

# Innovations

in early education: *the international Reggio exchange*

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## The RELATIONSHIP Between DOCUMENTATION and ASSESSMENT

by  
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I would like to reflect with you about a fundamental aspect of our experience in the Reggio municipal infant-toddler centers and preschools. I hope to offer you our point of view on the topic of documentation. We feel it is very important to share with our colleagues the concept of documentation as a tool of observation and interpretation. Documentation, as we have developed in Reggio, does not mean to collect documents after the conclusion of experiences with children but during the course of these experiences. Traditionally, the recording and reading of memories takes place at the end of an experience and may become part of a collection of archives. For us, documentation is part of the daily life in the schools. It is one of the ways in which we create and maintain the relationships and the experiences among our colleagues and the children. We think of documentation as an act of caring, an act of love and interaction. We believe that both the teacher and the children are learners. For us within the Reggio experience, documentation is an integral part of the learning and teaching process of the children and teachers. In the process of learning through documentation, we become aware of that learning and its value; we assess it. Therefore, we believe that assessment is also an integral part of the learning and teaching process. We believe that the relationship between documentation and assessment is fundamental to our experience. This belief has completely changed not only our approach to documentation but has also helped us to understand the relationship between documentation and testing. We see more and more often, the risk of considering testing as a tool of assessment. In reality, testing assess-

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es only children's knowledge of the test's content, not the true learning of children.

Our interpretation of documentation has evolved from a fundamental question that we ask ourselves as teachers and educators: How can we help children find the meaning of what they do, what they encounter and what they experience? How can we do this for ourselves? These are questions about the search for meaning that influence the development of our identity. Why? How? What? I believe that these are the questions that children constantly ask themselves, both in school and outside of school. We don't have to teach them to ask "why?" because inside each human being is the need to understand the reasons, the meaning of the world around us and the meaning of our life. We believe that it is important to try to reflect on the children's questions and understand *why* they are asking why. What are their connections? What are their reflections? *Why* do they ask this why? Children ask "why?" not only when they speak directly but also through the hundred languages. There is a mix of practical and philosophical concerns in their questioning attitude, in their effort to understand the meaning of things and the meaning of life.

But children not only ask "why?" They are also able to find the answers to their whys, to create their own theories. One could ask why we, in Reggio, talk about "theory," about "constructing theory." Why, among

many words, did we choose the word theory? Many people refer to theories only in the scientific realm of men like Galileo and Einstein. Can children build theory? If we accept the idea that our search, as human beings, to find the meaning of the world around us is essential to life, then we can accept that we can build the answers to our questions. We tend to build theory as a satisfactory explanation that can help us to understand the whys that are inside of us. We are inviting you to think about this essential element that is expressed in the children, because the children themselves are one of the best expressions of our being human, when they create their own theories as satisfactory explanations. Observe and listen to children because when they ask "why?" they are not simply asking for the answer from you. They are requesting the courage to find a collection of possible answers.

This attitude of the child means that the child is a real researcher. As human beings, we are all researchers of the meaning of life. Yet it is possible to destroy this attitude of the child with our quick answers and our certainty. How can we support and sustain this attitude of children to construct explanations? If a child says, "It's raining because God is crying," we could easily destroy his theory by telling him that it's because of the clouds. How can we cultivate the child's intention to research? How can we cultivate the courage to make theories as explanations? In this attitude, we can find the roots of creativity, the roots of philosophy, the roots of curiosity and the roots of ethics. In this capacity of building the-

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ory with the freedom of collecting elements are the roots of creativity. In this attitude to find answers to questions are the roots of philosophy. This why is the only way in which to maintain what is essential in our life . . . curiosity. Humanity exists because we have developed our curiosity. In the search for reasons and information lie the roots of ethics.

Children also are better able to develop theories as satisfactory explanations that can be shared with the others as a point of view. A theory is much more than an idea. Theories must be pleasing and convincing. They must be useful and able to satisfy our intellectual and aesthetic needs. Theory is an expression of our point of view about things and about life. Because of this, theories need to be shared with the others, not only to gain an ethical perspective but as an indispensable element for learning and understanding. The theories that the children can elaborate have to be shared with the others, communicated using all the languages that we know, in order to exist. This is one of the roots of the pedagogy of listening and one of the roots of documentation as visible listening, beginning from the idea that the children are able to elaborate theories as explanations about life. This attitude has to be preserved as essential for our development as human beings.

The pedagogy of listening is not only a pedagogy for the school; it's an attitude for life. It can be a tool but it can be something more. What does listening mean? It means taking responsibility for what I am sharing. If we need to be listened to, then listening is one of the most important attitudes for the identity of the human being, starting from the moment of the birth. Before we are born, we live for nine months in the body of our mother. Therefore, we grow up as a listener surrounded by dialogue, and listening becomes a natural attitude. Listening is a sensitivity to everything that connects us to the others, not only the listening of the school but the listening that we need in our life. The most important gift that we can give to the children in the school and in the family is time . . . to offer our time to the children, because time is the only possibility for listening and being listened to by others.

It is also essential to listen to ourselves, to who we are and what we want. Sometimes we move so quickly through our lives, we lose the courage of meeting ourselves. What are you doing? Where are you going? This courage to listen, this attention to what is inside

ourselves is a sort of interior listening and reflection. Listening means being open to differences, recognizing the value of another's point of view and interpretation. Thus, listening becomes not only a pedagogical strategy but also a way of thinking and looking at the others. Listening is an active verb that involves giving meaning and value to the perspective of others, a form of assessment. This kind of listening is a way of welcoming the others and their differences, and a way of welcoming different theories and perspectives.

Our way of listening means to be open to doubts and uncertainty. This listening means to be open to being in crisis. This listening accepts frustration. When I was in the States, many, many teachers were worried because a child was in crisis or they themselves were in crisis. It is not always bad to be in crisis. It means that you are changing. The problem is when you are not in crisis, because maybe you are not really listening to the life around you. To be open to the others means to have the courage to come into this room and say, "I hope to be different when I leave, not necessarily because I agree with you but because your thoughts caused me to think differently." That is why documentation is so fascinating and so difficult to share. Documentation as visible listening can help you to understand and to change your identity, and can invite you to reflect on your values. Listening also means to welcome uncertainty, to live in the zone of proximal development. Only if I have doubts, can I welcome the others and have the courage to think what I believe is not the truth but only my point of view. I need the point of view of the others in order to confirm or change my own point of view.

Real listening requires the suspension of judgement and prejudice. The relationship between peace and prejudice concerns the ability or disability to be good listeners. This is where education for peace begins. There is a connection with the pedagogy of listening. Peace is a way of thinking, learning and listening to others, a way of looking at differences as an element of connection, not separation. Peace is a way of remembering that my point of view is not the best and I need that of the others. Here we find the roots of participation in the school as a place to encounter differences. We must have the courage to share, to agree or disagree. Listening provides the opportunity for professional development and human development.

A "listening context" is created when individuals feel

legitimized to represent their theories and offer their own interpretation of a particular question. We enrich our knowledge and our subjectivity by listening to others and being open to them when we learn as a group. When children are working together, each is developing her own process by learning from the processes of the others. If you believe that the others are a source of your learning, your identity and your knowledge, you have opened a very important door to the joy of being together. We are not separated by our differences but connected by our differences. It is because of my difference that I am useful to you because I offer another perspective. To learn as a group means to learn from the learning of the others. This learning from others is visible, not only because of documentation but because there is a context of listening, in which my theories are shared with the others.

*To learn* is strongly related with *to communicate*. Dialogue and the sharing of ideas generates understanding as well as the responsibility for your learning process. The capacity for reciprocal listening and expectation, which enables communication and dialogue, is a quality of the human mind and intelligence that is clearly present in young children. In some way, when you represent your theory, your interpretation to the others with a different language or medium, you also offer the others the possibility to become part of your theory, your development and your thought. From the moment they are born, children develop this attitude of being part of the identity of others. The educators in Reggio have had the possibility of reflecting about the relationship between individual and group learning. We have learned the value of learning that is collective, collaborative and democratic.

For us in Reggio, making listening visible means to be open to the theories of the children. The elements of observation, interpretation and documentation are strongly connected. It is impossible to observe without interpreting because observation is subjective. It is impossible to document without interpreting, and it is impossible to interpret without reflecting and observing. When you choose something to document, when you take a photograph or videotape an experience, you are making a choice. That means that you are giving value or evaluating this experience as meaningful for the children's learning processes and for your learning processes as well. When you document, you are sharing the children's learning and your own learning . . . what you understand, your perspective

and also what you value as meaningful. Within the word "evaluation," there is the word "value." Valuing means giving value to this learning context, and to certain experiences and interactions within that context. This is what we offer to the learning processes of the children and to those of our colleagues.

Here, in my opinion, is the genesis of assessment because, in producing the documentation, you make the element of value, as well as the indicators you have applied, visible and sharable. From your documentation, the children can understand not only their processes but what you value as meaningful for their learning processes. In this way, assessment becomes more democratic. Thus, the children can see the meaning that the teacher has drawn from their work. When you share your documentation with the children, you demonstrate that what they do has value and meaning. The children discover that they exist, and can emerge from anonymity and invisibility, seeing that what they say and do is important, can be listened to, can be valued, can be shared, can be appreciated, can be understood.

Therefore, you cannot document without assessing. Assessment becomes part of the learning process as you become aware of your choices and your values, as you come to understand your ethics. When you go into our schools and into your own schools, perhaps what you see documented are not only experiences but values . . . what the members of that learning community have assessed and valued as important. If we want to create a school of education, and not a school for instruction and information, then we can hope that education for peace also begins from the moment of birth. Education for peace is a way of thinking about the others and the world, a way of looking at the reality as the children do, without prejudice. The children can teach us because they welcome everything. The children can teach us how to be open to others and to their differences. They can teach us to be open to understanding that we are so extraordinary because we are unique, because we are different. Listening is a metaphor of encounter and dialogue. Because we believe in the pedagogy of listening, the experience in Reggio tries to honor the children by listening to that expression of the human being. Perhaps the pedagogy of listening may be a pedagogy for supporting a way of living with hope that it is possible to change.