like in practice at Hilltop Children’s Center.

Laurie: A particular place—the parts and the whole

Hilltop Children’s Center is a particular and remarkable place filled with dedicated, passionate teachers. It is important, I think, to point out that Ann and Sarah work within the context of a whole system of support and professional development. While my doctoral research specifically focused on the work of these two individuals, their work represents a part of the whole, and must be considered in this context. Margaret Wheatley’s (1999, p 143) words come to mind:

Seeing the interplay between system dynamics and individuals is a dance of discovery that requires several iterations between the whole and the parts. We expand our vision to see the whole, then narrow our gaze to peer intently into individual moments. With each iteration, we see more of the whole, and gain new understandings about individual elements. We paint a portrait of the whole, surfacing as much detail as possible. Then we inquire into a few pivotal events or decisions, and search for great detail there, also. We keep dancing between the two levels, bringing sensitivities and information gleaned from one level to help us understand the other. If we hold to the awareness of the whole as we study the part, and understand its relationship to the whole, profound new insights become available.

Laurie: What is pedagogical documentation?

We, and our children, have been raised in a culture of documentation. Cameras and video cameras appear almost anywhere there are children. Proud parents save school report cards, greeting cards, diplomas, crayon drawings, and photos—all artefacts of childhood. These artefacts only begin to tell the stories, however. ‘Without words, without a narrative, there is only a shadow of an anecdote with no particular shape, without substance’ (Burrington & Sortino, 2004, p 225).

Pedagogical documentation, as developed by educators in Reggio Emilia, is a way of making visible the often otherwise invisible learning processes by which children and teachers work in early childhood centres and schools (Cadwell, 1997). This documentation may be presented in many formats, such as videotapes, books, display panels, or slide shows. Usually, the documentation, regardless of format, includes anecdotal observations, samples of children’s works, photographs that illustrate a process, transcripts of children’s voiced ideas, all accompanied with a teacher’s reflective commentary. It is this interpretive piece, this narrative, which sets pedagogical documentation apart and makes it a viable tool for reflection.

From early on in the educational project of Reggio Emilia, educators recognised the rich potential that pedagogical documentation offered in several areas. Firstly, the artefacts of photographs and transcribed conversations provide children and teachers with a tangible record that can be revisited, inviting further opportunities to extend the learning. Secondly, documentation serves as a tool of research for the educators, encouraging on-going evaluation and renewal of the educational experience. And thirdly, the detailed information collected and displayed for parents and the public serves as a means of eliciting their reactions and support, and thus a way of advocating for high quality early childhood programs (Kocher, 1999).

Pedagogical documentation is not primarily about creating beautiful panels or displays, but about following and shaping the knowledge building process (Guidici, Krechevsky & Rinaldi, 2001). As Reggio pedagogue Carlina Rinaldi (1998, p 120) describes it:

Documentation sustains the educational process (teaching) in the dialogue with the learning processes of the children. Documentation is a point of strength that makes timely and visible the interweaving of actions of the adults and of the children; it improves the quality of communication and interaction. It is in fact a process of reciprocal learning. Documentation makes it possible for teachers to sustain children's learning while they also learn (to teach) from the children's own learning.

Dahlberg, Moss & Pence (1999, p 144–5) capture the essence of what it is to be a reflective practitioner when they respond to the question: 'How can we practice a reflective and communicative pedagogy?':

It presupposes, first and foremost, a reflective practitioner who, together with his or her colleagues, can create a space for a vivid and critical discussion about pedagogical practice and the conditions it needs. It also requires certain tools. With inspiration from the early childhood institutions in Reggio Emilia, in northern Italy, many pedagogues around the world have begun to use pedagogical documentation as a tool for reflecting on pedagogical practice.

Krechevsky and Mardell (2001, p 289) suggest that the very act of documenting changes teachers' understanding of what goes on in the classroom, causing them to slow down and 'encouraging them to reflect on and understand the deeper meaning and value of a learning experience'. This reflection informs their decisions about where to go next. 'Rather than trying to tell the whole story of an experience or putting up the work of every child, teachers become selective about what to document' (p 289), continually making decisions about the moments and experiences that are most meaningful to record. Often, these may be the 'ordinary moments' that occur spontaneously, in addition to thoughtful exchanges that take place during complex project work. 'Instead of simply describing the experience of the learning group, this view of documentation involves a deeper analysis of the purposes behind it and behind the related learning processes and products (p 289).'

Australian educator Jan Millikan (2003, p 102) points out that pedagogical documentation:

...provides for many inherent possibilities, such as leading an inquiry forward, being a tool for children's own reflections, enabling parents to view and contribute to the process of children's learning, for teachers' professional development, and as an advocacy for children.

She cautions that this can, indeed, be a daunting process and so we must proceed slowly. In the following section, we'll talk about the role of documentation as it is evolving at Hilltop Children's Center in Seattle.

Laurie: ‘coming home’—a sense of the possible

Upon first viewing *The Hundred Languages of Children* exhibition (a travelling collection of children’s work documented and compiled by the educators in Reggio Emilia), I was overwhelmed by the depth and complexity of the children’s work and by the multiple ‘languages’ with which children expressed themselves—with words, movement, drawing, painting, building, sculpture, shadow play, collage, dramatic play, and music, to name only a few. Particularly impressive was the reflective, profound, and sometimes metaphorical text that accompanied these documentation displays. Transcribed recordings of children’s conversations were paired with the reflective commentary of their teachers. The image of the child as strong, resourceful, curious and competent was everywhere evident in *The Hundred Languages of Children* exhibition. Indeed, children’s thoughts and feelings were offered in such a deep and respectful way that I came away changed, determined to attempt to document the work of children in my own classroom following along the lines of the work of educators in Reggio Emilia. This effort led me to seek out other educators who were also incorporating the practice of documentation into their work, and ultimately to Hilltop Children’s Center where my doctoral research was located.

In conversations that took place with teachers as I was conducting my research, Sarah and Ann also identified a powerful sense of connection upon initial exposure to the work of Reggio Emilia educators. Referring in particular to viewing the video *To Make a Portrait of a Lion* (Commune di Reggio Emilia, 1987), which portrays one project undertaken by Reggio educators with young children, Ann’s comment reflects this experience:

The heart and soul piece, the way of being with children in the world, the pedagogy that grows out of the image of the child, the image of the teacher, the image of the family, is so deeply resonant for me. Watching the video ‘Portrait of a Lion’, I had this experience of weeping, just weeping—weeping both from being so deeply moved with this joy at what children and families and teachers were experiencing together in Reggio, and weeping with this yearning for my own work to continue to deepen in those sorts of ways of building relationships with children and families, and supporting children’s thoughtful collaborations.

Both Ann and Sarah speak of a sense of resonance, of a heart-felt connection with this portrayal of living with children in an authentic, intentional way. It is almost as if each woman articulated an experience of coming home, of arriving, metaphorically, in a place where the lived experience meshes with the dream of what could be possible. Canadian researcher Max Van Manen’s seminal work, *Researching Lived Experience* (1990, p 5) comes to mind as he describes phenomenological research:

From a phenomenological point of view, to do research is always to question the way we experience the world, to want to know the world in which we live as human beings. And since to know the world is to profoundly be in the world in a certain way, the act of researching—questioning—theorizing is the intentional act of attaching ourselves to the world, to become fully part of it, or better, to become the world. Phenomenology calls this inseparable connection to the world the principle of ‘intentionality’.

The vehicle of pedagogical documentation is what makes these experiences in the schools of Reggio Emilia, this principle of intentionality, visible and shareable.

Ann, Sarah and Laurie: the role of documentation at Hilltop—‘Documentation is a verb’

The word ‘documentation’ is a familiar one amongst families and teachers at Hilltop, and is understood to represent the writing and photos posted on the curriculum boards in the school hallways or on project panels. In addition to documenting on-going project work, teachers attempt to daily post a page or two of observations, unfolding project work, recorded conversations, or spontaneously captured ‘ordinary moments’ (Shafer, 2002). Often digital photos are included in these postings. Each teacher has his or her own style of writing and presenting the documentation; this in itself is a conscious effort to embrace diversity. Different headings on the curriculum board—such as community happenings, anti-bias learning, social learning, socio-dramatic play, stories and emerging literacy, art and symbolic representation, sensory knowledge, logic and mathematical thinking, and on-going projects and emerging interests—provide a way to organise these pieces of writing. Copies of these writings are made for children’s individual journals. Over the course of time, a fairly comprehensive picture is painted through these stories of life lived in community at Hilltop.

But documentation represents a more active, vibrant practice—the practice of deep engagement by adults in the lives of children. Documentation means a way of being with children with intentionality—a habit of paying attention, watching and listening closely, reflecting together about what we see, planning from our reflections and understandings, and telling the stories in ways that enrich our community.

Teachers at Hilltop are working to reclaim this vibrant, vital understanding of documentation, embracing documentation as an active verb rather than an inert noun. We’re re-invigorating our understanding of written documentation, seeing it not as a static piece of paper, but as a series of love letters about the children, exchanged between teachers and families, traces of our shared lives.

Documentation holds many elements. It could be replaced with more descriptive and specific words: observing closely and making notes, studying

the observation notes, and telling the story. These are the key practices that, woven together, become our practice of documentation. For further discussion on this, see Chapter Ten, ‘At the crossroads: Pedagogical documentation and social justice’.

Ann and Sarah: Pedagogical documentation and emergent curriculum

At Hilltop, curriculum ‘grows’ out of teachers’ observations of children’s play activities in an emergent, organic sort of way. We strive to be close observers, paying careful attention to the passions that underlie children’s work. Documenting helps us to attend more carefully to children’s work—to their actual words, and to the intricacies of their play. In so doing, we often notice themes or patterns or repeated ideas that help us to identify not just what children are playing, but to speculate on why they are playing it. In various projects, careful note-taking and transcription helps us hypothesise that there are strong, serious emotional themes underlying children’s fast and light-hearted play. In carefully observing and recording children’s play, we have the opportunity to wonder, ‘what are these children trying to figure out?’ Looking back over collections of drawings, words, and photographs, often in collaboration with our co-teachers, we can trace the strain of a developmentally critical theme. We may see elements of the same powerful themes—identity, relationship, self-expression, and scientific inquiry, to name just a few—emerge each year, but always embedded in a new topical context that is specific to that particular group of children.

It’s through the habitual practice of capturing children’s work that we discover potential or unfolding study projects. We laugh, and talk, and interact with children all day long, but also watch for moments to snap a photo or jot a note about play that seems to stand out for one reason or another. Some of these seeds-of-ideas blossom slowly over time, while others burst forth and play themselves out in an hour or a day. Rarely do children propose turning their spontaneous work into a short-term or long-term project. Rather, we take responsibility for noticing opportunities that seem rich with possibilities to investigate further, or to bring children together, or to provoke development of particular skills, or to emphasise issues of bias or cultural relevancy. Documenting this rich play is part of what turns on-going work into projects. By documenting each relevant work session or play sequence and gathering that documentation, we demonstrate the purposeful process of discovery that children and teachers undertake together, this process of ‘reciprocal learning’ that Rinaldi (1998, p 121) describes.

Pedagogical documentation is critical in extending and deepening children’s involvement in on-going project work. Recording their conversations provides

a wealth of potential ideas to pursue, and lets their own brainstorming sessions be the source of their plans rather than depending on outside encouragement from teachers. We use tape-recorded conversations to help anchor children's work by continually directing them back to decisions they have made as a group. Photographs create a pictorial history of where we've already been in the course of a project, and looking back over those photos with children often reminds them of previous intentions or sparks new ideas. Saving their drawings and other artwork also provides a tool for sustaining project work by identifying particular aspects that children may want to learn more about, or providing models to use in re-representing an object or idea in another medium.

At Hilltop, our documentation practices have grown hand in hand with our expanded and clarified techniques for facilitating an emergent curriculum. We have discovered how integral and critical documentation is in bringing the spirit and ideals of emergent curriculum into actual practice. We have come to believe that emergent curriculum is essentially an attitude, a commitment to put children and their pursuits at the heart of the curriculum. That philosophical goal is translated into practical reality by the art, skill, and disposition to document children's work.

Laurie: a culture of research

The documentation process allows each teacher to become a producer of research and to examine his or her own development as a reflective practitioner. As teachers examine the children's work and prepare its documentation, their own understandings of children's development and insights into their learning are deepened. On the basis of the rich data made available through documentation, teachers are able to make informed decisions about appropriate ways to support each child's development and learning (Beneke, Harris-Helm, & Steinheimer, 1998). A significant component is the teachers' own reflective text, which is an integral part of the documentation. Most importantly, documentation provides a focus for concrete and meaningful adult and child reflection on children's learning processes.

Practising the art of pedagogical documentation while living school days with children fosters a culture of research at Hilltop. Gandini and Goldhaber (2001, p 143–4) believe that the process of documentation can be an agent of change. Pedagogical documentation:

...has the potential to change how early childhood educators see ourselves as professionals. It certainly requires that we expand our identity from nurturer and caregiver to include theoretician and researcher. We have found that documentation demands a high level of intellectual commitment and curiosity and a passionate engagement in our work.

Having incorporated pedagogical documentation into a nearly daily practice, there is a very high level of intellectual engagement for these teachers, which is made manifest in the process of interpretive writing. Sarah speaks of the intellectual vitality she finds in the process:

I'm so engaged by the intellectual piece, and so engaged by the professional development inherent in active documentation...Is the documentation what keeps us intellectually linked in to this daily work? Here we are, smart, thinking, intellectually curious people who are attracted to work with young children, and is documentation part of what lets us be both of those things at the same time? Sure, there are moments of living with kids that aren't intellectually rewarding or fulfilling, unless we really come at the question of 'Who is this kid?' with curiosity, or 'How do I know this family?' or 'What is the meaning of this interaction?' If we take in the message that we can be really curious about everything that happens, it's completely intellectually fulfilling work, which so many people just don't understand. That's a message that belongs in the work...

This 'culture of research' invites constant discussion and making of hypotheses and predictions about the on-going work with the children, and is closely linked to the other aspects of the teacher's work involving documentation—namely listening, observing, gathering documents, and interpreting them (Rinaldi, 1998). Engaging in continuous self-reflection imposes high requirements on teachers, but also functions as a challenge and inspiration for a deeper engagement (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence, 1999).

Laurie: Reflective commentary

Many have been intrigued by the process of pedagogical documentation developed by the educators in Reggio Emilia. What makes the work of these teachers at Hilltop particularly inspiring is the insightful reflective commentary that is paired with their observations of children's experiences. For example, during an investigation launched by play around Disney's 'Lion King', Sarah wrote:

Thinking back on this first gathering with this group of children, I'm struck by two things. First, it seems that one of the main jobs for this group will be grappling with and working on the interpersonal dynamics of how decisions get made in their play. These girls have been learning all year about the power struggles of inclusion and exclusion, and this work team may be an opportunity for them to think through these issues. Second, I heard some ideas emerge in this first conversation about good lions and bad lions, light lions and dark lions. I will be curious to see how these distinctions and classifications play out in our next meetings... Though my primary intention for the Lion Work Team is that

they have a chance to explore the Lion King story in a wide range of symbolic languages, it seems this work may also be a rich opportunity for them to play about issues of race and bias... My role as a teacher continues to be that of watcher, listener, documentor. I don't plan to do much overt provocation around issues of racial difference until I better understand what internal questions and wonderings these girls really have.

During another investigation, Ann wrote:

In their play, children work actively, explore and understand themselves, their friends, their world. They are asking questions, constructing knowledge, extending and deepening their understandings. When we observe their play, listening carefully, we can see 'underneath' the topical content of their play to the development themes at its roots. Our note-taking about and transcribing of children's play helps us uncover these themes. Our sense of these developmental themes guides our work with children, as we seek to support, enrich, and extend their work around these themes. It's tempting for adults to stick with kids' topical themes, and certainly easier than digging deep for the themes underneath. When we notice the themes under kids' play, though, we honour their authentic work, and we can meet them there. Our curriculum, then, becomes driven by the children—a respectful, engaging, fascinating approach to curriculum for us adults and for the children.

Documentation, such as that collected and collated by Ann and Sarah, is focused on what Seidel (2001, p 307) describes as:

...the 'stuff' of understanding—ideas, theories, hypotheses, feelings, experiments, deductions, notions of cause and effect, imagination, intuitions, 'performances', and the relationship of experience, skill, knowledge, and insight—cognitive processes involved in coming to know something... Recording and presenting children's actions and interactions can reveal the genesis of ideas and then, in being shared, can lead to new thoughts, questions, and discoveries.

The work of Hilltop teachers exemplifies the ideals of Zeichner (1999), who suggests that critical reflection incorporates moral and ethical criteria into the discourse of practical action. Here the major questions are, 'which educational goals, activities, and experiences lead toward forms of life which are more just, equitable and so forth?'

Laurie: Writing as a native language

A significant component of sophisticated pedagogical documentation is the teacher's reflective commentary, and so it's not surprising that someone who is

a competent writer would be drawn to this practice. Ann and Sarah have both commented that their comfort level with professional writing helps with this aspect of documentation. As Ann expressed it:

Writing...it's my native language, really. To really sink into the experience, or a moment that I'm watching unfold, and to write about it... I mean, writing is something that I do anyway, so this way of being, that we call documentation, it's a really great fit. So there's that personal piece for me, of feeling sustained by documentation, because it is going to this native language place. And feeling like it's a place where I really practice and deepen my writing skills, and become a better writer—that can only be a good thing. When I write, I feel able to do more nuanced thinking about children and learning and able to dig deeply as well as to see broadly what's the heart and soul of learning and play. It is research and writing, and I'm living it all day every day...

The writing process itself helps to deepen one's own thinking or, as Richardson (2000, p 923) says, 'writing is a way of "knowing"—a method of discovery and analysis'. Van Manen (1990, p 36) suggests that in phenomenology, one studies the obvious: a phenomenon that is right before us but that is not well documented or described. He also writes that the aim of phenomenology is to 'transform lived experience into a text that expresses something essential in re-living and a reflective appropriation of something meaningful'. Ann and Sarah are able to think 'out loud' in their documentation, to be transparent in their thinking, thereby inviting the reader into the reflective process.

Laurie: Infinite attention to the other

Carlina Rinaldi has put forth the challenge that 'the best environment for children is one in which you can find the highest possible quantity and quality of relationships' (Cadwell, 2003, p 136). Bill Readings (1996, p 16) says: 'I want to insist that pedagogy is a relation, a network of obligation...[in which] the condition of pedagogical practice is an infinite attention to the other.' The primacy of relationships is a strong theme that pervades the work at Hilltop. As Ann describes it:

That's sort of the heart of the whole relationship piece...the whole heart of the beginning and sustaining piece for me of this work. Documentation is the practice...that reflects and cultivates relationships... Certainly I'm so engaged by the intellectual piece, and so engaged by the professional development, I mean, all of that is definitely there, but the living, breathing meaning of it for me is being in relationship, being in community.

Hilltop teachers have worked hard to effectively develop systems where collegiality and collaboration support relationships among the children, educators and parents, relationships with the community, opportunities for learning and the co-construction of knowledge. Working with an emergent or responsive curriculum that is negotiated with all the stakeholders is a dynamic process that generates documentation and is re-generated by documentation. Building and maintaining relationships is the guiding thread. As Rinaldi (1998, p 122) puts it:

...documentation influences the quality of relationships among and between teachers, children, and parents... documentation becomes the heart of each specific project and the place for true professional training of teachers.

With relationships at the heart of their daily lived experience with children, Ann and Sarah tend to have their eyes wide open and riveted on the learners, taking up Ayers' (2002, p 42) call for 'honest and righteous teachers to stay wide-awake to the world, to the concentric circles of context in which we live and work'. Having a strong belief in children who are capable, competent and creative, with a fierce interest in a sense of fairness (a belief or image of the child also held by educators in Reggio Emilia), Hilltop teachers are committed to fostering opportunities for children to be active protagonists in their worlds. By so doing, teachers invite students to become (Ayers, 2002, p 42):

...capable, more thoughtful and powerful in their choices, more engaged in a culture and a civilization, able to participate, to embrace, and, yes, to change all that is before them.

Ann and Sarah: embracing difference and working for justice

Ann and Sarah write that:

For us, the practice of documentation, coupled with the principles of emergent curriculum, fit 'hand in glove' with social justice work. By studying our documentation notes, we can see underneath the words of the children to the themes and issues under-girding them. With that understanding, we can respond in meaningful ways, taking an active role in shaping an activism project.

Expanding on this, Ann says of her social justice work with children:

It's my core, my spine to my work, that's been the sort of deepest anchor. That's what drew me to working with young children in the first place... If, in fact,

we're paying such intimate and close attention to children and building deep relationships with them that deeply respect who they are individually and culturally, we can't help but do anti-bias and diversity work... There's no way to do that work without paying close attention to children, and hearing from them what their passions and pursuits are, and meeting them in that place, and letting that be the curriculum that we live with children. Bringing those two pieces together...feels really important to me.

For many years, each Hilltop teacher brought his/her passions (or his/her lack of passion) about anti-bias issues to the classroom, and each teaching team found its own way to integrate anti-bias work and activism into the life of the classroom. More recently the staff began to talk together about issues of diversity and anti-bias work, exploring what a centre-wide commitment to anti-bias work might mean for the program. They have been reflecting on ways to involve parents in creating a school as dedicated to anti-bias work as to an emergent curriculum. Throughout the year, teachers engage with families in dialogue about their anti-bias work and what they're doing about diversity issues at Hilltop. A pamphlet that provides an overview of anti-bias practices with children is included in the initial registration package for families.

Hilltop teachers devote part of our team meetings each week to discussing current anti-bias efforts and opportunities in the classroom. A deliberate attempt is made to introduce meeting topics, thinking games, teacher skits and other activities to provoke conversations about bias and fairness. In addition, teachers support in-depth study projects that contain elements of activism for social justice. Though perhaps not immediately visible on the walls and shelves in the form of commercially produced 'multi-cultural' posters and props, all of these anti-bias efforts are recorded in on-going documentation of classroom work.

Our teachers are committed to nurturing within each child a disposition to speak and act for peace, tolerance, and justice. With that as a base, the teachers create an environment for learning that has multiple entry points. Such an environment must be abundant with opportunities to practice justice; to display, foster, embody, expect, demand, nurture, allow, model, and enact inquiry toward moral action (Ayers, 2002).

One of our main objectives at Hilltop—our mission, even—is to support children's social development, and help them learn how to be in the world with each other. Some of this learning happens naturally in the course of children's play, but occasionally we also seek out ways to do some gentle coaching about the skills needed for getting along with each other. A particular thread we've observed from one year to the next is the question of inclusion and exclusion. For example, what do you do when you're playing a fun game with somebody, and then another child comes along and wants to join? Or, conversely, what do you do if you see some children playing a fun game, and you want to join it?



A scene from Teacher Theatre

To invite children into conversation about just these questions, we sometimes use a tool called ‘Teacher Theatre’ at our morning meeting. ‘Teacher Theatre’ has been a part of Hilltop culture for a number of years.

It’s a way of introducing a topic for discussion without drawing direct attention to the people or incidents that inspired the need for a conversation. Sometimes two teachers will replay a disagreement that they saw happen earlier in the morning, or a few dollhouse figures or plastic animals will have some kind of a problem that needs to be resolved. For example, once two teachers acted out stealing pieces from each other’s block structures. Another time, two small lion figures had a problem about excluding a third lion from their game. In ‘Teacher Theatre’, children watch the scenario unfold, and then offer suggestions as to how the teachers (or dolls, or animals) might solve their problem. Then the scenario is replayed several more times, trying out children’s suggestions.

We have found ‘Teacher Theatre’ to be a gentle but effective way of including the whole group in the process of clarifying class agreements, and in the process of creating a classroom culture that is safe and fair and happy. These sometimes impromptu performances are always photographed, tape-recorded and transcribed, so that teachers and children can refer back to them, and also share them with families. Often, children will replay a ‘Teacher Theatre’ scenario days or weeks after it was first presented. And more importantly, they often refer to the scenarios in the context of their own social play—‘we’re having the same problem that those lions had!’—and then use the ideas they had brainstormed for the ‘Teacher Theatre’ characters to solve their own conflicts.

Another tradition at Hilltop is to invite children to create self-portraits as one way of helping them extend their understandings and conversations about skin colour. Building on other colour-mixing practice done earlier in the year, this self-portrait work focuses on creating the colours of children's skin, hair, eyes, and lips.

Here are excerpts from Sarah's write-up of a session of self-portrait work, which included many photographs of the children at work. She noted:

I began by inviting each child to look into the small mirrors placed around the table. Children talked as they looked, making quiet observations to themselves and each other: 'my skin is a little bit brown and a little bit pink', and 'I have freckles, like my daddy', for example. One child said, 'I have brown eyes, brown to match my hair.' After a bit, I gave each child a plastic plate with four separate sections, and asked them to start by mixing the colour of their skin.



Child mixing colours



Researching a portrait: looking in mirror

I moved around the table, giving children squirts of whichever colour they requested from the many bottles of commercially available ‘people colour’ paints. They soon noticed that there was no bottle labelled ‘Emily’ or ‘Kenji’ or any other name. Each child clearly needed a mix of many shades to reach a skin colour that they felt matched what they saw in the mirror. Once children began mixing, they became quite particular about the colour they were creating. ‘It’s still too dark!’ or ‘I need more brown’, they said as they worked. ‘This is a lot about mixing!’ one child declared.

I noticed a few kids holding their paint-soaked brushes up near their faces to compare colours, and they often needed to make more adjustments (stirring in yet more paint) once they’d looked into the mirror to check if it matched. Once each child was done, I gave her or him a small piece of paper to paint on, suggesting that they ‘look in the mirror to notice the shape of your face, and then try to make that shape on the paper’. As each child finished painting their basic face shape, I collected the small pieces of paper and set them aside to dry for a bit while we worked on mixing colours for hair.

We repeated the whole process described above—pouring, stirring, testing, pouring and stirring some more—until each child had a match for her or his hair colour. Then they looked closely at their hair in the mirror, and painted that part onto their self-portrait. I set the self-portraits aside again, and we repeated the whole process for eye colour, and yet again for lip colour. Finally, I took a digital photo of each artist, and printed them out to display alongside the portraits.

This was a painstaking but satisfying process. I was impressed by the intense concentration each child showed in carefully mixing the colours they wanted. I was proud of the hard work they did to make such artful and sensitive reflections of themselves. And I was fascinated by the spontaneous, easygoing conversations about appearance that children had with each other while they worked. For example:

‘I need some black and some brown for my hair, because my mom has brown hair, and my dad has black hair’.

‘I need more brown, ’cause my skin is darker’.

‘My skin is white’.

‘Mine is peach’.

‘Your skin is pinker, like mine. You can use this pink when I’m done’.

This hard work children did creating self-portraits offered them a new medium to explore and understand their own appearance, and to think again about the conversations we’ve been having about race and skin colour. We’re often



Self-portrait



Playdough provocation set up for thinking about skin colour

looking for opportunities like this—ways to extend children’s thinking by helping them revisit their own big ideas again and again, in as many different media, or ‘languages’, as possible.

Ann and Sarah: pedagogical documentation is the cornerstone

Reflecting on our individual experiences of developing a personal style of pedagogical documentation over a number of years, we both describe the practice as having become the cornerstone of our pedagogical work with children. Ann expresses it this way:

The process or way of being in the world, is really what it is, a way of understanding our work, or understanding our relationships with children and with each other that is about mindful presence and authentic engagement and curiosity and delight. How that all gets lived out or made tangible is the form of this thing we call documentation, this paper we put up on the wall, this document we send out to the web-page, whatever form it takes...documentation is an expression of a way of being with children. I think of documentation as growing out of deep listening and close observation, so that’s not anything that necessarily shows, it’s not any tangible piece. I’d say that’s a core piece of documentation, really being

present to what the children are experiencing, doing, saying, playing about, arguing about, collaborating about, feeling about. So, that is a central component of documentation, that mindful presence...

Sarah describes documentation as a really close description of what teaching an emergent curriculum looks like:

It's the main activity, if you take documentation in its biggest description that includes the reflective part, and the use of what you've collected to be thoughtful and playful about what you might want to do next. To me, documentation is that something to hang onto...the anchoring structure in a very organic curriculum.

She considers her collection of documented projects incredibly treasured items. They provide really solid evidence or traces of doing rich, important work with children:

The process of documentation takes this organic, experiential, fluid curriculum, and groups it into meaningful stories in some way. The stories give you little pieces to hold on to that can represent that time lived. It's partly a sense of relief that this moment is at least captured to some degree, so it's not lost...it's in the history. Partly it's the sense of, 'I've something to show for what we've been doing.' That's still a huge reassurance, for me, and my biggest defence against anybody who might say, 'What do you do here all day? You don't do anything; you don't have a lesson plan.' And I can say, 'Well, no, but I can show you what we did every day this week, and how rich it was.' So that feels like money in the bank, knowing that those stories are there.

Laurie: the phenomenological connection

There seems to be a strong parallel between phenomenology, particularly Max van Manen's description of human science research, and the experience of Ann and Sarah as documentors. The way in which each stands in pedagogical relation to the world, and their abilities to write reflectively on the meanings of phenomena of daily life lived in this community, are reflected in these words of van Manen's (1990, p 2):

Pedagogy requires a phenomenological sensitivity to lived experience (children's realities and life-worlds). Pedagogy requires a hermeneutic ability to make interpretive sense of the phenomena of the life-world in order to see the pedagogic significance of situations and relations of living with children. And pedagogy requires a way with language in order to allow the research process of textual reflection to one's pedagogic thoughtfulness and tact.

What these particular teachers are doing in their everyday practice appears to be, indeed, un-named phenomenological research of the lived experience of these teachers and children.

Laurie, Ann and Sarah: the disposition to document

Ann and Sarah have each had a remarkable, intuitive response to the work of educators in Reggio Emilia, a response that resonates with a vision of great possibilities. Keen observational skills, delight in and curiosity about children, the ability to articulate and put into text their reflections, a commitment to nurturing relationships, and intellectual engagement that is fostered by the active role of researcher are all dispositions that these teachers bring to their work. This list is also the description of the phenomenological researcher. It may be that it is a relationship of reciprocity—that perhaps initially Ann and Sarah were drawn to the ideas from Reggio Emilia because they resonated within each of them in an intuitive way, and that their subsequent work with pedagogical documentation has fostered dispositions that each already had. Van Manen (1990, p 1) writes, ‘when we raise questions, gather data, describe a phenomenon, we do so as researchers who stand in the world in a pedagogic way’. This way of standing in the world is reflected in the way that Ann and Sarah speak of their experience as both teachers and as documentors.

Teaching is excruciatingly complex, idiosyncratic, back-breaking, mind-boggling, exhausting, wrenching. Teaching at its best requires heart and mind, passion and intellect, insight and intuition, spirit, understanding, and judgment. As Ayers (2002, pp 39–40) says:

Teaching can be an act of hope and love—love for persons, love for life, and hope for a world that could be, but is not yet. Teaching can be, must be if it is to maintain its moral balance, a gesture toward justice.

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'In my mind, the most remarkable feature of this book is its profound humility. As much as they proclaim to have learned about the children they teach, the authors repeatedly remind us of how little we know about those we presume to care for.'

Taken from the Foreword of this book by
*Rebecca New, Associate Professor,
Eliot-Pearson Department of Child Development,
Tufts University, USA*

'The timing of this book is spot on, if not overdue. With contributions from an eclectic mix of authors, it is a fantastic resource for those struggling to articulate ideas and thinking about pedagogical documentation.'

*Felicity Barclay, Director,
Gordon Preschool Centre, New South Wales, Australia*

'*Insights* is a major contribution to understandings about early childhood education in Australia and New Zealand. It is notable for the respect it shows to teachers' perspectives and life worlds, and to the highly complex and interpretive work of teaching with young children.'

*Dr Jocelyn Nuttall, Senior Lecturer,
Faculty of Education, Monash University, Victoria, Australia*

Built around stories of practice from Australia, New Zealand and North America, this book raises questions and possibilities related to pedagogical documentation. As the introduction states: 'people who choose to work in early childhood ... want to explore their own practice and improve the work they are doing, learning from children, the community and each other...We designed this book both to help the newer members of the professional community to gain access to the discussion, and also to engage those who have been thinking around these ideas for a longer period of time. Some people might enter this book as part of a course of study while others might dip into it individually or in groups to further their own thinking.'

Alma, Catherine and Janet have been colleagues for more than ten years at Macquarie University in Sydney, Australia. Their studies in Reggio Emilia and their work with other professional colleagues informs their thinking about many things, including intersections between pedagogical documentation and social justice. Janet now works predominantly with young children at Mia Mia, the Child and Family Centre at the Institute of Early Childhood, while Catherine and Alma work primarily with undergraduate and postgraduate teachers.

Responders

Margie Carter, Margaret Clyde, Sue Groom, Diti Hill, Jan Millikan, John Nimmo, Jenny Porter, Anthony Semann, Wendy Shepherd and Anne Stonehouse.

