

## BUONE PRASSI – BEST PRACTICES

### THE POTENTIAL ROLE OF PEDAGOGICAL DOCUMENTATION IN ITALIAN EARLY EDUCATION DURING THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

### IL RUOLO POTENZIALE DELLA DOCUMENTAZIONE PEDAGOGICA NELL'EDUCAZIONE PRECOCE ITALIANA DURANTE LA PANDEMIA DI CORONAVIRUS

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In Italia, la pratica della documentazione pedagogica nell'ambito dell'educazione e cura dell'infanzia ha una tradizione lunga e significativa, dal 1991 fino a documenti più recenti. L'emergenza pandemica e le recenti esperienze di lockdown invitano a focalizzare l'attenzione su questo tema per due ragioni: la pratica di documentazione di educatori e insegnanti è funzionale ai processi inclusivi, da un lato, ed emerge oggi come una pratica in evoluzione, dall'altro. Questo contributo presenta i risultati emersi da uno studio esplorativo condotto sull'esperienza di educazione a distanza durante il lockdown nel contesto dei servizi educativi per l'infanzia 0-6 italiani. Lo studio ha raccolto, attraverso un questionario, il punto di vista di 412 insegnanti, educatori e coordinatori. In particolare, proprio il focus sulle pratiche di documentazione, qui indagato attraverso un'analisi descrittiva delle risposte chiuse e un'analisi del contenuto delle domande aperte, permette di rendere visibile la bellezza resiliente dei legami educativi a distanza.

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The practice of pedagogical documentation in the field of early childhood education and care in Italy has a long and significant tradition, starting in 1991 up to the most recent documents. The pandemic emergency and recent lockdowns in Italy are an invitation to focus attention on this theme for two main reasons: the documentation practice is indicated as functional to inclusive processes; the documenting practices of teachers and educators are changing. This paper discusses the results emerging from an explorative study carried out on the experience of distance education during the lockdown in Italy in the context of 0-6 years early childhood education and care services collecting the opinion of 412 teachers, educators and coordinators through a questionnaire. In particular, the focus of this study will be on documentation practices through a descriptive analysis of closed answers and a content analysis of open questions. This allows to make the resilient beauty of LEAD visible.

### *1. Documenting: theories and perspectives*

In Italy, the practice of pedagogical documentation in the field of early childhood education and care has a long and significant tradition that stretches from 1991 to the present.

The Italian scholar, Paolo Bisogno (1980), who is well known for his theoretical analysis of documentation, defined it as «a science and art at the same time [...] whose goal is to find out what has been done so as to be able to do» (p. 10). This definition points up the twin components of documentation, namely mentally acting on the content of a document and sharing it using specific methods. Historically, the Italian debate on documentation has been a rich and productive one: taking place against a broader social-cultural-political and educational backdrop spanning the late twentieth century and the early 2000s, it has mainly focused on the construction of systems for recording and disseminating educational experience, as well as on conceptualizing the act of documenting

itself, along with its challenges and leading aims. This debate is recorded in the writings of numerous scholars and practitioners, including, by way of example: Biondi (1990), Massa (1996), Cambi (1999). The international scientific literature explores many different aspects of pedagogical documentation.

First, the practice of documentation is acknowledged to play a key role both in providing teachers with insights that enable them to assess children meaningfully and constructively, and in promoting the professional development of educators and teachers by prompting them to engage in reflexive practices (Formosinho & Peeters, 2019; Kang & Walsh, 2018; Picchio, Giovannini, Mayer & Musatti, 2012). Particular emphasis has been laid on the tried and tested potential of documentation within the *Reggio Children approach*, which has been implemented in different countries, to lend visibility to children's learning processes (Giudici, Rinaldi & Krechevsky, 2001). Pedagogical documentation has also been attributed a role in the design of 0/6 curricula (Oberhuemer, 2005; Sylva, Ereky-Stevens, Pastori, Slot & Lerkkanen, 2016).

Furthermore, documentation can crucially contribute to fostering participation and educational alliances with families, as well as contributing to the education and learning of all the parties to the educational (in the Italian context: Antonietti, 2011; Guerra, 2014). It is not surprising therefore that in recent European guidelines (European Commission, 2014), the value of documentation practices is explicitly linked with: the ECEC center's relationship with families and stakeholders, reflexive practices and formative self-evaluation, and the co-construction and design of educational practices.

The COVID-19 public health emergency and the consequent lockdowns in Italy invite us to focus on the theme of documentation for two main reasons. Documentation practice has been found to encourage inclusive processes (Antonietti, 2020; Ianes & Canavaro, 2015), which are more vital than ever at a time when educational needs are so many and widespread. The documenting practices of teachers and educators are changing based on a redefining of their professional role.

The initial public health response to the COVID-19 outbreak in spring 2020 included the abrupt closure of early childhood education centers and kindergartens. The resulting prolonged absence of children from their educational settings inevitably generated a widespread increase in feelings of isolation and distress and came at the risk of undermining acquired standards of democracy, justice, social equity, and the protection of rights. In general, studies on emergency education have been focused on the themes of boosting personal and professional resilience (Vaccarelli, 2017) and achieving new equilibria at the individual and institutional levels (Malaguti, 2005). Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, scientific research on the use of educational documentation in emergency situations had never adequately explored the contribution of documentation to the quality of educational work in ECEC services, the design of educational work, and the evaluation of learning and educational settings.

Hence, the current study offers an original perspective that is focused on the importance of working reflexively and as a team in emergency education scenarios and how this can be facilitated by educational documentation. Specifically, documentation can help practitioners to avoid engaging in improvised, irreflexive actions driven primarily by events and emotions. Rather, documentation practices will foster shared educational design and mindful educational choices, even in stressful, emergency situations.

## *2. Research background*

For the entire duration of the spring 2020 lockdown prompted by the COVID-19 outbreak, educational services for children up to the age of six remained physically closed. In place of in-person educational activities, the Italian Ministry of Education called for the implementation of *Legami Educativi A Distanza* (LEAD) which may be translated as “educational ties at a distance”

because the educational dimension at this age is grafted onto the affective and motivational relationship. It is therefore a primary necessity, in this unprecedented situation, to restore and maintain the educational ties between teachers and children, teachers and parents, among teachers, among children, and among parents (Commissione Infanzia Sistema integrato Zero-sei, 2020, p. 2).

Consequently, this study examines the ways in which LEAD was implemented, including via distance education practices, given its general aims of enhancing practitioners' educational relationships with the children through care, learning, and play (Bondioli & Savio, 2018) and their educational alliances with the children's families by means of dialogue and educational co-responsibility (Milani, 2018).

To this end, we present and discuss preliminary data from an exploratory study (cfr. Antonietti, Guerra & Luciano 2020a; 2020b; 2021) on distance education during the Italian lockdown in the domain of educational services for children aged 0-6 years.

The analysis presented here is part of a broader exploratory study that drew on a mixed, qualitative-quantitative, research design to investigate the ways in which Italian educators, teachers, and coordinators of educational services for children aged 0-6 years experienced and responded to the lockdown period (9 March - 18 May 2020). In addition to the theme of documentation as a tool for making the LEAD's value visible, which is the focus of the present paper, the study investigated a range of further topics. An online questionnaire was developed *ad hoc* for the study. It included both closed and open-ended questions and was administered to a convenience sample beginning in June 2020. A specific section of the questionnaire – consisting of two closed questions and one open-ended question – was dedicated to investigating the actions implemented by the educational services in relation to pedagogical documentation.

The sample comprised 412 respondents, of whom the vast majority were women (98.3%), mean age 39.8 years, 49.3% held one or more degrees in education. In terms of respondents' professional roles, infant-toddler educators accounted for 38.8% of the

sample, kindergarten teachers for 35.9%, service coordinators for 20.3%, and other types of education practitioner for 5%. It is useful to consider that the distance education offerings implemented during the lockdown were “live only” for 3.6% of respondents, “offline only” for 28.6%, “both live and offline” for 67.2%, and “absent” in 0.5% of cases. We now present the findings about documentation practices specifically via a descriptive analysis of participants’ responses to the closed questionnaire items, content analysis of their responses to the open-ended questions and some further analysis of the documentation materials that they reported using during the lockdown.

### *3. Data Analysis*

#### *3.1. How we operated*

In response to the questionnaire item concerning the professional development topics on which they had worked during the lockdown, coordinators, educators, and teachers listed documentation in fourth place: they had enhanced their knowledge/competence in the field of documentation independently (39.3%), in conjunction with the educational service employing them (20.4%), or both (14.3%).

Via a multiple choice, multi-select item, participants were asked to indicate the different kinds of documentation material that they had produced during the lockdown, across all educational activities implemented. Some 81.8% of respondents reported having assembled a collection of photos/videos, learning products, or texts documenting the work carried out during the lockdown, 46.1% had put together a reconstruction of the teaching/learning path implemented during the lockdown, 41.5% had documented their observations and reflections on what had been accomplished during the lockdown, 35% reported using the same documentation material as the rest of the year, 6.8% had produced no documentation material. As many as 58.3% of respondents reported having produced

documentation materials on activities conducted to facilitate children's transition from one level of early childhood education to the next.

Turning now to the open-ended question about documentation, this item invited respondents to choose one piece of documentation produced during the lockdown that they viewed as particularly significant and to describe it briefly, stating what they believed to be its most important characteristics. This item was answered by 275 (66.75%) of the 412 participants, in varying degrees of detail. Some responses were extremely brief, for example, some merely named the type of documentation in a word or two, while others provided an explicit rationale for why they chose to highlight this particular material.

Participants' answers to the open-ended questions were subjected to content analysis, meaning that we took them to be textual data, drawn from texts that had been created to be seen, read, and interpreted as a function of their meaning (Alivernini, Lucidi & Pedon, 2008). From a procedural point of view, we used a method of content analysis that follows a bottom-up or inductive approach (Mayring, 2000), in which the categories of analysis are defined based on the material itself. Hence, we set out to "discover" new categories of content, by reading and jointly and intersubjectively interpreting the data.

Hence each of the authors/researchers first read the data corpus and identified possible categories of analysis by associating tentative labels with units of text. Subsequently they discussed the labels assigned until they were able to agree on four shared categories, which may be summarized as follows.

*Conceptualization of documentation, its objects, and its objectives:* under this category, we included the different meanings that our informants seemed to attribute to pedagogical documentation: the ideas, beliefs, and theoretical-methodological perspectives they hold in relation to the role of documentation in early childhood education and care services. It is thus a category of analysis that – based on respondents' own accounts – groups together the various ideas and beliefs underpinning what educators, teachers, and coordinators think that pedagogical documentation is and how they view it in

the context of their everyday work. These concepts of documentation also shape what they believe to be its purpose. In sum, this category tells us *why and in what sense*, the practitioners in our sample decided to document their implementation of the LEAD programme. This category of analysis also includes the different objects and contents of the pedagogical documentation, informing us as to *who/what* educators, teachers and coordinators primarily chose to document during the lockdown distance education (LEAD) phase.

*Beneficiaries*: this category of analysis groups together the accounts of educators, teachers and coordinators in relation to who – in their educational community – the recipients of the pedagogical documentation produced during the lockdown were primarily intended to be. This category therefore tells us *for whom* the LEAD programme was documented.

*Format*: this category of analysis groups together the forms and formats of pedagogical documentation adopted during the lockdown in the ECEC facilities represented in the sample. In other words, it tells us *how* the LEAD experience was documented.

*Timing*: finally, this category covers the different time frames the respondents appear to have adopted in relation to their pedagogical documentation. In other words, *when* documentation was produced, whether extemporaneously or occasionally, only in relation to a particular object or experience, or throughout or at the end of a project.

### *3.2. Why, for whom, how, when, and what to document in times of pandemics*

Overall, a range of perspectives on documentation emerged from the respondent's answers and these different views correspond to different associated goals pursued during lockdown.

Thirty out of the 275 (10.9%) answers to the open-ended question on documentation mentioned the documentation of specific projects that had either been designed ad hoc for the lockdown period or had spanned the entire educational year and were continued during the lockdown. For these 30 respondents, therefore,



documentation was associated with a specific project, whether short-, medium-, or long-term.

For 12 of these 30 (4.4%), documentation in this context meant the actual design and planning of the project, and hence not a material to be assembled while the project was being implemented or retrospectively when it was over, but rather a record of the choices that had guided the design and implementation of their educational work during LEAD.

Alongside documentation relating to specific projects, whether limited to the lockdown period, or lasting the entire year, other respondents chose to highlight a type of documentation that might be described as a collection of materials moving in one of two broad directions: offerings produced by the ECEC service and products requested by the ECEC service and submitted by the families.

First, 122 respondents (44.4%) reported producing documentation that consisted of a collection of educational offerings, appearing to interpret documenting as keeping track of what had been done, or the output of the educational service, especially in terms of activities proposed to children and families. Second, some 120 (43.6%) respondents referred to documentation in the form of collections of products by the children or their primary caregivers, implying the view that documentation concerns the learning products of the beneficiaries of an education activity.

The answers of 35 participants (12.7%) appear to describe a type of documentation that, in addition to collections of educational offerings or products, also features a form of reflection and critical re-visiting on the part of educators and teachers.

In these cases, as the participants' own words make clear, documentation is a tool that allows ECEC practitioners to «grasp the meaning of the programme and go on [implementing it]», «reformulate offerings», «rework actions», «read the competences being deployed by the children and the potential in play», «make explicit [...] choices, motivations, difficulties», «reconstruct the common thread», «reflect about oneself», generate connections between dif-

ferent actions even when implemented by different educators, obtain «validation of the work done», «attribute meaning to the time spent together and reflect on the offering *per se*», «ask questions», but also «redefine objectives and offerings», lay the foundations for defining a «new set of rules» that is appropriate for the current situation and assimilating it into practice. In these cases, documentation, while attributed with many different meanings and nuances, was explicitly acknowledged by educators and teachers as providing a «metacognitive phase in which to observe what has been done», thus fostering more reflexive practice and informing subsequent developments in educational design.

For 37 respondents (13.5%), documentation appeared to represent a vehicle for sharing information, especially with the children's families. In these cases, it mainly consisted of materials requested by the educators and produced by the families, who were invited to participate in joint writing activities, such as keeping virtual diaries about the child's experiences, or – more frequently – reporting back on activities conducted at home during the lockdown based on input received from the educators. Hence, two types of shared documentation emerge: the first was more co-constructed, the second mainly produced by the children's families in the form of materials, images, or videos requested by the education service. With regard to the primary beneficiaries of documentation, the answers of 190 respondents (69.1%) explicitly addressed this topic. Four groups of beneficiaries emerged. First, 98 (35.6%) respondents cited the children themselves. In 56 of these 98 cases (20.4% of the total), children were represented as the sole beneficiaries of the documentation described by educators and teachers in answer to the open-ended questionnaire item, while in 37 cases (13.5%), respondents identified the beneficiaries as the children and their families, and in four cases (1.5%), the beneficiaries were the children and the educational team. In 55 cases (20%), the sole beneficiary of the documentation was the educational team, while in 16 cases (5.8%) the documentation was produced for the benefit of the children's families and the members of the educational team.

The educational team mainly was seen as the beneficiary in cases where the documentation was understood as a collection of actions/offerings delivered by the team or as a collection of outputs received back from the children's families.

In 18 cases (6.5%), the children's families were cited as the sole beneficiaries of the documentation. Information about the format was provided in 231 (84%) of the 275 open-ended answers collected. Among the formats cited, some were featured more prominently than others. Specifically – alongside online platforms and especially padlets (15) (5.5%), diaries (17) (6.2%), and photos (24) (8.7%) – videos (85) (30.9%) were the most frequently mentioned format; this is in keeping with the fact that one of the main methods deployed to communicate with families throughout the lockdown was the sharing of brief video clips recorded by the educators.

The timing of documentation was alluded to in 116 responses (42.2%), of which 35 (12.8%) referred to the production of documentation as occurring at the end of the educational year, while 51 (18.5%) described it as occasional, eight (2.9%) as project related, and seven (2.5%) as continuous (of which one mentioned making weekly updates and one daily updates).

#### *4. Interpretation and discussion of the data*

The data analysis shows that documentation was most commonly understood among the participants as collecting or assembling the actions, activities, and offerings delivered by educational services to children and their families, and/or materials produced by the children's parents when specifically requested to monitor how their children had responded to and carried out the educational activities proposed by the ECEC service while at home during the lockdown. This appears to provide evidence for an incomplete understanding of documentation among early education practitioners, in that they appear to attribute it with the function of building up a historical record of the educational work implemented: this suggests that, in many cases, the value of reflexive

work on documentary materials remains marginal or ignored and that the different meanings that may be attributed to educational work remain implicit.

In most of the examples of documentation reported by the respondents it was not clear whether there was any overarching documentation project, while the tendency to merely collect or assemble materials appeared to prevail even when educators and teachers intended to develop a body of documentation with a view to describing their educational offerings.

From a quantitative point of view, it emerged that documentation had been used by the surveyed educational services to make visible their (new) way of remaining in remote contact with children and families and to demonstrate their commitment to providing continuity in the educational relationship and the children's educational and learning processes, even in times of pandemics.

However, when understood as a collection of educational offerings and products developed by children and families, this documentation was often removed from any interpretation of meaning, whereas attention to meaning would have helped the education practitioners to read their own educational actions, especially in a novel emergency situation such as that of a lockdown and pandemic. In emergency situations characterized by profound uncertainty and suffering, analysis of ongoing educational action, supported by a reflexive documentation process, can provide practitioners with a more in-depth understanding of the choices they have made and inform their next steps, in a logic of continuous redesign.

Only in a low percentage of those who answered the open-ended question, just over 10%, explicitly mentioned, in addition to collecting educational offerings or outputs, the use of documentation to stimulate reflection and inform critical re-design. In contrast, in responding to the closed items, over 40% associated documentation with observation and reflection: this would appear to suggest that documentation instruments do tend to foster a more mindful approach on the part work of educators and teachers, and

a greater emphasis on planning, design, and teamwork. Furthermore, the respondents' capacity to explicitly and clearly articulate what they had set out to document, as well as why and for whom, in itself implies an appreciation, on the part of the individual practitioners and presumably on that of the educational teams to which they belong, of the importance of narrating, making visible, and sharing their educational work with children, including the meanings attributed to it, the objectives and competences implied in it, and the will to question, plan, and monitor educational processes in an ongoing redesign cycle.

Such an approach to documentation, which is closely tied up with the reflexive processes of the educational team, will have a significant impact at different levels: on the practitioners' relationships with children and their families, on the fostering of the children's talents, areas of potential, and learning, and on the professional development trajectories of educators and teachers.

Considering that the value of documentation lies in great part in its power to prompt reflexivity and critical dialogue on the meanings of educational action, it is worth noting that a small percentage of respondents described a project rather than a specific method of documentation, suggesting that there may still be some confusion and overlap between the concepts of designing educational action and documenting it. Furthermore, the «I don't know» or «I can't think of one» responses to the open-ended question requesting an example of documentation might imply that documentation had not been a focus for the educational team and that these practitioners did not have a strong grasp of what documentation is or what its role is meant to be in relation to an educational project. This in turn implies a need for ongoing professional development for practitioners that is designed to clarify the meaning and potential of documentation in educational contexts, as well as the role of educational design in ECEC settings and how it intersects with observation, documentation, and evaluation (Bondioli & Savio, 2018).

A further significant aspect of the answers to the open-ended question is that the effort made by the practitioners to read and

document the distance educational relationship during the lockdown seemed to be experienced by them as an integral part of a complex educational year and not an isolated exercise confined to a specific period. This appears to be fully in keeping with the core objective of the LEAD programme, which was to offer continuity in terms of children's and families' education and learning processes despite the emergency, the associated distress, and the imposition of distancing arrangements. It is also in line with an understanding of documentation as a practice that gives new form and meanings to forgotten or taken for granted or underestimated practices and relationships, as a tool that continuously challenges the parties to the educational process and helps to make sense of the evolving educational experience of children and adults.

Again, the fact that children were identified as the main beneficiaries of documentation implies that it was being used as a means of maintaining strong ties with them both during and after the lockdown. Documenting *for*, but above all *with*, the children's families, appears to reflect a new intertwining of roles and the need for primary caregivers to be directly involved in observing and acknowledging the children's educational trajectory from a co-educational and participatory perspective (Guerra & Luciano, 2014).

Also of note is the fact that most participants explicitly reported the documentation format used, displaying a marked – and understandable – preference for videos, both in light of the young age of the children and given the emergency scenario and the need to make themselves seen and heard despite the physical distance separating them from the children. Naturally, this choice prompts multiple questions – as called for by Parola (2015) – concerning the functions fulfilled by making and sharing the video documents; the reflexive practices brought to bear on the material by the practitioners while making the videos; the role of the video narratives in socializing the educational activities with the children and their families; the extent to which the viewing of a given video was backed up by instructions, questions, and follow up discussion.

### *5. Conclusions: documenting in times of emergency*

There was considerable diversity among the practitioners who took part in the study. Specifically, they articulated different understandings of pedagogical documentation and different approaches to using it in relation to designing their educational action during the public health emergency. It may be plausibly assumed that the educational services' shared cultures of educational design in normal times prior to the lockdown, likely shaped their new methods of documentation, design and evaluation during the emergency.

The use of pedagogical documentation during the lockdown had a significant impact on educational projects, professional development, and the image and evaluation of education and care in the ECEC sector.

This confirms the need to view documentation as pedagogical statements «to be viewed as monuments requiring an archaeological kind of analysis» (Massa, 1996, p. 39).

It is no coincidence that documentation has been compared, given its potential to inform research and reflection, to a «questioning machine»,

a machine in the sense of a mechanism, of a question that begs clarification, of a provisional answer that requires reformulations of the question itself, in the sense of a movement that crosses the present to reach the recent past and the remote past of the [educational] action, that shakes up educational professionalism, breaks it down into its component parts, subjecting it to a check-up and consequent adjustments... a machine with its mechanisms in view so that they too can be serviced as needed, so that it is possible to regulate their rhythms in keeping with the processes, subjects, and type of experience that are in play (Sacchetto, 2003, p. 68).

In an emergency situation such as the COVID-19 crisis which is still ongoing, the role and value of documentation is even further amplified, given its now even more evident potential as an instrument that can not only orient and reorient educational practices and design strategies, but also contribute to showing renovated practices in spite of the crisis, shaping relationships, partly giving

back substance to education and suggesting new ways in which these relationships can be realized, both with children and with families, as well as within educational teams who may themselves be forced to communicate at a distance.

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