

# “Documentation” in Pistoia preschools: A window and a mirror

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## **Abstract**

This article discusses the practice of documentation in the early years education services of Pistoia, Italy. The findings, arising from a research study visit in May 2014, provide insights into the values and principles implicit in early childhood practice in the Pistoian *nidi d’infanzia* [nurseries] (for children from 3 months to 3 years of age) and *scuole d’infanzia* [kindergartens] (for children from 3 to 6 years of age). Documentation plays an important role in Pistoia: it provides a window (for multiple audiences) into children’s learning journeys, and also a mirror that reflects children’s and teachers’ experiences and constitutes an important element in a reflective pedagogy.

The analysis of group interviews with both teachers and parents during the research visit identified four main themes. Firstly, documentation in Pistoia provides a graphic representation of the guiding threads that run through long-term projects and also identifies key moments in children’s learning. Secondly, documentation makes visible an educational approach in which emotion and affect are seen as central to young children’s learning. Thirdly, the regular inclusion of families in documentation illustrates the collaborative partnerships between schools and homes that are the bedrock of early education in Pistoia. Fourthly, documentation expresses the highly developed aesthetic of Pistoian early years practice; the beautiful and cared-for environments in these preschools constitute an invitation to children to explore and create.

## **Keywords**

Pistoia; documentation; reflective pedagogy; home and school; aesthetic; emotion

## **Early years practice in Pistoia: the context**

The website of the city of Pistoia, in Tuscany, states that Pistoia is a child-friendly city, where the space of the city is at the service of children and constitutes a resource for their education; all citizens are responsible for it (Becchi, Bandioli, & Ferrari, 2013). This positive and supportive view of children and childhood has created a context in which early years practice can flourish. The city's centres for early childhood education: *nidi d'infanzia* [nursery] for children from 3 months to 3 years of age, and *scuole d'infanzia* [kindergarten] for children from 3 years to 6 years of age, cater for approximately half of the young children of Pistoia.

Over more than 40 years, Pistoia, along with other centres of best practice in Italy such as Bologna, Parma, and Reggio Emilia, has pioneered an approach to early childhood education supported by “substantial investment in practitioners’ professionalism” (Picchio, Giovannini, Mayer, & Musatti, 2012, p. 159). Since 2013, the Tuscan Region has promoted a common approach to early childhood education based on best practice in the region (Fortunati & Catarsi, 2001).

Because of a relatively stable political situation, and with a great deal of cross-party support for these services, the structures set in place in Pistoia have survived and developed until the city is now recognised as a centre of excellence in Italy. It hosts regular visits from other Italian towns and universities and has established visiting programmes with Denmark, Spain, and the USA (Smith College).

A distinguishing feature of the Pistoia system is that there are no head teachers: the teachers in these schools and settings work as teams and have individual responsibilities but no hierarchy, though there is generally one experienced teacher who develops each school's “specialism”. The team of advisory teachers responsible for the “pedagogic coordination” of early years centres throughout the city is led by Donatella Giovannini and Laura Contini. This team constitutes the support network for the *nidi (d'infanzia)* and *scuole d'infanzia* and is responsible for professional development, workshops for parents, and many different initiatives within and between the schools.

This allows for the establishment of a definite “Pistoia style”: there is a clear continuity in terms of architecture, provision, resourcing, design of spaces, and a strong, shared aesthetic. The focus is on creating contexts that are rich and favourable enough to stimulate and engage children. Donatella Giovannini writes that: “The environment is not a mere container but it is an integral part of education, which is not only rooted in it, but also represented by it” (Giovannini, 2018, p. 182).

Within these beautiful and carefully ordered settings, the workers in the early years service talk about establishing “a climate of well-being”: welcoming spaces that communicate a sense of familiarity and safety. Pistoia's early years provision is based, above all, on an all-round view of children's experience in which social and emotional experiences are viewed as being basic to learning. Relationships—between children, between adults and children, and between schools and families—are seen as the bedrock of early childhood education.

## **The architecture of documentation**

The walls of these spaces are often covered with evidence of past and present learning: photographs, paintings and drawings, displays, artefacts, and written commentaries, which often incorporate children's comments and ideas. Donatella observes, of the *nidi* and *scuole d'infanzia* (translated below as "preschool"), that:

Over the years a new approach has emerged, which may be called "the architecture of documentation and of its languages". This architecture has transformed the walls of preschool into large open books; it has increased the volumes of the preschool with panels full of pictures and words.... Through documentation the spaces in the preschool bear witness to children's intelligence, skills, ability to learn, curiosity and cooperative spirit. (Giovannini, 2018, p. 188)

These panels, which are professionally produced and of very high quality, reflect back to the children what they have done together in this space, and also what previous groups of children have done. They provide parents with a kind of "graphic novel" of the children's life in school, a summary of their activities and achievements. For parents and other visitors, they also provide a visual representation of the values and principles behind the schools' approach. And they are powerful evidence of teachers' reflective practice.

All of these displays are produced as a result of teachers' reflections: teams of teachers meet to decide on the content of a "documentation" and to select the photos which will best represent what was most important about a shared project. They write the commentaries, including children's words, and decide on the sequence and the presentation of the material. The work of documentation forms an essential part of teachers' professional development and is taken very seriously both by the staff in the schools and by the early years team, who support this work.

The documentation that is an integral part of Pistoia early years practice is not confined to display panels and photographs. It also includes the day-to-day diaries kept by teachers, mainly in the form of pictures with commentary, and the photo albums that accompany individual children through their years in the nursery school. It also includes the many other kinds of documentation produced by the Pistoia early years service to communicate with parents and other audiences about the work of the service, such as booklets, leaflets and posters, and DVDs of children's learning.

## **Theoretical framing**

Like Pistoia, Reggio Emilia is a city where early years practice has a long and illustrious history. The theoretical perspectives explored in the preschools of Reggio are based on the notion of the competent child as an active participant. The child is viewed as "rich, strong and powerful" (Rinaldi, 1993, p. 102) and teachers are coauthors of their paths of learning. Building on the work of Vygotsky, a sociocultural perspective holds that "children become knowledgeable and are able to give meaning to their world by negotiating meaning with others" (MacNaughton & Williams, 2004, p. 214). Within a growing interest in children's voice and participation, a child can be viewed as a "co-creator of knowledge, identity and culture" (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 1999, p. 48). Much of the current focus on giving voice through listening (Rinaldi, 2005) is visible in the pedagogical thought and practice in Reggio Emilia: "a pedagogy of listening and

relationships” (Rinaldi, 2005, p. 19). Teachers in Pistoia also speak of “a pedagogy of listening”.

The understanding of knowledge as the construction of meaning, and learning as a process of construction based on relationships, is made visible through the process of documentation. But documentation also makes visible aspects of children’s development that are equally important in their learning and growing: the emotional development, which underlies the growth of empathy (Emde, 2012), and the fundamental role of emotion in their learning (Vygotsky, 1999). Mantovani (2001) makes clear that these affective aspects were central to the development of early years services in these Italian cities, where:

The overall approach to intervention was based on several theoretical sources including writings of psychoanalysts, such as Anna Freud and Margaret Mahler; the attachment work of John Bowlby and colleague; and the notable early intervention breakthroughs of the educational psychologists, Irene Lezine in France and Emmy Pikler in Hungary. (p. 24)

Through documentation, children’s learning processes are shared, discussed, reflected upon, and interpreted, by children, teachers, and parents. However, what documentation is not used for is evaluating children’s progress or assessing educational outcomes. Mantovani explains that early childhood practices in Italy were born out of classic European pedagogy, and the thinking of educational theorists such as Pestalozzi, Rousseau, Froebel, and Montessori, who saw childhood “as a period of life important in and of itself” and not as a prologue to real life:

As a result Italian parents, caregivers and researchers tend to be scarcely interested in, even at times annoyed by, pressures towards evaluating child outcomes. The great unending North American emphasis on educational evaluation runs contrary to the prevailing attitudes within Italian educational philosophy. (Mantovani, 2001, p. 27)

Finally, it is important to emphasise in this picture of the theoretical underpinnings of early years practice in Pistoia, the role of the environment in children’s learning and development. In their paper on the “spatial dimension of the setting and the educator’s role”, Musatti and Mayer (2011) point to the active role of these settings in structuring children’s experience.

In best educational practices for early childhood in Italy...special care is taken over the quality and arrangement of the environments, furnishings and play materials (Galardini 2003; Malaguzzi 1993) to the extent that it may be claimed that in the Italian early educational approach “space and materials made available to children are considered ‘a third educator’...” (Mantovani 2007, p. 117). (p. 208)

Musatti and Mayer link these ideas to the work of Bronfenbrenner (1979) on the interaction process between the child and the environment. They suggest that the physical setting “interact[s] actively with the activities of the educators in orienting children’s experience” (Musatti & Mayer, 2011, p. 208). This provides a helpful expression of why the aesthetically pleasing and beautifully ordered and resourced spaces of Pistoian *scuole d’infanzia* and *nidi* should be viewed as an integral part of the education that they offer.

## **Documentation as a research focus**

Because documentation plays such an important role in the culture of Pistoia's preschools and because it provides such vivid graphic evidence of the work that goes on in its classrooms, it makes an excellent starting point for an enquiry into the quality of the early years practice in this city. Documentation provides the researcher with both a window and a mirror. Through *what* it represents, it gives a wide range of rich examples of the activities and learning journeys that go on in these classrooms. We can look through these windows at the content of the learning, at what children and teachers have been exploring and investigating, often over a long period, both during the current school year and also from some previous years.

But documentation is also a mirror, a means of reflection held up to the *how* of this practice. It is evidence of the thought and care that has gone into the design of the learning environments, and of the opportunities that these environments offer young children for playing and learning with others. And it also testifies to the work that has gone into the documentation itself, the care and seriousness that teachers bring to this process.

Donatella Giovannini, in an interview, defined what should be involved in a good documentation:

You can see a documentation as a post hoc thing – but it's not a question of putting a frame round the finished work. Really, a documentation needs analysis, observations, archiving of materials, interpretation, documentation of process. To create a good documentation the adult has to be capable of observing, noticing, recording, analysing and interpreting. It's an aid to reflection. (Research interview, May 2014)

This quotation makes clear what high standards apply to the work of documentation in Pistoia early years practice, and just how much reflection and analysis is involved.

## **The research study**

Because documentation provides this double insight into the work of the Pistoia early years service, we chose to take it as our main focus in a research study visit in May, 2014. The study aimed to illuminate the unique quality of nurseries in Pistoia, and the importance of documentation as a practice. The participatory nature of the pedagogy in Pistoia was mirrored in the approach to this research. Consent was sought from all participants and participation was voluntary. Assurances were given about confidentiality, anonymity, and accessibility. The research was approved by the University Human Research Ethics Committee and British Education Research Association (BERA) guidelines for research ethics were followed. Through focus-group interviews with teachers and parents<sup>1</sup>, participants' reflections and discussions about documentation were recorded and transcribed. The narratives obtained in this way are analysed and presented in this article. As well as drawing on observations and interviews from the research visit, the article also refers to the work of other researchers, and quotes from articles by the staff of the Pistoia early years service.

## **The roles of documentation within Pistoia**

In this article we consider three contexts in Pistoia where documentation has an essential part in the work of the school. In each of these contexts we focus on a different role that the documentation plays.

1) The first role is that of establishing relationships between the school and the families that constitute its community. To this end, the documentation reflects those families and that community as far as possible, and makes a graphic bridge between home and school. We have chosen to focus on Il Grillo, a *nido* for children from 6 months to 3 years of age, in this section of the article. Our evidence includes an extensive discussion with Flavia, one of the parents, and with Armanda, an experienced teacher with highly developed skills in documentation.

2) The second role is that of documenting the play and learning of children for multiple audiences: for the children themselves, the parents and visitors, and for the teachers. In this section we have chosen to focus, firstly, on the *scuola d'infanzia* Marino Marini, where we were able to interview a group of parents as well as a group of teachers, and secondly, on the *nido d'infanzia* Lago Mago, which provided us with a particularly rich example of the documentation of a long sequence of learning.

3) The third role is that of enabling the teachers to develop as “reflective practitioners”, and to see the practice of documentation as an opportunity to stand back from their own work, to reflect on their own practice, and to analyse and represent the main features in an episode of children’s learning. This section draws on observations from Lago Mago, but also on interviews with two groups of teachers from all the schools visited during our two-day research visit. Recently, the role of documentation and analysis as an “ongoing collegial activity for early childhood professionals” has been the subject of a research project by members of the National Research Council of Italy in association with the Department of Education of the City of Pistoia (Picchio et al., 2012, p. 159).

In reality all these roles cross over, and there were examples of all types of documentation in each of the three schools visited. However, for the purpose of exploring these different aspects of documentation—its potential for fostering relationships, representing learning, and structuring teachers’ professional development—we have chosen to treat them separately and associate them with particular working contexts.

### **1) Beginning relationships: Il Grillo**

To achieve our vision, we continually try to construct an alliance and coherent connection between the two worlds in which children live: home and infant-toddler center. (Galardini & Giovannini, 2001, p. 99)

The central importance of participation and community is evident in the children’s centres in Pistoia. Establishing meaningful relationships is an underpinning principle of the work. Children’s learning is considered to be socially constructed in relationships with teachers, parents, and others in the community. A collaborative partnership is developed between home and school. This begins from the very first days in the *nido*.

Edwards and Gandini (2008) discuss the “beginnings and endings” in early childhood settings as major transitions, and describe the “dance of relationship” (p. 96) which opens up during these times. The period of “settling in” or *inserimento* is particularly discussed by Edwards and Gandini (2001, p. 98). At the *nido d’infanzia* Il Grillo everything is done to welcome children and their parents to the nursery, from the moment they arrive.

At Il Grillo, there is a welcoming entrance hall, which celebrates the involvement of families with the nursery, showing pictures of families working as helpers in many contexts, from cookery to carpentry. Armanda, a senior teacher, commented that the *nido*

includes parents in the documentation on display, partly as a means of making school part of the family’s life. The school has to welcome the family’s words. Parents’ words are not usually found anywhere in schools. This has created a new perspective on documentation. It is a question not just of capturing words, but developing a relationship.

An interview with Flavia, a mother of a little girl, Elettra, at Il Grillo, revealed ways in which teachers and parents work as partners in the learning process, communicating the experiences of the children and building reciprocal understanding. Documentation plays an important role in this. Flavia brought her daughter to Il Grillo when she was 6 months old and at the time of the interview, Elettra was 3 years old. Flavia described her child’s early experiences at the centre.

From her child’s early days at Il Grillo, Flavia remembered the documentation on display at the centre about “the names you chose”. The parents contributed by writing the story of the reasons behind the choice of their child’s name. This is an important experience that all parents have in common and enjoy sharing, and one that recalls their earliest days with their child.

Parents were also invited to tell the story of the child’s first days and weeks in the *nido* and to include positive and negative things. They were encouraged to describe their own feelings during this period. During children’s “settling in” period, parents often stayed with their child in the *nido*, talking and working together. Flavia commented, “it helped me, it was a way of meeting the teachers and talking about my child”.

As children stay with the same teacher over the course of three years during their time at the *nido*, a rich collection of material is gathered and shared with parents in a diary (*diario*). This extended piece of documentation begins when the child enters the centre with his parents and ends at the point of transfer to the *scuola d’infanzia*. It creates a “biography” of each child over three years, which is then handed over to parents. The diary includes observations and notes and pictures. It is a text in which the teacher’s and child’s voice have equal importance. The importance of this form of documentation lies in the way the diaries show the children in a social context—with other children and teachers. Flavia commented:

It helps me very much to know what they’re doing. You understand the growth of your child, the meanings of the things they do there, and how much more she grows here than she could at home. You can discuss children’s progress or any problems. The photos that are taken are important. They’re not snaps, they have a meaning.

A similarly important and evocative example of documentation at Il Grillo is *La Nanna*, the stories of children's bedtimes. Parents were invited to write about how children go to bed at home—the pictures and writing are displayed in small boxes. Armanda explains:

It's the moment when the children and parents are together—a moment for cuddles, an intimate moment. All families share similar experiences—the bath, the bedtime story. If you read these accounts there are lots of common points.

The significance of small incidents was emphasised in the album "The Importance of Little Things" which had been created from parents' contributions. They had been asked to select one experience from their child's school holidays, choose a reminder of it (a photo, an admission ticket, sweet paper) and write about it on one page for inclusion in the album. This documentation involved parents in close attention to children's responses to home experiences and brought into the *nido* the observations and knowledge of parents. Flavia, like other parents, contributed to all these forms of documentation.

## **2) Learning and sharing: Marino Marini and Lago Mago**

In an interview, Donatella Giovannini once described what she considered to be the characteristics of a good educational environment. She was critical of many schools as learning spaces:

There is a problem about formal learning. The most important thing would be to concentrate on the children's way into the learning culture.... The restrictions on sitting or moving around are unnecessary. Schools should be more like workshops, laboratories... You lose a lot of education if you think of it as transmission.

The spaces in Pistoia's *nidi* and *scuole d'infanzia* are so organised that they encourage children to play and learn together. A great deal of thought has gone into the design of these inviting educational environments. They are generous in size, with plenty of natural light, clean, uncluttered, and aesthetically pleasing—both because of the studio-like quality of the spaces and because of the array of opportunities that are on offer.

All the classrooms have rich displays of natural and man-made materials that have been collected to support learning. These resources are carefully ordered and classified and arranged on open shelves, so that they are easily available to children. They have an immediate appeal: they are tactile, colourful, and inviting. On some display surfaces are baskets containing materials and natural objects such as petals, fir cones, seed heads or dried leaves, to handle, play with, and arrange in different ways. Galardini and Giovannini (2001) comment: "This kind of organisation supports neatness, tidiness, and autonomy" (p. 94). Children are always able to find what they need. But it also supports a sense of categorisation, a sense of "what goes with what", and thus has great significance for cognitive development.

Children enjoy playing with these objects and making them into collages, making paints out of the flower petals, or creating landscapes out of bark, twigs, and pebbles. In the same way, they create fantastic characters or animals out of the junk materials that Pistoia nursery schools make extensive use of: wood offcuts, cardboard tubes, buttons, springs, and washers.



All of the schools contain areas and corners that are designed to encourage imaginative play. There are sometimes light boxes which project onto the wall; children can play with the coloured transparent plastic counters, rings, discs, and other resources—such as geometric shapes, chains, and transparent coloured sheets—to create complex patterns and pictures. There are often “large block” areas which encourage ambitious construction projects. And there are small puppet theatres or sets of puppets, together with abundant provision for dramatic play, from realistic “home corners” to decorative tents.

At Marino Marini, there is a strong emphasis on exploring and making. During our visit, children were involved in a long-term project about roses that had begun because one of the parents owned a garden centre specialising in roses. The children had been invited to visit the garden centre and had seen (and smelt) many different kinds of roses. Their visit had been photographed and the photos were made into a wall display with a commentary. The children created collages with rose petals and made greetings cards. Then they learned to make paper, using some of the rose petals they had collected. While we were visiting, the papermaking was taking place in the middle of the classroom, with the rose petals embedded in the paper.

This project, which had been going on for several weeks, was typical of Pistoian practice. The schools tend to work through long sequences of related activities which begin with ideas and questions raised by children. These questions are discussed and pursued, and often lead to unexpected outcomes. Both teachers and parents whom we met talked about the *filo conduttore*—the “guiding thread”—that runs through a particular learning sequence. Another expression that is often used is that of the “learning journey”. Many of the projects that featured in the documentation we saw were long-term explorations, which may have begun in quite a small way but grew into extended sequences of work.

For instance, at the *nido d'infanzia*, Lago Mago, we saw documentation about a piece of work that had occupied many of the children over a period of months—and in fact from one school year into the next (this is possible because in Pistoia children remain with the same teachers during the whole period of their stay in the *nido* or *scuola d'infanzia*). This work began with one child, Leonardo, constructing a slide out of a hollowed out piece of wood. Leonardo “silently and repeatedly experimented with sliding twigs, stones and shells” down this natural slide. Many children were attracted to this activity and began to make and play with wooden slides. In November, Leonardo began to construct slides with everything he could find, rolling wooden rings down inclined rods and building slides with wood blocks and other materials.

As the teacher, Gabri Magrini, commented:

this took off from the quality of attention that the adults pay to what children were concentrated on.... The right idea to choose is the one which succeeds in involving adults and children and which releases the spring of curiosity and the pleasure of discovery.

The work continued in the classroom and in the following summer holiday, parents were invited to send in objects that could be rolled down slides. So in September, the children found, in addition to the familiar play materials from before the holidays, new materials that could be used in the slide investigation, which was still firmly embedded in their memories. Bigger and bigger slides were created and the slide idea even became part of lunchtime too, as Milo slid a meatball down his fork and created a “fork-slide”. Children

went on to look at shapes that slide easily, what helps them to slide (the inclination of the slide, the strength they are pushed with), which objects slide quietly, and which noisily.

In the park adjacent to the *nido* they also found natural slides, such as “water slides” where leaves slid down a small waterfall, and they slid and rolled their own bodies down steep banks in the park. In school, they invented games with rules, rolling balls to each other and creating tunnels with their bodies to send the balls through. This whole long project was marked by successive discoveries as children grasped the principle of what was needed to make a workable slide, what objects were best for sliding, and explored—in a scientific way—physical forces such as force, friction, and gravity.

This learning journey was a good illustration of the way teachers in Pistoia respond to children’s interests, and notice and encourage new developments. The essentially ludic nature of these activities, and the way teachers participate in them, is also notable: their involvement encourages and makes possible the more ambitious aspects of the play. But although all this is experienced by children as play, it is also unquestionably “a way into the learning culture”. These aspects were all contained in the documentation.

For parents, these stories, which showed the “guiding threads” of children’s work at school, were a fundamental means by which they could orient themselves to what was going on. Very often they provided a different view of children from what parents experienced at home. One mother at Marino Marini was struck by “how my child seems different from how he is at home – we couldn’t believe what he could do. They had managed to calm him”. Dora, a senior teacher, commented: “Children in these nurseries and nursery schools are in a social setting which puts them into new relationships and reveals them differently”.

The importance of seeing the “other side” of children and appreciating how different they can be in different contexts was a major outcome of the documentation for these parents. Dora said: “Documentation completes the picture we have, it supports our understanding”.

### **3) Growing through reflection: Lago Mago**

#### *Documentation and professional development*

Documentation has many facets in Pistoia, but among the most important is the promotion of teachers’ reflective practice. During our visit to Pistoia we were able to meet with two discussion groups with teachers from all three schools that we had visited, where teachers discussed the importance of documentation to their practice. Armanda said: “It’s been an endless process of professional development, informed by research”.

Armanda had started working on documentation across Pistoia early years schools and settings 10 years earlier, and for five years had advised teachers across Pistoia early years settings on how to set about creating documentation. She helped teachers to reflect on what they wanted to show and choose what to focus on. She suggested ways of making documentation richer and more explicit. She also helped teachers to consider the context for displaying the documentation.

The first documentations of this kind were done as part of the in-service courses that have taken place on a regular basis with Tullia Musatti of Rome University over several

years (see Picchio et al., 2012). Armanda felt that the original documentations had been fairly basic. But as professional dialogue between the teachers developed—and as technology became more advanced—so too did documentation become more sophisticated. There was now a continuous dialogue going on within teachers' groups about the purposes of documentation and the messages that it was communicating.

If, for the parents, documentation was “a kind of window” on their children's experiences in school, for teachers it was unquestionably a mirror, a way of reflecting on their practice through presenting it graphically. The teachers in the discussion groups we met felt that they had learnt an enormous amount through their work on documentation. One said: “This has developed our professionalism so much; I've seen myself grow through reflection”. Another teacher added: “It's a way of revisiting and understanding what you do and of taking things further through reflection with colleagues. The whole process is collegial”.

It became increasingly clear from the teachers' discussions just how seriously teachers took the work of creating a documentation. One teacher described the process as follows:

First you stop, you choose, you find something you want to keep and you decide what kind of message you want to convey. We are not just choosing beautiful images, we are looking for a strong message, a way of making our work explicit and conveying the depth of our practice.

The teachers at Lago Mago and Marino Marini felt that documentation was an essential part of their practice. Dora described how she felt about making a documentation: “Documentation is a consequence of long reflection, it's not a simple process - to gather everything together and produce something that's legible by adults and by children”.

The creation of documentation brought everybody together. Teachers from all the schools represented in the discussion groups emphasised the fact that this was a process in which the whole staff collaborated. One teacher said:

The beautiful thing about it is all the sharing that goes on. We learn such a lot of things – we have to challenge each other to make explicit our aims and reflections and decide how to convey this. It's a real growing experience, we put so much time into it.

### *Development of documentation*

During the discussions and interviews with teachers it became apparent that there were ways in which the practice of documentation in Pistoia had changed over time and with experience. One development was the focus on showing the meaning of everyday events. For instance, the documentation of school lunch at Lago Mago stressed the sociability of lunchtime and the interaction that went on between children. From this documentation, parents and visitors were able to appreciate that eating together was not only a social and physical event; it was also part of children's emotional development and cultural education. In one panel of documentation, children's lunchtime conversation about colours and gender was recorded, showing what apparently informal discussions over lunch could lead to. Gabri Magrini said: “We are sharing our way of seeing with parents”.

A second development was the way of photographing children, not so much through conventional photographs of them working in different settings, but through pictures

which captured relationship and sociability, showing them responding to others in everyday interactions. Armanda commented: “We’ve come to give value to attitudes and gestures that might seem banal but have been given significance through documenting them, and this in itself has improved observation”.

Documentation now showed the affective nature of children’s relationships and their learning, capturing their expressiveness and their emotions. One series of pictures of two very young children greeting each other in the cloakroom at Il Grillo one morning carried the label, “The joy of finding each other every morning is sometimes seen in ritual gestures and demonstrations of affection that don’t need words”. Similarly, a teacher from the *nido d’infanzia* Lago Mago said, about their documentation on children’s laughter, “We wanted to show the importance we place on emotion”.

A third development was the focus on narrative, on “telling a story” through documentation. This kind of documentation followed the process of learning and showed what learning looked like for young children—the construction of meaning in a real context. The documentations that showed a long process of learning and development, such as “The Story of a Slide” from Lago Mago, were often long stories containing many narrative elements: an initial situation from which the story developed, a growing cast of characters, the broadening out of the initial situation to a whole series of related incidents, and the moving of the story into different settings (the park, the bowling alley).

#### *Audiences for documentation*

All of these developments in documentation were part of making the work of the schools more accessible to many audiences including children, parents, and visitors. In focusing increasingly on everyday events, the social and emotional aspects of children’s learning and their communal life, and the stories of their learning, teachers were providing an insight into the values, principles, and philosophy of their schools. But the work of documentation was also pushing the teachers to recognise and articulate these aspects more explicitly. Teachers were well aware of the need for documentation to be a graphic expression of their whole educational approach. One contributor to a discussion group said: “A panel has to be communicative but also harmonious, aesthetically pleasing and above all legible”.

Children were a primary audience because the documentation was part of their environment, and reflected their experiences. Donatella commented:

Documentation helps children to recognise themselves in this setting and to recognise others. It gives them a sense of being seen and valued by adults, and their work is validated... It’s a way of saying to children “We are making this place together, we can make use of this space”.

Parents greatly appreciate the insights they gain from the documentation of children’s activities. In a group interview at the Marino Marini nursery, they explained how helpful they found this:

The orientation you gain from the documentation is fundamental, it gives you insight into the *filo conduttore* (leading thread) of the work in the school which sometimes surfaces at home.

It's a kind of window. We leave them here, we don't know what's happening, we want to know, we'd like to be a fly on the wall. This allows us to know what they're doing and makes a link.

Donatella commented:

Documentation is a way of communicating with families and talking not only about their own children but about the children in general. You can see the joy of their recognition – they feel more represented in the school – and this can bring great benefits.

In addition to these immediate audiences, teachers used documentation to share their practice with other *scuole d'infanzia/nidi*, with other children's services, and with visitors from different educational systems: "Documentation helps them to share, share their insights and perspectives".

### *Reflective practitioners*

The extended and developing dialogue in which all these teachers had been involved, and with which they re-engaged every time they started work together on a new documentation, had involved them in continuous reflection on children's learning and teachers' practice.

Our discussions with teachers revealed the level of care and thought that goes into this work of documentation, and how it has deepened their professional dialogue. From the initial selection of the topic, to the choice of photographs to represent stages of the learning journey, to the editorial and aesthetic choices about the sequencing, arrangement, and presentation of this visual story, with its accompanying commentary, the making of a documentation is a major collaboration, and is taken very seriously by all involved.

As Donatella underlined, this work is a very concrete way for teachers to reflect on their practice together:

Lots of people talk about reflective practitioners, beginning from reflection on practice. We're trying to do this through documentation.... When you want to do a good documentation of something that has had a long development and evolution, you need tools, recordings. And ... it has to be culturally elevated, you need to find a new language, one that is up to the level of the work, not worn-out language – and language that takes account of the affective nature of the learning and of the relationships involved.

## **Conclusions and reflections**

In this study we set out to look at the practice of documentation in Pistoia early years education and consider its different functions. For parents and visitors, documentation is a "window" on Pistoia's early years practice, giving an insight into children's experiences and teachers' pedagogical approaches. For children and teachers, documentation is a "mirror", reflecting their shared experiences. For teachers it is also a key part of professional development a very active form of reflection on their own practice.

For us as observers and researchers, documentation has proved to be a good focus for an exploration of the quality of these early years services. It has revealed many aspects of the strength of Pistoian approaches to the education of young children and has provided a good focus for discussion with parents, teachers, and administrators. A number of themes have emerged during this exploration.

1) One has to do with the approach to children's learning in these contexts. Because documentation makes visible the *filo conduttore* of particular investigations, it provides insights into the learning process and into teachers' roles in children's learning. These documentations are examples of (in Donatella's words), "what learning means to a little child – the construction of meaning in a context".

"Learning journeys" often arise from a particular incident, or an individual child's interest in an activity. We saw examples of learning journeys that lasted for several months, or even from one year into the next, and gave rise to many different ways of exploring and developing ideas from the original starting point. By analogy with the "slow food" movement, this could be called "slow pedagogy"; it deliberately allows time for in-depth explorations, for playing with possibilities, and revisiting ideas.

Play is a fundamental part of the learning, and documentation can also show the seriousness of play, and can illustrate very young children's intellectual capacities and their ability to hypothesise and experiment, as well as their capacity to concentrate over long periods. This emphasis on the long-term nature of learning together, in schools where teachers stay with their classes over the whole of their time in the school (i.e., up to three years), is one of the key strengths of practice in Pistoia.

2) Documentation also shows the human context for this learning and makes visible the fact that these schools are welcoming and sociable places, for parents as well as children, where a great deal of thought goes into making children feel safe, valued, and happy. This has been an increasingly important message in the documentation and reflects the explicit emphasis in Pistoia on emotion and affect as being at the core of children's learning. This approach is often described within these schools as *una pedagogia di ascolto, una pedagogia di affetto*: a pedagogy of listening, a pedagogy of affection. The positive and harmonious relationships that are being fostered are reflected in the pictures of children working, playing, and eating together and in the emphasis on feelings and relationships in the accompanying commentaries.

3) Further, documentation provides an insight into Pistoia nurseries and nursery schools' relationships with parents. Sometimes parents and families are actually the subject of documentation, as in Il Grillo's panels showing mothers, fathers, whole families, and grandparents. This explicit inclusion of parents in documentation is one of the many ways in which the *scuole d'infanzia* and *nidi* foster close relationships between homes and schools (Giovannini, 2013).

4) Finally, the documentation is part of the aesthetic of Pistoia early years settings. For visitors, the beauty of these nursery schools and *nidi* is probably the most striking aspect of these settings. The creation of beautiful environments for learning is a conscious part of the Pistoian educational philosophy; this is why Pistoian educators sometimes refer to a "pedagogy of good taste".

The pedagogical approach in Pistoia's preschools is characterised by the attention to aesthetic qualities: the general idea is that one of the rights that children have

during development is the right to beauty. People are happy to stay in a beautiful place, where they feel well and at ease (Giovannini, 2018, p. 187).

These are ideal contexts for learning, but they are also places where it is a pleasure to stay, and to which children can become attached.

Throughout Pistoia nursery schools and *nidi*, there is this same emphasis on space, beauty, order, and clarity; these are places where children can “read” the environment and a rich range of materials and resources are attractively displayed. These materials and resources in themselves constitute *proposte*: invitations to children to explore and create. In this way, these beautiful environments become not merely settings but, in Mantovani’s term, “a third educator”.

Documentation contributes towards this aesthetic: it provides an ever-developing graphic record of children’s experiences. In so doing it creates a “collective memory” for the community of children, parents, and teachers, and shows children that this space belongs to them.

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In discussing all these issues with teachers in Pistoia, we noted the common language that marked their reflections. There is a core of vocabulary that recurs in their discussions which reveals their assumptions and their priorities. We became familiar with these terms, such as:

- *Filo conduttore*: a guiding thread through a learning journey
- *Leggibilita*: used to describe the “legibility”, for children, of an environment
- *Le proposte*: the “proposals” made to children, the learning opportunities
- *Cura*: “Care” is a word with many meanings in Italian, as in English. As a noun its primary meaning is “carefulness”, “attentiveness”, “orderliness”, or “attention to detail”. As a verb, with an associated noun, it means “looking after”, “protecting”, or “caring for”, with overtones of “feeling affection for”. These two meanings interact in the use of the word in Pistoia.

At one point in our discussion of the “Pistoian aesthetic” with teachers, we commented on the difference between the very orderly and aesthetic presentation of children’s work and of the documentation of their learning in Pistoia, and the more relaxed and informal approach often found in UK schools and settings. There is often a view in the UK that it is important not to tidy up young children’s work too much, and that it is better to let them display what they have done in their own way. This may result in casual or lopsided displays, but allows children to have more of a hand in how their work is presented. But in Pistoia, we had found that documentation and children’s productions were always presented with great *cura*. We asked the Italian teachers whether they did not think there was an argument to be had about these contrasting positions.

The teachers considered that *cura* was an essential part of their whole approach. It was part and parcel of their concern for children, their regard for parents, and their view of their own roles and responsibilities. Children’s work, they argued, should above all be valued, and this meant that it should be treated with respect and presented in such a way that it was taken seriously. Donatella said: “You need a cared-for environment and cared-for children. Care [*cura*] is a paradigm that runs through everything.”

*Cura* really was a word that was very helpful in describing and understanding the Pistoian teachers' approach to children, to their own work, and to the aesthetics of the environments that they had consciously created in these schools. It summed up their determination to provide educational experiences of very high quality for children, and to share these experiences with parents. It expressed the shared standards that they had arrived at as a service through a continuous programme of reflection on their practice, and which now drove that practice.

The documentation through which they presented their work to many audiences was a product of this same *cura*. It enabled us, as visitors, to see so many facets of the lives of the schools and to gain insight into these teachers' priorities and values. By the loving care with which it was put together, and the high quality of the final documentation, it exemplified both kinds of *cura*: a highly developed aesthetic sense and attention to detail, and a deep care and concern for children and their parents.

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<sup>1</sup>The quotes from teachers and parents are from research interviews conducted in May 2014



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