

Re-thinking professional development: Positioning educational documentation as everyday professional learning

Deborah Harcourt

Lesley Jones

Australian Catholic University

THE INTENT OF THIS PAPER is to explore the ways in which educational documentation—one of the many important key principles that challenge and sustain the educational theories and teaching practice of the Reggio Emilia Educational Project in Italy—supports the practice, principles and pedagogy of early years educators. In this particular context, documentation is positioned as both a strategy and a tool for examining the work of the individual and of the group, for both children and educators, with the aim of questioning the role documentation might play in supporting educators' professional learning. This commentary paper will examine the concept of documenting as a process that enables an educator's work to become visible and therefore support their evolving capacity as an educator, through ongoing reflective practice, as indicated in the Australian Early Years Learning Framework (DEEWR, 2009).

The context

The *Early Years Learning Framework* (EYLF) (DEEWR, 2009) is the first national framework for the Australian early years profession. It was developed by the Council of Australian Governments with the aim of ensuring that all children '... have the best start in life to create a better future for themselves and for the nation' (DEEWR, 2009, p. 5). The construction of the EYLF was based on extensive national consultation, an interrogation of international learning approaches and the substantive literature in this area. As a result, it provides broad directions for early childhood educators in prior-to-school settings to facilitate children's learning in partnerships with families. This can then bring diverse experiences, perspectives, expectations, knowledge and skills to the learning of both children and adults. The Framework is designed to inspire dialogue, improve communication and provide a common language about young children's learning among children themselves, their families, the broader community, early childhood educators and other professionals.

As many Australian program providers struggled with these new expectations (Commonwealth of Australia, 2011), the Australian Government stepped in to provide \$200 million to support the implementation of the Long Day Care Professional Development Program (LDCPDP). This has been designed to assist educators and program

providers to manage the professional requirements needed to respond to the new *National Quality Standard* (NQS) (the quality measurement tool of the EYLF) (ACECQA, 2012) and the ongoing implementation of the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009). Within the first few months of this initiative, there were in excess of 5000 services who lodged applications to be involved in this program (Commonwealth of Australia, 2013). While this initiative can be applauded on many levels, the response is indicative of the sector's need for professional learning opportunities. However, the authors contend that initiatives, such as the LDCPDP and its predecessors, serve to exemplify traditional approaches to professional development that include workshops, breakfast seminars, conferences, publications, community of practice and train-the-trainer models (Commonwealth of Australia, 2011).

Contesting the professional development paradigm

Buchanan, Morgan, Cooney and Gerharter (2006) contest the use of these traditional models as effective designs to drive practice change, and argue that there is no clear understanding of which elements of professional development design yield the best results for educators. They stress that more data needs to be collected to determine which types of content, design, quality or

quantity of professional development are most efficacious in leading practice change. Urban (2008) also challenges the traditional model of professional development based on hierarchical reproduction and application of expert knowledge by facilitators/trainers, arguing that it is disconnected from how learning and development occur in the field. Fenech, Sumsion and Shepherd (2010) suggest that when professional development positions the facilitator or trainer as the expert, there is a risk that learning becomes situated '... in a habitus where professionalism is confined to objective, technical practices' (p. 89). Urban (2008) asserts that, in effect, change is presented to the sector as 'what needs to change' with little about 'how we make the change', especially at deeper epistemological and philosophical levels. Dunn-Kenny (2010), Roehrig, Turner, Grove, Schneider and Liu (2009), and Buchanan et al. (2006) suggest that a new professional development design is critical in achieving practice and epistemological change, and must incorporate time for reflection and sustained engagement that cannot generally be facilitated in one-off experiences. Nuttall (2013) goes even further by suggesting that, as early childhood educators, professional development should not just be undertaken as a task but motivated by the values and aspirations that are brought to those tasks.

The following discussion will contend that, if we have the courage to borrow competences from educational systems that position educational documentation as being *about and central to*, professional practice, we may re-position the current 'administrative burden' (Australian Government, 2015) of documentation to be one that is at the core of quality and an early childhood educator's professional learning and development.

Educational documentation and Reggio Emilia

Interpreting from the perspective of our colleagues in Reggio Emilia, educational documentation (commonly referred to as pedagogical documentation in Australia) is a process that means being open to others and trying to see things from a different viewpoint. It offers the possibility to digress from a traditional position of transmission of knowledge, to one that proposes a co-construction of knowledge (Rinaldi, 2001). Rinaldi suggests that in this way documentation becomes 'mirrors of your own knowledge where we see our own ideas and thoughts reflected' (p. 57). Our Italian colleagues use documentation to try and understand the everyday life of their schools, and therefore become more aware of the role the educator plays in this context. Documentation in this sense then holds the capacity to elicit elements of surprise for the adult recorder/reader, often making visible the delicate modes of negotiation that occur between adults, children and the context. The adult act of (for example) writing, photographing or sketching the events and relationships within children's experiences is content for educational

documentation, providing a solid platform from which to critically reflect on professional practice.

According to Filipini (2015), educational documentation offers educators the possibility to exchange viewpoints with others (educators, children and families) which may well bring divergent perspectives, but as a consequence, offers the potential to seek a much deeper way of 'seeing' the learning experiences that have occurred. Actively learning to listen, see, observe, interpret and 're-launch' (Quinti, 2015) the children's actions, thoughts and processes of investigation and construction, as they engage with the learning context, helps educators to learn the skill of being and conversing with children. It brings into sharp focus the idea of trying to understand the processes and procedures children choose for developing learning relationships with other children, and the impact or influence of the resources and materials that are supporting the generation of tentative theories and the acquiring of new knowledge.

The Reggio Emilia Educational Project is not necessarily based on one school of thought; rather it is an approach that offers the potential for re-thinking and re-conceptualising theories. In this sense, educational documentation becomes the conduit for an ongoing exchange and debate about the nexus between theory and practice, which may indeed lead educators to review or question accepted theories on children's learning and development. It therefore holds the potential and capacity to: give significance to understanding the relationship between theory and practice; enhance professional relationships; further extend knowledge about children's learning; and generate opportunities for deep deliberation on professional practice. It consequently becomes the educators' responsibility to design and construct contexts that support these processes in order to foster relationships, to exchange competences and expectations, and sustain the 'contagion' of ongoing professional inquiry (Giudici, Rinaldi & Krechevsky, 2001).

The authors here would query, are these not the cornerstones of professional activity that are being asked of us in the *National Quality Framework* (ACECQA, 2012)? What gaps are there in our current approaches to documenting children's learning that have led to a plethora of suburban myths such as the generation of discrete numbers of observations or learning stories per child per month; 'mandatory' individual portfolios; daily/weekly planning cycles; that the primary audience of documentation is families; and a disconnected attitude and understanding of the outcomes for children in the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009)? It is possible to consider that a range of unintended outcomes has been generated in an attempt to operationalise the EYLF, and meet *perceived* compliance aspects of the NQS (ACECQA, 2012). While the authors fully appreciate the expectation that every child should be the focus of an educator's thought processes in designing a meaningful early learning program, the

unintended pressure to simply quantify outputs around these expectations runs the risk of diminishing the actual quality. Volume for volume's sake should not become the lone driver of the development and production of documentation.

Discussion

It would be the authors' contention that by engaging in the professional activity of educational documentation, educators give visibility to the ethical, ecological and egalitarian choices that they are making each day through their recorded observations, interpretations and sharing of potentials. As a 'public' document, it removes the possibility for any anonymity (for both adults and children) and becomes an act of deliberate communication to others (regardless of the perceived primary audience), and therefore makes visible that which is being given value and significance *from the educator's viewpoint*. However, our colleagues in Reggio Emilia would contest that this is only a partial viewpoint and needs to be supplemented/complemented by the addition of other points of view (for example other educators, parents and children) in order to construct a holistic proposition about what is occurring.

Communicating with families and other vested parties, such as regulating bodies and assessors under the NQS (ACECQA, 2012), is an important professional responsibility; however, the authors suggest there is a risk in attempting to have educational documentation serve multiple functions. In doing so, there is a possibility that the salience of the information is diminished for all audiences. Documentation that is nuanced to make consumption by families easier may well lessen the deeper professional theoretical thinking needed by educators. Equally, documentation presented in theoretical and technical ways to families may be disengaging.

What it might be

It may well be time to disrupt the current Australian narrative about educational documentation and its perceived primary purpose. What if we were to strive for authentic and purposeful partnerships through educational documentation? Could we ask what additional value is possible through documentation that moved beyond the single educator's perspectives of simply what is being observed and analysed? Consider the relationship between educational documentation and the learning outcomes for children in the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) if it was used to generate a genuine enterprise between teaching (intentional pedagogical contexts) and learning (children's thinking and responses). Perhaps we should be focusing on the role of documentation as a critical tool for the ongoing examination and illumination by a pedagogical team to better understand their work. This would also help to better understand the child, and to deepen a shared image of children and its influence on the way pedagogy is enacted: perhaps sitting as evidence of the synesthesia (Giudici, 2015) of our practice with children's thinking.

What if documentation was used as a centre- or school-based inquiry that actually examined the learning outcomes, where there was a whole-of-centre/school approach to the evaluation and meaning being given to the outcomes through professional conversations among educators? Drawing from the experiences of the Reggio Emilia Educational Project, the authors believe that educational documentation could become the early childhood profession's *intellectual compass*. Done well, it offers rich and powerful possibilities for knowing ourselves as educators, what we have to offer as an educational body of work for children and an opportunity to ask, 'What's in it for me?', 'What will I learn from this investigation?', 'What questions can I propose for answering about what it means to work with young children?' A critical examination of the EYLF's (DEEWR, 2009) learning outcomes through the practice of documentation as professional illumination, may well bring enlightenment to the Framework's actual intentions.

What if documentation was used as a conduit for a broader Australian social inquiry: an inquiry *with* the learning outcomes rather than *on/about* the learning outcomes? It could then be possible to bring deeper meaning and value to the art and science of pedagogical practice through acknowledging that the strength of the work comes from the notion that it is contestable. It would also be possible to make judgements and seek consensus with others about young children's learning and development and how educators construct a context for that to occur. Educational documentation should be a catalyst in bringing our expectations of/for children and ourselves, and parents' expectations of/for their child and educators, closer to a common ground. We could use it, as our colleagues in Reggio Emilia do, to support our work but also to support family and community understanding of our work and proactively seek their contribution to evaluating and assessing that work—this is partnership with families and communities at its best.

It is the authors' argument therefore, that educational documentation must be primarily for critical reflection and (re)construction of knowledge—a way of self-actualisation within a professional development context (Filipini, 2015). It may well be nice to share with others, parents and children, but it is primarily for educators to construct and reconstruct their understanding of learning, teaching and the curriculum. This kind of documentation could be positioned as both a pedagogical strategy and a tool for examining and evaluating the work of individuals and the group. In this way, an educator's work becomes visible through the documenting process, and when shared with others through professional conversation, assists the educator in evolving as both a teacher and a learner. If documentation could move towards this more robust purpose, the process of documenting would support educators' deeply collaborative construction of meaning and epistemology about teaching and professional practice.

This means effectively repositioning documentation from a compliance focus (and a required task) to a journey of individual and group learning, grounded in the real work of being and working with children, families and colleagues.

What it is not

Fleet often asks us to consider what documentation is not (Fleet, Patterson & Robertson, 2012), which provides a useful reference point for the current discussion. Educational documentation is not a chronicle, slide show, scrapbook or diary of what might have (or perceived to have) happened that day. The focus of documentation is not on the product, but on the process of getting to that product. It becomes important therefore to make visible the decisions, the discussions, the actions and the reflections that accompany the unfolding of the experiences. If we borrow from our colleagues in Reggio Emilia, the documentation could be developed as rich substance for adults to engage in dialogue about the meaning children are attributing to an experience in order to deepen professional understandings about children's developing theories and concepts. At the same time, it also makes visible how the educators are proposing further provocations and complexities to children and, in this way, teaching strategies are illuminated and can be refined as part of collaborative dialogues among the team. As an ongoing professional inquiry, educators should be able to 'see' how well they are supporting children's zone of proximal development: that they are supporting the children in achieving that which is just beyond their current individual capabilities (Vygotksy, 1978).

It is critical for Australian educators to have a strong understanding of the intent of the EYLF and the complexity with which each child encounters the intended outcomes through their own learning and the learning of others. Highly evolved educational documentation enables the educator to 'see' the context they are creating in order for that learning to occur. As the educator engages with their own interpretations of that learning, supported by the perspectives of his/her colleagues through professional conversations, moments of recognition occur. For what is now visible for the exchange and debate of ideas is the child; the context; and the role of the educator.

If we move educational documentation beyond a descriptor of 'what learning happened today' to an interpretative or investigative stance, we begin to see a serious professional learning experience emerging. Shifting the focus from developing pleasant-looking displays and framed artifacts to placing an emphasis on examining the interrelationship between children, adults and the context enables consideration to be given to deepening understandings about children, childhood and pedagogical practice. The more informed educators become about their effectiveness as provocateurs of the learning, the more complex their invitations to children will be and the more they will become drawn to matters of significance within their practice.

Where to next?

The authors propose that professional development in Australia needs to be re-configured. This would mean that professional learning becomes part of everyday practice, rather than something that is a nice day out where, frankly speaking, much of what is heard leaks out of your left ear before you hit the car park! Perhaps we could (re)reference professional development as professional (re)formation, where we approach our own professional learning in much the same way as we approach children's learning—looking for what you don't yet know or cannot do as the most interesting space to inhabit. This demands an attitude of inquiry, pleasure and enjoyment towards professional practice and the role of being an educator. It is something you are not gifted, but something you strive to achieve.

Many educators are (re)positioning their image of the child—another provocation offered to us from our colleagues in Reggio Emilia. In essence, this means educators are proposing that they are working with the strong, powerful, competent child who, the authors believe, in turn demands to work with a strong, powerful and competent educator. When constructing this new image of the child it is anticipated that the educator will be constructing, in parallel, a new pedagogy and a new context for teaching and learning. Educational documentation, in this sense, becomes an examined narrative about the learning and life of each centre, rather than an individual educator's response to what they believe is being proposed by the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) and its measurement tool, the NQS (ACECOA, 2012). High-quality educational documentation must be used to support and challenge the intellectual growth and development of both children and adults, as a life-blood of professional practice. This documentation should support a collaborative ongoing reflective practice—that is, teams having crucial evidence to continually look back upon in order to inform current and future decisions about the learning context. Educational documentation, therefore, should be used to enable rigorous dialogue and debate about learning and professional practice among educators, so that a shared responsibility about the quality of pedagogy emerges.

Australia needs courageous educators who are prepared to see themselves in action, holding Rinaldi's mirror up on their own practice. This reflective professional endeavour asks educators to expose themselves as practitioners who are open to critique (and criticism)—a strategy which could become the cornerstone of high-quality professional practice. Using educational documentation in this way indicates a desire to actually critically engage with one's own pedagogical approaches and lays the foundation for a democratic context for dialogue about early childhood education with others.

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