

## The Living Wall: Implementing and Interpreting Pedagogical Documentation in Specialized ELCC Settings

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*The program approach in specialized early learning programs may result in adults focusing too intently on therapeutic treatment reports and disabilities and not on the stories children share through play. Observing, listening, and documenting play scripts can shift adults' focus and make the self of children and their interests visible. Exploring different ways of documenting children's experiences in specialized educational settings was the impetus for this paper. The Living Wall—a form of pedagogical documentation—aligns with Ted Aoki's notion of a "curriculum-as-lived-experience" that honours children and gives them a voice through the collection and interpretation of their artwork, dialogue, and imaginative play scripts.*

**Key words:** listening; Living Wall; pedagogical documentation; specialized ECE

In recent radio rebroadcasts of the 2017 CBC Massey Lectures, law professor and social justice activist Payam Akhavan talked about upholding the rights of diverse individuals and building a "human rights culture" built on empathy. When asked by an audience member how one can teach empathy, the professor suggested that sharing personal stories is a powerful way to increase people's understanding of difference and diversity. Akhavan emphasized that "human rights is a thousand humble stories" (March 26, 2018, CBC Massey Lecture 1, 11:46). In reflecting on Akhavan's ideas about advocacy, empathy, and stories in the context of our work in the Alberta Early Learning and Child Care (ELCC) Curriculum Framework project<sup>1</sup>, we have come to recognize pedagogical documentation as more than a form of storytelling or the practice of writing "learning stories" (Makovichuk, Hewes, Lirette, & Thomas, 2014). Documentation is a tool that gives children a voice in specialized child care settings.

Although words such as "voice," "dialogue," and

“conversation” often imply verbal communication, many children in specialized settings do not and will not have the capacity to engage verbally. However, they can still engage with their own strengths and ways of communicating through graphic, symbolic, embodied, and visual languages. Carlina Rinaldi’s (2006) “pedagogy of listening” includes both holistic and metaphorical definitions of “listening” and emphasizes the need for educators to be sensitive and open to interpreting “the hundred, the thousand languages” (p. 65) of children. According to Gianni Rodari (1996), children “must be encouraged to ... reproduce their own language and meanings through stories that will enable them to narrate their own lives” (p. xix).

Our interest in documenting children’s play was inspired by the work of educator Vivian Paley (1981, 2001, 2004), who recorded children’s experiences in the kindergarten classroom, and scholars Richard Kearney (2002), Thomas King (2003), and David Loy (2010), “who write about the symbolic and functional work of storytelling in sociocultural, historical, and political contexts ... [and] offer us ways to think about storytelling as a form of imaginative play” (Bjartveit & Panayotidis, 2017, p. 117).

Katz and Chard (1996, p. 2) have explained that documentation includes samples of a child’s work, photographs, comments written by teachers and parents, transcriptions of children’s discussions, and an explanation of intentions about their activities. Expanding on these ideas, pedagogical documentation includes adults’ and children’s interpretations of play in the context of learning and development (Pacini-Ketchabaw, Nxumalo, Kocher, Elliot, & Sanchez, 2015; Stacey, 2015). Educators who work in the northern Italian Reggio Emilia schools have described documentation as “the skin of the school” (Ceppi & Zini, 1998) and an “act of love” (Rinaldi, 2001, 2006). Our understanding of documentation aligns with Rinaldi’s (2001, 2006) metaphor of “visible listening” and Pam Oken-Wright’s (2001) description of documentation as “both mirror and light” that reflects the self of children and shines a light on their learning and interests.

Over a two-year period, a team of faculty from Mount Royal University in Calgary engaged in a project with education-funded/based early learning programs to explore practices originating from the Alberta Early Learning Curriculum Framework (Makovichuk et al., 2014). Participants in the development of these ideas included the project leaders, Catherine Smey Carston and Joanne Baxter, who invited leaders from the local school district programs to facilitate learning communities made up of preschool administrators and educators from four school boards in the Calgary area. Jennifer Hart and Cheryl Greenidge represented the Calgary Board of Education (CBE), and with the support of their pedagogical partner, Carolyn Bjartveit, participated in the exploration of the curriculum framework in practice. It is through our personal experiences and reflections that we share how pedagogical documentation made the children’s interests and learning visible and changed how we view and engage children holistically in a specialized learning environment. These unique educational settings are fully comprised of children diagnosed with severe delays and/or disabilities and are staffed with educational as well as therapeutic professionals.

In this paper, we focus on a form of pedagogical documentation that Carolyn has named the “Living Wall”—a term she invented based on the ideas of education scholars Ted Aoki (1994) and Bronwyn Davis (2014). Aoki’s (1994) explanation of the difference between a “curriculum-as-plan” versus a “curriculum-as-lived experience” shifts educators’ focus from teaching prescribed, preplanned curricula to co-planning programs with young learners based on their lived experiences and interests. Davis (2014) has noted that

in order to keep the walls alive ... in which the not-yet-known of the children's thoughts has space to emerge, the photos and paintings, along with quotes from what the children say, are posted on the wall in an informal way that invites the passer-by, both child and adult, to stop and contemplate what it is that is emergent there ... and to wonder how they might become involved in it, how they might respond to it. (p. 25)

The random placement of documents on the Living Wall is a metaphor for the tangle of children's ideas—both imaginary and real—always transforming and often unpredictable. Like a Jackson Pollock<sup>2</sup> painting with messy splatters and layers of colours creating an aesthetic whole, the Living Wall represents the multilayered processes of children's thinking, which is anything but linear and orderly. Recognizing the complex, contextual, and individual nature of learning and development creates tensions and raises questions about some diagnostic assessment tools that categorize and fit children into stages or a linear, universal trajectory of development. Gaile Cannella (2002) has explained that “child development has been constructed based on enlightenment/modernist notions of human progress ... that establish advancing as a standard for ‘normalcy. Those who do not fit are abnormal” (p. 63).

In considering the scholars' (Aoki, 1994; Davis, 2014; Cannella, 2002) ideas, we wondered how the Living Wall might be used in a specialized classroom as a documentation, planning, and advocacy tool to make the self of children, including their cultures, languages, histories, stories, and interests, visible. This was a key question while working with educators, therapists, and support staff who had an additional focus—meeting the therapeutic goals in this environment.

We believe that an understanding of developmental perspective is important to support classroom teams in knowing the impact of medical diagnoses on children and to support their education based on the diagnoses. A combination or layering of therapeutic and educational perspectives is essential to interpreting, engaging in, and planning for interest-based play experiences while also honouring children's developmental skills and growth. While we do not minimize the importance of therapeutic reporting, interactions, and expertise, we wanted to understand how time and opportunities were provided for the children to freely play, explore their interests, and tell their personal stories. Our intent was to explore the challenges, tensions, and possibilities of introducing pedagogical documentation to teams of professionals who were focused on therapeutic and educational reporting and supporting the safety and progress of children with severe special needs, which adds to the complexity of their work.

By sharing our experiences, we hope to provoke ideas about how the Living Wall invites children and adults to question, imagine, and explore ways to share children's play scripts in specialized classrooms. Following Enid Elliot (2010), we recognize that “remembering our own stories of our practice can provide us with a deeper awareness of what needs to be shared and understood about this work” (p. 5).

## Documenting in the specialized playroom

Scholars and educators who write about inclusive and specialized practices (Donegan, Hong, Trepanier-Street, & Finkelstein, 2005; Dalkilic & Vadeboncoeur, 2016) and other researchers who have worked with exceptional learners in emergent curriculum classrooms (Gilman, 2007; Smith, 1998; Soncini, 2013; Tsekhman, 2011) offer ideas about the role of documentation in supporting children's learning. Sheryl Gilman (2007) wrote about the value of honouring children's work through documenting, sharing projects with parents, and using documentation as a means of communication with the families of children with disabilities.

In the preprimary schools of Reggio Emilia, a maximum of two children with “special rights” can be accepted into an inclusive class of up to 20 students (Smith, 1998, p. 200). Ivana Soncini (as cited in Smith, 1998) has noted that

in the Reggio schools, a flexible program plan is created for each child, based on a long period of initial observation and documentation, which can be revised and reinterpreted based on the educator and pedagogista. The educators' and support staff's role "is to help the child find the way ... through motivation and interest" (p. 204). Each child has a documentation binder that includes photographs, written observations, artwork, and anecdotal records. The documentation is always available to families and reflects "the collaboration among professionals, family, and educator to support the child's progress" (p. 204). Listening to children's ideas, expressed through multimodal languages, is a key principle of the Reggio Emilia philosophy of education. Rinaldi (2006) has noted that

documentation ... is seen as visible listening, as the construction of traces (through notes, slides, videos, and so on) that not only testify to the children's learning paths and processes, but also make them possible because they are visible.... This means making visible, and thus possible, the relationships that are the building blocks of knowledge. (p. 68)

In Canada, many early learning programs function to serve the child's exceptional needs. Historically, policies and funding in these programs necessitate the involvement of therapeutic supports to meet the disabilities assessed by the professionals. Accordingly, children are assessed and goals are determined by therapeutic and teaching professionals. The assessments contribute to the creation of an individual program plan (IPP), individual student profile (ISP), or individualized education plan (IEP). When a therapeutic assessment is completed, a report is generated and used, along with teacher observations and anecdotal notes, to document the impact of assessed needs in an educational environment. Goals, key understandings, and strengths, focused on a child's function in classroom experiences, are recorded in an IPP. A structured plan is developed and evidence toward reaching goals must be presented to meet funding guidelines in many jurisdictions. Therapists' time and resources are allocated based on the identified functional severity of the needs of the child. This often results in a structured, goal-oriented environment. Educational programs, for many therapists, are typically grounded in developmental and behavioural practice and based on the requirements of their practice. They often come to early learning settings with these approaches.

Through sharing various forms of documentation, engaging in ongoing dialogue, and interpreting classroom observations together, the educators and therapists—participants in the Alberta Early Learning Curriculum Framework project—honed their listening and observation skills and developed alternative pedagogies and practices.

### **Navigating tensions and exploring alternative pedagogies**

Carolyn's role as a pedagogical partner in the Alberta curriculum project involved supporting the implementation of curriculum concepts, including pedagogical documentation, in specialized classrooms. She met with school administrators and educators on a regular basis to discuss coaching and mentoring strategies and worked directly with children, their teachers, and teams of therapists in the school. These meetings enabled the project participants to discuss the purposes and processes of documentation and relevant academic articles and texts (Stacey, 2015).

In the schools participating in this project, the preschool curricula and programs were prescribed, tightly scheduled, and sharply focused on the tenets of child developmental psychology and therapeutic practices. This was defined in the programs' policies and funding guidelines and was desired by the children's parents. Although the educators described the program as "strength based," Carolyn noticed "conventional practices of specialized education ... [that] view disability through a lens that pathologizes difference from the assumed norm of development (Slee, 2001)" (Dalkilic & Vadeboncoeur, 2016, p. 18).

A typical day in the playroom began with story time, followed by speech and language supports that included a focus on activities designed to target expressive and receptive communication skills as well as social interactions. The educators used visual cue cards to support receptive and expressive communication with children and pointed to pictures as they spoke. Learning activities were planned by educators and therapists to develop children's oral language and fine and gross motor, social, and cognitive skills. There were many transitions as children were moved between the various activities, and free play time typically encompassed approximately one-third of their day. Often, play time was available as "free play time" when teachers and support staff in the playrooms took their required breaks and children were provided a mix of time to play on their own and with adults.

On her first day in the classroom, Carolyn observed educators documenting the children's experiences in therapeutic reports, anecdotal records, and IPPs. Concerned that adding another form of documentation would increase the professionals' workload, she decided to focus on creating documents (notes, photographs, and artifacts) that would speak to the child as an individual.

Carolyn invited the educators to create documents and place them on a panel mounted low on the wall in the classrooms and school hallway so that children and adults could view the work and add their own ideas. As the educators posted documents on the Living Wall, the therapists working in the classrooms noticed and began to ask questions: "What will you do with these notes and photographs? What is the purpose of this documentation?" At a monthly curriculum planning meeting with the full professional team, Carolyn introduced and explained how the Living Wall could be used to co-plan activities with the children. Her objective was to engage the group in conversations, with the hope they would come to understand the value of documentation in making children's interests and learning visible. After several weeks of listening, observing, and recording the children's play, the documentation included photographs, notes, dialogue, and artwork—evidence that the staff had contributed information to the panel.

Standing in front of the Wall, the educators and therapists read and discussed the various documents and recognized echoing ideas and interests of the children. They drew lines on the panel to make the connections visible and, based on their findings, co-planned curriculum activities related to the children's questions and repeating ideas about robots, transportation, and Tim Horton's restaurant. Carolyn reminded the professionals about the importance of revisiting the Living Wall with the children on an ongoing basis and involving them in the interpretation and planning processes.

Pointing to documents on the Living Wall, one teacher asked how it would be possible to document a child with selective mutism. Through sharing documentation of a nonverbal child's play experience, Carolyn explained how listening, observing, and recording stories told in multimodal languages enables adults to interpret children's playscripts. By moving toys and props and using gestures and facial expressions, a nonverbal child told Carolyn a story about a dinosaur that fell ill. The child took a toy ambulance in the playroom, placed the dinosaur on the roof of the vehicle, and drove to a nearby Tim Horton's restaurant (a mock setup of the restaurant in the drama centre). The child found a bowl and spoon and through dramatic play and nodding responses to questions, explained how chicken noodle soup made the dinosaur well again. When the story was shared with the child's teacher, she seemed surprised and had not recognized the child's ability to communicate imaginative stories through embodied language (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. A nonverbal child's story props.

The children's interest in robots was evident on the documentation panels in two different classrooms—proof that the children had noticed documents on the Living Wall mounted in the school hallway. The educators listened, observed facial expressions and body language, and recorded the children's verbal and nonverbal conversations and play scripts about robots. In one classroom the children set up a robot shop, stocked with found materials, with their teacher (see Figure 2). In another room the children worked together to create a large-size model robot (see Figure 3). To further support their interests, the educators built a robot factory with recycled materials and boxes for the children to construct with. They also found picture books about robots to share with the children. The educators said there was a significant change in the children's attention and engagement during story time after choosing books connected to their interests (Documentation, June 3, 2016). Carolyn asked the professionals to consider how their therapeutic objectives might be met through the planned activities. Responding to the children's interest in robots, a physiotherapist on the team created a machine with working lights and sounds to entice children to run the length of the gymnasium and push the buttons—an activity that increased the children's engagement and supported their gross motor development.



Figure 2. The children's robot shop.



Figure 3. A large-scale robot project.

## Memories and reflections

One year after the curriculum pilot project had ended, the school administrators shared their thoughts about our work together. In her role as a specialist for early learning within the CBE, Jennifer's primary responsibility was overseeing the board's early development centre (EDC) programs. She collaborated with system, area, and school personnel to enhance and ensure the successful organization and running of the program. Jennifer's involvement in the curriculum framework project allowed her to support the enhancement of programming at each of the EDC sites and to successfully showcase their work related to the framework at a system level. Jennifer explained:

I believe that any time we engage individuals to closely examine their practice, it is natural to experience tension. When we encouraged and supported our staff to look at new ways of doing and thinking and to push themselves to approach their work in a different way, because of the CF project, we naturally saw questions and uncertainty arise. Questions were often tension filled, but by continually seeking answers through collaborative dialogue and modelling by Carolyn, we saw individuals become open and receptive to approaching and seeing the work in a new light. I believe that we successfully supported others and eradicated tensions by first establishing a relationship where mutual understanding and trust were present. To create opportunities for shared leadership for all staff, we considered and created multiple entry points to allow staff to be active participants. By honouring the voices and opinions of all staff and working alongside them and allowing them to question freely, we enabled them to be open to new possibilities for teaching and learning within our programs.

Cheryl's role within the EDC settings as an early learning strategist was working collaboratively with teachers to support staff and parents in the school environments. She worked directly with classroom teams and children to facilitate planning and programming and provided leadership in the implementation of professional practice. Cheryl explained that tensions arose when questions were posed by teachers as to how they could come to know children's curiosities, wonderings, discoveries, and interests if their ability to engage or communicate verbally was limited. The answer to that came in the form of documentation and the very beginnings of a Living Wall. The educators began by taking photos and jotting quick anecdotes onto sticky notes to share simple observations such as smiles, squeals of joy, or a delighted word or phrase like "happy" or "I want" when children were engaged with a new toy or, perhaps, discovered a small insect outside. Sparks of interest were being ignited for both the adults and the children in the room. Over time, staff in the classrooms began to recognize the multiple messages communicated through the documentation. Interests were evident in the play children were choosing to engage in on an ongoing basis, skills as learners were reflected in the progression of photographs over time, and opportunities to expand on classroom experiences were easily recognized as children demonstrated an increased curiosity and motivation to explore the materials being offered. Conversations around the Living Wall became a part of weekly reflections among staff members, and over time, contributions to the wall were being added by therapists, support staff, and even students throughout the school as they were keen to share their observations of the children's "work." Cheryl noted:

The documentation on the Living Wall also inspired another equally exciting change in our classrooms as children began to take note of their own images on the walls and were drawn to discover themselves in the photos of their play and exploration. Recognition of their place in the classroom, the importance of having their photo on the wall and reliving play experiences was invaluable as an opportunity for children to see themselves as worthy, capable, and collaborative partners in their own learning successes. Through this process of intentionally documenting children's play and creating a living wall, the classroom effectively began to evolve into a dynamic and responsive environment where play experiences were used to expand children's opportunities and serve as a vehicle for all children to find their place and grow as a learner in a specialized setting. (Personal correspondence, April 12, 2018)

In utilizing forms of pedagogical documentation in their specialized settings, Jennifer and Cheryl saw how ordinary moments of children's play were now being captured and carefully considered as an ongoing source of information for planning engaging play experiences and assessing learning achievements. As staff began to see the value and purpose of the Living Wall, they moved away from therapeutic reporting and adopted approaches that ensured personalized learning opportunities and increased student engagement. This personalization allowed each child to be successful within tasks while addressing their specific interests and identified learning needs. With a strong emphasis on pedagogical documentation, the shift in how educators approached teaching and learning was evident in each of the specialized preschool classrooms. Creative and critical thinking as well as collaborative planning emerged, which has had a direct impact on the advancement and influence on instructional practices on behalf of each child's personal development.

### **To understand is to story**

As David Loy (2010) writes, to understand is to story. Documentation, dialogue, and reflection provided a new way of understanding and working alongside children and adults in specialized classrooms. Will Parnell (2012) emphasizes that

by looking back ... and recalling memories and experiences with a group we begin to sharpen our focus as we build on each other's recollections, adding to each other's knowledge of the experiences with this double-vision technique. This broadening and deepening of our knowledge is what we strive to achieve in our work to uncover the meaning of our experiences in the early childhood [classroom]. (p. 119)

Rather than understanding learning as naming, repeating, and reproducing concepts, the professionals lived the curriculum through critical reflections and reflexive practice. At the end of the project there were fewer transitions, more time for children to freely play with adults, and Living Walls were mounted in classrooms and school hallways. Educators, therapists, children, parents, and support staff were posting and using the documentation for curriculum and program planning.

The most significant shift was in how the administrators and educators came to understand and appreciate the benefits of using the Living Wall. They focused on creating and interpreting documents and through this process discovered different ways to share and highlight children's strengths, engagement, and learning with therapists, families, and each other. This provided an authentic and meaningful way for educators and therapists to observe, notice, and engage with children in play and understand how play can be used in meeting prescribed goals and interventions. The collaboration of educational and therapeutic professionals and expertise and using the Living Wall as an anchor allowed for enhanced programming and child engagement.

Although the benefits of stories and storytelling is highly celebrated among many early learning participants, we also recognize that continuous efforts and conversations will be needed to engage therapists and specialists—individuals trained under a medical, behavioural paradigm, where traditional assessments are required for funding and reporting purposes—in this type of documentation process.

Another challenge that educators wrestled with during the project was making time in heavily scheduled programs to document, discuss, and co-plan the curriculum with children. The educators and administrators came to understand that documenting requires reflection, patience, and moving forward in small steps (Wein, 2011)—a very different practice than what Veronica Pacini-Ketchabaw and colleagues (2015) have described as the “McDonaldization of pedagogical narration ... [or] tendency toward a superficial, oversimplified approach to documenting children's learning” (pp. 120–121). The educators needed time to communicate with children,

staff, administrators, and parents to discover how curriculum concepts work and can be implemented within their unique communities of practice. Engaging the therapists in these conversations increased collaboration and offered holistic approaches to support the children's learning. The Living Wall provided a bridge between the therapeutic world of goals and individual plans and the world of childhood play. Through the documentation, therapists and educators came to recognize that play-based opportunities provided the means for prescribed goals and interventions to occur. Therapists and educators understood how play-based learning and documentation can support the complex needs of the child, while at the same time meeting the prescribed expectations of professionals in the program.

Through the project, the participants learned how dialogue and documentation can uphold the rights of children with disabilities to have a voice and express their ideas and stories. According to Caplan, Loomis, and Di Santo (2016),

employing multimodal approaches to learning, such as through storytelling and storyacting (Paley, 1981) and pedagogical narrations (Atkinson, 2012; Pacini-Ketchabaw, Nxumalo, Kocher, Elliot, & Sanchez, 2014), creates spaces where children can explore ways to overcome challenges together as a community, develop a sense of community, and better understand their individual roles within their broader community (Zepeda, 2014). (p. 42)

Rinaldi (2006) has noted that sharing pedagogical documentation is a "true act of democracy, sustaining the culture and visibility of childhood, both inside and outside the school: democratic participation, or 'participant democracy,' that is a product of exchange and visibility" (p. 59). While working together with the children, we discovered that "human rights *is* a thousand humble stories" (Akhavan, n.p., emphasis added). Although we acknowledge that further research related to using pedagogical documentation in specialized educational settings is necessary, we have come to recognize how the tools can begin to address the rights of children with disabilities. The Living Wall gave children a voice and served as an advocacy tool to support children's right to play, dream, invent, explore, and share their imaginative stories.

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## (Endnotes)

- 1 Information about the Alberta ELCC Curriculum Framework—Alberta Education Project—and work described in this paper has been published by Alberta Education in *Pedagogical Leadership Resource Guide: Mount Royal University Alberta ELCC Curriculum Framework—Alberta Education Project* (Bjartveit with Candelora & Suave, 2017). Sections of this paper were presented at the CAYC conference “Perspectives on Curriculum Frameworks in Early Learning and Child Care” at NorQuest College, Edmonton, Alberta, April 27–29, 2018.
- 2 Jackson Pollock (1912–1956) was an American abstract artist who explored the unique painting techniques of dripping and spilling paint on canvas (<https://www.jackson-pollock.org/biography.jsp>).