

**Including Parents in the Process of Documentation:
A Dialogue with the Reggio Emilia Approach to Early Childhood Education**

During the past several years, the educators at Make A Mess and Make Believe, an infant-toddler-preschool located in Boulder, Colorado, have been studying and exchanging ideas with educators throughout the world around the subjects of children, education, and, more specifically, the Reggio Emilia Approach to Early Childhood Education. We believe that the educators in Reggio Emilia have developed a thoughtful and vital approach to early childhood education for their community, and we are grateful to them for their willingness to share this approach with other educators through ongoing dialogues and initiatives. Our dialogue with the educators in Reggio Emilia has helped us to create new meanings and clarify our understandings about children's and adult's learning, to define and give shape to our work with children and their families and with one another.

The Learning Community

In Reggio Emilia, education is viewed as a system of relationships: the environment of the schools foster and nurture these relationships by providing opportunities in which children and adults become partners in learning. The interactions among children, families, and teachers are central to the learning process, serving to deepen their understanding of the world in which they live. Loris Malaguzzi, founder and former director of the infant-toddler centers and preschools in Reggio Emilia, wrote:

“Our goal is to build an amiable school, where children, teachers and families feel at home. Such a school requires careful thinking and planning concerning procedures, motivations, and interests. It must embody ways of getting along together, of intensifying relationships among the three central protagonists, of assuring complete attention to the problems of education, and of activating participation and research. These are the most effective tools for all those concerned - children, teachers, and parents - to become more united and aware of each other's contributions. They are the most effective tools to use in order to feel good about cooperating and to produce, in harmony, a higher level of results” (Malaguzzi, 1998, pp. 64-65).

Inspired by Reggio Emilia, our purpose at Make A Mess and Make Believe is to establish a community of learners who think reflectively and who collaborate in the construction of knowledge. We believe that the collective contributions of children, families, and teachers are vital to the creation and maintenance of our learning community.

At Make A Mess and Make Believe We Believe That Documentation Reveals the Identity of the Learning Community

Within the learning community children, teachers and families enter into important, reciprocal relationships. We have learned from Reggio Emilia how these dynamic exchanges can be made visible through documentation, a process that also enables us to understand and to share the ways that children construct knowledge. Carlina Rinaldi, Pedagogista and Executive Consultant of Reggio Children, writes:

“Documentation offers the teacher a unique opportunity to listen again, see again, and therefore revisit individually and with others the events and processes in which he or she was co-protagonist, directly or indirectly...”

With regard to children, documentation offers an opportunity for revisiting, reflecting, and interpreting... Documentation supports the children’s memory, offering them the opportunity to retrace their own processes, to find confirmation or negation, and to self-correct. Documentation allows for children to make comparisons with others and hear comparisons by others. In a sense, it invites self-evaluation and group evaluation, conflict of ideas, and discussion...

Documentation provides an extraordinary opportunity for parents, as it gives them the possibility to know not only what their child is doing, but also how and why, to see not only the products but also the processes. Therefore, parents become aware of the meaning that the child gives to what he or she does, and the shared meanings that children have with other children. It is an opportunity for parents to see that part of the life of their child that often is invisible.

Furthermore, documentation offers the possibility for parents to share their awareness, to value discussion and exchanges with the teachers and among their group, helping them to become aware of their role and identity as parents” (Rinaldi, 1998, pp.121-2).

Amelia Gambetti, coordinator of Reggio Children, Reggio Children Liaison for the Reggio Approach in the schools, has traveled to Boulder on several occasions to work with the educators at Make A Mess and Make Believe. During Amelia’s recent visit to our school, she supported us in understanding the importance of context - our history, our environment, our work, and our relationships with one another - as it shapes our identity. Equally important is the way in which we make this identity visible and share our experiences as learners with others. Inspired by Reggio Emilia, we are learning how to reveal our identity through documentation. We think that documentation makes visible that which is otherwise opaque: it creates a forum for the study and understanding of children’s and adult’s thinking and provides opportunities to enrich and extend the learning experiences.

The Pumpkin Experience

Boulder is a community that values its outdoor spaces. As members of this community, the educators at Make A Mess and Make Believe were motivated to create, along with the entire community, a space that could promote both environmental awareness and good health. They believed that constructing and maintaining a garden, which is a strong presence in our outdoor spaces, would provide an opportunity to create an identity reflective of the culture and values of Boulder. The garden could become a space where children and adults would feel welcome, a gathering place, a place where relationships could be established and maintained. The garden could become a space for wonder, reflection, study, and discovery.

This fall there was much cause for wonder in the garden. A large pumpkin had grown from the small seed that had been planted the previous spring. The children in the three-year old class wanted to harvest the pumpkin and bring it inside. Reflecting on the size and weight of the pumpkin relative to the size and strength of the children led to a study of possible solutions to the problem of transporting the pumpkin from the garden to the classroom. The children decided to roll the pumpkin, a difficult task indeed, but one that ultimately ended in success.

It was evident to the teachers that the pumpkin experience, recorded on video, would provide an excellent opportunity to communicate the learning, the wonder, reflection, study, and discovery that had taken place. The children had constructed a theory, which, when tested, led to the solution of the problem. The teachers were interested in the parents' perspectives: what aspects of the experience did they find interesting? what were they curious about?; what did they see as evidence of children thinking?; what did they observe about the learning inherent in the experience?; and, what were their thoughts around extending the learning?

The first viewing of the videotape by parents and teachers resulted in a lively discussion. Parents observed teamwork, determination, excitement, curiosity, communication, problem solving, and a sense of accomplishment as the children worked to move the pumpkin indoors. It is interesting to note that while the teachers were noticing evidence of cognitive thinking, children constructing their learning together, parents were more aware of the social and emotional aspects of the learning experience.

Utilizing the viewing of the pumpkin video with parents as an opportunity to examine the process of documentation and its valuable role in the learning process, the teachers asked for suggestions about how best to make the children's learning, as evidenced by the video, visible for study. After much discussion about the format and placement of documentation, an interesting idea emerged and was developed: create a book that would tell the story of the pumpkin experience through the words, drawings and images of the children, with reflections by parents and teachers. It was decided that the book would be presented to the children during a gathering which parents would attend.

The pumpkin experience – by the children, teachers and parents - reveals an important example of the process of reciprocal learning. The children began by asking a question: How could the pumpkin be transported from the garden into the classroom? Their observations led to suggestions, proposals and hypotheses. The children collaborated, shared thoughts, questions, insights, and ideas, which led to a theory about moving the pumpkin. Subsequently, utilizing photographs as a forum for revisiting the experience, the children discussed the size of the pumpkin, how they worked together, and the successful transporting of the pumpkin into the school.

The reciprocal learning process of the teachers and parents was analogous to that of the children. They first posed questions about the video: what evidence of thinking and learning could be observed?; how could learning be made visible through documentation?; how could the thinking about the pumpkin experience be extended? The

unique perspectives of the parents, their thoughts, questions, insights, and ideas, added to the perspectives of the teachers, enabled both parents and teachers to become aware of aspects of the experience that they might not otherwise have observed. The ensuing dialogue led to suggestions and proposals around extending the learning and making the learning visible. Parents gained a deeper understanding of their children's thinking and of the purpose and value of documentation in the learning process. The creation of a book, the story of an experience, presents another opportunity for documentation and many new possibilities for learning.

At Make A Mess and Make Believe, we believe that parent's inclusion in the process of documentation not only serves to enrich the learning, but also enhances the relationships among parents, teachers and children. Additionally, we believe that this experience was richer because of the relationships that had been established among the children and adults years ago in the infant classroom, relationships that had grown in the toddler classroom and that were being further developed through ongoing experiences in the current preschool classroom. The creation of a supportive learning environment enables children and adults to feel secure and comfortable sharing their reflections and understandings with one another.

Learning from the Pumpkin Experience

Reflections on the Pumpkin Experience brings to mind a passage written by Carlina Rinaldi:

"In this context the documentation becomes 'a place of listening', making listening visible and shareable...Listening means being open to and welcoming differences, recognizing the value of the points of view and interpretations of others; listening as waiting and expectation. Listening means the capacity to respect others, to take them out of anonymity, to give them visibility, enriching both those who listen and those who produce the message. Listening as a prerequisite of any teaching-learning relationship that is focused on learning: listening as the capacity to construct a context in which one learns to listen, where each individual feels legitimated to talk about and represent his or her theories, and narrate his or her representations regarding specific questions or issues; a context in which each individual feels welcome"(Rinaldi 1999, p.7).

Our dialogue with the educators in Reggio Emilia and with educators around the world who have been inspired by the Reggio Approach has given new meaning and understanding to the value and importance of listening and of making this listening *visible* in our relationships with children, educators and families. Including parents in the process of documentation underscores our commitment to the values that define our school community. We visualize the school community with an identity reflective of the setting in which it resides, a community in which values are defined and lived, a system of relationships through which meaning, understanding and knowledge are constructed. Our school community wants to support listening, reflection, collaboration, and communication. We like to think of it as a place where all voices are acknowledged and respected. Documenting our parents' inclusion in the process of documentation further

acknowledges the integral role that parents, along with children and teachers, play in the life of the school community.

SOME REFLECTIONS OF AMELIA GAMBETTI

Why is it important to maintain a dialogue about education?

Society changes and people change. It is important to notice these changes, to observe how situations develop and evolve. From my point of view, I think that only in this way can we research new meanings and offer new interpretations to what we see and understand.

What role do the teachers and families play in the child's construction of knowledge?

The educators and families can become the "co-constructors" of knowledge in partnership with the child and with each other. As such, they should find new rhythms with which to be both teacher and learner, parent and learner. Through their collaboration and respective perspectives, they can have a deeper understanding of the thinking child, and of the ways in which each child is a co-creator of knowledge. These partnerships, not easily achieved, have to be founded on trust and confidence.

How does documentation help to enhance the relationships among children, educators and families?

Among many other things, documentation is also about leaving traces, about giving visibility to actions, and about being committed to openness to dialogue and sharing. Families can see what their child is doing and what other children, learning in collaboration with their child, is doing, as well. If and when the parents become curious and interested they become more skillful in posing questions, seeking answers and beginning to give answers themselves. I believe that if and when this process takes place with the support of educators all feel part of a community of learners that build a sense of belonging to the experience and to the context where these experiences take place: the school.

How does documentation as a process of listening further the dialogue about education?

If and when parents feel that they are listened to they enter into a reciprocal relationship with educators. The listening becomes active and not passive, producing debate, exchange and sharing of ideas. The listening of the teachers and the parents also produces an attitude of being in a situation of permanent research that gives more value to the actions, more motivation to the work and more possibilities and opportunities to continue to think and to study. At this point, we can talk about a parent who, through a strong collaboration with the teachers, becomes a competent component helping also the school and the educators develop new concepts about the issues of early childhood education.

References

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Resources

Innovations in early education: The International Reggio exchange. The Merrill-Palmer Institute, 71A East Ferry Avenue, Detroit, Michigan 48202, Phone 313 872-1790.