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Gigi Schroeder-Yu

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ABSTRACT

An art specialist and action researcher discusses the dynamic role of documentation in the classroom as influenced by the Reggio Emilia approach.

Documentation:

Ideas and Applications from the Reggio Emilia Approach

Gigi Schroeder **Yu**

Teachers of the visual arts have long considered the importance of how to collect and display their students' work. Throughout history, bulletin boards have covered classrooms and school hallways neatly displaying children's art work. In my own teaching as an arts specialist, I sought out ways to hang all of my students' work in neat rows with manufactured borders of apples, stars, or other themes surrounding the outside in an effort to display the achievements of my students.

But what was missing? How was I really demonstrating the learning process that existed behind the paintings, collages, or other art works? Only after a visit to Reggio Emilia, Italy, did I begin to consider other possibilities for revealing the learning that was taking place in my classroom.

This article briefly summarizes how documentation functions within the Reggio Emilia approach and then discusses the many ways in which documentation can play a key role in any arts education context. I draw examples from my own classroom experiences and examine how documentation affected my practice as an art specialist working with students in kindergarten through second grade at a northern Chicago suburb's elementary school.

Correspondence regarding this article should go to:

Gigi Schroeder Yu
630 South Monroe Street
Decatur, IL 62522
gigis1231@yahoo.com

The Reggio Emilia Approach

The municipal pre-primary schools in the northern Italian city of Reggio Emilia have been attracting worldwide attention from educators for several years. Reggio Emilia is a town located in the northern part of Italy that has approximately 130,000 inhabitants. In the 1940s, after the end of World War II, a group of parents decided to use money from the sale of old tanks to create a quality preschool program for children. Several years later, Loris Malaguzzi, an educational leader in Italy, was impressed by the community's dedication to their children and offered to help the town develop an approach to working with children that combined theories from Dewey, Bruner, Montessori, as well as others. Today, Reggio Emilia has twenty-two community preschools and thirteen infant/toddler centers that all focus on using a social constructivist approach to learning. There is also a documentation research center that was built to further study the educational approach.

What is now referred to as the "Reggio Emilia Approach" includes many remarkable features that have influenced teachers from a variety of backgrounds and teaching situations. Perhaps one of its most unique contributions to the field of education is the use of the documentation of children's experience as a standard part of classroom practice (Katz & Chard). The educational philosophy and practices of the Reggio Approach have served as an inspiration to many programs around the world for modeling how to include the voice of the child in our educational practices. They have also inspired our thoughts on how learning occurs in collaboration with others. The Reggio Emilia approach sees the family, the child, the teacher, and the artist as all being integral parts of learning. The element of documentation in Reggio Emilia creates a dialogue between these groups. The children and the adults are seen as equal participants in learning, with each having an equal voice. Documentation occurs through photographs, transcribed conversations, the graphic arts, and video recordings. Documentation also provides an inside view of the interests, needs, and experiences of children.

Documentation practices in Reggio Emilia pre-primary (ages 3–6) schools provide inspiring examples of the importance of displaying children's work using both the content and aesthetic aspects of the display. Documentation typically includes samples of a child's work at several different stages of completion; photographs showing work in progress; comments written by the teacher or other adults working with the child; transcriptions of the child's discussions, comments, and explanations of intentions about the activity; and comments made by parents. The following are only a few examples of how documentation is realized within the Reggio Emilia philosophy.

The Image of the Child: Taking Children's Work Seriously

Attractive displays are created using children's work, photographs from projects, and examples of dialogue. These convey to the children that their efforts, intentions, and ideas are taken seriously. These displays are not created to serve primarily as decoration or ways of showing off the work. Rather, taking children's work seriously in this way encourages them to approach their work responsibly and reinforces the idea that their work is considered important.

Environment as the Third Teacher

The organization of the physical environment is crucial to the Reggio Emilia approach. The environment is designed to inform and engage children and those that visit the

schools. The aesthetic display of documentation is an important element within the school environment. When you walk into schools, white panels with photographs and documented conversations decorate the walls and tell the stories of events that have occurred within the school. The documents reveal how the children planned, carried out, and completed the displayed work. Some panels remain up for a considerable length of time, whereas others change as projects and studies change to reflect the ongoing learning. Panels are displayed at eye level for both children and adults.

Emergent Curriculum

Reggio classrooms follow an emergent (continuously developing) curriculum and documentation plays a crucial role in the planning of future activities. The children undertake complex individual or small-group collaborative tasks over a period of several days or weeks. Intense reflections about conversations with children, children's work, observations, videos, or pictures help teachers to think about what directions to pursue with the activities. For example, in a study titled *Shoe and Meter* (Malaguzzi, Castagnetti, & Vecchi, 1997), children were confronted with the problem that the school needed a worktable. The children call on the aid of a carpenter to help them, and he challenges them with the task of finding the measurements for the table. Throughout the study the children discover the function and use of measurement.

Collaboration

Documentation fosters collaboration among all participants within the Reggio Approach. Children, teachers, and parents participate in collection and use of documentation. Children often compare and analyze photographs, drawings, and previous conversations to determine the direction of their projects. Teachers use documentation to guide them during daily and weekly teacher meetings. Close working relationships exist between teachers; they rely on each other's input and guidance during ongoing studies. Documentation creates a platform from which to develop open discussions among teachers and, as an added benefit, affords parents a look at not only the products of a project but the ongoing learning processes that occurred.

Views on Children's Art

The Reggio Emilia philosophy of "art" for children is a definite departure from what many teachers are taught in the United States, and challenges many assumptions about the use of art in early childhood classrooms. Children's visual interpretations are collected and studied as components of documentation that reveal their growing understanding of a subject. Their work reveals things about the process and study of a subject, not just the final product. Cadwell describes an occasion when children went on an autumn walk outside the La Villeta School and discovered holes and tunnels made by small animals. After returning to the classroom, children were invited to re-create and invent their own animal dens using a variety of materials. Over the following few days, children used several materials to help them remember, explore, re-create, and invent their own animal dens. Some used soft oil crayons by experimenting with the different colors and marks to represent their interpretation of the animal homes. Others re-created animal dens using clay and recyclable objects (Cadwell, 26). The examination and documentation of process reveals the reveals much about the artistic development of the child, for instance, that children learn that each medium has a different voice or speaks a different language.

Teachers as Researchers

In the Reggio Approach, documentation supports the teacher's role as researcher in the classroom. The teacher's role is shifted from that of giving direct instruction to allowing children's thoughts and ideas to plan the direction of the curriculum. Teachers carefully listen, observe, and document children's work and the growth of community in their classroom. Teachers are also committed to their own professional growth and use documentation to reflect on their own practice.

Documentation or Display?

Forman writes, "The passage from display to documentation travels the path from informing to educating and thereby changes the teacher's perspective from observing children to studying children" (245). When teachers use documentation in their classrooms, it changes the way they interpret their students work and how they make choices for what they display. Displays are created not for entertainment but to educate others on what really happens in classrooms.

In my own elementary art room, I attempted to examine how documentation can be used for four different purposes: making learning visible, classroom planning, creating a narrative context or showing the emotional aspects of learning, and professional development. The narratives and analyses that follow are not intended to provide a specific model for documentation. Rather, they aim to give the reader a concrete sense of the wide variety of purposes documentation can serve.

Making Learning Visible

Documentation collected through photographs, recorded conversations, and visual art examples can provide an opportunity for educators to make visible the learning that is happening in the classroom for individual children but also for a group of children or an entire classroom. Documentation reveals not only what children are learning but how they are learning. In my classroom, I often began a project with a proposed problem or question to my students. I collected photographs of children working; their drawings which illustrated the formation of ideas; and conversations, both group and individual, from the beginning of a project through to the end. The following project narrative provides an example of how documentation functions to reveal individual and group learning experiences among teachers and students.

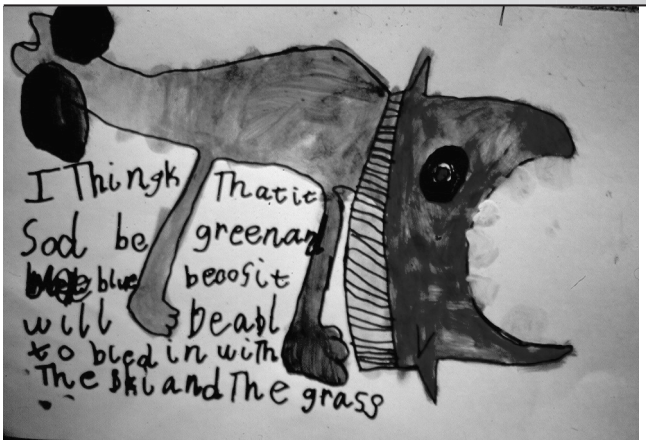
The Dinosaur Story. In a first-grade classroom, students were discussing the topic of dinosaurs. They discussed the height and weight of dinosaurs, what dinosaurs ate, and where they lived. Simultaneously, in the art room, we explored the capabilities of paint, and how to create different colors. Children individually created their own colors. Each child developed his or her own understanding of color theory through shade and tint scales and by making color wheels.

After discussing the study of dinosaurs with classroom teachers, we found ourselves fascinated by the children's interest in colors. We decided to proceed by investigating the relationship between colors and the dinosaurs. There is no conclusive information about what colors the dinosaurs were. Scientists have speculated about their colors and have advanced various theories to justify these speculations. The role of the teacher in approaching this type of investigation is to ask children questions that stimulate their thinking and provoke discussion. I went back to the children to ask them their own theories on the colors of the dinosaurs:

Teacher: How do we know what color the dinosaurs were?
Cristine: Tan. Because they might blend in with the ground.
Anna: All different. We weren't there. If we weren't there how do we know what colors they were?
Maggie: Green and black. They were reptiles. Today reptiles are usually these colors.
Harry: Brown to camouflage.
Ellen: Grayish, green and blackish. Because when I looked in a book that is what I saw.
Teacher: How did the people who wrote the book know what colors to choose?
Ellen: Because archaeologists. I think they found the bones.
Teacher: So how do we know from the bones?
Ellen: I don't know.
Billy: If people dig up. They can be dirty with a little skin.
Chris: Light green and dark green. They blend in so they won't get attacked.

Documentation of this conversation allows one to see how the children formulated their ideas. The idea of blending or camouflage is mentioned by several students who believed that dinosaurs in the prehistoric age had a need to be hidden. From this idea, another student sees the relationship between reptiles today that may be related to dinosaurs and their colors. The role of collaborative learning is evident; students build theories on each others' answers.

The children then proceeded to explore the dinosaur in more depth by drawing all of its sides and angles. The drawings were then used for the next step in the project. After hypothesizing about dinosaurs and their colors, children created their own paintings expressing their ideas about the color of dinosaurs. The paintings also revealed the children's new interest in color theories and applications as tools with which to demonstrate their ideas. For example, one child not only was able to re-create colors that represented the sky and grass but, proceeding from the camouflage theory, also applied the colors to her image so that the head of the dinosaur, which was closer to the sky, was represented by the color blue and the body was green similar to that found on the ground: "I think it will be green and blue because it will be able to blend in with the sky and grass."



Dinosaur with camouflage coloring.

Gigi Yu

Classroom Planning

The Use of Documented Dialogue to Plan Work: Having Genuine Conversations with Children

Dialogue and recorded conversations offer opportunities to reveal how individuals and groups of learners create meaning of subjects. Recording a dialogue with students is much different from having students write about their work because it allows teachers to examine the dynamic interplay of conversation and how we as teachers respond to students' interactions. Dialogue can happen spontaneously or can be organized by a teacher through group or individual conversations. The dialogue can also be used with students as a way to inspire their work and also for teachers to plan the next sequence of events.

The Campbell's Soup Can Story. What follows is another example in which documentation, in the form of recorded dialog, illuminates the subtlety and complexity of children's critical response to, and reinterpretation of, art. During a visit to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art's education department, I was struck at the lack of materials available for young children. I expressed my concern to one of the department employees, who responded that young children were not able to analyze and understand modern art.

In response to this assertion, I decided to try an experiment with my students in my own classroom. I set out several examples of artwork and played a game with my students in which they were to choose their favorite and least favorite. There was an overwhelming dislike for the image of Andy Warhol's Campbell's Soup Can. I then planned a conversation with my students in which I asked them about their dislike for the artwork. The following conversation unfolded:

Teacher: Explain to me why you do not like the Campbell's Soup Can artwork.
Teddy: It's just Campbell's soup. He only had the Campbell's soup can. You should have something else in the picture to make it more interesting. You should have like background to make it more interesting.
Teacher: Okay. Maria?
Maria: Um, a lot of people see a Campbell's soup every day and so it might be kind of boring for them because they are so used to seeing it.
Teacher: Anything else?
Amanda: But some people like Campbell's soup and they would like to see a picture of it.
Eric: It is really detailed.
Teacher: What do you mean by that?
Eric: Like they really, they didn't do everything you see, but they zoomed in on so you could see everything.
Charley: Some people might not like red and it doesn't have many other colors on it.
Morgan: I don't really like it because it kind of matches, because it's not that interest ing and it's cause some people they have like a soup can and they pour soup from it and it is something they see every day and it gets very boring. And it just doesn't have a background and it's really borrrringgg.
Zachary: I don't like it because I don't like Campbell's soup.

Teacher: That makes sense.
Natalie: I don't like it because it doesn't have that much color.
Morgan: I still don't like it, but I do like chicken noodle soup.
Kelly: I don't like it because, um, it's just a can of soup and there is not that much color and it's not that grounded and I wish there was something else in it like a pretty colorful picture. Soup is boring.
Kristin: There is something on the bottom of the can and you can't really see it. He could have shown it and it would have been more interesting.

I was intrigued by the advice students provided on how to make the Campbell's Soup Can painting more interesting. I decided to ask them to reinterpret the image. I provided Campbell's soup cans for students to use while drawing, and then they added their own elements to the design to make the image more appealing.

Gigi Yu

Campbell's soup and bowling.

Gigi Yu

Campbell's soup on Mars.

Emotional Aspects

Learning is an emotional experience that cannot be fully engaged or understood through simple paper-and-pencil activities. Successful documentation strategies reveal the daily struggles, triumphs, fears, and joys that exist between children, teachers, and artists. Documentation moves us beyond an interest in outcomes and moves us to an exploration of the relationships and feelings that form the context and stuff of educative experience.

Jamal's story. Documentation does not need to be restricted to project work; it can also capture a single learning experience.

Jamal was a first-grade student who often struggled with drawing concepts. In class, students were experimenting with the concept of taking an object and drawing it up close. Jamal seemed to struggle with this idea, and his drawings reflected his lack of understanding of the subject. They were at times scattered and not focused on one object.

Jamal sat next to Jessica in the art room. Jessica, on the other hand, was a bright student who was seen as an exceptional artist. She was often quiet, kept to herself, and enjoyed making art on her own. Jamal seemed oblivious to Jessica's skills and often seemed distracted by other events around him. One day I was making my rounds in the classroom when I glanced down at the paper in front of Jamal. Jamal had drawn an exquisite flower, very similar to Jessica's. I was astounded at this transformation; what others might have seen as copying, I saw as a huge accomplishment for Jamal. I praised his new drawing as his face beamed with a smile from ear to ear. I took Jamal aside and asked,

Teacher: Where did you get the idea for this drawing?
Jamal: Jessica. I saw Jessica and got the idea.

Jamal was able to see Jessica as an outside resource who helped him to model new techniques. Jessica, in her quiet and unobtrusive way, supplied new alternatives for his struggle with drawing. I was also fascinated that Jamal was not ashamed at giving his fellow student credit for helping him overcome his struggles. He appeared proud of his work. All art is, to some degree, "copying." A conscious embrace of this truth is a really powerful tool for any artist.

As successful documentation, Jamal's story demonstrates both the struggle and joy of learning for an individual student. It also powerfully reveals how unexpected forms of collaboration can allow a student to move beyond his or her limits and to expand their capabilities.

Professional Development: Educating Educators and Teacher Growth

Successful documentation allows for the child's voice to become a part of the education community and creates opportunities for teachers to share learning that occurs within their classroom and might not otherwise be revealed. In a larger sense, documentation provides a community of educators opportunities to study what is taking place among learners and to develop strategies for global and systemic changes in education. Documentation of children's work in a wide variety of media also provides critical and compelling public evidence of the intellectual powers of young children, evidence that is not otherwise available (Katz, 1993).

Teachers can use documentation to promote professional development in a number of ways.

1. Panels hung in hallways and classrooms are opportunities for teachers to communicate the ongoing learning that is happening in the classroom. Observers may include parents, other students, other teachers, administrators, and others who visit the school. For teachers of the arts, this is an important way to demonstrate the effectiveness of arts instruction and its important role in learning, but it also helps such teachers develop into advocates for arts education.
2. Teachers can use documentation as a basis for publishable articles, other professional writing, and contributions to research in the field. I used the documentation collected from my classroom to create presentations that were shared at national conferences and in an International Arts Education publication for a UNESCO conference in Seoul, Korea.

As an educator, it was very rewarding to share this information with my colleagues from around the world and to receive direct feedback on my work.

3. In addition to advocating for pedagogic value of the arts, documentation can provide the basis for teachers to advocate more specifically for their own profession. This is particularly important for arts specialists who often find their jobs on the budget chopping block every year. I often used documentation at parent meetings to inform parents on the learning that was happening in the art room.

Conclusion

For teachers, learning to document what takes place in the classroom means learning to listen, see, observe, and interpret student intentions and actions. This process moves teachers of the arts away from simply collecting works for displays to collecting and creating pieces that can educate others. This display and collection of work can radically heighten the effectiveness of arts learning as an educative experience and can play a key role in advancing the field as a whole.

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Appendix

Web Sites on Documentation on the Reggio Emilia Approach:

http://www.pz.harvard.edu/mlv/documentation/index.cfm
http://www.reggioalliance.org/
http://www.capeweb.org/appproc.pdf
http://zerosei.comune.re.it/inter/reggiochildren.htm

Gigi Schroeder-Yu is a teacher, researcher and professional development provider. She trains teachers on implementing the arts and documentation practices in early childhood classrooms influenced by the Reggio Emilia Approach. She is currently an adjunct faculty member at Millikin University and is pursuing her doctorate degree in education at the University of Illinois at Champaign Urbana.