

Pedagogical Narration: What's It All About?

An Introduction to the Process of Using Pedagogical Narration in Practice

BY KIM ATKINSON

What is pedagogical narration? Why is it important? How do you use it? How do you fit it into an already busy day? Kim Atkinson addresses these questions with the hope that practitioners will come to a better understanding of pedagogical narration and how to incorporate it into practice.

In my work with educators, both those new in the field and those with years of experience, there is great interest in pedagogical narration* and what it can contribute to enriching practice with children, colleagues, and parents. The philosophy of Reggio Emilia has become influential and has inspired educators to look at documentation as a valuable tool for making learning visible. But there is uncertainty about what to document, how to go about it, and what its purpose is. The barriers of too little time, limited resources, technical challenges, and the general busyness of a practitioner's day can be daunting. Add to this an unclear understanding of what can be gained from pedagogical narrations, and it seems just one more thing added to an already long list of tasks in a day.

In this article I bring my own experience of engaging with pedagogical narrations in my preschool program over a period of five years, beginning with small photos pasted on construction paper and progress-

ing to embedding narrations into the culture of the preschool. I also bring my experience of delivering seminars to groups of educators with my colleague Danielle Davis through the Images of Learning Project in which we meet with hundreds of educators to share our experiences. And I bring experience from my role as a pedagogical facilitator, where I work alongside educators in their centres to support them in beginning to use pedagogical narrations. Throughout these experiences I have encountered uncertainties and struggles, as well as the "Aha! moments" of learning inherent in engaging with pedagogical narrations.

At its simplest, pedagogical narration is recording through photos, video, or transcription the ordinary moments of children's play. It is a tool that allows us to reflect on the theories and strategies that children develop, the way social relationships are explored, and the constant process of learning, of "making meaning" that children undertake. In

examining these ordinary moments we can see children as competent and complex, as explorers of their world. If we can observe and reflect on children's thinking, then we can create meaningful opportunities and experiences to support and expand that thinking.

While my intention in this article is to address questions surrounding pedagogical narration, its implementation cannot be undertaken in isolation. Rather it is just one part of a shift in thinking about the image of the child, the role of the educator, and how children construct knowledge.

Critical reflection is a crucial step in this shift. The BC Early Learning Framework states: "Critical reflection is the art of thinking deeply about our own fundamental beliefs, with the goal of understanding the various cultural and social forces and factors that shape our own sense of self – and then taking our thinking one step further." (Ministry of Education 2008, p. 11)

Thinking deeply requires us to consider the image of the child we hold, and our ideas about how children learn. Currently developmental theories of growth and learning dominate our thinking. Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) is embedded in our thinking and in our early childhood curricu-

* Note: Pedagogical narration is the term for this process adopted in British Columbia in the Early Learning Framework. Reggio Emilia uses the term documentation and New Zealand refers to it as Learning Stories.

lum. As practitioners we plan our programs accordingly, introducing themes, activities, and materials that correspond with our understanding of what is best for children at each stage of their growth and development. The underlying assumption is that we know what children need to learn, when they need to learn, and how they need to learn it.

However, scholars and practitioners have recognized that developmental theories are simply one lens through which to view children and by embracing other postmodern perspectives we can “challenge common knowledge and explore new viewpoints and actions. (Government of British Columbia 2008, p. 11)

Through careful and intentional observation and critical reflection educators can begin to see children differently, as capable learners who are continually constructing knowledge and theories. Rather than deciding what children “need” to know, we can begin to see what children already know. If we begin to view children as competent and capable, as continually researching the world and how it works, then new ways of being with children emerge, new ways of thinking and doing in our practice.

If we reframe how we see children, we then need to reframe our role; instead of transmitters of knowledge, we become co-constructors of knowledge. If we observe children carefully and intentionally, we can begin to ask different kinds of questions about what we see. For example, if we are observing a child in a sandbox we might ask: What does the child already know about sand? What are they trying to discover? What theories are they developing? What experimentation

is going on with the sand, with the shovel and with the bucket? What relationships are being formed or negotiated?

Creating a pedagogical narration is a process to capture this ordinary moment in a sandbox and make it visible. Through the use of a camera, a video camera, or note taking we can record an ordinary moment, begin to reflect on it, interpret it, and consider what learning might be taking place. By recording and making visible an ordinary moment, we are listening intently to what children are saying not only with words, but also what they are saying with their bodies, facial expressions, and gestures. From there, we can begin to invite questions about what children might be thinking.

Once that moment is recorded we can then reflect on it, adding our own thoughts and interpretation, thinking about questions such as how are the children using their senses? How are they exploring power? What theories are they developing? How are they testing those theories? What meaning did this experience have for the child? How is the child thinking through the medium of sand?

But pedagogical narration is not a solitary endeavour, nor is its aim simply to show a progression in a child’s learning. Putting photos and children’s words on a bulletin board is not a pedagogical narration. Pedagogical narrations must be shared, discussed, reflected upon with colleagues, with children and/or parents. The purpose of narrations must always be to open new perspectives, to explore different interpretations and ways of seeing. For example, the child playing in

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a corner of the sandbox might be viewed by one person as lonely, using the sand toys in close proximity to another child as a means of entering into play. However another person may disagree, observing how two children make eye contact and mimic each other’s movement of shovelling sand into the buckets. And a parent might add that their child rarely sits in a sandbox at all, adding yet another layer of questions.

Now this ordinary moment has become richer, and our thinking has expanded. New questions have emerged, our assumptions have been challenged. Collaborating with others deepens our understanding and reduces the objectivity of a single viewpoint. It facilitates the development of new ideas for future planning, inspiring new provocations to extend the construction of knowledge.

For if we are no longer transmitters of knowledge but co-constructors of knowledge, then we have a

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responsibility to use the thinking that emerges from the narration to provoke further thinking. The questions and theories that have emerged can now be incorporated into the narration, and we can plan with these new questions in mind. We might now be more attentive to the social relationships of the child in the sandbox: are non-verbal connections being made with other children? Does the child return to the sandbox and if so what pulls him there—the sand itself or the possibility of a social connection? What can we do to expand opportunities for developing relationships? If it is sand the child is exploring, how can we expand on that experience?

In this way pedagogical narrations begin to guide our curriculum. By paying close attention, by listening with intent, we begin to see what interests children have, and what questions they are asking. We value children's thinking, and we bring our own questions, our own wonderings. As we begin to think and learn alongside children, in a “pedagogy of listening,” our relationship with children changes, it becomes more reciprocal. We listen without

judgment or preconceived plans, open to other's ideas, perceptions, and possibilities.

By critically reflecting on our observations, by listening to children, to colleagues, and to parents, we can open ourselves to new planning, perhaps rethinking schedules, rules, and routines. We can take risks to try a new idea, expand on a child's question, and “think differently about what might be possible.” (Government of British Columbia 2008, p. 22).

Getting Started with Pedagogical Narrations

But how does an educator have time to sit and take photos and record dialogue among children? How does this “listening” fit into an already busy day?

There is no one-size-fits-all answer to this question, nor is there a direct path that offers a step-by-step progression of action. It is an individual process with stops and starts, moments of clarity, and moments of frustration.

Here are some ideas to consider in getting started:

Look at the environment. Simplifying your environment can simplify your day. Too many toys, too much stuff can create a more chaotic atmosphere and is much more work to tidy up. Reducing clutter and rethinking how and where materials are stored can help reduce the stress of transitions.

Look at the schedule. Too many transitions in a day can result in feeling like you are constantly hurrying. A schedule that allows for long uninterrupted periods of play invites children to become more deeply involved in their play and

their engagement with materials. And it gives educators time to slow down and observe.

Reflect on how you spend your time. As educators we often get caught up in monitoring behaviour, reminding children about rules, and giving instructions. Stepping away from this role, rethinking the rules, and reflecting on why those rules are in place can move us away from “policing.” By recognizing children as capable and giving voice to their ideas and opinions about rules, the educator's role becomes more about facilitation and less about enforcement. This shift can dramatically change our relationship with children and give educators more time to engage and observe.

Be ready, be flexible. Getting into the habit of doing pedagogical narrations takes time. Having the camera accessible (with a fully charged battery!), having paper and pencil at hand, or the video camera ready, involves a new mindset. Noticing ordinary moments, choosing what to observe, and being there with the right equipment takes practice.

Experiment. Test out a few ways of recording, try different technologies, learn what works for you. Experiment with photography; take close-ups of hands, faces, and materials. Try different viewpoints; use photos to tell a story. Take more photos than you think you need—you may be surprised at what you see.

Talk less. As ECEs we are trained to ask open-ended questions, and begin and extend conversations. Try observing silently. Sit in a corner and simply watch and listen. Children's talk in play is different than their talk in conversation with an adult.

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Be patient with yourself. Engaging with pedagogical narrations takes time. It is an ongoing process of recording, questioning, reflecting, planning, and implementing, and then beginning the process again. The importance of a narration is not the finished piece; in fact a piece should never be considered complete. The value of pedagogical narration is the ongoing dialogue, the critical reflection, the co-construction of theories, and the professional growth. Don't be frustrated if you feel you aren't getting it right, there is no "right" and there is no end to the process of learning.

Start from where you are. Do what you can now and take small steps. Take some photos and go from there.

Involve colleagues. Engaging with colleagues is critical. Engaging in a dialogue about reflective practice, about the process of creating pedagogical narrations, and about challenging our assumptions strengthens and enhances our thinking. It can lead to disagreement, but also to strong collegial relationships. Colleagues can be within or separate from your workplace.

What Should Pedagogical Narrations Look Like?

There are as many kinds of pedagogical narrations as there are practitioners. There is no "right" way to do a narration; however, there are elements that distinguish a pedagogical narration from a display.

Pedagogical narrations invite diverse perspectives by children, educators, parents, and community members. The intention is to open different meanings, not to present a single viewpoint. In other words, there is no certainty or unified understanding. Instead, there is an opening for dialogue.

The purpose of pedagogical narration is to make learning visible, not to record an event or series of events. While the display should be pleasant to view, it should also invite inquiry. This is an important distinction and impacts what a narration looks like. Traditional bulletin board displays that use borders and images purchased from catalogues invite the viewer to respond differently than a bulletin board of photographs and/or text on a plain black background. In the first example, the message may be that the display can be viewed and understood quickly even from a distance. In the second example the message may be that the viewer needs to come close and spend time reading and reflecting. This is not to say that narrations should always be on black backgrounds or that borders are bad, but to make the point that the design of the narration influences how it is interpreted.

Here are some points to consider as you create a pedagogical narration:

- Think about design. What do you want the viewer to see? How can you best tell the story? Many overlapping images, printed bor-

ders, and multiple colours likely confuse the message.

- Ask yourself, What is the learning I want to make visible? Focus on some aspect of learning, not just "what we did." This may be the child's learning, or it may be your own learning.
- Think about moving away from and image of the child as cute and moving towards competent. Is this shift evident in your presentation of a narration?
- A pedagogical narration asks questions and is reflective (e.g. how does this moment challenge preconceived assumptions? How does my image of the child impact how I view this moment? What theories is the child/children building?)
- A narration may focus on processes rather than outcomes, it may highlight thinking or relationships rather than a project.
- As the creator of the narration, your voice is important. How did you feel, were you surprised or startled by something? Did this moment make you feel uncomfortable or did it give you pleasure?
- What happens next? Where are the next steps you might take to expand on this moment? Can you document more of this process? How? Would a different medium such as video or tape recording be beneficial?

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As soon as one no longer thinks things as one formerly thought them, transformation becomes very urgent, very difficult, and quite possible.

—Foucault, 1988

I want to emphasize that this is by no means a comprehensive or complete description and I urge readers to seek out further readings. What I have presented here only scratches the surface of the complexity, the depth, and the possibilities that engaging with pedagogical narration can evoke.

I also feel compelled to add a caution. As the ideas from Reggio Emilia become more widely known there is a danger of simplifying pedagogical narrations and adding them to the list of what constitutes “best practice.” By creating documentation and posting it up, educators may feel they are now “doing the right thing.” But simply posting photos without going more deeply into rethinking practice and engaging in critical reflection entirely misses the point. Pedagogical narration is a process that should continue to engage educators to rethink and challenge assumptions, to generate dialogue, and be a tool for activism.

Engaging with pedagogical narrations can lead into unexpected terrain. Long-held beliefs come into question, and familiar truths we have held dear all our lives are challenged. New theoretical lenses unsettle our thoughts; the way we

practice day by day is challenged. We feel we are standing on a precipice of the unknown, uncertainty is our constant companion. And yet, taking the leap and embracing the uncertainty leads to a new relationship with our work, with children, with parents, and with colleagues. It revitalizes practice as we become researchers, continually looking to grow our understanding of children’s learning and how we can expand their and our own thinking. We become more engaged as we redefine our role as educators, redefine what knowledge is, and what a school is. It is nothing less than transformational.

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