I feel is fundamental for us, and in a certain sense a founding principle of our experience: the value of learning. Learning is and can be a value if we are aware that learning – which is pursued by each individual in times and ways that cannot be programmed – is a ‘relational place’ that makes us reflect on the meaning of education itself and search for new paths in educating and personal and professional development.

In educational practice, this means being open to the complex, contradictory and unpredictable nature of human learning, wherever it takes place, both inside and outside the institutional contexts that are directly involved in education. The entire educational system today – with a huge hard work, contradictions and many risks – is involved in this process of evolution from a school of teaching to a school of learning. Learning is the emergence of that which was not there before. It is a search for the self as well as for the other and others that surround each individual.


Those who participate in an educational process, in fact bring their own growth and development into play, and do this on the basis of their own expectations and their own plans. There is a constant relational reciprocity between those who educate and those who are educated, between those who teach and those who learn. There is participation, passion, compassion, emotion. There is aesthetics; there is change. In this sense, I would also like to mention the value of play, of fun, of emotions, of feelings, which we recognise as essential elements of any authentic cognitive and educational process. Learning thus becomes a value because of its force in creating a synthesis of the individual and his or her context, in an affective relationship between those who learn and that which is being learned, a relationship filled with emotion, curiosity and humour. For each of us, the cognitive act becomes a creative act, which involves the assumption of responsibility as well as autonomy, and act of freedom. Knowledge – or better, subjective understanding – becomes an individual responsibility and needs a sense of optimism and future in order to be realised to the fullest.

So what, then, do we mean by professional development? It is simply learning: our job is to learn why we are teachers. It means keeping our distance from an overbearing sense of balance, from that which has already been decided or is considered to be certain. It means staying on the interweaving of actions and thoughts, of doing and reflecting, theory and practice, emotions and knowledge. Perhaps the only way is to constantly search for – without ever finding – a balance between rules and limitations (some of which are obviously indispensable) and the real emotion and passion of learning.

So, I have described some of the values that inspire and orient daily life in the schools in Reggio and some other places in the world. But these values are very distant from those which prevail around us Nowadays: individualism, egoism, career, success, money, and so on – values that are not easy to oppose, and will not be so in the future. This kind of school requires us to be courageous and consistent; it requires passion and emotion, reason and feeling, commitment and hard work. But it can also give us so much, most of all, the deep sense of what it means to be a teacher.

This article is a chapter from a recent Reggio Children publication ‘In Dialogue with Reggio’ and offers a selection of Rinaldi’s most important articles, lectures and interviews from 1984 to the present day, with introductory explanations explaining the context which inspired each piece. Much of this material has never before been published in English, and focuses on a number of questions:

- Why is the pedagogy of listening, pedagogical documentation, participation and research such important concepts in Reggio Emilia?
- How are they practiced?
- How can educators most effectively make use of art and creativity?
- What is so unique about Reggio Emilia?

This book will not just be essential reading to those studying or teaching early childhood education. Anyone with a concern for the larger issues of learning, childhood and the place of the school in a democratic society will find this a seminal text. For more information see Book reviews section of the ReFocus Journal page...

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The Role and Responsibility of Documentation

The power within simple ideas

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

IT IS THROUGH OUR CLOSENESS to children, observing sensitively with care and time that children’s learning and thinking is revealed. Vivian Gussin Paley, (see book review in RfJ 2. 4) has spent her working life listening, watching and reflecting upon how children think and learn. She believes that the more children work to reveal their ideas and thoughts to us, the more we will be able to help them answer the questions they have. Given that children are born with an innate and powerful drive to learn, they soon become insatiable in showing themselves as competent learners once they understand someone is interested enough to listen and watch them.

Accepting the underpinning simplicity of this idea is the first step in discovering that tuning in to children’s thoughts and ideas is a more complex process than we might have imagined. The difference for us, as adults looking in on childhood, lies in the relative range of our frame of reference. Though their frame of reference is smaller than ours, this does not mean we cannot distinguish between the sensory information we gather and its interpretation. Observation can only be a subjective process because we cannot experience anything without making it our own: our personalities, emotions and acts of mind will necessarily shape our interpretation.

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

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

LORIS MALAGUZZI

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

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

When we document children’s learning and try to offer our own thoughts about what is happening, we are using ‘research in practice’.

In Reggio, documenting is the linchpin of continuing professional development, done with colleagues. New understandings are forged through this researchful practice and practitioners become confident and articulate.

The role of the adult in places of learning

Young children’s flexibility of thought and ideas seems to lead us towards something that our education system may not yet be prepared for: learning is subjective, complex, cannot be mandated and needs us to reinterpret our role, becoming ‘researchers in practice’ rather than all-knowing teachers.
Our role in this context is to draw out the thoughts and ideas of children and to understand the process of children's thinking, not from a book or national initiative, but from the very children in front of them, with whom they share their time. Documentation in this sense becomes the most powerful and effective professional development tool available to us.

Documentation as an approach

Documentation is an approach to teaching and learning like no other. To document is to ascribe to every child their own place in the sun. It is a constructivist approach, rooted in the belief that learning is a constructive process. The power of children to learn from each other is often underestimated and we may, as a result, miss opportunities to nurture the creativity of the child. Documentation as part of our everyday teaching, planning becomes acutely tuned to what the children think and understand and, therefore, where to go next. Documentation is an early years model of formative assessment at its most sophisticated and best. It supports the principles of and strengthens the current national focus on assessment for learning. Prior knowledge will be elicited and children involved in self-evaluation. Observation and reflection will be used as teaching tools, questioning will be related to genuine enquiry, children will be firmly at the heart of the process and assessment will sustain our planning.

Documentation also challenges the interpretation of learning as a passive process that is linear and cumulative. Sometimes known as the 'transmission model' of learning because it reveals the uncertainties and doubt, confusion and error as moments of weakness to seeing them as rich learning opportunities. Learning itself can then be upheld, as subjective, dynamic, and constructed within the companionship of others.

Open-eyed playfulness

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

Partnership in learning

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

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Making choices and taking risks – evaluating what we value

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

We need to re-consider the current practice of displaying children's work in schools and settings. Typically this involves either a teaching display with prompts and reminders for learning or a display of children's work (often perceived to be the best pieces of work), sometimes annotated with notes regarding aspects of the content. This could constitute display in Reggio terms, but often lacks informed adult reflection and analysis of the children's thinking, and projection about the future possibilities for their learning.
Documentation enables and requires the practitioner to take responsibility and understand the process of children’s thinking, not from a book or national initiative, but from the very children in front of them, with whom they share their time. Documentation in this sense becomes the most powerful and effective professional development tool available to us.

**Documentation as an approach**

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

**The importance of relationships**

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

Children need to be valued and developed in the ‘starring role’ within the theatre of their own learning. They are, as Reggio reminds us, the protagonists. This leads us to consider the responsibility we are offering children in their own learning and the extent to which we both expect and enable them to use their own minds; to make choices; at the same time. The stage at the front of the stage requires us to respect and understand the child’s curiosity and to establish our role as questioners. The way we document in our planning becomes an opportunity for reflection and dialogue. In this way, documentation simultaneously scaffolds both the adults and the children’s learning, enabling discussions and conversations about children’s thinking, and planning becomes an early years model of formative assessment at its most sophisticated and best. It supports the principles of and strengthens the current national focus on assessment for learning. Prior knowledge will be elicited and children involved in self-evaluation. Observation and reflection will be used as teaching tools, questioning will be related to genuine enquiry, children will be firmly at the heart of the process and assessment will sustain our planning.

**Partnership in learning**

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

Documentation also challenges the interpretation of learning as a passive process that is linear and cumulative. Sometimes known as the ‘expert approach’, this model is considered to be the ‘small pedagogy’. Documentation, in contrast, promotes the idea of a partnership in teaching and learning relationships in which the child has an equal opportunity to ask questions, seek answers, generate ideas and delight with adults in the uncertainties of human knowledge and experience. The partnership approach is compatible with the ethos of Every Child Matters, where the child’s voice is not just limited to their membership of the school council, but requires listening in respect of their learning and their engagement in the development of the curriculum. Documentation thus strengthens children’s entitlement to greater levels of freedom and creativity.

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

Documentation entails taking risks in making choices to affirm our commitment to protecting children’s rights to learning experiences which are empowering and meaningful. It needs us to be strong, competent and skilful in supporting children’s thinking and planning their next steps. It can be a transformational tool, deepening our own practice through opportunities for reflection and dialogue. In this way, documentation simultaneously scaffolds both the adults and the children’s learning, enabling discussions and conversations about children’s thinking, and planning becomes an early years model of formative assessment at its most sophisticated and best. It supports the principles of and strengthens the current national focus on assessment for learning. Prior knowledge will be elicited and children involved in self-evaluation. Observation and reflection will be used as teaching tools, questioning will be related to genuine enquiry, children will be firmly at the heart of the process and assessment will sustain our planning.

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

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

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

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

Practically speaking
Using photographs, children’s drawings, their quotes, video, and learning stories are all useful remembering and re-visiting tools. They enable adults and children to look back at a previous moment, reconsider the significance of the experience and reconstruct their meanings. The notion of rapidly changing displays can also be re- assessed if they are replaced with learning stories that are constantly revisited by the children and added to when appropriate. Many children are adept at recalling from visual cues and unlike adults can often remember which children were not even in the photographs! Documenting as an approach will undoubtedly offer us a different perspective, adding to the complexity of documenting and its richness of interpretation. Parents value the opportunity to share in their child’s learning journey as can be seen in the following excerpt:

“I have always felt up to date with what my child has been doing at (school). I have lots of photographs and snippets of conversations that have taken place throughout his learning process. I consider myself so very fortunate to have so much background into the beginning of his learning journey. It has enabled us as a family to talk about the things he has experienced and go into more detail. It’s a way of sharing and remembering the tiny details that unless they are logged or photographed, are memories gone forever, or memories I would never have had the opportunity to share. I would ask any parents with older children to think back and try to recall the funny things your child said or did. You may recall a few. But are you as fortunate as I have been – have you got the evidence?” Denise, parent of Anton

It can also at times support the relationship building between a child and his/her family as a new perspective on a child is offered back to the parents from the setting. Sharing our pedagogy and thoughts with parents in these ways goes much further than just involving them: it is participation exemplifying the principles of listening, relationships and community.

To conclude
In Reggio, the school is constructed as a public space that instigates relationships, discussion, and connections within and beyond the immediate setting. Loris Malaguzzi and his colleagues developed the approach we know as ‘pedagogical documentation’ to ensure that the events and experiences of the school were made visible to the city of Reggio. This was a political and ethical decision that situated the education of young children indefatigably within the context of liberal democratic continuity in turn has supported and sustained the image of children within the pre-schools in Reggio as citizens with capacities and rights. It is an approach with wide implications for all.

Carlina Rinaldi rightly describes children as ‘the greatest listeners’ to the world about them: they often enable us to enrich our own thinking and in turn our professional lives. We owe it to them to make visible and authentic the mark as the guardians of a long and supported childhood. In doing so we may not just be making learning visible but also the treasures of childhood itself.

Documenting as an approach will undoubtedly offer us nourishment and strength in our everyday professional lives and as Vea Vecchi sums it all up it is, 'a unique source of knowledge... it is precious material for teachers, but also for the children, for the family and whoever wishes to get closer to the strategies in children’s ways of thinking.'

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Andrea Sally has been an early years trained teacher for 18 years, working across the primary age ranges but found her niche in Foundation Stage. She has also worked as an advisory teacher in a Children’s Centre. Since 2003, she has been an Early Years Advisor in North Somerset and from September 2006, he learning, Research and Development Advisor, taking forward some aspects of EY practice into KS 1 and KS2.

“The Role and Responsibility of Documentation” is an extract from a longer article which can be found in full in the ‘articles’ section of the ReFocus website (accessible to ReFocus members only).
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Practically speaking
Using photographs, children’s drawings, their quotes, videos, and learning stories are all useful remembering and re-visiting tools. They enable adults and children to look back at a previous moment, reconsider the significance of the experience and reconstruct their thoughts, feelings and ideas that tell the story of the day, the week, the month, or term, still see that when so much care is taken over other children, their own child is constantly valued in the setting.

Children as allies
Documenting will also give young children a strong message about the world that strongly involves you because you feel you are weaving together something with a child that somehow, will go beyond the time you spend together. It calls for a generosity of attitude and a will to give back to the individual child and parents, the events, thoughts, feelings and ideas that tell the story of the day in the centre’.

Lella Gandini, 2005

Families can offer us a different perspective, adding to the complexity of documenting and its richness of interpretation. Parents value the opportunity to share in their child’s learning journey as can be seen in the following excerpt: “I have always felt up to date with what my child has been doing at (school). I have lots of photographs and snippets of conversations that have taken place throughout his learning process. I consider myself so very fortunate to have so much background into the beginning of his learning journey. It has enabled us as a family to talk about the things he has experienced and go into more detail. It’s a way of sharing and remembering the tiny details that unless they are logged or photographed, are memories gone forever, or memories I would never have had the opportunity to share. I would ask any parents with older children to think back and try to recall the funny things their child said or did. You may recall a few. But are you as fortunate as I have been – have you got the evidence?” Denise, parent of Aaron

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Documenting as an approach will undeniably offer us nourishment and strength in our everyday professional lives and as Via Vecchi sum it all up it is ‘a unique source of knowledge… it is precious material for teachers, but also for the children, for the family and whoever wishes to get closer to the strategies in children’s ways of thinking.’

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