

## PART II: THE DOCUMENTATION PROCESS

*The documentation process leads us to improve our understandings, knowledge, and intuitions. Topics emerge — teachers document and wonder and provoke — children respond in an exquisite, often non-linear dance with layer upon layer of meaning. It cannot be planned, but it can be planned for through the teacher's disposition to observe, document, provoke, and think through the preparation of the environment to invite the interactions and encounters through which children's ideas emerge, and through the development of a culture of conversation and construction of theory.*

—Pam Oken-Wright



At Diana School in Reggio Emilia, behind the adults we see documentation panels and clay sculptures showing the children's growing understanding of tree growth.

Sydney's photograph, 1992

# CHAPTER 9

## We learn about documentation

*Learning and teaching should not stand on opposite banks and just watch the river flow by; instead, they should embark together on a journey down the water. Through an active reciprocal exchange, teaching can strengthen learning how to learn.*

—Loris Malaguzzi

### Introduction

The importance of the documentation process to the many successes of the Reggio Emilia early childhood program cannot be overemphasized. The ecology and health of their schools for children from 3 months to years result directly from the adults learning to observe and then document *reflectively*, to document *collaboratively*, and to document *with clarity*.

In this section of our book we will discuss our experiences with this complex documentation process — our gradual initial exposure to Reggio Emilia documentation presentations and how we began to approach doing documentation ourselves, and we'll offer some ideas for you to begin to document your program. First we want to try to show you the breadth of this topic. This documentation process makes possible the *active reciprocal exchange* Dr. Malaguzzi advocates in the quotation at the beginning of this chapter.

It has been a long and winding process — trying to understand what the Reggiani are doing and modifying what they do to suit our local conditions, learning to use technology sensibly, and most importantly finding out *how to use documentation as a learning tool for ourselves, for the parents, for the children and for the community*.

## What is documentation?

Is documentation the report we hang on the wall, or is it a process integral to the work and lives we lead? Can it be three-dimensional? May it include audio or video recordings? Is it something we *do* or something we *make*?

The answer to all these questions is yes.

We collect data, we think about what we've collected, we consider it with our friends and colleagues and we produce something to share with the children, their parents, the school community, and the wider community.

Leslie and I wouldn't have noticed Reggio ideas and thinking had the Reggiani not brilliantly documented and exhibited and published their work so we could see the enormous events of the children's investigations and their beautiful, thoughtful art.

I first saw a little bit of Reggio Emilia early education on a VHS video, *To Make a Portrait of a Lion*, handed to me in 1989 by Dr. Elizabeth (Betty) Jones, my senior colleague at Pacific Oaks College. Along with the video came a single page of notes about the Reggio Emilia program from John Nimmo. Stunned by the excellence of the work of the children in the video, I watched it again and again and, the next evening, invited my best students to watch it with me. The question that came up, as we watched the children make masterful drawings, sculptures and plays about the lion whose statue stands guard in front of the big church in the market square, was "*How old are these children?*" and the answer, which they had heard before they watched the video, was always, astonishingly, "They leave this school around the time they turn six."

The next time I saw Reggio work it was at the Washington, D.C. National Association for the Education of Young Children conference in 1990, where I spent almost all of my conference time at the *One Hundred Languages of Children* exhibition, which introduced the world to Reggio Emilia work and philosophy. I was trying to puzzle out the work these people were doing with children and its amazing outcomes. Leslie was at that conference too, but we didn't know each other yet.

Separately, both of us were informed, delighted and convinced by the documentation panels we encountered at the Hundred Languages exhibit, and later impressed and amazed by what we saw on the walls of classrooms in Reggio Emilia.

The panels and the things the children had made all told us about the commitment these Reggiani had made to support very young children investigating and delving deeply into a subject of interest: for example *Shadows*, or *What's Under the City* or *Rain*. Children's theories about where rain comes from, or how shadows are formed were respected and explored, and the children were able to learn, as we could see from the drawings and sculptures and dioramas they had made — not because some adult told them but because of the children's own research. It was clear that these children were spending time over weeks and even months, exploring and discovering *things of interest to them*. We saw these panels teaching us, teaching the children, and teaching the teachers and community. Our astonishment, and the desire to improve our work, stimulated us to study this documentation process.

A few months later I had the opportunity to go to Reggio Emilia, Italy and visit the schools for young children there, where I saw hundreds of detailed, thoughtful, deeply moving documentation panels on the walls of the schools. The panels show and tell the process of long, thoughtful projects done by the children and could be seen all over the place: in their piazzas<sup>69</sup>, corridors and classrooms. The panels depict the children's process of learning, and let us overhear interesting parts of what the children say during their experiences. They also describe what the adults were studying as they lived in the classroom with the children and paid close attention to the children's ideas and intentions.

## Documentation increases respect for the children and for the program

So, what did we see in Reggio and at their exhibit? Large wall panels that demonstrate and describe the intellectual power of the children, as they make theories, test them, and revise them. These panels proclaim to the community — and the world — that this classroom is a *serious, productive place, where important work is happening*, thus correcting the common misconception of the early childhood classroom as a silly, frivolous place lacking meaning or importance. Remember how much we came to respect baby Laura with the watches? Reggio Emilia documentation is validation!<sup>70</sup>

The Reggiani make panels that show what happened over a period of time in their classrooms: how a project flowed between irregular banks of an ever-changing river; where the children embarked, and what sidebars, side trips,

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69. As in Italian cities, Reggio Emilia schools all have a central gathering area, where larger-scale activities or materials shared by all classes in the school are located. Parent meetings happen in this space, and dressing-up stations are sometimes located here, as are the famous kaleidoscopes in which children see themselves reflected "a million times".

70. See the story about Laura, page 13 of this book.

sandbars and asides emerged organically along the way. The Reggiani record and save this material, learning from it at least five times:

1. Participating in the direct experience of the event;
2. Deciding which data to record;
3. Reviewing, sorting and ordering the many photos, transcripts and commentaries, and later choosing those that best tell the story combined with the children's words and adult commentary;
4. Viewing, considering and reflecting on the finished documentation panel with children, colleagues and parents and
5. Considering how the work depicted on the panel might stimulate future explorations and investigations.

These five steps might take months. Let's look at their process in slower motion. Because it's recursive, the documentation process always starts over and over again.

The pieces of the display — photos, quotations from the children, introductory paragraphs, titles, and more — are considered with colleagues many times *before* they are glued down.<sup>71</sup> Questions arise from the collaboration and must be addressed on the panel. The intention is to offer a *well-organized and thoughtfully displayed picture of the children's life and work in a complete, positive, and strong narrative.*

The Reggiani often hang a panel beside a shelf next to the finished artwork — the objects we see being made in the photos and language of the panel. My photograph on page 69 shows clay trees on a shelf, and behind them a panel showing the children's drawings and quoting what they said. On my trips to Reggio Emilia, next to a photograph I saw children's portraits of the person in the photo. Next to the old typewriter I saw drawings of typewriters, and even an ambitious attempt at building a typewriter of clay. An audio recording was tucked into an envelope in the display, and an audio player situated nearby, for listening in on the process.

## What's on the documentation panel?

...Anecdotal observations, samples of children's works, photographs that illustrate a process, transcripts of children's

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71. I've written elsewhere about the importance of editing. See <http://ecrp.uiuc.edu/v1n1/clemens.html>

voiced ideas, all accompanied with teacher's reflective commentary. It is this interpretive piece, this narrative, which sets pedagogical documentation apart and makes it a viable tool for reflection.<sup>72</sup>

The Reggioiani include many sorts of things on a panel: photos, drawings, language, information the children have gathered, information about why the teacher chose to move this activity into the spotlight, reasons why this work is important in the community, descriptions of how one child worked, how two children interacted, how a group functioned, and more. Each panel is very different from other ones, reflecting different aspects of children's work and their ideas.

### The Crowd Project:<sup>73</sup> baseline evidence

During the Crowd Project in Reggio Emilia, the children learned and practiced many sub-skills including how to make profiles, studying perspectives from which people can be seen, sculpting clay human figures and developing a process for making — from paper — people who could stand and talk with each other. Each of these pieces of work was evident, in photos and children's words, on a panel.

At the start of a study it's valuable and useful to record clear evidence of baseline moments. Begin by taking some "before" photos. At the beginning of the Crowd Project, recorded in a documentation book<sup>74</sup> from Reggio, the boys and girls talked, in separate groups<sup>75</sup>, about crowds they had experienced at the beach. These conversations were recorded. Next the children were asked to draw a crowd. The details and specifics *that had been clear* in their conversations about crowds were *missing from their drawings*, which tended to look like uniform, faceless paper dolls. When the boys and girls were together in a single group these details and specifics were read back to them from the previous day's transcripts and the children examined their drawings with sharper, more thoughtful understanding.

At first some children defended their drawings:

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72. Felstiner, Sarah et al "The Disposition to Document" in Fleet, Alma, et al, *Insights: Behind early childhood pedagogical documentation*, Australia, Pademelon Press, 2006 page 57.

73. See Part One of this book, page 37. The atelierista in charge of this project was Veà Vecchi.

74. 100 Languages of Children Exhibit Catalog, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Pages 142ff.

75. I was curious about this division by gender, which I saw repeatedly in Reggio. I asked a senior staff person about this, saying "Do you divide girls from boys in order to make them more different from each other, or more the same?" She thought for a bit. "That's a new question to me," she said, "but I think it's to make them more the same." This satisfied my feminist concern, and made sense to me, since in a co-ed discussion about outer space the boys will take over the discussion, and in a co-ed discussion about babies, the girls do. Having the children's initial discussions in same gender groups means they come to the mixed group having already done some thinking and clarifying of their ideas.

“Mine’s just a LITTLE crowd.”

“They’re all friends, so they’re all going the same way!”

Others didn’t:

“...but in a crowd the people aren’t all friends or relatives, you know.”

And some were mixed:

“This piece of paper is all filled up. It’s a crowd...it’s just that people don’t all walk with their arms open.”

“Yeah, they all look sort of like penguins.”

When reminded by a re-reading of what they had said about crowds, these children were now able to skillfully critique their work and go on to *describe what they needed to learn* about how to draw a crowd — they identified the drawing problems and the skills they needed to learn: how to draw people in profile and from the back, how to individuate the people in the crowd, how to vary body positions and more.

“We need to make some from the back and some from the side, not all facing forward.”

“I don’t know how to do them from the back.”

“Me, neither.”

“We have to learn how to do it.”

“...Listen, you don’t know how to do the profile because you need a lot of time to learn how to understand that it’s a profile, otherwise they look like monsters.”

“I want to say an idea: you have to do the profile one time and then again and again until you learn how.”

”Yeah, or else somebody says: ‘What kind of a crowd is THAT?’<sup>76</sup>”

Finally a plan for work over the next weeks was becoming clear to the teachers, and over time they set the children tasks that would lead them to accomplishing the hard work of drawing crowds and building them in clay.

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76. Ibid, Page 145.

To attack the problems of profiles and people-seen-from-the-back, the teachers put a boy in the middle of the studio and had other children draw him (in pencil) and others model him (in clay) from four directions. The children noticed that in order to *draw* accurately they had to leave out body parts they couldn't see, but in contrast realized that accurate *sculpting* included all body parts. This profound discovery — about two- and three-dimensional media and how differently they work — results when children represent what they know, repeatedly, in more than one medium.

Children made profiles with pencil, wire, and clay. The wire was particularly helpful in seeing the line of the profile, and the clay work required them to learn to roll even, smooth coils to use as lines.

To focus on individuation, children milled around the room, each assuming a particular personality chosen from a crowd photo, considering and imitating that person's individual speed, posture, and gesture.

For the triumphant finale of the Crowd Project the boys made a crowd in clay, and the girls fabricated another crowd using paper. The boys re-invented the assembly line, one boy rolling balls for heads, another making arms, another trunks, another legs and yet another feet, and then they assembled many members of the crowd. When they got tired of making clay people they creatively put a mirror behind their crowd to make it look even bigger! The girls' crowd of people, made of paper, all stood upright, and were engaged in conversations — shown in overhead balloons, like comic book conversations — highlighting the relationships between people in the crowd.

From the first conversation about crowds and the subsequent baseline drawings of crowds, (which came from the teachers' *review* of the conversation about the beach, and their astute discovery that the children were *more interested in crowds* than in beaches) the community of children and teachers devised a long and complex process of learning to represent a crowd.

This extraordinary, extended project project shows us how the Reggiani take a small — but emotion-laden — report from children and transform it into a magnificent study, enhancing the children's disposition to go into an area where they're not skilled, do hard exploration and representation, and emerge with new skills well and truly their own. Sublime!

Visiting Reggio Emilia we were impressed by how frequently colleagues confer (both in scheduled meetings and on the run) in the course of planning, considering and documenting the children's work, comparing and checking their perceptions and plans with each other.



## A reciprocal pedagogy leads to many possibilities

In this country, sadly, we have no established, historical image of the teacher as storyteller and historian of the classroom. Instead, our attention is usually directed more towards outcomes, results, products to take home and best scores rather than to the *processes* which create them.

Our new Image of the Child helps us liberate ourselves from what Dr. Malaguzzi called “prophetic pedagogy” — a curriculum that determines what the children will learn *without consulting or studying the children*. We need new perspectives which help us examine many possibilities at once. There is never a *single* solution for the infinite variation we experience while working with children. We must respond in context to the flesh-and-blood children who are with us, and to their very particular, specific intentions. That requires of us flexibility, resourcefulness, responsiveness and reciprocity which unconsidered, conventional, or “canned” curriculum and practices don’t allow.<sup>77</sup>

## The documentation process drives the curriculum

Without a documentation process a classroom may be wonderfully pleasant, and may help children with their social growth; but for emotional and intellectual growth nothing is as productive as a reflective documentation process that makes a regular time and place for teachers to think and plan collaboratively what they offer the children.

## Progettazione and programmazione

The Reggioiani distinguish between what they call *progettazione*, projecting or spinning off from interest, as described above, and what they call *programmazione* — delivering a program from a pre-planned curriculum package or lesson plan. If you stay with *programmazione* — the curriculum planned in advance by people who haven’t even met your children — your program will rarely experience the kind of excitement and power that emerges from a curriculum based on exploring the passions of the people in the room.

We’re exploring and advocating for *progettazione*.

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77. In 2012 the American Federation of Teachers is circulating a petition to end the focus on testing and allow teachers, instead, to respond to the needs they perceive in children. Shocking that this would be an issue!

## Reciprocity

Veia Vecchi tells us:

*Pedagogy and environment should — in a natural and attentive reciprocal process, and reacting to external reality — evolve together with general cultural references and metaphors in transformation.*<sup>78</sup>

The Reggio Emilian set up spaces and repeatedly change the room in light of what they've discovered about the children. This discovery comes from their documentation process. They undertake long and complex investigational projects with this children, and these, too, are based upon the data they discover, as well as their expectation that children will learn to express themselves in media of all sorts — the “Hundred Languages”.

The Reggio Emilia discipline of planning, making, using, and learning from documentation demands an alert staff who use their data to inform their further planning. It is enormously productive.

### Where does documentation fit in?

A dialog on documentation between Leslie and our friend, videographer Jed Handler.

Leslie wrote: At its best, documentation and the everyday work of the teacher and children become so intertwined that one doesn't exist without the other — each breathes life into the other — the two become one. Their energy is transmitted into the environment, the materials, and into the work of the learning community. If done well, documentation enters and changes the lives of the children, the families, and the craft and understanding of the teacher.

Jed replied: Conventionally “documentation” is classified as *separate* from the everyday work of the teacher. It is somehow seen as *outside* the relationship between teacher and student, or teacher and parent, as if *remote* from that intimate sharing. The kind of documentation we're discussing is *not* comparable to attendance records, bureaucratic statistics, or standardized testing; practices readily divorced from the act of teaching or from the classroom or the community.

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78. In *Grazia e cura come educazione. Reggio Children. Translated from the original Italian by SGC.* Veia Vecchi was the atelierista at Diana School for many years.

Reggio documentation is a process occurring *inside* the educational experience, and is essentially about (and central to) inner connections among all the members of the educational village, and *within* each individual element as well. The teacher, the child, the parents, the administrator – *all* are served by thoughtfully created and utilized documentation, since it enriches the process they are all engaging in, and thus themselves.

It deepens their understanding of their own behavior, intentions, and motivations by focusing attention on the core educational issue — the real actions and interactions as they have occurred in the classroom — facilitating user-friendly feedback for all to share.

Documentation provides another perspective by being a review. It allows for timely contemplation and analysis of what has happened, and fresh planning for what happens next. It provides a basis for expanding or contracting interactions. It serves as a landmark from which a better navigational path can be charted. It gives missed opportunities another chance. It can shift focus or emphasis from what was planned to actual occurrences. It can include those who didn't share in the original moment and permits their meaningful and active participation. It supports those formerly passive in becoming active and reactive, thus furthering and enriching their experience.

Properly understood, supported, and utilized, documentation delivers an additional new and unique perspective, the effects of which profoundly change the way we go forward. When we share perspectives and experiences through the documentation materials we generate and create new opportunities and increase the chances that we will go forward differently!

Leslie wrote, and it's worth repeating: At its best, documentation and the everyday work of the teacher and children become so intertwined that one doesn't exist without the other — each breathes life into the other — the two become one. Their energy is transmitted into the environment, the materials, and into the work of the learning community. If done well, documentation enters and changes the lives of the children, the families, and the understanding of the teacher. If done well, documentation enters and changes the lives of the children, the families, and the understanding of the teacher. This work vitally impacts the hearts and lives of the children, the families and the teacher, provoking further growth for all!

## Integration and agency

Documentation is deeply coordinated and incorporated into all parts of the work in Reggio. The Reggiani depend on the documentation process to en-

sure honest, accurate and comprehensive feedback — to help them research what specifically is going on, to see the possibilities of improving or extending their work. They aren't just trying to please parents or other audiences — although they *do* — but they are studying *work they value highly, to help children develop a strong sense of their own capability*. This strong sense of capability, also sometimes called a sense of *agency*, is one of the big differences between what happens in Reggio and most other places. Helping children retain the “I can do it” feeling — one they're born with — is a major goal, and documentation helps keep everyone on track.

## Waiting to intervene

The Reggioiani teach us to pay a lot of attention to pacing. Teachers are encouraged to take the time necessary to really understand what's at the core of the children's interest and intention. Here's an example from Seattle, Washington. During an investigation sparked by play around Disney's “Lion King,” Sarah Felstiner 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, 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.<sup>79</sup>

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79. Ibid, *Insights*

## Why bother to document?

Documenting the children's work is time-consuming, challenging, detailed and finicky. Why do the Reggioiani take significant time from their other work to do it? *Because the documentation process grows the whole community.* It grows the teachers who make it, as they reflect on the work of their children, individually and collectively. It grows the children by making their lives visible, fixing and holding these events in their memories.

Documentation also grows the parents, answering their perennial question: What did you learn in school today? It helps the administrator and the world understand this constructivist<sup>80</sup> way of working, which moves beyond worksheets, tests and other academic rituals that purport to “certify” that learning is going on.

Beside the data displayed, Reggio Emilia panels answer questions like these: Where did this panel's story come from? What does it tell us about priorities in this classroom? What does it tell us about how the children are experiencing their time in the learning community? What does it tell parents about their children's lives during the time they are apart?

Looking at data, teachers consider: What's the engagement level of children in the photo? Do they care about this activity as much as we had predicted? More? Differently? The language the Reggioiani collect from the children about what's in their photos and their work can tell us how the children conceptualize it — is it different from what the adults expected? Is the *difference* important in telling the story? Many interesting discoveries make their way into panels.

## Children's theories

Early in the Shadow project the children are asked to draw “me and my shadow”. These baseline drawings show the adults the children's initial understandings and misunderstandings. Later, after weeks of experiences with shadows, the children have learned to predict correctly where a shadow will fall, they can draw complex shadows with multiple light sources, and they have had at least one remarkable experience with making and testing theory.<sup>81</sup>

80. The reader unfamiliar with constructivism is encouraged to read Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky, both of them important influences on Reggio Emilia thinking.

81. This story was told in the book, *Everything Has a Shadow Except Ants* published by Reggio Children. <http://zerosei.comune.re.it/inter/reggiochildren.htm> I read this book before I got to Italy. and was interested to see, when I visited Italy, that the children could make other correct predictions not recorded in the book .

One child constructed and explained her theory: “things that move (like butterflies and me) have shadows that move, and things that stand still (like houses and trees) have shadows that stand still.” This admirable theory represents accurately what can be seen at any given moment, but not what can be learned over time.

One morning the teachers took the children to the Municipal Theater, a short walk from Diana School. The children chalked the outlines of a column’s shadow on the pavement, and looked around, noting where the sun was and who was opening shops, what birds they saw, etc. The teacher asked the children if the column’s shadow would still be inside the chalk-marks at noon, and most of the children predicted, obedient to their theory, that it would still be there. At noon they returned and saw the column was no longer in the chalk-marks! The children looked around, saw that the sun had moved, realized that the shadow’s movement is a function of the sun’s movement, and *revised their theory*. It wasn’t mystery or illusion, but rather science — the children learned as a direct result of thoughtful observation.

## Using many languages

This intellectual work and the growth it engenders is exactly the sort of thing we expect to emerge when adults pay mindful attention to children’s work. We saw in the Crowd Project that *shifting the subject from one medium to another* — from conversation to drawing — evoked the children’s desire that their drawings accurately reflect their experience, and they were *moved to learn* how to draw better. Throughout all the Reggio schools they ask children to repeat something in another language. Each new medium in which a child can reach her goal provides her with another language, and as she accumulates languages she can choose among them how best to express herself. Testing a theory in context — on real columns in real time — helped the children discover the relationship of sun to shadow. Not all of the children’s theories are so amenable to testing, but it was wonderful that this one could be tested, and was, and the children could see for themselves.

## Variations

Repetition with variations is interesting. In Reggio there are many practices that have become part of the world of possibility, *languages*, because they prove interesting to groups of children. Examples:

- Photocopies can be made of a drawing, which then can be colored in various color schemes, or dressed up or down, as children desire.

- Self-portraits are very revealing, and often the portraits are focused on one body part: eyes drawn very large, with things they see drawn inside (things at the beach, or toys one hopes to have, or what is at the zoo, or the sun, the moon, and the stars).
- Hands are drawn at rest and in conversation, in anger and in joy. Brains are drawn in various forms: thinking and not thinking, angry and happy and trying to be understood.
- Often the Italians will project a large image on a wall, for the children to play “inside” it. An ocean, a sky, a crowd, a square with stone lions in it or whatever is under consideration. The children play inside the scene and it becomes more real to them, readying them to go on to represent it in their individual ways and in their choices of medium.

The wisdom to provide experiences like this comes from collaborative reflection, thinking about data as part of the documentation process. Had the teachers not *paid close attention* to the child’s original theory, had they not *collaborated* to figure out how to help the children re-construct their theory, had they not *spent a long time* on shadows, had they tried to give correct information, — risking, and therefore ending the conversation as I did with Hamid who thought the sun was broken<sup>82</sup> — this wonderful piece of intellectual development would have been lost.

When I read through documentation from Reggio I highlight the teacher’s language and look very closely at what was said. I ask, how did this adult intervention affect the dialogue? Did it open up the child to more questions? Did it help the children return to the topic? Was it helping children invent theories? 🐞

## Documentation changes your attitude and understanding

Nicole Mitchell researched changes in college students’ attitudes toward documentation before and after they visited Pistoia, an Italian city near Reggio Emilia, very similar in its early childhood programs to those of Reggio Emilia.<sup>83</sup> She reports that one of her students said, “[American] caregivers are unable to use this form of documentation as a curriculum guide because of the focus on kindergarten readiness skills and other restrictions”. Another student reported, “[documentation in Pistoia] opened my eyes to the different approaches to documentation and the various forms it can have. I loved see-

82. See Page 12 of this book

83. Mitchell, N., *University Students’ Perceptions of Pedagogical Documentation: A Qualitative Research Study*. M.A. Thesis, East Carolina University, August, 2010.

ing the teachers value the children and everything the children were involved in, including art pieces or books they were creating.” And, “the *study abroad* experience broadened my understanding of how people are constructed into a society. This experience allowed me the opportunity to reflect on how children are socialized in various early childhood settings.”

*This last comment indicates the deep influence of early childhood organizations on how a society operates.* Let’s keep it in mind as we look at the Documentation Process, because there’s no question that documentation is a great deal of work and the strength of these reactions underlines important reasons for taking that work on.

In the next chapter you’ll find teachers beginning to document in the U.S. Each in her own way discovers she learns so much from documenting that it changes her life with children, significantly improving it!



# CHAPTER 10

## Stories about starting to document

### A starting place

The idea of making documentation panels may seem overwhelming to you, but documenting develops in stages, not all at once. Remember, the Reggiani have been working with that idea since 1945 (and since 1968 with government support) so they have a head start. With collaboration and practice — and perhaps first beginning with what we call Daily Sheets — documentation displays will come within your reach and be enormously valuable to your whole community. This chapter will show you some early documentation work by people in the United States.

### Documentation starts with collecting data

Everyone who thinks in depth about documentation has an individual opinion about *when* it becomes documentation. Yet we can all agree *that what's first collected is data*: the pictures, videos, audio recordings, the notes we take when we have a moment to observe something we see or hear in the classroom, the questions parents ask, the questions children ask, the questions we ask ourselves...all this *undigested* material is data.

Data — photos and audio recordings — are immediately useful, starting as soon as they're taken, to help the children remember, reflect and build on what they've done. In Richmond, Virginia, veteran documenter Pam Oken-Wright hangs new photos with magnets in a place where children can consult them and be reminded of what they were doing. Marie Catrett (see chapter 13) keeps a hard copy of every Daily Sheet on the children's bookshelf in a loose-leaf book the children called the "Words Letter Book" since the e-mail that comes to their homes is called the "Words Letter".

Each of the teachers you meet in this book began sharing data in her own way with the children and their parents, so the parents know what's going on at school and can help the children reflect and build on their experience. (When you make them, finished documentation panels will contain some data and also commentary and analysis. What they reveal is culled from much more material, gathered over time, and discussed at length with the children and other adults at school and in the community.) Experience has led me to believe that you should start your documentation process gently, simply, leaving panel construction until you have a lot of documenting experience.

Documentation, then, is the process: what happens to us and to the data as we collaborate, reflect, consider, and bring data back to discuss with the children (“You were talking about \_\_\_\_\_ and I didn’t understand. Can you help me?”). It is ongoing reflection as we think and collaborate with our colleagues and friends — discussing the material and planning for the short- and long-term work.

### **Leslie’s early documentation**

Leslie’s documentation was composed on a computer and distributed as a printout to parents at the end of the school day. She was in a community where many families didn’t have a computer and, rather than leave anyone out, she sent home hard copy — a method that worked for everyone. The next chapter tells the reader what Leslie had to say about documenting in 2006.

# CHAPTER 11

Thinking about how to document

By Leslie Gleim

## Listening

Since we've been trained as teachers to talk pretty much all of the time, listening is very difficult. When we shift our thinking to the Image of the Child that we've learned from Reggio, and we want to *follow the children's lead*, we must learn to practice *listening*.

### Who's getting the practice?

Amelia Gambetti told us in a workshop that early in her teaching she was being supervised by Loris Malaguzzi. Together, they were poring over her documentation of a dialogue in her class. The data showed Amelia asking a question, one child responded, and then she would ask another question, and maybe two children would respond, and then she would ask another question. *Amelia was speaking far more than the children were. She was getting the practice in language. As they looked at the transcript they could see how many times she spoke and how few times children responded before she spoke again. Her lesson to us was: It is the children who need the practice in speaking, in formulating their thinking into speech, in participating in a conversation. Not the teacher, who needs practice in listening.*

### Observation and documentation help children understand each other

On the Reggio online discussion group a teacher wrote a long description of a child, ending with:

I am trying to think of how children might show their understanding of the identities of others besides using words.

I wrote back: The richest text you'll ever read is the children's play! Young children don't yet understand that others have different ideas and perspectives and that talking with each other is the way to explore and possibly bridge those differences. If children come to our programs sometimes seeing other people as *objects*, we can help them become more adept at relating to others as *people* who are in some ways like them and in other ways different.<sup>97</sup>

## Advice about observing

Observing what goes on in the dress-up area provides rich material. Some children play different roles over time, others stick to a single role. You'll see some children use the little people and furniture in the toy doll house to experiment with being someone else. Children building with blocks will assume many identities: a crane, a street sweeper or a bulldozer. Vygotsky says: "In play it is as though the child were a head taller than himself".<sup>98</sup>

Offer a variety of dolls in many sizes and materials. Be sure to include boy and girl dolls, babies, teens, moms and dads; dolls of all races and dolls with disabling conditions — and multiples of each. Your dress-up clothing will include child and adult garb for both genders: hats, capes, ties and shawls — props that allow children to slip into other familiar characters.<sup>99</sup>

As you observe the dress-up area, are some children being the Mom and Dad? What characteristics do they reveal, how do they portray power in their families, what preferences do they act on and how does behavior shift when the child becomes, instead, the Brother or the Sister? Remember, much of what they act out is fantasy, so this is not a description of what happens in his or her home. Notice how *unlike you* they are when they play teacher!

If the child always plays the same narrow role you might want to raise provocative questions, (what if a fire fighter came by to visit?) inviting her to try out other possibilities. If, as Mom, the child has fitted herself out with a purse and high heels, when she changes to being baby and yet keeps the purse, you could ask "What does baby do with the purse?" You'll hear hints about how children understand gender, parenthood, and other indicators of status.

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97. You can read more about this in: *The Child's Construction of Knowledge: Piaget For Teaching Children* by George E. Forman and David S. Kushner.

98. Vygotsky, L. (1978). Interaction between Learning and Development (pp. 79-91). In *Mind in Society*. (Trans. M. Cole). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University

99. You can write a small grant application to extend your diverse community of dolls. Here's a good place to start that process: <http://foundationcenter.org/>

Notice who the child seeks out. See if he plays with one set of children in the block area but chooses other children when dressing up. Children who are good observers are skilled at choosing productive playmates.

When children play at being cartoon characters or action figures such as Ninja Turtles or Power Rangers, this play rarely develops a complex story line. The children tend to copy what they've seen on television. The longer you watch, the more the children reveal of their frequently extensive, detailed knowledge of the story they've seen on TV. For example, one child playing the blue Power Ranger drew out a pretend sword to protect another Power Ranger and a third child said, "You can't do that. Only the *red* Power Ranger does that." Another four-year-old, this one in family childcare, was so enchanted with *Pirates of the Caribbean* that he would dress up (including eye shadow) and *be* Jack Sparrow.

Observing this kind of repetitious play, teachers often want to see more of the children's creativity and less replaying the TV show. Our task is to offer or promote experiences that are as appealing as the TV events, yet encourage creative expression.<sup>100</sup> The clues to what this expression will consist of are in the details of the behavior you observe:

- What does the Ranger do that's exciting the child?
- Are there dance moves that might give the same satisfaction?
- How does the pirate behave?
- What kind of power is stirring these young children?

## Helping children see and hear each other

Teachers can help children to recognize and be respectful of other children's preferences. For example, you can help Roberto notice which children like which foods. As he helps hand out snacks, teach Roberto to ask, "Do you want milk?" When Pete answers "no" you can coach Roberto: "Ask him if he'd rather have water or juice." Tomorrow Roberto can tell the new snack helper Pete's preferences.

As we started to get to know each other in the fall, two of my children dictated a poster for visitors, describing all of the children in our class. (Remember, some of our children had special needs.) These two typically developing girls in their second year with us understood well the strengths of the others.

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100. Wassermann, S., Growing teachers: Is there life after Pac-Man? *Childhood Education*, Vol 61(5), May-Jun 1985, 331-336.

This is what they reported:

**Everything You Need to Know About the Kids in Our Classroom**

By Saralee and Kelly

NOTE: I added the diagnostic labels in bracket as they were not in Saralee and Kelly's original story.

Carl: He feeds himself well. [Cerebral Palsy.]

Laura: We're friends, she is good.

Kala: She is good, she likes to ride on the teeter totter with the girls. [Cerebral Palsy. Uses wheelchair.]

Kandy: She is good. She prints pretty pictures on the computer. [Developmental delays.]

Andy: He builds lots of stuff. [Downs Syndrome]

Aaron: He is a boy; boys are different.

Kelly: She is funny; she is a good, good kid.

Elaine: She is very pretty, she is kinda funny. [Downs Syndrome]

Braden: He is good. [Motor and language delays.]

Ryan: He is a kid. He likes to color.  
[Legally blind, profoundly deaf.]

Saralee: Is good and funny.

Amanda: She is a good kid. She thinks about a lot of stuff.

Paul: Is an OK Kid, he is very, very brave. [Double amputee.]

Children are such keen observers! We must learn to be the same!

# CHAPTER 12

## Daily Sheets

By Leslie Gleim

*Editor's note:* Leslie's Ohio Daily Sheets closely matched the needs of the community where she taught. Leslie sent a copy of her Daily Sheet to each family every day. They really were *daily*, and when one didn't arrive home some parents would phone her to ask where it was. Leslie took their concerns seriously, asking their pardon and explaining what she had been doing instead. She developed Daily Sheets to welcome parents into the process of the classroom. Children, parents and staff all grew through their connections with them. Leslie's Ohio Daily Sheets were handed to parents at the end of the school day or sent home with the children on the school bus. SGC



### Let Me Tell You About Our Day    October 16, 2003

Over the past four weeks I have been videotaping the children's work at the water table. What they do is awesome! They have many ideas about how water moves and have discovered how to move water by blowing through tubes. Today I brought in some water pipe and was going to have them create a new water play tunnel using the pipes. But the water table room was unavailable, so we remained in the science/math room where we built a tunnel using the pipe and colored masking tape. Instead of water we used ping-pong balls. We were learning more about movement, but now with a solid instead of a liquid. We constructed our tunnel with peek-holes so the children could look through and see inside.



After building our tunnel we used it in a game where we tried to get a ping pong ball to fall into a bucket. The children had to move the bucket and place it where they thought the ball would land. They weren't allowed to keep moving with the bucket. This required them to think in advance about the movements of the balls and where they would land. Each child was challenged by this simple game, and it also provided opportunity for their different perspectives to be discussed. Children cheered as they figured out how to work together and put the bucket in the right place.



Children at this age are beginning to understand that others have feelings and want to be recognized. In addition to this expanded social perspective which includes the views of others, their cognitive development is also stimulated by using new materials in ways which result in a changing perspective – the children are learning to see things in new ways. The simple construction we did with the pipes and the game we played using what we made helped develop both social skills and cognitive knowledge. The children worked 45 minutes in the morning, and after lunch they chose to go back for another 45! Just awesome!

Have a great weekend!

Leslie





## What questions do I ask myself when creating a Daily Sheet?

- What was the central idea or focus for the children today? How do I make it known to the family?
- How does today's work connect to child development theory? Do I have photos of the children doing this work? Have I captured some pertinent children's language or dialogue?
- Does my customary format work with today's material, or does this new material call for another kind of presentation?
- How might I provoke the children to deepen or further their exploration? Can parents help too?

Jargon turns people off, but images and stories draw them in, so I always eliminate technical terms, abbreviations, initials or acronyms by spelling everything out. Similarly, by eliminating some background, I can better focus on what a child is doing, so I crop out anything in the photos that obscures, and highlight what I believe to be important.

When I'm nearly done, I reread my draft of the Daily Sheet. I ask myself if all the parts support a strong Image of the Child and ask myself how today's Daily Sheet fits the flow of our work — how it builds on or emerges from what came before, and what possibilities it suggests for use tomorrow and into the future.

In writing the narrative I often refer to a chart of ages and stages taken from a child development textbook to use as a reference. I don't use their wording but rather explain it using my own words and interpretation.

Example: In the development chart it says "children at age three are able to make + or - marks."

I wrote: Today Kyle, Tyler, Audrey and Tim quickly settled in with paper and markers. After a short while, I noticed them intentionally experimenting. As they paid attention to each other's work, I watched their random scribbles shift to horizontal lines. Audrey began making crosses of her horizontals. The boys, observing her work, began creating their own crosses. How exciting to watch as this group of children extend their thinking and work, connecting early literacy and the child's symbolic thoughts.

My Daily Sheets focus upon the community of learners and the reason for today's work. Eventually, during a week, I represent each child in either the photos or the narrative or both. I think first about *community and relationships*: relationships between the children, and between the children and their families and teachers. Then I think about relationships between the *children and materials and the environment*; and I aim to show those relationships, ideas and theories in my photos and notations of their language.

I try to keep the Daily Sheet on a single page. The point of the Daily Sheet is to build a bridge between home and classroom. Parents are more likely to look closely at one thoughtful page than something longer. A Daily Sheet might be as simple as showing children using a particular material or as complex as my thoughts on the deep meaning of an ordinary moment. I think about which of the “hundred languages of children” are being explored in my room and how to focus on a child's growth (or the growth of a group of children) in one of these languages.

In constructing the Daily Sheet I generally limit myself to six or eight key photos chosen from the many that I take. Pictures take up about one-third of the page, leaving the rest for the narrative. I usually include dialog of the children discussing the work and my interpretation of the work and its significance.

I avoid lists of the things we did and places we went. Instead, I select photos that show the reasoning behind what I'm providing to the children, and children's language that indicates the importance of their work. If we go on a field trip the sheet will show *learning that took place there*, rather than tourist highlights.

My intent with these sheets is for parents to come to understand that *the way we spent our day helped children learn and grow*. I hope that sharing these reasons will help parents think about their children in ways they haven't considered before, and that this new thinking will then influence what they do at home with their children, how they do it, and what they will look for in future schools. When I share details of the children's day along with my thinking, the parents realize I am looking with respect at all the children and families, including the particular child they know and love best!

## Ryan's story

Before he came to us, I heard about Ryan, age 3, legally blind and profoundly deaf. I wasn't sure I'd know where to begin to teach him. I made a visit to his home, and his Mom told me that Ryan loved the big embossed writing

on T-shirts. This was my first key into Ryan's world, and I used it to connect with him. Here is my journal of Ryan's experiences with media and some of the questions I asked myself:

9/20 Ryan works in clay. Makes imprints and pokes and scrapes with sticks. When finished he goes to look at a picture book with large images and large letters. Why?

In October and November I made frequent notes about Ryan's intense work in clay. Here are some of the details I saw:

He uses a variety of tools to make marks and to print shapes in the clay. Stays engaged as long as 45 minutes. How can we use his clay work to help him dialog with his peers or adults? How can we help him connect language with his clay work? Has he made a connection between these marks in clay and the writing he likes on t-shirts?

1/22 Ryan has shifted from poking in the clay to creating lines. Last week I had him feel the smooth clay and then, with my hand over his I made the line and then he would explore it. Once he felt the groove Ryan traced it with his fingers, and then took my hand and moved it as if he wanted more lines from me.

2/2 His scribbling seems purposeful and planned. I'll provide him with chalk, paint, markers, pens, pencils and a variety of papers.

3/9 Ryan explores lines and V shapes. He makes some V's on his paper. I help him work on signing his name. He brings a magnetic letter N to the work table. We worked together. He would make a simple mark and then I would make the same mark. Now it was my turn to change the mark, and he would follow my lead. This game went for 70 minutes once, using up 48 sheets of paper. What connections were made? How can we take this further? Try light table and letters, chalkboard, raised letters, Magna Doodle™.

3/13 Ryan works 25 minutes with clay.

3/21 Now he matches corresponding plastic letters on the light table. Then makes a connection with letters of his name and writes his name!

4/19 Today he made a series of four yellow pictures with crossing lines.

4/27 Today he made a cross on his paper, and used more circular arm movement as he was drawing.

5/10 I see that today he has created several mandalas (circles with projecting lines.) Where to next? Will the connections still be there when school begins in the fall?

As the year unfolded what we logged helped us see more clearly how Ryan learns. We logged a lot, and each of his surprising behaviors led us to more questions and trying more media with him. His intelligence became evident to us as he found how to use each new medium, and used the minimal sight he did possess to get deeper into his work. When he left our program we felt that he was ready to learn in the next setting. We hoped the assurance he had come to feel using the various media — his mastery of several languages — would support his thinking and communication as he moved into the Big School.

My close observation of Ryan helped me devise a program that he explored deeply and enjoyed. Put more formally, Pelo and Felstiner tell us:

Pedagogical documentation is critical in extending and deepening children's involvement in ongoing project work. Recording their conversations provides a wealth of potential ideas to pursue, and lets their own brainstorming sessions be the source of children's 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.<sup>101</sup>

### Creating time to document in the U.S....

One hurdle was finding time to document. As classroom assistants came to understand and appreciate the usefulness of documentation, we found that

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101. Pelo and Felstiner, *The Disposition to Document*, Pages 61-62 in *Insights*. See bibliography.

if we worked it right, during nap time we could reflect together on the data we had collected, and also had time to prepare Daily Sheets for parents. Since children didn't attend our school on Fridays we allocated two hours for compiling, processing and planning documentation. Full-time centers have real difficulty finding time to document — but some find ways.

One director I know, committed to the Reggio approach to documentation, meets once a month with her staff after the center closes. They order pizzas or other delivered food and eat from 6:00 to 6:30, and then work together until 8:00 PM. Because the director feels strongly that this type of collaboration and reflection fosters important growth the teachers are paid for their time.

### ...and in Reggio Emilia

Meeting time is built into the teachers' union contract in Reggio. It is standard practice in Reggio Emilia to review the data, discuss the children, and plan the next stages of the project. Ample time is available for considering what a single bit of data might mean, as well as the meaning of all the data taken together. With time to meet and discuss there's no *rush* to complete a display.

#### PHOTO TIPS

- The background isn't needed unless it is part of the story, so zoom in!
- Remember when you photograph the children's work to show multiple views: front, back, side, close up of the hands at work, the child's facial expressions showing engagement, wonder, question and surprise.
- Take pictures in natural light whenever you can, with your back to the light source.
- With a digital camera you can take lots of pictures and select only the best ones.
- You can crop easily.
- Always have extra batteries at hand, and keep the camera charged and ready!

All this helps to show the joy of the children's work to others.

# CHAPTER 13

## Marie's Early Documentation

In 2012, in Austin, Texas, Marie Catrett began to document her teaching, and didn't *hand* anything to parents, but rather *e-mailed* her Daily Sheets to arrive by dinnertime. Marie had years of experience as a teacher and a childcare center director when she came to SummerCamp<sup>102</sup> to study with me. We looked at a lot of documentation exhibits from Reggio Emilia and from Reggio-influenced classrooms in the U.S., (especially Leslie's) and New Zealand, Australia and Canada. She had high-quality technology. So, she began documenting as an accomplished photographer. All of this helped her have a strong start.

When it came time for Marie to collect data she was already skilled at using her iPhone, so she uses the iPhone to photograph and audio-record (and occasionally to video-record) the children. Since all her children's parents are comfortable with e-mail, she uses that to send her daily documents. (I get these daily, too, for collaborative mentoring and critique — and to my great delight!)

### The train project brings Elias into the group

It took Marie a few weeks to collect enough data so she could understand that Elias was fascinated with *trains* — to realize that the various materials he would glide through the air were all imagined to be trains.

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102. SummerCamp is the joking name I have for a five-day study program where a student comes to my home and we do an intensive study. Since all my materials (books, videos, documentation packets and files) are handy, it is a resource rich way to teach. The David Z. Levitov scholarship makes my spare bedroom in San Francisco available to those who might otherwise not afford to study with me.



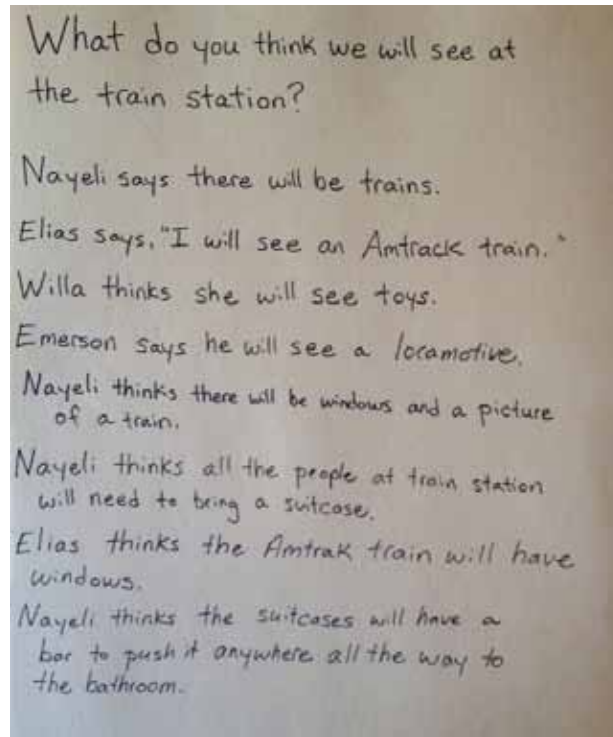
Marie often sees Elias playing like this with materials.

After two weeks she shows him a block, asking, “What does this remind you of?” Elias responds, “It’s a train!”



So the data have led Marie to an important discovery.

After talking about this with me, Marie planned a trip to the train station for her group and their parents. The week before the trip, Marie and the children made a list of things they thought they might see when they got there. The children dictated and Marie printed what they said on a list.



The next day, her third birthday, Nayeli got herself a paper and, while the children were dictating more for Marie to write, Nayeli began her own list.



Nayeli's list



### Nayeli, 3, discusses her train station list

Nayeli: I will make a list about the train. First I draw pictures of the trains. Choo choo choo! [makes small circles going up] Station too. I wanted to write down about what we had to say. [on the top right] Choo choo choo! Choo choo choo! Okay, ah, we said... Emerson said he would see a locomotive. [more marks] I don't know what Elias said.

Marie: Would you like me to read it to you off of this list?

Nayeli: Yeah.

Marie: "Elias says I will see an Amtrak train" at the station.

Nayeli: [Writing] Elias said... I would see an Amtrak... at the station.

Elias: [Listening, also looking at the train book.] That's an Amtrak train!

Nayeli: I have ideas on my list (too). What did Willa say?

Marie: "Willa thinks she will see toys."

Nayeli: (Writing) Willa thinks... she will see... toys. (Points to these new marks) This says Willa thinks... she will see...toys. Actually, I saw an Amtrak station with toys one day. . .

Elias: (Looking over the list with us) I will see an Amtrak train. It has windows.

Marie: Oh let me add that to our list! "Elias thinks the Amtrak train will have windows," did I say that right?

Nayeli: What did Emerson say he think he will see?

Marie: (Reading) Emerson says he will see a locomotive.

Nayeli: Okay. (Writing) Emerson says he will see a locomotive. Anything else he said? Okay anything that I said again?

Marie: Here's what I have: Nayeli thinks all the people at the train station will need to bring a suitcase.

Nayeli: Yeah, because you will need to pack up your things in it! And there's a bar to push it where you want to go. If you push it all the way to the bathroom that will be really far!

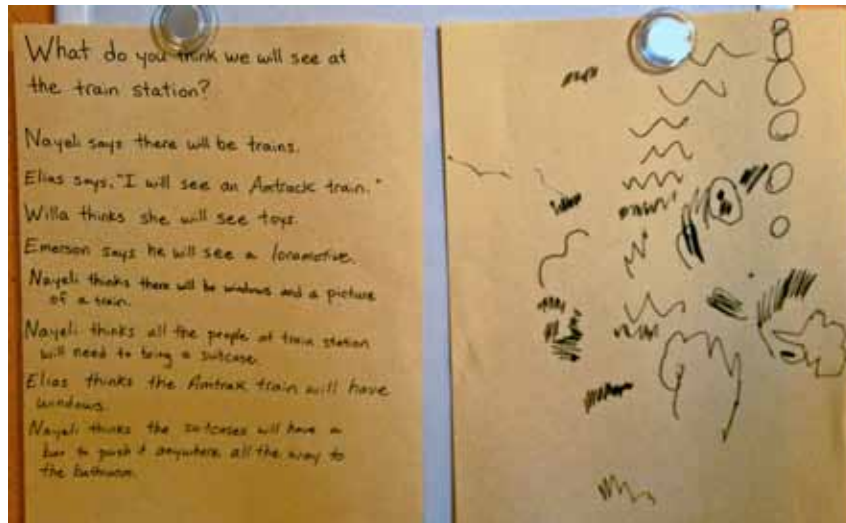
Marie: Should we write that?

Nayeli: Yeah! (We both write on our lists.)

Marie: Are you finished? May I put your list next to mine?

Nayeli: I forgot to say conductor on it! Conductor, conductor! Little one, little one, (Writes again, a short line). Con-duc-tor. I write about conductor here.

Con-duc-tor. I will give this list to the conductor so that way the conductor will remember that his name was on it.



Nayeli: "Now they are both here."



Emerson's list



The train arrives.

Marie: We are on a trip today to visit the train station. Could we take a look at your suitcase?

Lady at the station: Sure.

Nayeli: Does yours have a bar that goes up? For pulling?

Lady at the station: Yes.

Marie: Do you think we could see?

Lady at the station: Okay. *(She raises up her handle).*

Nayeli: Like mine!



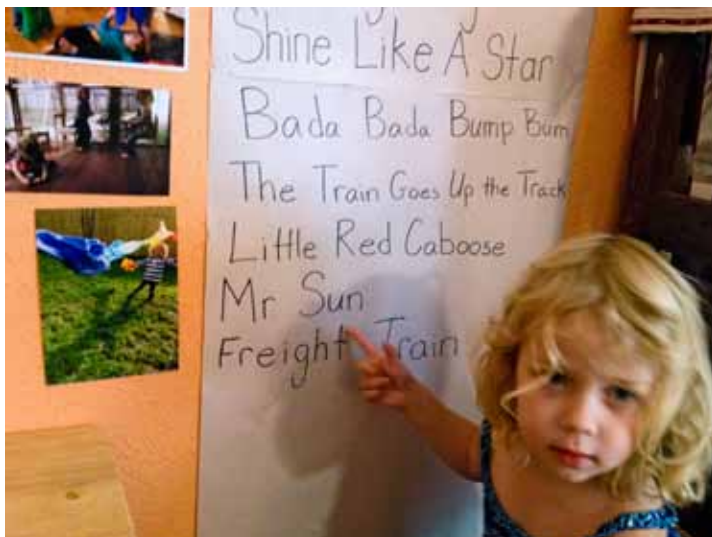
Nayeli finds a passenger with a big suitcase with a bar



Nayeli and Willa document their trip



Elias absorbs the sights and sounds of the train station



Willa chooses a song about trains from the children's repertoire list.

## Willa's research and her lists

The children discussed the train trip after they got back to school and again the next day. Willa was back (she had been absent during the second list-making day) and spoke to Marie: "I want to see the new things that Nayeli was doing yesterday when I was not here. The thing I saw in the Words Letter." Marie replied: "You could look in the Words Letter Book, and maybe you could show me what you're thinking of." After Willa looks in the Words Letter Book she decides to make her own list.



Willa: I will make a list like Nayeli made a list.

Marie: What did you see at the train station?

Willa: I saw Nayeli. I'll write that on my list.

Marie tells me that Willa wrote several different lists.

## Wyatt designs curriculum

Weeks later, Marie *heard* Wyatt tell her that she didn't have enough laundry baskets (she had two at the time — one for laundry, and one to hold drawing paper.) She got four more baskets and the spontaneous play that resulted — underwater, animals in cages, and, lining them up, train play — was wonderful. Her initial intention was to honor Wyatt's idea, but she was amazed (she told me so, repeatedly) when she had no further tasks to do to make this material useful to the children. They knew what to do, and did it! And, of course, they incorporated train play into their basket play!



Train play and basket play merge

Your relationship with the children benefits when you admit your own oversights and shortcomings — like Marie, correcting her undersupply of laundry baskets as a result of Wyatt's complaint — and they see you learning from their ideas or your own mistakes. They observe that this isn't shameful, but rather leads to growth — many children and adults need and appreciate this.

As I was editing this chapter more things happened with the train project — the story isn't over. There is such knowledge and understanding of their experience in this group of children that, for example, someone passing by with a suitcase with a bar isn't going to be ignored. Marie has begun writing for *publication* about her documented work. And the children still request the train whistle, as they play.

Listen to the train whistle:



*Note: You will need Adobe Reader 9 or higher to play this sound file.  
You can [download Adobe Reader](#) for free.*

# CHAPTER 14

## Using a documentation process to identify goals for an individual child and to develop group projects

Children carry out the search for meaning with tenacity and effort, sometimes making mistakes, but they do the searching on their own. We cannot live without meaning; that would preclude any sense of identity, any hope, any future. Children know this and initiate the search right from the beginning of their lives. They know it as young members of the human species, as individuals, as people. The search for the meaning of life and of the self in life is born with the child and is desired by the child. This is why we talk about a child who is competent and strong — a child who has the right to hope and the right to be valued, not a predefined child seen as fragile, needy, and incapable.<sup>97</sup>

— *Carla Rinaldi*

### Listen, become quiet, watch and wait

Believing that the child is competent, we have to figure out his or her behavior when it seems odd to us. We have to learn to see better. Regularly writing down what we see — *and regularly taking photos and recording* — are tools for improving understanding. To record children's behavior accurately, we first have to quiet ourselves and learn to *see and hear* it. When we have set aside our agendas and preconceptions, we will find out what's going on, and then we can set a course that will support this child.

***Editor's note:*** The rest of this chapter is by Leslie. She presents some stories from the classroom, observing and documenting and acting on her findings.

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97. Rinaldi, C. (2001c) p.79)

Of course there's no prescription here, you'll have to find your own way. But listening to what others have done helps. She starts by showing us how observing and recording Jerry's behavior helped:

### Jerry's borrowed guilt

Jerry arrived at our school with what felt to me like a thousand behavior issues. As I observed and documented during the first few weeks of our time together, I found that every time another child cried, Jerry lashed out! At four, Jerry was the older brother, and I suspected that when his younger brother cried at home, Jerry was blamed and punished for it. He seemed to think that when anybody cried, that meant he would be punished. Once I developed and tested this theory, and made sure of this pattern, my aide and I wrote a plan, and after that, when any child cried in our classroom, she rushed to the crying child *while I rushed to Jerry*, saying, "Cheryl just had an accident, Jerry, you're not in trouble, it's OK. You didn't do anything wrong."

Reassuring Jerry minimized the number of times he lashed out at others. This was one piece of the complex puzzle that was Jerry, but it was a small triumph on our journey. Eventually Jerry learned he could relax with us.

### How can documenting help Lauren bloom?

Children with special needs (they're called Children with Special Rights in Reggio Emilia) have pushed and challenged my Image of the Child. Finding strength and competence in children who appear to much of the world as incomplete or incompetent has made me adopt an unwavering belief that *all* children are born competent, capable and rich. I wouldn't have learned as much without studying and documenting them.

Someone on the Reggio online discussion group asked about Lauren, a child who was hurting the other children and frightening them. The questioner wrote: "We find it difficult to respect and support Lauren and at the same time to support the children who feel scared or hurt by her."

I replied, "You and your staff seem exhausted from working with Lauren. It is evident to the reader that you already give Lauren support, since you have taken all this time to get to know her so well. Do you respect her? Can you think of her as competent, strong, and full? This isn't easy, but it is necessary. We can't let Lauren's current mistaken behavior stop us from imagining her as a fully co-operating member of the classroom community. When you decide to behave toward Lauren *as you do toward a child you respect*, you will be helping others, big and little, respect her too.



## Learning from data:

I've learned a lot from the data about Lauren that you've sent. These are the troubling behaviors:

- Cutting her own hair
- Poking a child in the face with scissors
- Spitting at children and teachers
- Screaming
- Hitting and kicking teachers and children
- Being easily and frequently distracted from tasks by noise, movement and touch and needing the full attention of one teacher to get through a transition
- Avoiding fine motor tasks, or getting very frustrated while attempting them

## Strategies you employ to help her

Here are the strategies you are currently employing to help her:

- Offering a wide range of relaxing sensory activities: waterplay, sand, rocking, etc.
- Warning her verbally before classroom transitions
- Assigning her tasks during those transitions: e.g. she closes the door after everyone's out of the room
- Providing her opportunities to paint and work in clay and other creative activities

These strategies are great — continue them! Lauren may need both words and touch, so placing your hand firmly on her shoulder as you announce a transition may help center her and allow her to attend to what you say. You can also hold her hand during transitions. Perhaps she can even be the person who *announces* a transition from time to time.

## First: work on changing Lauren's self-image

Lauren knows how to get people to pay attention to her. When she is violent, people notice her. She makes them mad, and they yell or fuss or punish her. This is who *she has been* in the classroom. You will want to help Lauren see the contradictions between her *behavior* and her *goal* of wanting children to be her friends. Look closely at each of the behaviors on the list. What is the result for Lauren after each of these events? She has learned how to get some attention, but it isn't the kind of attention she really wants — the positive connection she ardently desires to have with her classmates. She is one smart

cookie who knows how to get herself seen! If she is this smart, you can help her to see value in getting friendly attention instead!

### Unpacking, analyzing and coping: what else you can do to help Lauren

No child Lauren's age (3.2 years old) should be written off as un-reachable, hopeless. There are no un-reachable children, although, sadly, there are some parents or teachers who are unwilling to take the time and the risk of finding out enough about them to help them. It takes patience and some digging to find out what's going on inside any person, especially one who's not yet ready or able to tell you what's wrong.

Lauren, by her actions, is seeking help to find her way into the community. Your task is to align with her, to take her hand and help her become a child who can join with others and learn and play well together with them. You have learned that you can't "fix" Lauren in a day, a week or a month. With children like Lauren you have to be there for the long haul! Continue to study Lauren, and you'll grow more sensitive to how she understands her world and responds to it and as you study her you'll become better able to support her growth.

Continuing reflection on your data will reveal changes in Lauren's behavior. The other children and their parents will come to understand why you pay her disproportionate attention; they will see her growth as she learns new, positive ways to be a member of her community. You will be helping the child who needs you the most at this moment in time.

### The teacher's task: unpacking, analyzing, coping

When I've identified a child like Lauren, I keep her close. She travels with me and sees the classroom from my perspective. I don't take hold of her *after* she misbehaves; rather, her place is with me from her arrival in the morning. I do this to help her lose her self-image as a "bad girl".

As you get to know Lauren, find a moment when she is in control of herself. This is when you'll begin a quiet discussion with her about *why kids like each other* and what makes kids *want to be friends* with somebody and what makes them want to *not* be friends. Remind her that she wants the children to like her, and that rather than grabbing or yelling or hitting to get what she wants she can use other ways. You can model language for her if she doesn't seem to have her own. As a community, you will want to shift the emphasis from what Lauren does that makes us mad to the *many positive and appropriate things she does*. Over the coming weeks, as you continue to talk with her

about this, your job becomes to help her *act thoughtfully* in situations where, customarily, she has *reacted*.

### Be sure to document Lauren's competence

Start by noticing and writing down moments when Lauren is being competent, purposeful, and non-violent. She will quickly recognize that when she is doing important, constructive, and valuable things you often come by and document them. Not only is she getting attention but now *she has evidence of herself* being competent, to look at, share and enjoy.

Your words, your presence, and your documentation are all positive responses. While you collect data you send a clear and powerful message to Lauren that she is interesting, likeable, strong and capable, *showing her that she is good*. There is a difference. Sydney tells me that she often told children “You can do hard things! Remember when you did such and such?” When we show children the possibility of living well with others, they learn that social skills are within their reach. And then they reach!

### Second: heighten your sensitivity and awareness

As you focus on Lauren, look closely for signals that she's feeling upset, frustrated or anxious — feelings likely to lead to an outburst. Those signals are precursors of loss of control, warnings that she is in trouble, alerting you to redirect and channel her energies into appropriate activities before she resorts to inappropriate actions.

Observe and observe her again, until she shows up in your dreams. When you can figure out what happens *just before* she explodes, you'll have the key. You'll still have to watch closely, in order to intervene before it's too late.<sup>98</sup> Does she become extra restless going from activity to activity? Do you see her begin rubbing her nose indicating frustration, or does she flap or wring her hands? I once worked with a child who started to sweat a moment or two before he would lose control. These signals tell you what this child is feeling inside, feelings that she can't yet put in words. Discovering these signals means you're halfway home. When you detect her signal, go to Lauren and offer her a few appropriate choices: a task, sitting on your lap, work with clay or other calming materials; really anything she loves to do. You know what she loves because you document what goes on in your program. You want to redirect her behavior while she's still approachable and can still hear

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98. See *One Ball at a Time*, page 16 of this book

your calm words. If you're late you will have to wait until after the explosion before you can intervene productively.

### **Tell her what you have learned**

When you have identified a signal and connected a signaling child to a calming material, you should tell her what you've learned. "It always calms you down when you play with water." In time, *she* will use this information about what calms her down — as she feels herself going out of control. Learning to make this change, on her own, may take many weeks, possibly months, but it's what we aim for.

### **Third: changing the image other children have of Lauren**

When I model interested and caring behavior toward Lauren I am showing her, and the other children in the community, that I value and respect her. I want the children to shift their attitudes toward her as she comes under her own control, and I model attitudes I want them to take. The documentation panels on our walls which show Lauren being a positive member of the community also help. I become both an anchor for Lauren, so she won't do harm, and a bridge for the other children to cross in safety, to meet her. It's better for Lauren to express her anger with me, not the children, so I can protect her from the consequences of her rage. The rest of the children feel more comfortable and willing to risk making friends with her, knowing that I am going to keep them safe.

When Lauren begins to hurt another child I rush over and get between her and her victim. I take the victim's hand and we walk away from Lauren. For the moment, my entire interest is in the victim. I tell the victim "when anybody hits you, tell her you don't like it and walk away from her." I don't want the child to label Lauren bad, but instead to realize that this is a good time to leave her alone. Later I help Lauren realize that *hitting this child did not get her a playmate.*<sup>99</sup>

### **Fourth: my limitations and those of my co-workers**

It's often exhausting to study a child who acts out and to advocate for her. Before I can help her I have to know myself — what my limits are, where and what my triggers are — and who are the people on staff with me and what their limits are.

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99. There is material similar to this in the chapter, "Ivan the Terrible", in Clemens, S. *The Sun's Not Broken, A Cloud's Just in the Way: On Child-Centered Teaching.*

For example, my classroom assistant couldn't tolerate a child who spit, so if she was tussling with such a child I would relieve her. There are also days when one of us has low energy, and we lean more heavily on the other. Remember and beware — upset children will find and target our vulnerabilities. While you are observing and studying Lauren she is watching and studying you!

### **Fifth: putting Lauren's strengths to work**

Let's use what you told us to try to understand Lauren.

*Lauren craves friendship and seeks out the company of children.*

A child who wants to be friends with other children has a great incentive. Let's say you have a gentle child who is in need of help with something Lauren is good at. Tell Lauren, "I have seen you build great towers and Molly really needs some help. Could you and Molly work on making a really big tower *together*?" Lauren may say no, and if she does, you can find Molly another helper. But Lauren will probably be glad to show this little girl how to make a great tower. Now you're tapping into her strength and channeling it. There are many possibilities for Lauren to do what she's good at and help other children in the process.

*Lauren likes to be a leader and can often be found reading to a group of children or telling a child how they might handle a certain situation.*

You can use Lauren's eagerness to help to build your community. As you document her — reading to other children and counseling them — you are showing her the very best of herself! And, as the other children view the documentation photos, they see themselves getting along with her!

*Lauren is extremely articulate and when she's calm she's able to retell home stories and reflect on situations.*

Another great asset! The key here is "when calm." Use sensory materials with her all day long to help her stay calm. That's no problem because, as you report, she enjoys exploring sensory materials such as goop<sup>100</sup>, play dough, clay, water, and paint — anything hands-on and messy!

When she is at loose ends you might suggest: "Lauren, I see you're having trouble deciding what you want to do. Would you like to play with sand or with water or to sit in my lap?" Asking her to choose sends her inward *to see what she wants and feels*, and doesn't allow her to react automatically and

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100. Goop is a mixture of cornstarch and water. It also has other names: among them *pud*, *goo*, and *ooblick*

inappropriately to external events. If she can articulate her desires and intentions you can help her satisfy them without her angering or hurting others.

*Lauren loves to move! She used to run aimlessly around the playground, but now has grown to explore slides, swings and climbers!*

She is directing her own growth when she's outdoors. That environment permits her to control herself! One reason she erupts so often indoors might be that she isn't getting to use her large muscles enough. Possibly you, or someone else, can take her outdoors for five minutes at intervals several times a day? Other children may also want to go out. Or, you might ask her Mom to let her go for a run before delivering her to school. Sydney used to take her class or a few children out for a run whenever the room felt chaotic — she had the advantage of living in San Francisco where the climate co-operates, but running in a hallway or gym is an option you might want to explore.

## Sensory issues

Some of the things you reported about Lauren show her to have sensory issues:

- Distracted easily from a task by noise, movement, or touch, really anything!
- Needs one-on-one teacher support during transitions, particularly those with a larger group of children
- Displays very intense feelings ranging from happiness to anger. Screams and throws things

You have to approach each of these issues slowly, patiently, and with expert advice. Ask an Occupational Therapist to provide you with some very specific strategies to better help her:

- Does she like deep or light touch?
- Is crowding overwhelming to her?
- How might you calm her and have her enter into groups in a way that isn't over-stimulating for her?

We really hope you won't give up on Lauren. She's worth the investment of your time, energy, and love. Hold on to your strong, competent, wonderful Image of the Child and let that be your guide! 🍀

# CHAPTER 15

## Documenting and projects (go together like a horse and carriage!)

You will usually get your ideas about group projects from either watching or listening to the children as they play and work together and make choices, or studying and analyzing the data you've collected in your documentation process.

The key to a good project is to uncover the children's particular, specific interests and intentions. That often takes a bit of digging.<sup>101</sup> Before initiating a project a teacher will need to observe and document and collaborate extensively. We suggest you begin by documenting for at least a couple of months before you try to launch a project, to become more sensitive and adept at uncovering the children's intentions. The Reggioiani usually do a project with a group of 5-8 children, not their whole class. Do what you can to keep groups small.

We should note here that the Reggioiani usually do a project with a group of four to eight children, not the whole class. You have a different situation, but it is advisable to keep the children in your project group ones who have a real interest in the work. Projects begin when the adult recognizes the possibilities. Not everything that the children are interested in can or should become a project. You will have to choose, as Marie did when she built on Elias' interest in trains.<sup>102</sup>

After you've studied the data you collected and a project emerges, you'll continue to collect data during each stage of the project; using it to inform the next day's work and beyond, and saving the data so you can eventually make

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101. Starting at page 34 of this book.

102. There are good examples of U.S. attempts at this in: *We are all Explorers: Learning and Teaching with Reggio Principles in Urban Settings*. Daniel R. Scheinfeld, Karen M. Haigh, Sandra J.P. Scheinfeld, 2008, Teachers College Press.

a panel depicting the project's journey for yourselves and for others, for tomorrow and for ongoing reflection and reference.

In a Reggio-influenced classroom, and in Reggio Emilia itself, a lot of time is spent doing the usual early childhood activities — building with blocks, looking at books, listening to stories and acting them out, doing puzzles, running and jumping, climbing, riding bikes, making music and art, dressing up and pretending. As we document them, these activities and the children's commentary on them are the clues that lead us to recognize a project.

### **Be sure you know exactly what's important to the children**

Search with colleagues for the nugget, the reason this topic matters to the children. *If you think you've found a project* ask yourselves questions: Have we grasped what is driving the children's interest? What prevents them from exploring it without our help? Are the children we expect to work with a diverse enough group to support many kinds of exploration, many ways of thinking?

### **Plan**

Projects require that there be some initial planning: how to provoke or introduce them, what materials might be wanted or needed, which children are passionate about this question, and what resources are available. Continuing the central work of the project requires regular adult meetings to support its maturation and continuing responsiveness to the children's thinking.

### **Keep checking in**

Once your project is identified, go slowly and keep checking in with your collaborators. Your initial thinking will have predicted some of the things that happen, but *other surprising things will occur*. Each step will need to be questioned, modified, expanded, and supported to enhance its richness.

### **Include exploration and representation in your plans**

Projects do not always need to be tied to facts. Children can do excellent thinking about their fantasies, concocting and explaining theories about them in detail. Projects can be long or short, but they must include exploration and representation by the children.



## Pick up on the children's interests

Several children are showing some interest in boats. What should you do next with this interest? With an audio or video recorder ready, you can ask the children who've been most active in talking about boats and doing things with them to tell you what they're thinking about boats, what they're wondering about — their ideas, their imaginings and their questions. Others can join in the discussion if they like.

“Sam, the other day you were talking about going for a ferry boat ride. Will you tell us about it?” Then just listen, or probe: “What else happened?” “Was there anything scary?” “Were there lots of birds?” “Can you say more about that?” When Sam seems finished, go on with the next child: “Susan, would you tell us how you made your boat?” And, “Peter, let's look at the boat picture you made. What's going on here?” To search further for the children's intention you might put some toy boats near a water table and record and listen to what the children say spontaneously. Hearing the children talk freely will correct, support and extend your understanding of their intention.

Next, looking for the heat of the subject, listen to the tape, and transcribe any sections that seem meaningful to you — the intention of this child, of that child, of the other — what do boats signify to them? Collaborate with adults you respect to find the reasons why each child cares about this subject.

## Stages

To summarize the stages of the project:

1. Collect data that shows what's happening in the classroom
2. Locate and frequently refine a topic, collaborating with other adults and aiming to make it align closely with the children's intention
3. Pay close attention to what the children discover and supply resources they need to continue. This stage repeats as many times as needed.
4. End with a celebration!

Each of these stages must be collaborative, so the *best intelligence of the community* can be expressed in the work.

If you keep recording, and collaborating with others to analyze what you've recorded, you'll be engaged in *progettazione* so your projects will be rich and wonderful, and the whole community will celebrate!