

## Documentation and Assessment: What Is the Relationship?

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The concept of documentation as a collection of documents used for demonstrating the truth of a fact or confirming a thesis is historically correlated to the birth and evolution of scientific thought and to a conceptualization of knowledge as an objective and demonstrable entity. It is thus tied to a certain historical period and to profound reasons of a cultural, social, and political nature that I will not examine here.

Rather, I find it interesting to underscore how the concept of documentation, which has only recently moved into the scholastic environment, and more specifically into the pedagogical-didactic sphere, has undergone substantial modifications that partially alter its definition. In this context, documentation is interpreted and used for its value as a tool for recalling; that is, as a possibility for reflection.

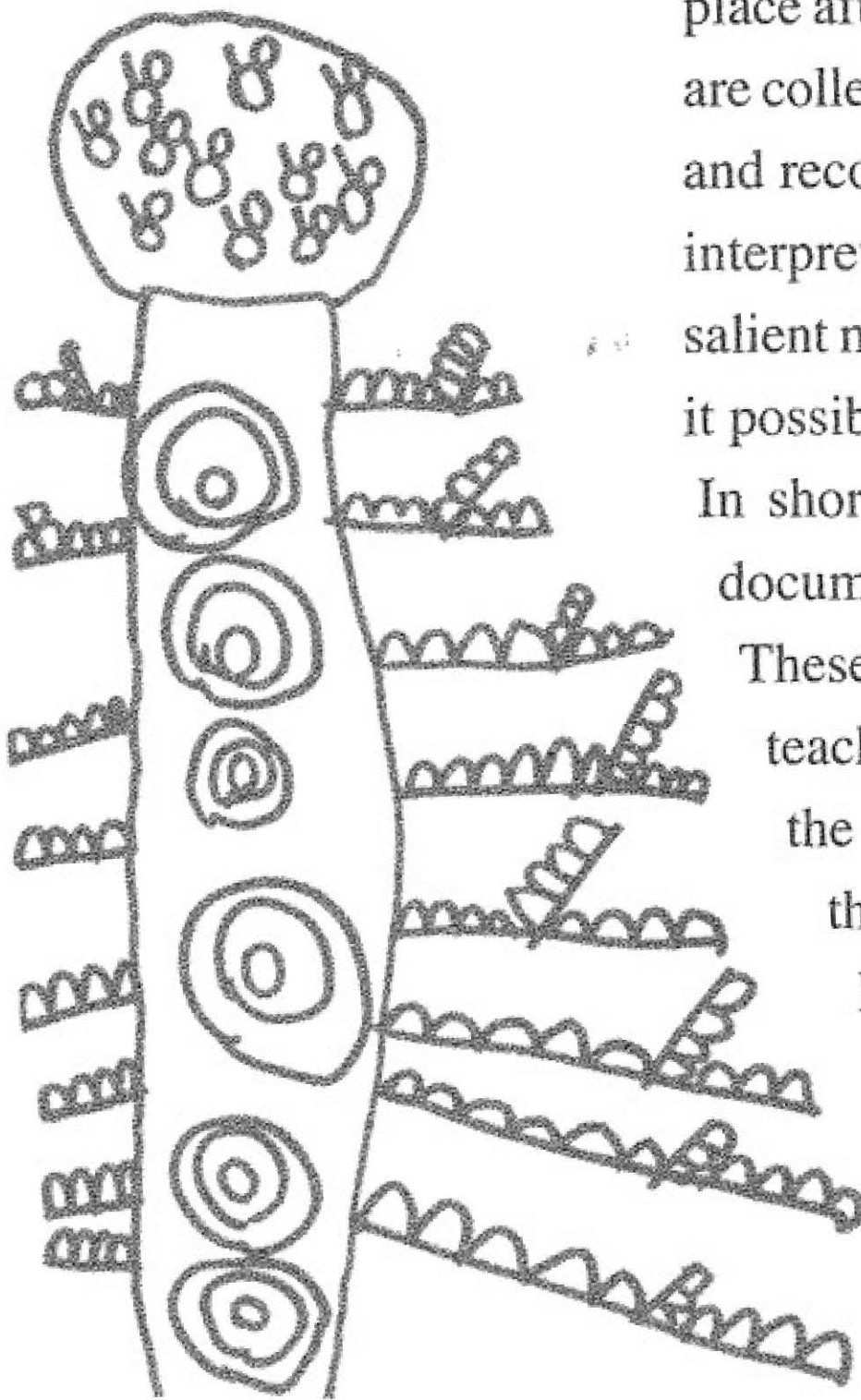
The didactic itinerary and the learning path that take place in a school assume full meaning for the subjects involved (teachers and students) to the extent that these processes can be suitably recalled, reexamined, analyzed, and reconstructed. The educational path becomes concretely visible through in-depth documentation of the data related to the activities, making use of verbal, graphic, and documentary instruments as well as the audiovisual technologies most commonly found in schools.

I want to underscore one aspect in particular regarding the way documentation is used; that is, the materials are collected *during* the experience, but they are read and interpreted at the *end*. The reading and recalling of memory therefore takes place after the fact. The documents (video and audio recordings, written notes) are collected, sometimes catalogued, and brought back for rereading, revisiting, and reconstruction of the experience. That which took place is reconstructed, interpreted, and reinterpreted by means of the documents which testify to the salient moments of a path that was predefined by the teacher: the path that made it possible for the objectives of the experience to be achieved.

In short, according to this conceptual approach and didactic practice, the documents (the documented traces) are used after and not during the process. These documents (and the reflections and interpretations they elicit from teachers and children) do not intervene during the learning path and within the learning process in a way that would give meaning and direction to the process.

Herein lies the substantial difference. In Reggio Emilia, where we have explored this methodology for many years, we place the emphasis on documentation as an integral part of the procedures aimed at fostering learning and for modifying the learning-teaching relationship.

To clarify further what I mean, a number of assumptions should



be stated that may initially seem far from the issue at hand but that—or so I hope—will aid in understanding that our choice and practice are neither random nor indifferent. In fact, I believe that documentation is a substantial part of the goal that has always characterized our experience: the search for meaning—to find the meaning of school, or rather, to construct the meaning of school, as a place that plays an active role in the children’s search for meaning and our own search for meaning (and shared meanings).

In this sense, among the first questions we should ask ourselves as teachers and educators are these: How can we help children find the meaning of what they do, what they encounter, what they experience? And how can we do this for ourselves? These are questions of meaning and the search for meaning (why? how? what?). I think these are the key questions that children constantly ask themselves, both at school and outside of school.

It is a very difficult search and a difficult task, especially for children who nowadays have so many spheres of reference in their daily lives: their family experience, television, the social places they frequent in addition to the family and school. It is a task that involves making connections, giving meaning to these events, to these fragments that are gathered over the course of many and varied experiences.

Children carry out this search with tenacity and effort, sometimes making mistakes, but they do the searching on their own. We cannot live without meaning; that would preclude any sense of identity, any hope, any future.

Children know this and initiate the search right from the beginning of their lives. They know it as young members of the human species, as individuals, as people. The search for the meaning of life and of the self in life is born with the child and is desired by the child. This is why we talk about a child who is competent and strong—a child who has the right to hope and the right to be valued, not a predefined child seen as fragile, needy, incapable. Ours is a different way of thinking and approaching the child, whom we view as an active subject with us to explore, to try day by day to understand something, to find a meaning, a piece of life.

For us, these meanings, these explanatory theories are extremely important and powerful in revealing the ways in which children think, question, and interpret reality and their own relationships with reality and with us.

Herein lies the genesis of the “pedagogy of relationships and listening,” one of the metaphors that distinguishes the pedagogy of Reggio Emilia.

For adults and children alike, understanding means being able to develop an interpretive “theory,” a narration that gives meaning to events and objects of



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the world. Our theories are provisional, offering a satisfactory explanation that can be continuously reworked; but they represent something more than simply an idea or a group of ideas. They must please us and convince us, be useful, and satisfy our intellectual, affective, and aesthetic needs (the aesthetics of knowledge). In representing the world, our theories represent us.

Moreover, if possible, our theories must please and be attractive to others. Our theories need to be listened to by others. Expressing our theories to others makes it possible to transform a world not intrinsically ours into something shared. Sharing theories is a response to uncertainty.

Here, then, is the reason why any theorization, from the simplest to the most refined, needs to be expressed, to be communicated, and thus to be listened to, in order to exist. It is here we recognize the values and foundations of the "pedagogy of listening."

### The Pedagogy of Listening

How can we define the term listening?

**Listening** as sensitivity to the patterns that connect, to that which connects us to others; abandoning ourselves to the conviction that our understanding and our own being are but small parts of a broader, integrated knowledge that holds the universe together.

**Listening**, then, as a metaphor for having the openness and sensitivity to listen and be listened to—listening not just with our ears, but with all our senses (sight, touch, smell, taste, orientation).

**Listening** to the hundred, the thousand languages, symbols, and codes we use to express ourselves and communicate, and with which life expresses itself and communicates to those who know how to listen.

**Listening** as time, the time of listening, a time that is outside chronological time—a time full of silences, of long pauses, an interior time. Interior listening, listening to ourselves, as a pause, a suspension, as an element that generates listening to others but, in turn, is generated by the listening that others give us. Behind the act of listening there is often a curiosity, a desire, a doubt, an interest; there is always an emotion.

**Listening** is emotion; it is generated by emotions and stimulates emotions. The emotions of others influence us by means of processes that are strong, direct, not mediated, and intrinsic to the interactions between communicating subjects.

**Listening** as welcoming and being open to differences, recognizing the value of the other's point of view and interpretation.

**Listening** as an active verb that involves interpretation, giving meaning to the

message and value to those who offer it.

**Listening** that does not produce answers but formulates questions; listening that is generated by doubt, by uncertainty, which is not insecurity but, on the contrary, the security that every truth is such only if we are aware of its limits and its possible "falsification."

**Listening** is not easy. It requires a deep awareness and at the same time a suspension of our judgments and above all our prejudices; it requires openness to change. It demands that we have clearly in mind the value of the unknown and that we are able to overcome the sense of emptiness and precariousness that we experience whenever our certainties are questioned.

**Listening** that takes the individual out of anonymity, that legitimates us, gives us visibility, enriching both those who listen and those who produce the message (and children cannot bear to be anonymous).

**Listening** as the premise for any learning relationship—learning that is determined by the "learning subject" and takes shape in his or her mind through action and reflection, that becomes knowledge and skill through representation and exchange.

**Listening**, therefore, as "a listening context," where one learns to listen and narrate, where individuals feel legitimated to represent their theories and offer their own interpretations of a particular question. In representing our theories, we "re-know" or "re-cognize" them, making it possible for our images and intuitions to take shape and evolve through action, emotion, expressiveness, and iconic and symbolic representations (the "hundred languages").

Understanding and awareness are generated through sharing and dialogue.

We represent the world in our minds, and this representation is the fruit of our sensitivity to the way in which the world is interpreted in the minds and in the representations of others. It is here that our sensitivity to listening is highlighted; starting from this sensitivity, we form and communicate our representations of the world based not only on our response to events (self-construction), but also on that which we learn about the world from our communicative exchange with others.

The ability to shift (from one kind of intelligence to another, from one language to another) is not only a potential within the mind of each individual but also involves the tendency to shift across (to interact among) many minds. We enrich our knowledge and our subjectivity thanks to this predisposition to welcoming the representations and theories of others—that is, listening to others and being open to them.

This capacity for listening and reciprocal expectations, which enables



communication and dialogue, is a quality of the mind and of the intelligence, particularly in the young child. It is a quality that demands to be understood and supported.

In the metaphorical sense, in fact, children are the greatest listeners of all to the reality that surrounds them. They possess the time of listening, which is not only time *for* listening but a time that is rarefied, curious, suspended, generous—a time full of waiting and expectation.

Children listen to life in all its shapes and colors, and they listen to others (adults and peers). They quickly perceive how the act of listening (observing, but also touching, smelling, tasting, searching) is essential for communication. Children are biologically predisposed to communicate, to exist in relation, to live in relation.

Listening, then, seems to be an innate predisposition that accompanies children from birth, allowing their process of acculturation to develop. The idea of an innate capacity for listening may seem paradoxical but, in effect, the process of acculturation must involve innate motivations and competencies. The newborn child comes into the world with a self that is joyous, expressive, and ready to experiment and explore, using objects and communicating with other people. Right from the beginning, children show a remarkable exuberance, creativity, and inventiveness toward their surroundings, as well as an autonomous and coherent consciousness.

Very early in life, children demonstrate that they have a voice, but above all that they know how to listen and want to be listened to. Sociality is not taught to children: they are social beings. Our task is to support them and live their sociality with them; that is the social quality that our culture has produced. Young children are strongly attracted by the ways, the languages (and thus the codes) that our culture has produced, as well as by other people (children and adults).

It is a difficult path that requires efforts, energies, hard work, and sometimes suffering, but it also offers wonder, amazement, joy, enthusiasm, and passion. It is a path that takes time, time that children have and adults often do not have or do not want to have. This is what a school should be: first and foremost, a context of multiple listening. This context of multiple listening, involving the teachers but also the group of children and each child, all of whom can listen to others and listen to themselves, overturns the teaching-learning relationship. This overturning shifts the focus to learning; that is, to children's self-learning and the learning achieved by the group of children and adults together.

As children represent their mental images to others, they represent them to

themselves, developing a more conscious vision (interior listening). Thus, moving from one language to another, from one field of experience to another, and reflecting on these shifts and those of others, children modify and enrich their theories and conceptual maps. But this is true if, and only if, children have the opportunity to make these shifts in a group context—that is, in and with others—and if they have the possibility to listen and be listened to, to express their differences and be receptive to the differences of others.

The task of those who educate is not only to allow the differences to be expressed but to make it possible for them to be negotiated and nurtured through exchange and comparison of ideas. We are talking about differences between individuals but also differences between languages (verbal, graphic, plastic, musical, gestural, etc.), because it is the shifting from one language to another, as well as their reciprocal interaction, that enables the creation and consolidation of concepts and conceptual maps.

Not only does the individual child learn how to learn, but the group becomes conscious of itself as a “teaching place,” where the many languages are enriched, multiplied, refined, and generated, but also collide, “contaminate,” and hybridize each other, and are renewed.

The concept of “scaffolding,” which has characterized the role of the teacher, also assumes new and different methods and meanings. It is the context, the web of reciprocal expectations (more than the teachers themselves) that sustains the individual and group processes. In addition to offering support and cultural mediation (subject matter, instruments, etc.), teachers who know how to observe, document, and interpret the processes that the children undergo autonomously will realize in this context their greatest potential to learn how to teach.

Documentation, therefore, 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. For us this means making visible, and thus possible, the relationships that are the building blocks of knowledge.

## **Documentation**

To ensure listening and being listened to is one of the primary tasks of documentation (producing traces/documents that testify to and make visible the ways of learning of the individuals and the group), as well as to ensure that the group and each individual child have the possibility to observe themselves

from an external point of view while they are learning (both during and after the process).

A broad range of documentation (videos, tape recordings, written notes, and so on) produced and used *in process* (that is, during the experience) offers the following advantages:

- It makes visible (though in a partial way, and thus “partisan”) the nature of the learning processes and strategies used by each child, and makes the subjective and intersubjective processes a common patrimony.
- It enables reading, revisiting, and assessment in time and in space, and these actions become an integral part of the knowledge-building process.

Documentation can modify learning from an epistemological point of view (enabling epistemological assessment and self-assessment, which become an integral part of the process in that they guide and orient the process itself).

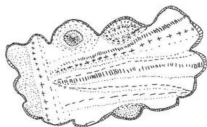
- It seems to be essential for metacognitive processes and for the understanding of children and adults.

In relation to recent studies that increasingly highlight the role of memory in the learning and identity-forming processes, we could hypothesize that significant reinforcement can be offered to the memory by the images (photographs and video), the voices, and the notations. Likewise the reflexive aspect (fostered by the “re-cognition” that takes place through use of the findings) and the capacity for concentration and interpretation could benefit from this memory-enhancing material. This is only a supposition, but in my view it deserves to be confronted and discussed.

In this movement, which I would define as a spiral as it weaves together the observation, the interpretation, and the documentation, we can clearly see how none of these actions can actually be separated or removed from the others. Any separation would be artificial and merely for the sake of argument. Rather, I would talk about dominance in the adult’s level of awareness and consequently of action. It is impossible, in fact, to document without observing and, obviously, interpreting.

By means of documenting, the thinking—or the interpretation—of the documenter thus becomes material, that is, tangible and capable of being interpreted. The notes, the recordings, the slides and photographs represent fragments of a memory that seems thereby to become “objective.” While each fragment is imbued with the subjectivity of the documenter, it is offered to the interpretive subjectivity of others in order to be known or reknown, created and recreated, also as a collective knowledge-building event.

The result is knowledge that is bountiful and enriched by the contributions of



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many. In these fragments (images, words, signs, and drawings) there is the past, that which took place, but there is also the future (or rather what else can happen if...).

We are looking at a new concept of didactics: participatory didactics, didactics as procedures and processes that can be communicated and shared. Visibility, legibility, and shareability become supporting nuclei because they are the basis of communicative effectiveness and didactic effectiveness. Didactics thus becomes more similar to the science of communication than to the traditional pedagogical disciplines.

At this point, a particular aspect emerges that structures the teaching-learning relationship and that in this context is made more visible, more explicit. At the moment of documentation (observation and interpretation), the element of assessment enters the picture immediately, that is, in the context and during the time in which the experience (activity) takes place. It is not sufficient to make an abstract prediction that establishes what is significant—the elements of value necessary for learning to be achieved—before the documentation is actually carried out. It is necessary to interact with the action itself, with that which is revealed, defined, and perceived as truly significant, as the experience unfolds.

Any gap between the prediction and the event (between the inherent meanings and those which the child/children attribute in their action) should be grasped readily and rapidly. The adult's schema of expectation is not prescriptive but orientative. Doubt and uncertainty permeate the context; they are part of the "documenter's context." Herein lies true didactic freedom, of the child as well as the teacher. It lies in this space between the predictable and the unexpected, where the communicative relationship between the children's and teachers' learning processes is constructed. It is in this space that the questions, the dialogue, the comparison of ideas with colleagues are situated, where the meeting on "what to do" takes place and the process of assessment (deciding what to "give value to") is carried out.

The issue, then, is to consider the child as a context for himself or herself and for the others, and to consider the learning process as a process of construction of interactions between the "subject being educated" and the "objects of education" (seen as including knowledge as well as social-affective and axiological models of behavior).

This means that the object of education is seen not as an object but as a "relational place." With this term I underscore the way in which the teacher chooses and proposes the knowledge-building approach (assuming all due



responsibility). It is a construction of relationships that are born of a reciprocal curiosity between the subject and the object. This curiosity is sparked by a question that stimulates the subject and the object to "encounter each other," showing what the child knows (understood as theories and desires for knowledge) and the knowledge of the object in terms of its cultural identity. This identity is not limited to the elements that are immediately perceivable, but is also directed toward the cultural elaborations that have been produced around it, and above all those that *can* be produced in this new knowledge-seeking relationship. This re-knowing of the object is not only "historical," that is, reproducing what is culturally known about the object (for example, what we know about a tree in its disciplinary interpretations: biology, architecture, poetry, and so on). It is also a living organism because it comes to life in the vitality, freshness, and unpredictableness of this encounter, where the children can give new identity to the object, creating a relationship for the object and for themselves that is also metaphorical and poetic.

**Documentation is this process, which is dialectic, based on affective bonds and also poetic; it not only accompanies the knowledge-building process but in a certain sense impregnates it.**

Documentation not only lends itself to interpretation but is itself interpretation. It is a narrative form, both intrapersonal and interpersonal communication, because it offers those who document and those who read the documentation an opportunity for reflection and learning. The reader can be a colleague, a group of colleagues, a child, children, parents, anyone who has participated or wants to participate in this process. The documentation material is open, accessible, usable, and therefore readable. In reality this is not always the case, and above all the process is neither automatic nor easy.

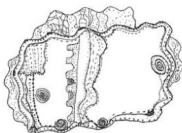
Effective documentation requires extensive experience in documentary reading and writing.

### **Legibility**

Documentation is thus a narrative form. Its force of attraction lies in the wealth of questions, doubts, and reflections that underlie the collection of data and with which it is offered to others—colleagues and children.

These "writings," where different languages are interwoven (graphic, visual, iconic), need to have their own code, their own convention within the group that constructs and uses them—this in order to guarantee, even though partially, the effectiveness of communication.

That is, these writings must be legible, effectively communicative for those



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who were not present in the context, but should also include the “emergent elements” perceived by the documenter. They are three-dimensional writings, not aimed at giving the event objectivity but at expressing the meaning-making effort; that is, to give meaning, to render the significance that each author attributes to the documentation and the questions and problems he or she perceives within a certain event. These writings are not detached from the personal biographical characteristics of the author, and we are thus aware of their bias, but this is considered an element of quality.

The documenter looks at the events that have taken place with a personal view aimed at a deep understanding of them and, at the same time, seeks communicative clarity. This is possible (though it could seem paradoxical) by bringing into the documentation the sense of incompleteness and expectation that can arise when you try to offer others not what you know, but the boundaries of your knowledge; that is, your limits, which derive from the fact that the “object” being narrated is a process and a path of research.

### **Assessment: A Perspective that Gives Value**

What we offer to the children’s processes and procedures, and to those which the children and adults together put into action, is a perspective that gives value. Valuing means giving value to this context and implies that certain elements are assumed as values.

Here, I think, is the genesis of assessment, because it allows one to make explicit, visible, and shareable the elements of value (indicators) applied by the documenter in producing the documentation. Assessment is an intrinsic part of documentation and therefore of the entire approach of what we call *progettazione* (*progettazione* is defined on page 17). In fact, this approach becomes something more than a prescribed and predefined procedure; it is a procedure that is nurtured by the elements of value that emerge from the process itself.

This makes the documentation particularly valuable to the children themselves, as they can encounter what they have done in the form of a narration, seeing the meaning that the teacher has drawn from their work. In the eyes of the children, this can demonstrate that what they do has value, has meaning. So they discover that they “exist” and can emerge from anonymity and invisibility, seeing that what they say and do is important, is listened to, and is appreciated: it is a value.

It is like having an interface with yourself and with whoever enters into this sort of hypertext. Here the text acts as vector, support, and pretext of the children’s personal mental space.

## The Teacher's Competency

In this context, it is obvious that the role and competency of the teacher are qualified in a different way from how these elements are defined in an educational environment in which the teacher's job is simply to transmit disciplinary knowledge in the traditional way.

The task is not to find (and teach) a specific series of rules, or to present certain propositions organized into formulas that can be easily learned by others, or to teach a method that can be replicated without modifications.

The teacher's competency is defined in terms more of understandings than of pure knowledge. It indicates a familiarity with critical facts, so as to allow those who possess this familiarity to say what is important and to hypothesize what is suitable for each situation—that is, what is helpful for the learner in a particular situation.

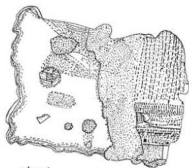
So what is the secret? There is no secret, no key, if not that of constantly examining our understandings, knowledge, and intuitions, and sharing and comparing them with those of our colleagues. It is not a transferable "science," but rather an understanding, a sensitivity to knowledge. The action and the results of the action, in a situation where only the surface is visible, will be successful in part thanks to the success of the actors—children and teachers—all of whom are responsible, though at different levels, for the learning processes.

Proceeding by trial and error does not debase the didactic paths; indeed, it enriches them on the process level (that is, the process and our awareness of it), as well as on the ethical level.

There is also an element of improvisation, a sort of "playing by ear," an ability to take stock of a situation, to know when to move and when to stay still, that no formula, no general recipe, can replace.

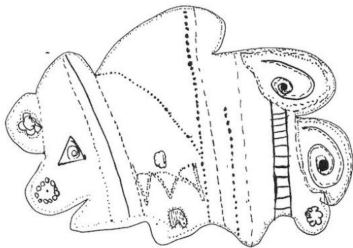
Certainly there are also risks, quite a few in fact: vagueness and superficiality can lead to mistaking a series of images or written notes for documentation which, without the awareness of what one is observing, only creates disorientation and a loss of meaning.

The issue that emerges clearly at this point is the education of the teachers. The teacher's general education must be broad-based and range over many areas of knowledge, not just psychology and pedagogy. A cultured teacher not only has a multidisciplinary background, but possesses the culture of research, of curiosity, of working in a group: the culture of project-based thinking. Above all, we need teachers who feel that they truly belong to and participate in this process, as teachers but most of all as people.



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Loris Malaguzzi, architect of the pedagogical and philosophical thinking that permeates the Reggio experience, once said that we need a teacher who is sometimes the director, sometimes the set designer, sometimes the curtain and the backdrop, and sometimes the prompter. A teacher who is both sweet and stern, who is the electrician, who dispenses the paints, and who is even the audience—the audience who watches, sometimes claps, sometimes remains silent, full of emotion, who sometimes judges with skepticism, and at other times applauds with enthusiasm.



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