

# WHAT'S PEDAGOGY ANYWAY?

Using pedagogical  
documentation to engage  
with the Early Years Learning  
Framework

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# MEET THE AUTHORS



## Dr Alma Fleet

As an Associate Professor at Macquarie University, Alma Fleet has had an opportunity to be engaged with a wide range of teaching, researching and publishing opportunities. She enjoys working both with pre-service teachers and those currently working across the early childhood sector. In addition to her involvement in practitioner enquiry and educational change initiatives, she has a particular interest in her work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander colleagues.



## Toby Honig

Toby is an early childhood teacher working in a long day setting in Sydney. He also curates and contributed to the pedagogical documentation exhibition panels that were produced by Macquarie University (Exhibit-on). Toby has been working in early childhood for over 10 years and completed his Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood) at Macquarie University. He has presented at early childhood conferences across Australia and overseas. Toby has a particular interest in how pedagogical documentation can transcend age groups and cultural differences. He enjoys the opportunity to be able to critically reflect on practice, using documentation as a way to communicate easily with families and colleagues the thinking behind practice.



## Janet Robertson

Janet is the Outdoor Teacher at Mia Mia, Institute of Early Childhood, Macquarie University. Her professional interests include the Educational Project of Reggio Emilia, outdoor education and thinking for young children, pedagogical documentation and listening (in the pedagogical sense). Having worked in a range of roles in the Sydney area, and presented her ideas both regionally and internationally, she enjoys opportunities for professional exchange.



## Anthony Semann

Anthony is a Director at Semann & Slattery ([www.semannslattery.com](http://www.semannslattery.com)), a research firm based in Sydney and Melbourne. Anthony has worked as an educator, innovator and advocate with a broad range of government and private organisations. His skills and expertise have seen him work across Australia and overseas. Anthony is in demand as a presenter, facilitator and public speaker. Anthony has qualifications in Education, a Masters degree in Sociology and is currently completing a PhD with a research focus on leadership and courage.



## Wendy Shepherd

Wendy has been the Director of Mia Mia for the past seventeen years and has worked with the staff during this time in the exploration of the process of documentation. Wendy has an understanding that documentation is and should be unique and contextual to each setting and that engaging in the process is a professional development program in itself as it is such an excellent reflective task and a vehicle for connecting with others. Wendy welcomes the rigour that is required in researching, reflecting and collaborating as it reveals the complexity that is early childhood pedagogy.

# INTRODUCTION

The *Early Years Learning Framework* provides a timely opportunity for the early education sector to critically reflect on the practice of education and the diverse ways in which curriculum is developed and teaching is delivered across the varied locations where programs are offered to children. Alongside (and in-fact preceding) the introduction of the *Early Years Learning Framework* has been much theorising, thought and attention given to the role of pedagogical documentation. Pedagogical documentation has for many years served as a source of inspiration, reflection, activism and transparency for all involved in the education of children. Thus, whilst the *Early Years Learning Framework* offers new and revised ways of thinking about early years education, it is inevitable that it will also raise questions for educators regarding the documentation they keep and the purposes such documents serve.

We do suggest that educators proceed with caution. Any new ideas entering the space of education may run the risk of homogenizing practice, therefore leading to a formulaic approach to teaching and quite possibly also to the ways in which documenting children's learning takes shape.

This book attempts to challenge us all to refrain from creating a one-size fits all approach when it comes to documenting teaching and learning. It also suggests that we must think and act critically when exploring the role of pedagogical documentation in early years education. The act of thinking critically will enable educators to create contextually relevant curriculum and documentation that works not only for the educators, but also for the community at large.

Furthermore, this book challenges educators to resist the notion of reducing children's learning and consequently the associated pedagogical documentation to the five outcomes as outlined in the *Early Years Learning Framework*. Documenting pedagogically must move beyond a simplistic process of matching observations to learning outcomes outlined in the Framework. Learning is a complex process, as is the formation of human identity. We therefore challenge all educators to think broadly about teaching and learning and the implications of this complexity on documentation.

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## WHEN WE TALK ABOUT PEDAGOGICAL DOCUMENTATION, WHAT DO WE MEAN?

**P**edagogical documentation is a term that we use to describe a process of gathering artefacts, conversations, ideas, and displaying children's learning, energy and theories. The concept is inspired by the work of educators in the schools of Reggio Emilia, Italy, and in Sweden. The challenge for early childhood educators in Australia is how and if to adapt these ideas to our Australian context (Fleet, Patterson, Hammersley, Schillert, Stanke; 2006, p.312).

Pedagogical documentation follows children's and educators' thinking and finds ways to make that thinking visible. It is a means of analysing what lies beneath the play experiences to find the questions being asked and the learning that occurs. It is a tool for educators to gather information to create meaning, but documentation is more than just the gathering of evidence:

Documentation is not only the process of gathering evidence and artefacts, but also the reflection on and analysis of the collection, and the presentation of that collection, in a way that makes the children's learning visible to the children, the teachers and other adults. (Rinaldi in Wurm 2005, p.98)

In describing what pedagogical documentation is, it may also be useful to define what it is not i.e.

- A record of the day's events,
- A photo essay of centre life,
- A scrapbook of children's work.

What is missing in the above example that is present in pedagogical documentation? Thoughtful reflection and analysis.

The thing that separates pedagogical documentation from other forms of observation and record keeping is the use of analysis and reflection. This form of research always includes these two fundamental aspects. The analysis may be a self-reflection; it may draw on different theories and/or theorists; it may be linked to texts and ideas within early childhood or beyond. What it does is give the educator opportunities to reflect on what learning has taken place and to assist in thinking where to from here? There is almost always a journey that takes place within the story being told, whether that means a journey over a series of weeks or months or even a journey that occurred within a small space in time. There is always a moment where something needs to be overcome (or to be offered) that may be achieved through adult or child intervention.

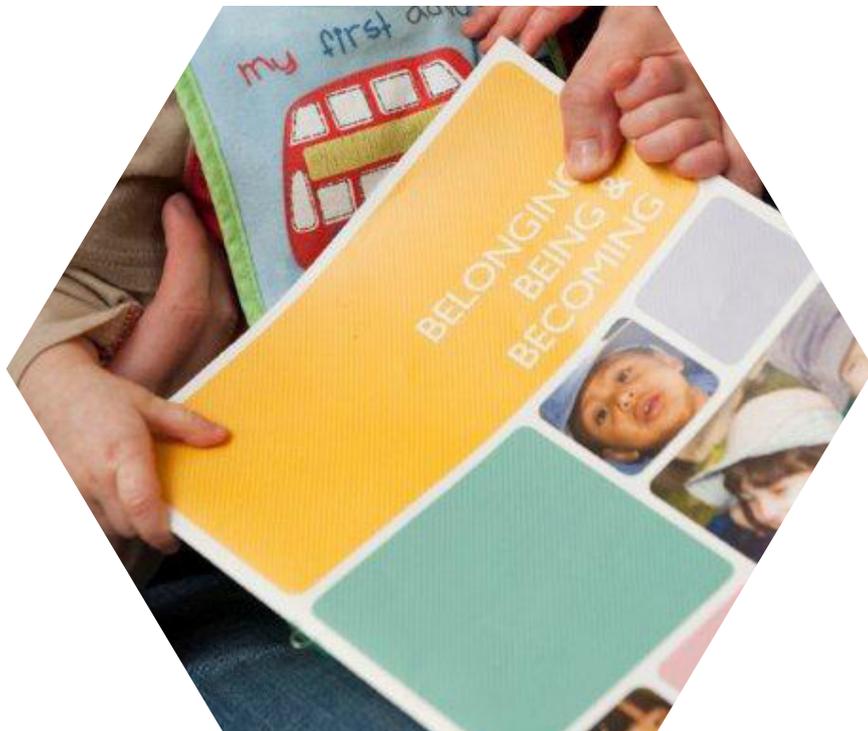
Documentation is not the collection of data in a detached, objective, distant way. Rather it is the interpretation of close keen observation and attentive listening, gathered with a variety of tools by educators aware of contributing their different points of view (Gandini & Goldhaber, 2001).

Pedagogical documentation also encourages multiple authors to collaborate on the one piece. The authors may include educators, families and/or the children. The inclusion of multiple voices and perspectives can strengthen the understanding gained through the process as well as the document produced.

Pedagogical documentation also has a role in exploring everyday experiences and is a tool for educators to see "the extraordinary in the ordinary" (Shafer, 2002). This encourages us to take every day experiences that may otherwise pass us by or we may overlook, and see them as moments of learning, of relationships, of thinking, of listening and of insight and then using these moments to form the basis of documentation. Through documentation, we can show the ordinary to be extraordinary (Strozzi in Reggio Children, 2001, p.58).

## Thinking points

- Can you identify what you are currently doing in your program that might be called 'pedagogical documentation'?
- How can you plan to investigate ways of identifying the extraordinary in the ordinary within your classroom or setting i.e. morning arrival, children greeting each other, lunchtime?
- In what ways are you able to engage in a collaborative approach to documenting children's learning, including families, children and other educators?



## WHY SHOULD I DOCUMENT?

**H**opefully this question does not infer that documentation is just a task that must be completed to comply with regulatory requirements. If so, such an obligation may dissuade you from experiencing the exhilaration and stimulation that documenting the lived experiences of the children you are guiding and developing relationships with, each and every day, brings. It is indeed a professional responsibility to record, document and assess the children's learning, skills and understandings. But it is also much more than this. Documentation is more than writing a running record or an observation and formatting and publishing text, photographs and work samples.

Documentation is a practice that has a robust and an enviable international history. Early childhood educators can aim beyond simply recording facts and the functional, perfunctory act of writing. There is a need to seek answers and ask the many questions that arise when working alongside children and gathering data. When writing up your reflections (including those of the children, families and colleagues) about a moment in the day or an event, the information you gather should begin to intrigue and sing to you and you should be inspired to explore theories fearlessly, analyse deeply, research widely and revise and craft a narrative that is evocative and seductive. You want to draw the reader into the story, your story and the children's, the hypothesis and questions and provocations. You want the reader to savour the

written word and be delighted by the imagery and be informed about the thinking of the teacher and the child/ren revealed in the narrative.

Why should we spend our time and energy in this way? The best reason of all is to build connections with families and the community and to celebrate our practice, to bring to light the complexity of pedagogy and theory. This is active advocacy for early childhood education and for the profession. It may ultimately raise awareness and a level of respect for the sector within the broader community. In the process we become critical thinkers about children, play and theory and begin to understand more comprehensively the purpose and the impact of our work. There are other secondary reasons for documenting that are also very worthwhile. We document in order to trace the process of learning and speculate on the outcomes for children. It also makes visible ours and the children's thinking and to create an aide-de-memoir for children, educators and families of particular events and moments in the life lived in the early childhood setting.

An archive is created of the rich learning that takes place over the years and is recorded referring to current knowledge and theories. One day this archival material may serve as a wonderful sociological research project about early childhood education over the decades. The sense of doing this work becomes apparent when families linger to read the documentation as they arrive to collect their

children and when children pour over the documentation stored in folders that provides a record of their experiences. Perhaps we all have a memory of loving to look at old family photos and this is evident when children in early childhood programs look at their centre 'family albums', the archival documentation of their experiences when they were younger.

A wonderful example of the merit of this practice presented itself when two children looked through the photographs and documentation of clay work they had completed in the previous year. Immediately the children wanted to engage with the clay again to replicate the original clay characters they had created. However this time, a year later, they recreated the characters with more well defined features and with the addition of limbs this time, representing an action such as combing their character's hair or eating a lollypop.

Usually when questioned about previous documented experiences, children will demonstrate that their memory is acute and they can usually account for what they had said and describe their thoughts about each photograph and the recorded story within the documentation. Thus the documentation and the process of documenting serves many purposes - What rich data for the assessment of children's learning, for critical reflection, to promote dialogue, collaboration and building connections and community: Educators and children engage in meaningful collaboration, the real work of life, inclusive of family and respectful of diversity.

“There is a need to seek answers and ask the many questions that arise when working alongside children and gathering data.”



Clay Figures 2010

## WHAT IS THE FAMILY'S ROLE IN DOCUMENTATION?

**P**edagogical documentation is an investment for the practitioner as it effortlessly invites families to engage in a dialogue and develop a respectful, meaningful and equitable relationship with the 'significant others' in their children's lives. For families who enrol their children in early years programs, this investment is particularly important as early childhood educators may only have the perspective of the child within the program. Educators need to confer, liaise and collaborate with the children's families to gain the image of the child who lives their life within a family and a community. Having knowledge of the diversity of the contexts of family life adds to the professional's knowledge about the child and cultural competence, as family members are the child's first mentor and life guide. Families are well placed to provide us with an authentic and meaningful image of the child.

In letting go of the image of the all-knowing professional expert, being uncertain and unsure allows room for the 'other' to also be knowledgeable in particular and equally valuable ways. This is a sound starting point for an abiding professional relationship with families. Families (if we have the ears and heart to listen) will reveal the child they know and love, augmenting our knowledge of the child we see playing,

exploring and developing. Both family and early childhood educators receive the knowledge of aspects of the child that we do not know and what they are capable of. Often families have the opportunity to see their child in a new light, and practitioners have the opportunity to see the tender, loving and loved child from the perspective of the home - a gift to both educators and family.

Families are a critical audience for our work. This reality may require educators to pause to frame a professional dialogue, but not reduce it. Rather this is to invite an understanding of the complexity and theory within our work. Documentation should not exclude the reader from the conversation. Families will be keen contributors when the request to engage in the dialogue is respectful and sensitive. Families will continue to contribute when they see a reflection of their thoughts and impressions in the documentation. Families as well as children have editing rights and educators must ensure that consultation is complete prior to the finalisation and publication of documentation. Through the process of consultation, families will become a link to the broader community and another advocating voice for early childhood education.



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## WHO IS DOCUMENTATION FOR?

**B**uilding on the previous sections, let's think through each of the topics so far and summarise: Who is documentation for?

Before reading any further, you might make some notes to answer the following question:

**How might different purposes for documenting affect the way that pedagogical documentation is developed and presented?**

Later you can revisit these notes to see if your thinking on these ideas is changing.

Depending on your background, and if you are feeling a little grumpy or perplexed about the whole exercise, your first answer to this challenge may have been: this work is an *Early Years Learning Framework* requirement. As such, this process might be seen as meeting an expectation of accreditation or as a required piece of a regulatory puzzle.

Would everyone agree with this response? Well, yes and no. Like so many parts of this discussion, there are blurry areas that are not clearly defined. **THIS IS A GOOD THING!**

It would be restrictive and demeaning if evidence-based practice required the same type of evidence from educators for

the wellbeing of all children across the diversity that is Australia. This work definitely is a useful tool in accountability, in demonstrating that you are meeting your professional obligations and working in a thoughtful, intelligent way. Documentation of 'something' is required, so make what you do meaningful, both in terms of the processes you use and the products you produce.

Pedagogical documentation can be considered as evidence of many things, including the richness of curriculum, the theories evolving from a group of children, the depths of relationships developing in a centre, the growth of skills, knowledge, understandings, creativity, curiosity, resilience and so on. So, who would you be speaking to if you evolved pieces of pedagogical documentation for these various purposes (and for the others described earlier)?

Several hundred early childhood educators (including centre based, school-based, college and university based) who were attending workshops related to this topic in Australia and New Zealand in 2010 considered this question. Their answers to the question "who would you be writing for?" included:

- Parents
- Children
- Colleagues
- Visitors to the program
- Employers
- Community members

- Regulatory authorities
- Yourself as an educator.

Basically, your purpose affects your presentation. Wisely, you will probably attempt to integrate a range of purposes in your pedagogical documentation and similarly, you will try to include a range of visuals, accessible language, a clean layout which will invite a reader into the piece, and so on.

The regulator is NOT your major focus. If you record in ways that assist your decision-making for arranging and provisioning the environment and scaffolding curriculum, recognising the individuality of children in the context of a community, you will have met your regulatory requirements. More importantly:

**Share your thinking with others!**



## Thinking points

- How can documenting pedagogically help me in the work I do with young children and their families?
- How might the processes and products of pedagogical documentation be valuable for children?
- What does 'working alongside children' mean?
- How can I approach pedagogical documentation so that the text resonates with the diversity of potential readers?

## WHAT IS THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PEDAGOGICAL DOCUMENTATION AND THE EARLY YEARS LEARNING FRAMEWORK?

**T**he *Early Years Learning Framework* places children's thinking in the forefront. Pedagogical documentation is one of the tools we can use to make this thinking visible to others. However, it is not just a document in which we celebrate children's experiences 'after the event'. Pedagogical documentation is a way of keeping the process of thinking and the 'problem at hand' open and visible to the group of children and adults while it is occurring (Olsson, 2009).

Children often engage in ideas and experiences over long periods of time. For example, two boys were trying to solve the problem of a sunken rock in the middle of the sandpit, attempting to think of ways to pull it out. They met, and discussed their ideas about how to pull it out, and came up with three theories: they could get a rope and pull it out; they could get strong people to help them pull it out; or finally they could get a digger. While never losing sight of the larger problem (the removal of the boulder), each theory was explored fully (both physically and cognitively) over a period of several months. This was all recorded and kept in a folder while occurring, so the boys could refer to ideas they had, strategies

they had used, and know where they were up to. Finally a fourth theory was introduced, that of nutrition for strength. The cook was interviewed, a strong food café menu designed and implemented, and teams of well nourished children attempted to, under the direction of the boys, to pull the rock out. This was successful as the strong people theory held out, as three adults and the boys after eating the strength-inducing food, did manage to move the boulder. The transcripts of their conversations, the adults' interpretations of these, the boys' strategies and drawings were all a part of the process, and used constantly throughout the experience as references, motivation and memories. It shows their interdependence as thinkers (EYLF, p.12).

This focus on the process, not just the product (EYLF, p.14) enables pedagogical documentation to become part of the planning process, enabling specific work with children to evolve over time. As each immediate problem is solved, the tactics and thinking of the children and educators used are evident, leaving open the opportunity to re-examine the larger 'problem at hand'. For example while designing a flag, four boys wanted to include a table. However, they were defeated by the task of drawing it.

Rather than get bogged down by this impasse, the teacher decided to help them focus on other aspects of the design. Once these were completed, they returned to the issue of how to draw a table. The strategies they developed while completing the other design elements enabled them to tackle the table issue with greater insight. The draft drawings, conversations and photographs of the 'problem at hand' (the table legs) were all utilised as the children conceptualised how to draw from a different perspective.

The *Early Years Learning Framework* gives those educators who work with children the role of making their thinking visible to others (p.17). So within the 'problem at hand', the written voice of the adult should be present, so other adults can further understand the thinking processes of the protagonists. We know that to be reflective and mindful about our work is central to the EYLF (p.13). Making our thinking evident to others within and during pedagogical documentation, not only shows others our ideas and thoughts, it allows others to enter the process too. Conversations with others about 'what we think is going on' creates complexity in ours and therefore children's thinking (EYLF, p.16).

## Thinking points

- How might you make your thinking visible? Brainstorm an example with a friend or colleague.
- How might you track the process of an investigation with children while it is in progress? Look at something that is happening now in your program. What work in progress could you write up or print out to share with families?



## WHAT DOES PEDAGOGICAL DOCUMENTATION LOOK LIKE?

**W**hilst there is no definition of exactly what pedagogical documentation must look like, typically pedagogical documentation includes sequences of photos, records of conversations, samples of work including: things drawn, built, created, and so on. It usually includes several children and highlights the social construction of knowledge.

Each piece of documentation should have its own voice and integrity and can be shared as a work in progress while ideas are being explored with children and other adults. It is important that documentation is professionally presented; this means being laid out in a way that is easy to be read, for example photos that are clearly labeled, consideration being given to text size and chosen font.

The aim of documentation is to display professionally rather than a display that is purely decorative without being informative. Too often, educators are being asked to use their time to decorate portfolios or fill in templates of learning stories in a fictional child's voice, whereas time spent on collaboration with children and community analysis would provide more benefit.

Other points to consider are:

- Photos of children (with the permission of families and the child) should be respectful and used thoughtfully i.e. photos portraying children engaged in experiences rather than posed,
- Observation and analysis should be reflective of the public nature of documentation, therefore careful consideration should be given to how children are portrayed (e.g. appropriately clothed), and
- Spelling and grammar should be carefully checked before putting up/out for display.
- Documentation usually will include:
  - A title that draws attention to an underlying essence of investigation or focus for thinking
  - A rationale for the focus of the documentation, explaining why this was a potentially productive area to explore, or where there were interesting interactions in relation to an assigned topic
  - First names and ages of children central to the investigation
- Insight into some aspect of children's relationships, understanding or learning which would not be immediately obvious using traditional approaches to recording and which have been shared with children
- A conclusion that brings the story to closure or highlights directions for future thinking.



## Thinking points

- Consider how you negotiate the challenges around taking and using photos of children in your pedagogical documentation; has your centre established any guidelines to assist you?
- Thinking of a recent piece of documentation you have shared with families, were there any aspects that were more decorative than professional and informative?
- Look at a series of photographs about a recent series of experiences in your program; analyse the thinking in this series – brainstorm ways to make their theories visible to others.

## WHERE CAN I FIND THE TIME TO DOCUMENT EFFECTIVELY?

**D**eveloping curriculum and writing associated with documentation takes time - not only scattered bits of time but large blocks of thinking and writing time. This unfortunately is often a luxury afforded to a small proportion of early years educators. However, perhaps it is useful to reflect on what time can be provided and how educators can make the best use of this time as well as how best to advocate for more time in future budget decisions.

**Pedagogy and documentation is about thinking** - Consider this: often in leadership and management programs the following statement is offered to participants: 'How much time do you spend **IN** your role and how much time do you spend **ON** your role'.

Not surprisingly most participants would confess to spending less time working **ON** their roles than they so desire. Why is this the case? This is often the case as 'the doing' is seen as the busy stuff and the important part of one's work. That is not to be dismissed; however time away from the everydayness of our work allows us to stop and reflect, to take time to think and ponder as well as to explore new and exciting ways that we can re-engineer how we go about doing what we do. And whilst education differs in many ways to other sectors, it is all too often reported that educators feel like

they have very limited time to step away from their teaching in the classroom and provided with time to think and reflect.

Time away from directly teaching children offers us the following:

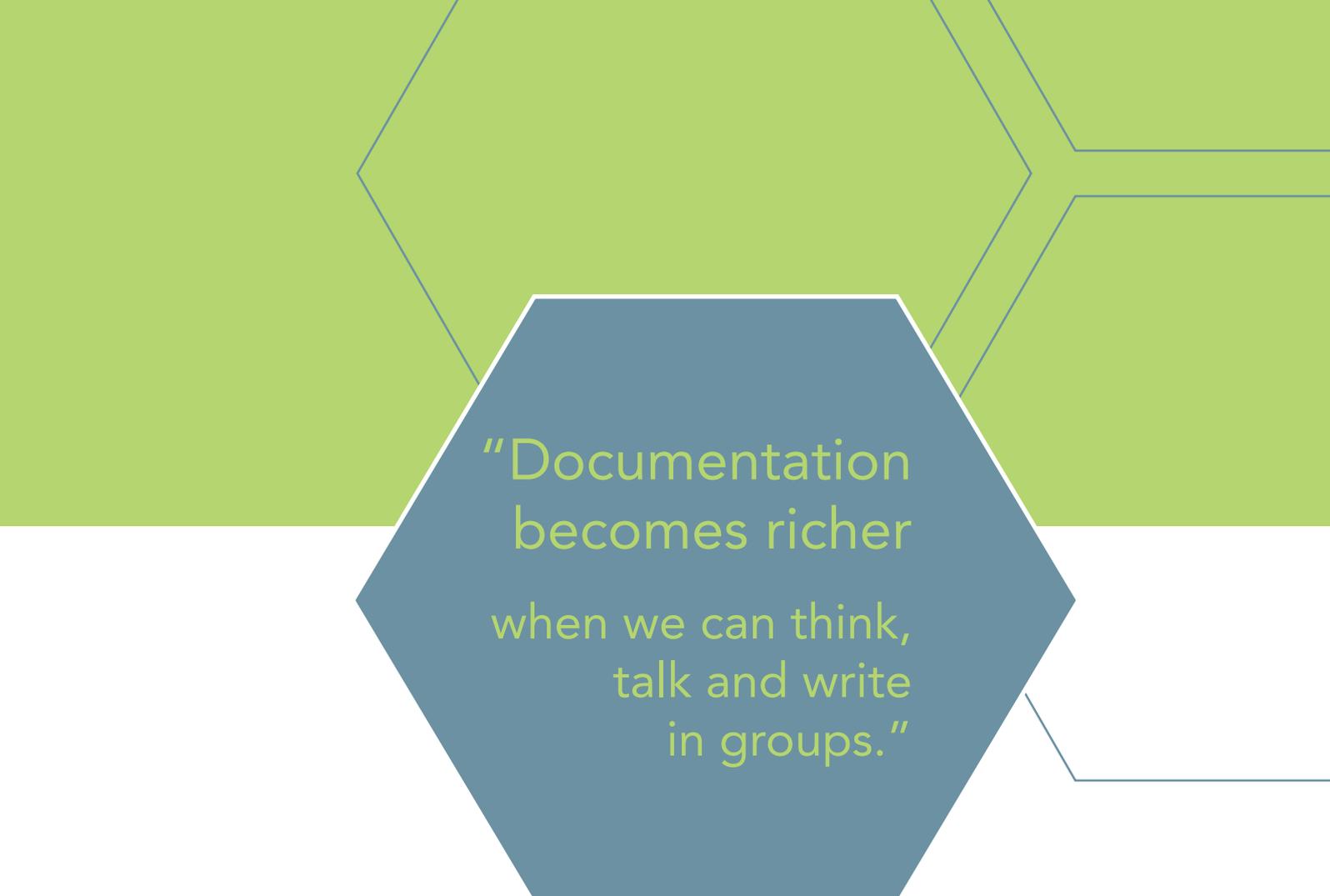
- Time for reflection
- Opportunities to gather with our colleagues to discuss and debate practice
- Time to get on top of work that has slipped behind due to competing time pressures and finally
- Time to sit still and catch our breath as we find enjoyment in collecting new knowledge through reading periodicals and journals.

Internationally there has been a trend towards including documentation as a critical component of quality early childhood programs; in responding to this move educators have been creatively exploring ways to find time for this work. Time management is often seen as the solution to this; however, time cannot be 'managed'. Whether we like it or not, time will keep on ticking away. What can be managed are our priorities. An increase in children who are only attending part time has also resulted in an increase in workloads associated with documentation, as educators attempt to ensure that no child's learning is left behind in the process of documentation.

So, with all these issues in mind, how can educators find time to document teaching and learning? Creating such a productive strategy is never an easy process given the diversity of programs, qualifications and educator ratios. Nevertheless, here are some approaches you may wish to consider:

**Documentation becomes richer when we can think, talk and write in groups** – All we know is what we know, however, bringing groups of educators together to reflect and debate on observations and educational records enriches our thinking. Therefore, consider creating opportunities for educators to develop and document curriculum in pairs as opposed to individually. Structure time for educators from the same classroom or pedagogical leaders from across the program to come together on a regular basis. The diversity of thinking that comes out of these collective moments are rich and textured.

**Talk theory** – Theory is an organized system of accepted knowledge that applies in a variety of circumstances to explain a specific set of phenomena. While the idea of theory is threatening to some people, early childhood pedagogy is steeped in theory (both implicit and explicit); much of our teaching has a history of thinking associated with it. Whilst the Educator's Guide, which has been released as a companion



“Documentation becomes richer when we can think, talk and write in groups.”

to the *Early Years Learning Framework*, identifies a number of theories by which educators can come to understand their work, it is important that practice is not limited to these theoretical orientations.

The diverse qualifications and experiences of people working in early childhood settings means that there will be varied understandings of theory. That noted, all educators have a responsibility to understand how their decisions about teaching and learning affect the ways in which they will teach into the future. Staff meetings are a great opportunity for educators to collectively theorise their work. In doing so, a starting point is to examine which theorists have had the greatest impact on educators' thinking and to imagine which other ways of understanding and knowing may assist in the future. Create opportunities to read an article or book chapter that might

be helpful and share individual understandings of this at a staff meetings. To further extend this, invite individuals to share with the group an observation or piece of pedagogical documentation and begin a collective conversation on this work and theories which may assist in building on this observation or documentation.

**Ratios matter** - Improved ratios means more people are available to work alongside children. The regulations state the minimum standards expected by regulatory bodies. As such, working above the minimum standards allows educators greater opportunities to work with smaller groups of children, to take time out throughout the day to document experience and to gather to discuss learning throughout the day. Improved ratios also means educators can take time away from children to briefly gather their thinking and document learning without breaching the

regulations. Improving ratios across a program may take some time, however, these changes must begin at some point. Spend time discussing how much time is currently available to document and how much time could usefully contribute to documentation. It is important that educators are realistic about the impact structural components of quality (ratios, qualifications, group sizes) have on the quality and quantity of documentation. It's also useful to consider what aspects of documenting can be done WITH the children, enabling them to comment on their participation and insert other perspectives into the perspectives being recorded. This collaboration is not only interesting, it enables documentation to unfold as part of the regular working day.

## WHAT IS THE ROLE OF THEORY IN DOCUMENTATION AND THE EARLY YEARS LEARNING FRAMEWORK?

**W**e all use theories everyday in early childhood settings:

From the simple, 'it's cloudy; I'd better wear a raincoat' to the complex, 'how do children acquire language?' One of our responsibilities as adults who work with children is to reflect on our own thinking and consider how it impacts on children's thinking and experiences. As the *Early Years Learning Framework* (p.18) suggests, some of our thinking may be unhelpful to children if we don't acknowledge our perspective.

When we write about an experience with children, we are using, intentionally or unintentionally, theories. We might be using developmental theory when we write about children increasing a skill on the jumping boards. Or we might engage socio-cultural theory when we interpret two children's engagement with ideas about marriage. If the role of pedagogical documentation is to open up the process of thinking with children, then it is important we don't obscure what it is we are thinking. We need to give the reader clues. How we frame our thoughts and

ideas are as critical as what it is we are thinking. When others, our audience, read our interpretations of an event with children, the picture is incomplete unless we begin to include what theoretical framework we are employing. The inclusion of the theory enables the reader or viewer to get a clue about which way you are thinking. This is an unfamiliar process for some educators; working together with others will help to make these theories more accessible and familiar.

As we all know, one event may be viewed differently. For example an observation of two children playing in the sandpit can be framed through different theories. We could use maturational theory, seeing the children developing in ages and stages in their ability to manipulate the sand and the equipment. Or we could see a social event, and frame the play through socio-cultural theory, explaining their conversation and play as socially constructed. We could also see it from post humanist theory, where the sand and equipment are active agents upon the children. Or we could see gender theory in action as the children delegate roles in the play according to gender, 'you be the mummy'. There are many more theories than there

is room for discussion here. In themselves these interpretation's are equally possible; one is not more 'right' than another. It's also important to note that at any one time multiple theories are in action, and so the above scenario might be written with all theories identified. It will depend on the purpose of the recording and the stage of development- whether the first quick notes are being put out to start a conversation, or something interesting has been unfolding which deserves more professional thought and careful analysis in the recording of a larger piece of work.

Theory can also help us when we get stuck. Sometimes children's ways of making meaning are puzzling to us. Through reflection we can explore what might be going on. For example, why do children sometimes engage in 'silly' interludes when working together? In the transcripts of the conversations of the two boys who were engaged with the problem of the rock, it became evident that they always engaged with a nonsense dialogue within the serious business of thinking a problem through. These moments of silliness were short in duration, and although appeared to be a detour, actually often created the solution they were hunting. The teacher began to develop

## Thinking points

- What theories or theorists do you know well? If nothing comes to mind, how can you work with others to refresh your memory or learn about some ideas that might be useful to assist you?
- How do you and your colleagues make your theoretical knowledge visible to others?

a theory that the humour was a way of letting off steam, of letting go of thinking for a moment. By using a theoretical frame of humour assisting cognition (Martin, 2007), it is possible to see that these nonsensical moments within otherwise serious conversations are supporting the children's ability to think through a difficult concept by engaging the problem solving areas of the brain in a humorous way. The hilarity is part of the social glue which binds them together and gives them purpose in perusing the task to its completion. So far from interrupting the more important thoughts, it appears sometimes that silliness is essential in supporting the focus of the interaction. This analysis is theoretically based!

If we place ourselves within pedagogical documentation as the recorder, manager, witness and compiler, but also as interpreter, then it is imperative

we engage with theory. For when we interpret what we are seeing, we are theorising. Making our theories visible to others enables them to get inside our thinking, and therefore respond in a deeper more mindful way than if the work were not visible to others. This increases the chances of multiple perspectives (EYLF, p.18) and offers the chance for pedagogical documentation to be always in process, rather than a product.

We know there is a continuum of learning to think about and use theory in relation to everyday practices and that some people are less comfortable with this challenge than others. So why do we need to engage with these big ideas and how do we go about it? and how do we include our colleagues in this conversation?

## GIVE ME AN EXAMPLE PLEASE!

The problem with examples is that people tend to assume the format or focus or topic is one that should be copied. The problem with not giving any examples is that some people cannot visualise how they might begin! Excerpts from Alisha's example below are included here as a starting point for discussion. This piece is useful for us in that it challenge us to think more carefully about a snippet of play that might have gone unnoticed, to think about the actions the teacher took to scaffold further thinking while drawing out the possibilities the children had to offer.

### Dominoes: How to make them fall the right way.

I was helping some students pack away the set of large and small wooden blocks into their allocated shelving. One of the students helping us, Harry (4yrs), became side tracked and began placing some blocks on the top of the shelf in a straight line. A casual passer by, Annalise, accidentally bumped the shelf which caused the blocks to fall down knocking each other over in a 'domino effect'. This kick started an investigation by Harry that snowballed into his own discovery of theory making, creating and testing different domino falling sequences.

Harry was initially quite upset that Annalise had knocked over his block line up telling her to 'go away' because she had 'wrecked it'.

I asked Harry if Annalise had 'wrecked it' or had this accident shown us how to make it work?

To this he looked at the blocks and stood them up again in the same sequence. When he was finished he knocked them down. Harry agreed that by bumping the blocks and causing them to fall down, she had helped to 'make it work'.

Harry was then ready to investigate different possibilities with 'knocking over the blocks'. Harry restacked the blocks in a straight line using tall 'people blocks' intermittently that he

hypothesized would fall down. He tested his theory discovering that he was correct: the large wooden people did fall over.

(I asked Harry) "Since the tall people fall further, would you need as many blocks in between?" Harry and I looked at the space and he said 'No, you don't need as many blocks because it falls this far' indicating the distance between the tall people blocks and their falling length. He carefully measured each 'tall person' to make sure that they would fall onto the next domino. Harry tested the theory by re-setting the blocks with spaces between the blocks which stood before a tall block person. He tested the theory by knocking them down again.

It did not work! When Harry knocked over the blocks the tall people did not fall down!

Why hadn't they fallen down? Harry thought that we should try it again with the blocks in between not leaving any spaces. Harry tested the domino sequence again, this time it worked. Why did it work with more blocks?

Unbeknownst to us, this activity had roped in some interest from onlookers in the room who were keen to offer their own hypothesis. Isaac decided that he had a theory why they would not fall down without blocks in between 'because that one hits that one and that one hits

that one and they all fall down together'. It took some reflection on this answer before I thought I had a better understanding of what Isaac was trying to say. Was he referring to the weight of the dominoes falling causing the continuation of the movement?

The investigations continued with Harry discovering how to make the blocks go around corners by 'making them just touch each other ...'.

The next day we decided to take the project onto the floor which was a much larger area which also enabled us to use larger blocks. This also gave extra room which would allow for other students to join in and help Harry achieve some new masterpieces.

As predicted, the new area drew in the interest of more children who started sitting on the sidelines offering Harry suggestions. Some children including Isaac (4 yrs) and Zander (4yrs) began to help Harry to construct some new domino creations. Harry showed them how to make the dominoes go 'around corners' purely by demonstrating to them how he had discovered this the day before.

After observing Harry create this sequence, Isaac and Zander began to build the corners as Harry had shown them. This was such a wonderful example of the co- construction of social knowledge that the boys were



creating without having to say anything at all!

The investigations went on through the morning with Harry continuing to be the key protagonist. Onlookers were coming and going offering advice and encouragement ... This took many times to master with the boys talking through why it did or didn't work each time.

Zander – 'They were all together there, but that one was too far away'

Isaac – 'Yeah and they didn't touch each other and didn't fall there'

Harry - 'We can do it again and put them closer, ok?'

The problem was rectified and on the third attempt, the sequence was a success!

The three other onlookers and I gave the boys a clap and the boys looked at each other with big smiles on their faces. They had worked together as a team, solved the problem and entertained the crowd!

By hypothesising a theory, setting up an experiment, analysing the results and changing the technique to find an answer to their hypothesis, Harry, Zander and Isaac were not only discovering how to make dominoes fall the way in which they intended them to fall, but also forming an understanding of how to investigate a problem using scientific methods.

Harry, Zander and Isaac had become scientists in their own right. Each was demonstrating 'Logico – Mathematical Intelligence' which the Theorist Gardner describes as being demonstrated in young children who are interested in discovering patterns (Fraser, 2000. p 5).

By encouraging children to make their own thinking visible, by allowing them time and resources, we are enabling them to 'do' what comes naturally to them, discovering what their interests are and investigating them to their natural conclusion.

*Continued overleaf*



During this process of documentation I have been inspired by these children who were capable learners who did not need adult instruction to form their own hypothesis and seek answers independently. I was able to take a step back and marvel at the children's ingenuity and resourcefulness given simple tools and a conceptual challenge.

By slowing down and giving the children time and the resources to discover, we give them the opportunity to take charge of their own learning. As a teacher I need to continue to look for the unexpected and welcome it with open arms.

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This piece of pedagogical documentation highlights the thinking child and the reflective practitioner, the availability of time and space to experiment and investigate in ways that showed the depth of thinking of an individual within the context of a supportive group.

While enjoying the insight shown in this example, someone might be tempted to ask, what were the other children doing while this focussed observation was unfolding? The answer is surprisingly straightforward: they were getting on with rich exploration in the environment that had been provisioned for them, learning from and with each other, laughing, singing, playing- living the lives that children lead in warmly welcoming and intellectually challenging settings.

How might this piece be interpreted in the context of the *Early Years Learning Framework*? In her notes at the end of the week, Alisha might have noted that this piece of pedagogical documentation highlighted instances of communication and group negotiation as foregrounded in Outcomes 1 and 5 (including emerging autonomy and inter-dependence; relating with care and respect), of initiation and problem-solving as sought in Outcome 4 (effectively adapting ideas), and in scientific and mathematical thinking as per Outcome 4 (confidently resourcing their own learning). Beyond these notations however, she has enacted the principles of Partnerships and Secure reciprocal relationships, learning more about these individuals and about the potential of the moment for extending deep thinking.

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## WHERE TO FROM HERE

The *Early Years Learning Framework* will have an impact on our pedagogical practices to the extent to which we allow it. The interaction therefore between pedagogy and documentation cannot be oversimplified. Complex pedagogy can lend itself to complex documentation. Those educators who have had more experience with pedagogical documentation have a responsibility to be available to assist the new comers to this process. This process of collaboration and mentoring builds a knowledge base that assists both the building relationships and opportunities for inspiring others.

As educators, we have a responsibility to showcase the complexity of teaching and learning within educational programs for children. With a range of different possible formats, pedagogical documentation is characterised by being a respectful recording of important moments of interaction, surprise, investigation in children's days, of being underpinned by analysis of linking threads, of reflection on children's theories and attempts to negotiate their world, presented professionally, offered back to children and families for multiple perspectives and used as a springboard for backward gaze and forward planning.

"As educators, we have a responsibility to showcase the complexity of teaching and learning within educational programs for children."

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