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# Substantiation of the invisible: pedagogical documentation as professional development support

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## ABSTRACT

This study started from a collaborative work developed with a group of educators, who work in an institution that welcomes children from 0 to 6 years. The educators, after participating in a seminar on documentation and evaluation in early childhood education, showed enthusiasm to learn how to document the children's voice and experiences. This study analyses the processes of awareness that occurred over a two-year period of action and that revealed how pedagogical documentation can support educators to reconstruct the image they have of children and the reconfiguration of their practices, substantiating the invisible. The staff-based learning and development is conceptualized from an ecological socio-constructivist following the Pedagogy-in-Participation approach. This piece of research assumes that pedagogical documentation is a process that values the children's voice and enables educators to reflect, favoring the reconstruction of their practices.

## KEYWORDS

Pedagogical documentation;  
children's voice;  
praxiological transformation

## Pedagogical documentation as a central point of educational action

Pedagogical documentation has been understood by different authors as a process that allows listening to the voice of the children and taking a deeper look at the educators' practices, favoring their reconstruction (Azevedo 2009; Oliveira-Formosinho 2019; Dahlberg, Moss, and Pence 2013; Mesquita-Pires 2012; Fochi 2019; MacNaughton, Smith, and Lawrence 2003; Fleet, Patterson, and Robertson 2017; Oliveira-Formosinho and Pascal 2016).

Pedagogical documentation does not fit into just any pedagogy. It is located within participatory pedagogies, since it claims another image of child and adult and is based on a perspective of construction of meaning (Fochi 2019; Oliveira-Formosinho 2019). Moreover, pedagogical documentation can be important in raising awareness of the role of the different actors in the educational process. It will be a way of giving meaning to the educational experience and to the participation of all those involved.

For this, it is necessary to counteract the transmissive pedagogy, which is still very present in the practices of educators. These practices do not represent a challenge for children and educators, and do not intervene to expand their learning experiences (Oliveira-Formosinho 2007). Children are encouraged to produce many things but in an

unfruitful way. The results are very visible, but the processes are poor and based on the repetition and standardization of final products (Pires 2013).

In fact, participatory pedagogies make use of different methods and techniques to gather and understand the perspective of children, which they express through multiple languages (collages, drawings, various representations, dramatic, musical or corporal expression, conversations with peers) (Guijt 2014). Participatory approaches envision the empowerment of all involved, allowing them to represent their own situations, reflect on their experiences, and influence change (Sousa, Loizou, and Fochi 2019). These tools seem to have special relevance when we want to access the multiple perspectives of children who are usually the actors with less power within the institutions, they are part of. In this sense, the use of different methods and techniques that make children's views explicit is part of an ethical pedagogical line, because it allows all children to document and record their ideas and feelings.

These conceptions value listening to the children and to how their rights of participation are guaranteed. In practice, pedagogical documentation is important in the awareness of the role of different actors in the educational process. It is a way of attributing meaning to the educational experience and the participation of all involved. In this line of thought, the pedagogical documentation, in the essence of this study, make the thought of children and educators visible through the way educators gather information and create meaning.

However, the pedagogical documentation was beyond data collection. It included both the process of documenting and the content of this process. In Dahlberg, Moss, and Pence's (2013) perspective, documenting goes beyond the simple process of collecting material, configuring itself as a process that allows educators to reflect on their work in a rigorous, methodical and democratic manner. Pedagogical documentation has been translated as a means through which professionals have to deepen their knowledge about how they develop their pedagogical action. Pedagogical documentation is 'a narrative of self-reflexivity' (Dahlberg, Moss, and Pence 2013, 193), because it implies the awareness of the reality that is being constructed, thus opening itself to change. It is a lens that broadens the understanding of how educators relate to children and how they experience and recreate the environment offered to them. By documenting, educators construct images about themselves, about children and about the pedagogy experienced in the activity room.

To listen carefully to children's voices, the pedagogical environment must promote humanizing, respectful, and safe interactions that allow for participation and communication among all. As MacNaughton and Williams (2009) argue, listening carefully to children requires: (i) creating specific times to collect children's perspectives and responses; (ii) waiting for children's responses so that they perceive that their opinion is being taken seriously; (iii) helping children learn to listen to others by actively listening to them; (iv) responding to children's comments carefully, really thinking about what they mean; and, (v) being the scribe of children's ideas.

This study is based on the principles and logic of action of Pedagogy-in-Participation, which places pedagogical documentation at the center of learning processes that allows the educator and the child to construct meanings about learning experiences, about how the child evolves in this learning and about the construction of the child's learning identity (Oliveira-Formosinho 2019). Documenting is a shared and participatory social

construction about what the child is, does and thinks that allows professionals to describe, interpret and understand the experiential pedagogical daily life of children where learning is developed (Oliveira-Formosinho and Formosinho 2019).

This is a holistic praxis that is inspired by fundamental pedagogical axes that give intentionality to the educational action, creating situations of experiential and reflected learning, sustained in relational identities, which are recreated in an environment of opportunities. The reflective and documented way of living the holistic experience, transforms it into narration and meaning (Oliveira-Formosinho and Formosinho 2019).

In this conceptual line, the pedagogical documentation is based on ethical principles and, therefore, it should: (i) serve children and their families, considering the fundamental principle of the greater good; (ii) be based on democratic principles; (iii) actively involve children, assuming a holistic approach that is recreated in what the child does, feels and learns; (iv) call on parents to participate, welcoming them as relevant actors in the processes of reflection and meaning of the child's narratives; (v) consider ecological dimensions, recognizing the interactivity between contexts, processes and outcomes; (vi) support individual learning of each child and of the group; (vii) favor the learning of children in interaction with the learning of professionals; (viii) be interculturally relevant; (ix) be based on rigorous observation and recording processes; (x) provide useful information to all actors, answering the questions of their intentionality; (xi) contribute to the formation of a civic spirit and solidarity.

Given the complex nature surrounding the entire process of pedagogical documentation, this study sought to track the efforts of a group of six early childhood educators in their processes of understanding and transformation.

## **Methodology: the action-research process cycle**

This study started from a collaborative work developed with a group of six educators, who work in an institution that welcomes children from 0 to 6 years. The educators, after participating in a seminar on documentation and evaluation in early childhood education, showed enthusiasm to learn how to document the children's voice and experiences. In this sense, this study analyses the processes of awareness that occurred over a two-year period of action and that revealed how pedagogical documentation can support educators to reconstruct the image they have of children and the reconfiguration of their practices, substantiating the invisible.

In this study, staff-based learning and development is conceptualized from an ecological socio-constructivist perspective that departs from the daily pedagogical situations and is aware of the ecological connections between micro and macro contexts, following the Pedagogy-in-Participation approach (Oliveira-Formosinho and Formosinho 2013). It assumes a concept of pedagogy that integrates the holistic nature of professional practices. This approach defines praxis as practical intentionality for change in an ethical commitment with action. It emphasizes the unavoidable link between the professional development and the early childhood pedagogical perspective. Moreover, it assumes the perspective of pedagogical documentation as a process that allows listening to the children's voice and looking more deeply at the practices of educators, favoring their reconstruction (Dahlberg, Moss, and Pence 2013; Fleet, Patterson, and Robertson 2017; Formosinho and Peeters 2019; Oliveira-Formosinho and Pascal 2016).

In this study, which follows a qualitative methodology, data collection and analysis towards finding the meaning of pedagogical documentation was complex, because it involved multiple processes and the construction of meanings, which implied experimentation, reflection, collaboration and sharing.

The qualitative approach interconnects epistemology, ontology, and methodology. The descriptive and interpretive analysis attempted to access the perspectives and practices undertaken by the educators at different stages of the process. The researcher/trainer, during the investigation, assumed an ethical attitude, returning data to all participants.

The methodological design of this study was configured in a cyclical process of ‘thinking-do-thinking’ to research and create change. These cycles of research involved different phases and interconnect steps:

Step 1 – Development of a focus group to analyze the initial educators’ perceptions on children’s documentation and evaluation;

Step 2 – Characterization of the practices of the participating educators on observation, documentation, and evaluation of children, through the analysis of the children’s portfolios and the documents on the walls;

Step 3 – Presentation and discussion of results;

Step 4 – Learning how to use the involvement scale from the Effective Early Learning (Laevens 2005; Bertram and Pascal 2009) and the child well-being scale (Laevens 2005) to understand how children feel and act, and how adults respond to their interests;

Step 5 – Reflection to establish action plans and priorities;

Step 6 – Development of the action, deepening of the group’s ideas on pedagogical documentation, through workshops, with reading of texts and case studies;

Step 7 – Development of a focus group to analyse changes on the educators’ thoughts on children’s documentation and evaluation.

The process starts with the shared reading of the data that emerged from the focus group 1 and the analysis of the children’s portfolios. Then it was necessary to learn to observe the child and understand what kind of opportunities were offered, using the engagement scale and the child’s well-being scale. Later, the educators were invited to reflect on some case studies and to confront ideas between what they did and what the practices in the books revealed. Then, they began by documenting a learning experience or a small project, recording the action that was being developed, the interactions that were established and the communication that was taking place. Each educator took the documentation home, observed and reflected on the material, interpreting the meanings that were emerging, both from the interactions established between the children and from their own action.

From the records, they had collected (photographs, videos, written notes) and from the children’s written or oral productions, the educators asked questions about how the child and themselves were learning, also analysing how the environment was responding to these learnings. The reflections made by the educators on the documentation were later shared with the group. After reviewing the documentation, the educators shared it with the children so they could re-examine it. Later, they placed it on the

wall, in order to share with the other rooms and the families of the children the experiences developed. The shared documentation generated new meanings and allowed to establish more complicit relationships between the different actors.

The corpus of analysis consists of *focus group* 1 and 2, the pedagogical documentation created, the reflective narratives of the educators around the documentation produced, the field notes taken in situation by the researcher. For each instrument, an alphanumeric code was created: for the Focus Group performed at two different moments, FG1 and FG2 followed by the name of participant respectively; for the Field Notes, FNnumber-month/year; for the narrative reflections R followed by the participant's name, was used.

The ethical issues in this piece of research are closely related to the guarantee and consideration of the rights of participants, in particular the right to be properly researched (Mesquita 2020). A negotiation process was used, and with the data being returned at different times of data collection and writing.

### Children's learning before the staff-based learning

Before starting the process of staff-based learning, data were collected from the researcher's observation in the context, as well as from the educators' narratives in an initial focus group. The modes of action absorbed throughout their successive socializations showed the routines that the educators put into practice, often without determining their intentionality (Mesquita-Pires 2012).

All the participants, despite considering that they could do better, were sure of what they were doing and when they referred to educational action, they assumed they value the significant learning as can be seen in the following speech:

The whole educational team is concerned with providing children with a set of activities where they can develop their autonomy, self-esteem, skills and where, in general, they feel happy, have equal opportunities, and achieve significant learning. (FG1Clara)

This expression shows the intertextuality of the group, and explains the idea that they were working for the same purpose. The pedagogical team considered kindergarten as a place for socialization, promoting equal opportunities, global development of children, well-being, emotional security and knowledge. The educators considered it important to promote the child's 'autonomy and increased self-esteem' (FC1Rute) through 'interactions with other children and with adults' (FG1Clara), involving them in experiences that fostered 'problem solving' (FG1Gorete) and 'progressive awareness and responsibility' (FG1Carolina). The educational space was seen as a place for sharing and building rules with the broad objective of preparing children to 'face society and face problems and coexistence with others' (FG1 Clara).

However, the walls revealed another conception. The works of the children in the different classrooms, defined as pedagogical documentation to be included in each child's portfolio, were all the same, reflecting a standardizing educational concept. It did not reflect the children's creation nor the expression of their sensations and emotions in relation to the diversity of materials and resources.

The presence of all children in all activities was understood as participation, as shown in the following field note:

I asked Luisa if I could sit next to her. She was doing a model that she had to color. I let myself watch her for a while. She asked me: 'Am I doing it right?' I nodded. She looked at me and said yes, but she added 'When I finish, I can go to the house, but now I have to do this, because we have to do a lot of work here at school ...' 'Really?' I replied. 'Yes, so the parents can see our beautiful work'. (FN18-11/18)

The child's participation was understood as the execution of an activity, performed through mechanical processes dictated by the educators who guided the use of the materials.

I went into one of the rooms and sat down. Twenty-five children were sitting in a circle. Afterwards, the educator said the name of five children to go to the table and the others to freely chose the working areas where they wanted to go. The children who were at the table were told the work they would have to do. First, on wrapping paper, previously cut out, there was a model. The educator with a stapler had pierced the template all around and the children with a needle threaded brown wool into the holes. Then the educator asked the children to stick the template on a sheet of paper, which had their name on it. Then the children had to draw the head, legs and arms of the figure. When one child was finished, she called another, taking into account the sequence of the names they had put on the worksheets. The next day, the children continued this work until everyone had done it. At the end of the week the teacher met with the children and asked them what they had learned. The children told her what they had learned, and the educator wrote it down on a sheet of paper and placed it next to the works they had done. Some of these works were later displayed in the hall for the parents to see. (FN9-12/18)

To evaluate the children, the educators said that they used the observation. They explained that they recorded 'the children's discoveries', some elements about 'the drawings they (...) made' and other 'funny situations'. Some educators said that they carried out 'quarterly evaluations' although not 'much time is devoted' to 'reflective and evaluative records with the children'. Work evaluation seemed to happen in an unstructured way, although they mentioned that they held meetings with the children to 'reflect on their work' (FG1Rute).

The pedagogical team held 'some meetings where experiences were shared and where work was jointly evaluated' (FG1Clara). One way of communicating the actions to parents was through exposing 'some of the children's work' (FG1-Gorete) in the main entrance.

The intentions of observation, planning, recording and evaluation were not very clear for any of the participants. The observation process, as a fundamental aspect of data collection, was diluted in the action developed by the educator. Although the educators talked about the importance of observing to plan, they did not explain the observation processes and instruments used. The crossing of the indicators points to a poorly focused look on observation as a fundamental element in action planning. Pedagogical documentation was not understood as a process of reflection and meaning.

## Learning together

The immersion in praxeological complexity allowed us to understand that pedagogical action is a space where actions, beliefs and theories converge (Oliveira-Formosinho 2019). The researcher in this process was seen as an agent, that mediated the cooperative professional development.



The dialogue with Dewey (1997) allowed us to understand the concept of democratic school as a space that establishes democracy in life, a democracy that should be actively participated by the child, educators and parents. It was necessary to offer the child opportunities to engage in activities of daily life, where they felt they were participating and contributing to a cooperative community of life, which uses and takes advantage of the instruments of culture as a means of learning (Bruner 2003).

It became necessary to discuss the issues around child participation in the processes and some questions were asked: How do we know what children are learning and how they are learning? To answer these questions, we spent two months learning how to use the involvement scale from the Effective Early Learning Project (Bertram and Pascal 2009) and the child well-being scale (Laevens 2005). Only later did we begin to reflect on pedagogical documentation, answering questions such as: What is meant by pedagogical documentation? Why document? What to document? How to document? And finally, How to communicate? The theoretical insights on pedagogical documentation came from the shared readings of the texts by Oliveira-Formosinho and Formosinho (2019), and Oliveira-Formosinho et al. (2019).

Later, the educators were invited to read some case studies presented in the book by Edwards, Gandini, and Forman (2011) and the book by Malavasi and Zoccatelli (2013). Some reflections were promoted on how those projects were developed and the way they make children visible as beings that are, do and think. Later, the case studies presented in the book by Oliveira-Formosinho and Pascal (2019) were analyzed. The educators confronted their practices and ideas on pedagogical documentation with the examples they read.

All these factors together allowed the educators to begin their process of pedagogical reconstruction. The use of pedagogical principles to support the action brought out the idea that learning is beyond content, taking place at the interface of the pedagogical dimensions.

## **Substantiating the invisible**

Gradually, changes began to be visible in the kindergarten. The spaces took on a new organization, the interactions revealed greater proximity and a more challenging attitude by the educators. Small projects emerged, based on questions raised by the children, and the activities proposed by the educators became more open, leaving room for children's participation. The appreciation of the child's work began to be visible in the documentation that was placed on the walls. The observation records that documented the children's actions in the different areas were more diversified and reflected the child's expression.

One of the most visible transformations was observed in the walls. The exhibition of children's standardized drawings gave way to pedagogical documentation. Common areas and classrooms began to host temporary narratives about the projects and activities that were being developed. These sought to value the children's action and were carefully and aesthetically organized. The documentation placed on the walls included different supports that not only show the products but, above all, the processes, through photographs and descriptions of the various stages. These descriptions were almost always accompanied by the transcription of dialogues or comments that occurred throughout the process. They expressed how the activities were planned and thought out, the



learning that the children were achieving, the negotiations and the reflection on the action developed or to be developed.

Before communicating the collected data (photographs, written notes, description of processes), they were analyzed in group. Through a shared reading, the educators constructed new meanings, helping to situate their intentions, their action and the action of the child, through questioning. In this regard, one educator mentions:

I never imagined that I would condition the children's action so much. When I documented David's dinosaur action, I realized that I was not documenting the process, but the product. Only then did I see that it was not his action, but mine! If we didn't do these reflections, I would never realize that! (RCarolina 2019)

The walls acquired the temporal and spatial dimension of memory, interconnecting actions and voices, celebrating the meaningful experiences lived. It was frequent to see children standing next to the documents, making comments and explaining to the others the processes and achievements. A field note from the researcher documents one of these situations:

I entered Sara's room and noticed that, on one of the walls of the room, a process developed in a group was documented. One of the children who had done this work was with two classmates and said – See that chestnut tree I made – she pointed to the bench where her work was – this is the one in the picture. I wanted to use the wire. I thought and thought and wanted to make a chestnut tree. Through the sequence of photographs, Luís was explaining to his colleagues the whole process of making it. He said – Look here, in this picture, first I took this roll to make the trunk and then I went to get a branch with chestnut leaves, which were in that box. Then, I took the wire and made it like this, like this, like this (making the gesture of squeezing, with his hands). But I didn't succeed very well. Then I talked to Sara, who told me I could go look for other materials if I needed them, and I went to get the clay. She held it and I put the clay, you see, here. That's how I did it. The hardest part was holding it upright! See here, João also did one, that one, but only his was a Robot. (FN4-05/2019)

The children felt that the adults respected their work, showing that their actions were important for the whole community. Children and adults seemed to appreciate the work that was being done, and documentation was the medium through which this relational encounter could be read.

The educators understood that through the children's work they could share with parents and the whole educational community the children's achievements, their potential and their involvement. In one of the reflections an educator evoked the following:

Initially, when we started talking about this, I was wary of putting the works in this way on the walls. Since not all children were represented, I thought that the parents would somehow object. But exactly the opposite happened! Even the parents of children who had not participated in these activities were pleased. One day when I was at the front desk, one of my children told her father to go and see the work that had been done in her classroom, and I explained the whole process to him through the documents. The father told me – 'what an extraordinary job' and asked me if the children didn't all do the same work. I answered no and invited him to go to the room to see some documentation of work that his son had done. (RVera,12/19)

Parents were invited to participate. Through the pedagogical documentation, they understood what was being done and they felt motivated to get involved. The children felt valued, and the educators felt the recognition and respect for their work.

One evidence in the educators' voices is related to the importance of collecting data, on a daily basis, about children and the processes by which they learn in a holistic perspective. This, according to the educators, implies understanding children's interests and respecting them. It implies observing and listening to them, respecting their diversity, and providing them with differentiated support.

Maybe I saw the children as being very similar to each other. All with the same needs, since they were in the same age group. I thought they all had the same needs and the same interests. Maybe it wasn't them who had the interests, maybe it was me who was more interested in showing or working on that theme, not them. At this moment they are the ones who bring or naturally bring up some interest in the classroom, a play, something that interests them, an idea, and in the conversations, we perceive this very well. It is mainly by understanding their interests through observation and listening that I carry out some proposals for small group work. But now the fact of listening to them and participating more actively in what they are doing leads me to know them better and understand what their interests are. (FG2Gorete 2020)

According to the educators, the documentation allows to understand the opportunities that needed to be created to develop a relevant curriculum:

The activities I propose are based on the observation and listening I do throughout the week. I try to be attentive to what they are doing in the various areas where I support them. Other times they arise from interests they have about things in their daily lives, things they have seen on a walk, in the village, things they do at home, knowledge they bring from home. These things are shared in a group conversation and, from there, questions and needs for answers arise, that we try to plan and answer, through negotiated processes. We also have several materials, diversified things, that generate ideas as well, either exploring those materials, or sharing those materials with the classmates, either in play or in areas. What they learn now is much more interesting. We used to work by themes, didn't we? Now there are very diverse activities and very interesting projects. It seems to me that we develop a much more relevant curriculum. (FG2Clara 2020)

The educators revealed, however, that this was complex work and often difficult to accomplish. They said that this kind of work is only possible when they are available, open and attentive to the children's actions and, for that, they have to define their educational intentions. In this process they claim for themselves the role of listeners and observers of the children, revealing that:

I have to be available and attentive to what the child does. This means that I have to think about pedagogical intentionality. This intentionality relates to everything I offer from the educational environment. It relates to the respect that I have for the child and the way in which the action is carried out as they want and need. That can be in everything, but I have to be willing to listen to it. Look, this is not easy, because it involves many things and demands from us a huge capacity to reflect on these processes! (FG2Sara 2020) The dialogue with participatory pedagogies led the educators to understand that there is an interdependence between people and the context, and that this influences their learning and development processes. This awareness stimulated the group to understand the educational environment as a dynamic and solidary composition, which implies the organization of all the areas that compose it. In this sense, educators began to understand the importance of the organization of space, time, interactions, observation, planning, evaluation and projects and activities in the co-construction of learning. (Oliveira-Formosinho and Formosinho 2019)

The pedagogical mediation supported the efforts of all social partners, including the children themselves, in their learning processes. Communication of ideas and

coordination of efforts in shared endeavors are fundamental aspects in the development of people (Rogoff 2003).

Throughout the formative process, the educators came to understand the interdependence between the various dimensions of early childhood pedagogy, recognizing that the quality of interactions depends on how they intentionalize the learning opportunities for children in the space, respect their rhythms, organize the group, launch proposals and collect data on children's actions, through observation and listening. Observation and listening helped the educators to become more aware of the children's interests, no longer worrying so much about the contents, but focusing on the processes of meaning making instead.

## Messages that emerge

This process of reconstruction based on the pedagogical documentation led to the emergence of consciousness, resulting from the reflection that both adults and children carried out (Freire 1979). The pedagogical documentation became the center of the development of collaborative, plurivocal actions, where children and adults were, simultaneously, agents and researchers of their action and learning.

This staff-based learning experience transformed the vision that educators had of children. They now recognize their creative potential, intelligence and sensitivity. They accept that children are co-designers of their learning and regard them as active and competent participants in the development of experiences. Assure their rights, not only to provision and protection but also to expression. Children are listened to and influence their own learning.

It became visible in this process the *intentional educator*, evidenced in the way she plans and organizes time, space and interactions, in the way she documents and negotiates with the children, how she organizes the groups and the classroom culture, which aspires to a democratic experience and its integration into a broader social culture.

Since the sample of this study is not representative, no generalizations can be made. However, the evidence that emerges can provide valuable information for further studies.

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