

Linda Kinney Pat Wharton

# An Encounter with Reggio Emilia

Children's  
Early Learning  
Made Visible



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# An Encounter with Reggio Emilia

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The documentation of young children's learning plays a vital role in the pre-schools of Reggio Emilia. This leading-edge approach to bringing record-keeping and assessment into the heart of young children's learning is envied and emulated by educators around the world.

This unique, accessible and inspiring book is based upon a documentary approach successfully implemented by Stirling Council in Scotland, whose pre-school educators experienced dramatic improvements in their understandings about young children, how they learn and the potential unleashed in successfully engaging families in the learning process.

This approach, which is based on careful listening to children and observation of their interests and concerns, centres around recording and commentating on children's learning through photos, wall displays, videos and a variety of different media. The authors, both experienced educators, include chapters here on:

- ◆ why early years educators should use documentation as a means to enhance young children's learning;
- ◆ the values, principles and theories that underlie the 'Reggio' approach;
- ◆ how to implement documentations into any early years setting, with real-life case studies and hints for avoiding common pitfalls;
- ◆ how to involve, inspire and enthuse families and the wider community.

**Linda Kinney** is Head of Learning and Development in Stirling Council and a member of the Scottish Executive's expert reference group on integrated children's services.

**Pat Wharton** is an early years pedagogical consultant currently working in partnership with Stirling Council's Early Childhood Services on a documentation approach to early learning.



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Children's early learning made visible

Linda Kinney and Pat Wharton

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This book belongs to all the children, parents and families in Stirling and all the early years educators who found the courage to join us in the implementation of a documentation to early learning.

Early childhood is 'a period of momentous significance for all people growing up in our culture . . . by the time this period is over, children will have formed conceptions of themselves as social beings, as thinkers and as language users and will have reached certain important decisions about their own abilities and their worth'.

(Donaldson *et al.* 1983)



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# Foreword

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Dear reader,

This encounter with Reggio Emilia and myself had extraordinary beginnings. Pat and Linda and myself had met in Reggio Emilia and Kendal, England, and one day in spring 2002 I found myself arriving at Edinburgh Airport in Scotland being greeted by Pat. My first words were ‘I don’t know why I am here, but I am looking forward to finding out.’ As expected, I did, since I knew that there must have been an understood and unspoken connection between the three of us which had brought us to this place. This connection was going to be significant in making a difference for children in Stirling and beyond . . . and so it proved to be.

What impressed me from the outset was their recognition that what they were attempting to put into practice in early years settings was an interpretation of the Reggio Approach within a Scottish (United Kingdom) context; this, running counter to others who talked of ‘doing Reggio’. They had understood that there could be no straight transference of this approach that did not take account of the context and culture of the country in which it was being introduced. This respect for what the Reggio approach is and can be has proved to be a cornerstone of our encounter which has allowed our contact to develop, strengthen and grow. In fact, if to educate is to develop a sense of belonging – understood as the cultural basis making it possible for each individual to find their way in their own individual story and to build a future in the dialogue with others – then the truest meaning of the Reggio approach is to help every community, every school to take responsibility for educating its children and its own future.

In this way, communities and societies will also have a new opportunity for taking responsibility for their own futures.

The ‘tussle’ with this interpretation and its implications for the early years settings in Stirling is recorded and referred to directly throughout this book. That there have been challenges has been clearly referenced alongside the awe and wonder experienced at the amazing discoveries that educators have made not only about the children but about themselves. Making this clear to the reader will hopefully be helpful when they encounter difficulty and uncertainty in adopting this approach. The joy, excitement and challenge all fuse to make an intoxicating mix which has been captured by the authors throughout the pages of this book.

It has been my pleasure to have visited early years settings in Stirling on two visits there over the past three years, and I have witnessed the uncertainty and the struggle to understand the essence of the documentation approach to early learning and its implementation into practice. For me, I have at times been uplifted by the progress made from one visit to another, and at other times I have found myself bringing clarity to the processes of documentation when the staff had reached a 'sticking point' with aspects of it. Staff teams have been able to be honest and direct about their lack of understanding, and this was really important for me as a pedagogical consultant coming in and trying to understand their routines and practices from another European perspective.

One project that was particularly presented to me on my last visit, which is highlighted in the documentation-in-action section of this book, is the One-Eyed Rabbit. When I saw this, I was excited about it since it represented two important aspects. First, the progress that had been made by this early years setting since my last visit and second how it encapsulated many of the complexities of the documentation approach to early learning. Notably, the visibility it gave to the children's learning, which is the hallmark of this approach, along with its ability to reveal all the traces of research that the children embarked upon through their engagement with the One-Eyed Rabbit project. Others that are recorded in this chapter, though not directly seen by me, reflect a growing understanding of this approach and the generosity of the staff teams to have recorded many of their triumphs but also exposed some of their vulnerabilities and uncertainties.

In conversation with them and Pat and Linda, we have understood together that uncertainty, far from being a negative, can, without a doubt, present us with many more possibilities than certainty ever can. In the same way, what has occurred to me as significant in this project is that all the actors have come to its implementation in a collaborative mode. Admitting to each other from the outset that there was no set model to follow and, indeed, never would be, simply a set of values and principles to guide them. Researching and working out together its many possibilities and learning from each other how to take the next stage forward, this, in itself, has been an innovative departure from other projects they have embarked upon previously, and it has meant that a new fellowship has emerged between leaders, staff, children, parents and families.

What I feel it would also be important for the reader to know is that over time, each of us understood that we shared a common vision: to disseminate the documentation approach to early learning to as wide an audience as possible. To do this, we knew that we had to find a platform to realise this vision so that many more professionals could be persuaded to adopt it, thereby accessing a greater number of children to this significant way of living and working. Thanks to the funding provided and the belief in this approach by the Bernard Van Leer Foundation, the authors have been able to write this book and use it as a platform. It is clear to me that they have attempted to do this in a very straightforward way, making the journey for others hopefully less hazardous. This book marks the first stage of keeping faith with that vision.

And so our encounter and connection created in uncertainty in 2001 has realised many possibilities. Taking the risk that it could be so has been a source of both trepidation and inspiration to all those who have to date been involved in this Encounter with Reggio Emilia.

Carlina Rinaldi  
Executive Pedagogical Consultant,  
Reggio Emilia municipal infant-toddler  
centres and pre-schools

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# Acknowledgements

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We would like to thank the children who have contributed to this book; the parents and families of children who have given their permission and support for their children's involvement in the book; the staff teams represented in this book from the following early years settings: Arnprior, Castleview, Croftamie, Doune, Fallin, Fintry, Park Drive, Thornhill Primary School.

We would also like to thank the following: Stirling Council and Stirling's Early Childhood Link Officer Team, Sue Gutteridge, Elizabeth Greig, Carlina Rinaldi, Alison Clarke, Peter Moss, Peter Lee, Jacqui Fee, Eileen McKenzie, Early Learning Associates, Frank Wharton, Michael Burke, Rita Swinnen and the Bernard Van Leer Foundation without whom none of this would have been possible.

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## What is this book about?

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This book is about a remarkable ‘encounter’ with pedagogical documentation as experienced over the past seven years by educators, key personnel and policy-makers within Early Childhood Services in Stirling Council, Scotland. The encounter that we are sharing with our readers refers to children in the three to five age group although we have extended it more recently to children under three, which it is our intention to record in a similar way following the publication of this book.

This encounter took place in Stirling Council, which is a semi-rural area in Central Scotland. It stretches from the Highlands in the north almost to Glasgow in the west and encompasses ex-mining villages in the south-east. Its administrative centre is the fast-growing city of Stirling, where two-thirds of the population of 89,000 live.

Stirling is a council that has high aspirations for the children and families who live there and that has been excited and enthusiastic about taking forward the documentation approach to early learning within its Early Childhood Services.

We were inspired to adopt this approach through our connections with Reggio Emilia, whose guiding values and principles had a resonance with our own and who gave us a methodology and practice to give these a clarity of expression and visibility.

It has become clear to us that this resonance has been a key factor in our ability to adopt the documentation approach to early learning within a whole local authority area. This made it more possible because the foundations were already in place, it was not necessary to start laying them. We feel that had this been the situation, our task would have been even more challenging. However, it is important to record here that the one value that we had not embraced entirely prior to our first Reggio experience was the image of the child as rich, resourceful and capable. The significance of this to our thinking and practice has been immense. This is not to say that previously we related to children through a deficit model approach but that we tended to interact with them within a context which did not take enough account of their overall capability and resourcefulness.

For those who are not familiar with the characteristics of the Reggio Emilia approach the following quote should be helpful.

Reggio Emilia . . . a comprehensive Educational Project for children birth to 6 years old which is based on the image of a child who has enormous potential and who is the subject of rights. The aim of this project is to promote children’s education

through the development of all their languages: expressive, communicative, symbolic, cognitive, ethical, metaphorical, logical, imaginative and relational.

(Malaguzzi 2000: 19)

Seven years ago, in 1999, this encounter with pedagogical documentation began. It was piloted with three- to five-year-old children in five nurseries where, in the main, all the staff were willing to be involved, though scared of what it could mean for them, both in terms of practice and organisation within the nursery. These feelings of apprehension and challenge were not restricted to nursery staff; they were shared by all of those who were implementing it either as supporter or motivator.

During the first four years, our challenges and excitements (documented elsewhere in the book) were many, and one of our uppermost considerations was always how possible it was going to be to extend this approach across all Stirling Council early years provision. Eventually, we came to understand that the possibilities of this approach for children, educators and families were such that we had no option. We had to find a way of exposing all young children, parents, families and educators to this powerful way of working. This has meant that over the past three years an intensive staff-development programme (referred to later in the book) has been developed which has drawn twelve more nurseries into the pilot. The intention is to continue to extend it until all early years settings are involved with the encounter with pedagogical documentation.

In the same way as we had no alternative but to extend this approach to all early years settings within the Stirling Council areas, we now feel that what we have understood so far about the outcomes of our encounter has been such that we feel a real responsibility to share it with a wider audience in the hope that they too will feel compelled to engage with it – hence, one of the most important reasons for writing this book. The support of the Bernard Van Leer Foundation, a charitable organisation whose core aim is to fund and share knowledge about work in early childhood development and child rights, has helped us to realise this ambition. This has been significant not only in providing the funding but also because they shared our belief that this approach had the possibility to make a difference to children's lives.

We have been further encouraged by the interest that public presentations of our work have generated amongst the early years community and the reactions of the many visitors to the nurseries. Peter Moss, Professor at the Institute of Education at London University and Carlina Rinaldi have also been influential in supporting us with this approach. In particular, they have been key in the development of our understanding of the listening-to-children element of the approach and were keen to support our intention to extend it across a whole local authority area rather than restrict its implementation to a few nurseries who could be perceived as standing apart from other mainstream settings.

Of particular importance to us in developing our work has been the pedagogical support and inspiration that Carlina Rinaldi, Executive Pedagogical Consultant to Reggio Children, has given us since she has understood that we were genuinely attempting to develop this approach not as the 'Reggio Approach', but as an interpretation of the documentation approach to early learning within a UK context.

Using this as a reference point, she felt, would be exceedingly helpful to us and to others wishing to adopt it wherever their location. Her involvement with our project, which she has called Building a Reciprocal Learning Community, has been through visits to nurseries in Stirling adopting this pedagogical approach and entering into dialogue with all nurseries at seminars and conferences held locally and nationally.

The most remarkable aspects of our encounter with pedagogical documentation have been those which have revealed to us those capabilities of children and educators which were previously unknown to us in their extent and depth (see Chapter 3). We have experienced some breathtaking moments when another element of a child's capability as an individual or within a group has been revealed, and the educators themselves have been stopped in their tracks at times when they have learned and understood something further about themselves which has taken them to another place in their thinking and practice. 'Inspiring' and 'uplifting' are words that we find ourselves using to describe these experiences, and when coming away from professional encounters, emotions can be running high because of the excitement we feel and the challenges that we know we face as we continue on our journey with pedagogical documentation.

What follows is a record of this journey, which represents how far we have travelled in embedding the documentation approach to early learning into usual practice. Chapter 1 explains why documentation was chosen as a preferred pedagogical approach and how it had a resonance with curriculum practices currently in place across all early years settings. In Chapter 2, we have set out our understanding of what the documentation approach to early learning can mean within a UK context. We have attempted to do this by recording what we feel it means, for children, educators and families. In this chapter also, we felt it might be useful in a very practical sense to share with the reader a learning space with suggested resources that we have found to be supportive of the documentation approach to early learning. Chapter 3 is intended to make visible what this approach can look like in practice at the current phase of our understanding. It is our intention here to be explicit about how the guiding principles of the approach have been integrated into practice. In sharing these examples with us for this purpose, staff teams have been both generous and courageous, since visibility of this kind can have the effect of revealing the approach but also the limitations in our understanding at this point in time. Since we are in a process with this, we recognise this can be a painful element of 'going public' but have not shirked from it since we feel it might reassure the readers about stages they might go through in the adoption of this pedagogical approach. In Chapter 4, we reflect on our journey so far and the new understandings that we have gained about children, educators, parents and families through working with this approach. We also speculate on further challenges and how we might embrace and overcome them. In the last chapter, we discuss questions that we ask ourselves and that people pose to us when in conversation with them about this approach or during a presentation about an element of it.

We would want the reader to realise from the outset that this book is a reflection of what we understand about this pedagogical approach at this stage of the journey; journey's end is not within sight and is not necessarily our goal. We see ourselves as being very much in a process and recognise it as a long process. Our aim is, rather, to reach a deeper understanding of this approach and its significant implications for children's learning. We invite the reader, through the pages of this book, to accompany us on this journey and experience with us along the way some of the joys, excitements and challenges of adopting this approach.



# Why the documentation approach to early learning?

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Documentation can be seen as narratives of children's and teachers' lives; they are a way of telling the story of one's contribution to a community.

(Dahlberg, quoted in Penn 1999: 182)

## Why documentation?

The documentation approach to early learning in Stirling was able to take root because it fell on fertile ground in that it connected with a way of thinking and working that already existed within Early Childhood Services. An ethos of respect and participation between adults and children was established from the outset, with organisational and curriculum approaches based on children's rights and the belief that children should be at the centre of decisions about their learning and development.

A commitment to listening to children and consulting with them is core to curriculum thinking, development and practice in early childhood settings. This was greatly influenced by understandings gained from a Scandinavian trip in 1998 and, as a consequence, a range of methods to support children's participation is in place to ensure that their voices, their views and their understandings can be heard and made more visible, so that adults can respond appropriately.

Our belief is that children have the right to be heard and have important things to say and to tell us, but, as adults, we need to be able to understand the messages that children are giving to us.

Reading about inspirational practice in Sweden and New Zealand through books like *Advanced Reflections of Reggio Emilia*, *Beyond Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care* and *Te Whariki*, the New Zealand curriculum document, made us review the approaches we were taking.

Visiting Reggio Emilia made a significant impact on us and caused us to reflect more deeply on how we could be more effective in hearing, seeing and feeling what children were communicating to us.

Our desire was to make the process of how children learn and what they were learning more visible. As part of this process, we began to 'document', to systematically record through a range of media resources including photographs, videos, journals and audio recordings what children were telling us. It was this aspect of the process and the methods

## 2 Why the documentation approach?

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of listening to children that led us to a new stage and to new and deeper understandings about:

- ◆ how children learn and construct meaning;
- ◆ the amazing ability and potential of children;
- ◆ ourselves as adult learners and our interactions with children and with each other;
- ◆ the cultural importance of families and communities.

And so began our encounter with ‘documentation’. An encounter already in process through core curriculum practices like consulting with children and listening to them but in need of deepening through specific guiding principles which we understood, through our connections with Reggio Emilia, to be significant for its further development.

These guiding principles are as follows:

### ***The rights of children should be respected***

This includes the fundamental right to be heard and to have views taken into account. It means that we should not only understand the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child,<sup>1</sup> but be able to demonstrate, to show actively and positively in our policy and practice, how this can be achieved.

States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child . . . The child shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child's choice.

### ***Adults should be able to listen and respond***

Children give us information in many different ways. It is important to ensure effective ways of supporting children to communicate their viewpoints and for us to learn the many different ways of ‘hearing’ children. This means actively listening to and observing children’s reactions and responses. It means taking appropriate action that is visible, that can be recorded, shared, discussed and reviewed with others. It also means that we must acknowledge and confront power relations between children and adults.

Taking action takes courage. Taking action as result of listening to children means sometimes having to change decisions already made. It sometimes shows up gaps in our adult thinking and understanding. Taking action means that we have to recognise and acknowledge this or admit that we were wrong and, perhaps more importantly, that we do not have all the knowledge.

(Kinney quoted in Clark *et al.* 2005: 122)

1 UN article 12, 13 (1990).

## **Children as participators**

Encouraging choice supports children's participation in practice as it offers, in particular, opportunities for independence and interdependence; it offers time to think, to interact, to relate and to make connections. This means recognising that a wide range of opportunities and experiences should be available to support children's participation and to assist the ways in which children learn and engage with each other and with adults.

## **Children as active social agents**

This includes recognising that children are active participants in their own learning. It means putting children at the heart of the learning process, ensuring that they are fully involved in planning and reviewing their learning alongside the early educators, that they can engage in meaningful exchanges with adults and other children in such a way as to extend their ideas and viewpoints.

## **Children as meaning makers**

Listening to children provides us with many valuable insights and understandings. It helps us to focus our attention on the ways in which children make sense of their world. We witness how children make connections, develop theories, construct hypothesis through the range of experiences and activities offered to them. From our careful observations and dialogue, we understand that children naturally and actively engage in the search for meaning and, in doing so, are in a constant process of constructing meaning.

## **Children as co-constructors of learning**

The methods and approaches that support children to be central to their own learning mean that early educators can see more clearly the processes of learning, the strategies that children use and their individual personalities and interests. As educators guide and scaffold children's learning, new understandings are reached, including that the adult's hypothesis on what children are learning may not be the experienced learning of the child. The ability of the early educator to 'tune in', to interact meaningfully with children and other educators, means that, essentially, space is given to children to construct their learning alongside the adult and that children and adults can then become co-researchers and co-constructors of learning.

## **The pedagogy of listening**

Reflecting on methods of listening to children has meant a new appreciation of what it means to listen. This has led us to contemplate and explore the multiple forms of listening, internal and external, and the complexities, both social and political, around listening. At the heart of these deliberations is Loris Malaguzzi's theory of 'the hundred languages of children' which offers to us a deeper understanding of listening as a 'culture and as an approach to life'.

### ***The Hundred Languages of Children***

The child  
Is made of one hundred.  
The child has a  
hundred languages  
a hundred hands  
a hundred thoughts  
a hundred ways of thinking  
of playing, of speaking  
A hundred ways of listening  
of marvelling of loving  
a hundred joys  
for singing and understanding  
a hundred worlds  
to discover  
a hundred worlds  
to invent  
a hundred worlds  
to dream  
The child has  
a hundred languages  
(and a hundred hundred hundred more)  
but they steal ninety-nine.  
The school and the culture  
separate the head from the body.  
They tell the child:  
to think without hands  
to do without the head  
to listen and not to speak  
to understand without joy  
to love and to marvel  
only at Easter and Christmas.  
They tell the child:  
to discover the world already there  
and of the hundred  
they steal ninety-nine.  
They tell the child:  
that work and play  
reality and fantasy  
science and imagination  
sky and earth  
reason and dream  
are things  
that do not belong together  
And thus they tell the child  
that the hundred is not there.  
The child says:  
No way. The hundred is there.

(Malaguzzi 2000: 1)

## **The image of the child as rich and resourceful**

Listening to children has changed the way in which we think about children. It has changed our understandings and perspectives about how and what children learn and our image of the child. We have been able to see more clearly the amazing potential of all children, their richness, their talents, their understandings and views of the world, their feelings about themselves and other children around them as well as the adults who engage with them. 'Our image is of a child who is competent, active and critical, therefore, a child who may be seen as a challenge . . . This child is a person' (Rinaldi quoted in Gandini *et al.* 2001: 51).

The guiding principles described above and the approaches that underpin them involve children as individuals, children as part of a learning group, and children and early educators as partners together in environments that inspire, that support and promote discourse, dialogue and a documentation approach that records the search and tussle for meaning.

# What do we mean by the documentation approach?

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It makes visible (though in a partial way, and thus partisan) the nature of the learning processes and strategies used by each child.

(Rinaldi 2006: 68)

## What can this mean for children?

Our current cultural understanding of this pedagogical approach recognises that it makes children's learning visible and encourages them to become central to their own learning.

In real terms, this means that the child is actively involved in making decisions about which learning processes he/she engages with. On the basis of this, the educators and the child (children) through a collaborative process negotiate the context for learning together. This collaborative relationship between educators and children helps the child to feel confident in sharing their profound interests with the educators and their families in the early years setting. Having such information allows educators and children to co-construct a learning environment which will support and develop these interests across the curriculum. In this way, educators, over time, will free themselves from previously held practices where only they made decisions about what, where and how children learned.

Once this way of working has become established, the children develop an increasing understanding of their role as consultants and participants within the learning environment rather than just consumers of it. The implication of this is that embedded-in-practice systems and approaches are developed which create a climate wherein having this expectation of children about aspects of nursery life which affect them becomes usual rather than unusual to the extent that children become key to decision-making processes like the organisation of the learning environment, indoors and outdoors and like participating in the identification of those episodes which have the capability to be converted into projects and being involved in the resourcing of them.

The implication of children playing such a central role in the life of the early years setting means that they will gain not only an understanding of the responsibility it carries but also an understanding of the need to take time to be thoughtful when they are engaging in such important processes. Allowing for and encouraging children to take time to consider, think and put forward their ideas, opinions and solutions to problems that have been posed is fundamental to this approach.

For children, educators and families, this problem-posing and problem-solving element of this pedagogical approach creates an enquiring ethos within the early years setting which nurtures that innate curiosity that children, in the main, have in their quest to make sense of their world.

Children's confidence to approach learning in this way is helpful to them when they become members of a learning group, either as a core group member or as an interested contributor. It also means that they learn to have a point of view which they express through a range of languages and which others respect and interpret within an environment where listening to each other's voices is understood not only as respectful but also as a key requisite to the collaborative learning aspect of this approach.

Allied to this is the researching element, which requires children to find out information about a given interest from a range of sources and share what they have understood with other children, educators, parents and families. In this way, they together learn to be both thoughtful and critical about the relevance of such information to the topic being researched.

Learning is about being a researcher. The young child is a builder of theories. The young child learns by communicating and expressing their concepts and theories and by listening to others.

(Rinaldi 2002)

This act of sharing and leaving themselves open to the views and opinions of others paves the way for them to become critical thinkers who are able to engage in critical dialogue with all those involved in the episode/project. This is important since dialogue between educators, between children and with families, where they are involved, is the engine room of this pedagogical approach.

These connecting threads of the documentation approach to early learning can at times become tangled and provide a variety of challenges for all those involved. However, such provocations have the ability to provoke further understandings of the approach and the learning that is in process, such that the 'provocations for learning' themselves are quickly perceived as an important dynamic of the approach which not only present themselves during the learning process but can be devised by the educators as a further strategy for extending learning.<sup>1</sup>

## **What can this mean for educators?**

We need a teacher (educator) who is sometimes the director, sometimes the set designer, sometimes the curtain and the backdrop and sometimes the prompter [. . .] who dispenses the paints and who is even the audience – the audience who watches, sometimes claps, sometimes remains silent, full of emotion.

(Loris Malaguzzi, quoted in Rinaldi 2006: 73)

What this pedagogical approach means for educators is clearly affected by what this means for children. The sense in which previously educators considered themselves as primarily 'the directors' in terms of children's learning is now no longer an option, since the guiding principles of this approach require relationships between adults and children

1 'Provocation for learning' means a stimulus that arises naturally within a learning experience or one that is provided by the adult to extend the learning within an episode or project.

to be reciprocal, collaborative, companionable, researchers together and above all 'tuned in' to each other.

This means that the educator needs to be able to embrace these guiding principles and believe in this way of living and working with young children. Involved in such a process, he or she might find it necessary to deconstruct previous ways of being with young children in order to construct a more collaborative approach to educators, children and families. To support the educators in this process, access to ongoing professional-development programmes is crucial. Their purpose will be to support both the theory and practice of this pedagogical approach, which will contribute to their developing understanding of the implications of embedding it into usual practice.

What will become clearer to them as part of such a training programme will be how to recognise with greater clarity and understanding the significant learning processes of the children during the course of an episode or project. With such knowledge, they will be able to give these visibility through various media resources and through dialogue with the child and, very often, the families. In order to make these learning processes visible, educators need to be keen observers who are alert to learning possibilities and have cameras, camcorders and audio recorders always 'at the ready' to capture these extraordinary moments.

Making the attitudinal shift required to adopt the documentation approach to early learning can create a level of uncertainty which can initially feel disempowering for educators. In order for them to accept this, almost as another principle, ongoing support in situ is essential. Naturally, living with uncertainty will cause them to pose questions to themselves and fellow colleagues and its impact on them and their status within relation to the children, the parents, the families and the setting. The value of these critical encounters is their ability to generate professional dialogue whose contribution to the professional life of the setting cannot be underestimated. Such dialogue can be a source of great creativity as well as of considerable discomfort for those struggling to come to terms with both the uncertainty and the highs and the lows that the visibility of this approach confers on them. Extending these professional dialogue sessions to colleagues, parents and families beyond the setting provides a further important opportunity to share understandings and misunderstandings in a desire to deepen current knowledge about how this approach works.

To consider possible solutions and to reflect on their practice, educators need time for this reflection within the routine of a usual day. This could require creative and innovative solutions to be found to create this time both for themselves and for the children at significant points for each of them in their learning. At times, to do this requires staff teams to be able to cross conventional boundaries and to perceive problems as potential opportunities rather than obstacles, which are a block to further exploration and learning.

It is also our belief that the impact of this approach on children, educators and families is such that educators almost have a responsibility, as we do, to become powerful advocates for it whenever the opportunity presents itself. To be able to do this, they need to genuinely believe in its possibilities to change lives – their own and children's – and to develop the skills necessary to present their understandings to other people.

The following represents how educators, almost instinctively, learned to become advocates for the documentation approach to early learning. A group of staff who were attending an international conference locally found themselves with groups of educators from across Scotland and beyond who were debating, in their groups and in the main

body of the audience, ways of working with young children. Many of the topics under discussion ran counter to what they now understood to be good practice with young children. To their complete surprise, they found themselves advocating, in a very powerful way, the documentation approach to early learning, even though they were challenged by the uncertainties and struggles which they were encountering on a daily basis. The unexpectedness of this gave them an insight into how important the development of this approach was to themselves and, most importantly, to making a difference to young children, parents and their families.

The following represents some of the struggles that staff have had to encounter in deconstructing their previous practice and constructing new and more challenging ways of working and being with the children, each other and families.

At various stages throughout a six-day professional development programme, the staff confessed to a serious crisis of confidence in relation to their ability to make this fundamental change in their practice. The presenter was, at times, finding it difficult to engage them in interactive exchanges, and, overall, there was a feeling of uncertainty all round about the ability of these programmes to inspire and enthuse staff who were clearly struggling with some of the fundamental concepts of the approach. They would often comment at the start of a new session, 'Well, at least we have come back for more, though we are not quite sure why!' To counterbalance this, upon their return six months later to make presentations to the learning-group colleagues about their adoption of this pedagogical approach, such comments were made as:

This has been a scary six months, but what we have found out already about children that we did not know before is stopping us in our tracks. This is changing my way of thinking and interacting with the children and the families, which in this short space of time is really making a difference to how I support children's learning. What is more, we have always found difficulty in involving parents in our area, and now we are noticing that is in a process of positive change.

### **What can this mean for parents and families?**

What this means for families is affected by the significance of the impact upon their children. It is also affected by how information about the documentation approach to early learning is communicated to them.

What we have discovered through a period of trial and error is that it has to be a method of communication appropriate to the community where the nursery is located and that it needs to be of an ongoing nature both in terms of theory and practice. It has been our experience that in a couple of communities some parents have, in the first instance, expressed serious reservations about the implications of the approach on their children within the setting and within the family. For example, one family was expressing concern about the children being allowed to share decisions with staff about how the nursery was set out. One mother said to a member of staff, 'This is the staff's job not the children's.' Clearly seeing what an element of the approach looked like in practice surprised this particular parent. She did not welcome the idea of her child having a choice in such an important element of the nursery and saw these kinds of decisions as being exclusive to adults only. There could have been many reasons for the family's disquiet relating to their own child-rearing practices or a lack of understanding about what the staff in the nursery were trying to achieve with their child. The staff team, however,

grasped this as an opportunity to explain further what this way of working with children really means now and can mean in the future for life in the setting and for the home. The use of children's journals has also been a keen source of some discussion with the parents, most of them welcoming them as an important record of their children's lives in the nursery and others sometimes seeing them as potentially an intrusive element of this approach which they only became comfortable with over time.<sup>2</sup> Then again, there have been one or two other parents who were quite specific about situations in which they would allow their children to be photographed and limited the use of such photographs very often to within the confines of the early years setting.

What follows is an example of one head who had, after several attempts, eventually managed to find a way of communicating with her parents and families which was meaningful to them.

At Doune Nursery, the Head had been, for some time, seeking ways of involving the families with the documentation approach through a variety of means which drew only a limited response from them. However, after having prepared a presentation about the documentation approach to early learning for a conference which was well received by the audience, she decided that, with some modifications, it might be a good idea to share this with families at the beginning of the new session in August. She has been really delighted at the interest and involvement from families since then, and she now says, 'I cannot believe I did not think to do this sooner.' It certainly remains her intention now to start every session with a presentation of this kind supported by ongoing inputs throughout the year.

However, other early years settings found that introducing the approach through the children's involvement in a learning group, documentation folders, children's journals and active membership of a learning group succeeded for them. In these communities, presentations of projects very often came later.

Once appropriate inductions to the approach have been found, parents and families have been invited to become active participants with their children and the educators in this collaborative approach to early learning. We have found that this is much more likely to happen when it is visibly demonstrated to them that they can be integral to this pedagogical approach.

Through dialogue with the educators in the setting, it is quickly realised that most of the interests that their child/children are pursuing stem from the home. Whilst we have always had a level of understanding of this, it has been deepened by the powerful listening and collaborative elements of this approach. One clear example of this was when James, in a busy early years setting, consistently, over a period of weeks, became absorbed in constructing houses with the large wooden blocks. Educators discussed this interest of his with his family who told them that his grandmother was having an extension built and since James was often cared for by her, he had been observing this with interest on a regular basis. What the staff team did was to ask the grandmother to photograph the

<sup>2</sup> Children's journals are used in a number of early years settings on a regular but not necessarily daily basis to develop an ongoing record of the child's nursery life from admission to leaving to go to school. Contributions are entered by children, staff, parents and families and can include special events, favourite drawings, pictures, dialogue recorded by staff and comments by parents and families. They contain beautiful and significant memories for the children, parents and families to carry with them for the rest of their lives. They do not necessarily find their way to school; this is a decision that the child and the families make together.

extension with James and link the visibility of James's family interest with the photograph of James's construction in the setting. More and more, we have sought to make visible the link between learning at home and in the setting which has been enriching for the children and at times enlightening for the parents who can have the view that 'worthwhile learning' only takes place in an educational setting.

Equally, because of the visibility of this approach, parents and families are more naturally contributing to an interest that is being developed because, without being invited or pressurised, they are able to see where they can and would want to make a contribution to an episode and to the life of a project. Some of the ways in which this has happened have been by parents researching a topic on the Internet or, for example, by developing the interest by taking their child/children on a visit to a waterfall which is a different experience to the waterfall they went to with the staff team. Or, it has been that they have come into the setting and gardened alongside the children and at the same time brought plants and shrubs in from their own garden. In this way, shared traces are being made visible between nursery and home. Such shared moments are captured to be included in the documentation of the overall episode or project.

Making such engagements between parents, families, children and staff teams has not only been collaborative, it has also been helpful in deepening the mutual respect between all concerned as well as becoming part of that reciprocal learning element which is another significant feature of this pedagogical approach to children's early learning. In deepening our contacts with parents and families, there is an inevitability about its impact on local communities where families amongst themselves share both their reservations and celebrations about their children's involvement with the documentation approach to early learning.

### **What can this mean for spaces indoors and outdoors within an early years setting?**

As with any pedagogical approach, working with the documentation approach to early learning clearly has a significant impact on the spaces for learning indoors and outdoors. What we have understood is that the spaces indoors and outdoors need to reflect that nature of the approach that places a high priority, amongst other things, on children's independent learning, creativity, group and individual learning, their capabilities and need for thoughtfulness. The environment is considered as the third educator:

We value space because of its power to organise, promote pleasant relationships among people of different ages, create a handsome environment, provide changes, promotes choices and activity, and provide the potential for sparking all kinds of social, affective, and cognitive learning.

(Loris Malaguzzi, personal communication 1984)

In terms of ethos, what we have found to be helpful is an environment that is flexible, aesthetically pleasing and calm in its atmosphere and presentation, inclusive with a commitment to the development of a culture of enquiry amongst the children, staff team and parents and families. For this to be possible, it must be supported by responsive educators who encourage the children to pose questions, make choices and be involved in decision-making, alone or collectively.

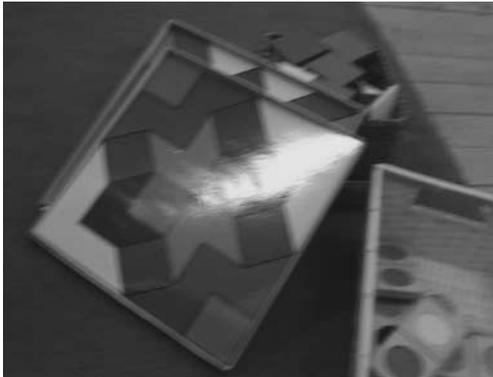
In terms of organisation we recommend that:

- ◆ it is personified by its purposeful use of space rather than by the number of resources that can be housed. The children's voices should be heard in its layout specifications, and they should have easy access to personal folders and a range of resources which are visible;
- ◆ it has responsive and flexible space where children's ability to choose and use space is provided for, including empty spaces for reflection;
- ◆ it has flexible organisation possibilities which allow children not only to plan for their session but also to accommodate both individual learners and those working within a learning group;
- ◆ it is supported by routines that do not interrupt the learning processes of children and that are regularly reviewed to be sure that they are still 'fit for purpose' for any given group of children and their unique learning styles and processes;
- ◆ it is uncluttered and minimalistic in its approach to availability of resources and furniture, so that children are able to move freely and not be constrained by an over-abundance of resources. This does not mean that the setting is not well resourced; it simply means that the use of these resources can only be enhanced by their possibilities for exploration, which is jeopardised if there are too many of them available at the same time.

In terms of resources, the following have been found to be essential:

- ◆ digital cameras for educators and children;
- ◆ disposable cameras for a range of purposes;
- ◆ video camera to capture longer sequences of learning;
- ◆ Digi Blue (basic version of the above);
- ◆ hand-held tape-recorders to further record children's and adults' hypotheses about the theories they are researching;
- ◆ overhead projector/transparencies;
- ◆ computer with Internet access and printer;
- ◆ laptop – where possible with the appropriate software to accommodate the technologies that support this approach, i.e. CD-writer, PowerPoint, video facility, web-cam, etc.;
- ◆ photocopier;
- ◆ black felt pens for recording children's narratives;
- ◆ Post-It notes for educators to record observations and for children to write labels;
- ◆ notepads to record more detailed commentaries on children's pursuits or conversations;
- ◆ flip charts for children and educators to mind-map;
- ◆ display boards/small hanging pinboards for projects to be made visible (These should be at a height for both children and adults to view and should have neutral backgrounds. For maximum visibility, these should be well spaced out and should be capable of making visible the nature of the projects being developed in the setting.);
- ◆ display areas for models which are permanent and support the possible longevity of a model or table display;
- ◆ children's personal journals;

- ◆ folders to hold significant data arising from projects undertaken within the context of a learning group;
- ◆ display space for mind mapping and planning which is at a height both for children and adults to view;<sup>3</sup>
- ◆ a fiction and non-fiction collection of books which are wide-ranging in their content and are capable of resourcing, in the main, the ongoing interests and episodes and projects of the children;
- ◆ a collection of precious resources which are continually being added to for their awe and wonder quality.



<sup>3</sup> Mind-mapping is a method used during consultation and planning sessions with the children which makes visible through a mapping system the design and plan of a particular episode, project or experience inside or outside.

# What does the documentation approach look like in practice?

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'documentation' as content is material which records what the children are saying and doing, the work of the children, and how the pedagogue relates to the children and their work.

(Dahlberg *et al.* 1999: 148)

The documentation approach to early learning has afforded us the possibility to make visible the children's learning, either as individuals or as members of learning groups, by recording across a range of media both shorter and longer term encounters.

Those which are shorter term are referred to in this section as episodes, whilst those which are longer term are referred to as projects. In the main, what is being shared in this section is a cross-section of documentation projects as they occurred within core learning groups. This became necessary because we realised that this way of supporting young children's learning incorporates a socio-constructivist philosophy which, we understand, has many advantages for children over the mainly individualistic approach which tended to be our previous dominant practice.

### **What do we mean by an episode?**

An episode is an interest identified sometimes by an individual child or group of children which is not necessarily sustained or sustainable over a long period of time but which it is important to make visible because of its significance in the child's/children's learning and development. As with some topics that children can express an interest in, it may be as transitory as a day, a week, or two or three weeks and then it dies. On the other hand, it may have the possibility to be developed as a project. Close observation by the staff team and important conversations with the child or children involved will be key to understanding the nature of the interest and whether it has distinct learning possibilities within the early years setting and within the community.

### **What do we mean by a project?**

A project is not to be understood as interchangeable with 'a theme' which would be constructed around a particular topic, very often chosen by the staff team, and would usually have a predetermined time limit. Rather, a project is to be understood as an

interest identified by an individual child or a group of children which is observed as being persistent and sustained and with no preconceived time limit. (It could have started life within what educators had thought was an episodic or transitory interest.) Some projects can have an ongoing lifespan and become what we have termed a long-term project (see below, Bannockburn Mural).

The educator or educators working with this child or children would then confer between themselves or with other colleagues about its learning possibilities, both within the nursery and their local community. On the basis of such a dialogue, a decision would be made about the viability of the project, and if it was starting its life with a problem or problems to be solved, since this can be one of the vital ingredients determining the inception of a project. If the decision is to proceed, then ways of developing it would be discussed and agreed between the child or children and the educators and families where an interest by them was known. Once a project has been agreed, then it would be referred to as a project amongst the learning-group members which would include children, educators, parents and families.

## **What do we mean by a learning group?**

A learning group, as we understand it, is distinct from children being engaged in experiences in parallel with other children within a usual group situation and learning alone. We have taken as our conceptualisation of learning groups the following key features from the Project Zero (2001: 286). They are as follows:

- ◆ The members of the learning groups include adults as well as children.
- ◆ Documenting children's learning processes (within a learning group) helps to make learning visible and shapes the learning that takes place.
- ◆ Members of learning groups are engaged in the emotional and aesthetic as well as the intellectual dimensions of learning.
- ◆ The focus of learning in learning groups extends beyond the learning of individuals to create a collective body of knowledge.

When using the term 'learning group' within this section, we are usually referring to a core group of children who are developing their interest together through hypothesising about and trying out their theories according to a co-researching model with the educators and, increasingly, families. This does not mean, however, that other children are excluded from a particular project or episode. The visibility of the learning group and the actual episode or project is such that other children are able to declare an interest and contribute to the learning of the group when aspects of it are attractive to them or when invited to help solve a problem that currently seems intractable to the core learning group.

## **Documentation in action**

### ***An episode: Light and Dark***

Doone Nursery is a purpose-built nursery provision in a semi-rural district of Stirling. The children who attend the nursery are in the three to five age range and have access to it on a mixed pattern of attendance, which includes extended day and part-time provision.

### *How did it start?*

An interest in light and dark had been prompted by one of the children bringing in a snake torch and a luminous spider. This spider sparked an interest in other children who then brought in other luminous spiders as well as other light sources which they had discovered at home, – for example, luminous shoes, light-changing torches, T-shirts, etc.

Through close observation and by engaging in dialogue with the interested children, the staff and children decided that the availability of a dark room would provide a further provocation for learning. This was duly set up, with the inclusion of an overhead projector (OHP), and the children were then able to explore the possibilities of various light sources as well as their own: for example, OHP, CD-player, light mirror, fairy lights, lava lamp, torches, etc.

The same core group of children sustained their interest in this type of experimentation with light and dark over a period of time, which was evidenced not only through staff observations but also by the entries made in the children's planning books on a daily basis. In consultation with the children, the educators decided that it had lots of learning possibilities, which included problems to be solved and theories to be tested out; at the very least, it was decided that this could, meantime, be considered as an episode with possibilities to develop into a project.

Arising from this light and dark interest, a learning group was formed with approximately six children as core members, one of whom was a member of the staff team.

### *Provocation for learning: where does the light come from?*

After lengthy experimentation with the various light sources, which were supplemented from nursery and home, the children began to be thoughtful about where the light in these pieces of equipment came from.



Luminous spider



Dark-room play



Light and dark group

This process clearly led the children on to electricity. The learning-group staff member, as well as the Head of the Nursery, had a certain discomfort with this because of the health-and-safety issues surrounding electricity and its potential dangers for everybody but particularly for children. However, the interest was so strong that the educators worked with the group on this, being very clear with the children about the inherent dangers of electricity, while being careful not to detract from the learning of the group.

Bearing such safety issues in mind, it was decided in consultation with the children that it would be a good idea if a set of rules was negotiated which would ensure the children's safety when considering wall plugs and using the OHP and other related electrical equipment.

This was the dialogue that took place between the educators who were the lead staff members of this learning group. Their names are Andrea and Yvonne.

- Yvonne:* We are going to talk about the OHP.  
*Rachel:* It makes a picture on that curtain.  
*Yvonne:* How does the picture get on the screen?  
*Rowan:* Because there is light and a mirror.  
*Andrea:* What does the mirror do?  
*Flora:* It's a reflector.  
*Andrea:* That's right. How do we operate the OHP?  
*Natasha:* Because it's on it stays on.  
*Andrea:* Should the children turn it off and on?  
*Rebecca:* No, it might break.  
*Blair:* It might run out of that stuff electricity.  
*Erin:* It might break and it might run out.  
*James:* Grown-ups switch it on and off.  
*Andrea:* What do we put on top of the OHP?  
*All:* Pictures.  
*Jenna:* And it goes on the curtain.  
*Andrea:* What do we do with the pictures?  
*Jenna:* Just look and don't go close.  
*Natasha:* It's hot. Just keep it on.  
*Erin:* Not wiggle it about.  
*Jenna:* 'Cos you might not see the picture and it might fall off.  
*Blair:* It might, if you keep switching it off and on the bulb inside might break.  
*Andrea:* What will happen to the image?  
*Natasha:* It might rip.  
*Katie:* It might get torn.  
*Peter:* It might flatten the battery.  
*Andrea:* Now that we have talked about the OHP, can we make some rules?  
*Yvonne:* Look at the OHP, is it on or off?  
*All:* Off.  
*Yvonne:* What do we do first?  
*Natasha:* Put it on.  
*Andrea:* Do the children put it on?  
*All:* No.  
*Andrea:* What would we do?

Flora and Natasha: Tell the ladies.

Natasha: What do we tell the ladies?

Andrea: What do we tell the ladies?

Flora/Natasha: To turn it on.

Andrea: What do we do next?

Katie: Not switch it on.

Peter: Not on or off.

Blair: After that, you have to put the picture on.

Yvonne: What else do we have to do? Where does the picture go?

Natasha: On the curtain.

Yvonne: How does it go on the screen?

Flora, Freya and Natasha: Roll it down, pull it down.

Blair: Even if it is not down, it flashes on the door.

Yvonne: After that, what would you do?

Blair: Watch it.

Seumas: If you drop it, the bulb might break.

Yvonne: Does anyone know what this is?

All: A book.

Yvonne: Does anyone know what's in it?

All: Pictures.

Yvonne: What are the pictures for?

Peter: The projector.

Yvonne: What do we have to do with this folder?

Jenna: You have to put them in.

Rebecca: Take them out.

Rebecca: And then you see them and when it's switched off, can't see it.

Andrea: If there is a picture on the OHP and you want to change it?

Natasha: Put it back in here [*pointing to the book/folder*].

Peter: It would get all scraped and all ripped.

Blair: Take it out.

Andrea: To put it back.

Andrea explains that the OHP gets too hot and not to touch it. The ladies may turn it off if it gets too hot. The children agree to their rules for safe play.

### **Provocation for learning: you can't see electricity, where does it come from?**

The children then came up with various hypotheses about where the electricity came from:

Blair: Comes from the socket over there [*pointing to the wall*].

Louise: Comes from the road.

Blair: It comes from under the ground, people put it there, the Council.

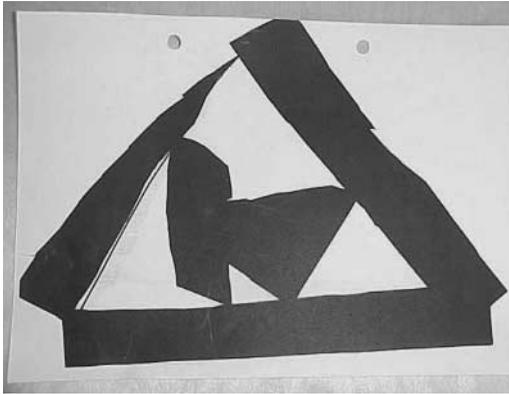
Educator: Who installed the electricity?

James: It was the electricity man.

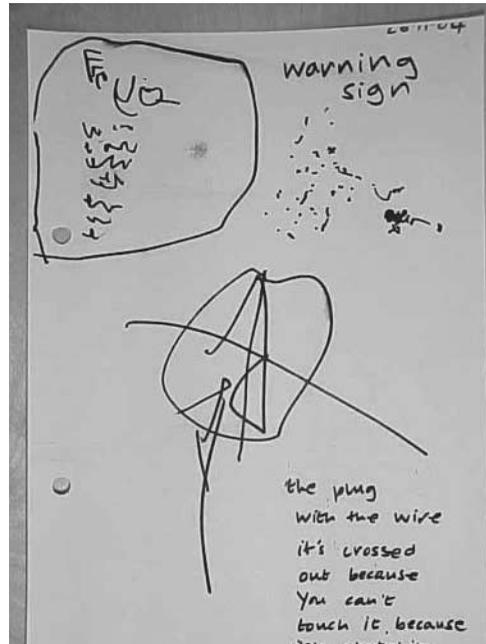
Educator: How does the electricity get from the ground to the plug?

James: It goes through that pipe.

Louise: It's not a pipe it's a wire.



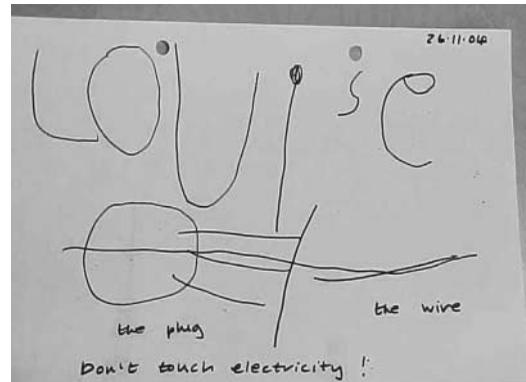
Danger sign



Freya's warning sign



Freya's plug and wire



Louise's plug and wire

### Provocation for learning goes home . . . and comes back!

*Louise:* I've been speaking to my dad about electricity. He knows all about it – electronics – he told me about electrons, how they are so small you can't see them. They go through the wires and they make electricity. It goes into everything to make it work, lots of things that need electricity [*laughs*] but not paper because that's what you draw on not plastic!

*Rowan:* You can only see electricity in electric balls.

*Louise:* Electric balls are electrons.

Rowan: With the pink electricity, if you place your hand on the electric ball, because I touched one this morning before I came to nursery, and I didn't die! I've got an idea. Let's go into the dark room and look for electrons!

Where does their research into electricity take them next?

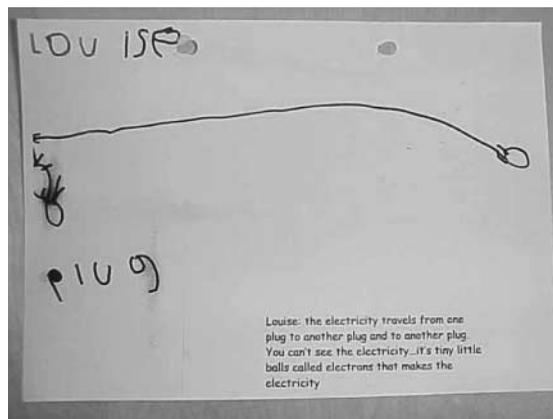
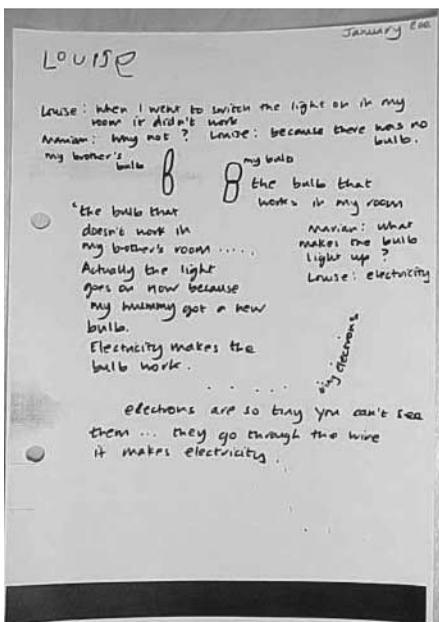
Some of the children used the Internet as part of their research; others, like Rowan, find *The First Encyclopedia of Science*. Rowan shows the educator a picture of this book, and says, 'I found a bit on electricity. I know that's electricity travelling on the ground' (pointing to the cables). Katie and Zoe are listening to Rowan's description of electricity. Katie looks at the book and decides she wants to draw electricity.

### Provocation for learning goes home again

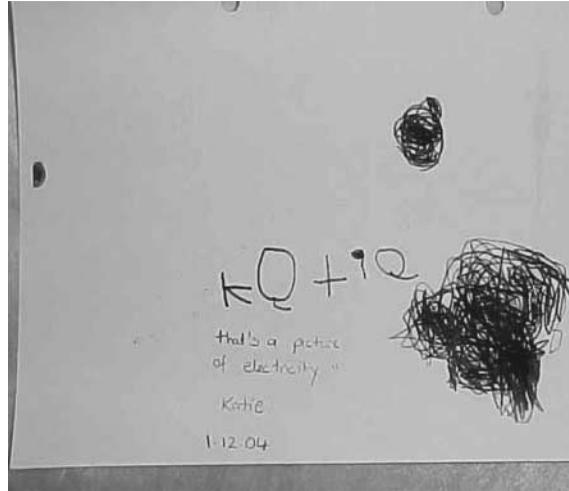
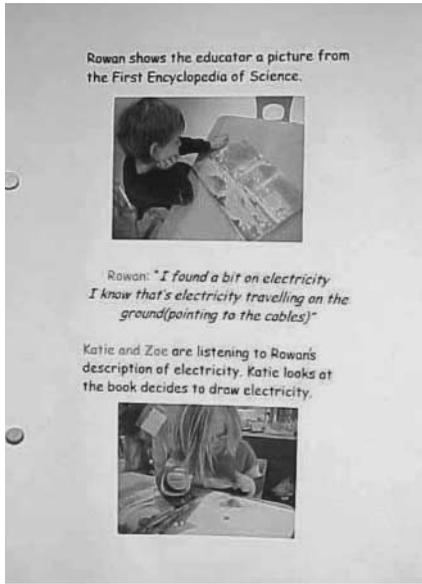
What was becoming increasingly clear to staff during the development of this significant episode of learning was that Louise, one of the learning-group members, had a particular interest in electricity because her dad was building a new house for her family. This meant that she was actively seeing electricity being installed through the cables into her house. Since the family was engaging in conversations with Louise at home about elements of the episode being researched in the learning group, they thought it might be helpful if they invited the members of the learning group to the building site to take their investigations into electricity a stage further.

Following this visit to Louise's home by the light and dark learning group, the specific interest in electricity waned and did not develop into a project, though it could be said it inspired another project about buildings which had its genesis in Louise's new house.

Why this keen interest in electricity with its many possibilities for learning did not develop further will never be known. Could it have been that the children found



Louise's electrons



Katie's picture of electricity

Rowan looking at the encyclopedia



Children visiting Louise's new home



Louise's dad and electricity wires

buildings more interesting than electricity? Or could it have been that the staff team were wary of developing such an interest further, and this conveyed itself to the children? However, the significance of it was such for the learning that took place that it was really important to record it and make it visible both for the children and the parents who took part.

### ***Documentation approach to early learning***

#### ***Key features made visible***

- ◆ Special objects brought in by the children from home provided the stimulus for this episode.
- ◆ The vital ingredient here was present: there was a problem to be solved, 'What is the source of the light?'
- ◆ Listening through dialogue and through a wide range of observations, particularly when observing children's use of torches and when children recorded dialogue, enabled the safety rules to be agreed and recorded.
- ◆ Staff allowed the interest to take its course and waited to see how and if it developed further, taking care at this point not to give it any direction, only to support it.
- ◆ Capabilities of children were reflected through, in particular, Louise's understanding of electricity to such an extent that she was able to explain and represent it verbally and through her drawings.
- ◆ The children were attempting to make sense and then meaning of their research into the source of light and electricity, and some children, like Louise, were able to do both, whilst others were still in the process of researching it.

- ◆ The children's dialogue reflected resourcefulness and creative thinking of staff and children, particularly when the staff found ways to take this episode forward when they had strong reservations about the safety aspects, like when they took the children to look at the electricity power unit outside the nursery, and the children in turn reinforced this for themselves with graphic drawings of the safety sign.
- ◆ Risk-taking was reflected by staff's and parents' willingness to take forward the electricity project, even when they did have concerns about safety aspects.
- ◆ Provocations for learning were used throughout to extend the children's thinking and learning.
- ◆ Home and nursery links were an intrinsic part of this episode, parents' involvement and visibility were evident throughout the episode. We now recognise visibility as an important factor in encouraging parents and families to become involved in the episodes and projects.
- ◆ Co-researching between children, staff and parents was evident throughout this whole process, in the use of the Internet at home and in the nursery and in Rowan's use of the encyclopedia to continue his search for more information about electricity.

### ***An episode becomes a project: Earthquake in Pakistan***

#### ***The context***

Croftamie Nursery is a rural nursery on the outskirts of Stirling. It currently offers provision for children in the two to five age group on a mixed pattern of attendance, which includes part-time and extended day provision.



James and Fergus

*How did it start?*

James arrived at the nursery and joined his friend Fergus who was playing with the Lego. James was eager to ask Fergus if he had heard about the earthquake in 'Pakistani'. Fergus indicated that he did not know about this. James then began to explain that there had been an earthquake in 'Pakistani' and the school building had fallen down on top of the mummies, daddies and children.

The Head of the Nursery, Annie, was working in the office at this point and had overheard the conversation. She was interested in hearing more about this, and so she joined the children in the playroom. She explained to both children that she had overheard what had been said and was interested to hear more if they were agreeable to this. They agreed that she should join them and take part in their conversation.

*James:* I heard that there was an earthquake in 'Pakistani' and the ground shook like this [*James holds his hands out together and shivers and shakes, demonstrating the movement that the earthquake made*].

*Annie:* I wonder what made the ground shake like that?

*James:* It's the plates moving together that makes the ground shake.

*Annie:* That's interesting. Where did you hear this?

*James:* I saw it on the telly and heard it on the radio in the car. The school building fell down, and the mummies and daddies and children were inside. They got squashed.

*Annie:* How terrible, that must have been an awful thing to happen.

*James:* Yes, and all the houses fell down, and now people do not have homes.

*Annie:* How awful not to have anywhere to stay.

*James:* Maybe we can help the people in 'Pakistani'.

*Annie:* You would like to help them? How can we do this?

*James:* I know, I have a good idea. Thunderbirds could help.

*Annie:* That sounds like a good idea. How can we do this?

*James:* I know. I have Thunderbirds at my house, it's 5, 4, 3, 2, 1, Thunderbirds are go!

*Annie:* Good. How can they help us?

*James:* Well, they're not real, Annie.

*Annie:* Oh! So that won't work then?

*James:* No, but I have another good idea. I could take some money from my piggy bank and send it to them.

*Annie:* Well, James, I think that is a very kind thing to do, and if you take some money from your piggy bank, I'll give you some money from my purse to send also.

*James:* Well, not all of my money from my new bank, just a little.

*Annie:* Of course, I am not giving you all of my money from my purse, but I will give some of it. I am wondering how we are going to get this money to people in Pakistan.

*James:* I know, we can send it on an aeroplane to the Pakistani people and then they can buy things.

*Annie:* What a good idea. Maybe other people would like to help. What do you think?

*James:* Yes, I think the mummies, daddies would like to help.

*Annie:* But how can we let them know about this?

*James:* Yes, I think the mummies and daddies would like to help.

### *Provocation for learning*

*Annie:* But how can we let them know about this?

[*James thinks about this . . .*]

*James:* I know, let's send them a letter telling them about it and ask them to help.

*Annie:* What a good idea. What should we say in the letter? Would you like to tell me, and I will type it out for you and then we can photocopy this?

*James:* Yes.

Fergus, who had originally been involved in the discussion for some time, returned to listen to the conversation and indicated that he would also like to help.

### *Provocation for learning: how can we find out more?*

The Head then suggested to James and Fergus that together they go into her office and look on the Internet to see if they could get some information about the Pakistan earthquake and find ways in which they could help.

Both James and Fergus agreed that this was a good idea.

A website was found which gave the information about the Pakistan earthquake and about the resources the people in Pakistan needed. It also showed pictures of the resources that the money could buy. The three of them looked at this for some time, and both James and Fergus decided they wanted to buy resources with the money that they collected.

Having sourced this information, Annie decided it would be helpful to contact James's mum at work to share the news about her son's idea. She was eager to get her permission to take this forward. Mum agreed; however, what was not clear to us was that James's



James, Fergus and Annie on the Internet

mum was so moved by her son's thoughts and actions that she took the opportunity to share it with her work colleagues. They spontaneously decided that they wanted to be involved in the fundraising.

James and Fergus then dictated the letter and then photocopied forty-four copies.

James went off to make the picture for the people who may want to help.

Forty-four envelopes were counted out and both James and Fergus put the letters into envelopes. By the end of the morning, the envelopes were ready to be given out.

James took the lead and engaged with the parents as they came to collect their children. James handed parents the letter, taking time to tell them about his ideas and how he wanted to help the people in Pakistan who had been affected by the earthquake.



James writing a letter



James drawing a picture



James and Annie put letter in envelope



Fergus puts letter in envelope

***Provocation for learning: who else should we share this with?***

Annie, the Head, then suggested to James and Fergus that they should share with the rest of the staff and the other children what they had been working on that morning so that they could help and be involved if they wanted to.

Annie then said to both boys, 'You have really worked hard this morning finding ways to help the people in Pakistan. Do you know that there is a name for the job that you have been doing? It is called fundraising. This means that you are both fundraisers.'

James, in particular, was very happy with this and used this new word to share with his friends in the nursery. He told them, 'I am a fundraiser!'



James and Fergus sharing ideas with others

### ***Where does the episode go next?***

This interest, that started as an episode as described during one morning, developed into a project. James and Fergus, in the meantime, collected a sizeable sum of money and became very keen to include other children in their work, which meant that there was now a learning group emerging whose interests in the Pakistan earthquake were appearing to be diverse. The two staff members of the learning group were working with the children to discover what exactly sparked James's interest in the earthquake. Was it that he felt a compassion for the people themselves? Or was it that he wanted to know more about earthquakes and how they happen and could this happen in his home or the nursery? Or was it both? Also they were becoming aware that other children in the learning group were definitely showing an interest in what makes buildings crumble and fall apart. What they understood already is that these different interests would continue to emerge and provide rich possibilities for learning which they would plan for in consultation with the children. And so, the project, still in its early stages, continued, and families as well as children and staff were supporting its development.

### ***Documentation approach to early learning***

#### ***Key features made visible***

- ◆ James's keen interest in the Pakistan earthquake provided the impetus for an episode of learning to develop.
- ◆ Vital ingredient present: problem to be solved, 'How can we help the people in Pakistan who have no homes following the earthquake?'
- ◆ The listening culture within the setting meant that the Head of Nursery was used to tuning into the children in the nursery and understood that something significant was being discussed, and she followed it up.

- ◆ The sustainability of the episode was possible because of the enthusiasm that Fergus and James continued to have and, as a consequence, the other children became 'infected' by it.
- ◆ Because of its sustainability and the interest of a larger group of children, the episode proved that it had the capacity to develop into a project.
- ◆ Being respectful to children, the Head didn't interrupt the initial conversation and sought the children's permission before she joined them.
- ◆ Not making assumptions about the interest, researching it further with the child, discovering that James was motivated by compassion not by the technicalities of why and how buildings collapsed. It was important for the learning potential of a project for this process of 'going deeper' to take place.
- ◆ Listening through observations was clearly present in finding out what James's initial interest was, in order to follow it through appropriately.
- ◆ Provocations for learning were threaded through the project overall. These provided a real stimulus for the children and provoked them to extend their learning about the earthquake as well as helping them to solve problems when they arose.
- ◆ Listening as an emotional response to an encounter or situation as evident between the Head, James and Fergus.
- ◆ Childrens' trying to making sense and then make meaning of this natural disaster and constructing theories around it from a variety of aspects depending on the varying perspectives of the children involved in the group. James's sense of compassion was aroused; another child was interested in how and why buildings collapsed.
- ◆ The co-researching element was emphasised in how staff and children used various media resources together to find out how to fundraise and how to use the money when collected. Access to the Internet was crucial in this process.

### ***A project: The One-Eyed Rabbit***

#### *The context*

Fintry Nursery is a nursery in a primary school which is located in a semi-rural area of Stirling. The children who attend the nursery do so on a morning-only basis and are in the three to five age range. There are two early years educators.

The images that follow were captured as part of a long-term project which became known as the One-Eyed Rabbit for the simple reason that the rabbit around which the project was based had only one eye.

The project started in August and continued in the nursery until the following August when the rabbit accompanied the children starting school into Primary 1 (reception class) for a six-week period.

#### *How did it start?*

Through listening and close observation, the members of staff became aware that a group of children, initially three of them, were developing a deep interest in hospital matters and, in particular, in making people better. One of the staff members remembered that her daughter had a rabbit with one eye whom she thought they might like 'to try and make better'. After discussion with her colleague and the agreement of her daughter, Rabbit came to nursery and became a provocation for learning.

Whether there are problems to be solved is a key factor in deciding whether a project has rich learning potential or not. Most of those confronted in this project are outlined below. Many of these were posed by the children, others by the educators and some in collaboration with each other.

### *Provocation for learning: how do we make Rabbit better?*

The children soon became absorbed in how 'to make Rabbit better' and restore him to full 'rabbithood' again. Following an analysis by the staff team of the possibilities for learning within such an interest, the staff plans and children's plans began to clearly reflect this emerging project – or did they? At this point, both sets of plans merged, and, in an ongoing way, supported the organic nature of the project as it developed into expected and unexpected territories.

### *How did it develop?*

Initially, three children came together as the core learning group who were quick to engage with Rabbit and his dilemma. This caused them initially to be thoughtful about how he came to lose an eye and then to consider the reason for having two eyes as opposed



The one-eyed rabbit



Children at planning wall



Children reflecting this exploration

to one. This led them to consider their own images with cameras, mirrors and their own representations of themselves with two eyes. This period of intensive research and the understandings arising from it led the core group of children to enter into conversations with the rest of the children in the nursery who, as a result, included themselves in this exciting exploration.

However, this was only the beginning! What follows is an overview of the community of enquiry that developed from the introduction of the one-eyed rabbit to the nursery.

It is important to indicate that the interest in the rabbit was not confined to the core learning group. Opportunities were created for these children to regularly update and

involve the other children in the setting in the avenues of enquiry as they emerged and particularly when there were problems to be solved. Those children who were not members of the core learning group tended to dip in and out of the interest to pursue those of their own. This is an important feature of working within this approach.

*Provocation for learning: how to replace Rabbit's eye?*

In the quest to replace Rabbit's eye, the children developed a number of theories which were shared within the core learning group as well as with the other children in the setting and their families. They put their theories into action by using materials in the nursery such as paper, pebbles, glue, string, jewels, etc., which they thought might become a substitute eye. What satisfied them as a solution at this point was black paper screwed up and stuck into the blank eye space.

*Provocation for learning: replacement eye fell out – what now?*

Initially, when this happened, the staff observed and listened to the core learning group and were surprised to learn that they did not seem particularly interested in pursuing a substitute eye for the rabbit. Instead, they noticed that the children were adopting really caring attitudes towards the rabbit and his condition, which the staff supported them in extending to other children in the setting.

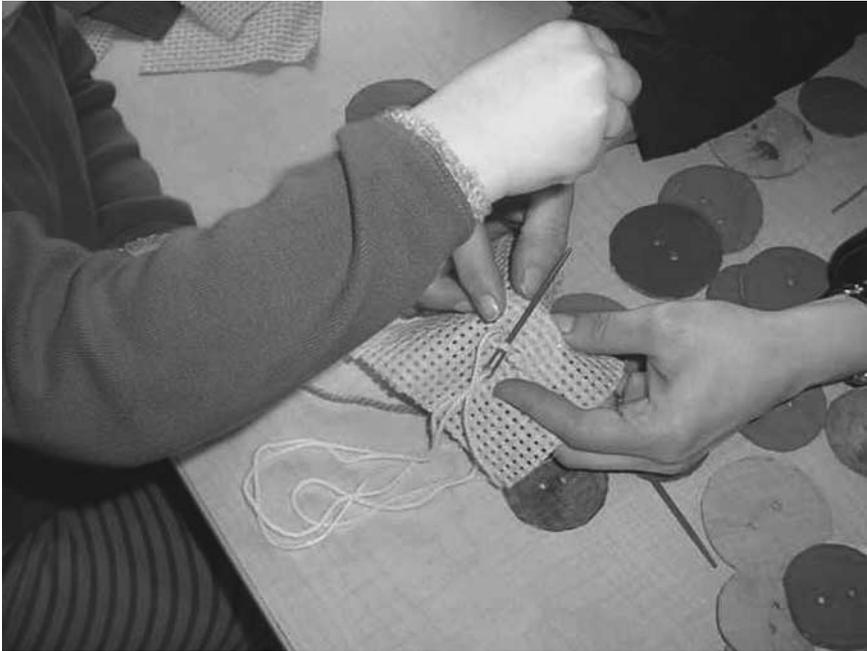
Until one day . . . one of the girls in the core learning group told one of the staff that her granny had suggested that a solution could be sewing a button into the space where the eye should be.



Shining light on Rabbit's eye



Fixing replacement eye



Children learning to sew

***Provocation for learning: what gender is the rabbit?***

Again, through systematic observation, listening and recording the children's dialogue, it emerged that two of the girls in the core learning group were keen to dress the rabbit in girl's clothes. The children's approach to this was quite simple: 'boys wear blue and girls wear pink'. This sparked a discussion about what gender the rabbit was and how this could be reflected in the clothes it wore. The educators saw this as a good opportunity to research this area of children's perceptions about possible relationships that can exist between gender and clothes in particular. This dialogue between the children and the educators was extended to include families, and it evoked a great deal of interest and sharing of clothes and photographs.

***Provocation for learning: Rabbit is poorly – what can we do?***

Again, through systematic observation, listening and recording of dialogue in the home corner, the staff became aware that there was a high level of imaginative play in the home corner intensely focused on the health of the rabbit. Various hypotheses were posed as to the particular health problem that the rabbit might have, and eventually the children decided that they must set up a doctor's surgery to diagnose his condition. In consultation with other children and the educators, they made their plans for constructing a doctor's surgery within the area where the home space was usually located. Rabbit then became very ill, which necessitated the transforming of the doctor's surgery into a hospital. The help of one of the mums, who was a sister in an operating theatre, was sought here, and she came in to show them how some operations are performed. More dramatic hospital role play developed from this: everybody was 'operated on', not just the rabbit, but also the children, the educators and the buddies.<sup>1</sup>



Rabbit and clothes

<sup>1</sup> Buddies are children from Primary 6 in the school within which the nursery is situated. They visit the nursery on a regular basis to make relationships with those children who are going to school in the next school session. This supports these children in their settling-in process when they start school.



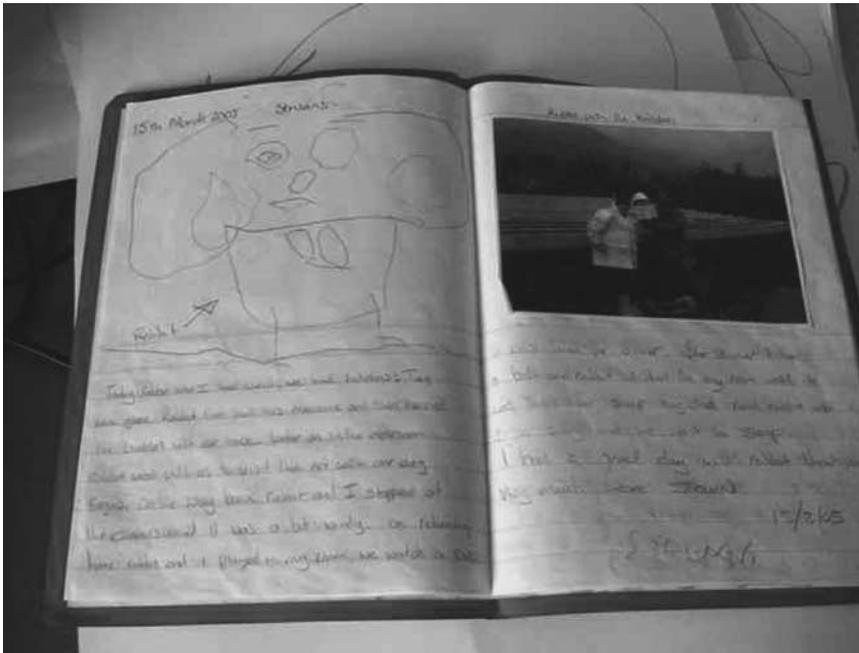
Mum in operating theatre

*Provocation for learning: Rabbit could be dying – what does this mean?*

The possibility of Rabbit dying caused the children to consider, first, how they could prevent this and, second, what does dying or death mean? The children reflected deeply, during the course of a conversation with the staff team, on what death meant to them at this point in their understanding, and there were many expressions of this through ‘the hundred languages of children’. They presented their theories about death and dying to the whole group of nursery children through oral communication, and many of them were keen to illustrate their understanding through paintings and drawings, which were presented on panels and mounted on the wall near to the home corner in the nursery. Families were consulted about how comfortable they were with this avenue of enquiry, since children had different versions of what happened after death which could have proved to be offensive. There were no objections, and so a fascinating dialogue opened up which revealed understandings and misunderstandings that children might have about an area that might not often be broached with them.

*Provocation for learning: how do we keep Rabbit alive?*

In the search for ways of keeping Rabbit alive, the children came up with a number of suggestions. First, they thought it might be a good idea if the member of staff who brought Rabbit to nursery took him home to be nursed by his owner, her daughter. Then, after a good deal of consultation amongst themselves, they felt that since Rabbit could not be left on his own in the nursery overnight and at weekends, it would be a much better idea for each one of them to take it home each night on a rota basis. This was readily agreed by the educators, since they were keen to develop further the learning



Book showing dialogue about Rabbit

connections between home and nursery which had been getting stronger as the life of the project expanded. A special bag was created between children and staff which contained medical records, medicine and a book to record Rabbit's experiences when he went home. The response of parents to this was amazing. Children and parents pooled their resources to make this work and shared the respective outcomes enthusiastically with the members of the staff team.

### *Provocation for learning: Rabbit is disabled – what does this mean?*

Throughout the lifetime of the project, both of the educators had been engaged in ongoing professional dialogue to support it and to consider what were the learning possibilities evident to them as professionals that were not arising as part of the consultation and participation with the children. One of these was disability awareness. The one-eyed rabbit could be considered to be disabled, and they felt it was important for this concept to be explored with the children who had not encountered this aspect of life previously within the setting. As it so happened, this was one of these coincidences mentioned earlier which they came to know about through the 'regular children's meetings'.<sup>1</sup> One of the children's grandfathers used a wheelchair, and so he was invited to come into the nursery to talk to them about his disability and how the wheelchair helped him to get about. About the same time, because parents were very much

1 'Children's meetings' refers to regular meetings that children have within the setting about a range of topics. These can be called by staff or children and are usually around issues that arise within the setting which require discussion and agreement between children and staff.

connected with the project, one of them suggested that a lady in the community had disabled dogs – one of which had only three legs. She also was invited into the nursery with the dog. Finally, in this aspect of the project, an almost unbelievable coincidence occurred when one of the children shared with an educator that his granny had now only one eye; she had just had the other one removed!! She also was very happy to come and share her experience of living with one eye with them.

### *Kieren's nana comes to visit*

Kieren had been telling us about his nana who had her eye removed recently. Since we had Rabbit with his one eye, we asked if Nana would come along and talk to us about what it is like to have just one eye. She was very happy to do so!

*Rosellen* How does Kieren's nana look?

*(Educator):*

*Cate:* She looks different and she has a sore face.

*Kieren:* You've got hearts and bones in your body, I saw it on telly.

*Rosellen* What was it like in hospital?

*{to Nana):*

*Nana:* People were all dressed in green with masks on.

*Struan:* Was your eye sore?

*Nana:* It wouldn't get better, so the doctor said the only way they could make it better was for it to come out.

*Jennifer* How long did you have to stay in hospital?

*(Educator):*

*Nana:* Just for one night.

*Kieren:* When are you going to open your eye?

*Rosellen:* Is it difficult just having one eye?



Kieren's nana with Kieren

- Nana:* Threading a needle is difficult, and I can't see people on my left side.
- Kieren:* Nana needs a walking stick.
- Niamb:* My grandpa has a walking stick.
- Kieren:* So does my dad.
- Cate:* Can you see the ground when you are walking?
- Nana:* I have to be very careful when I am walking, so I don't fall. The walking stick helps me too.
- Niamb:* Can you see all around you?
- Nana:* Not very well. When Kieren plays hide and seek, I can't find him.
- Pippa:* How did they get your eye out?
- Struan:* Your eye is made of jelly!
- Kieren:* They used pliers.
- Nana:* They used special tools.
- Stuart:* My eye has come out now [*pretending to close one eye*].
- Kieren:* When are you going to get a new eye?
- Nana:* When I go to Glasgow, I am going to see an artist, who is going to paint a picture of my good eye, and then from that they will make a new one.
- Struan:* What will they make it from?
- Nana:* Well, a long time ago it would have been glass, but now it is made from plastic.
- Jennifer:* Will you be able to take the eye out?
- Nana:* Yes, they will show me how to clean it and put it in and take it out.
- Cate:* All of us here have two eyes, and Nana has only one eye, and Rabbit has only got one eye too!
- Nana:* When I get my new eye, I will come back and see you, if you would like.
- All:* Yeh, thank you very much Nana for coming to see us. We can't wait to see your new eye.

Nana did return to see the children with her new eye and, since most of the children involved with this project, including Kieren, her grandson, had now gone to school, she went to visit the learning group in their new primary-school setting to share with them the next part of her experience with her 'new eye'.

### **The three-legged dog**

- Jennifer* (Educator): How did the dog lose its leg?
- Stuart:* A car vroomed and ran over it.
- Cate:* He went under the car.
- Kirsty:* You have to be very careful when you cross the road.
- Struan:* You need to look where you are going.
- Elizabeth:* You need to listen with your ears, and then you know when it's safe to cross.
- Jennifer:* Could the dog do all the things that a four-legged dog can do?
- Niamb:* Yes, cause dogs are very clever.
- Kirsty:* He went zooming fast.



Three-legged dog

- Stuart:* He's got lots of energy!
- Kirsty:* I threw the ball for it, and it ran really fast, just like my dog.
- Rosellen*  
(*Educator*): It was moving so fast that I found it hard to take a photograph.
- Jennifer:* If he only had two legs, could he still do all of those things?
- Stuart:* He would fall over, and only the back ones will work.
- Cate:* He would fall over . . . that's not good.
- Kirsty:* What would happen if he got all his legs knocked off?
- Stuart:* He could run on his tail!
- Niamb:* I think he could do a handstand on his tail.  
[*All of the children start to laugh.*]
- Struan:* He could have a walking stick.
- Kirsty:* Wheels. He could have wheels! You could put them on his tummy.
- Jennifer:* Have you seen a person with wheels?
- Cate:* Some people have legs, but they can't walk.
- Niamb:* A wheelchair.
- Jennifer:* What is a wheelchair?
- Cate:* It's a chair that has wheels.
- Pippa:* Someone needs to push them.
- Cate:* If their arms work, then they can push themselves with the wheels.  
[*Cate and the other children get up and try to move around the room using only one leg.*]
- Cate:* It's hard only using one leg.
- Katy:* My papa has got a wheelchair cause he can't walk. He's got a button on his wheelchair that makes it go. It goes back and forward.
- Cate:* How does he get in the car?
- Katy:* My mummy and grandma help him into the car. They hold his arm to get him into the car.
- Struan:* A walking stick would help.

- Jennifer:* If you only had one eye, could you see everything?  
*Kirsty:* It's better to have two eyes cause you look better.  
*Cate:* You can see better too.  
*Struan:* It wouldn't be very nice if you didn't have any arms or legs.  
*Niamb:* You couldn't play football or rugby or run very fast.  
*Kirsty:* You wouldn't be able to wave your arms or dance.  
*Struan:* You would get bored.  
*Pippa:* You could talk.  
*Struan:* If your eyes don't work, you are blind.  
*Pippa:* If you had no ears, you wouldn't listen.  
*Cate:* If you had no teeth, you wouldn't be able to eat.  
*Jennifer:* Let's hold that thought for another day!

The atmosphere around this project was at all times exciting, at times breathtaking in the depths it plumbed in the children, educators and families, and, wondrously, coincidences occurred that made significant connections with particular milestones in the project. Such coincidences injected a sense of relevance and realism into the overall project and made aspects of it much more understandable to the children – for example, Granny with one eye, three-legged dog, Grandfather in a wheelchair.

The children's interest in Rabbit remained alive for the remainder of the session, and what emerged, surprisingly, was that it was only towards the end of the session did they declare an interest in giving it a name. This involved the children in a consultation process which gained momentum in its remit as it went along. For example, they began to think about the rabbit's date of birth and address as well as its possible name, which eventually led them to developing a passport for it, which came in useful for the rabbit when it made the transition from the nursery to Primary 1 (reception class). The name they decided to give to the rabbit was Bouncer Hopper Shadow Rabbit.

As the nursery year came to its close in June, the one-eyed rabbit went home to his owner for the summer holidays. At the beginning of the new term, the rabbit returned to accompany the children going from the nursery to start school. This provided a continuity for the children and the encounters that the rabbit had during his time in the primary school have been recorded.

The project continues. Significant traces of the work developed through the rabbit remain visible in the nursery in various media forms, and, in time, through revisiting these, the idea is that the children and educators may well develop the project further or integrate elements of it into a future project. A further important feature of this approach is not only its adaptability and flexibility but also that time is never really called on a project – it always has further possibilities for the same children or for a new generation of children to research.

## **Documentation approach to early learning**

### *Key features made visible*

- ◆ An adult-led stimulus was prompted by an early interest that some children were showing in caring for others.
- ◆ The vital ingredient: a problem to be solved – 'How we can we restore Rabbit's eye?' – was clearly present at the outset of this project.

- ◆ It went beyond the episode stage because of the sustained interest of a core group of children initially, whose enthusiasm for it captured the interest of most of the children in the setting.
- ◆ Its capability to become a project was due to this as well as to the ability of the staff at times to introduce elements that they felt were particularly relevant for the children and the community. In a sense, this meant that they were adopting one of the Malaguzzi roles of the educator to 'be a director at times'.
- ◆ Such was the interest from all actors, including children from Primary 6 in the school, that it became a transition project for the children from early years nursery to early primary.
- ◆ Professional dialogue was an ongoing part of this project which took place informally and formally between two staff members. They reflected on what they had heard and what they had recorded, which enabled them to support the strands of learning as they emerged.
- ◆ The sustained use of provocations for learning was evident throughout this project.
- ◆ The ability of the staff team to use and build on all the resources available within the early years setting, the school and the community.
- ◆ Listening to children through observation, recorded conversations, family members and a range of media activity.
- ◆ Learning beyond the nursery, impact on the community and the primary school particularly engaging the support, interests and talents of the primary head teacher.
- ◆ The engagement of the early years primary staff with the nursery team when Rabbit went with the children starting primary school in the autumn.
- ◆ A culture and ethos of enquiry developed between, particularly, the children, the staff and the families. This came about almost automatically because the children began to understand the importance of asking questions through the educators' use of them, and then they did likewise. Interestingly, parents then began to follow suit, and the educators began to recognise this as a community of enquiry and talked about it as such.

### ***A long-term project: a Bannockburn Mural, November 1999–March 2006***

#### *The context*

Park Drive Nursery is a refurbished nursery provision attached to a primary school in an urban area of Stirling where the children who access the nursery are in the three to five age range and attend on a part-time and extended day pattern of attendance.

This project is quite distinctive and is included because it has revealed itself as being capable of sustaining a long-term interest over a six-year period with different generations of nursery children contributing to its emergence and development. This is important because, as well as its longevity, it demonstrates that children can pause their current profound interest and, because of its visibility on wall panels, inside and particularly outside in this instance, and in folders, they and others can revisit it and bring fresh ideas and insights for its future development. One of the other advantages of such a project is that the children are engaging with their local area, which helps to keep it alive for current and new children in different contexts and with a range of people, both of which will influence the children's thinking about their community. Their expression of this

will be made visible within the overall project but most noticeably within their extension of the mural itself.

### *How did it start?*

This project arose initially from a group of children becoming interested in creating images of themselves as part of a settling-in process in the nursery at the beginning of the new term. As part of this process, they decided that they would like to be able to make bigger images of themselves, and the educator, who was leading on this interest, felt that she needed help with this herself since she knew that she did not have the skills to support them. To do this, she engaged the help of the Play Services staff team and also members of the community, one of whom she understood specialised in creating large images on different types of materials to match different environmental conditions and the other an art student who was a friend of a member of the staff team.<sup>2</sup>

Once the children had been exposed to the techniques shared with them by the community specialists, they developed their own large images, which are shown below. Once having achieved these, they appeared to have abandoned their interest in this process.

However, it was revitalised a few weeks later when, out on a usual outing into the Bannockburn community where the nursery was located, they became fascinated by a very noticeable church building which had significant characterising features. This inspired their interest in other large buildings in their community, and the staff team, aware that there could be a connection between their interest in large images of themselves and large buildings, thought this could well be an interest that had the potential to be developed further.



Child with artist drawing large painting

2 The Play Services team is part of the Early Childhood and Out of School Care Service in Stirling Council.



Children painting large pictures



Children looking at and drawing car



Stuart's drawing of the church



Michelle's interpretation of Stuart's drawing

This is Stuart's drawing of the church building. This technique of sketching the church building was supported by Michelle, the art student, and the members of the staff team who had been observing the strategies used by her with the children.

The children's interest in this building then led them to become aware of other buildings in their community, and it became clear over a period of time that they had twin interests: first, their interest in large images and, second, their interest in their local area, which it seemed that they were seeing for the first time as a place of real interest.

Through conversations between the children and meetings between educators and children together, it was agreed that this had the potential to be a project exploring the buildings in the local area. Because of the children's interest in large images, it would be represented by a large mural known as the Bannockburn Mural. Although it was a core learning group of children who were involved in the project initially, the visibility of it was so powerful that all the children in the nursery contributed to the emerging mural and associated activities over a considerable period of time.

*Provocation for learning: how do we fit the church into the mural?*

Although the children had managed, with the help of Michelle, to draw a large outline of the church building, integrating it into a mural, which needed to represent all of those aspects of the local area that attracted their interest, was quite another matter. This meant that they now had to look more closely at the features of the church, not just its impressive outline. They were exploring and looking at its features and trying in some way to represent them on paper to take back to the nursery for further discussion with the other children and educators as to how to merge the church into the mural.



Children kneeling at church door



Child kneeling on pavement

### *Provocation for learning: where to position the mural?*

Having done initial explorations into the community, important questions arose such as: Where will we hang a mural of this size? Will where it hangs affect the kind of materials to be used?

During the course of their research into local buildings, the children began to realise that whilst a large mural was a desire they had, to manage it posed some an important question: Was there a space large enough in the nursery, either inside or outside, to display it? Wherever it was, the materials used would have to be suitable for its environment, if it was to be enduring.

Answering such questions involved the children and the educators in some interesting conversations and required a facilitative and consultative approach to ensure that the voices of the children were heard as powerfully as those of the educators and community specialists.

After this process was completed, it was agreed that the most appropriate place to display the mural was outside. This was for two reasons. First, since the interest of the children was about representing the external appearance of large buildings in their community, it seemed fitting to fix it to the external walls of the nursery. Second, it was realised that if created from suitable environmental materials, it might have the possibility of becoming a permanent feature of the building. The latter really appealed to the children. It certainly had attractions for the educators also since it left traces of these children which other children would have the opportunity to pick up and relate to in their later contributions.

The agreement on the space where this was to be hung was only the beginning of a very long process of accessing materials suitable for the outside environment and finding ways of fixing such a large mural to the external wall of the nursery building.

What follows are images of the children inside the nursery using a range of materials to develop the outside appearance of the church and its railings. Through this, the children were developing understandings of those materials which would withstand the weather as opposed to those they were familiar with using indoors.



John cuts up lengths of black plastic



Children continue to work on mural



Interest and help from parents

Throughout this whole phase of the project, excursions into the local area continued at regular intervals to inform the emergence of the mural.



Children on project excursions

*Provocation for learning: what kind of backdrop will support the weight of materials being used and how to plan for them on such a structure?*

At each stage of this project, help from community specialists was called upon, and they became ad-hoc members of the core learning group. Consultation with them and participation by the children and the educators in the overall process was crucial to its successful development. Again, this collaboration between all key players is fundamental to the documentation approach to early learning. From such an engagement, it emerged that large wooden boards would provide a suitable support for the materials to be used, and the space on these boards would have to be carefully planned to ensure that all the elements of interest to the children could be incorporated.

Meantime, inside the nursery, the children continued to develop elements of the mural with a variety of materials which involved them in rich and rewarding learning processes.

Again, due to the powerful visibility of this project, parents participated at various stages of its development, both inside and outside the nursery. They came into the nursery to support it both with their own children and others.



Lisa and Hayley blocking in the areas

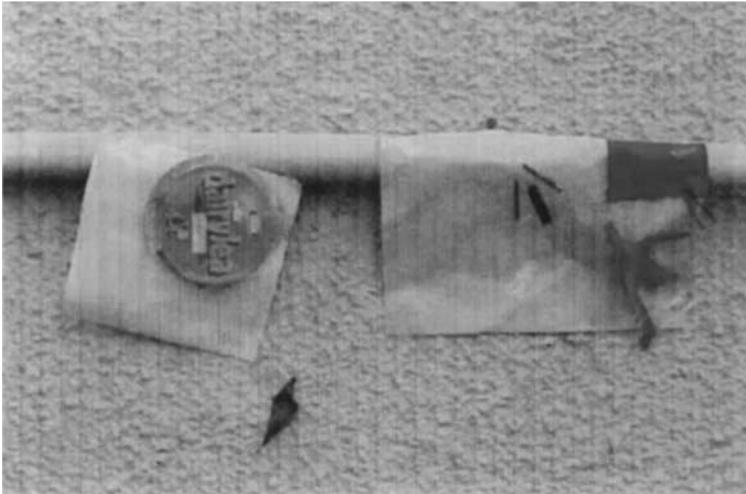
*Provocation for learning: how do we fix the wooden backdrop on to the external wall of the nursery?*

This became another problem to be solved. The mural had now reached a stage where all the aspects that the children had decided were important elements of the community to be incorporated had been constructed. Now came the problem of how to fix it onto the external wall. They researched and experimented with this extensively in collaboration with the educators. They tried out their theories and understood during the process what did not work and why and, eventually, what could work and why.

This collaboration of the children with each other and their co-researching with the educators is made visible in the images on these pages. It led them to an understanding, in conversation with the adults, that whilst fixing the drawings onto wood with sellotape on the outside wall did work, placing the wooden backdrop of the mural on to the wall permanently would need further expert assistance. The staff suggested that they bring in a joiner. They consulted with a local joiner who readily agreed to help them, and the mural was eventually fixed to the wall.



Children putting work outside



Emily and Kimberley continue to experiment with sticking outside



Alex's picture with sticking tape



Local joiner fixes mural to the wall

This represented what this group of children found interesting in the local community but, as was to become evident later, the next generation of children who came to the nursery 'saw' other elements of the community that they felt should become part of the mural. This is what this pedagogical approach has to offer. Time is never called on a project; it is very visible. This always leaves open the possibility of having another dimension to it which other 'eyes can see'.

As we write, the current generation of children are about to mount their extension of the mural next to the original one. Their understandings are different to those of their predecessors but add another dimension to a long-term project which tells its own story about what interests different children about their own community and how they choose to record it.

### ***Documentation approach to early learning***

#### ***Key features made visible***

- ◆ The impetus came through the children's interest in developing large drawing techniques.
- ◆ The vital ingredient was at the core of the initial interest: there is a problem to be solved, which is how do we draw large buildings?
- ◆ The mural continues to reflect the images, experiences and relationships of each generation of children. Its history is embodied in its availability and visibility.
- ◆ The mural has become embedded in the nursery culture and the community.
- ◆ Collaboration between children, families, professionals and the community are reflected in the project. This was particularly noticeable at the outset, when the children and the artists were working together to develop large images, the artist giving her impression of the church and the children recreating their own.
- ◆ Co-constructing between educators, children, families and members of the community when the mural was actually being developed and decisions were being made about what was important for the children to include.



Current mural with additional section to the right

- ◆ The direct involvement of the community, both in terms of parents and families but also community specialists, such as artists and joiners.
- ◆ Problem solving evident throughout the overall project, emphasised particularly when the children were trying to find out how to attach a drawing to the outside wall. All the stages of their process were clearly identified and made visible.
- ◆ There was an ongoing use of provocations for learning throughout the life of the project.
- ◆ Children were listened to through observations, recorded and oral, and through drawings, oral and non-verbal communications.
- ◆ There was a recognition by educators that there is no need to 'call time' on a project. Its time should be measured according to the interest of the children and not by conventional term endings, etc. This should be an understood possibility when engaging with a project.
- ◆ Shared memories of existing children and new children helped the project to be sustained. When new children joined the nursery, the returning children talked to the new children about the mural through its visibility on the outside wall and through folders which had been made about its life so far.
- ◆ The longevity of the project was possible because it literally became part of the fabric of the early years building. Its location on the outside wall of the nursery means that it is visible to families and the community. It is of the community.
- ◆ The mural is an example of an ongoing project which still has a future and has existed through six generations of children and still retains its energy. This is reflected in the near completion of the next panel of the mural.

And below, bringing us completely up to date, the next generation's contribution to the mural almost nearing completion . . . demonstrating other interests and images in the landscape of the community in a distinctive way which is reflected not only through the use of different colours but also in the different undulations which are being represented.



Latest panel in the mural

# Reaching new understandings

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The documentation-in-action section in the previous chapter demonstrates our current understanding of the key features of a documentation approach to early learning. In this chapter, it is our intention to share how its implementation is currently impacting on:

- ◆ children
- ◆ parents and families
- ◆ educators and early years staff teams
- ◆ communities
- ◆ policy (local and national)

as well as the challenges which are implicit in its adoption as a pedagogical approach.

## Children

### *More visible*

Children are more visible. Their learning is being made more visible through photographs, dialogue and the visual presentations of the process and outcomes of documenting children's learning. This includes images and transcripts of children and adults as collaborators in learning which are made available on walls inside and outside, in folders and on laptops and slideshows. These presentations of children working and learning together on episodes and projects in learning groups means that their voices, views and understandings as people are more visible.

Recently, in Park Drive Nursery, the staff witnessed an example of a child making his capabilities visible which was unexpected. A project was in progress with a core learning group of six children. This project was provoked by a beautiful wall hanging which had been introduced by one of the members of the staff team. As part of their research into making a wall hanging of their own, children and the educator were collaborating on an element of it which meant that at one point, the educator was juggling between two media forms, script and camera, when Max, one of the learning-group members, recognised the educator's dilemma. He said to her, 'Let me have the camera and take the photographs.' She agreed, and since then, Max has become known as the

learning-group cameraman who, in this role, recently, when a group of parents was being updated on the projects, was invited to take a photograph. This he did very competently and comfortably, and the outcome was two photographs which served as an important visual record of the meeting.

### ***Increased confidence***

Early educators have reported that children are more confident in expressing their views and ideas, that they are more 'outgoing', more readily able to share their thinking on a wide range of topics, both in individual and group situations. On account of this, they have become more able to become involved with the consultation and democratic processes in a much more individual way and are tending to present their own views instead of repeating the response that the child next to them gives. The consequences of consultation processes begin to make more sense to them, even though they struggle, at times, with the concept that the majority view prevails.

In Thornhill Primary School, the Primary 1 teacher was excited by the new enthusiasm and confidence that the children demonstrated when they came into her class from the nursery. She had commented positively to the nursery staff about what she was learning from the children and how she was keen to establish a closer partnership with the nursery in order to build on the way in which children were learning in nursery, into primary.

The impact of spending time in the nursery with the nursery staff, children and parents had a profound effect on the teacher. Significant changes to the school classroom ethos and organisation meant that the children's learning became more visible. More time was given to talking and listening to the children; opportunities for children to explore and solve problems increased; and the children became more involved in planning and assessing their programmes of work in consultation with the teacher. As the children's confidence continued to increase, along with the teacher's confidence, this led to predicted increases in both the pace and quality of learning in school.

### ***Being listened to***

The increased opportunities for children to reflect and review their achievements, and their participation in a wide range of activities, has led to many children gaining an increased awareness of their value and worth.

### ***Listening and concentrating***

From evidence recorded in early years settings and reports from both early educators and some Primary 1 teachers, it seems that for many of the children involved in this approach, their ability to listen and to concentrate for longer periods has increased. Early educators are reporting that children are concentrating for longer periods of time – for example, on stories, conversations and activities, and that they are more purposefully engaged in areas of interest expressed by them and supported by adults.

### ***Learning from each other***

As the light and dark episode (Chapter 3) shows, they are becoming skilled at asking questions, engaging in dialogue with each other and with educators and, essentially, are

becoming facilitators in small and large group situations. Children are 'speaking up' more in small and large group activities and in other situations. What is noticeable is that their talents and capabilities are becoming more visible, as, for example, some children recognise they have an expertise and put it at the disposal of staff and children and others becoming able to take more of a leading role. Where this becomes a dominating rather than a lead role, then staff teams are conscious that discussions need to take place with the children about this and strategies need to be adopted which support all the children to have their say and, importantly, help the child to revert back to the lead role rather than the dominant one.

Children's ability to tune in to other children's moods and feelings means that close connections have been established between the children and demonstrates that they are 'listening' with all their senses, as outlined in the following example from practice.

### *Sam and Craig*

Sam and Craig are two four-year-olds at Doune Nursery. Sam's mother is Brazilian, and he had just returned from his first family holiday in Brazil. Part of the holiday had included going on a safari. Sam was particularly interested in the safari animals, and when he came to the nursery, staff provided opportunities for him to play and work with the safari animals. This conversation was recorded between Sam and Craig as they played together with the safari animals in the nursery.

*Sam:* This is a herd. They are moving all the way from Alaska to Brazil. They have their heads down so they can hear the big boss.

*Craig:* The big boss is that cow in front.



Sam and Craig play with safari animals

- Sam:* This bit is Brazil. Brazil is a very important place. There's lots of grass there and a very important person, another queen. The queen is a mummy jaguar.
- Craig:* They need a lot more grass and there isn't much food here.
- Sam:* Alaska is very dry. Brazil is hot and wet.
- Craig:* Lots of sweet grass.
- Sam:* Yes, 'cos of all the rain.
- Craig:* It fills the Amazon up.
- Sam:* The Amazon is a great big river.
- Craig:* Where alligators live.
- Sam:* And crocodiles called caymans.
- Craig:* I've got an alligator book at home.
- Sam:* The Amazon is very long and very deep. It's got lots of piranhas and eels, electric eels. It will take the animals one and another day to get to Brazil.
- Craig:* That's two days.
- Sam:* Brazil is this big.
- Craig:* They need their heads down to punch some little animals.
- Sam:* No Craig, that's not it. They are listening to the big boss. These animals have to swim across the river to get to the good grass. Brazil is at the bottom of America, Alaska is at the top. The Amazon is the longest river in America, larger than another river in South America. Water buffaloes live in it.
- Craig:* Brazil is a special place.
- Sam:* Brazil are going to win the World Cup. My mummy says so.

### **Relationships and interactions**

Opportunities for more detailed dialogue, conversations and commentaries between children and children and adults have changed the nature of some relationships and interactions. Some early educators reported that they felt closer to the children, and relationships were becoming deeper in the sense that they were 'tuning in' more to children and trusting each other. They also believed that the impact of 'tuning in' to children meant that the range of activities and experiences being developed and offered in the nursery setting were more relevant to children's interests and the nature of the engagement between the adult and the child supported closer working relations.

Children were also more willing to share with each other; they were more aware of the needs and feelings of others and would offer their support, food, toys and equipment during group activities.

As children increasingly became more confident in taking the lead and sharing with each other, there was a recognition from adults that there was a shift and change in adult and child power relations, and some early educators felt that they were beginning to release some of their 'adult power' by supporting and encouraging children to take the lead and to share responsibility.

More meaningful connections were being made between home and nursery which supported children's interests and learning across the contexts of both home and nursery. Early educators, parents and families talked about children's increased enthusiasm in sharing and expanding their interests and learning at home.

At a link meeting with a very young parent in Castleview Nursery in a regeneration area of Stirling, early educators were sharing her son's special book with her, which documented visually, through photographs and dialogue, his development and life in

the nursery. Sean was two, and the parent was amazed at what this record revealed about him to the extent that she made a request to take the book home and share it with her immediate and extended family. Having done this, staff suggested that she should take the nursery camera home to record aspects of Sean's development there and also to take photographs of other members of the family. Mum was very enthusiastic about this family involvement, and once the photographs had been returned, the connections between learning at home and the nursery were visibly made on panels on the nursery walls alongside photographs of family members close to Sean. This proved to be a significant breakthrough with this very young parent, and such has been its impact on her and her family that her husband is also about to become involved in the nursery using practical skills that he has to enhance the nursery environment.

## **Parents and families**

### ***Increased involvement***

Parents, families and early educators reported that as a result of working with the documentation approach, parents and families become more involved and interested in their children's learning. Parents and families were more actively sharing experiences from home with early educators and were more open to becoming involved in learning group episodes, projects and events. There was also an increased awareness of the relevance of families sharing responsibility for their children's early learning with early educators, particularly as interests of the children were emerging and revealed a real connection to interests from home. (See Chapter 3, in particular 'One-Eyed Rabbit' and 'Bannockburn Mural'.)

### ***More informed and more confident about their children's learning and development***

Parents and families were being given increased evidence of what and how their children were learning and the impact of this learning at home. Parents recorded that they felt more informed about how their children learn. There is also evidence to suggest that some parents, who previously appeared to be less interested in the work of the nursery, had new insights into how the setting operated and, as a result, felt more able to participate. Parents and families also said that they had a better understanding of their own importance and the impact of their relationship and input into their children's learning.

At Arnprior Nursery, the children were involved in a building project which involved them in a great deal of modelling work using areas across the nursery like the building blocks, junk, art and crafts. It became clear as it developed that one of the children had a real talent for making costumes and all the challenges involved with this, whilst another became absorbed with junk modelling techniques. Neither the parents nor the families of these children had understood the extent of their children's capabilities, though they were all delighted to hear about them. Until this time, one of the mums tended to perceive the junk models as just something else to find a place for at home. But, after engaging in conversations with the educator leading on the project, she eventually understood that this is currently an important feature of her child's learning, and she has become much more supportive and interested in his work and life at the nursery and is beginning to see what her role can be in the nursery and at home with her son.

### ***Relationships and interactions***

Parents and families reported that they were talking more to their children. As children became more vocal at home and shared their views, ideas and thinking more openly, parents said that they were amazed at their children's capabilities. One parent recorded feeling 'very proud' of her child. Educators recorded that some families appeared to have more understanding and respect when involved with all the children in the nursery, and, as outlined previously, parents were engaging more in their children's interests at home. The following was recorded during an interview with a parent:

You never have any idea what is happening when you send your child to nursery. You drop them off and you pick them up. This approach means that you can really see what happens in between. You realise just how much your child is contributing to learning in the nursery, and I am reassured. I feel my child is in an environment that will help her to develop . . . a good strong learning environment where her opinion matters, what she has to say matters, and what I say and think matters too . . . this means more to me as a mum, to know all of this.

(Parent, Doune Nursery)

However, it is important to note alongside this that some parents also have reservations, for example, the parents who feel that this democratic process of listening to children through consultation processes is too soon for their child at four years old. They are concerned, because they believe that their children are not yet ready to understand fully the nature of the consultation process. They can form this view because sometimes one or two children can become upset because their consultation option was not acted upon because the majority of the children preferred a different option. This has been a critical topic of discussion with some parents and one that we feel may continue to be so. To some extent, the acceptance that children can understand such democratic processes can hinge on an overall belief by adults that children are capable, resourceful and serious in their considerations of a whole range of issues that sometimes they can be excluded from.

### **Educators and early years staff teams**

There has been a profound effect on early educators working with the documentation approach. A real understanding of the endless possibilities of working in this way with children is being recognised. In particular, early educators have developed in the following ways.

#### ***Deeper insights***

They have deeper insights and understandings and increased awareness of how and what children are learning, children interests, talents and abilities, how to listen to children and to value listening.

Educators are learning more about how children learn, and although they report feeling more informed about early learning, they also wish to continue to learn and a new enthusiasm for learning has evolved.

### ***Working more closely together***

Early years staff teams have become more sensitive to each other's needs and are working more closely together by sharing understandings, ideas and practice and engaging more in a discourse about children's learning. The increased level and quality of dialogue within staff teams has resulted in more effective team-working as evidenced in 'One-Eyed Rabbit' and 'Light and Dark' (see Chapter 3). However, what is recognised by all involved with this pedagogical approach is the need to be continually upgrading our communication and listening skills, particularly in asking appropriate questions to children and listening to their responses so that scaffolding their learning becomes more possible and more effective.

### ***Tuning in***

There is a real desire to be more 'tuned in' to children, to hear more clearly what children are saying and to record and to capture the essence of children's potential through improved observation and reflection techniques. This is allowing early educators to make more sense of what they have understood, both individually and collectively, which impacts significantly on how they support children's early learning.

Recently, in Fallin Nursery, a zero to five years early years setting, one of the educators realised, through her close observations of one of the children in her key group, that he had developed an absorption with the wooden building blocks. This involved him, over a period of several days, in building a series of constructions which were approximating to varying types of shelters or houses. Once the constructions were built, he brought them crashing down as he struggled to put 'house-building' theories into practice. His key person encouraged him to continue despite the considerable noise being created, and she alerted other members of the team to do likewise: this because she understood that there was something really significant in the 'house-building' for this child and, on delving into his family circumstances, realised that his current home circumstances were neither stable nor consistent. The 'house-building', therefore, could well have been a way of him trying to make sense of his situation, and the staff team between them ensured that this opportunity continued to exist for him as long as he needed to play out these scenarios.

What they also realised, through professional dialogue and individual and collective reflections, was that previously they would not necessarily have 'tuned in' to why the child was so interested in 'house-building', and they may well have been inclined to stop the noise rather than find reasons why this was being created in the way that it was. For them, going deeper into this situation had helped them to recognise the importance of really listening to children and pondering on why particular interests arose and then seeking ways in which these could be developed, supported and extended.

### ***Relationships have changed***

Relationships and interactions between educators and with children have changed as a result of working with the documentation approach. There has been a greater awareness of the importance of quality interactions with children, more thought is being given to interactions that will extend learning and provide space for thinking (see Chapter 3, 'Pakistan Earthquake' and 'Light and Dark'). These include the range and appropriateness of questions and provocations that are posed to both the children and the adults

and the concept of developing a 'spirit of enquiry' whereby children, adults and families are encouraged to question, to think, work and research together to find solutions.

There is now a greater understanding about the importance of sharing practice and sharing learning between home and nursery.

One head of an early years setting said, 'We think we know, about children, but we don't. We make too many assumptions. We are too busy supporting children into the physical "doing" rather than the process of "thinking".'

### **Dialogue**

Increased dialogue within staff teams and with children has increased understandings about more appropriate choices in supporting children's learning. Children's interests and talents are being recognised and more readily catered for. A range of opportunities that children can be proactive in developing, organising and choosing has increased independence and interdependence and has promoted a shared ownership of the early learning environment.

The increased dialogue has impacted on the potential for more reciprocal relationships and arrangements. This means that there is a growing expectation that children and adults will share in making decisions that affect them. This has become most visible within the learning-group context, where children and adults are constructing, making meaning and learning together.

More professional dialogue is emerging around learning processes, and there is a greater emphasis on professional reading, research and reflection. Dialogue is being understood as another form of listening to children's voices which had not been previously recognised within that context.

### **Increased confidence**

There is increased confidence in trusting children as active learners. Early educators feel more able to trust children to present their theories, to experiment and explore in an ethos and an environment that supports a model of working that is based on research and enquiry. They also feel more able to trust children to lead their own learning and to support a shared approach to extending their learning. There is also a growing understanding and recognition of children's competencies and confidence, particularly with new technologies, as adults witness children's capacities to engage with the range of technology available to support early learning.

### **New professionalism**

A new professionalism is emerging from a growing belief and awareness of the personal qualities, dispositions, skills and competencies of an effective educator. Educators are taking more risks as learners and researchers themselves; they feel more able to share with other professionals and parents, their ideas, thoughts and understandings, which has led to more effective team-working.

Equally amongst all this ongoing reflection and reconstructing of working practices, there have been some acutely painful examples of staff having a perception that they were, for example, allowing children's interests and ideas to be taken seriously when video footage that has been taken reveals something entirely different.

Such a situation arose in Arnprior Nursery when two members of the staff team were in the initial stages of a project on water. As part of this, the children and the educators were discussing together how they could access a larger container than the water trough which was currently being used for exploration and discovery but was proving to have space limitations. To access a larger space for the water, the staff engaged in a consultation exercise with the children about resource possibilities that existed within the early years settings to accommodate more water. Quite an extended discussion ensued, and, eventually a solution was found to this problem. The interesting element of this was the process of how this came about. The video footage clearly revealed that the staff member who was leading on the consultation with the children was seen to be looking for the children to find the solution which she already felt was the right container for the water before the discussion with the children took place. Despite the many good suggestions that the children made, none of them was acceptable until eventually one child gave the member of staff the response she was looking for.

When she saw the footage, she was embarrassed and pained at what was revealed but was very willing for this to be shared with her own staff team and others in other settings since she realised that this needed to be made widely available so that others could learn from her mistakes. Her misconception of how she handled this was a really important learning curve for her and one that she would not readily forget.

## **Communities**

### ***Increased visibility of the children in the community***

This is one of the reported outcomes of working in this way. Although this is still at an early stage, staff are more frequently providing opportunities for children to become involved and to participate in community activities and events and are more likely to build in and include elements of community engagement in their projects. In one nursery, the children were taking pictures of local buildings, and, as they were doing this, they naturally began to tell local residents and other community members what they were doing. The impact of this was that the wider local community began to join in and take an interest in what the children were doing. One local resident commented on the fact that 'he wished he could use a digital camera.' The following week, he called in to the nursery to tell the teacher that he had been so inspired by the children that he had signed up for classes on how to use a digital camera.

### ***Increased involvement of the wider community in the work of the nursery***

The increased confidence of the staff and the visibility of the children's learning in the home and in the community has encouraged and promoted greater awareness and understanding locally of the work of the nursery and how and what children are learning, evidenced in the example of the Bannockburn Mural in Chapter 3. Early years educators report enthusiastically on the interest shown by local community members and of the many offers to become involved in projects and nursery developments.

Though this is still at an early stage, members of the local community have also become more visible in the work of the nursery as their images, dialogue and involvement are recorded and documented in presentations featured around the nursery. Where this is

happening, we can see that adult views of what and how children learn and the importance of children's early learning is beginning to change.

For example, specialists from the wider community are photographed working alongside the children as they were at Croftamie Nursery during the course of an outside project which involved the children in making toadstool seats alongside a sculptor. A similar visible profile was given to the dog-rescue specialist at Fintry Nursery when she came in with one of the dogs to talk and discuss the dog's disabilities with the children. On both of these occasions, the specialists from the community not only entered into a dialogue with the staff about how to work with young children in these situations but were also impressed by the ability of the children to have practical involvement in the experience and to be able to frame really insightful questions about the tasks and topics under discussion.

## **Policy**

### **Local**

The impact of working with the documentation approach has had a significant impact on local policy, thinking and development. The enthusiasm, insights and desire to share outcomes and understandings with all early educators and others was most compelling and led to the production of the 'Working with Documentation' guide aimed at all early years staff across the Stirling Council area. The guidance set out our current thinking about the documentation approach and a framework that would support early years educators to explore the approach in practice within their own settings.

The importance of staff development has also been recognised, and a comprehensive programme was devised to support working with documentation in practice. The content of the programme explored and explained theories and principles underpinning the documentation approach and included practical examples of the approach in action. The programme also encouraged professional dialogue and strategies that would promote professional discourse and collaboration between early educators both within and across settings. It also encouraged reflection and provided access to professional reading materials. The delivery of the programme was both course- and practice-based, with support for individual settings. Local networks were also established to support settings to work together in the putting of the documentation approach into practice.

In order to assess the impact of the staff-development programme, outcomes were recorded and an action research model established by an external researcher.<sup>1</sup> The outcomes and key findings from this have been integrated into this publication.

The implications of our new understandings around documentation and our approach to staff development means that, in general, the application of the core elements of the documentation approach are built in and embedded in all local staff-development programmes.

We have been very privileged to be working with others on this approach and, in particular, with Carlina Rinaldi, Pedagogical Consultant to Reggio Children, who has been guiding us, sharing with us and challenging us with her perspective and understandings on this way of working, thinking and living. As a result, we have devised a 'project' with Carlina which is encouraging us to develop our thinking and our approach

1 External Action Research Project – staff development.

in Stirling and to see this as an 'encounter'. As a result, we have begun to review our current methods and to change our approach to how we develop policy and practice. This included establishing the Stirling Documentation Group, which aims to:

- ◆ lead and research the documentation approach in Stirling;
- ◆ consider and make explicit our understandings about documentation in order to reach a shared understanding;
- ◆ devise key strategic and operational objectives for the implementation of a documentation approach to early learning in Stirling and possibly farther.

### **National**

There has been growing interest nationally to find out more about the ways in which we are working with documentation. Other local authorities, individual settings and some national organisations and agencies, such as Learning and Teaching Scotland and Learning Unlimited and Children in Scotland, are keen to hear more about:

- ◆ the impact of listening to children;
- ◆ our views and understandings about the image of children as rich and resourceful;
- ◆ documentation as a tool in making learning visible.

Following a major review of the current curriculum arrangements for children in early years and schools, a new national curriculum framework for children aged three to eighteen years has been devised in Scotland. The new curriculum framework represents our developing understanding about the ways in which children learn and our aspirations for all Scotland's children to be successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors. At the core of this framework, the values and principles of documentation are clearly represented. This includes children's rights, responsibilities, respect, participation and an image of children as active social agents with rich capabilities. This new framework and the support materials have the potential to assist the core elements of the documentation approach to be embedded in practice across all early years settings in Scotland.

This is supported further by cross-cutting themes within the curriculum for excellence such as citizenship and democracy, which recognises children as citizens now rather than in waiting.

The contribution from Stirling has been recognised in these key national policies.

## **Challenges**

### **Cultural**

From the work and research we are engaged in, we have come to understand that there are many challenges to working in this way. Working with the documentation approach is not easy, and, at times, there can be real tensions. People do not always agree or share the same perspectives, and we have found that some colleagues feel unhappy with this potential conflict of views and perspectives. Working successfully with the documentation approach means that educators must be willing to enter into professional dialogue, and, for some, this can be uncomfortable. Early years staff teams may be at different stages

in their understanding; some educators find that they have more understanding and skills to engage in this particular way of working than others. Those who do not feel so confident can feel anxious about 'getting it right' and that they need to be working to the 'right answer'. This cultural shift brings with it uncertainty, and although uncertainty can be viewed as a value, for some educators this can be unnerving. For example, there is no 'set way or tick list' of ready-made questions or responses to assist staff in the best way of taking a conversation forward. (This is illustrated in Chapter 3 in the conversation between the Head, James and Fergus in 'Pakistan Earthquake'.)

### **Professional development**

How best to support people involved in the documentation approach who are at different levels of understanding is one of the major challenges facing the service and individual settings. As set out earlier in this chapter, we have engaged in a comprehensive and successful programme to support staff in such a way that builds on their enthusiasm and openness to learn. We have developed learning networks, encouraged joint research and provided dedicated staff-development days. All early years staff have five in-service/professional development days built into their core working conditions.

Sustaining and developing an effective model of staff training and development remains a key priority. We are currently giving consideration to the best way to develop resources and materials that will offer continuous support. Staff teams seem to prefer a mixture of ongoing training sessions combined with critical enquiry sessions, both within their own settings and in collaboration with others. Currently, these benefit from being led by a key person who can pose significant questions around the pieces of documentation being presented. What remains problematic is the differentiation and sustainability elements, since some settings have been working on this approach for five years whilst others have been involved for only two. The hope would be to get those who have been involved longest to be able to take more of a lead role in supporting others who are newer to the approach. This would clearly have the advantage of tackling both of these identified problems. However, in the meantime, the intention is to develop a range of resources and materials to support staff teams in specific areas which they are identifying as 'sticking points', such as how to identify children's key interests and how to record a learning process and its key stages. What forms of enquiry will help us to find this out? An important element of any professional development strategy is access to professional reading which continues to be supported by a central lending system, and there is an expectation that professional dialogue will be generated as a result of this.

We continue to discuss and consider other ways of developing our professional development programme which supports staff teams in their implementation of this approach, both in terms of content, design and time.

### **Time**

Managers and heads of early years settings view time as one of the major challenges facing them in working with this approach. They feel it is difficult to find enough time to talk, time to listen, time to reflect, time to record and time to be together. We have come to believe that changing our understanding and philosophy of what we mean by time, seeing it more as a value and changing our perspective on what we think is our core activity in relation to time is an ongoing challenge.

Our construct on time can be seen as a reflection on current society where everything seems to be pressurised and we are all trying to fit too many things into any one twenty-four-hour day. Nurseries can be like this too. One of the issues around time that we seem to be grappling with in early childhood settings is what do we give our time to? One response could be that time should be given to listening to children, trying to interpret their interests and understandings, making observation visible and slowing down the pace and embedding the elements of the documentation approach into everyday practice. This could also include recording alongside children, getting their view on a situation or image which is in the process of being recorded so that the process being captured within a learning group or of an individual child can be recorded at the time that it is happening. There is a growing recognition that staff teams need to be more creative and resourceful in how best to allocate time. Going at a slower pace will be helpful to children as well as to staff teams since many children are part of a rushed environment in the rest of their lives and will perhaps appreciate the ability to live their nursery lives in the slow rather than the fast lane. It is not being suggested that 'it should be a contest between speed and slowness, but about having the courage to rediscover the time of human beings' (Rinaldi, personal communication, 2005).

### **Ethics**

We always have to pose questions concerning what right we have to interpret and document children's doings and what is ethically legitimate.

(Dahlberg *et al.* 1999: 156)

Working with documentation has encouraged us to think more deeply about the concept of ethics and, in particular, about ethical practice and what this means. This has come about as a result of working outside traditional approaches and a dominant discourse. When there is no one or 'right' answer or pre-defined outcomes, faced with choices, the question of responsibility is raised and, with it, the balance of rights and responsibilities.

Although we are witnessing a change in relationships with children, we are still acutely aware of the issues around the balance of power and are in the early stages of exploring what we understand by ethical relationships. We are now asking the following questions:

- ◆ Do we have the consent of children to record and interpret their thoughts?
- ◆ How effectively are we listening to all of our children?
- ◆ Are we only listening to those who have the most to say or those who are the most skilled at telling us?
- ◆ Are children with additional needs included in the projects and do they have visibility?

We have no 'one' answer. We have come to realise that there are many ways of thinking about and comprehending the meaning of ethical practice, and we are at an early stage in exploring and engaging in dialogue with staff teams on reaching new understandings about this.

***Transition and continuity of learning from nursery into primary school***

The impact of working with the documentation approach in early years is beginning to be felt in the early stages of primary. Some primary teachers are beginning to comment on the differences that they see in the children, in particular, the increased confidence of children to share ideas and views and to participate actively in their learning. Some primary teachers are amazed at the richness and resourcefulness of children and are excited about the possibilities. In a small number of primary-school settings, Primary 1 teachers are beginning to explore new ways in which they can work with elements of the documentation approach in the classroom. Although there is an increasing interest and evidence of change in developing and engaging in more active and participatory approaches in the early stages of primary, there continues to be a number of early years teachers in primary schools who are resistant and find this way of working and the confidence of the children threatening and against their perceived order. It is not uncommon for some primary teachers to 'complain' to the nursery heads and staff team that the children coming from the nursery are 'too assertive' and challenging.

As a result of this, we have embarked on a transition programme and framework that involves early years and primary staff, parents and families to support both the continuity of learning and approaches to learning from home to nursery and nursery into Primary 1. In addition, one or two early years settings are using a current documentation project as a subject of transition which continues into Primary 1 (reception class). In another the staff are making a presentation of their project to the Primary 1 teacher in a local primary school prior to the children's entry there. They will do this accompanied by the children, parents and families who were involved in it. It is their hope that this will serve a double purpose: first, that the staff working with children going into Primary 1 (reception class) will have a better understanding of the children's capabilities, and, second, it will help them to recognise the potential of documentation for making visible the children's learning and their progress. The main challenges facing the services and the settings is the differences in culture, staff-child ratios and the impact of the national curriculum, although, in Scotland, we are now implementing a national three-to-eighteen curriculum that specifically states that the approaches to early learning should be visible in the early stages primary. This work is ongoing.

# Reflections, and what next?

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### Reflections

We realised that it was important to develop an approach which was complementary to our own existing values and principles. What it caused us to do midway through our process was to revisit these and fully understand their importance in promoting and developing this pedagogical approach across a whole council area. Our challenges would have been even greater if we had to negotiate a new set of values and principles and, at the same time, adopt a new approach to children's learning as well. Our existing values and principles gave us a sound foundation on which to build the documentation approach to early learning. It is also clear to us now, despite real doubts that we have had from time to time, that to pilot this approach with just five nurseries in the beginning on a trial-and-error basis was probably an important decision since we were all in at the deep end and had to support each other's understandings as we went along. Interestingly, we have since learned that these nurseries did not quite believe that those of us who were leading on this approach were learning alongside them, even though we had shared this with them. We think they probably felt reassured by disbelieving us at this point!

The impact of adopting this approach has been significant in helping us to understand

- ◆ what listening to children really means (we thought we were doing this already);
- ◆ how important the process of shared observations is in looking and actually seeing what is happening even with very young children;
- ◆ how rich and resourceful young children really are in their ability to pose problems and solve problems and to be researchers and theorists alongside adults;
- ◆ how the visibility of this approach has been able to draw families into the learning processes of their child in a way that has not been contrived or 'set up';
- ◆ how thoughtful educators have become about their own practice;
- ◆ how they are becoming more able to identify their own learning needs alongside those of the children.

Further, it has led some of us to recognise the importance of space indoors and outdoors in the documentation process:

- ◆ space for children to explore;
- ◆ space for them to be together in a learning group or on their own;
- ◆ space to think and consider options to current problems;
- ◆ space that is organised to make space not simply to house resources;
- ◆ space that makes visible the documentation approach to early learning.

Some of the emerging realisations have been that staff feel that they could not go back to 'being' with children in the way that they previously were. Whilst it is still possible for them to revert back to previous ways when they are confronted with the uncertainty that this approach can generate, at some level they understand that this is only a brief respite, for, deep down, they know that they are getting a much better sense of the child through pedagogical documentation. For some staff, at times, this has become an incredible experience, and this is evident in the way that they present a panel of documentation for discussion and comment. They cannot quite believe what they are discovering about the children because it is overturning all 'previous knows' that they have been working within, and, still further, they cannot believe that they are able to uncover such amazing capabilities in the children which they will honestly say they would not have noticed or known in their previous way of interacting with the children.

Other realisations have been that, being part of a professional dialogue forum, all of us have learned something else from each other, either about ourselves, the children and families or about the documentation process itself. Nobody is exempt from the process. We are finding such encounters have the capability both to scare and inspire us, such can be the depth, discomfort and exhilaration that can be felt in gaining understandings of this approach and what it can mean now and in the future for children, families and educators.

### **Democracy and citizenship**

What has also become clear to us is that all the strands of the documentation approach, such as consultation, listening to children's many voices, learning in groups and recognising the importance of hearing what other people have to contribute and are good at are all elements of a democratic society. Therefore, children engaged with this approach are living the democratic process in their daily lives at the nursery. (See Chapter 3, 'One-Eyed-Rabbit', children's meetings.)

The fact that children are citizens from birth means that they are living their entitlement within the early years setting. What we have understood more deeply is what an important role the documentation approach has to play in accustoming young children to the democratic process. This is an important civic role that each early years setting is embracing and one that staff teams, when confronted with it, can feel overwhelmed by. They sometimes find it difficult to recognise what a potentially important role they are playing in society since there is a tendency to see their work in the early years setting as important work but to some extent separate from society and certainly not extending into the realms of civic society.

Through making pedagogical work both visible and a subject for democratic and open debate, pedagogical documentation provides a possibility for early childhood institutions gaining a new legitimacy in society.

One of the issues can be that in our culture children are not necessarily taken seriously and are often referred to as citizens in waiting, further casting them in 'the becoming' role rather than as citizens now. Talking to parents and families about this perspective of the documentation approach can sometimes be tricky because they do not recognise what important ideas and opinions their children have, and the visibility of this approach, which demonstrates their children's capabilities, can be helpful in this regard. However, we recognise that we have to continue to have conversations with staff, families and other professionals about the important implications of this approach for children now and in the future.

## **What next?**

Where we go from here is something that all of us continue to be thoughtful about. What feels right at this time is that our priorities must be around finding differentiated ways in which to support staff teams, to continue to develop our critical thinking skills and to become more able to engage professionally when hard discussions arise which take us to hard places and can make us feel uncomfortable.

It seems imperative that we develop a much better understanding of the difference between episodes and projects and their respective importances in the documentation process. We must become more courageous and construct ways together which help us to make professional decisions about when an interest of a child or children have the learning potential to become a project. We must not overlook either the necessity to continue to document individual interests that children have which do not become either a project or an episode but also deserve to be documented and made visible in the same way as projects.

The essentiality of the learning-group culture within this approach and its ability to be transformational to the learning, teaching and development of all children cannot be underestimated, particularly when it is seen at first hand; our ability to support it and to find ways of integrating it into the life of the setting remains a crucial factor in progressing this pedagogical approach further.

The presentation of this approach must be more appropriately articulated to others so that their understanding of its crucial elements is clear. All of us need to become less self-conscious about 'having a go' and letting go of the 'getting it right' agenda.

We also recognise and are working hard at continuing this approach into Primary 1 (reception class) in the primary school so that core elements of this pedagogical approach will become embedded into the thinking and practice of the early years settings within the primary school. A pilot is being embarked upon currently, but we realise that this will be a very gradual process which will need a similar kind of support that nursery staff have had access to since the outset of the implementation of the documentation approach. This is clearly important for the continuity and progression of learning, which remains one of our key aims since children going into primary school will adapt much more quickly to a new setting if the attitudes and practices of the staff teams are similar to those encountered in the early years nursery setting.

All of our work with children aged three to five has inevitably raised the question, what about children under three? It is not only a question that we ask of ourselves but also one that is asked of us frequently by any group that is seeking to know more about this pedagogical approach. We have understood this as a necessary next step in our

process, and, informally, we have already started to introduce it in those settings where children under three attend. What is becoming clear to us is that we may need to construct ways of doing this which could be different from those currently adopted with the older children. At this very early stage, staff are working on this and are already finding that their early documentation is revealing how this approach with the younger children is allowing them access to their interests, how they learn and their relationships with other children. None more so than with those children who have not yet included verbal language in their range of communications.

Below, we have included one of our initial attempts at documentation with children under three. What this represents is a glimpse of what is possible with this age group through the documentation approach to early learning.

### **Context**

Castleview Nursery is an extended day nursery for children in the three months to five years age group in a regeneration area of Stirling. The pattern of attendance is both full- and part-time, and the catchment area is quite mixed, accommodating mostly an urban population of children and their families.

### **How did it start?**

It started with the staff team observing the children to confirm a view that they had that some of the children were showing a keen interest in technology. The outcome was that two or three children were sustaining an interest in cameras and the computer. The interests and the learning processes of the three children were documented, and one of these children in particular was seen as being of great significance, particularly as she was a child who did not yet speak English (neither did her parents, Mandarin being their first language).

The two children in this episode are Shihan, two years and two months, and Marie, one year and eight months.

What staff had realised, through their ongoing observations, was that Shihan had seemed to make a really important connection with Marie, who was a child who had been in and out of hospital with a heart condition.

Alongside this important attachment, Shihan had been demonstrating, over a period of time, a keen interest in the digital camera and had spent a lot of time examining and experimenting with it.

During her exploration of the camera, one of the aspects she had really enjoyed was watching the images on the screen after she had been taking photographs. Her first successful photograph was, not unexpectedly, of Marie. She was very pleased with the outcome, and staff observed her giving a secret smile. Staff reporting on this felt that since she could not tell Marie in words that she was her friend that the camera had become her voice.

Since staff were very aware of Shihan's developing friendship with Marie and also her fascination with the digital camera, they supported both children in this relationship and Shihan with her interest in the camera.

The relationship between Shihan and Marie continued and, one day, two amazing events occurred. On account of Marie's health difficulties, she had not reached usual milestones, and over a month or so, staff understood that Marie, who was still not mobile,

*Shihan has shown an interest in the digital camera.*



*she spent lots of time, looking and inspecting it, turning it over and experimenting with the buttons.*



*Shihan found the button that controls the zoom lens. She spent lots of time looking at the images on the screen.*

*11-6-06*

Shihan and digital camera

was experimenting with the process of becoming mobile. Within the setting at this time, both children and staff lived in a state of high expectation that Marie would express her mobility soon. The day when she eventually made the movement of raising herself to her feet, Shihan went for the camera and captured this momentous event through it. Staff wondered if she understood the importance of this 'happening' and made it visible or was her main interest the camera.

Importantly, also, the staff noticed what Shihan was doing and its significance for her, and photographed Shihan photographing Marie.



Shihan and Marie

When Shihan's mother next came into the nursery, through the photographs, the staff were able to share with her what Shihan had been able to achieve. Mum then tried to explain that they had a camera at home and that she would bring it in the next day with her relative who spoke some English. This she did, and the camera became a really important way of involving Mum in the nursery, which was particularly helpful since Shihan's younger sister was about to be admitted to the nursery.

Mum used her camera in the nursery and made an important home–nursery link as well as a way of communicating with the nursery.



Shihan and Marie on the floor



Shihan's mum taking picture

This episode is ongoing . . . and already has changed in terms of other happenings within the nursery and the admission to the nursery of Shihan's younger sister. What is self-evident is the importance of implementing this pedagogical approach with very young children. Constructing ways of doing this has become a high priority for us, and what has been shared here is one way which already looks different in its presentation and application to how we document the learning processes for three- to five-year-old children.

We thank the reader for accompanying us on the journey so far and hope it has inspired you to adopt the documentation approach to early learning within your own setting. We look forward to meeting up with you again in our next publication when we will make visible our next encounter with the documentation approach to early learning with children under three years of age.



Shihan and Marie on the floor

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# Glossary of terms

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**'Becoming'** Where this is referred to in the book, it means that children can sometimes be seen as, for example, 'becoming' citizens rather than actually being in a real state of citizenship in the present.

**Community of enquiry** This term embraces the community involving parents and families, families and the community as well as children and educators.

**Co-researchers/researchers** Refers to an interpretation which is not academic; rather it is used in the sense that research is about 'finding out' about the world, life and living. It also is central to the Reggio Emilia approach and a documentation approach to early learning.

**Culture of enquiry** We used this term to describe a context where the ethos is characterised by support to be curious, to ask and pose questions and, hopefully, find solutions. This culture includes educators, children, parents and families.

**Early years settings** Refers to all those settings which care for and educate young children in the zero to five range.

**Educators** Refers to all professional staff working with young children in the early years settings.

**Encounter** This term is used here to describe the deep engagement of a person or persons in a discussion, dialogue, conversation or an episode or project.

**Episode/project/long-term project** All of these terms are explained quite specifically in Chapter 3.

**Parents and families** We have used these terms to include the extended family in the lives of children in relation to the early years setting. Using simply the term 'parents' or 'families' could have the effect of excluding one or the other.

**Pedagogical** Term used, in this context, to characterise the values, principles, cultural, social and political climate which underpins a documentation approach to early learning (Learning, Teaching Scotland 2005: 9).

**Provocations/provocations for learning** Refers to problems and challenges that can be presented by and to children to extend their learning within a particular interest, episode or project.

**Reggio Emilia** A municipality in northern Italy which has a worldwide reputation for its cutting-edge philosophy, thinking and practice with respect to early childhood education.

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