Documentation as a Tool for Co-constructing Situated Communities of Learners:

A Case Study of Early Years Educational Environments

in Reggio Emilia and Western Australia.

PhD RESEARCH PROPOSAL

by

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RESEARCH PROPOSAL

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Contents:

A. Proposed Study

(i) Title

Documentation as a Tool for Co-constructing Situated Communities of Learners: A Case Study of Early Years Educational Environments in Reggio Emilia and Western Australia.

(ii) Aims

The present study aims to develop understanding of both *how* the personal and collective culture of schools is developed through processes of pedagogical documentation, and *how* the wider cultural context situates this development. In order to achieve this twofold aim, the study will consider the extent to which documentation contributes to creating a 'community of learners'. The study will involve qualitative ethnographic case studies of naturally occurring events in pre-primary school environments in the internationally renowned Municipal Preschools of Reggio Emilia, Italy, and in 'Reggio inspired' pre-primary schools in Western Australia.

(iii) The Research Context

The Reggio Emilia 'Educational Project'

Over the past forty years, educators in the municipal infant-toddler centres and pre-schools of the city of Reggio Emilia, Italy, have been engaged in what they define as '*an educational project'* (http://zerosei.comune.re.it/index.htm): the evolving development of an innovative approach to the education of young children. This approach is strongly embedded in socio-cultural and constructivist theories of child development, in the progressive pedagogical theories of John Dewey and others, and in the cultural context of a city with a strong history of participatory democracy and civic community (Putnam, 1993, cited in Edwards et. al, 1998a). The Reggio Emilia *'pedagogy of relationships and listening'* (Rinaldi, 2001a) is based on an image of the young child as a competent, intelligent social being from birth. This strong image of childhood sustains an innovative pedagogy which encourages educators to focus on enhancing the competencies and respecting the rights of young children, rather than focusing on meeting their needs (Malaguzzi, 1994). The pedagogy is strongly rooted in practice, and is the result of many years of collaborative research on teaching and learning processes with young children, carried out by Prof. Loris Malaguzzi, the founder and mentor, and by teachers, 'pedagogistas' (pedagogical coordinators) and 'atelieristas' (art studio teachers) in the schools. In recent years, the schools have participated in wider research studies, amongst which stands out the 'Making Learning Visible' project carried out in association with the Harvard Project Zero research team, and coordinated by Prof. Howard Gardner (Project Zero and Reggio Children, 2001).

The 'Reggio Emilia Educational Project' enjoys an unprecedented visibility throughout the world. Reggio networks are established and thriving in areas of the world as culturally diverse as Sweden, Korea, Japan, China, The United States, South America, Australia, and New Zealand. The 'Reggio Approach', as the insights of the Reggio Emilia educators are most commonly referred to, presents a unique challenge to teachers interested in implementing its insights in schools throughout the world: the educators in Reggio Emilia have long maintained that their schools do not present a model to imitate, but rather an inspiration for thought and change in educational environments in diverse cultural contexts. The strong socio-cultural perspective of the approach is a deterrent to conceiving of the educational project as a model. The educators in Reggio Emilia maintain that their approach is strongly embedded in their own cultural context and is continuously evolving, therefore they suggest that early years educational environments throughout the world, rather than striving for imitation, should be inspired to reflect on their own cultural context and 'find their own Reggio'. It may be suggested therefore that the greatest strength and challenge of the 'Reggio Emilia Educational Project' lies in the encouragement it offers to educators and scholars to deconstruct culturally-constructed assumptions on the nature of childhood and of education in the early years: 'encountering powerful ideas and educational practices with a spirit of self-reflection can help to identify and understand what lies beneath our classroom practices' (Mardell, 2001, p.281).

One of the most significant tools for the *'cultural diffusion'* (Edwards et al, 1998b) of the Reggio Emilia Educational Project has been the travelling exhibition 'The Hundred Languages of Children'. Since its first version shown in Reggio Emilia in 1980, the exhibit has visited many cities throughout Europe and North America, as well as Japan, Hong Kong, South America, Israel, and Australia, and continues to travel the world with showings planned in the future for Turkey, Singapore, Thailand, New Zealand, and South Africa (Reggio Children, 1996a, http://zerosei.comune.re.it/inter/100exhibit.htm). The exhibition was created collaboratively by Reggio Emilia educators, with the main aim of informing both public and professional audiences of their 'educational story' (Edwards et al, 1998a). The exhibition visited Perth in 2001, further sparking a growing interest in the implementation of the Reggio insights in Western Australian educational environments, and prompting the creation of network groups, the organization of conferences and workshops, and the diffusion of reflection within schools. Currently, many pre-primary schools and some primary schools throughout Western Australia are promoting their programs as *'Reggio inspired'*, a term that can be a strong marketing tool as well as an expression of the thoughtful reflection of educators on their practices and assumptions. The 'Hundred Languages of Children' exhibit, as a form of communication, is a strong and unique example of what the Reggio educators call *pedagogical documentation* (Edwards et al., 1998a). In a personal communication (December, 2004) on the issue of the diffusion of the 'Reggio Approach' to early years educational environments in Western Australia, Sandra Piccinini, President of the 'Scuole e Nidi dell'Infanzia, Istituzione del Comune di Reggio Emilia' [Pre-schools and Infant-toddler Centres, Institution of the Municipality of Reggio Emilia] expressed an interest to know whether and how these environments made use of documentation in their practice. This interest provides a pragmatic basis for the development of the present study.

Harvard Project Zero, an independent research group at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, and educators in the Municipal Infant-toddler centres and Preschools of Reggio Emilia joined together in 1997 'to explore questions about the nature of learning in groups and how documentation can make that learning visible' (Project Zero and Reggio Children, 2001, p.19). Pedagogical documentation as practiced in the Reggio Emilia schools is: 'visible listening' (Rinaldi, 2001a, p.83); a 'construction of traces' (Rinaldi, 2001a, p.83); a 'social construction and an interpretation' (Dahlberg, 1999, p.32). It 'offers a research orientation, creates cultural artefacts, and serves as a collective memory' (Krechevsky, 2001, pp.259). Documentation in Reggio Emilia schools often takes the form of: aesthetically stunning wall panels detailing learning processes; published books with the children's work and voices (e.g. Reggio Children, 1995a, 1995b, 1995c, 1996a, 1996b, 1997, 2000a, 2000b, 2002); and exhibits open to the wider public. As Forman & Fyfe (1998, p.241) suggest, 'the intent of documentation is to explain, not merely to display'. Colourful displays are a common sight in pre-primary schools. They often show the finished *product* of learning and may be accompanied by a short caption to describe the learning activity (e.g. 'Observational Paintings'). In contrast, documentation, which has explanation and interpretation as its means and purpose, reveals the *process* of children's learning and makes that process visible to all in the community. The teacher who displays will often choose one piece of work for each child (in a quest for equality), and will arrange the products on the walls with the intent to decorate the classroom and value children's individual work. The teacher who documents aims to interpret and explain process, not to display product, therefore she/he will: record and transcribe children's conversations as they are engaged in learning; take digital photographs during the learning process; and collect significant examples of the children's work throughout different phases of an activity (planning through completion). Documentation as a finished product might take the varied form of wall panels, journals, books, and/or exhibits, and might include: selected photographs with captions detailing the teacher's interpretation of the learning process; excerpts of the children's conversations sustained by teacher interpretations and explanations; preliminary drawings; and the finished product (e.g. the observational painting). Documentation can then be used by teachers to: plan further learning on the basis of the learning they have observed and recorded; assess children's learning, understanding, and knowledge; and to share with the children to reflect on and remember their learning (a tool for 'metacognition' – 'thinking about one's one thinking, Bruner, 1996). Documentation, similarly to qualitative research, gives voice to young learners and informs the community of the power of their learning – it shows what lies behind 'play'. In addition, documentation moves away from a focus on the individual child, towards a recording of group processes. Therefore, the teacher who documents may be perceived as a qualitative researcher, selecting, interpreting, and explaining information on the children's learning, and finally making that learning visible to others.

The Harvard Project Zero and Reggio Emilia research team found that 'through systematic documentation of children's learning, teachers and children create the artefacts that become a school's culture' (Krechevsky and Mardell, 2001, pp.293-294). Prof. Carla Rinaldi, pedagogical coordinator of the Reggio Emilia pre-schools and for many years a collaborator of Prof. Malaguzzi in the evolving development of the Educational Project,

states (2001a, p.79): 'I believe that documentation is a substantial part of the goal that has always characterized our experience: the search for meaning – to find the meaning of school, or rather, to construct the meaning of school, as a place that plays an active role in the children's search for meaning and our own search for meaning (and shared meanings)'. One of the challenges posed to other researchers by the Harvard Project Zero team as a development of their own research is to observe the implications of pedagogical documentation in cultures other than the Italian and the North American: 'What are the implications of these propositions for learning groups in other cultures and contexts? … Which elements of this culture can be usefully built on in other contexts?' (Krechevsky, 2001, p.267). Accordingly, the aim of the present study is to respond to this scholarly challenge by investigating processes of documentation in pre-schools in the Italian and the Australian contexts.

Documentation in Australia

'Documentation … should also suit the culture in which it is situated'.
(Robertson, 1999, p.48)

In the only book published on the implications of the Reggio Emilia Educational Project for Australian contexts (in contrast to several from the North American perspective) Jan Millikan (2003) records the reflection of a discussion group of teachers on the role of documentation in their contexts: 'Participants in the discussion group said they had found that the pedagogical documentation in the Reggio Emilia context was difficult to explain to others. This is largely because the purpose of observation and documentation for many educators in Australian preschools is to contribute to the developmental records of individual children' (p.102). This observation reflects a cultural difference in the approach to documentation: an individualistic perspective (Australia) versus a collectivist perspective (Reggio Emilia), and exemplifies the challenge facing Australian teachers aiming to be 'Reggio inspired' within their cultural context. This challenge offers a further pragmatic basis for the present study.

It is assumed in the present study that 'Reggio inspired' schools in Western Australia will have some understanding of the processes of documentation as used in the Reggio Emilia schools. Therefore, the aim of the research is to reveal _how_ the interpretations and uses of documentation in the two cultural contexts are related, and conversely how, through documentation, schools create their own culture, which is embedded in the wider context of which they are a part – _how_ the culture of documentation suits the cultural context in which it is situated (Robertson, 1999). By incorporating documentation into their practice, teachers in Western Australia have made the choice to be 'Reggio inspired'. Therefore, the research asks:

• How does this choice influence the culture of their schools?
• In addition, how does the Australian cultural context situate the interpretation of the 'Reggio inspired' documentation by participants in the community of learners?

Rinaldi (2001b, p.38) suggests: 'School is a place of culture – that is, a place where a personal and collective culture is developed that influences the social, political, and values context and, in turn, is influenced by this context in a relationship of deep and authentic reciprocity'. To reiterate, the present study aims to observe both *how* the personal and collective culture of schools is developed through documentation, and *how* the wider cultural context situates this development. In order to achieve this twofold aim, the study will consider the extent to which documentation contributes to creating a 'community of learners'.

In a *'community of learners'* adults and children enjoy 'shared and interested participation in joint endeavours' (Rogoff et al., 2001, p.8). An educational environment may be interpreted as community of learners when adults and children engage in *'intersubjectivity'* – 'how humans come to know each other's minds' (Bruner, 1996, p.12). The concept of 'intersubjectivity' is at odds with a 'transmission' metaphor of teaching and learning, where an all-knowing teacher delivers 'knowledge' to passive learners. In fact, in a community of learners, 'both children and adults engage in learning activities in a collaborative way, with varying but co-ordinated responsibilities to foster children's learning … this perspective eliminates the dichotomy of adult-controlled learning versus children-controlled learning: it substitutes a quite different arrangement in which children and adults are partners rather than adversaries' (Rogoff et al., 2001, p.7). The concept of 'community of learners' is closely linked to the concept of 'community of practice': in fact, as Lave and Wenger (1991, p.98) theorise, membership in a community of practice implies 'participation in an activity system about which participants share understandings concerning what they are doing and what that means in their lives and for their communities'. Similarly, 'developing a community of learners requires the participation of the people involved in inventing and adapting customs and traditions, who learn from their efforts to develop the principles and practices for themselves' (Rogoff et al., 2001, p.10). Therefore, participation in a community of learners necessitates 'intersubjectivity' (sharing understanding) between adults and children. Rogoff (2003, p.80) cites John Dewey (1916, p.5): 'There is more than a verbal tie between the words common, community, and communication. [People] live in a community in virtue of the things which they have in common; and communication is they way in which they come to possess things in common'. Documentation is a form of communication (Edwards et al., 1998a); therefore it may provide a tool for educational environments to 'possess things in common' and, furthermore, a tool for adults and children to co-construct a community of learners. Membership in a community of practice (and, therefore, in a community of learners) necessitates *participation* (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Rogoff et al., 2001; Rogoff, 2003); a crucial resource for increasing participation is *'transparency'* (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p.91). As Lave and Wenger (1991, p.105) theorise, 'the notion of transparency … is a way of organizing activities that makes their meaning visible'. Project Zero and Reggio Children (2001) found that documentation makes learning visible; therefore documentation may be perceived as 'transparency', a crucial resource for increasing participation in a community of learners. In addition, Bruner (1996) theorises that *'externalisation'* (the creation of collective 'oeuvres') helps 'make a community' (p.23), and therefore contributes to the 'interactional tenet' of education – the establishment of communities of mutual learners. There is a strong relationship between the concept of 'transparency' and the

concept of 'externalisation': from the perspective of externalisation, documentation may be perceived as a 'collective oeuvre' and may be seen to contribute to 'making a community' in early years educational environments.

The fundamental questions are:

- How is the community 'made' through documentation?
- And how is it 'made' in different cultural contexts?

Rinaldi (2001a, p.84) suggests on documentation: 'while each fragment is imbued with the subjectivity of the documenter, it is offered to the interpretive subjectivity of others in order to be known or re-known, created and recreated, also as a collective knowledge building event'. This implies that the role of all participants in the community is important in making sense of documentation. Consistently with this view, Turkanis (2001, p. 91) suggests: 'in a community of learners, everyone has a part to play in supporting the learning process'. The present study takes a similar perspective and takes account of teachers', children's and parents' voices to answer the following questions:

- How is documentation offered to the interpretive subjectivity of others?
- How do the participants create collective knowledge?
- To what extent does this contribute to creating a community of learners in early years educational environments in Reggio Emilia and in Western Australia?

Rankin (1992, p.39) comments: 'Establishing a sense of we is an important part of any project in Reggio'. The present study poses the question:

- How is a 'sense of we' established through documentation?

Rogoff et al. (2001, p.241) suggest that 'how principles [of learning in a community] are used must vary from one community to another': the present study aims to adopt an ethnographic approach to the study of educational environments in Reggio Emilia and Western Australia in order to answer the question:

- How do principles of learning in a community vary from one cultural context to the other?

The study's perspective

Bruner (1996) argues for the *'situatedness'* of learning; similarly, Lave and Wenger (1991, p.97) suggest that 'a learning curriculum is essentially situated'. The present study, by acknowledging the fundamental role of culture in shaping experience, takes a 'situated' perspective of communities of learners, recognizing that educational environments both create their own culture ('situate themselves') and are 'situated' by their context. The concepts of 'situatedness' and 'community of learners' are developed in the tradition of the *sociocultural* developmental theory of Lev S. Vygotsky (1962). The sociocultural perspective views cultural processes as inherent in development: children are 'socialized' into a culture and into the use of 'cultural tools' such as language. From this perspective, documentation may be interpreted as a 'cultural tool' for educational environments. The sociocultural perspective views learning as 'a process of enculturation into a community of practice' (Cobb, 1999 p.135) and 'locates learning in co-participation in cultural practices' (Cobb, 1999, p.137).

The present research takes a similar perspective to the study of documentation as a tool for 'enculturation' in pre-school environments. As Bruner (1996, p.4) suggests: 'on this [culturalist] view, learning and thinking are always situated in a cultural setting and always dependent upon the utilization of cultural resources'. In addition, 'culturalism takes as its first premise that education is not an island, but part of the continent of culture. It asks first what function education serves in the culture and what role it plays in the lives of those who operate within it' (Bruner, 1996 p.11). The present study adopts a similar perspective by taking account of the interpretations of 'those who operate within' the cultural environments of schools.

As Gardner (2001, p.339) suggests, 'We travel to learn about other places, other people, other ways of doing things. But of course in the end, the ultimate reason – and the ultimate reward – for travel is to learn more about oneself'. The ultimate purpose for the present study is: to learn more about the potential of documentation to increase the visibility of early years environments in Australia, for the benefit of children and childhood, as well as teachers and parents in educational communities. As Fraser (2000, p.7) suggests 'making early childhood services more visible and relevant within the community' is a fundamental aim for the future of early childhood education in Australia. The issue of increasing visibility for early childhood services appears to have been successfully addressed in Reggio Emilia, as exemplified by the international interest in the schools, through diffusion of their pedagogical documentation. The present study asks:

- Could documentation provide a crucial tool for increasing visibility of Western Australian early years educational environments?

The study's substantial and original contribution to knowledge

The present study proposes to be of significant value and use to children, teachers, and others in the Australian early years educational community, by:

- Making visible Western Australian practitioners' efforts at reflecting on their practice through the Reggio Emilia 'mirror' (Mardell, 2001).
- Offering a framework for understanding to those practitioners who wish to reflect more on culture-sensitive and pragmatic ways of implementing the approach.
- Providing the Australian and international educational communities with a much needed perspective on the Reggio Emilia Educational Project which establishes a relationship between educational practices and Italian and Australian cultural contexts.

In addition, the study proposes to be of significant value to the educational community in Reggio Emilia by:

- Extending their reflections on the power of their pedagogical documentation.
- Offering a further cultural perspective on their innovative insights.
- Making visible _how_ educational environments in Australia have been inspired by their Educational Project to promote innovation in schools and to develop pedagogical documentation within their own cultural context.

By conceptualising documentation as a powerful tool for increasing visibility of educational environments, the study proposes to be of significant value to children and to practitioners. Documentation reveals the power of the child: the present study, as a 'documentation of the documentation' within the scholarly tradition, offers itself as a tool to further promote the image of an intelligent, competent, strong child with dignity and rights.

In addition, the study proposes to extend the knowledge on documentation provided by the Project Zero 'Making Learning Visible' research (Project Zero and Reggio Children, 2001) by recasting some of its insights in the Australian cultural context. More significantly, the study aims to fill a gap in the knowledge of the applications of the Reggio Emilia Educational Project in Australia. An extensive review of the literature conducted over the past six months has revealed that while there exists a significant amount of literature recording the implementation of the pedagogical insights of Reggio Emilia educators into cultural contexts in North America, there exists little knowledge on the cultural diffusion in Australian pre-primary contexts, with the exception of Millikan (2003), and of the proceedings from the 'Unpacking Conferences' held at the Macquarie University Institute of Early Childhood (Fleet and Robertson 1997-2003). Ardzejewska and Coutts (2004) published an investigation into Australian primary teachers' perceptions of the Reggio Emilia philosophy. Their study however was limited to teacher questionnaires and did not include naturalistic observation. The present study proposes to more widely contribute to knowledge in the area by relating processes of documentation to the co-construction of communities of learners situated in cultural context. The review of the literature has failed to reveal any studies with this particular approach. The results of the study, owing to its cross-cultural focus, will be of interest to the international community of researchers in the sociocultural and ethnographic traditions in education and developmental psychology. The implications for assessment, planning, and visibility for educational environments will be pragmatically useful for teachers, and informative for school administrators and policy makers struggling to understand how the approach fits into state requirements for educational practice.

The interpretive, multiple case study method (Merriam, 1998), with its narrative approach, will allow the research to be interesting and accessible to practitioners, as well as making their efforts visible to the wider community. The in-depth analysis of multiple cases will ensure results of wide interest which are pragmatically useful, and amenable to further interpretation.

B. Research plan

(i) The Research Questions

The research aims to answer two fundamental and interrelated questions, each of which is subdivided into more specific questions to guide the data collection process and analysis. The related nature of the general questions is inspired by Krechevsky and Mardell's (2001, p. 294) observation, in the context of the Project Zero research, that educational environments 'not only transmit culture and knowledge, they create them'.

General Question 1:

1) How does pedagogical documentation contribute to constructing communities of learners situated in cultural context?

    i) How do children/ teachers/ parents in early years environments in Reggio Emilia and in Western Australia experience/ give meaning to/ interpret/ construct documentation?

    ii) How do children's/ teachers'/ parents' interpretations of documentation contribute to situating learning processes in cultural context?

    iii) To what extent do these interpretations contribute to constructing situated communities of learners?

    iv) To what extent does documentation contribute to constructing a shared image of the child in a cultural context?

General Question 2:

2) How do culture and context situate co-construction of the uses, processes, and interpretations of documentation?

    i) How are the cultural and contextual histories of early years educational environments in Reggio Emilia and in Western Australia related? How did the Reggio 'provocations' influence the Western Australian context?

    ii) How are the images of the child and of childhood held in Reggio Emilia and in Western Australia related to each other? How have Western Australian images been influenced by the Reggio 'provocations'?

    iii) How are interpretations of documentation in Reggio Emilia and in Western Australia related to each other?

    iv) How could documentation provide a crucial tool for increasing visibility of early years educational environments in Western Australia?

(ii) The Research Method

Research design

The study takes a socio-cultural perspective on the naturalistic, ethnographic study of teaching and learning processes in social context. The methodological framework is qualitative and interpretive. Accordingly, the search is for the interpretation of meanings in social contexts that have not been transformed or manipulated, and the chosen strategy of investigation is the case study.

The reason behind the choice of a *naturalistic* study lies in the nature of the phenomenon observed. The present research takes cultural groups and processes as a central focus, and as Punch (1998, p.161) highlights, 'to understand any group, or any culturally significant act, event, or process it is necessary to study the behaviour in its natural setting'. A fundamental aim of the present study, as outlined in the introduction, is cultural interpretation. As Punch (1998, p.160) suggests, commitment to cultural interpretation is an 'overarching characteristic of the *ethnographic* approach' [my italics]. As outlined above, the research adopts a sociocultural theoretical framework. Accordingly 'an ethnography is a sociocultural interpretation of the data' (Merriam, 1998, p.14). In *qualitative* enquiry, 'the researcher's goal is to gain a holistic overview of the context under study' (Punch, 1998, p.149); 'qualitative enquirers seek what Geertz (1973) has called thick description … they aim beneath manifest behaviour to the meaning events have for those who experience them' (Eisner, 1991, p.35). The present study, in the cultural ethnographic tradition of qualitative research, aims to holistically interpret the activity of others with regard to their shared meaning systems and goals (Rogoff, 2003; Punch 1998). The study aims to reveal the 'voices' of all participants (Eisner, 1991) and to 'illuminate' (Eisner, 1991) meanings and interpretations. As Merriam (1998, p. 4) suggests, 'in *interpretive* research, education is considered to be a process and school is a lived experience' [my italics]; this is consistent with the sociocultural theoretical framework adopted in the present study. As Bruner (1996, p.6) suggests, 'the meaning making of the culturalist is in principle interpretive'.

The present study aims to present a 'holistic overview' through the application of a *case study* strategy.
The case study method: is anchored in real-life situations (Merriam, 1998); deliberately covers contextual situations (Yin, 2003); is most appropriate for studies which ask how and why questions (Yin, 2003, p.1); prefers a focus on process and understanding (Merriam, 1998); and offers insights and illuminates meanings (Merriam, 1998). For these reasons, and for the assumptions inherent in the socio-cultural, interpretivist framework adopted in the study, the case study appears to be the most appropriate investigative strategy to answer the research questions. As Merriam (1998, p.41) suggests, 'the case study results in a rich and holistic account of the phenomenon … educational processes, problems, and programs can be examined to bring about understanding that in turn can affect and perhaps even improve practice'. A fundamental aim of the present study is indeed to provide a rich and holistic account of educational processes of documentation, in order to bring about understanding that may affect and perhaps even improve practice.

The multiple-case strategy and cross-cultural approach are used not so much with an aim to *comparing* environments in Reggio Emilia and Western Australia, but rather in an effort to *interpret and relate* them to each other in order to highlight how culture and context situate the processes, uses, and interpretations of documentation: 'ethnographic observations of particular cases (events, communities) can be brought together in ways that maintain attention to the meaning within the individual cases while also examining patterns of similarities and differences across them' (Rogoff and Angelillo, 2002, p.221). In addition, 'a focus on dynamic configurations of related practices of cultural communities shifts culture to ways of thinking and doing, rather than categorical identities of individuals or groups' (Rogoff and Angelillo, 2002, p.222). By focusing on the 'dynamic configurations of related practices' of pedagogical documentation in the cultural early years

educational communities of Reggio Emilia and Western Australia, the individual case studies and the ensuing cross-case analysis aim to investigate the cultural 'ways of thinking' about documentation together with the cultural 'ways of doing' documentation, and their relationship to the co-construction of situated communities of learners, not the 'categorical identities of individuals or groups'. The study is based on the assumption that culture is not an independent variable emerging from the analysis, but rather a medium in the experience of the participants, which reveals the 'situatedeness' (Bruner, 1996) of their activity. The study aims not to overlook the 'mediating effect of culture' (Cole, 1998). In fact, as Cole argues, cross-cultural studies overlook the mediating effect of culture when 'interpretations [are] not grounded in an analysis of culturally organized activities' (Cole, 1998, p.45). The research aims, therefore, to be grounded in the analysis of the culturally organized activity of documentation, and to interpret documentation as a 'culturally grounded activity', occurring in interdependent environmental settings, in order to understand and interpret the 'mediating effect of culture' in the experiences of children and adults in the Italian and Australian contexts.

Role of the researcher

'You never come in an isolated way; you always come with pieces of the world attached to you'.
(Malaguzzi, 1994, p.53)

Reflexivity, to acknowledge that 'the knower is part of the matrix of what is known' (DuBois, 1983, cited in Tindall, 1994, p.151), is a fundamental part of qualitative research. In particular, from a sociocultural perspective, the process of reflexivity is an acknowledgement by the researcher that 'all findings are constructions, personal views of reality, open to change and reconstruction' (Tindall, 1994, p.151). Reflexivity in qualitative research increases validity: 'we arrive at the closest we can get to an objective account of the phenomenon in question through an exploration of the ways in which the subjectivity of the researcher has structured the way it is defined in the first place' (Parker, 1994, p.13). Therefore, in an effort to make explicit how my understandings were formed, and what 'pieces of the world' I bring attached to me, a reflexive research journal will form a part of the data collected for this study.

I believe it is a significant asset to the present study that I bring Italian, Australian, and early childhood teacher 'pieces of the world attached to me'. I was born in Italy and grew up in Rome, bilingual in English (my American mother) and Italian (my father). For five years I taught pre-school in an International School in Rome, within a 'Reggio inspired' program. I came to Australia two years ago and I taught Italian to 3-12 year-old children at a Montessori School in Perth. I am a dual Italian-American citizen and an Australian resident – I truly feel a citizen of the world, with an awareness of the way both culture and context have shaped my own personal experience. I am that teacher who was inspired by the Reggio Emilia Educational Project and struggled to understand how it best fit within my existing practice and school context. I am that teacher who believes in the power of the young child and in increasing the visibility of early childhood services. I have a background of a multicultural and innovative teaching and learning experience. Most importantly, I will be able to relate to all participants in my study in their home language, to listen, to initiate and sustain conversations in

Italian and English with young children, teachers, parents, and policy makers in Reggio Emilia and in Australia, and to engage in an understanding of the way cultural contexts and assumptions structure the educational environments.

The study sample

The present study will adopt *'purposeful sampling'*, which is 'based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned' (Merriam, p.61). There are currently twenty-one pre-schools operated by the Municipality of Reggio Emilia. It is considered that a sample of two pre-schools will be an appropriate case for the present study. In Western Australia, purposeful sampling will be adopted in order to seek access to those schools within the Perth metro area (for logistic reasons) that are most involved in documentation from a Reggio Emilia perspective. While it is assumed that not all schools will be willing to participate, it is also assumed that those who are most closely linked to a Reggio philosophy will share an aim towards visibility. A sample of two pre-primary schools (or pre-primary environments within a larger school) will be considered appropriate.

Within both Reggio Emilia and Western Australian cases, it is inappropriate at this stage to determine the exact number of participants in the study. The data collection process is of an emergent nature, and the naturalistic observation process assumes that all children, teachers, and parents who have expressed consent to participate in the study within the environment are participants. The data collection process will therefore drive within-case sampling: as the observations proceed, it is assumed that the nature of the involvement of participants in the environments with documentation processes will emerge, and on these participants and their interpretations the study will focus further in order to obtain more specific understanding.

The cross-cultural approach and multiple-case sampling adopted allow the present study to be 'theoretically diverse', to 'capture enough variation', and to 'encourage transfer of findings' (Punch, 1998, p.261). As Punch (1998, p.261) argues, 'the concept of *transferability* is often preferred to generalizability in qualitative writing' [my italics]. Therefore, while the present study does not propose to be generalizable in the positivist sense of the term, the case study strategy will allow for the research to be 'thickly described, so that the reader can judge the transferability of findings to other situations', and the ensuing concepts propose to be 'at a sufficient level of abstraction to permit their application to other settings' (Punch, 1998, p.261). The research aims to develop theoretical propositions 'which link concepts or factors within the case' (Punch, 1998, p.154). As Punch (1998, p.154) suggests, 'these [propositions] can then be assessed for their applicability and transferability to other situations'. Developing propositions is one of the ways in which a case study can produce generalizable results (Punch, 1998).

Data Collection

In order to maximise validity of findings, the data collection process will involve:

- *Data triangulation* ('collecting accounts from different participants involved in the chosen setting, from different stages in the activity of the setting and … from different sites of the setting', Tindall, 1994, p.146)
- *Method triangulation* ('the use of different methods to collect information', Tindall, 1994, p.147)
- *Theoretical triangulation* (the embracement of multi-theories, Tindall, 1994).

Data Triangulation:

Participants in each case will be:

- *Children*
- *Teachers*
- *Parents*

The extended naturalistic observation process will allow for collection of data from 'different stages in the activity of the setting'. In addition, the multiple case study approach assumes 'different sites of the setting'.

Method Triangulation:

Data collection methods include:

- *Naturalistic Observation*

Naturalistic observation will entail the collection of field notes and will include a focus on the interactions occurring between children, between adults and children, and between adults around the processes of collecting, observing, and interpreting documentation.

- *Audio-recordings of naturally occurring events*

Audio-recordings will similarly focus on the interactions occurring between children, between adults and children, and between adults around the processes of collecting, observing, and interpreting documentation. Audio-recordings will be collected to supplement field notes. Conversations between participants will be taped and transcribed in full.

- *Digital photographs of naturally occurring events*

Digital photographs will similarly focus on the interactions occurring between children, between adults and children, and between adults around the processes of collecting, observing, and interpreting documentation. Photos will be collected to supplement and extend field notes and audio-recordings.

- *Naturally occurring conversations with adults and children*

These conversations are intended as those spontaneously occurring (unplanned and unstructured) between myself and adults and children. Selected conversations will focus on the experience and interpretation of documentation, and will be taped and transcribed in full.

- *Semi-structured focus-group interviews with children and adults*

Focus-group is considered the most appropriate form of interviewing for the present study as it is a method consistent with the focus on collaboration and collegiality in teaching and learning that is a fundamental part: of the Reggio Emilia philosophy (Project Zero, 2001); of a 'community of learners' approach (Rogoff et al., 2001); and of sociocultural theory. Focus-group interviewing provides further access to 'group culture', which is an aim of the present study. One of the aims of the interview process for this study is to highlight issues

specific to the cultural context for further investigation through observation, and focus group interviews 'produce data that would be less accessible without the interaction found in a group' (Morgan, 1988, cited in Punch, 1998, p.177). The semi-structured format is the most appropriate to ensure that significant questions posed by the study are addressed, while allowing for participants' views and perspectives to be revealed through an open-ended facilitation of discussion. Interviews with both adults and children will occur in small groups, and will focus on uses and interpretations of documentation (see Appendix 2 for sample list of guiding questions). Interviews will be audio-recorded and transcribed in full.

- *Examples of documentation*

Examples will be selected from the documentation mentioned in field notes and audio-recordings, in order to support analysis.

- *Researcher's reflexive journal*

The reflexive journal will focus on recording my feelings, perspectives and experiences within the cultural contexts, in order to assess how these may have influenced data collection and analysis.

Theoretical triangulation:

The study is not locked in one theoretical tradition, but instead it develops and relates insights from: educational theory, research, and practice; developmental theory; the tradition of cross-cultural ethnographic research. In addition, the study interprets and integrates scholarly and practitioner theory, research and practice from the diverse cultural contexts and traditions of Italy, The United States, and Australia.

Tentative plan for data collection:

It is envisaged that the data collection process will proceed following an emergent framework, during a time period of twelve weeks (three months) per case setting, for a total of six months in Italy and six months in Western Australia (see Timeline):

(1) *Initial naturalistic observations* in each case setting (tentatively weeks 1-3) will focus on 'finding a feel' for the school culture, classroom dynamics, and interactions. The aims of the initial observations are: to identify those participants who are mostly involved in producing, using, and interpreting documentation within the school environment; to allow participants to feel comfortable in my presence, thereby minimising the effects of the 'observer's paradox' (Labov, 1970, cited in Swann, 1994, p.27); to participate in the culture of the school and establish collaborative relationships. Initial observations will structure:

(2) *Second round of observations* (tentatively weeks 3-7) will focus on episodes of interaction around documentation by both adults and children. The aim of the second round of observations is to develop understanding about processes of documentation in each cultural case. Following the second round of observations:

(3) *Interviews* with both children and adults (tentatively weeks 8-10) will focus on questions relating to the aim of the study (Appendix 2) and on emerging questions related to issues of particular interest in each cultural environment (not predicable at this stage). Context-specific questions will have emerged from the

second round of observations, and are expected to further develop in the collaborative and collegial context of the interviews. Following focus-group interviews:

(4) *Final round of observations* (tentatively weeks 10-12) will focus on issues of interest that have emerged from the interviews. Issues to focus on will be selected according to the responses of adults and children to interview questions, taking account of their context-specific questions, interests, or concerns. Interpretation and analysis of responses is expected to reveal issues from the perspective of participants that may not have been transparent to me. Accordingly, the final round of observations is designed to allow for the opportunity of investigating these context-specific issues, in order to further 'give voice' to participants and 'illuminate' their meanings and interpretations.

Audio-recordings, photographs, and examples of documentation will be collected throughout the process.

Data Analysis

It is envisaged that data will be divided into three subgroups according to its nature:

1. *Sub-group 1* will include data from: observations, audio-recordings of naturally occurring events, and digital photographs. The data collected through these methods is considered to be closely related, due to its naturalistic essence and to the focus on processes of documentation (audio-recordings and photographs supplement field notes).
2. *Sub-group 2* will include data from: naturally occurring conversations and interviews. The data collected through these methods is considered to be closely related, due to my own involvement in questioning and in facilitating discussion.
3. *Sub-group 3* will include data from: examples of documentation and reflexive journal. The data collected through these methods is considered to be closely related, due to its narrative and 'documentative' nature.

Following division into sub-groups, *thematic analysis* will be adopted in order to identify the 'recurring messages that pervade the situation' (Eisner, 1991, p.104). Thematic analysis is a form of 'inductive analysis'; through inductive analysis 'findings emerge out of the data, through the analyst's interactions with the data' (Patton, 2002, p.453). In qualitative analysis, the analyst is required to 'create or adapt concepts relevant to the data rather than to apply a set of pre-established rules' (Merriam, 1998, p.165). Therefore, consistently with the qualitative, interpretive methodological framework adopted in the present study, themes will emerge from the data rather than being pre-specified: 'themes are concepts indicated by the data' (Merriam, 1998, p.179); 'themes are distillations of what has been encountered' (Eisner, 1991, p.104). It is envisaged that *metaphor* (Miles and Huberman, 1994) will provide a useful tool for developing themes which is consistent with the philosophical and theoretical tradition of this study (Reggio Emilia educators make extensive use of metaphor, as does the Italian theoretical and linguistic tradition). Metaphors are 'ways of connecting findings to theory' as well as 'pattern-making devices' (Miles and Huberman, 1994, p.252). In addition, to enhance transferability of findings, themes 'provide clues or cues to the perception of other situations like the situation

from which the themes were extracted' (Eisner, 1991, p. 104) and, to support validity of the results, 'themes also provide structures for the interpretation and appraisal of the events described' (Eisner, 1991, p.190). In order to support the validity of themes and thereby increase reliability of results, *analyst triangulation* will be employed. Analyst triangulation is the use of multiple analysts to review findings (Patton, 2002). In the present study, analysts will be independent colleagues with an interest in the research findings, and their role will be to analyse the data in order to determine whether they reach similar conclusions in terms of themes and content.

As Eisner (1991, p.191) suggests, 'the thematic structures derived inductively from the material … can provide the conceptual hubs around which the story can be told … the stories told around these thematic situations can then be used as material for a summary account of the story as a whole'. Accordingly, following thematic analysis, a *narrative analysis* will draw together the themes for each case in order to tell the ethnographic story of the cultural environment. The 'stories told around these thematic accounts' will then provide the material for the cross-case analysis: the 'account of the story as a whole'. The ultimate aim of the analysis is indeed, to draw the themes together in order to develop a narrative, a story: to 'marry' concept approaches to story approaches (Miles and Huberman, 1994, p.208).

The voices of children, teachers, and parents will be 'made visible' in the present study through interpretation, as occurs through documentation in Reggio Emilia. The narrative analysis, as such, will be closely linked to the observed and interpreted documentation itself: 'Documentation often has a narrative quality, telling the story of a group's learning experiences' (Project Zero, 2003, p.18). Bruner (1996, p.42) suggests that 'it is only in the narrative mode that one can construct an identity and find a place in one's culture'. The case study strategy is particularly suited to narrative analysis: as Yin (2003, p.120) suggests, 'in most existing case studies, explanation building has occurred in narrative form'. In addition, as Shulman (2004, p.497) suggests: 'A case is a special kind of story; it is a narrative'. The analysis will utilize written, spoken and visual languages, in an attempt to 'reveal the richness of the field in the field's own terms' (MacNaughton et al, 2001, p.134). The 'field's own terms' - as so eloquently expressed by Prof. Loris Malaguzzi in his poem entitled 'No Way. The Hundred *is* There' (Edwards, et al., 1998, pp.2-3) - are the '100 Languages': the multiple and infinite ways children have for constructing meaning. In addition, as developed by Reggio Emilia educators, the 'field's own terms' are the languages of documentation (written, visual, aesthetic, emotional, metaphoric etc.): 'Documentation makes use of multiple languages' (Project Zero, 2003, p.13). In an interpretive, culturally-embedded, narrative, and 'multilingual' form, the analysis and ensuing discussion aim to be consistent with the philosophical underpinnings of the Reggio Emilia educators' pedagogical insights, and therefore will be accessible and interpretable by those most likely to be affected by the results: early years teachers, parents, and policy makers reflecting together on Reggio 'provocations', and through them, young children.

Similarly to the process of data collection, the process of data analysis will employ a 'recursive model', by which 'data are collected, then analysed, then more data collection is done based on the analysis, and so on' (Hatch, 1995, p.127). Merriam (1998, p.162) suggests that 'the right way to analyse data in a qualitative study is to do it simultaneously with data collection'. Accordingly, and in the tradition of qualitative ethnographic

research, the process of data collection and analysis will occur on the field in both Italian and Australian cases, and as such my presence in each field setting will be as extended as the time limit for completion of the study permits (see Timeline). Cross-case analysis will begin once both within-case analyses have been completed.

(iii) Efforts made to ensure that the project does not duplicate work already done

During the past six months, I have conducted an extensive review of the literature in the following areas: the Reggio Emilia Educational Project; applications of the Reggio Emilia Educational Project to Australian contexts; cross-cultural research; sociocultural developmental and educational theory. I have failed to locate any research that utilizes the case study method to investigate how processes of documentation contribute to the co-construction of communities of learners situated in cultural context.

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D. Bibliography

See Appendix 1 for a comprehensive Bibliography list.

E. Facilities

The only 'special equipment' required for the study is: a digital camera, an audio-recorder, and a laptop computer. All of this equipment is already in my possession.

F. Estimated Costs

Photocopying and telephone costs (local) are covered by the Graduate School of Education.

300$ per year offered by the GSE will contribute towards the following expenses:

- Unavailable literature (essential books and journal articles which may not be available at the University Library or through extended interlibrary loan).
- Conference attendance costs

Travel Costs for field work in Italy (January-June 2006):

Return Airline ticket:	2.000 $	
Accommodation & living expenses:	14.000 $	= 9.000 € - 1.500 € per month, for 6 months
TOTAL	16.000 $	

To assist with this expense, I plan to apply for a number of travel funding awards which I am eligible for.

I am prepared to cover the expenses through my University Postgraduate Award funds.

Travel Costs for field work in WA (Jul-Dec 2006):

Costs for travel to settings in the Perth metro area will be covered by my University Postgraduate Award funds.

Conference attendance (2007-2008):

To cover costs for possible presentation of my work at a National or International Conference during the final year of my research, I plan to apply for a number of travel funding awards.

G. Confidentiality

Informed consent will be sought from all participants in the study. The children will be informed of the general reason for my presence in their environment, and their parents' signed consent will be obtained prior to involvement in the study. All data will be treated in a way that respects and protects the confidentiality and anonymity of the children, teachers, and parents involved in the study. Should the schools and participants wish to waive their right to anonymity due to a desire for visibility in the community, this will be considered as appropriate to the underlying aims of the study.

H. Approvals

See Appendix 3: Application to Undertake Research Involving Human Subjects.

I. Appendices

1. Bibliography
2. Sample List of Guiding Interview Questions
3. Application to Undertake Research Involving Human Subjects
4. Information sheets and Consent forms

J. Timeline

July – December 2005

- Chapters:
    1. Introduction
    2. Literature Review
    3. Methods

January – June 2006

- Data collection in Reggio Emilia pre-schools
- Chapters:
    4. Reggio Emilia Case Study

July – December 2006

- Data collection in Western Australian pre-primary schools
- Chapters:
    5. Western Australian Case Study

January – April 2007

- Chapters:
    7. Cross-Case Analysis

May – October 2007

- Chapters:
    7. Discussion
    8. Conclusion, Implications, Recommendations

November 2007 – January 2008

- Thesis Review and Binding

K. References

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