

## The Disposition to Document: Portraits of Practice

Laurie Kocher

**Laurie Kocher** has been a kindergarten teacher in British Columbia for over twenty years. Her doctoral research takes a close look at the process of change experienced by a cluster of teachers, profoundly influenced by the principles of the Reggio Emilia Approach, particularly in the area of documentation. Ms. Kocher will join the Institute for Early Childhood Education and Research team at UBC (Vancouver) in September, 2004.

### Abstract

With inspiration from the early childhood institutions in Reggio Emilia, in northern Italy, many educators around the world have begun to use pedagogical documentation as a tool for reflecting on their pedagogical practice. This article briefly summarizes a research project that has explored the process of change experienced by three teacher-researchers. Each teacher is a master at the art of documentation, which they have developed in a way that is culturally relevant for their own community. The systematic documentation process has allowed each teacher to become a producer of research, and one who exams her own development as a reflective teacher. A form of descriptive narrative, known as *portraiture*, has been used as the framework for this study. Parallels are drawn between phenomenology, as described by Max van Manen, and the experience of these teachers as documenters.

### Introduction

This study, undertaken as a PhD research project at the University of Southern Queensland (Australia), has explored the process of change experienced by three teacher-researchers who have employed the practice of *pedagogical documentation*, inspired by the Reggio Emilia Approach to early childhood education.

Pedagogical documentation is a way of

making visible the otherwise invisible learning processes by which children and teachers work in early childhood centres and schools. It may include anecdotal observations, children's works, photographs that illustrate a process, audio and video tape recordings, and children's voiced ideas. A significant component is the teachers' 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.

---

*... 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.*

---

Dahlberg, Moss, and Pence (1999) capture the essence of what it is to be a reflective practitioner when they write:

*Practicing a reflective and communicative pedagogy presupposes 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...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 (pp. 144-145).*

*Giudici, Krechevsky, and Rinaldi (2001) 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, 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).*

### The Reggio Emilia Approach

Reggio Emilia is one of several small wealthy cities in Emilia Romagna, a region in northern Italy with a history of collaboration and political activism. Shortly after World War II, the ground-

work for what is now regarded as “the Reggio Emilia Approach” was laid when working parents built new schools for their young children. Following upon the devastation of the war, parents did not want ordinary schools. Rather, they wanted schools where children could acquire skills of critical thinking and collaboration essential to rebuilding and ensuring a democratic society. This strong sense of purpose inspired the late Loris Malaguzzi to join in this collaborative effort. In 1963, well in advance of the national system, Reggio Emilia opened its first municipal preschool. By the late 1970s, a system of municipally funded preschools and infant-toddler centers was in place; it has since served about half of the city’s young children.

International interest in Reggio Emilia has grown at a remarkable pace, inspired in large part by the traveling exhibition “The Hundred Languages of Children.” Delegations of educators and other interested parties have visited the city to see firsthand its early childhood classrooms. On December 2, 1991, Newsweek magazine proclaimed the preschools of Reggio Emilia to be the “best in the world.” The three tenets of communication, exploration, and problem solving complement one another and are paramount in these schools. Together, they form the underpinnings of a robust and collaborative early childhood education paradigm. Reggio Emilia’s *image of the child* as “rich, strong, and powerful” (Rinaldi, 1998, p. 114) has become a dominant theme in discussions on early care and educational policies and practices at the local and national levels. It is this influence - to promote not only change, but reflection, debate, and conversation - that may well be Reggio Emilia’s greatest legacy.

### **Pedagogical Documentation As Communication**

Early in their history, the Reggio educators realized that systematically documenting the process and results of their work with children would simultaneously serve three key functions. It provides:

- *children* with a concrete and visible memory of what they had said and done in order to serve as a jumping-off point for ensuing steps to learning (Bredekamp, 1993);
- *teachers* with a tool for research and a key to continuous improvement and renewal; and
- *parents* and the public with detailed information about what happens in the schools and serves as means of eliciting their reactions and support (Koehler, 1999).

These insights led the development of documentation into a professional art form in Reggio Emilia, involving the use of slide shows, posters, and increasingly, videotapes to record children’s project experiences (Cadwell, 1997).

---

***Pedagogical documentation,  
however, is not about creating  
beautiful panels or displays,  
but about following and  
shaping the knowledge-  
building process.***

---

Often, selections are taken from ongoing documentation and organized in panels and displays of children’s work to reveal the ongoing unfolding of a project, or even an “ordinary moment” during a single day. The documentation panels cover the walls throughout the school as if they were a second skin (Giudici, Krechevsky, & Rinaldi, 2001). These panels might include photographs that tell about the process, a description of the various steps and the evolution of the project activity. These descriptions are carefully composed to include the transcriptions of the children’s own remarks and conversations that accompanied their particular experience (which is often tape-recorded). The documentation panels tell stories about specific activi-

ties, the educational approach, and the steps of the learning process. Additionally, the documentation contributes to the generally pleasing aesthetic atmosphere of the space.

Pedagogical documentation, however, is not about creating beautiful panels or displays, but about following and shaping the knowledge-building process. It allows teachers to deepen their understanding of children’s strengths and interests, different languages or domains of knowledge, their own actions and pedagogical decisions, and the processes of learning.

This process of documentation clearly makes evident to parents, colleagues, and visitors the high regard that adults have for children’s work. Children receive the message that their work is important and valued. Through viewing the panels (and other forms of documentation), parents may become more aware of curriculum objectives and appreciate teachers’ efforts. Many parents become more involved in the school experience. For teachers, reviewing the transcripts and photographs helps them to consider children’s learning processes and to clarify their own objectives.

Documentation is an important kind of teacher research, sharpening and focusing teachers’ attention on children’s plans and understandings and on their own role in children’s experiences. As teachers examine the children’s work and prepare the documentation of it, their own understanding of children’s development and insight into their learning is 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). Documentation makes visible traces of the child’s experience and learning, and makes possible a public sharing and testing of ideas (Freeman, 1998). The systematic documentation process allows each teacher to

become a producer of research and to examine his/her own development as a reflective teacher.

Educators in Reggio Emilia view documentation as an instrument of exchange and communication of ideas. Especially, they try to communicate that children are rich, competent, and powerful. The documentation of young children's work highlights their capabilities, often surprising viewers with its complexity (Kocher, 1999). It is through the unity of thinking and feeling that young children can explore their world, represent their ideas, and communicate with others at their highest level. Recognizing that exploration, representation, and communication feed one another, teachers can best help children to achieve this potential.

### Methodological Approach

In this study, I sought to learn more about the personal qualities that enable some teachers to embrace pedagogical documentation with enthusiasm, and the development and evolution of pedagogical practice that arises out of reflecting upon the process of documenting children's learning. My own experience with documenting and making visible the complex learning of young children has caused me to wonder if the documentation process acts as a catalyst for dispositional change. *Does this change happen because of a disposition to embrace Reggio or does embracing Reggio precipitate the desire to change?*

The approach taken in this qualitative case study has been characterized by a design that is emergent, flexible, and responsive to the changing conditions of the study in progress. The sample selection was non-random, purposeful, and small; as a researcher, I spent considerable time in the natural setting of the study, often in intense contact with the participants. Desiring to limit this study to a reasonable scope, and particularly to focus on information richness (Patton, 2002), three teachers and their work

were chosen for in-depth study and analysis. These three, Ann, Sarah, and Margie, are primary sources of knowledge in examining and understanding pedagogical documentation, as inspired by the schools of Reggio Emilia, interpreted for a North American context. Each woman was selected based upon input from others, and a desire to provide distinct voices reflecting different experiences.

The site of research, Hilltop Children's Centre, is a private preschool/day-care programme, which serves children of approximately 3-6 years of age. Three teachers in particular at Hilltop have been incorporating elements of the Reggio Emilia Approach into their teaching practice for nearly ten years. These teachers have participated in study tours to Reggio Emilia, as well as engaging in independent study on this approach. They have adapted a method of pedagogical documentation that is culturally relevant to their own community. These teachers are MASTER documenters. Documentation panels consisting of photographs, transcribed conversations, and teacher reflections, cover the school walls. During their years of documenting children's work, they have amassed a collection of project history books detailing various investigations and experiences (Field notes, 2002).

Three primary kinds of data gathering were included in this research project: (1) in-depth, open-ended interviews; (2) direct observation; and (3) written documents, including such sources as personal diaries, archived documented project stories, and programme records (Creswell, 1998; Goodwin & Goodwin, 1996). The data from lengthy open-ended interviews consisted of direct quotations from individuals about their experiences, opinions, feelings, and knowledge (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). The data from observations included detailed descriptions of programme activities, participants' behaviours, and staff actions. Document

analysis yielded excerpts, quotations, and entire passages from records, correspondence, and official reports (Merriam, 2001).

Descriptive information about programmes and people provided initial evaluation data. Content analysis involved identifying coherent and important examples, themes, and patterns in the data, looking for quotations or observations that seem to go together or are examples of the same underlying idea, issue, or concept. Patterns, themes, and categories of analysis emerge out of the data rather than being decided prior to data collection and analysis. Organizing and simplifying the complexity of data into some meaningful and manageable themes or categories has been the basic purpose of content analysis.

### Portraiture

The final written form of the project has taken on the framework of a descriptive narrative known as "portraiture," a term used to define a method of inquiry and documentation in the social sciences developed by Sarah Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997). Portraiture seeks to combine systematic, empirical description with aesthetic expression, blending art and science, humanistic sensibilities and scientific rigor. The portraits are designed to capture the richness, complexity, and dimensionality of human experience in social and cultural experiences. These portraits are shaped through dialogue between portraiture and the subject, each one participating in the drawing of the image. The encounter between the two is rich with meaning and resonance and is crucial to the success and authenticity of the rendered piece, a text that comes as close as possible to "painting with words" (p. 4).

Portraiture is framed by the phenomenological lens. Van Manen (1990) 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” (p. 36).

As portraitist, I am interested not only in producing complex, subtle description in context but also in searching for the central story, developing a convincing and authentic narrative. This requires careful, systematic, and detailed description developed through watching, listening to, and interacting with the protagonists over a sustained period of time, the tracing and interpretation of emergent themes, and the piecing together of these themes into an aesthetic whole. The process of creating a whole often feels like: “weaving a tapestry or piecing together a quilt. Looking for points of thematic convergence is like searching for the patterns of texture and colour in a weaving. In creating the text, the portraitist is alert to the aesthetic principles of composition and form, rhythm, sequence, and metaphor. The portraitist’s standard, then, of authenticity, capturing the essence and resonance of the actors’ experience and perspective through the details of action and thought revealed in context” (Davis & Lightfoot, 1997, p. 12).

Portraiture, with its focus on narrative, intends to address an audience beyond the walls of the academy. The attempt is to move beyond the academy’s inner circle, to speak in a language that is not coded or exclusive, and to develop texts that will seduce the readers into thinking more deeply about issues that concern them. The interpretations of protagonist and portraitist contribute to the co-construction of the story, but the final contributor is the reader – who brings yet another interpretation into the discourse. The reader is “an active force in the co-construction of story, applying available data to the elaboration of his or her interpretation of the narrative” (Davis & Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1997, p. 118).

### Discussion

Dozens of salient themes have emerged from the data. The limitations of this brief article obviously preclude detailing them all here, so I highlighted only a few. Karen Gallas (1998) uses the imagery of a beachcomber to describe her research. The analogy seems apt. Taken with texture, colour, and shape of sea glass, the novice beachcomber picks up every piece. The collection process is almost indiscriminate because the delight in finding treasure scattered along the sands is so captivating. Over time, blue glass becomes the prize because it is so rare, and in the process of looking for the blue glass, the beachcomber’s focus narrows. Let me offer some of those cobalt blue gems here.

### Resonance with “What Could Be”

In our interview conversations, each of the three participants identified a powerful sense of connection upon her initial exposure to the work of Reggio Emilia educators. Referring to their viewing of the video, “To Make A Portrait of a Lion,” which portrays one project undertaken by Reggio educators with young children, I noted the following comments:

~ *What I was seeing was all my yearnings for how to be with children right there, in images and words, and being lived out in front of me...*

~ *Seeing people living with the kind of heart and spirit that I wanted to live with in my days with children, and had something to strive towards without really knowing what I was striving towards.*

~ *It’s hard to even find words for it because it was such a heart-level experience...*

~ *I think that’s what brought me to tears. Some place is doing all these things that I dream about and they’re not just doing it in some alternative, backwards place. They’re not just doing it by removing themselves from the world, they’re out in ‘the marketplace.’ That’s just such a bea-*

*con of hope. I mean, it sounds trite, but it really is, it’s such a beacon of hope for that...*

~ *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.*

~ *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. Weeping out of the sense that I am so excited about it, and so overwhelmed by the ‘bigness’ of it.*

---

*Karen Gallas (1998) uses the imagery of a beachcomber to describe her research.*

*The analogy seems apt. Taken with texture, colour, and shape of sea glass, the novice beachcomber picks up every piece.*

*The collection process is almost indiscriminate because the delight in finding treasure scattered along the sands is so captivating. Over time, blue glass becomes the prize because it is so rare, and in the process of looking for the blue glass, the beachcomber’s focus narrows.*

---

Clearly, there was a sense of resonance, a heart-felt connection with this portrayal of living with children in an authentic, intentional way. It was almost as if each woman was articulating an experience of coming home, of arriving, metaphorically, in a place where the lived experience meshed with the dream of what could be possible. Van Manen’s seminal work, *Researching Lived Experience* (1990) 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” (van Manen, 1990, p. 5).*

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

### **Pedagogical Documentation is the Cornerstone**

Reflecting on their individual experiences of developing a personal style of pedagogical documentation over a number of years, each described the practice as becoming the cornerstone of her pedagogical work with children. As van Manen (1990) writes, “when we raise questions, gather data, describe a phenomenon, we do so as researchers who stand in the world in a pedagogic way (p. 1)” – this way of standing in the world is reflected in the following selected quotes:

*~ Yeah, exactly, 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, but that in fact documentation is an expression of a way of being with children.*

*~ I think of documentation as growing out of deep listening and close observa-*

*tion, 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.*

*~ I felt that as this moment where, of recognition that this practice had become, like I’d absorbed it into my bones, into my understanding, in an utterly powerful way.*

*~ I feel the way it feeds me, it’s energizing. I love the way in which I pay attention to children as I’m writing, as I’m taking a photo... I feel the contact of it.*

*~ It sure has been an anchor in, an anchor that’s allowed me step into this very open-ended, in many ways, open-ended way of being with children. Most of the teacher scripts that we’re taught are really heavy on planning and agendas. To let go of that way of teaching, and step into this other playful, intentional way that is looked at as much more open - I think documentation can be something to hold onto in that process. I know myself as a teacher, I am radically different, because of just having lived these years of documentation in so many ways. That’s what’s been pivotal in my growth.*

*~ Personally, one thing, one way that I experience the power of this little being called documentation is finding myself invited to be nourished, to be challenged to be a close observer, and to be really present in the world.*

*~ It just feeds me so deeply, and is for me the thing that gives meaning to any of this.*

Documentation, such as that collected and collated by Ann, Sarah, and Margie, is focused on what Giudici et al. (2001) describe 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 (p. 307).

### **Intellectual Engagement**

A particularly salient theme that has emerged from the data is that, having incorporated pedagogical documentation into a nearly daily practice, there is a very high level of intellectual engagement for the teacher, which is made manifest in the process of interpretive writing. Read their comments:

*~ So, is that the key, or a key, to the intellectual engagement? Is the documentation what keeps you intellectually linked in to this daily work? How big a component is that? Here we are, smart, thinking, intellectually curious people who are attracted to work with young children, and is documentation part of what lets you be both of those things at the same time?*

*~ That’s a message that belongs in the work, because, you know, I’m smart, and I’m a thinker, and a writer, and..., you know, you don’t have to engage intellectually, it’s not what’s perceived as what’s needed for this work. It’s not the expectation of most people when they come to this work, and I think that’s partly why I think I was so attracted, initially, to these lab schools that were connected to universities, because it felt like, “Oh, well, the work with children isn’t, you know, intellectually stimulating, but I could be working with undergraduates or doing research, or working with these researchers, or...” I was trying to be the intellectual part of myself in that way, and that’s kind of what changed in the living it full days here at Hilltop, was just realizing that it’s all here. I’m really smart, I’m really well educated, and I use every ounce of it every day. Sure,*

*there are moments, you know, there are the moments of living with kids that aren't, sort of, intellectually rewarding or fulfilling, except that, if you really come at, "Who is this kid?" with curiosity, or, "How do I know this family?" or, "What is the interaction?" If you take in the message that you can be really curious about everything that happens, then yeah...it's a totally, completely, completely intellectually fulfilling work, which so many people just don't get.*

*~ I'm so engaged by the intellectual piece, and so engaged by the professional development, I mean, all of that is definitely there...*

Practicing the art of documentation while living school days with children fosters a culture of research at Hilltop. Gandini and Goldhaber (2001), 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 (pp. 143-144).

### **Writing as a Native Language**

A particular personal quality that each participant independently identified was that of being a comfortable writer. 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. Quoting again from van Manen (1990):

*In writing the author puts in symbolic form what he or she is capable of seeing. And so practice, in the lifeworld with children, can never be the same again. My writing as a practice prepared me for an insightful praxis in the lifeworld (I can now see things I could not see*

*before). Although I may try to close my eyes, to ignore what I have seen, in some way my existence is now mediated by my knowledge. And because we are what we can 'see' (know, feel, understand), seeing is already a form of praxis – seeing the significance in a situation places us in the event, makes us part of the event (p. 130).*

*~ Writing...it's my native language, really. So there's that personal piece for me, too, 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 a writer – that can only be a good thing.*

*~ 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 anyways, so it's this way of being, that we call documentation, it's a really great fit.*

*~ 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...*

*~It helps a lot that I write...that's shaped the form, that shapes what my documentation looks like.*

*~ I think the fact that I'm a good writer pushes me towards documentation that looks like a lot of writing...*

The writing process itself helps to deepen one's own thinking, or, as Richardson (2000) says, "writing is a way of 'knowing,' – a method of discovery and analysis" (p. 923). Ann, Sarah, and Margie are able to think out loud, in their documentation, to be transparent in their thinking, thereby inviting the reader into the reflective process.

### **Infinite Attention to Another**

Well-known Reggio pedagogue, 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) 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" (p. 16). The primacy of relationships is a strong theme that was referred to by the three participants in this study, as well by many of the parents of children who attend Hilltop.

*~ That's sort of the heart of the whole relationship piece, is the whole heart of the beginning and sustaining piece for me of this work. Documentation is the practice that cultivates relationships, that reflects and cultivates relationships.*

*~ It's being in relationship with children and families, and that's what it's about for me, the deep and intimate and meaningful relationships that are there.*

*~ 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.*

My observation, as an outside researcher, is that these educators have worked hard to effectively develop systems where collegiality and collaboration support relationships among the children, educators, parents, and community, opportunities for learning and the co-construction of knowledge. Working with an emergent or responsive curriculum, 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. Giudici et al. (2001) make the observation that schools "too often dedicate their energies primarily to curriculum and didactics, neglecting the broad network of relationships and communication that are an integral part of the educational process,

and consequently placing little emphasis on the organization of these relationships” (p. 53). Clearly, these teachers have overcome that hurdle.

### Reflective Commentary

Earlier I described Ann, Sarah, and Margie as master documenters. Many in North America have been intrigued by the process of pedagogical documentation developed by the educators in Reggio Emilia. What makes the work of these three teachers at Hilltop particularly inspiring is the insightful reflective commentary that is paired with their observations of the children’s experiences. For example, during an investigation launched by play around Disney’s “Lion King,” Sarah wrote:

*Thinking back on this first gathering, 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, documenter. 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. Here is a sketch, or “web,” of our thinking about some of the developmental themes and their manifestations we see in the Tricks, Treasure, and Titanic play.*

Reflective practice is a dynamic, inquiry-oriented process that connects classroom experiences, including children’s learning, to a teacher’s construction of knowledge. Through self-reflection, one learns to listen to oneself, a skill that is essential to listening to others and developing awareness, which leads to mindfulness (Rud, 1995; Van Manen, 1991). These teachers are masters at this, as is clearly evidenced in the reflective, interpretive text that is a significant component of their documentation. Freeman (1998) contends that teaching, and the notion of a teacher’s work, must be thought of as a process of doing research, defined as speculation, wondering, and questioning what we do. Reflective teachers move toward a deeper engagement with the burning and authentic issues of teaching that allow for soul transformation and increased understanding, or, following Socrates, a “turning of the soul” (Haroutunian-Gordon, 1995).

### Three Voices, Three Perspectives

Each of the protagonists in this story, names the practice of documentation as the centre of the work she does with children.

**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. *“There’s something about the concreteness of that and the process of documentation takes this organic, experiential, fluid curriculum, life, 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 this 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 looks like money in the bank, knowing that those stories are there.”*

**Ann** considers doing peace and justice work with kids as *“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.”* For her, the practice of documentation, coupled with the principles of emergent curriculum, fit “hand in glove” with social justice work. By studying her documentation notes, she can see under-

neath the words of the children to the themes and issues under-girding them. With that understanding, she responds in meaningful ways, taking an active role in shaping an activism project. She says, *“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.”*

What has always been at the heart of **Margie’s work** has been ideas about close observation of children, and thinking about what can grow out of those observations. In her role as *pedagogista* (or self-described “community elder”), she encourages observers to slow down, to be mindful of the ordinary moments that are, in fact, extraordinary. Thinking about fostering a culture of documentation, she believes that *“creating the disposition to notice and delight and be curious about what you’re seeing”* is key. *“Valuing children for who they are, not just what we want them to be, causes a shift in the way we think about learning and teaching. We also begin to envision a larger purpose for the teaching profession – making childhood visible and valued for the ways in which it can enrich our humanity and contribute to our collective identity. To bring this transformation about, we need a pedagogy (a way of thinking about learning and teaching) that mirrors our vision for children, not the existing one of the popular culture. Teachers who subscribe to a pedagogy of this nature come from a place of curiosity, believe in children’s capabilities, and know that they are engaging in a process that is unfolding, not static...There’s a lot of ways you can use your observations, and, because I’m straddling a bunch of different worlds, advocacy being a big one, it took me a*

*while to find a good balance between documenting for advocacy purposes.”*

### The Phenomenological Connection

I find a strong parallel between phenomenology, particularly Max van Manen’s description of human science research, and the experience of Ann, Sarah, and Margie, as documenters. 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. The way in which each of them 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):

*...pedagogy requires a phenomenological sensitivity to lived experience (children’s realities and lifeworlds). Pedagogy requires a hermeneutic ability to make interpretive sense of the phenomena of the lifeworld 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 (p. 2).*

Each participant was asked if her experience of embracing the practice of pedagogical documentation has acted as a catalyst for personal growth or change. Ann’s response was a resounding:

*~ Ah...I think that’s exactly the right question to be asking. My own personal experience is that profoundly, YES. It was life changing, it set me on this journey that I’m still on...*

And again, this is mirrored in van Manen’s (1990) belief that phenomenological research can be a transforming process:

*Phenomenological projects and their methods often have a deep transformative effect on the researcher himself or herself. Indeed, phenomenological*

*research is often itself a form of deep learning, leading to a transformation of consciousness, heightened perceptiveness, increased thoughtfulness and tact, and so on (p. 163).*

It seems fitting to conclude with the words of Loris Malaguzzi (1993), founder of the Reggio Emilia preschools, written shortly before his death.

*This work has strongly informed – little by little – our way of being with the children. It has also, in a rather beautiful way, obliged us to refine our methods of observation and recording so that the process of children’s learning becomes the basis of our dialogue with parents. Stand aside for a while and leave room for learning, observe carefully what children do, and then, if you have understood well, perhaps teaching will be different than before (p. 77).*

Whether or not there is a disposition to document seems to be the proverbial “chicken and egg” question. Which comes first? Ann, Margie, 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. Having 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. It is also the description of the phenomenological researcher. It may be that it is a relationship of reciprocity – that perhaps initially Ann, Margie, and Sarah were drawn to the Reggio Emilia Approach because it resonated within each of them in an intuitive way, and that their subsequent work with pedagogical documentation has fostered dispositions that each already had. In a reciprocal manner, the personal disposition enables the practice of documentation, which nurtures the innate disposition...

## References

- Beneke, S., Harris-Helm, J., & Steinheimer, K. (1998). *Windows on learning: Documenting young children's work*. New York: Teacher's College Press.
- Borgia, E. (1991). *Impressions of Reggio Emilia* (Report No. 141). University of Illinois. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 338 386).
- Bredenkamp, S. & Copple, C. (Eds.) (1997). *Developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood programs* (revised edition). Washington, DC: NAEYC Publications.
- Cadwell, L. (1997). *Bringing Reggio Emilia home*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Creswell, J. (1998). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five traditions*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Dahlberg, G., Moss, P., & Pence, A. (1999). *Beyond quality in early childhood education and care: Postmodern perspectives*. London: Falmer Press.
- Davis, J. & Lawrence-Lightfoot, S. (1997). *The art and science of portraiture*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Edwards, C., Forman, G., & Gandini, L. (Eds.) (1998). *The hundred languages of children: The Reggio Emilia approach to early childhood education - Advanced Reflections*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing.
- Edwards, C., & Springate, K. (1993). Inviting children into project work. *Dimensions of Early Childhood*, 40, pp. 9-12.
- Freeman, D. (1998). *Doing teacher research: From inquiry to understanding*. New York: Heinle & Heinle Publishers.
- Gallas, K. (1998). "Sometimes I can be anything": Power, gender, and identity in a primary classroom. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Gandini, L. (1993). Fundamentals of the Reggio Emilia approach to early childhood education. *Young Children*, 49 (1), 4-8.
- Gandini, L. (1998). Educational and caring spaces. In C. Edwards, L. Gandini, & G. Forman, (Eds.) *The hundred languages of children: The Reggio Emilia approach to early childhood education - Advanced Reflections*. (pp. 161-178). Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- Gandini, L., & Goldhaber, J. (2001). Two reflections about documentation. In L. Gandini and C. P. Edwards (Eds.), *Bambini: The Italian approach to infant/toddler care*. (pp. 124-135). New York: Teachers College Press.
- Giudici, C., Krechevsky, M., & Rinaldi, C., (Eds.) (2001). *Making learning visible: Children as individual and group learners*. Reggio Emilia, Italy: Reggio Children srl
- Glesne, C., & Peshkin, A. (1992). *Becoming qualitative researchers - An introduction*. White Plains, NY: Longman.
- Goodwin, W. L., & Goodwin, L. D. (1996). *Understanding quantitative and qualitative research in early childhood education*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Guba, E. G., & Lincoln, Y. S. (1981). *Effective evaluation*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Guba, E. B., & Lincoln, Y. S. (1989). *Fourth generation evaluation*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Haroutunian-Gordon, S. (1995). Soul. In J.W. Garrison & A.G. Rud (Eds.), *The educational conversation; Closing the gap* (pp. 97-107). Albany, NY: SUNY.
- Kocher, L. (1999). *Butterfly transformations: Using the documentation process modeled in the schools of Reggio Emilia, Italy*. Unpublished master's thesis. Victoria, B.C.: University of Victoria.
- Malaguzzi, L. (1993). No way. The hundred is there. In C. Edwards, L. Gandini, & G. Forman (Eds.), *The hundred languages of children: The Reggio Emilia approach to early childhood education*. (p. vi). Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing.
- Malaguzzi, L. (1998). History, ideas, and basic philosophy. In C. Edwards, L. Gandini, & G. Forman (Eds.), *The hundred languages of children: The Reggio Emilia approach - Advanced Reflections* (pp. 49-97). Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing.
- Marshall, C., & Rossman, G. (1989). *Designing qualitative research*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publishers.
- Merriam, S. B. (2001). *Qualitative research and case study applications in education*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- New, R. (1992). The integrated early childhood curriculum: New interpretations based on research and practice. In C. Seefeldt (Ed.), *The early childhood curriculum: A review of current research* (pp. 286-322). New York: Teachers College Press.
- Ouellette, S., 2003. Painting lessons. In R. Josselson, A. Lieblich, & D. McAdams (Eds.), *Up close and personal: The teaching and learning of narrative research* (pp. 13-28). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Palestis, E. (1994). The Reggio way. *The American School Board Journal* (181), 32-35.
- Patton, M. (2002). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods* (3rd edition). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Readings, B. (1997). *The university in ruins*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press.
- Richardson, L. (2000). Writing: A method of inquiry. In N.K. Denzin and Y.A. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 923-948). Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.
- Rinaldi, C. (1998). Projected curriculum constructed through documentation - *Progettazione*. In C. Edwards, L. Gandini, & G. Forman (Eds.), *The hundred languages of children: The Reggio Emilia approach - Advanced Reflections* (pp. 113-125). Greenwich, CT: Ablex Publishing.
- Rosen, I. (1992). Reggio Emilia: A model in creativity. *Scholastic Pre-K Today*, 7(2), 81-84.
- Rud, A.G. (1995). Learning in comfort: Developing an ethos of hospitality in education. In J.W. Garrison & A.G. Rud (Eds.), *The educational conversation: Closing the gap* (pp. 119-128). Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- van Manen, M. (1990). *Researching lived experience: Human science for an action sensitive pedagogy*. New York: State University of New York Press.
- van Manen, M. (1991a). *The tact of teaching: The meaning of pedagogical thoughtfulness*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.