

Chapter Ten

At the Crossroads: Pedagogical Documentation and Social Justice

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Ann writes this chapter from the perspective of a mentor to the staff at Hilltop Children's Center, a full-day, urban child care program in the United States. The position of mentor teacher was created at Hilltop in 2003 as a strategy for creating a shared understanding of core pedagogical principles and establishing common teaching practices among the teaching staff. Hilltop had long been influenced by the teaching and learning in Reggio Emilia but, until this position was created, there was little institutional support for centre-wide efforts to weave these influences into daily practice. After 12 years of classroom

teaching, which launched Ann on her journey into pedagogical documentation, she became Hilltop's mentor teacher. In this work, she partnered with individual teachers, worked with classroom teaching teams, and facilitated centre-wide professional development gatherings, with a year-long focus on pedagogical documentation. This focused attention on the rhythm of observation, reflection, and planning, shook loose old habits and patterns, opened new possibilities, and sparked new participation by teachers who had long been on the periphery or entrenched in old ruts and routines. The experience described below confirmed for Ann the power of pedagogical documentation as a doorway into teaching that is full of zest, engaged awareness, and playful exploration.

Introduction

Too often in our field, passionate advocates of anti-bias practices and committed practitioners of Reggio-inspired pedagogy live in separate worlds, each with its own focus, vocabulary, and curriculum emphases and practices. These two arenas are perceived as distinct and self-contained, with little exchange or dialogue between them.

But the crossroads where social justice work and child-centred, Reggio-inspired teaching meet is a place of vitality, challenge, and profound engagement with fundamental values and vision. At the crossroads, we are called into a way of being with children and families that demands passionate dialogue and action. At the crossroads, we are challenged to listen closely to children's understandings of their lives—their expression of individual and family identities, their experiences of culture and relationships, their encounters with justice and oppression. At the crossroads, we are asked to weave together the dispositions to pay attention, reflect on children's play and conversations, plan from our reflections, and tell the stories that enrich our community. At the crossroads, we are called to weave together a commitment to responsive pedagogy with a commitment to work for just, non-violent communities.

When social justice work and child-centred, Reggio-inspired teaching come together, we find a shared image of the child as a keen observer, attending to the ways in which people are similar and different, and to the layers of cultural meanings and judgments attached to those similarities and differences. We recognise that the child is at risk for developing biases about others and inaccurate images of herself without guidance and support from caring, aware adults. We understand the child to be passionate about expressing her understandings—eager to communicate what she notices, what she feels, what she believes, what she questions. And we know the child to be capable of deep study and critical thinking, and enthusiastic about taking action that brings her ideas to life.

At the crossroads, we find a shared image of families as embedded in culture which gives rise to ritual and tradition, language and expression. We recognise that all families and individuals experience and participate in the dynamics of bias, oppression, and privilege that characterise our communities. We believe that families are eager for dialogue with each other and with teachers to explore the ways in which these dynamics impact on their children's development and learning, while at the same time they feel vulnerable and protective about taking up issues like racism, classism, heterosexism, ablism, and sexism, particularly in connection with their children's lives.

At the crossroads, we find a shared image of teachers as people learning in relationship with children and families. We understand teachers as facilitators of children's passionate pursuits and as guides and mentors for children's learning, creating a context in which children can take up the issues that matter to them—including issues related to unfairness and inequity. We recognise that teachers are eager to engage with families in authentic dialogue about values and the expression of values in daily life and, too, that they feel vulnerable and unsure about how to begin these dialogues.

Another way in which social justice work and Reggio-inspired teaching come together is the shared image of teachers as agents for social change. One important role of pedagogical documentation is to make visible the lives and experiences of young children, too often sidelined and discounted in our culture which claims to 'leave no child behind' (US Congress, 2001).

Another important aspect of teachers' social justice work is to advocate for more just and equitable communities, including advocacy around issues of compensation and working conditions for early childhood professionals. On the most immediate level, this means participating in efforts addressing the financial crisis in child care in the United States, where the wages of child care teachers are so low that teachers frequently leave the field. These efforts, like the National Worthy Wage Campaign and corresponding local movements, are aimed at creating institutional priorities and structures that provide the tools, resources, and working conditions that allow teachers to engage in the practice of pedagogical documentation. This engagement moves beyond 'keeping children safe' and 'meeting licensing regulations' to deep, collaborative engagement with children and families, while earning a liveable wage which supports their investment in their profession.

With these points of intersection between social justice work and Reggio-inspired pedagogy, we can, I believe, make the bold statement that when we are genuinely engaged in pedagogical documentation we *will* take up issues of social and environmental justice with children and families. The only way we can avoid these issues is by deliberately ignoring them when they arise—ignoring children's observations of differences and the cultural biases that accompany those differences, ignoring children's observations of unfairness, ignoring children's requests for our help in understanding the communities in which they live.

And this would be terrible violence, this denial of children's right to think critically about and engage with their world. Children will call our attention to social justice issues and when we practise pedagogical documentation, we will partner with the children around these issues.

A story to illustrate...

Four boys, seven and eight-years-old, slip into the silky, shimmery, calf-length, pink and purple dresses in the drama area. They accessorise with layers of beaded necklaces, scarves, and fancy hats, laughing and laughing as they transform themselves with their over-the-top outfits. They're calling out to each other, 'You look like a girl!' 'You look really weird!' 'Hey, now I'm a lady, look at me!' Their laughter catches the attention of other children in the after-school program, and they gather around the drama area, laughing and pointing. 'Get chairs! You can be the audience', calls out one of the boys, and a drag fashion show is born.

The boys prance and mince for the gathered audience (which includes five other children, girls and boys, and the two after-school teachers), not saying much but laughing hard. One of the boys, Drew, seems a bit tense, his laughter strained, a bit manic: perhaps a sign of discomfort under the silliness? Another boy, Liam, seems wholly at ease with the flowing silk and satin. The children in the audience mirror this range of responses to boys in 'girls' clothes; there's some shrill, fast laughter, some easy joking, some delighted giggles.

After about 15 minutes, the performers begin to tire and the audience members begin to disperse. One teacher helps the performers put away the costumes, while the other teacher guides the other children towards snack.

The teachers, Jackson¹ and Elaine, brought their observation notes and a couple of photos of this 'drag show' to our weekly staff meeting. After reading the notes and studying the photos together, we reflected on individual children's responses to the performance. As we talked, I asked Jackson and Elaine to point to specific observations—kids' comments, body language and expressions captured in photos—to anchor their reflections.

'Liam's family has a fluidity and ease around gender. They encourage both Liam and his younger sister to take on a range of roles and ways of being in the world. I think that for Liam, this "drag show" wasn't particularly remarkable, except, maybe, for the wild laughter and antics of the other kids', one teacher commented. 'He didn't say much during the whole thing, and his outfits were the least outrageous, like this wasn't a big deal for him.'

¹ Jackson prefers to use the lower case for his name.

‘Drew seemed sort of tense about the whole thing, under his laughter’, Elaine reflected. ‘His laughter had an edge to it, and he moved really fast and wild. He was the one who commented again and again about looking like a girl, about being like a girl.’

‘While I watched, I wondered if Drew and a couple of the other kids were using this opportunity to see how it feels to be “female”. They’re old enough now to understand social mores about boys in girls’ clothes, so they had to make this into a joke, but maybe it’s the best way they know, to try on these other identities’, Jackson mused.

With Jackson’s comment, we began to reflect on the meaning of the drag show for the children participating and watching. What were the children curious about, or trying to figure out, with their dressing-up and performing? What understandings or misunderstandings or experiences were they drawing on? What theories were they working from? In our conversation, we drew on other observations of the children’s play and informal conversations, as well as on our understandings of these children’s particular lives, worldviews, and experiences. After nearly an hour of study and reflection, we generated a hypothesis: These children—the players and the audience members—were curious to explore what it means to be a boy or a girl; What does it feel like to be a boy? A girl? What, fundamentally, *is* a girl? A boy?

We recognised that these children, certainly, have been exploring these questions throughout their childhoods, from various developmental vantage points. We believed that they were ready to take up these questions again from the vantage point of their current developmental perspectives, cognitive abilities, and social understandings.

We considered several possibilities for ways to extend the children’s exploration of the meaning of gender and identity, and settled on our next step: Elaine and Jackson would read *X*, a fabulous children’s story, by Louis Gould (1982), which describes the early life of a child named ‘X’, whose gender is kept secret from everyone, including Xself! After reading the story, they’d invite the children to create simple sketches of X, which would both challenge the children to wrestle with how to represent gender and genderlessness and give us more information about the children’s understandings.

This initial observation, study and planning, marked the beginning of an exploration of gender identity and social justice that lasted for six months. The exploration grew step by step, observation by observation, as we practised the circling, spiralling study and planning process of pedagogical documentation: observation, giving rise to reflection and study and hypothesising, giving rise to next steps and unfolding possibilities, giving rise to new observations, and so on. We had to be diligent about staying grounded in specific observations of the children’s play and conversations as we took up this topic, about which we all have strong beliefs and powerful personal experiences. When we caught

ourselves straying into more general conversations about sexism and gender identity and ways to ‘teach’ kids about these issues, we returned to the specific words and images on the table in front of us: What were the children saying, playing, and representing about their understandings of gender identity? These observations guided our planning day by day, week by week.

As this exploration unfolded, we became more specific and clear in our hypotheses and questions, distilled from our observations about the children’s interactions with the provocations we offered:

How much weight do the children give to biological markers of gender identity, and to external markers like clothes, hair styles, accessories, to mannerisms and language, to activities? What are the children’s understandings and values around our culture’s gender rules? What are their beliefs about exceptions to those rules: is there a point at which the exceptions disprove the rules?

And our planned next steps, week by week, became increasingly fine-tuned, as we learned more about the children’s specific understandings, misunderstandings, and questions.

During the six-month exploration, we invited the children to rewrite classic fairy tales—*Sleeping Beauty*, *Little Red Riding Hood*, *Cinderella*—replacing the female protagonists with male heroes. We invited the children to create paper dolls of themselves: large-size, full-body photos with several acetate overlays on which they could draw moustaches, or braids and bows, or skirts or baseball caps or hiking boots—ways to playfully experiment with external, cultural markers of gender identity. We read *The story of X* again, and the children created more elaborate portraits of X. We wrote the next chapter in X’s life, with the children as characters in the story. And we explored possibilities for activism: What could you do if a kid gets teased in the playground? How might we respond to advertisements that play on cultural ideas about what girls and boys ought to like? This is pedagogical documentation in action, at the place where it intersects with social justice learning.

How we came to live at the crossroads

I’m the mentor teacher in the full-day child care program at Hilltop Children’s Center, a role inspired by the work of the *atelieristi* and *pedagogisti* in Reggio Emilia. I work with teachers individually and in teaching teams and with the staff as a whole to support and facilitate reflective teaching practices anchored in key elements of anti-bias, Reggio-inspired pedagogy. Our collaborations are grounded in the cornerstone elements of pedagogical documentation: observation, reflection and study, planning, and telling the story. And, often, our collaborations involve social justice learning.

As we've become more and more skilful at the practice of pedagogical documentation, social justice issues have risen to the surface and become a focus of our teaching and learning. For many years we wanted anti-bias, social and environmental justice work to be front and centre at Hilltop; for a painfully long time, this happened only sporadically and, then, only in a couple of classrooms with participation from only a handful of teachers. This was the case for Reggio-inspired, 'emergent' project work, as well: a few teachers carried the vision for this work and attempted to realise this vision in their classrooms, struggling with isolation and yearnings for more authentic collaboration. To address the challenge of creating shared understandings of, and practices around, anti-bias and Reggio-inspired teaching, we added the position of mentor teacher to our staff. My first year's work as mentor teacher centred on pedagogical documentation: we practised and practised the cycle of observation, reflection, planning and telling stories, coming at this cycle through many doorways. By the end of that first intensive year, this way of being with children, families, and co-workers had become part of who we were. And in the course of this practice, issues of social justice crept into our discussions and our planning, until, indeed, it fell front and centre, an organic extension of children's pursuits and passions. When we paid close attention to what the children were playing and saying, we heard, again and again, children exploring the ways in which people are the same and different, and the cultural values and biases associated with identity differences. The children were our guides, leading us to the crossroads, as we embraced the practice of documentation as a verb.

Documentation is a verb

We'd used the word 'documentation' at Hilltop as shorthand for the pieces of writing posted on the curriculum boards or slipped into children's journals. The transformation of our understanding began with a change in discourse. We began to use 'documentation' as an active verb rather than an inert noun, embracing it as a vibrant practice—the practice of deep engagement by adults in the lives of children. We replaced the word 'documentation' with more descriptive and specific words in an effort to call attention to the cornerstone elements:

- observing closely and making notes;
- studying our observation notes;
- planning next steps; and
- telling the story.

Observing closely: The foundation of pedagogical documentation

The first cornerstone of documentation is observation. As teachers—people committed to inquiry—we strive to pay attention to the everyday, ordinary moments of each day. These ordinary moments are the fabric of children’s lives: they offer glimpses into the children’s hearts and minds. When we pay attention to ordinary moments, we begin to know the children deeply. Listening, watching, taking notes—observation is the beginning of documentation.

We collect ‘traces’ of our observations—taking notes, making audiotapes of children’s conversations with each other and with us, taking photographs, making videotapes, collecting children’s work. These ‘traces’ provide the raw material for our sharing, reflecting, and planning. Teachers take time to review their observations, transcribe audiotapes, choose sections of videotape, and organise photos. This work actively engages us—it is done to help us plan ways to sustain, extend, and deepen children’s play and learning. It invites us to immerse ourselves deeply in the children’s play, paying close attention to their words, their gestures, their expressions, capturing the details of their play that help us know them intimately and well.

In this first step of pedagogical documentation, we’re intentionally listening for children’s cries of ‘That’s not fair!’ and other cues that children are thinking about issues of difference, justice, and equity. We’re alert to children’s comments about skin colour, gender, body size and physical ability, family make-up and other issues related to identity and culture. We intervene in the moment, when needed, and we bring our observations of children’s play and thinking about social justice issues to our co-teachers so that we can grow explorations and in-depth projects that extend and deepen children’s learning.

As we become more skilful listeners and observers, the children’s work to understand issues of identity, difference, justice and bias becomes more apparent to us. For example, in our youngest group of children—children just turned three years old, teacher Molly overheard this conversation about identity and power:

Bridget: Heth has a little power. She doesn’t have enough, because she’s little and so she has only a little power.

Rachel: Bridget, Heth has control of her own body. You are not the truth of her body. Her body does have power! There’s little power and big power right in her belly. It’s inside you and you can have enough power. Heth can have enough power.

Molly jotted down the children’s exchange and brought her notes to our staff meeting, commenting that ‘I’m not sure what this means exactly, or what we ought to do next, but the kids are clearly trying to understand power—who has it and where it resides.’ Meanwhile, several comments over the course of a week or so in our group of three, four, and five-year-old children, called us to attention.

‘You can’t play in this game because you have brown skin and that’s not a pretty colour’, said a light-skinned child to a dark-skinned child.

A teacher intervened at this point with a clear statement that ‘It’s hurtful and unfair to keep someone out of a game because of the colour of their skin.’ She stayed with the children to support them both, as they figured out a way to play together.

‘Is your skin getting darker while you get older?’ a child asked Miriam, a teacher who is Filipino.

‘Your hair goes with your skin, and you have brown eyes, too’, another child commented to Miriam, stroking her dark hair and her dark skin.

‘When I go to kindergarten, I hope I don’t have a dark-skinned teacher. People with dark skin are bullies’, a child told her mother.

‘I’m surprised about that idea!’ her mother replied. ‘Your teachers Miriam and Liane have dark skin’.

‘Yeah, I know, but I like them’, answered her daughter.

Teachers brought notes about these exchanges to our staff meeting. They were concerned and eager to discuss how to address issues of skin colour difference and its cultural meanings, with the children.

Studying and reflecting: The bridge between observation and action

We bring our notes, photographs, and transcriptions to our co-teachers and to children’s families. In collaboration with these colleagues and companions, we review our observations and reflect together about what they tell us about children’s understandings, misunderstandings, theories, and questions. When we come together to study our documentation, we take up questions like:

- What are the children curious about? What are they trying to figure out?
- What knowledge and experiences are the children drawing on? What theories are they working from or testing?
- Do we see any inconsistencies in the children’s thinking? Are there ‘soft spots’ or misunderstandings in the children’s thinking?
- How are the children building on each other’s ideas, perspectives, and contributions?
- What do we want to learn more about, after watching and listening to the children?
- What insights does this observation give us about possible ways that we could deepen our relationships with children’s families?

These discussions help us develop hypotheses and questions to pursue with the children.

Exploring power

As we considered the conversation between Rachel and Bridget about power, we reflected on the relationship each of them has with Heth, the smallest child in their group, as well as on the ways each of the three children carry themselves in the world. A teacher shared a brief conversation she'd had with Rachel a few weeks earlier, in which Rachel had declared that her brother has a lot of power, because he's a boy, and that she wanted to be in his classroom group because that group of kids has power and her group doesn't. Intriguing to hold this statement alongside her quick defence of tiny, ultra-feminine Heth!

We named a theory that seemed foundational to their thinking, that power is correlated with size. We wondered what the children meant when they talked about 'enough' power—and, indeed, what they meant by 'power'. And we wondered where the children understood power to reside.

The meaning of skin colour

As we began to sift through the children's comments and questions about skin colour, we acknowledged the extra charge these comments held for each of us: a Filipino woman who had wished for light skin as a child; a native Hawaiian woman proudly championing her culture in the face of racism; two European American women engaged in anti-racist activism as adults and acutely aware of the power and privilege associated with white skin in a racist culture. With these experiences acknowledged by us all, we turned to study of the children's comments. We named several themes and questions that we saw in them:

- Brown is ugly. Is this about skin colour or a preference for all things pink and dainty?
- Does skin colour change? Are babies born light-skinned and their skin darkens as they age? Is colour something added to skin or intrinsic to skin?
- How do skin colour, hair colour, and eye colour come together to create a person's physical identity?
- Unknown people with dark skin are frightening—but relationship transforms fear.

We began to formulate ways to take up a conversation with the children's families about their curiosity and theories about skin colour, recognising that any exploration of skin colour and bias would need to involve children's families.

Planning next steps to extend children's investigations

We end our discussions by planning next steps—the concrete action that we'll take with the children to invite critical thinking, to nudge them to take new perspectives, to encourage them to reconsider their theories, and to facilitate activism. Questions that guide our planning include:

- What changes could we make to the classroom environment?
- What materials or 'provocations' could we add to the classroom?
- How could we participate in the children's play?
- How could we invite the children to use another 'language' to extend or shift their thinking?
- How might we use our notes and photos to help the children revisit their ideas?
- How will we be in dialogue with families about this exploration, inviting their reflections and insights as well as letting them know what we're thinking and wondering?

As we consider extensions of children's social justice explorations, we watch for possibilities for activism. How might the children's concern about and passion for fairness and equity open into action? We recognise that young children's activism looks different from adult activism, certainly, and that it is less about creating systemic change than it is about creating the dispositions of change-makers. We hope that the children in our care come to see themselves as people who notice injustice and bias and who join with others to take action in the face of unfairness. So, as we plan from our observations and reflections, we listen carefully for any ways in which children are identifying that 'we should do something about this problem!'

Exploring power

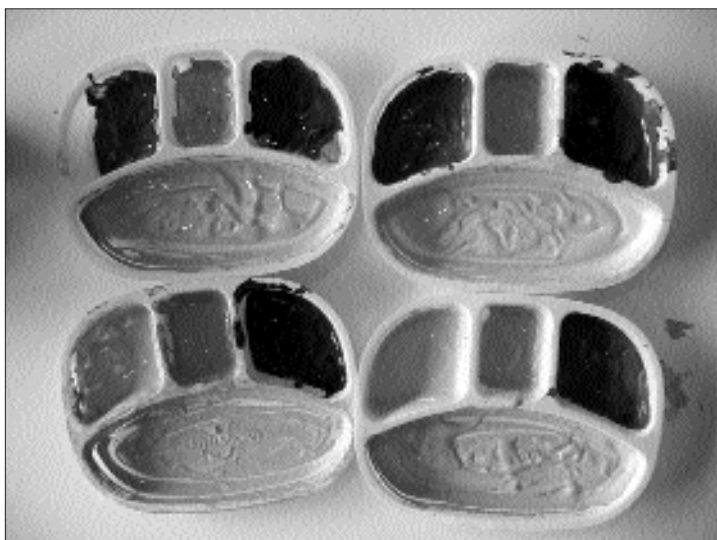
We decided to gather more information about the children's understandings—and to invite the children to become more aware of their understandings—by asking Rachel, Bridget, and Heth to sort a collection of photos of people according to whether they had power or not. This initial meeting with the 'power girls' (as we came to call them) sparked a heated and forceful discussion about whether power is an internal quality reflected in a person's eyes or a physical application of strength and might. Molly's notes about this debate launched us into another round of study, reflection, and planning, and an in-depth exploration of power was born.

The undertaking was quickly expanded by an early controversy. The three children affirmed, again and again, that power is active: 'Swinging isn't powerful because you're not doing anything.' They agreed that power is linked with strength, substance, and toughness: 'Clay is powerful because it's tough.' 'You have to be big and fat to be powerful.' They disagreed sharply, though, on the relationship between beauty and power. Heth commented that 'Princesses are powerful, because they're so beautiful.' Rachel's reaction was fierce: 'Princesses kill people who aren't beautiful enough. I don't want to be a princess; they'll kill me because I don't like to wear dresses. That's why I want to be a boy. They have even more power than princesses.' The debate about this was contentious, and led us to an overt focus on the relationship between gender and power which drew on the languages of colour, movement, clay, drama and storytelling, and woodworking.

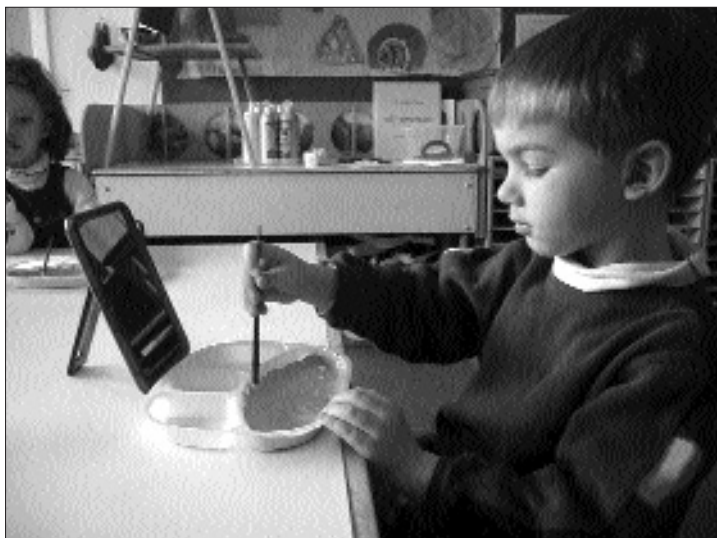
The meaning of skin colour

We decided to shine the spotlight on skin colour by inviting each child in the group to create a detailed self-portrait, first sketching their face, features, and hair with a black drawing pen, then mixing the colours they needed to capture their skin, hair, lip, and eye colour to fill in their portraits. As they worked on these portraits over several weeks, the children talked with each other and with the teachers about their understandings of the origins of skin colour.

These conversations provided an opportunity for teachers to correct misinformation that skin colour changes over time, or is an overlay on top of light skin (a common misunderstanding among dominant culture children who assume that light-coloured skin is the baseline). These conversations also gave us



Self-portrait 'palettes'



Using mirrors for self-portrait work

opportunities to talk together about the children's families, tracing skin colour and other identifying features in their family lineage. And through our conversations, we learned more about the children's questions and understandings, information that guided our on-going study and planning.

As this work was taking place in the studio, we engaged with the children in an exploration of the meanings of skin colour through a range of experiences. We brought in a persona doll (a detailed description of persona dolls can be found in Trisha Whitney's book, *Kids Like Us*) with dark skin whose stories of exclusion and name-calling sparked passionate discussion and problem-solving by the children. We called attention to books about people who took action in the face of racism. We made a regular practice of taking field trips to a beach in a part of the city with a wide-ranging diversity of people. And we watched for opportunities for individual and group activism, steps as simple as supporting a child who confronted a friend: 'It's not fair to say brown is ugly because that would hurt a brown-skinned person's feelings.' And we wrote to and talked with the children's families along the way, sharing our observation notes and our reflections, and inviting their suggestions for next steps.

Telling the story

Our notes, photographs, transcriptions, and collections of children's work become tools for communication. We use the traces of our observations to create written documentation that tells the story of the children's explorations, our reflections and hypotheses, and our plans about how we'll extend the children's learning.

This written documentation takes many forms, including narratives for bulletin board postings about curriculum, journals for individual children, documentation panels and bulletin board displays, and handmade books.

Particularly when we take up issues of social justice with young children, we need to share with families the stories that ground our exploration. Families, like teachers, have values and beliefs about these potentially controversial issues that they communicate to their children and the children bring those values and beliefs to their work on social justice issues. Families' values play a role in the unfolding of a social justice exploration, just as do teachers' values. When these values are acknowledged and discussed, there is true collaboration between teachers and families. When teachers seek out families' perspectives and invite their participation in reflection and planning, differences can be acknowledged openly, support can be frankly offered and received and relationships can deepen in unexpected and potent ways.

Written documentation creates a foundation for dialogue and collaboration between families and teachers. At Hilltop, we've heard again and again from parents that their children's transcribed conversations and comments are pivotal in their engagement in, and curiosity about, unfolding investigations, explorations and projects. In our written documentation, alongside the children's words, images, and work, we aim to include our reflections, hypotheses and questions; our planning for next steps; and specific questions for families, asking for their feedback and suggestions.



Photo of the artist



Self-portrait: Seeing myself

Exploring power

In the days immediately following the tumult about princesses, beauty, and power, we gave each girl's family a copy of the transcribed conversation, along with our initial questions and musings. We asked families for insights about their children's understandings of princesses. The stories we heard from Rachel's, Bridget's, and Heth's families were pivotal as we planned next steps. We learned about Rachel's determined conviction that she would be a boy one day, and about her absolute rejection of all things 'princessy' like sparkly dresses and tiaras. We learned from Heth's family about her passion for princesses. And we learned from Bridget's family that her princess play often involved princesses healing and helping others. This information guided our planning, as we continued to offer the children opportunities to examine the relationship between power and gender.

The meaning of skin colour

As we began our studio work with self-portraits, we wrote to families sharing the comments that children had made about skin colour, and our thinking about the underlying themes and questions. In addition, we included a brief overview of how children develop understandings of race and its cultural meanings and a synopsis of the anti-bias goals identified by Louise Derman-Sparks and the Anti-Bias Task Force (1989). We offered these in the context of child development research that informs our work. Finally, we asked families to share their reactions, hopes, and concerns with us. We heard from some families individually and from some families during an evening discussion that we planned. Families shared their dis-ease, their vulnerability, their hope:

'I didn't expect my child to be thinking about this hard stuff so early in her life.'

'I don't feel ready for this. How should I talk with my child about racism? What words, exactly, should I use? Are there books we can read together?'

'How exactly do kids think about race and skin colour? It's charged for us as adults, but surely not for them, not yet. How can we talk about it without bringing all our 'stuff' into it?'

'I'd like to think there are ways we can talk about these issues with the kids that could heal some of the hurts of our generation, so that we're not talking about racism as a reality that they just have to live with, but as something that can be transformed.'

We took notes during our conversations, and drew on these notes in the same way we draw on our observations of children's play and conversation, as we planned how to proceed with an exploration of skin colour and identity in a racist culture.

Clearly, written documentation is not a final, stale product. It is a lively tool for communication, for new learning, and for relationships. We use written communication in a range of ways (see Gandini and Goldhaber, 2001):

- We share written documentation with children. When children revisit their experiences by looking at written documentation, they often decide to take up an exploration from a new perspective, or to invite other children into an extension of their earlier work. They reconsider their theories and explore new understandings.
- We share written documentation with families. A primary goal for our work is to deepen and strengthen the relationships between families and children during their days apart. One key way that we do that is by telling the stories of children's days in our program, so that families come to know their children more fully in this context. In addition, we hope to involve families in meaningful, intimate ways in the daily life of our classrooms. This can only happen when we create many windows through which they can observe their children's days in our program.
- We use written documentation as a tool for social change. The stories that we tell of children's investigations and play have the potential for changing how people understand and value childhood. We share our stories with other early childhood professionals and with visitors from the community. Our stories call attention to the too-often unheard or disregarded voices of children.
- We use written documentation to create a history for ourselves and for the children and families in our program now and in the future. Participation in an unfolding story is a cornerstone for creating community. Our written documentation tells the stories of our shared experiences which, woven together, become the fabric of community.

Life at the crossroads

Pedagogical documentation leads surely and inescapably to social justice work with young children. When we listen to the children, allowing their passions and pursuits to guide our planning, we will find ourselves at the crossroads with anti-bias, social justice efforts. It is, truly, unavoidable.

Simply listen to the children! Young children pay close attention to what's fair and what's not fair—a common cry in any group of young children is 'That's not fair!'. This acute observation and concerned analysis is part of their developmental work: How am I the same as others? How am I different than others? What is it like to be someone else? (Think of all that drama play!)

We honour children's questions about identity, about the ways in which people are similar and different, and we hold clear hopes for how they'll answer these questions. We want children to know themselves as compassionate, reflective, resourceful, competent, generous people. We want them to know others in the same way, and as deserving of the same joys, delights, and resources that they receive.

We want them to become skilful at taking others' perspectives. We want them to ask hard questions and engage in critical thinking.

And if we pay close attention to the children, giving them the support they deserve as they pursue questions of identity, culture, and community, they will lead us right to the intersection with social justice issues. And that is the moment of truth for us. Will we go to the crossroads with them, affirming our belief that they are resourceful, engaged participants in their communities, or will we turn aside, unwilling to take up the challenging, invigorating work of exploring issues related to race, class, body size and ability, family make-up, and gender?

When we step firmly into that place of intersection, we deepen and draw on children's dispositions to be change-makers, dispositions to:

- notice and accept differences;
- collaborate with others;
- pay attention to other people's ideas, feelings, and needs;
- speak out about fairness and unfairness; and
- take responsibility for solving problems, offering their ideas and action.

Through their participation in social justice explorations:

- Children come to see themselves as change-makers: their dispositions for noticing injustice, caring about the people involved, coming together with other folks to think critically about the injustice, and taking action to confront injustice will be strengthened into life-long habits.
- Children come to new understandings and experiences of connection with people who are different from them, breaking down the boundaries between people and growing relationships where there might otherwise be disconnection and indifference.
- Children who are culturally privileged develop understandings of how to use privilege in the service of justice and equity.
- Children who come from cultures other than the dominant (white, straight, middle/upper class) culture deepen their identities as people who can resist injustice, claim their power, and become activists on their own and others' behalf.
- Relationships between teachers and families become more authentic, as people dive into challenging, value-laden issues in partnership with each other.

Documentation is a verb, a way of being in relationship. So, too, attention to issues of social justice is a way of being in relationship that honours identity and culture and that demands action. Pedagogical documentation, embraced fully, carries us to the crossroads and calls us to live in authentic, vulnerable, transformative relationship with children, their families, and each other.

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