Module 5, A Closer Look at Pedagogical Narrations

A. What this module is about

This module reviews some of the topics discussed in the workshop and provides you with a more detailed understanding of the technical and philosophical underpinnings of pedagogical narrations.

‘Pedagogical narrations’ refers to the process of observing, recording, and, individually and collectively, interpreting a series of related ordinary moments in your practice. The process is ongoing and cyclical and based on the art of critical reflection on the part of a community of learners (educators, children, family).

This process is called pedagogical documentation in Reggio Emilia and Sweden, learning stories in New Zealand, action research in parts of Australia (as the text outlines) and in BC we use the term pedagogical narrations. We have been introduced to the process of pedagogical narrations in the workshop and will deeply engage in this process beginning in this module.

There is one activity for this module. Based on the work begun in Module 4 and in light of the material presented in Module 5, please continue working on the tables with your small group. You are encouraged to continue contributing to the open discussion. Facilitators are available for questions and comments. See Section E 6.2 for more information on the activity.
B. What you will explore

At the conclusion of the module, you will be able to:

- Understand the technical aspects of documentation
- Understand the philosophical and pedagogical aspects of documentation (observation, recording, individual interpretation, collective interpretation)
- Link documentation with the areas of early learning described in the Framework.
C. Resources

1. Text and articles:


2. Optional readings:

These optional readings are listed for those of you who want to learn more about pedagogical narrations and the New Zealand experience or the Swedish model:


3. Videos and examples of pedagogical narrations:

Harvest Resources. (2007). Take time to see through children’s eyes. Seattle, WA: Author. (Slide show and audio; part of a package including Language of art by Ann Pelo and To see takes time by Margie Carter).


Performanetics. (1994). The amusement park for birds. (Video: 90 minutes; in-depth examination of Reggio Emilia project work; interviews with Loris Malaguzzi and Carlina Rinaldi).


D. How long is this module

Module 5 is a two-week module including readings, the critical reflections on the material presented and to continue working in your small group on work begun in Module 4.
E. Participatory Activities

1. Technical aspects of pedagogical narrations

How to begin creating your pedagogical narrations:

Use the following formats or combinations of to capture ordinary moments within the context of your classroom. These ordinary moments will be expanded into your pedagogical narrations:

- field notes
- audio-recording of the conversations you have with the family and the child transcripts of the audio-recordings
- photographs
- short video clips
- work done by the child such as drawings, paintings, constructions reflections written by the family.

In other words, the pedagogical narrations will capture ordinary moments in the day of the child/ren you are observing. You begin your pedagogical narrations by creating audio, visual and/or written descriptions of what you have observed.

Please read:
Art of Awareness: Chapters 11-13.

Please note that the *Art of Awareness* provides a brief introduction to pedagogical narrations and concentrates on the technical aspects. You will be reading more in-depth discussion about pedagogical narrations later in the module.
2. The ‘what’ and ‘why’ of pedagogical narrations

‘Pedagogical narrations’ is used as a tool to make children’s learning visible and reflect upon the educator’s practices. In the vision and principles outlined in the Framework (and in the ‘questions to consider’ under each of its goals), there are many references to reflection as a guide to improving children’s learning experiences. The ‘questions to consider’ serve to open up dialogue and reflection. ‘Pedagogical narrations’ is the tool we are using to make the reflective aspect of the Framework possible. Please note that you will be examining the ‘questions to consider’ from the Framework later in this module.

Please read:


This tool is widely used in places like Reggio Emilia, Italy, Sweden, and New Zealand. These different contexts use pedagogical narrations in different ways. However, certain similarities run across these contexts: the child is seen as a competent individual with multiple potentials; children's learning is made visible to educators, other colleagues, families, children themselves and the whole community; critical reflective practice is required. The BC Framework has been inspired by current practices in these contexts, therefore pedagogical narration is a key tool for practice when working with the Framework.
2.1 New Zealand’s Approach to Pedagogical Narrations

Called Learning Stories in New Zealand, this approach to pedagogical narrations is meant to make children’s learning visible so the educator and children can learn together. This approach assumes children’s competence and strengths. When we notice, recognize and respond to children we are alive to their possibilities. Notice, recognize, respond is part of the relationship-based focus of their national curriculum Te Whariki.

Educators are to notice children, observe what they are interested in and how they are learning. In other words, they are to pay attention. Paying attention to the other person is not always comfortable. The words attend and tension share a common root, tendere, which means to stretch. To really attend to another or to pay attention to another person, we must stretch ourselves, we must really strain to listen, to see, to feel—it is not a casual process. Educators in NZ are noticing children, noticing what children are doing, saying, exploring, and what they are concerned about.

After careful observations, they recognize (the root is to learn again, to know again) what children are up to, what are they trying to do, what are they interested in. They are not imposing their ideas on the children, but truly recognizing the children and their work. It is difficult to really observe and get to know a child again, to resist previous ideas of who that child is.

It is only after all that effort has been put in, noticing and recognizing children that they will respond. Only after taking the time to notice and recognize can you respond to a child effectively. At that point, the educators respond to the children building on their interests, skills, and abilities. In other words, educators use their understanding of children’s interests, skills, and abilities to guide their learning.

Please read:
Book 1, An introduction to Kei Tua o te Pae, pp. 1-20;

Optional reading:
If you are interested in learning more about the philosophical aspects of learning stories, you may be interested in this chapter by Margaret Carr.

2.2 Reggio Emilia and pedagogical documentation

Please read:
Dahlberg, G. & Moss, P. (2005), Chapter 5, Towards a pedagogy of listening, 97-120.

“Pedagogical documentation” is a practice we have learned from the infant-toddler centres and preprimary schools in Reggio Emilia, Italy. The practice has spread around the world from Reggio Emilia and is “a vital tool for the creation of a reflective and democratic pedagogical practice” (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 1999, p. 145). Pedagogical documentation is a process of observation, self-reflection, questioning dominant ideas and taking responsibility for making meanings and decisions in the field of early childhood.

The early childhood educators in Reggio Emilia do not formulate in advance specific goals for the children’s projects or activities or have “themes.” Their objectives are flexible and adapted to the interests of the children. The early childhood educators see themselves as observers and researchers and the pedagogical documentation is a component of their research. They make careful observations and document their observations with notes, pictures, audiotapes, videotapes, diaries, and other narrative forms. They use pedagogical documentation to better understand the children and to inform their planning. They use it to support and sustain children’s learning. They also learn from the children’s learning. They use pedagogical documentation to support their relationships with the children’s families. They use it to tell the story of individual and group learning.

Pedagogical documentation also includes a process of critical reflection, described by Glenda Mac Naughton as a “collective examination of the social and political factors that produce knowledge and practices, together with the use of this knowledge to strategically transform early childhood education in socially progressive directions”. Critical reflection challenges or problematizes common knowledge that we take as ‘truth’ and allows us to explore and discover “new viewpoints, consciousness, reflection, hope and action”. Considering a postmodern paradigm, as described in Modules 1-3, we can reveal many alternate perspectives and multiple truths. Swedish early childhood education institutions are actively using pedagogical documentations to expose and resist dominant discourses.

What's involved in Reggio Emilia’s pedagogical documentation? It is based on three interwoven and cyclical processes: observation; documentation of your observations (through narratives, audio transcripts, video, etc--see above); and interpretation (individually and in collaboration with others—colleagues, children, family).
3. How to conduct pedagogical narrations

3.1 Begin with observation
In module 1, we emphasized the image of the child as complex, capable, and strong--underlying the practices of Reggio Emilia programs within the context of the postmodern paradigm. Children are not viewed through the lens of developmental norms and categories as defined within DAP. The dominant North American perspective has provided us with a particular lens – a lens that has emphasized developmental theories. Ethical resistance, an important component to pedagogical narrations, prompts us to consciously think about and question our assumptions that inform our daily practice with children and understand the source of those assumptions. By engaging in pedagogical narrations we can challenge the image of the child presented by developmental theories through critical reflection and ethical resistance and ultimately create new ways of seeing, understanding, and working with children.

Child observation has played an integral part in early childhood training and practice. It can be understood as a means to assess children’s psychological development in accordance to predetermined definitions and stages of a ‘normal’ child. Therefore, the goal of child observation is mainly about assessing a child’s development in relation to developmental standards. The pedagogical narrations approach, on the other hand, is contextual and involves children in a process of co-construction with teachers (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 1999).
3.1.1 Observation of ordinary moments
Observation of ordinary moments provides an opportunity for us to wonder at what we are seeing. Checklists and developmental domains are sometimes used to organize observations, but they can narrow our vision. Observation is the starting point for thinking about children, considering our own roles with children, and questioning what we see.

In observing, you will spend time with the child and family and notice and listen to what is happening with children. Observation is a subjective activity; you should strive to refrain from having protocols/instruments that will limit/set boundaries on your observations.

Listen carefully, pay attention to what is happening. Pay attention to the child’s strengths. Begin with the assumption that the child and his or her family are capable. Listen and look for evidence of the child’s strengths.

Here are a few starting points for your observations:
- Notice the child making sense of the world or exploring an issue or idea
- Notice the child’s approach to the world
- Be attentive to the child’s interests and understandings of the world
- Notice the child at play, at a mealtime, or at a transition point.

Before you begin the process of interpretation, create a written description of the moment(s) you have observed.

Please read:
Curtis & Carter, Art of Awareness, Chapters 2-10.


Please view and read:
3.2 Continue with interpretation of pedagogical narrations

You will interpret the ordinary moments based on your observations:

- First, write your own interpretation of the ordinary moments you collected during your observations.

- Once you have written your own interpretation, set it aside for now.

- Next, share your ordinary moments with others and request their interpretive responses. It is important to seek the interpretation of others before sharing your interpretation. You don’t want to ‘limit’ their creative responses by introducing your perspective in advance.

- In sharing your ordinary moments, your role as narrator is to collect the multiple readings of others as a way of enriching your own, initial interpretation of the ordinary moments you collected and observed. Others will help you to extend the interpretations of your ordinary moments by suggesting new ideas and perspectives.
3.2.1 Using different lenses
When you interpret your own documentation and ordinary moments and the
documentation and ordinary moments of your group members, it is important that you go
back to MacNaughton’s ideas about lenses. Often, the developmental theories relied on in
early childhood are the ones we use first because we are accustomed to using those
theories and familiar with them. They are often the basis for our assumptions about
children. Remember that each person will provide new perspectives that you can
incorporate into your interpretations of ordinary moments. Your interpretations/
reflections should reveal multiple lenses and not only rely on the familiar and
comfortable.

Your interpretation should show the processes you are following, the questions you have,
and the links you are making between the theoretical ideas and your observations. As you
interpret your ordinary moment, you will reach deeper levels of understanding of the
child.
3.2.2 Enriching your understanding
Wondering beyond your initial thoughts opens new interpretations and working with a team enables us to consider the perspectives of others and thereby enrich our understanding of children. Thinking with others helps us ask different questions and consider multiple perspectives on what we are observing. This information can provide directions and ideas for furthering our thinking and our planning and work with children. Some of the most interesting work in the early years is done collaboratively.

Optional reading:
If you are interested in seeing how educators use different perspectives to interpret children’s work, this chapter may be of interest to you.

3.2.3 Including multiple perspectives in your pedagogical narrations

Once you have collected multiple perspectives, your work will be to organize them as part of your pedagogical narrations. The multiple perspectives will enrich the understanding of how children learn and make meanings of the world.

While interpreting ordinary moments with others, we construct theories and refer to theories to explain what you observe. As Carlina Rinaldi says, “while we affirm the inseparability of theory and practice, we prefer an open theory which is nourished by practice made visible, contemplated, interpreted, and discussed using the documentation we produce” (Rinaldi, 2006, p. 56). This requires careful listening to the children and families, as well as listening to co-workers.

MacNaughton also challenges us to think differently about our own assumptions and interpretations. She shows how a deconstructive analysis can open up spaces of democracy and liberation. See for example figure 9.1 on page 193 of MacNaughton.

To complete this reflective cycle, we can enter into our planning with ideas and thoughts of our own that come from the pedagogical narrations that we have been developing, but we must also continue in conversation with the children. This is what we mean in talking about co-construction with children. In other words, planning from your pedagogical narrations can include the child or children. Remembering the event or moment and retelling it and wondering more about it engages the children in proposing and planning the next steps. You can present information or materials that connect to the documentation and see if that intrigues or interests the children or child, remaining open to other possibilities all the while.
3.2.4 Reflect on these examples
Please watch/read the following examples:

Harvest Resources. (2007). Take time to see through children`s eyes. Seattle, WA: Author. (Slide show and audio; part of a package including Language of art by Ann Pelo and To see takes time by Margie Carter).

Performanetics. (1994). The amusement park for birds. (Video: 90 minutes. This video provides an in-depth examination of Reggio Emilia project work. Please watch the first 18 minutes, which is a summary of the project; a short interview with Loris Malaguzzi and Carlina Rinaldi follows; the remaining time shows dialogue among children).


WETA. (n.d.). The creative spirit: The poppy field project. Washington: IBM. (Video: please watch the 10 minute segment from 15:42-25:30; Reggio Emilia project with Howard Gardner narrating).

Think about how you can create a reflective cycle that continues the process with children, their families and the educators you work with as shown in the examples that you have reviewed.
4. The ‘who’ of interpretation

Educators and children together form a community of learners. Our curiosity causes us to wonder about the children, examine our programs, and evaluate our own work with families and children. We are learners, as well as educators, and we must continually re-assess our work. Assessing our work and ourselves is part of learning and growing as individuals and as groups of colleagues.
5. The ‘why’ of interpretation

Sharing different interpretations of the documentation of children broadens our understanding and encourages us to ask more probing questions. Thinking with a group of classmates or colleagues provides alternative perspectives and engages each group member in a dynamic process of wondering and questioning. Re-visiting our documentation with children, parents, our colleagues and the community also extends this ability-- opening up our own thinking and that of others.

Using the wisdom of the group, we plan how to extend the observations we make of children. In collaboration with our colleagues, we can reflect on how our program meets our goals and vision. Our dialogue has the possibility of becoming richer and deeper with the analysis of documentation that make the children’s growth and learning visible. Through our documentation of what we are seeing with children and what we are experiencing ourselves in the process we begin to plan differently and to think differently about what might be possible.
5.1 Using pedagogical narrations as a tool for planning and evaluation

Assessment or evaluation of our programs requires observation, reflection, and questioning. Pedagogical narrations can be used as a focus for recalling, analyzing, and reflecting on our practice. Engaging in this process involves examining and challenging our work and our assumptions.

We can record our own processes and analyze their effectiveness and usefulness. *Reflecting critically on our own practices keeps us open to opportunities for learning and it motivates us to make changes, if necessary, and be creative.* Research is nothing more than asking questions and searching for possible answers. Doing this regularly with the people with whom you work is useful; you can set aside space to reflect on what is working and what is not working. This allows time for self-assessment, as well as assessment and evaluation of a program or practice. For the same reason that checklists don’t give us much information about children, using checklists to evaluate a program or practitioner leaves a lot of information gaps.

Feedback that is useful and meaningful helps a program or individual build on strengths and successes. Asking questions of one’s practice or of one’s fellow practitioners can lead to deeper understanding and shifts in practice can lead to transformations. Another perspective can change the view and challenge the viewer.
5.2 Shifting perspectives generate new understandings

Shifting your perspective and asking different questions can lead you to other understandings. Discussing these understandings with co-workers, families and children can have implications for our practice. In our research, we can apply frameworks of gender or race; we can ask what we are not hearing, whose voices are silent. We can look at our assumptions about children and their families and consider their validity, relevance, and usefulness in our work.

Here is an educator from Sweden: "Once I revisit and revise what I “know” about how children think and learn, or about what approach I should use to help them grow, then I may be ethically obliged to change what I actually do with them. Based on my new understandings, I cannot ethically continue with my old practices. And neither can I stop with my new understandings. I am ethically obligated to continue to examine my practices always looking for better ways to “do good” for these particular children with whom I am working" (Lenz Taguchi, 2006).
6. The Framework and interpretation

As noted earlier, the Framework has questions for reflection that we should use to begin to unpack the layers of the documentation. These questions are further refined in the ‘Questions to consider’ sections in the Framework.

Please review:
BC Early learning framework:
For each of the major topic areas, please read the sections called ‘Questions to consider’.
6.1 Building from the Framework
For other sets of questions that will be useful to you in guiding and developing your pedagogical narrations, please see 4 pdf files, titled:

Questions, IQ Project Team
Questions, Alejandra Sánchez, 2008
Questions, Art of Awareness
Questions, Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2008

These questions (aspects and components of pedagogical narrations) have been developed by people involved in teaching and learning about pedagogical narrations and have been found to be particularly useful in guiding the process of interpretation. You will be revisiting these questions in more detail in module 6 and throughout the creation of your pedagogical narrations. Note that the aim is not to answer each question, but rather to use these questions to help you and the community of learners reflect. Some of the questions will be more relevant than others to your ordinary moment and the interpretation process.
6.2 Reflection and activity

Thinking of the ordinary moment you chose in Module 4, read the pdf sets of questions and consider these questions in light of your interpretation and the discussion that has happened. Can you think of how you can use the pdf questions to deepen that discussion?

Activity:
Based on the work begun in Module 4 and in light of the material presented in Module 5, please continue working on the tables with your small group. Your aim is to go deeper into interpretation of your ordinary moment and provide interpretive feedback to others in your group. You are also encouraged to continue to contribute to the open discussion.
F. References
