

Introduction

Documentation as Relationship: “I am in your eye”

How do we illuminate the capability and exquisite meaning making of very young children? This book does so by sharing the viewpoint of a master documenter in an early childhood setting. It does so by providing a forum for conversation with others about both what was seen and about the viewpoints expressed. Jason Avery began working two mornings a week as an artist-educator early in the life of the Together for Families program and continued in this role for eleven years. He worked closely with the educators, the children and those who accompanied them, offering provocations (such as taking a piece of paper out of the garbage bin on his first visit and creating a stand-up house with it) that opened new landscapes for thinking and making to everyone in the program.

This book highlights Jason’s documentation while engaged with the Together for Families program. The program as a whole is heartily influenced by the Reggio Emilia experience, and those involved consider their practice to be Reggio-inspired. One such practice is the joint activity of documenting children’s meaning making while simultaneously offering an environment carefully structured to invite and sustain rich interactions among participants. Jason observed the connections that children make: he invited further activity based on these connections. In other words he followed the sets of relations that children were constructing about their world: a marker rolls under a bookshelf of materials and a two-year old brings a surprising tool to assist with its retrieval (p. 76).

Noticing Moments of Children’s Thinking and Feeling

This book shows the deep thinking and attachment to their world present in the youngest citizens of our society, children from infancy through age ten. In story after story, Jason reveals observed moments of children’s thinking and feeling about their surroundings. Their love of life, their enchantment with new processes of making and doing, their exuberant joy in learning the world and creating what matters to them are readily visible. The depth of understanding shown by the children, illuminated for us by the depth of vision of the documenter, shows us the competence, resourcefulness, intelligence and feeling hearts of young children in ways frequently not fully appreciated in North American society.

After each day’s visit, Jason would choose one or two events from his raw documenting, in notes and images of what had occurred, and create a one-page narrative. These narratives included photos of the events, descriptive text and conversation with the children and families, and brief interpretations from Jason that show his view of what happened. On his next visit, he added the new pages to his binder of documentation for that year. Over the years he generated a large body of documentation, that is, narratives in text and images filtered by his own viewpoint and by study with others. When a family returned after an absence, Jason could quickly pull out one of his binders and find documentation connecting to that family, describing previous visits or friends or topics of interest.

Note: Children’s ages are identified in parentheses, in years and months—e.g., (2.3).

The Tangle of Past, Present Moment, and Future

Jason once said the past and present of the program became “like a knotted ball of wool.” What did he mean? He described how revisiting the documentation with children and families altered the experience of time. Revisiting previous events lifts them out of time past and restores them to the present moment so they can be thought about, activate feeling, and arouse memory. This process creates time loops that keep past experience directly in connection with present experience. How might this work? A child might, for example, look at a photo in a story and say, “Look, I’m doing the peg thing, and two are missing, red and yellow.” Responding to another photo he says, “Look, we found the yellow one. Where’s the red? I’ll go find it.” The peg board is nearby on a shelf, easily taken up again by the child, if he chooses to follow through on his intention. Jason’s comment about the knotted ball of wool bears a resemblance to Malaguzzi’s comment that knowledge is like a tangle of spaghetti. Both comments offer metaphors for the deep interweaving of elements that are part of environments and of learning in ways that cannot easily be separated or analyzed.

These “Fragile Moments”

Karyn Callaghan, who founded the Together for Families program, and I, a colleague with Karyn in studying Reggio-inspired practice, would become very excited about specific narratives from Jason’s binders and these would be shared, over the years, in presentations to conferences, in workshops, or education classes. As we worked with these narratives and discussed them frequently, we could see their value for students of early childhood education, for families of young children, for supervisors and managers of programs, for policy makers in government, for professors and researchers of early education. These narratives so often showed something we might easily fail to recognize as valuable, and how these “fragile moments” (artist Dawn White Beattie’s phrase) could become

sustained through conversation, drawing and making, until something new and beautiful emerged. We had thought for years that it would be valuable to create something for a wider audience from Jason’s documentation. When Lella Gandini visited Together for Families in early 2009 and looked at Jason’s documentation—at that time almost seven years’ worth—she urged that it be published. We began meeting in the fall of 2011 with the intent to create a portrait of the program (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman-Davis, 1997). We met roughly monthly for two years to study the nine years (and growing) of documentation, select from it, refine and develop it. We saw so much more in the documentation when we studied it this way, rather than merely reading it as individual pages. The role of our trio was to select and refine material so as to be communicable to an audience that does not know the program or community. Our working sessions together were wonderful, wide-ranging discussions with wildly different opinions, always subject to change, and a gradual coalescing around big values that we wished to highlight in framing an organization for the book.

The Values of Identity, Authenticity, Ordinary Moments, Design, and Context

When Jason, Karyn and I composed this book from the many binders of Jason’s documentation, we were conscious of five values that permeated our choices: we use these values as headings for the five sections of documentation. We call these values identity, authenticity, ordinary moments, design, and context. While we chose selections that highlight these aspects, we recognize that you can read any of these narratives and find all five values in place. So these values are not separate categories, and certainly not exhaustive, but rather qualities that move in and through each other like shifting winds.

Identity refers to our notion of who we are and what we belong to in the world. In a sense, identity is the sum total of all our relations – all our relationships with people and all the networks of relations with materials and events that we have formed. It is to be nested in a particular family, local community, and society (as Bronfenbrenner so elegantly described in his ecological model, 1994). It is to carry those attachments within us as messages about who we are. We identify also as what we are able to do in the world, whether as a reader, a musician, a mother, a mechanic, and so forth. Children communicate aspects of their sense of identity in what they design and create in ordinary moments of a program.

Authenticity requires self-acceptance on the part of the educator, as well as acceptance of the child. So for instance a child who “knows” the world in terms of Batman, who frames every encounter in terms of a relation to Batman, is accepted for this set of relations important to him that frame his identity: he is not asked to leave his cape in a cubby nor to refrain from seeing a pair of triangles as bat ears (p. 51). The inquiry becomes not one of correcting or reframing his identity but rather offering in ordinary moments of living in the program invitations that open up and expand his ideas about how to engage the world. Part of the artistry of authenticity is curiosity to see what a child will do in response to a move from the educator.

Ordinary moments are what early childhood programs are all about. What do we design and create on this given day? We wanted to show how children’s explorations of their environments, their unselfconscious moments of play and inquiry, their questions directed at friends or adults, their curiosity about this world they are discovering, how all of these unfold in moments of daily life in a setting designed for children. It is the richness of the possibilities

for exploration, inquiry, conversation, play, action on the environment, and so forth, that allow the child’s mind and heart to open, to expand, to love and be amazed and grow. When we see a child hold a wire spiral form on one side of a shadow screen and recognize that he sees its shadow on the screen, then watch him move his hand holding the spiral to the other side of the screen, we can infer his theory (see p. 123): if it makes a shadow on this side, perhaps it makes a shadow on the other side too; let’s see if it does. We see the relation he is making, and his attempt to test it out on reality.

Design is the arena where we see what children can really do. I think of design work as having a plan to make something and following through to produce it in some form in reality. Design requires creativity on the child’s part – generating ideas, elaborating on details, problem solving, testing out uses of materials, and the long process of exploring and adapting to materials and their properties to encapsulate in a satisfactory form what it is one wishes to make. To design something is to think it through to completion, from planning to satisfactory execution.

There are many astonishing design projects in Jason’s documentation, such as Sophia’s house (pp. 96–97) and young Jason’s cathedral (pp. 108–119) each of which required weeks or months of sustained effort to complete. Each of these is a sustained exercise in an experience of the creative process for the children involved, from having an idea about making something, to first steps to initiate the design in materials that will satisfy it, to developing the design through handling materials, to self-correcting with materials that do not meet the design adequately, to elaborating details in ever more refined particulars, to the moment when the creator feels the work is complete. It is a key process in the formation of identity and authenticity and a process often not fully considered in contexts of

education and care. We believe it to be integral to any quality education. Yet design, by children, cannot occur without the conditions that allow children to engage in it.

Context, in our thinking, is a combination of two aspects in tandem, physical environment and documentation. Both are crafted by educators, and act like two sides of a coin: one cannot occur without the other. A definition of context on a panel in *The Wonder of Learning Exhibit* (Filippini & Vecchi, 2009) is “an interaction that is capable of restructuring our knowledge.” The environment itself is organized to produce interactions that sustain learning. How does this happen? It is our hypothesis that context (as environment and documentation by educators) works in this active way when documentation and design of the environment occur in tandem as two sides of relationality with the world. When a child’s intentions are documented, as in little Jason’s cathedral construction, the documentation provides a mirror of feedback for further reflection and consideration by all concerned. Documentation sets up a dialogue among participants.

Secondly, documentation disturbs time: when it is revisited it brings what has happened in past experience back into the present moment. When we are documented, we see the self from an outside perspective—it is both us and not us, something separate from us. A strange coexistence. Documentation recognizes our presence in the world, and allows us both to value and to evaluate our designs on it.

To have interesting things to do in the environment means that teachers are obliged to create spaces rich in materials, complexity, and possible relations, yet highly organized as to clarity of function. These possibilities must have the power to sustain engagement and thus learning interactions. How do we sustain engagement? By letting

others have their own “wonderful ideas” (Duckworth, 2006). We are always interested in our own ideas, for there is a little rush of pleasure that accompanies finding them. We are attached to things that give us pleasure, and “the having of wonderful ideas” (Duckworth, 2006) is a source of attachment.

The book is a portrait of a way of living with children so that they and their families share in high quality experiences that expand identity, authenticity, the loveliness that can be daily living, and the creativity and imagination that children bring to life in our world. One of the things we love about this book is the strong presence of families and their participation in their children’s education. We are grateful for the presence of those families, and their willingness to be visible alongside their children. The love on their faces is an important activator of the dialogue of empathy that reverberates back and forth in positive human interactions. That love is an activator of faith in children, belief that they can indeed grow up sound and whole, strong in ideas and participation, deeply engaged with the world and their presence in it.

Approaches Toward Using the Book

We see three approaches (you may find others): one is linear, one focuses on the documentation narratives, and one focuses on concepts.

Linear. You could of course, begin at the beginning and read straight through. This is how many of us learned to read books and is a strong pattern in our engagement with books and what some readers will prefer. But there are other patterns that could possibly yield a more complex understanding for some readers, by allowing your own intentions to guide your involvement with our material.

Documentation narratives. You could, for instance, begin with the documentation narratives themselves, and follow a single episode and think about it, comparing it to episodes you are familiar with in your own setting; you could browse this way in the body of documentation itself for quite a long time. You could read the book this way with a small study group of colleagues with whom you discuss your perceptions and interpretations. What different perspectives do you find arise in your discussions? The documentation narratives are meant to be interpreted and interrogated. Our investigation of them contributes in multiple ways to our understanding. You might then wish to read one of the author essays in the material that follows the documentation narratives, to compare the author perspectives with your own. This is an approach we can see might work for students of early childhood education, for those engaged in action research in child care and school contexts, for graduate seminars and study groups. In this sense, the book is not finished, for your thoughts and feelings in response to it are not yet a part of the penumbra of interpretation that surrounds it, and we think that part important.

Index of concepts. Another approach could be to begin at the back with the index of concepts, which was constructed in a playful manner, not as a traditional index in which you might find anything at all mentioned in the book, but as a map of traces to particular concepts that we find interesting to think about. We have tried to convey briefly something of the meaning of a concept to us. But of course, the minute we do this, we find disagreements! And discussion arises. So you might take the index as an invitation to discuss the ideas mentioned, with the

notion each one on the page is but the tip of the iceberg of thinking that has already occurred around that concept and the tip of the thinking you will bring to your encounter with these ideas.

We invite you to find other ways to make the book your own as well, for our intention in creating the book has been to offer the material that belongs to our setting as an invitation to share in dialogue about your settings. We see it as an invitation to enlarge our community of practice around documentation, and to bring the possibilities of such documentation to the broad audience concerned with the lives and education of young children. To view children with such care and attentiveness changes us and the excitement of such change is the creating of new landscapes for learning and living.

Carol Anne Wien