

Reflections on the Relationship Between Documentation and Assessment in the American Context: AN INTERVIEW WITH BRENDA FYFE

By Lella Gandini and Judith Allen Kaminsky

Brenda Fyfe is the Dean of the School of Education at Webster University in St. Louis, Missouri. Brenda is a member of the St. Louis-Reggio Collaborative along with her colleagues at The College School, The St. Michael School and Clayton Schools' Family Center. Educators from these four schools have had a collaborative relationship with Reggio Children since 1994. The following questions are based on Carlina Rinaldi's essay, "Documentation and Assessment: What is the Relationship?" in the book, Making Learning Visible: Children as Individual and Group Learners. Carlina was a Visiting Professor at Webster University in the fall of 2001, and co-taught a graduate course with Brenda Fyfe, using the book, Making Learning Visible. Gunilla Dahlberg, Professor of Education at the University of Stockholm in Sweden, will share her reflections on this topic in an upcoming issue of Innovations.

Q: In her essay, Carlina Rinaldi stresses the difference between documentation that is collected during an experience but interpreted only at the end (a traditional way of using documentation for assessment), and documentation as part of the process of fostering learning, interpreted and reinterpreted in order to develop with the children, theories that give meaning to events and objects in their world (the process developed in the Reggio Emilia educational system). What are your observations about the traditional approach to documentation, which is more commonly used in the United States? What do you believe are the positive aspects of this approach?

BRENDA: I think a growing number of teachers, who have studied the Reggio approach in-depth, are interpreting documentation as part of their daily work, rather than only at the end of a unit, project or extended period of time. However, I agree with Carlina's observation that the traditional pattern is still to interpret at the end, rather than as an integral part of the ongoing process of learning.

In *Making Learning Visible* (2001), Steven Seidel, the current Director of Harvard's Project Zero, commented that in the U.S., "the practice of assessment is most

often thought of as synonymous with evaluation and, in an American context, evaluation is a process of judgment, measuring and placing one work in relation to the others' works" (p. 304-305). I think Steve's observation could explain why many U.S. educators, who collect documentation, wait to interpret and use it (as if it were evaluation data) to judge or describe the final learning outcome at the end of a series of experiences, rather than as part of the everyday teaching/learning process. Evaluation focuses on the summative rather than the formative character of assessment. Assessment, when viewed as evaluation, is seen as a tool for grading and comparing students, for rating them on a scale to determine a level of competence or development, for classifying them for special services, or for deciding whether to retain them or pass them on from one grade to the next.

Before answering the second question about positive effects, I would like to review a definition of documentation given by Carlina in *Making Learning Visible* (2001). She explains: "Documentation is seen as visible listening, as the construction of traces (through notes, slides, videos and so on) that not only testify to the children's learning paths and processes, but also make them possible because they are visible. For us,

I am concerned that some of our documents on best practice in the U.S. still have the tendency to narrow and limit our image of the child, boxing them into predetermined expectations about learning. The heavy emphasis on goal driven instruction and assessment is not balanced with an openness to going into uncharted territory with children. -Brenda Fyfe

this means making visible and, thus possible, the relationships that are the building blocks of knowledge” (p. 83). I think there are several important points to examine in Carlina’s quote. First, I think it is interesting that she uses the word “traces.” This word implies that observations are limited pieces of data. It reminds us that observations are always selective and partial, no matter how systematic and objective we try to be. Rinaldi’s definition explains that traces are visible evidence that focus on how children learn as well as what children learn. Finally, she emphasizes that when documentation makes learning visible, it makes reflection possible.

On the positive side, if educators use Carlina Rinaldi’s definition of documentation, then even when documentation is analyzed only at the end of a unit, project or period of time, there is value. Anytime learning is made visible through real examples of children’s work or words or actions, there is opportunity to gain

insight into the thinking and potential of children. There is opportunity to offer parents an inside view of the mind of a child, an opportunity to think together with teachers about learning. Although much is lost that could have come from the use of documentation in the formative sense (with children, parents and teachers) during the set of experiences, documentation of the sort Rinaldi describes can provide a rich base for interpretation and study at any moment in time.

Q: Have you observed teachers’ transition between the traditional way of using documentation and the one developed by Reggio Emilia educators? What are the challenges faced by teachers during this transition?

BRENDA: In my travels around the U.S., I have seen a transition of this sort among many educators who have studied the Reggio approach in-depth. I have

had the opportunity to more closely observe and study this transition over the past 12 years through my work with educators in the St. Louis area who form what is now known as the St. Louis-Reggio Collaborative. I have observed that there are several changes in mindset and practice as they move in this direction (Fyfe, 1998; Fyfe, Geismar-Ryan and Strange, 2000; and Forman and Fyfe, 1998). One of these is a shift toward thinking about teaching and learning as a process of collaborative inquiry, a process of ongoing collaborative action research. Collaborative action research involves an understanding of the interdependence between organization and collaboration, one of the fundamentals of the Reggio approach (Gandini, 1993). It requires a search for new patterns of organization and communication with fellow teachers, children and parents. It is a collaborative style of work that asks teachers to think, plan, work and interpret together (Rinaldi, 1994).

Finding and organizing time on a weekly or bi-weekly basis for this kind of work is most often identified as the biggest barrier. However, I have observed that even when time is available, it is often used inefficiently. Since time of this nature is so precious, it needs to be organized for optimal productivity. Teachers should have a preplanned agenda with agreements about what documentation will be presented, and who is responsible for bringing the documentation in a form that will make it easy for the team to examine (e.g. multiple copies of transcripts and appropriate technology when needed, such as video player or computer screen for viewing documentation to be presented in this format). The meeting space should support focused and serious discourse. At the meeting, multiple perspectives and interpretations should be encouraged and debated. Teams should give a significant amount of time to collective reflection on what the documentation reveals about children's ideas, interests, feelings, opinions, assumptions or working theories. I have observed that many teachers want to move too quickly through this part of the process, jumping ahead to implications for teaching. Only after considerable analysis of what the documentation reveals, in terms of children's theories, understandings and misunderstandings, will teachers be in a position to formulate hypotheses, predictions and projections about future learning experiences that have continuity with children's current thinking, and that will challenge and engage a particular group of learners at a particular time and place (Dewey, 1998). Finally, teachers must

plan how they will organize, diversify and coordinate their work in light of the interpretations and projections (Fyfe, 1998).

Another less obvious barrier that can prevent teachers from committing to the regular practice of placing documentation at the heart of the learning process, is a concern that it takes time away from the teaching of children. Amelia Gambetti once commented in a consultation visit with St. Louis teachers, that we must think of this as "time for children." The time adults spend observing and documenting, and then interpreting and reinterpreting documentation will make our time *with* children all the more meaningful and responsive. In addition, teachers learned the value of interpreting and reinterpreting documentation with children. As Carlina explains, this is done "in order to develop with the children, theories that give meaning to events and objects in their world" (Rinaldi, 2001).

Q: In *Making Learning Visible*, Carlina Rinaldi writes: "For adults and children alike, understanding means being able to develop an interpretive "theory," a narration that gives meaning to events and objects of the world. Our theories are provisional, offering a satisfactory explanation that can be continuously reworked . . . Expressing our theories to others makes it possible to transform a world not intrinsically ours into something shared. Sharing theories is a response to uncertainty." What are your experiences with teachers developing an interest in how children think? How can teachers evolve from "teaching" children to creating an environment where children share their theories?

BRENDA: Since my primary role is that of teacher/educator, I will begin with what I think we should be doing in teacher preparation programs. If we want new teachers to be interested in how children think, then we must put much more emphasis on the study of children's ideas. There are now many excellent teacher education programs that have shifted in this direction, as a result of inspiration from the preschools of Reggio Emilia. Here is one specific example of a particular change that I made several years ago to support pre-service teachers in this direction. I decided that when conducting student teaching and practicum observations, I would document, and give much more attention to the children's behavior and words rather than the student

teacher's behavior and words. I would document children's responses to the student teacher's directions and interaction, but I would also make a point of trying to observe and document small group interactions and/or an individual child's approach to solving a problem, when the student teacher was working with other children. In my debriefing conversation, I would ask the student teacher to study my documentation with me. Together we would wonder, question and interpret. I found that this shift in my supervisory behavior supported the student teachers' curiosity and wonder about children's thinking. They were less concerned about how smoothly the instruction had progressed and whether children followed directions, and showed more concern about what the children said, did and meant. As the semester progressed, the students' daily journals showed more detailed observations of children's comments and work. More attention was given to reflection on documentation and interpretations of children's thinking. I believe that I was helping pre-service teachers to come to the realization that responsive teaching requires this kind of daily study of children's expressed thoughts - that planning involves a negotiation between curriculum goals, and children's ideas and theories, not just their interests.

In many school systems today, the emphasis on standards, goals and predefined outcomes has resulted in an unintended narrowing of our views about learning. As a result, a de-emphasis or no emphasis is placed on the thinking of the child in relation to the curriculum, much less the thinking of the child that may appear unrelated to the curriculum goals driving instruction.

In one of his most recent books, *Schools that Learn*, Peter Senge writes, "States become preoccupied with establishing standards and measuring student outcomes through tests. Educators focus their attention on techniques and strategies to respond to the policy-makers' mandates, often narrowing the curriculum and increasing the emphasis on rote learning" (p. 281). The concepts of a responsive curriculum and negotiated learning (Forman and Fyfe, 1998) are certainly not supported in many school systems today. Even when pre-kindergarten teachers do not have such direct mandates, there is often tremendous pressure that comes indirectly from parents, colleagues in the elementary grades and the community at large, to rush children through a curriculum of procedural knowledge and skills. Teachers who are feeling this pressure often become more teacher and curriculum

centered. They feel they have no time or encouragement to support a negotiated learning process, where children's ideas are given serious consideration. There is no place for questions and uncertainty.

Considering the widespread pressures that I have just described, I believe it is critical for practicing teachers to have a support system that enables and encourages them to listen to children, to seek to uncover the children's beliefs about the topics to be investigated, and to share and probe their theories and ideas. In St. Louis, we have been able to develop and maintain such a support system for teachers. It began in 1992 with a grant from the Danforth Foundation. At that time, we formed a study and professional development network among teachers from several schools in the metropolitan area. Twelve years later, the St. Louis-Reggio Collaborative, a group of three schools and faculty from Webster University's School of Education, continue to support the study and celebration of children's thinking that is made visible through observation and documentation.

Q: On the subject of the pedagogy of listening, Carlina Rinaldi writes: "This capacity for listening and reciprocal expectations, which enables communication and dialogue, is a quality of the mind and of the intelligence, particularly in the young child . . . This is what a school should be, first and foremost, a context of multiple listening." What is your understanding of the reciprocal expectations that enable dialogue among children and adults?

BRENDA: This question reminds me of the significant insight expressed by St. Louis teachers in our Reggio study project. The phrase "slowing down to listen" could be heard in conversation after conversation in our group meetings. The teachers were continually amazed at what they learned from young children when they slowed down to ask the children's opinions, to listen to their ideas, to wonder about the meaning of a child's comment, to ask for clarification, to check on their understanding of the child's understanding. Teachers reflected that this kind of interaction with children was not possible when they were focused on guiding and directing children every moment through a pre-established curriculum. Gunilla Dahlberg has written and talked a great deal about the need for teachers to deconstruct what they have learned about the process of learning, the role of the teacher and the role of the student (Dahlberg, Moss

and Pence, 2000). With the support of an ongoing professional development system, teachers in our St. Louis group were able to deconstruct prior assumptions that guided interactions with children. Teachers were encouraged to take the risk of changing their normal patterns of behavior (e.g., from guiding, directing and facilitating - to slowing down to listen and having genuine conversations with children), and they were given the time and opportunity to reflect on these new experiences with colleagues.

In a chapter in the second edition of *The Hundred Languages of Children*, George Forman and I reflected on several passages we observed in teachers who were moving from initial to deeper understandings of what we called “negotiated learning.” One of these was a shift from talking to discourse:

“We talk almost all the time. Sometimes we listen to our own words and to the words of others in order to understand deeply. It is this attitude toward talking, as an intelligent pattern worthy of study that defines the discourse of schooling. Treating talk as discourse causes teachers to look for theories, assumptions, false premises, misapplications, clever analogies, ambiguities and differences in communicative intent. All of which are pieces to be negotiated into shared meaning by the group” (Forman and Fyfe, 1998).

Teachers report that through listening, they can truly be “in the moment” with children. Through listening, they are better able to spontaneously support and challenge a child to extend his or her thinking. But the reciprocal expectations of dialogue must be developed over time with some children. Many children are not used to teachers who want to understand their opinions and emerging theories. They may not trust the teacher’s motives, assuming that the interest in their ideas is really a test rather than genuine curiosity and interest in the child’s thinking [Kaminsky and Gandini, 2002]. Teachers who have embraced the pedagogy of listening may have to persist through a period of disbelief and mistrust from

children. My observation is that when children build relationships of mutual trust and respect with adults, and those adults engage them regularly in meaningful dialogue, the children develop reciprocal expectations in regard to dialogue.

I have observed that teachers who embrace the pedagogy of listening have an image of the child as someone whose ideas are worth listening to, whose comments and opinions are not just frivolous and cute, but intelligent efforts to make sense of the world. They learn that staying in the frame of mind of the child is critical to helping children to ask good questions (Forman, 1989). I have observed that the more teachers develop the reciprocal expectations of

the pedagogy of listening, the stronger the image of the child grows - in the minds of teachers, children and parents.

Q: In her essay, Carlina Rinaldi writes: “Documentation . . . is seen as visible listening . . . To ensure listening and being listened to is one of the primary tasks of documentation . . . as well as to ensure that the group and each individual child have the possibility to observe themselves from an external point of view while they are learning (both during and after the process).” Could you comment on documentation becoming a tool for self-observation, and the learning process becoming a

shared experience?

BRENDA: Self-observation is certainly made possible through documentation. For example, when a child sees herself in a video clip wherein a tower that she and two others were building falls down, she has the opportunity to examine what led up to the instability of the building. If she and her friends can examine this video clip together, they can learn from each other’s observations and interpretations. When a child reviews a drawing he has made as a blueprint for a boat that he wants to build, he can distance himself for a moment to think more deeply about the shape, size and particular features that should be considered. When this child’s teacher helps him to revisit some of

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his initial ideas, ideas that were expressed in prior conversations but not apparent in the drawing, she is helping the child to assess his drawn plan and make adjustments. When a teacher reads back to a small group, some of the recorded comments and insights they had expressed at a group meeting a week earlier when discussing ways to solve conflicts on the playground, the children are supported in assessing their behavior since that time.

Documentation offers a common platform for discourse and, therefore, enables collective reflection by teachers, children and parents. Reflection is a critical part of the learning process. Documentation makes it possible for teachers, children and parents to look together at learning, to reflect on experience and think about its meaning. Today, more and more teachers at the elementary school level are involving children in collecting examples of their best work to be included in portfolios. The portfolio is used as a tool for assessment discussions with parents. The child's involvement in choosing the "best" items for the portfolio is certainly a self-assessment process. Some teachers encourage a peer support process wherein a small group of peers consult with the child in question to share their perspectives about the quality of the works to be included in the portfolio. The teacher's role is to help children to express their autonomous voices, but also to help them remember standards of quality that have been studied and agreed upon. A good teacher scaffolds the self and peer assessment process in terms of curriculum goals, but is also open to new perspectives or standards of quality that children may bring to the discussion.

Q: On the subject of documentation, Carlina also writes: "At the moment of documentation (observation and interpretation), the element of assessment enters the picture immediately, that is, in the context and during the time in which the experience (activity) takes place. It is not significant to make an abstract prediction that establishes what is significant - the elements of value necessary for learning to be achieved - before documentation is actually carried out. It is necessary to interact with the action itself, with that which is revealed, defined and perceived as truly significant, as the experience unfolds." Could you comment about assessment becoming part of the learning process?

BRENDA: I have addressed this question, to some extent, in my prior answers and an illustration that is given at the end of this article further elaborates on this subject. I would like to take this opportunity to share a concern about what I think is often missing in U.S. literature on this idea of assessment becoming part of the learning process. In the quote that precedes this last question, I think Carlina is cautioning us to refrain from imposing a pre-established frame of analysis that will limit, in advance, how we will interpret and use documentation with children. I think she is talking about keeping an open mind to look beyond the learning that may have been anticipated or planned, to look beyond the goals of the curriculum.

Dahlberg, Moss, and Pence (1999) express concern that too often educators try to categorize and classify according predetermined schemas: "As a consequence, all we know is how far this or that child conforms to certain norms inscribed on the maps we use. Instead of concrete descriptions and reflections on children's doings and thinking, on their hypotheses and theories of the world, we easily end up with simple mappings of children's lives, general classifications of the child of the kind that say 'children of such and such an age are like that.' The maps, the classifications and the ready-made categories end up replacing the richness of children's lived lives and the inescapable complexity of concrete experience" (p. 36).

I am concerned that some of our documents on best practice in the U.S. still have the tendency to narrow and limit our image of the child, boxing them into predetermined expectations about learning. The heavy emphasis on goal driven instruction and assessment is not balanced with an openness to going into uncharted territory with children. I agree with Dahlberg, Moss, and Pence (1999) who plea for balance when it comes to combining frameworks of normalization (standards or developmental scales) and openness to meaning making that goes beyond or outside the boundaries of standards and scales. This involves the use of multiple frames (curriculum goals, developmental progressions and open-ended questions about learning and thinking) for examining children's learning and meaning making. We can use pedagogical documentation to rethink the meaning of "assessment," to question our certainties about what is significant learning and what is not.

Here is an example. In the latest edition of *Preparing Early Childhood Professionals* (NAEYC, 2003), Standard #3 addresses the importance of observing, documenting and assessing to support young children and families. At first reading, it appears that this standard is very much aligned with Reggio's emphasis on the ongoing and integral nature of documentation and assessment in the learning process. The NAEYC document indicates that teachers demonstrate their understanding of this standard "by embedding assessment-related activities in curriculum and in daily routines, so that assessment becomes a habitual part of professional life" (p. 33). The document goes on to emphasize "alignment" - "good assessment is a positive tool that supports children's development and learning, and that improves outcomes for young children and families" (p. 33). The basic concepts described in this document are sound, but I am concerned about what is not stated. For example, there is little or no discussion of the importance of using documentation to help children to self-assess. There is no mention of using documentation with children to reflect on their own learning or to think about their thinking. There is no mention of interpreting and reinterpreting in order to develop (with the children) theories that give meaning to events and objects in their world. Rather, this NAEYC document places emphasis on using observation and documentation "to capture each child's unique qualities, strengths and needs" (p. 33). There is no mention of using documentation to study children's ideas, current schemas or theories; no talk of using documentation with children to help them to ask good questions (Forman, 1989).

The social constructivist approach that Carlina describes encourages us to go beyond identification of qualities, strengths, needs and interest. The teachers in Reggio Emilia "seek to uncover the children's beliefs about the topics to be investigated. Their study goes beyond simply identifying the children's interest. Their analysis reveals the reasons behind the children's interest, the source of their current knowledge and their level of articulation about its detail" (Forman and Fyfe, 1998).

Q: Regarding the teacher's competency, Carlina Rinaldi writes: "Certainly there are also risks, quite a few in fact: vagueness and superficiality can lead to mistaking a series of images or written notes for documentation which, without the awareness of what

one is observing, only creates disorientation and loss of meaning. . . . The teacher's general education must be broad-based and range over many areas of knowledge A cultured teacher not only has a multidisciplinary background, but possesses the culture of research, of curiosity, of working in a group: the culture of project-based thinking." What is your experience with teachers in the United States who have accepted the challenge to proceed "by trial and error," as Carlina says, and who encourage curiosity and group work among children?

BRENDA: It has been my observation that vague and superficial documentation is usually the result of a lack of focus from the start. Teaching teams need to start with questions and rationales for what they choose to observe and study. These questions and purposes will help them prioritize what documentation will be collected and will serve as a lens for interpretation. On the other hand, we have learned from Reggio Emilia and other literature on collaborative action research, that there must always be an openness and expectation that the context that informed the original questions and priorities is ever changing. Teacher research is a dynamic process that unfolds and new questions emerge through the ongoing process of studying documentation with colleagues and children.

I am concerned when I see classrooms where teachers collect photos, quotes from children and anecdotal records, and then merely display them to tell a story rather than a study of what children did or experienced. It appears that many of these teachers use such documentation as a tool to help children and parents recall what happened rather than as a tool for rethinking and analyzing the experience to deepen learning. It appears that they do not approach the process of documentation from a research perspective, perhaps not even from an assessment perspective. As Carlina implies, when a culture of research, of curiosity and of working in a group exists, all of the subjects of education (children, teachers and parents) are in continuous conversation to negotiate shared understandings, to pose questions, to think together about the agreed upon subject of study.

Another point that Carlina makes is the importance of what we might call "general education" in the U.S. I agree that teachers need to develop and bring multiple frames of reference to the process of documenta-

tion and assessment. These include a broad and deep understanding of child development, research on learning, content knowledge or knowledge of the discipline, goals and values for learning, and the disposition and skills of collaborative action research.

Teachers in the U.S., who have a bachelor's degree and state certification, ordinarily have been required to take a broad array of general education courses. This does not necessarily ensure that they will apply a broad-based liberal arts perspective to their work as teacher-researchers, but it certainly makes this possible. I think we need to put more focus in teacher education programs on the integration and application of knowledge in the liberal arts. Unfortunately, many teachers in U.S. early childhood pre-k programs do not have a bachelor's degree. When this is the case, it is up to the individual or the school system to support broad-based and multidisciplinary professional development for teachers, as we see happening in Reggio Emilia [Kaminsky and Gandini, 2002].

I have seen the culture of research, curiosity and project-based thinking flourish in schools where teachers study together, and where they participate as co-learners and co-researchers with children and parents. For example, whenever I visit one of the Collaborative schools, I almost always hear about a new book or article that teachers have identified to help them think about a current project or the focus for their research with children. Sometimes they all read the same book and have a group discussion about its meaning and/or possible implications. At other times, they may bring publications and resources that they have found, which could be utilized by or shared with children or parents. It seems that they are always seeking to deepen or expand their understandings of subject matter, pedagogy, research and philosophy. They are always eager and open to going beyond the boundaries or delve deeply within the boundaries of curriculum standards and developmental theory.

Q: Carlina Rinaldi writes this about documentation: “. . . these writings must be legible, effectively communicate for those who were not present in the context, but should also include the ‘emergent’ elements perceived by the documenter. . . expressing the meaning-making effort; that is, to give meaning, to render the significance that each author attributes to the documentation and the questions and problems he or she perceives within a certain event.” How can teachers

achieve clarity in their documentation and encounter the challenge of including emergent elements?

Carlina also writes: “What we offer to the children’s processes and procedures, and to those which the children and adults together put into action, is a perspective that gives value. . . [It is part of] the genesis of assessment, because it allows one to make explicit, visible and shareable the elements of value (indicators) applied by the documenter in producing the documentation. Assessment is an intrinsic part of documentation and, therefore, of the entire approach of what we call *progettazione*.” How can teachers make value explicit in producing documentation? How can they make meaning visible to children?

BRENDA: I have saved the best for last. In answer to the last two excerpts from Carlina’s writings, and the questions posed by Judy and Lella, I will share a recent example of some work done by teachers, children and parents at The College School. I thank my colleagues, Jennifer Strange and Sandra Harris, as well as the children and families from their class of 4 and 5 year olds, for allowing me to share their work and reflections. I think it illustrates efforts to achieve clarity in documentation, the challenge of emergent elements, how teachers make value explicit in producing documentation and how they can make meaning visible to children.

Some of the teachers at The College School, like Jennifer Strange, have been studying the Reggio approach for over a dozen years, and bring an even longer history of commitment and expertise in regard to constructivist education. Some of the early childhood teachers are new to the approach, but open and eager to learn with their colleagues. Sandra Harris happens to be a recent graduate of Webster University and, through our program, had many opportunities to study and practice the social constructivist approach of Reggio Emilia, prior to becoming a teacher at The College School almost two years ago.

I will begin by sharing the opening statement that appears on a panel of documentation, which introduces the study I am about to share.

THE POETRY OF EXPRESSION . . . SELF

In previous years, children in The Newport Room have contemplated and expressed themselves through self-portrait drawings. This year, as we explored the essential qualities of descriptive language through poetry, we began to consider how the children's depictions of themselves might reflect this study. We have observed children ponder, play with and choose words that appeal to them when composing a poem, writing a message or telling a story. We wondered if they might consider and describe the favorite parts of themselves in a similar way.

"Toes, Touch my nose. Touch a rose. Toes can dance. Toes can hold you up, toes can hop, giggle and jump." -Sami

As this exploration of self-description unfolds, there are many questions to consider. What can we learn about the children and they about each other, through these drawings and descriptions? What do their choices - both of the parts of themselves they recognize as their 'best,' and the words they choose to describe and explain these parts - communicate?

I think this introduction depicts the culture of research that permeates teacher's lives with children. It is written in a way that, I believe, would engender a sense of wonder and curiosity on the part of the reader. It shows that these teachers continuously seek to gain new knowledge, while supporting curriculum goals related to language, and social and emotional development. The introduction gives value to:

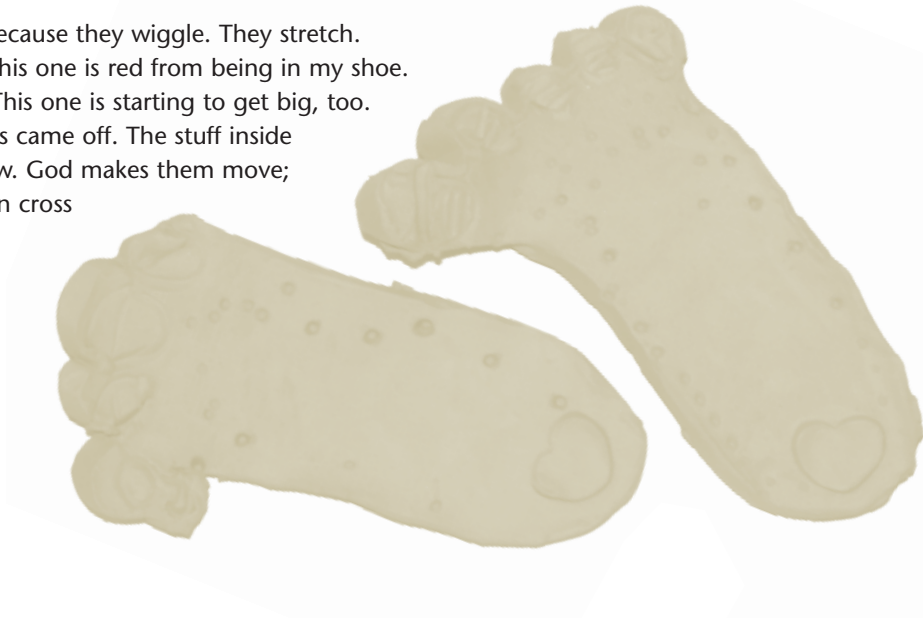
- the descriptive language of poetry

- self-understanding and understanding of self in relation to others
- drawing and sculpture as expressive languages
- the role of play in language development

Now let's look at a sample of some of the work and words of children that are presented after the introductory statement.

MY TOES

I like my toes the best because they wiggle. They stretch. They make me giggle. This one is red from being in my shoe. This one grew too big. This one is starting to get big, too. Once, one of my toenails came off. The stuff inside made a new toenail grow. God makes them move; he is inside my feet. I can cross my toes. -Sami



MY EYES

I can see. The brown part is the part that I see with. My eyes like to see a new puppy, a brown puppy playing. I saw a beautiful pink flower once. I like seeing leaves fall. I would like to see my bunny, but it ran away. When I look at things like the cello, I remember them. I think of what it looks like and then I could draw it. -Elizah



MY EARS

They can hear things. They can hear something when you eat a cookie . . . that scrumbling sound. They like to hear cool music, like NSYNC. I can hear a guitar; that's cool. I like Yo-Yo Ma and the tango. I like to hear my cartoons, like Sponge Bob, Rocket Power and Jimmy Neutron. Ears are good for secrets. -Jack

MY CHEEKS

That way, I can hold things like food, like oatmeal, fried chicken, biscuits and meat loaf. It goes down to my tummy and that's the second best part of me. My cheeks are on the side of my head, on my face. With air, my cheeks get big and with food in them, it does the same thing. I can make them like a big fat balloon and I can twist them. Cheeks make your eyebrows move. Cheeks are made of skin and people meat. When they are cold, they turn pink and when they are hot, they turn red. They can smile. A smile means giving people love because people need that. It helps them grow. -Jim



MY LEGS

They make me run fast, and my feet help me do tricks when I run from my brother. My legs are strong. They got strong when I was sleeping. My legs can kick a soccer ball. They can take me outside to play. They can spin-turn and slide. My legs are brown and sometimes they get scratched and bruised because they play so hard. -Mitchell

Jennifer and Sandra explained to me that there were many layers to the children's process of creating drawings, reflecting on the significance of the portraits, and then playfully and poetically expressing their ideas. It involved a complex process of using documentation to support learning at almost every step of the way. It involved continuous sharing of an evolution of experiences that led to what parents viewed as "amazing" work by such young children. The daily journal posted

at the end of each day was a vehicle for communicating with parents about the processes of learning that led to the work displayed on the panels. But the teachers knew that some parents still had many questions, perhaps even doubts about their children's work. They decided to make the thinking of children, parents and teachers about the project, visible through a series of interviews that would be posted within the documentation panels.

REFLECTIVE INTERVIEWS

Jennifer with Jaleen, Andrew, Jim, Carter, Roschan and Alex

JENNIFER: I think your self-portrait drawings are so amazing. I'm wondering what you think about them.

ANDREW: I think all the parents want to see because they are so proud of our work.

JIM: Yeah, they can't believe we did such a good job!

CARTER: They may think the teachers did the drawings!

JENNIFER: You wouldn't want the parents to think that, would you?

CARTER: No! It's work by us.

JENNIFER: What do you think you have learned from this self-portrait experience?

CARTER: Looking at how we draw helps us to know each other better. You know. People might call us artists!

ROSCHAN: Maybe everyone in the whole world would call us artists!

CARTER: It was really hard work though.

JALEEN: But it was worth it!

Sandra (teacher) with Jen Grossman (parent)

SANDRA: I would like to know what you think about Jack's self-portrait and the experience creating it. Also, what do you think about the project, in general?

JEN: I think it's ingenious. This is such a simple idea but . . . I can tell Jack really thought about his ears and about how things sound in his ears. He thought about what he hears and how he hears it. This work is insightful. I can tell the children are really thinkers. I see just how capable they are of this kind of deep thinking. I love reading these interviews! You know, at first I didn't believe the children really drew these. I thought maybe they had traced them. They are so amazing. Jack does not draw like this at home. How did they do this?

SANDRA: We used photographs and mirrors and, first, we just looked and talked about what we saw. We identified shapes, colors, shadows and sizes. As the children began to draw, the teacher continued to ask questions that would help the child consider one particular aspect at a time. In this way, with support and careful consideration, the drawings began to emerge.

Jennifer with Sandra

JENNIFER: This is a different kind of portraiture. Why did you propose this type of self-study to the children?

SANDRA: I was wondering about the children's perceptions of their own bodies and how their choices might reflect the personalities we were coming to know.

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JENNIFER: This has now been a five-part process . . . the interview, then photographs, followed by drawing, reflective dialogue and now clay . . .

SANDRA: The act of reflecting on each process provided the foundation for almost everything that happened, whether the children were reflecting while looking at themselves in the mirrors, composing their drawing or even in the telling of the story about their “best parts.” For example, while Jim was drawing his cheeks, he remembered the lively discussion we’d had about them weeks before when he told me “cheeks are made of skin and people meat!” The humor he originally found in that statement returned as he drew, and that playfulness is evident in his drawing.

JENNIFER: So, the ongoing dialogue throughout each process was essential?

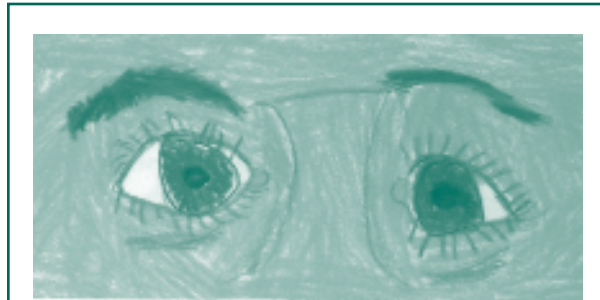
SANDRA: Definitely. The verbal exchange we had was as much a part of the drawing process as the act of putting the drawing tool to the paper.

JENNIFER: Ah, the “Expression of Self” through many languages?

SANDRA: Yes...

JENNIFER: Both children and adults have commented on the plausibility of four and five-year-old children creating such developed drawings. How would you help them to understand?

SANDRA: In our work, we have a strong belief that children are capable. While they are so capable, we know drawings like these rarely just happen. We observe carefully to see what each child needs and then construct the support, often in the form of questions, to encourage each child to go further in their thinking to reach their fullest potential.



I asked Jennifer and Sandra to comment on how this documentation might be viewed in terms of assessment. They told me that some parents could easily see the evidence of learning in the documentation - through the panels, the daily journal, and their observations and conversations with children about the work. But Jennifer quickly commented that they wanted to engage parents in thinking even more deeply about this documentation by making it the focus of a parent meeting. Through such meetings, they have found that parents learn from each other and the teachers through an exchange of what they see in the documentation, what they question and what they interpret. It was clear to me from this statement that Jennifer and Sandra viewed assessment as a social construction of knowledge through the study of children’s learning made visible. They believe and have experienced that parents as well as children need to engage in the process of meaning making. They view assessment as meaning making and they know that good documentation can support that process of learning. I agree with them completely.

It was clear to me . . . that Jennifer and Sandra viewed assessment as a social construction of knowledge through the study of children's learning made visible. -Brenda Fyfe

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