

The rapid expansion of technology in everyday life has meant that the tools available to early childhood educators to use in pedagogical documentation are many. The early childhood sector has responded enthusiastically to their arrival and a lot of documentation in children's programs reflects some use of photography. This makes sense. Photographs can be gathered over a period of time and can evidence development. They are also excellent for demonstrating how children participate and what they produce.

PHOTOGRAPHS

—a window to take a look at children's learning

Photography without a rich narrative to accompany it is not enough. It is the metadata around the image that enriches the documentation. It is the case that too often photography of children is valued only for the decorative, for the potential of display and as such we are deprived of realising its true potential. We have begun to assume that photographs by themselves reflect learning.

In the early childhood sector the narratives accompanying the photographs matter more than the existence of the photo in the first place. The process of photographing young children's learning and development has increased and our reliance on the digital has been at the cost of the words.

Photographic documentation of children's work, experiences and activities provides families and educators with valuable information about children's learning, as well as opportunities to discuss learning. Technology is a powerful tool for documenting. The use of photography to document children's learning in early learning services is now well entrenched and it would be difficult to find a care and education service that does not rely on some form of photography. There is a lot of value in this. When someone stops to take a photograph of a child or their work they are communicating a powerful message to children: you and what you are doing matters.

Our capacity to provide rich, informative narratives to accompany photographs needs further development if it is to be used to effectively support families and educators to fully understand how children are learning and the progress in their learning over time.

Robust pedagogical documentation offers educators the opportunity to become co-constructors of knowledge with children. The book *The hundred languages in ministries* (Gambetti & Gandini, 2016) provides examples of brief visual narratives. The power of the photograph and the accompanying narrative is clear. It invites educators to consider:

- What do we want to understand?
- What theories can I see in practice?
- What do I want to find out more about?

In the ministry *Francesco and the paper tube* (Gambetti & Gandini, 2016, p. 8), educators can clearly read and see the course of action and the complexities of the context, as the protagonist Francesco seeks to understand why his markers have not come out of the tube. This is powerful and reminds educators that 'Documentation is not about finding answers but generating questions' (Filippini, in Turner & Wilson, 2010, p. 9).

Documentation must provide a window into the learning and development that had occurred—rather than a simple:

Today we went to the zoo. You had a great time and really liked the butterfly enclosure. We had a great day!

Try a descriptive narrative ...

Today we went on our excursion to the zoo. We have spent a long time planning this excursion including making a list of all the animals we wanted to see. Do you remember what you had on your list?

One of the animals you wanted to see was the butterflies. Maybe this was because we have recently shared reading The very hungry caterpillar or maybe it was because you like bugs and spend a lot of time at kindergarten with your magnifying glass trying to find them under the rocks and logs in the playground.

You were the first person through the door and hundreds of butterflies swirled around your head. You did not mind them fluttering around your head and landing on your hand. Some of your friends thought the enclosure was too hot, but you told us that butterflies like warm weather and that is why we only see them in summer. We noticed that the butterflies landed a lot on your hand and you told me that it was because you had pear juice on them and that butterflies like sweet things. I wondered how you know this.

You spent a lot of time looking closely at the butterflies and you noticed that they have beautiful patterns on their

wings. I asked you how you thought they got those patterns and you said that the 'patterns get put on when they are caterpillars, before they get born'. I think this might be true. I think that we should try and find out more about this. I want you to help me think about how we might do that?

When I look at this photograph of you I can see how hard you are concentrating as you try and gently touch the branch to get a better look. You were very careful not to touch the butterflies. I don't know what you are thinking as you look at them but I can see that you are getting a very close look. I think that you probably know more about butterflies after seeing them today.

The butterflies stayed on that leaf for a long time and you spent a long time looking at them. You asked me to take a picture of you. Perhaps we can print this picture and take a closer look at those wings together.

This narrative and the accompanying photo give value to, and makes explicit, the visible nature of the individual or group understanding. As I was recently reminded on a trip to Reggio Emilia—if it's visible, it's shareable!

It is useful for educators to begin to build word banks rich with adjectives that can be built on and used to document useful and detailed narratives to describe children's development, behaviour and dispositions.

It is time to pay attention to the written word to enable educators to make the link between documentation and children's learning. When we become aware of the learning and its value, we can see the assessment possibilities. You cannot document without assessing. Narratives that accompany our photographs can provide a vital opportunity—one that enables us to revisit and assess.

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References

- Gambetti, A., & Gandini, L. (2016). *The hundred languages in ministries: Told by teachers and children from Reggio Emilia*. Worcester, MA: Davis Publications.
- Turner, T., & Wilson, D. (2010). Reflections on documentation: A discussion with thought leaders from Reggio Emilia. *Theory into Practice*, 49, 5–13.