

Documenting Stories Worth Telling

Concepts important to listening and documentation

1. The hundred languages of children.

<http://emh.kaiapit.net/rosalie/?page=hundred>

Loris Malaguzzi is the original educator-philosopher who was amazingly influential in shaping Reggio schools in to what they are today. His poem describes the hundred languages of children theory that has been instrumental in learning how to listen and document young children. The hundred languages theory says that children have very little experience with oral language, but that doesn't mean that they have weak thinking skills. Catherine Twonmey Fosnot writes about the misconception that "people need facts and information first in order to think" (p. 4, *Enquiring Teachers, Enquiring Learners: A Constructivist Approach for Teaching*, 1989). Children are amazing thinkers and creators of knowledge. They express what they know, think, feel and question through more than just oral language. This is the hundred languages of children: all the ways that children can express what they know, think, feel and question. As described in the poem, adults tend to have their ears shut off to all but the oral and written languages. Children are not at fault for adult linguistic illiteracy. It is the adult's responsibility to learn to listen, to learn to understand, to become literate in the languages of children. Only then can we begin to get a glimpse into the amazing mental capacities of very young children. The camera, the tape recorder, the pen and paper, the video recorder...these are tools that help us to hear. They let us capture moments and look at them later. They give us time to reflect and to translate the hundred languages, so that we can begin to understand.

2. Construction and social construction of knowledge

Children are not little sponges soaking up everything we tell them verbatim. They are great thinkers. You don't need information to think. They are born into the world with very little information, but their brains think anyway. They are such great thinkers and researchers that they are able to figure out how to walk and talk and fit into our cultural expectations. They do all this without being taught. When they are preschool age, they are still great thinkers and researchers, not sponges. They construct their own knowledge, and they do so most effectively in an environment with other peers and respectful adults who are listening.

Sometimes it seems like you can or should hurry children to what you believe is a correct answer by just telling them, but when they hear and recite facts, they do not own them. They did not construct the facts so there is no foundation to this information. It may, to the adult, look like the child understands what she is reciting, but looking a little deeper shows the recited information balancing precariously on a single spire, ready to collapse at any moment into a pile of misconceptions.

So how do I support children's construction of knowledge? How do I teach? By listening to the hundred languages of children. The listener transforms the speaker. I ask questions (may be oral or may not be) to understand better what the children know, think, feel and question, and to bring into their consciousnesses what they know, think, feel and question. Listening allows me to consider what "provocation" to present that will provoke them into revisiting, reevaluating and reconstructing what they know, think, feel and question.

Purposes of Documentation

1. A possible purpose of documentation can be as personal memoir – like a scrap book for remembering the past, but this is only scratching the surface at the power of documentation
2. Making learning visible/making teaching visible
 - a. To the teacher/documenter: As described above in "construction of knowledge", I don't know what the children know. I become a better teacher by learning from them, by listening to them and reflecting on the consequences to what I've heard. What I hear by listening helps me know what to plan as far as school activities.
 - b. To the parents: The parent coteachers are learning to teach too, so what is described in a. is relevant to them as well. Making learning visible also helps parents to develop their parenting and to advocate for their children more effectively. One of the moms from my school told a visitor "I feel I know my own children better now." She has always stayed home with the children, how could she know them better now that they are going to school? Powerful listening.
 - c. To the child now: When we are conscious of the tools we use for learning, we are more able to apply them to other situations. Therefore an important aspect of documentation is making the child's own learning process visible to himself. He is learning how to learn.
 - d. To the child when he grows up: Most people suffer from "early childhood amnesia": we don't remember being a very young child. We don't remember how we learned or how we felt or how well we could think. This makes it difficult to teach, to parent and to make political and social decisions as a voter. By making a child's learning visible in a way that the child can refer to 20, 30 years later helps combat that amnesia and make the world a better place for young children.
 - e. To the larger community: Making learning visible to the larger community (visitors, politicians, teachers from other schools, librarian...everyone) is helping children's voices get heard. It is combating again that early childhood amnesia

we suffer from. It combats ineffective testing and advocates for play and knowledge construction.

Languages to Document

When we document, we open our ears to the hundred languages of children. Consider these languages to document.

- Photos of learning taking place through whole body action
 - o A series of photographs can be very powerful at telling a story of learning. Here is an example of a series of photographs that show the joy of learning about wind: <http://emh.kaiapit.net/windseries.jpg>
- Photos of facial expressions: <http://emh.kaiapit.net/graysonhelps.pdf> (look at the pride the photo can capture!)
- Photos of hands and feet gestures



- Written descriptions of actions
- Oral language <http://emh.kaiapit.net/DiaryJune162010.pdf>
 - o When children use oral language, there can be hidden languages in there too. They speak using the languages of metaphor, imagination, poetry, humor, joy... <http://emh.kaiapit.net/mayaandthefeather.pdf>
- Graphic arts
 - o Construction <http://emh.kaiapit.net/DiaryJuly302010.pdf>
 - o Drawing (also shown here <http://emh.kaiapit.net/DiaryJuly302010.pdf>) scribbles, representations from memory, sketching from observations...
 - o Painting
 - o Sculpture
 - o Composition
 - o Etc
- Music <http://emh.kaiapit.net/DiaryJuly142010.pdf>
- Written language <http://emh.kaiapit.net/DiaryAugust182010.pdf>

Presentation of Documentation

Choose a method of presentation that matches the purpose and audience of the documentation.

I try to have a digital copy of everything so that it can eventually go into a diary for each child to keep, however it has many uses before them.

Daily diary: I write one mini story in the daily diary each day. Keeping it to one story per day ensures that I don't get documentation burn out.

Making learning visible to children: I show photos to the children of their past learning processes before they continue on to the next step in a learning project. I remind them of the words they used before, the plans they had etc. As children get older, they can present this to each other (4,5,6 year olds). They can explain the process they went through in a small group to the larger group. The larger group asks questions, offers constructive criticism and suggestions on how to proceed.

I have small documentation around the room to accompany works in progress or finished works on display.

I make some large documentation panels for public education. For example, there was recently an event at Old Town Plaza for the Launch of the Decade of the Child.



Rosalie School showed a panel at the event. By doing this, I am providing the opportunity for children's voices to be considered in democratic society. I am making it possible for them to affect their own educational future.

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When we pursue longer learning projects, and as I document recurrent themes of research in the children's play, I document them in longer books.

<http://emh.kaiapit.net/thebrainisthequeen.pdf>

I also add the songs children write to our classroom song book and compile a book of the stories and poems they tell.

It is possible also to have an online presentation of documentation materials through a blog that can be accessed by family members or an online portfolio. I would like to do this in the future so that working parents have similar access to documentation as the parent coteachers do, but I don't have this set up at this time.

Collecting Documentation

The parent coteachers and I have a camera on us all the time.

There are also small clipboards with attached pencils and half sheets of paper at child height outside and around the classroom.

I have a tape voice recorder that I occasionally use. It is time consuming to transcribe, so I have to be very judicious about its use.

I scan in their smaller 2D artwork and photograph their constructions and compositions, sculptures etc.

We take photographs throughout the school day. We avoid taking posed photographs and instead try to capture the learning as it is happening. As I wrote before, series of photos that tell a story can be very powerful as can facial expressions and hands at work.

Some of the documentation is planned beforehand. I might expect a good conversation to arise from a particular provocation, so I will bring out the tape recorder to capture it all. Or I might discuss with the parent coteachers how we can best capture the first experiences with a new type of paint: try to catch the child's first stroke with a watercolor brush, or get an up close picture of hands covered with fingerpaint.

I save all the photos (unless they are terrible) on the computer. I have a folder for each school day and within that folder, I have subfolders describing what activity is documented by the series of photographs within. Often something that happens at school one day is part of a longer learning process that was captured in photos from another day or week. <http://emh.kaiapit.net/DiaryJuly92010.pdf> I can then combine the old shots with the new ones to make a more complete story.

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The clipboards are at child height so that they can write or draw related to their play and learning (a sign for a zoo they built, a “don’t clean up” sign, draw a construction they made). Mostly the clipboards are used by the parent coteachers and I. If we see something interesting happening or hear an interesting question or conversation, we can grab a nearby clipboard and write it down. The written documentation gets pinned to the holding board where it can be read and discussed until it gets digitized or filed.

The tape recorder I only use when I am expecting a conversation that will be essential to capture in full and reflect on...or to record the songs they sing. I type a transcription of conversations and use parts in mini-stories or in longer project books. We also discuss transcribed conversations at parent meetings and reflect on what the children meant and how to proceed. <http://emh.kaiapit.net/fishexplore.pdf> The songs I listen to and respectfully approximate into written music.

I save the scanned and photographed graphical artwork in a folder for each child with a date and description of the work. This allows children to continue to work on a piece over many days or even take it home (though I try to keep it at school for the full year). We (including the children) can then compare the growth of competency of a language over time, emphasizing again the process of learning over the product.

At the end of the school day, I look at all the photos and written observations collected by all the coteachers. I choose one story that I feel is particularly interesting or significant and I reflect on it. I arrange the photos, scans of work, children’s words, descriptions, interpretations and questions of what happened into a diary mini story. I make it in Word using tables to place photos next to text. I print a copy and put it in the diary binder for that day. Stories range from one page to half a dozen. I try to choose stories that are worth telling now and in the long run. In traditional schools, documentation is mostly done for assessment purposes (to identify where children are deficient rather than to celebrate and value their strengths). It is supposed to be objective, so an documentation entry might look like this: “Johnny threw the ball over hand to a distance of three yards.” And that’s it. While it’s important to know that children are developing rather than stagnant, this is not much of a story to tell. The reader is not asked to think or feel anything. Most likely Johnny doesn’t care about this story today and he won’t care about it in 30 years either. Outside readers are probably bored by it.

<http://emh.kaiapit.net/laurawatch.pdf>

This amazing story of Laura and the Watch was documented in 1981 in Reggio Emilia, Italy. Almost 30 years later, it is still used all over the world for professional development. I have been to many seminars that show the series of photographs and tell the story, and the reaction of the audience when they see the last photo is enormous every time. This 10 month old girl and her teachers have brought joy and wonder to countless individuals from all cultures and linguistic backgrounds. The teachers empowered the little girl to change what we believe about babies and what we believe about education. That is a story worth telling.

I might identify a story as worth telling because

- It makes the reader feel <http://emh.kaiapit.net/graysonhelps.pdf>

- It makes visible the strong child <http://emh.kaiapit.net/DiaryJuly282010.pdf>
- We can learn from it
- It battles early childhood amnesia <http://emh.kaiapit.net/DiaryJuly262010.pdf>
- It gives value to an undervalued children's activity <http://emh.kaiapit.net/DiaryJune282010.pdf>
- It raises questions. (I haven't written a story for this one yet and I don't have a picture for it, but it's interesting in the questions it raises: Maya's puppy came to school with her and was playing with my dog. My dog was growling and running back and forth, and Maya got worried about her puppy. "Lyla is only pretending to growl," I explained to her. "They are playing." A little while later, the dogs ran past and Maya said, "I think Lyla and Banjo are only pretending to be alive." Her mother said Maya had said that yesterday about her brother, "I think Dylan is only pretending to be alive." What does this mean? What is Maya telling us about what she knows, thinks, feels and questions? What language is she speaking? Her questions make me think about philosophy. When Nietzsche wrote about existentialist philosophy, they became highly influential and certainly respected even if we do not ascribe to existentialist philosophy ourselves. Could it be that existentialist thought originates in these ponderings of a four-year-old? Do we fail to take the statements seriously because they are spoken by someone so young and so inexperienced with oral and written language?
- It is surprising <http://emh.kaiapit.net/camelbacks.pdf>
- It illustrates strong values promoted by the school, such as caring or joy

Note from the fingerprint story that stories can be just photographic

When children leave the school, the daily diaries, songs, poems, stories, and projects are compiled into a book for professional printing. The children get all the documentation of all the children because our emphasis is on the community of colearners, not on individual development. The cheaper versions of documentation in the classroom are temporary.

I write in 3rd person (Maya...) rather than 2nd person (you) because I am writing to so many audiences (all of the children in the school, to myself as a learner, to the parents, to extended family, to visitors, to the public, to you!) We've had grandparents say, "Why do you pay to have these kids go play when they can play at home?" The documentation makes visible to them that more is happening in the larger learning group with peer and adult colearners than would if the children were by themselves. It helps grandparents to see why play is a child's work.

When the parents take photos and write down their observations, they are adding their voices to the documentation. They also add their voice when they talk to me about their questions, concerns, anecdotes etc. The following story is written strongly with the parents voices because of an experience at another school when teachers wanted to separate friends:
<http://emh.kaiapit.net/DiaryJuly162010.pdf>

My voice is added to the voice of the children and of the parents as I collect, interpret, select and display documentation. We are an inseparable community of colearners.