reflections

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CAPTURING THE STORY – AN EXPLORATION OF RESPECTFUL DOCUMENTATION

By Jessica Horne-Kennedy

Last year, as a consultant for the Education Hub at Gowrie NSW, Jessica Horne-Kennedy facilitated the beginnings of a research project with Educators from Gowrie NSW Early Education and Care Services. This practice-based project asked the question "How can we 'capture the story' of each child in our care in a way that reflects the caring relationships we have?"

In a paper presented at the Infants and Toddlers: Practice, Pedagogy & Research Conference 2017, presented by Gowrie New South Wales and Macquarie University, Jessica reflected on her journey towards understanding and of capturing the stories of children in both professional and personal settings.

Authentically hearing each child's story begins through connection and this can be described as the 'caring space' that is created between child and caregiver (Paxton, 2014). The first stages of the enquiry process began with conversations about our connections with the children we work with or have worked with in the past. We traced memories and formed understandings about why these memories were significant to our connections with children each day.

Before we began to authentically understand the narrative of each child in our care – we needed to explore and understand our own narrative. Narrative, as a tool, allows us to reflect on our own sense of being as an educator. It gives us space to listen to both our own experiences as well as the experiences of others (Silva, 2017). It helps us to understand what is behind 'our ways' of being, of interacting and of connecting. Estefan, Caine and Clandinin (2016) share that reflection informed by narrative shows how people make sense of

their worlds and that thinking 'with' stories embeds story and the reader in a reciprocal relationship where the listener is invited to engage and consider one's experience from a new perspective.

As the participant researcher in this project, I engaged in a way that O'Hara-Gregan (2015) describes as "being in the picture with the participants". This means that when the participants shared their memories about a pivotal moment of connection with an infant or toddler, I was reminded of an important memory from my experiences as an early childhood teacher. To explore this notion of thinking 'with' another and to consider your experience as an educator from a new perspective, let me tell you a story.

Sadie and I – A moment of connection

My story is about an experience I had when I was an arts student in Dunedin, New Zealand. This experience happened long before I had even thought of studying early childhood education or being a teacher. This is a story about a moment of connection that I had with my niece Sadie who was at the time, only about two months old.

It was my first experience of caring for Sadie on my own and I felt nervous to say the least. I had many prior experiences of looking after young children and I loved being around children of all ages, but holding the responsibility for looking after a tiny infant felt incredibly scary to me.

"Just put her in the front pack and go for a walk." said my sister. "She loves that, and she'll fall asleep."

My sister helped me to put the front pack on, and then carefully positioned Sadie against my body. I adjusted the pack for comfort and set out on our walk. My sister lived in a rural village in a coastal area near Dunedin. The village is near Purakanui Beach - a beautiful place surrounded by nature. After walking for about ten minutes in the crisp autumn air, Sadie was fast asleep. I looked down at her little face – so calm and peaceful – and felt her gentle and quiet breath. I continued to walk but I moved slowly and carefully, very aware that I didn't want her to wake up. This gesture of slowing down and being slow had such a significant impact on me (and it is something that I continue to carry into my work as an educator of young children). I remember being so conscious of how I moved that when she woke I almost couldn't breathe!

I thought "What will happen? Will she cry? Will I be able to settle her?" But I continued to move, and I talked. I told Sadie about what I could see. I described the colour of the water, the sand and the trees. I talked to Sadie about the sound of the wind and how cool it felt on my face. It sounds sentimental, and perhaps it is, but the connection I experienced with my niece that day was such a formative experience for me.

By sharing this experience, I wonder if your thoughts have drifted to your first or formative experience of being with an infant or toddler? Perhaps this experience, like mine, happened long before you worked professionally as an educator. Maybe your thoughts took you to a recent experience of connection with a child you currently work with. Either way, you just experienced the significance of using storytelling as a powerful tool for reflection. Storytelling can enable educators to trace an internal dialogue about their sense of 'being' and their identity of 'self' as teacher (Lavinia, Fleet & Niland, 2017). Making sense of our role and our impact 'in the picture' of the child's unfolding story is essential to writing purposeful and authentic documentation about children's learning.

Considering respectful practice through a frame of narrative enquiry

Drawing from a narrative framework is essential when considering the notion of respectful practice with infants and toddlers, because narrative methodology is concerned with research that happens 'with' a person rather than something that happens 'to' or about a person. When we engage in a research process 'with' the person who is participating, we are alongside this person and allowing them to tell their story (Clandinin, 2012). Being with this person means that we are being present and 'tuning in' through responsive listening. This communicates a message of acknowledgment which values the possibilities found in shared dialogue. Shared dialogue was an important entry point for this research project. Through conversations with educators, who are working with infants and toddlers in Gowrie NSW Early Education and Care Centres, we began to see how the unique qualities of the educator's personal narrative intertwine with their work with young children.

> *"Conversations are not what we think they are. We've grown up thinking they are about talking, sharing information, telling people what to do, or telling others what's on our minds. We are now learning, through neurological and cognitive research, that a 'conversation' goes deeper and is more robust than simple information. Conversations are dynamic, interactive, and inclusive. They evolve and impact the way we connect, engage, interact, and influence others, enabling us to shape reality, mind-sets, events, and outcomes in a collaborative way"*

(Glasser, 2013).

Glasser's words describe how conversation became the vehicle in our research to highlight specific themes and shared values about working with infants and toddlers. Open-ended questions were used as conversation starters. One question asked educators about their first

experience of connection with a young child. Through memory, the educators were able to take a step out of their immediate daily experiences to reflect on the 'whys' of their practice. For example, one educator recounted her time as a child attending an early childhood setting and described a moment of connection with her younger peers.

"I remember I was 4 or 5 years old and I always visited the babies room…I remember I was always holding the little children's hands and we were walking together."

The educator's memory of this event highlighted how, from an early age, 'being with' another person was important to her identity. Other conversations focused on the educator's reasons for deciding upon this profession. The educators spoke about valuing: feelings of 'togetherness', trust and connection with young children as well as the privilege of watching children grow. The responses pointed to connections based on a genuine interest, warmth and love of being with young children. The educator's voices, ideas and feelings about their relationships with the children became the 'seeds' of our stories as Gowrie NSW educators. 'Seed words' such as *peaceful, calming, patient, caring, loving, respectful, responsive, gentle, home like, free, slow,* and *soft* emerged, describing both characteristics the educators embodied and the atmosphere of the care environment. By giving thought to words like these and considering how our gestures can communicate messages to the child, such as 'I'm here', Toni Christie's research about presence and respect became an important signpost for reflection.

> *"Only when we observe peacefully can we truly know a child and begin to understand his body language, cues, gestures and uniqueness. Slow down and take time to simply observe peacefully as a child explores independently as opposed to trying to engage the infant in activity or always talking to the child. Peaceful observation will lead to a deep level of understanding and empathy.*
>
> *Respect is the key to relationships. When you show consideration for another person you communicate to them that they are valued. Feeling valued contributes to a sense of trust and self-esteem and is reflected in the individual's ability to form and maintain relationships with others"*

(Christie, 2010).

Christie's words echo the thoughts and ideas shared during the conversation stage of this project, which valued close, responsive and respectful bonds with the children.

New questions and new Insights

"When a person chooses to view herself or himself, in the midst of things, as a beginner or learner or explorer, and has the imagination to envisage new things emerging, more and more begins to seem possible"

(Green, 1995 in Guyotte, 2015, p. 22).

This enquiry is ongoing, and the next phase will seek further insight into our initial question:

How can we 'capture the story' of each child in our care in a way that reflects the caring relationships we have?

An additional question is also important to the story of this research. It asks:

How can our practices of written and documented observation respectfully reflect these relationships?

Essentially the ways we observe children and then write or record what we see, hear and feel about each moment will have our values at the core. It is important that this story is not rushed – time is needed to build the foundation of a respectful documentation practice. This allows for authenticity in the methods used to capture each child's story. The processes used within the early stages of this enquiry have shown how our narratives are like threads in a woven cloth – unravelling, interconnecting and merging. A key learning gained from gathering our shared narratives, is that we acknowledge in years to come the child may have a memory of their moment of connection with each of us – their educator. Therefore, it is essential we are aware and present in each moment because this moment is the key to unlocking the potential found within our partnerships.

As educators, recollecting our personal narratives and earliest memories of being with young children allows us to trace a pathway from where we have come from, and where we are moving towards (Horne-Kennedy, 2015). This pathway features unique markers on the way and these markers signify our beliefs about working with infants and toddlers. By placing the narratives of personal and professional experience at the heart of practice, we reach new understandings about each child's sense of being and the story that articulates this.

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