

## Melting the Clock: Dalian Concepts of Temporality and Pedagogical Documentation in Early Childhood Education

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*The author describes how her documentation of children's play experiences and the stories that preschool children have told her continue to be useful and are reinterpreted in her current work with postsecondary teacher education programs. She explains the documentation as a resource for sparking fictional story writing, play, and critical dialogue about teaching and learning in early childhood education settings. Salvador Dali's artistic representations of time and Hans-Georg Gadamer's philosophical concepts of temporal distance and the movement of play provide a framework for understanding the long-lasting value and timelessness of pedagogical documentation in supporting inquiry-based learning and play (pre-K to postsecondary levels).*

**Key words:** early childhood education, pedagogical documentation, play, stories and storytelling, temporality

Things do not exist as objects that simply are what they are. Things are, in their lived, convivial reality, inherited from the past that has already shaped us ... and that will reshape what we have understood that shaping to have been. Even that which seems over and done with will turn out to be different than it was. (Jardine, 2012, pp. 28–29)

While recently viewing an exhibition of artist Salvador Dali's visual works, I was drawn to images of melting clocks in his painting, *The Persistence of Memory* (1931). My encounter with them felt as though time had stopped, was distended and upended. I studied the art and attempted to make sense of the whimsical dreamscape and figures in the piece, wondering what affected me so deeply. It was a moment of transformation and one that I now realize was related to pedagogical inquiry, documentation, and childhood. In 1954 Dali created a sequel to his original painting, and

although the two artworks have a similar composition, he submerged the scene underwater in *The Disintegration of the Persistence of Memory*. The contrasting images of desert and underwater landscapes in the two paintings are striking and reflect how Dali's reinterpretation of his original artwork was provoked by world events and his lived experiences during the passage of time. Dali's paintings spark memories of the fantastical stories that preschool children told, and I documented, fifteen years ago during the final year of my preschool teaching career. My goal in coauthoring "The Stories from the Garden" with the children was to support experiential learning, increase physical activities through outdoor play, and provoke dialogue, problem solving, observations, and inquiry projects focused on nature. The stories were written over nine months, and two classes of 4-year-old children and their families participated in the project. Sixteen children in both the morning and afternoon classes collaborated in creating the narrative script according to their ideas and interests. I published a journal article about the stories from the garden (Bjartveit, 2011) two years after I left the preschool to pursue graduate studies and postsecondary teaching;

however, my memories of the children's stories, including the characters that we created together, are vivid. Since 2009 the children's stories and documentation of their projects and play experiences have provoked discussions about curriculum and pedagogical practice and continue to inspire playful story writing in undergraduate- and graduate-level teacher education programs.

This article explores my past to present applications of "The Stories from the Garden" to curriculum (pre-K to postsecondary levels), and layers Hans-Georg Gadamer's (2004) hermeneutic concepts of "temporal distance" (p. 298) and the oscillating "movement of play" (p. 104) into an understanding of the role and passing of time in interpreting documentation. In addition, Dali's artistic concepts of time and memory provide a visual and temporal lens through which to view and interpret the children's creative experiences. Over the past years, I have come to understand documentation itself as an art form. I aim to contribute to theories and interpretations of children's play and processes of its documentation and to recognize the timelessness of both its construction and application.

Etymologically defined, the meaning of "time" proposed in the late 14th century is "an indefinite continuous duration," which closely relates to the notion of "timeless" as "eternal" (Online Etymology Dictionary). My understanding of time in relation to childhood and the timelessness of pedagogical documentation aligns with Tesar's (2016) explanation:

The idea of working with the temporality of "timing childhoods" can mimic the notion of a ticking clock. Childhoods operate within binaries of a Cartesian heritage, where adults, and policies about children and their childhoods, are concerned with notions of measurement, "the next step," and "correct" and "right" timing. (p. 402)

My goal is to rethink the practice of documenting children's activities for the purpose of developmental, therapeutic, and behavioural reporting or the recording of short snippets of play using time-saving digital tools. My focus is on the pedagogical aspects of documentation that invite children and adults to metaphorically "melt the clock" and linger or while over it (Jardine, 2008, 2013) and then reinterpret the documentation over a prolonged period. Jardine (2008) emphasizes that "whiling over a topic—working at it, composing it, composing ourselves over it, remembering and cultivating one's memory of it—defines the work of hermeneutics. Interpretation whiles. And such whiling ... defines the pedagogy at its best" (para. 6). In using "The Stories from the Garden" as an example, I hope to raise awareness about the lasting value and timelessness of pedagogical documentation and explore factors contributing to long-term cycles of inquiry, learning, and play. I next move to a review of literature that helps to situate pedagogical documentation as a relation to temporality. Then, I layer into the discussion the contributions of Hans-Georg Gadamer and Salvador Dali, making note of their unique representations and narratives of timelessness. Before concluding, I return to "The Stories from the Garden," adding contemporary thought and wisdom that I have accumulated, to wrestle with its continued impact.

## Scholarly Literature on the Developmental Time of Pedagogical Documentation

Although a wide range of academic literature relates to documentation practices, forms, and tools used when working with young children, here I spend time more specifically with literature that focuses on time and temporality in relation to pedagogical documentation. To understand the timeless qualities of pedagogical documentation, I searched peer-reviewed academic sources centered on philosophy, early childhood education, play, teacher education, and pedagogical practice spanning two decades of publication. I provide a summary of the literature in an effort to ground my own interpretations of temporality as it informs documentation and to understand the ways in which approaches to documenting children's play and activities are often bound to developmental time.

The documentation of children's play is rooted in the northern Italian Reggio Emilia philosophy of early childhood education and includes rights-based pedagogical approaches that emphasize listening to children, reciprocal learning, and supporting children's interests through inquiry-based projects (Edwards et al., 2012; Rinaldi, 2005, 2006). Dahlberg, Moss, and Pence (2013) have described pedagogical documentation as both material *content*, that includes written, audio/visual and photographic records of children's words, interactions and works (visual, graphic & written), and a *process* of reflecting on the materials and work "in a very rigorous, methodical and democratic way" (p. 148). Children are often measured and treated in ways that align with adults' sense of appropriate time. In early childhood education, we are instructed to document what occurs for children during their development over time. Child development itself is often assumed to occur through linear temporal milestones, and points to a universal developmental trajectory that ignores individual diversity factors and children's unique lived experiences. Scholars such as Cannella (2002), Gibbons (2016), and Tesar (2016) have challenged ideas about timed and measured children and childhoods in the context of Eurocentric child development theories and pedagogical practices and technological advancements. Knauf (2020), Kummen (2010), and Pacini-Ketchabaw et al. (2015) have explained the reconceptualization of early childhood education through using pedagogical documentation and "think[ing] about the clock in the context of early childhood practices and theories" (Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2012, p. 155). Time-saving tools and documentation processes are a focus of early childhood educators (Carr & Lee, 2012; Fleet et al., 2017; Stacey, 2022; Wien et al., 2011), as are the time-consuming challenges of documenting and scheduling time to record children's activities (Clark, 2023; Fyfe, 2012; Kroeger & Cardy, 2006; Rose & Whitty, 2010). Importantly, education scholars have viewed pedagogical documentation through a temporal lens and explained its potential in supporting "slow pedagogy" and researching with children (Carlsen & Clark, 2002; Clark, 2023; Jardine, 2013).

Visualized as a metaphorical bridge between past and present experiences, pedagogical documentation fuels ideas, questions, and interests and can motivate learners to keep the cycle of inquiry turning. Placing children's words, art, and photos on the classroom wall, often described as a "living wall" (Bjartveit et al., 2019; Davis, 2014), provokes dialogue about past experiences and what might emerge from children in future inquiries and projects. Kind (2020, as cited in Clark, 2023) explains her intention in displaying children's art on the wall for many years "as a trace of the history that says other children have been here before and have been thinking about particular things, so children come into a space already alive with ideas" (p. 73).

Edwards and Rinaldi's (2009) *The Diary of Laura* includes the experiences of a young girl in the Arcobaleno infant-toddler centre in Reggio Emilia, Italy. The diary was written by educators and includes observations and reflections on the child's experiences and teachers' practice. Two decades after the diary was written, Laura and her educators met and shared their memories of school and reflections on the long-lasting value of documentation. I should note that apart from these last few examples (Clark, 2023; Edwards & Rinaldi, 2009), I did not find academic sources describing how pedagogical documentation can generate different perspectives and questions about children's play several years after the experiences were recorded. While my search demonstrated that a bulk of scholarly literature is interested in pedagogical documentation as it relates to children's play, my hope is that this paper will add to work that is specifically concerned with the always-changing interpretations and timelessness of pedagogical documentation. Gadamer's (2004) notion of temporal distance and Dali's visual representations of time described in the next section of the paper provide philosophical and artistic perspectives that can be related to the interpretation of pedagogical documentation and children's play.

## Temporality, Dreamscapes, and Play: Philosophical and Visual Underpinnings

To help in understanding how time impacts the interpretation of documentation, I turn to 20<sup>th</sup>-century Western philosophers (Gadamer, 2004; Heidegger, 1963) and to visual artists (Aranda, 2009; Cezanne, 1869; Dali, 1931,

1954; Hals, 1643) who have represented time and temporality in their written and artistic works. While reflecting on the documentation of preschool children's play, I have been drawn to Gadamer's philosophical concept of time and the role of play in interpreting art and to Dali's reinterpretation and transformation of his visual works after the passage of time. Using play as a metaphor for interpreting art, Gadamer (2004, p. 104) describes the oscillating "backward and forward" or to-and-fro movement of play that can unfold during the process of meaning making. Layering Gadamer's concept of temporal distance with Dali's art provided a philosophical and visual framework on which to build a deeper understanding of how time and memory shifted my own interpretations of "The Stories from the Garden." Gadamer explains the connections between past and present experiences as a "fusion of horizons" (p. 367) that creates a "unified flow of experience" (p. 237) and that understanding increases through merging multiple experiences and perspectives. He emphasizes that the interpretation of a work of art or text includes understanding its origins and historical context and the factors shaping reinterpretations of the work from past to present times. Hermeneutics, as the "art of interpretation" through language, considers the parts that make up the whole meanings of visual or literary works (Gadamer, 2004, p. 291).

Temporal distance obviously means something other than the extinction of our interest in the object. It lets the true meaning of the object emerge fully. The discovery of the true meaning of a text or a work of art is never finished; it is in fact an infinite process. Not only are fresh sources of error constantly excluded so that all kinds of things are filtered out that obscure the true meaning, but new sources of understanding continuously emerge that reveal unsuspected elements of meaning. The temporal distance that performs the filtering process is not fixed but is itself undergoing constant movement and extension (Gadamer, 2004, p. 298).

Relating Gadamer's hermeneutic concepts of interpretation to Dali's art piece *The Persistence of Memory* (1931) opens opportunities to explore factors that impacted the artist's interpretations of the original work and his sequel, *The Disintegration of the Persistence of Memory* (1954). Exploring multiple perspectives on Dali's paintings, both when they were created and in the ensuing years, provides a more fulsome and holistic interpretation of the art. Layering the perspectives of academic scholars, artists, and art critics with Dali's worldviews and life experiences adds to the meaning and interpretations of his creative works.

The surrealism movement in art and literature emerged and gained popularity in Europe between World War I and World War II. Surrealism interrupted rationalist ideologies from past times that had shaped political, social, and cultural discourses in Europe. Surrealism connected conscious to unconscious experiences so vividly that dreams and fantasies became rational and a part of the everyday world (Breton, 1924). Inspired by Freud's (1900) interpretation of dreams, the visual works of artists Picasso and Matisse, and broader investments in cubism and purism (Shanes, 2014, p. 21), Dali painted mythical creatures and fictional and real figures into dramatic landscapes. The surrealist iconographs in Dali's *The Persistence of Memory* (1931) invite viewers to venture into a dream world and interpret the meaning of melting clocks, crawling insects, and a human-like figure positioned in the foreground. Dali explained that soft, dripping Camembert cheese inspired him to hang clocks over tree branches and structures in the painting:

With the clocks appearing to be limp and merely draped over other objects, their softness demonstrates that the hard and sturdy concept of time essentially loses all meaning in the unconscious world.... Within this dreamlike scene, with the numbers and hands of the clock melting into itself, there is no doubt that the concept of time does not function in an ordinary and reliable way. (Meyer, 2023)

The striking images in *The Disintegration of the Persistence of Memory* (1954) reflect Dali's interest in nuclear physics and "modern anxieties of nuclear warfare that were prominent in society at that time" (Meyer, 2023). Melting clocks are visible in both paintings; however, the sharp contrast between the arid landscape in the original piece



and the underwater wasteland with disintegrating objects in the sequel exemplifies how lived experiences, cultural discourses, media, and world events changed Dali's interpretation over time.

A connection can be drawn between the concept of fusion as it is understood in Gadamer's (2004) "fusion of horizons" (p. 367) and Dali's focus on nuclear fusion that influenced *The Disintegration of the Persistence of Memory* (1954). Nuclear fusion is "a process by which two light atomic nuclei combine to form a single heavier one while releasing massive amounts of energy" (Barbarino, 2023). In reference to Gadamer's fusion of horizons, the energy and motivation to engage in critical dialogue can increase when individuals share their diverse perspectives and experiences. Similarly, energy and excitement increased as children and adults shared and wove together their ideas, histories, cultures, and lived experiences into "The Stories from the Garden."

After viewing Dali's works through a historical lens and reflecting on Gadamer's temporal distance and the movement of play in the context of interpretation, I came to recognize how these same concepts apply to interpreting "The Stories from the Garden." The documentation of the narrative is a continuous construction and compilation of the conversations, artifacts, projects, and activities of children and adults from past to present time. Pedagogical documentation viewed through cultural, historical, pedagogical, and philosophical lenses—considering the *parts* that form the *whole* narrative—can construct different interpretations of the children's play and teachers' practice. The interest and motivation to understand the children's experiences has continued over the past years through revisiting and critically rethinking the documentation. By sharing perspectives and memories of "The Stories from the Garden" in the next section, I will highlight the timelessness of pedagogical documentation and its continuing influence on teaching and learning.

## Documenting "The Stories from the Garden": Context and Story Beginnings

Academic literature published over a decade ago reveals a concern that children in North America were becoming increasingly disconnected from the natural world and experiencing "nature-deficit disorder" (Louv, 1990, 2008; Nabhan & Trimble, 1994; Pyle, 1993). In recognizing the public concerns and threats to children's physical and mental well-being, my intention during the 2008/09 school year was to connect children to nature by placing natural objects in the classroom for them to explore, plan frequent class visits to community parks, and set up a recycling program in the classroom. "The Stories from the Garden" provoked classroom projects that sparked ideas to add to the unfolding tale. The oscillating movement of play, as Gadamer (2004, p. 104) describes, was reflected in the children's to-and-fro passage between their imagined worlds and real-life experiences. The children developed a strong attachment to the imaginary story characters. They were especially fond of a mischievous squirrel named Russell who was skilled at getting into trouble. Queen Bee, the respected and feared leader in the garden, expected full obedience from her royal subjects and kept a close watch on Russell, who received her frequent reprimands for his unruly behaviour. P. W. Woodpecker, a know-it-all and bossy bird, used every opportunity to give advice, to the annoyance of his garden companions, who preferred the kind counsel of their trusted friends Mr. and Mrs. Chickadee. The Garden Fairy was loved by all the characters and brought magic into the garden stories.

On the first day of the school year, I read a media article to the children titled "Alberta Bees Dying at Record Rates" (Fong, 2008) and an introduction to "The Stories from the Garden" (textbox), which evoked the children's responses to the questions "Where are the bees?" and "Why are they disappearing?" Here I include an excerpt from the text, providing an example of what was shared with the children.

**Excerpt from “The Stories from the Garden” (September 8, 2008)**

This morning when I left my house to come to school, I walked quietly through my garden. Something suddenly startled me! Queen Bee flew down from her hive at the top of Blue Spruce and buzzed a message in my ear. “There’s trouble in the garden. In the summer my worker bees left the hive to gather pollen, but they didn’t come back. The bees are disappearing. Please help me!”

I was worried about Queen Bee, so I called my friend Mr. Chickadee and asked him if the rumour was true. Mr. Chickadee perched on a telephone wire. “What a terrible problem,” he said. “If the bees disappear, there will be no honey for your toast. The bees pollinate the flowers so that the garden is beautiful and new flowers grow. We must do something! But what will we do? Perhaps the children at school can help. Please ask them to help us think of some good ideas so that we can help Queen Bee. Where did the bees go?”

The children’s desire to find and return the lost bees was also the task of fictional characters in “The Stories from the Garden” and initiated long-term projects by the children and their imaginary friends. Like Dali’s fantastical works, the close juxtaposition of real and imaginary worlds made it challenging at times to distinguish between the physical and imaginal realms. The children’s play activities, mirrored in the fictional story, closed a gap between reality and fantasy. The children regularly discussed the documentation with me and decided how to continue their project work and write the next section of “The Stories from the Garden.” Audio and video recordings, written notes, artifacts/visual works, and photographs of the children’s conversations and activities were collected daily. The documentation fuelled dialogue and interpretations of the children’s experiences, which, in turn, inspired imaginative storytelling.

While recently reading “The People of the Plains Project” (documented in “The Stories from the Garden”), I gained new insights into how my teaching philosophy and practices have changed over time. Below I include an excerpt that helps to analyze my growth as a thinker and practitioner, one who is continuously remade by encounters with new materials and experiences.

**Excerpt from “The Stories from the Garden” (Documented March 30, 2009)****The People of the Plains Project**

A great horned owl delivered a message to P. W. and Russell while they explored the banks of the South Saskatchewan River. “My ancestors told stories about who-o-o-o made these rings. It was the Indigenous people who-o-o-o lived here many years ago. They lived in tipis and set up camps along the riverbank—the Cree, the Blackfoot, and the Assiniboine Tribes. Who-o-o-o are you?”

P. W. and Russell introduced themselves and thanked Great Horned Owl for answering their questions about the mysterious rings. After the owl flew away, Russell asked, “What is a tipi? What did the campsite look like when Indigenous people lived here?” P. W. suggested that the boys and girls might know, so he sent his questions to their teacher in an email message and asked her to pass them along.

The characters' discovery of tipi rings while exploring along the banks of the South Saskatchewan River launched the project and fuelled the children's curiosity about Indigenous histories and cultures. After viewing images of Blackfoot tipis and learning about their construction and designs, the children wanted to erect a full-size tipi. A parent who assisted us engaged the children in problem solving and critical thinking about materials, tools, erecting poles, and wrapping the frame with canvas. The children studied Indigenous designs of animals, sketched their own drawings onto a canvas cover, and, using traditional dyeing techniques of the plains Indigenous Peoples, painted their designs with tea and berry juice.

A decade after "The People of the Plains Project" ended, undergraduate postsecondary students and I collaborated with a Blackfoot Elder and members of Indigenous organizations on community-based projects. Through these experiences we came to understand the importance of following cultural protocols and asking members of the Indigenous communities for their guidance on cultural teachings and decolonizing curricula. Reading the documentation, I regret that I did not consult with Elders and knowledge holders prior to launching the project. Although it is not possible to undo the past, the documentation reflects how my teaching philosophy and practice has been reshaped by the Elders' teachings over time. The documentation of "The People of the Plains Project" continues to be used as a conversation catalyst in my postsecondary teacher education classes and prompts students to think critically about cultural awareness, cultural protocols, and decolonizing teaching practice and curricula. This is an example of the ethical necessity of returning to previously constructed documentation and process in an attempt to renew its potential.

In 2017, "The Stories from the Garden" was the impetus for fictional story writing in a graduate-level early childhood education course focused on play (Bjartveit & Panayotidis, 2017). After reading the documentation and children's narrative, the graduate students were invited to coauthor their own imaginary story over a six-week semester. The to-and-fro movement of play was reflected as the story was passed among the students one at a time. Each student wrote a section and passed it to a peer who continued the narrative. Although some students felt anxious about participating in the story-writing game, their motivation and interest increased as they wove their creative ideas and selves (cultures, histories, lived experiences) together with curriculum concepts into the story. The fusion of their multiple perspectives resulted in a playful and unique tale reflecting individual and collaborative ideas.

## Conclusions and Future Returns to History

As noted in 2008, "The Stories from the Garden" began with a media article about the disappearance of bees. The documentation and interpretations of the children's play experiences, projects, and stories reflect their motivation to collaborate and support environmental stewardship and sustainability. The children's determination to find workable solutions and strategies to return bees to the garden required time for problem solving, critical and imaginative thinking, dialogue, and negotiation. The playful to-and-fro movement and fusion of the children's ideas provoked interests, initiated projects, and supported play and fantastical storytelling that developed over nine months. However, the story and inquiry are not "over and done with" (Jardine, 2012); they continue to reshape interpretations and fuel dialogue. While writing this paper, I received an email from the mother of a child who had participated in coauthoring "The Stories from the Garden." Her daughter is currently studying architecture at a Canadian university, and as part of an academic term project, she created a 3-D printed cityscape influenced by her memories of Fairy City—a project documented in "The Stories." I remember the children's flurry of excitement and deep conversations as they gathered recycled materials and designed details of the city, including a Starbucks coffee shop and a wave pool—also visible in the photograph of the university cityscape project that the parent shared with me. It is significant that small details of the children's Fairy City project were remembered and reinvented 15 years later. The documentation of "The Stories from the Garden" has melted the clock, and for more than a decade

has generated new perspectives on inquiry-based learning, early literacy, play, culture, and pedagogical practice in postsecondary teacher education programs.

Dali's reinterpretation of his artwork *The Persistence of Memory* (1931), reflected in the sequel painting, *The Disintegration of the Persistence of Memory* (1954), is a visual example of how the fusion of lived experiences, cultural discourses, and world events reshapes ideas over time. The melting clocks in Dali's paintings, viewed as a metaphor for pedagogical documentation, point to the importance of "slow pedagogy" (Jardine, 2013) and increasing time for children to play and record their experiences with educators. Allowing project work to continue in synch with the ebb and flow of the children's interests and according to their time frame moves away from "clocking practices" (Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2012) and controlled scheduling. Timed efficiency and productivity are nascent concepts rooted in industrialization and have shaped dominant cultural discourses and ideals about child care and education in Western society during the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. Children's play time is too often forfeited to meet increasing curricular and program demands. The classroom is ruled by the clock, leaving little time for spontaneity and frivolity and robbing carefree moments when children can daydream and imagine (Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2012). However, children require time to situate their selves, their diverse interests, cultural beliefs, and ideas within the matrix of curricular requirements, assessments, and education standards.

Envisioning pedagogical documentation as a melting clock recognizes its timeless value in supporting teaching and learning in early childhood education settings. Documentation, in its many forms, can provide both surface-level reporting with brief summaries or deep and detailed interpretations with multiple perspectives on children's experiences. Rethinking and being intentional about the purpose, forms, and long-term uses of documentation can metaphorically melt the clock and provoke different ideas, questions, and interpretations of children's play over the course of time and in a distant future.



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