Introduction

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Several years ago, when this collection had its genesis, the idea of creating a book about work being done in the area of pedagogical documentation seemed a useful contribution to make. It seemed a simple enough proposition at the time. Early childhood educators were asking for support in exploring newer ways of working and, in particular, being fascinated with the provocations such as pedagogical documentation emerging from the town of Reggio Emilia in Northern Italy. That is still the case. The stage, however, is not the same. The scenery changed constantly and the previous script is unrecognisable. The book has evolved, shaped by rapid shifts in circumstances and is now constructed to reflect the ongoing conversations that are taking place in professional early childhood communities.

This book introduces the novice to ways in which adults and children explore possibilities for investigation together, but it does more than this. It is also a site for those who have been thinking through relationships between social justice issues and pedagogical decision-making. There are many ways into the conversations that are taking place and multiple definitions of the topics being considered.

Considering social justice

Increasingly, there is interest in the importance of social justice in the early childhood professional community. For example, in Australia, the Social Justice in Early Childhood group, based in New South Wales, held its second annual conference in 2005 and in Melbourne, The Centre for Equity and Innovations in Early Childhood (located in the University of Melbourne) had its fourth annual conference in 2004. Recent publications by Australian authors provide further evidence of this growing interest. For example, MacNaughton (2005) and Yelland (2005).

Nevertheless, it is interesting that many current early childhood textbooks do not include definitions of ‘social justice’. In some cases the term, and possibly the construct, is overlooked; in other cases, understanding is assumed. A web search reveals that the term itself is contested, with discussions related to the extent to which governments should, or could, ensure equity of opportunity for all citizens (see for example, Wikipedia, 2004). From an early childhood perspective, Cannella (1997, p 162) writes strongly about ‘social justice as a human right’:
Younger human beings are poor, hungry, familiar with violence, and subject to institutionalized assaults on their families, cultures, and values. We send some of them to schools that are dirty, rat infested, and have very few materials while others have all the resources and every opportunity that anyone can imagine… Further, even those ‘children’ from privileged groups are placed in the margins of society as inexperienced, immature, innocent, and needing protection from the real world. Our construction of ‘child’ silences a group of human beings, removing all possibility for social justice for them.

This confronting statement may seem distinct from issues of pedagogical documentation and everyday practice in environments for young children, including the inspirations from Italy. However, the Italians in Reggio Emilia have had a key role in providing provocations and examples of documentation that have inspired many of the authors in this book. Sergio Spaggiari, Director of the preschools and infant–toddler centres of the municipality of Reggio Emilia has commented about the city (2004, p 12):

…though not physically a border town, [Reggio Emilia] has intentionally situated itself in a transit zone of ideas and people, where diversities can be the essential resource for cultural exchange and civil enrichment.

In general, the dialogue in the English-speaking educational community about the experience of the municipal child care centres of Reggio Emilia has overlooked the centrality of social justice in that experience. Perhaps in an attempt to make the challenges of Reggio Emilia more politically and educationally palatable in the United States, the socialist politics of the city and Emilia Romagna region, and the social justice agenda running through the schools, was downplayed in the initial interpretations in North America. To us, this silence is deafening. It is as though an entire perspective of the Reggio experience is expunged in the English language texts that promote ‘Reggio ideas’. The municipal infant–toddler centres and preschools of Reggio Emilia are politically active and have a very ‘out there’ social justice profile, so much so that some centres are named after important political events or people. For example, the preschool Neruda was named after a Chilean political martyr and poet, Pablo Neruda; and another centre, Iqbal Masih, was named after an eleven-year-old child worker murdered in Pakistan after speaking out about child-bonded labour. Pedagogical documentation from work with children in the Diana School in Reggio Emilia has explored the ‘Rights of the child’ (Malaguzzi, Castagnetti, Rubizzi and Vecchi, 1995), racism, poverty and war. As Carlina Rinaldi (2001a, p 42) puts it:

The reoccurring question is whether the school is limited to transmitting culture, or can be, as we in Reggio Emilia strive toward, a place where culture is constructed and democracy is put into practice.
Furthermore Reggio Children (2004) note that:

Over the years, in collaboration with the Municipality of Reggio Emilia and the Friends of Reggio Children Association, Reggio Children [a support organisation for the schools]...has carried out cooperative initiatives with educational institutions in a number of countries and territories, including Albania, Bosnia, Kosovo, Cuba, and Senegal. Educational projects are now underway (focusing on improving environments and teacher professional development) in Egypt and the Palestinian Territories...

This work was made possible by using part of the profits made from publications and the international delegations that visit the municipal schools of Reggio Emilia. More recently (March 2005), Reggio Children appealed to the friends of Reggio Emilia to become part of a ‘project of solidarity’ for the countries affected by the Boxing Day 2004 tsunami. The President of Reggio Children (Giordana Rabitti, 2005, p 12) wrote:

We are thinking of helping in building anew, or restoring a place for childhood, be it a school or a children’s hospital or a place of the children or for the children. This enterprise should be accomplished in collaboration with those who are living in that place and are more capable than we are to listen to the needs, the wishes, the dreams of those who suffered so much, or those who have lost the hope their life can begin again.

It is this commitment to democracy and equity which intrigues and encourages us.

**Considering pedagogical documentation**

What is pedagogical documentation? For many people, the image that will come to mind with this term will relate to wall panels developed in line with the Italian experience or collections of photographs, drawings, conversations and analysis of experience. However, a straightforward definition would be misleading as the possibilities are complex; aspects of the concept will unfold throughout this book. While artefacts are certainly inherent in pedagogical documentation, more is implied by this term than the creation of products. For example, Carlina Rinaldi (2001b, pp 85–7) writes that:

…education is seen not as an object but as ‘a relational place’…It is a construction of relationships that are born of a reciprocal curiosity between the subject and the object…where the children can give new identity to the object, creating a relationship for the object and for themselves that is also metaphorical and poetic…
Documentation is thus a narrative form. Its force of attraction lies in the wealth of questions, doubts and reflections that underlie the collection of data and with which it is offered to others...They are three-dimensional writings, not aimed at giving the event objectivity but at expressing the meaning-making effort...

Provocations from Reggio Emilia are ongoing. In addition, other voices are contributing to the conversations that are unfolding. The notion of ‘pedagogical documentation’ emerges in association with the Scandinavian use of the term ‘pedagogue’ in relation to adults who work with pedagogy, the exploration of teaching and learning. The term ‘pedagogical documentation’ came to the attention of Australians visiting Scandinavia in 1997; it was coined originally by Gunilla Dahlberg and is now being used worldwide (personal communication).

In countries where ‘pedagogue’ is not a common term, would it not be simpler just to use the terms ‘teachers’ and ‘teaching’? Perhaps, but that would be misleading. For as well as other problematic issues related to cross-cultural translations, there are debates related to the notion of teaching that get entangled with definitions of qualifications. It is clear that the greater the knowledge of qualified staff in group settings, the better the outcomes for children. Nevertheless, it is also clear that all staff working in teams in children’s services can consider these newer ways of working and make a contribution to them. The language used can sometimes exclude people unintentionally or obscure meanings. We are trying to avoid those mistakes.

Exploring the book

There are many ways of working that are associated with similar starting points. Ideas move so quickly that the type of documentation that was envisaged when this book began, is now only one of many possibilities. To reflect some of these possibilities as well as the range of viewpoints associated with the discussion, this book is organised as a series of reflections. They are not interactive enough to be called dialogues, but the format is intended to invite readers to be part of the unfolding conversations.

To enable the linking of issues and ideas, the chapters are grouped under headings: Part 1—First Principles; Part 2—Beginnings; Part 3—Engaging the Hard Questions; Part 4—Looking Deeper, Seeing More and Part 5—Pulling Together, Reaching Out. Groups of chapters are followed by invited responses. This flow of voices is intended to provide a dialogic frame for the ideas; that is, a style of presentation that emphasises multiple viewpoints and possibilities associated with the ideas being explored.
The provocation for this book emerged from conversations amongst the editors at the Institute of Early Childhood (IEC), Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia. Subsequently, authors were invited to consider the ideas being raised in the context of social justice issues. The world’s complexities have become increasingly obvious through the immediacy of technology. The births and deaths of people and nations become part of daily discussion, radio commentary and visual backgrounding for breakfast tables and computer screens. Differences between individuals and groups of people become elements in the enacting of power relationships and inequity, as well as springboards for opportunity and possibility. The realities of poverty and terrorism are as much a part of children’s lives as play and wonder. Discussions about pedagogy can no longer take place under an isolated heading of ‘curriculum’; they have become recognised as integral to philosophies of practice and approaches to personal decision-making. These ideas will be unpacked as the book unfolds.

Considering some of the issues raised in each chapter may highlight ways in which the major threads are woven throughout the book. These brief comments about the chapters will not provide the power of the original and may focus on elements different from those identified by the readers. These mentions just serve as an overview. In their comments regarding each section, the respondents have highlighted points of interest for each reader to consider.

The first chapter orients the reader to the main definitions and debates that currently surround the concept of pedagogical documentation. It will support those who are completely new to the topic, exploring ways that photographs and excerpts of conversations help give insight to children’s worlds, to the learning and growing that is taking place, to planning possibilities, to conversations with families and other adults, to professional self-reflection. It will help to highlight other authors who have written about various forms of related professional practice and it will introduce some of the pragmatic and philosophical threads of current discussions. It is a useful place to start in order to contextualise the rest of the debate.

The chapters that follow may be read in any order. They are written mostly by people who are working with young children. Sometimes, colleagues in colleges and universities who are involved in thinking about these ideas have collaborated with these authors. The authors work in a range of settings and systems (author information is included in the book).

Each chapter includes a context summary as the authors are from several countries and terminology varies with the geography. In the tension between recognising accomplishments and honouring privacy, pseudonyms have been used for adults and children unless permissions have been provided for the use of real names.
The pieces contain stories of experience that include children from the youngest through to those in the early years of school. Adult thinking, interactions and shifts in perception are represented through the voices of early childhood staff and children’s families. While the ideas may be of interest to families and to those working with older children, most examples are drawn from the period of early childhood (birth to age eight).

In Part 1, the first group of chapters begins with Chapter Two. In this chapter, Jill McLachlan raises issues of teacher power, including complexities related to giving children space and knowing where to challenge them, while acknowledging and engaging with previously invisible content. Recognising the importance of treating children’s hurts as part of curriculum relates directly to social justice.

In the next chapter, Janet Robertson offers provocations regarding the images of children that we hold as demonstrated in our interactions with them. For example, her account of a toddler becoming a ‘dancer’ rather than a ‘hitter’ underlines the importance of consciously seeking positive perspectives when interpreting behaviour.

In the North American consideration of ‘the disposition to document’ in Chapter Four, Sarah Felstiner, Laurie Kochler and Ann Pelo raise challenges related to emotional and intellectual risk-taking. These authors give insight to work in practice and invite us to be puzzled by the unexpected. In Chapter Five, Kiri Gould and Lesley Pohio reflect on experiences in New Zealand and critique narrow definitions of assessment. This chapter has a focus on assisting teachers to work with an empowering national early childhood curriculum, especially through the use of narrative writing and ‘Learning Stories’ told from multiple perspectives. With a focus on problem-solving and empowerment, Kiri and Lesley incorporate elements of the processes involved as well as maintaining commitment to creating pieces (both large and small) of pedagogical documentation.

As commentators, Jan Millikan, Margie Carter and John Nimmo reflect upon the chapters in Part 1, adding their reflections to the dialogue. This pattern of a commentary after a group of chapters is intended to highlight the slippery and complex positions that teachers take in constructing curriculum.

Chapter Six begins Part 2. It includes many illustrations of the meaning of a learning community where all members are valued and curiosity is rewarded. During an interview with Catherine Patterson, Belinda Connerton recalls provocations for joint exploration. These include children’s reconstructions of the Twin Towers after September 11th in New York, and Belinda’s interpretation of their efforts as children attempting to re-create a history in which more people might have survived. These stories reflect one teacher’s journey towards more insightful seeing, listening and recording.

There is an exploration in Chapter Seven of aspects of early childhood teacher education, with perspectives from novices beginning their differing journeys with pedagogical documentation, in widely varying circumstances.
Joanne Burr, Danielle Crisafuli and Pamela Silversides tell of their work in a program with Alma Fleet and Catherine Patterson. Recommendations are made for starting slowly with small projects, listening to a range of voices and recording in a variety of ways. The impact of differing work contexts is also highlighted.

In Chapter Eight, Lesley Studans writes from the perspective of a school teacher about the importance of ‘teacher voice’ in pieces of pedagogical documentation. She also recognises the importance of integrated investigations for meeting school or system prescribed outcomes across many learning areas.

Janet Robertson presents Chapter Nine through a lens of relationships with a focus on ‘gaze’. She writes about the importance of ‘children’s presence’ and of seeing children’s exchanges as ‘gifts’ (Rinaldi, 1999) to each other as well as data to help adult understanding. Following Janet’s chapter, Margaret Clyde and Wendy Shepherd emphasise the importance of not underestimating children and of the need for infrastructure support in pursuing this goal.

Beginning Part 3—Engaging the hard questions, Ann Pelo writes from Seattle, Washington, extending the context presented in Chapter Four by highlighting the intersections between pedagogical documentation and social justice. In exploring ‘documentation as a verb’, she foregrounds the role of a ‘mentor teacher’, recasting to the local context while acknowledging her intellectual debt to the ‘pedagogista’ of Reggio Emilia.

In Chapter Eleven, Sandra Cheeseman and Janet Robertson raise issues of privacy, purpose and consent in documenting children’s work. This chapter is not a provision of answers, but rather a foregrounding of the importance of asking the questions. Queries are raised about the place of staff in the process which are reminiscent of the ‘image questions’ raised about adults in Chapter Three.

Miriam Giugni in Chapter Twelve, raises challenges related to popular culture as a contested context in early childhood settings and as a rich site for reconceptualising identity work as relevant early childhood curriculum. She raises provocations about ‘Barbie’-related behaviours and the social power of the ‘suits’ worn by super heroes.

In Chapter Thirteen, Alma Fleet challenges narrow definitions of diversity and illustrates the value of connecting with often-ignored curriculum. Through mini-stories and three extended narratives, these experiences provide examples of entry points into a more sophisticated discussion about interpreting diversity. Following these chapters, Anthony Semann and Anne Stonehouse engage with the relevance and authenticity of curriculum in the context of social justice imperatives.

Part 4 brings us to Looking deeper, seeing more. Janet Robertson’s narratives emphasise moments when adults become learners, in listening to and thinking about children’s experiences. Again, three stories create sites for understanding possibilities—seeing a teacher think through events over time helps readers share in the act and art of interpreting interactions.
Alex Harper considers potentials for confronting social justice issues in a formal school framework in Chapter Fifteen. She portrays a teacher doing things ‘differently’ in a context of accountability. Alex notes that there are times when capturing a photograph is less important than living an investigation with children. At the same time, she is confronting teacher power in selecting avenues for exploration and in accepting or rejecting the temptations of sanitised versions of world events.

This section ends with two perspectives from New Zealand. In Chapter Sixteen, Chris Bayes highlights the importance of acknowledging local sociopolitical contexts and gives an example of thoughtful, holistic curriculum. Her examples illustrate that, in the use of ‘Learning Stories’ within a ‘community of learners’, there can be tension between either a focus on individuals, or on individuals within a wider frame of reference. Following this chapter, Diti Hill also comments from a New Zealand perspective with a focus on participatory democracy. Jenny Porter concludes this section on Looking deeper, seeing more with the journey of transforming learning in one school context.

Part 5 has a focus on Pulling together and reaching out. In Chapter Seventeen, there are snippets of conversations heard in a range of places, as the speakers struggle with pragmatics and evolving personal philosophies. Conversations with Alma Fleet, Margaret Hammersley, Catherine Patterson, Lisa Schillert and Edith Stanke reflect differences in attitudes to documenting due to changing perceptions over time. The potential of portfolios is raised, leading again to the question of language use. What exactly do people mean in contrasting a portfolio with a piece of pedagogical documentation? Does one focus on an individual’s activities or development while the other is a working document seeking insight and understanding? Are there times when these purposes overlap? This chapter also explores the roles associated with being a ‘gatherer’ of information, as well as the delicacies of ‘being documented’ as an adult.

Chapter Eighteen concerns the ethics of an exhibition, again raising the difficulties of language use, communication subtleties, and the essence of responsive relationships. This account of the creation of Exhibit-on by Alma Fleet and Janet Robertson reveals key elements of decision-making in the creating of an exhibition, intending to celebrate and provoke—all within a frame of behaving ethically. In her response to these chapters, Sue Groom echoes the difficulties that many practitioners have with pedagogical documentation in shifting from ‘what it is’ to ‘what it does’.

Finally, in the Conclusion, we reflect on where the dialogue has taken us thus far and muse about where discussion might propel us in the future. We emphasise that the onus is on each reader individually to construct and collaboratively co-construct meanings from the provocations that are offered.

While the intention of these chapters is to be accessible, the approach is not simplistic. The ideas are too important and the issues too complex to be
dealt with in ways that are transparent to every potential reader. Work that we have been doing suggests that people who choose to work in early childhood, irrespective of qualification or compensation, are hungry for ideas. They want to explore their own practice and improve the work they are doing, learning from children, the community and each other, as the journey unfolds. We designed this book both to help the newer members of the professional community to gain access to the discussion, and also to engage those who have been thinking around these ideas for a longer period of time. Some people might enter this book as part of a course of study while others might dip into it individually or in groups to further their own thinking.

Ideas are gifts in a thoughtful world community. Thinking with others is a supportive way to explore ‘big ideas’ (Oken–Wright & Gravett, 2002). We look forward to further discussions with readers as these ideas contribute to evolving discourses and become part of wider debates.

References


