THE DISPOSITION TO DOCUMENT:
THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF TEACHERS WHO PRACTICE
PEDAGOGICAL DOCUMENTATION–
A CASE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

In recent years there has been a great deal of attention paid in early childhood settings to pedagogical documentation, a practice that has developed in the preschools of Reggio Emilia, Italy. Following upon the devastation of World War II, educators, parents and children began working in this small city to reconstruct their society and to build an exemplary system of education for young children. This system has become known as the Reggio Emilia approach. A hallmark of the Reggio Emilia approach, pedagogical documentation, is a way of making visible the learning processes by which children and teachers work in early childhood centres. It may include anecdotal observations, children’s work, photographs, audio and video tape recordings, and children’s voiced ideas. An integral part of the documentation is the teacher’s reflective commentary. Pedagogical documentation can also be a focus for linking theory and practice.

This qualitative instrumental case study involved looking at the personal qualities that have enabled three particular teachers located at an early childhood centre in Seattle, U.S.A., to embrace with enthusiasm the practice of pedagogical documentation. What are the lived experiences of these teachers? Do these teachers demonstrate particular attributes that foster a “disposition to document”?

Three teachers, along with two of the school’s parents, participated in a series of interviews which were analysed for significant themes. Subsequent conversations with the participants confirmed the initial themes I had drawn from the interview data.

A relationship of reciprocity emerged - working with pedagogical documentation fostered dispositions that each teacher already had, while at the same time, these teachers were drawn to the Reggio Emilia approach because it resonated with them in an intuitive way. Pedagogical documentation demands a high level of intellectual commitment and a passionate engagement with one’s teaching. Parallels were also found between pedagogical documentation and phenomenological research.
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It was similar to learning again how and why to breathe and see deeply when I took up the paintbrush. There I was, standing in front of a wonderful French landscape with only my palette and easel separating me from what it was I wanted to depict. And I squinted and squinted and used all the strategies my teacher had shared about how to see the big general shapes and the value contrasts. I loved what I was looking at and I felt driven to let others in on the beauty that I was observing. I was nearly overwhelmed by a commitment to get it right. And then there were all those decisions...Each decision pointed to many others that had to be made and heightened my sense of commitment and responsibility to those whom I was depicting and those who might view my work. For example, having chosen a particular mix of paints for the sky, I then had to make sure that it would work with what else was on my canvas. I was accountable for all of those choices and then turning them into a representation that would enable others to see the world in a new way (Ouellette, 2003, p. 14-15).
Acknowledgements

My own teaching and way of dwelling in the world with children is forever changed by my work with Ann, Sarah, and Margie. They have welcomed me with open arms to observe closely, listen closely, and think closely with them. They have left their thumbprints on my soul.

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I am appreciative beyond measure to my family for liberating me to do this work by taking on the bulk of the practicalities of our shared life, and for allowing me the possibility to “follow my bliss” to where unanticipated doors have opened.

And to the Inklings – it’s time now to scratch those “first words” with fountain pens and ink!

Coming Home

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

~ T.S. Eliot (1942)
Little Gidding, The Four Quartets
Dedication

This work is dedicated to the community of seekers and meaning-makers, both the young ones and the not quite so young ones, who have welcomed me along on their journey.
I certify that the attached material is my original work. I declare that no other person's work has been used without due acknowledgement. Except where I have clearly stated that I have used some of this material elsewhere, it has not been presented by me for examination in any other course or unit at this or any other institution.

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CERTIFICATION OF DISSERTATION

I certify that the ideas, results, analyses and conclusions reported in this dissertation are entirely my own effort, except where otherwise acknowledged. I also certify that the work is original and has not been previously submitted for any other award, except where otherwise acknowledged.

[Signature]
Signature of Candidate

26 March 2008
Date

ENDORSEMENT

[Signature]
Signature of Supervisor(s)

26 March 2008
Date

[Signature]
Supervisor(s)