



NQS case study:

In the past *Rattler* has turned the spotlight on the theoretical background that supports each Quality Area of the National Quality Standard (NQS). In the next few editions in a series of inspiring case studies, we will turn the spotlight on several standout services that have transformed practice at a centre level.

1 Educational program and practice

What is the Quality Area?

1.1 An approved learning framework informs the development of a curriculum that enhances each child's learning and development.

1.1.1 Curriculum decision making contributes to each child's learning and development outcomes in relation to their identity, connection with community, wellbeing, confidence as learners and effectiveness as communicators.

1.1.4 The documentation about each child's program and progress is available to families.

1.2.1 Each child's learning and development is assessed as part of an ongoing cycle of planning, documenting and evaluation.

DOCUMENTATION

Documenting children's learning is about critical reflection and debate to unravel wonders and complexity of children's thinking—this is the very fabric of early childhood education, according to childhood practitioners at Mia Mia Child & Family Study Centre.

Wendy Shepherd: Early Childhood Teacher & Director

Over the past 20 years at Mia Mia we have been curious about the pedagogy of documentation, inspired by the pedagogistas of the early childhood programs in Reggio Emilia.

Having seen this documentation in the context of the Reggio settings, we know it is hard to resist the desire to replicate this practice, as the lyrical, powerful language and discourse, the photographs and the physical artefacts, that are the subject of the documentation, are profound and entirely seductive. At Mia Mia, we have come to the understanding that wanting to engage in this practice comes with responsibilities, intellectual engagement, ethical considerations, a commitment to research and, most importantly, to be respectful of the children with whom we collaborate.

To engage in and conduct research about and with children, it is necessary to seek their permission to observe, discuss, critically reflect, and document what they are doing and ultimately to share the information with your colleagues and families.

It's the journey



Recently, there was an advertisement for a computer program to make teaching easy. The testimonial indicated more observations could be documented each day using this program. It is critical to understand that observing and documenting children's experiences is not and should not be easy. In collaboration with children, documenting their experiences provides the framework for further investigation and reflection, proposals or provocations.

Even though there are many commercial software programs available to assist with recording and reporting information about children, such programs reduce the complex process of documentation to a simple 'fill in the box' exercise. There are simply no shortcuts. The practitioner needs to reflect and ponder the events and the questions that are unfolding in the children's play or investigations. Sometimes it takes a while to fathom what is really happening, as what may appear to be a very ordinary, everyday occurrence, may possibly be a very extraordinary sequence of events. The process should not be limited to using a template.

Documentation should be challenging, thought-provoking and may take some time: weeks or months observing, recording and reflecting on what is taking place.

What can be gathered from the documentation from Reggio Emilia is that it is not just a running record or narrative about the children's play experiences, or an assessment tool, or an element in the cycle of planning the program. Nor is it simply evidence of children's engagement just to satisfy families or regulatory bodies. Rather, documentation is a reflective process,

a pedagogical practice that provides multiple insights into children's thinking and engagement, as well as the teachers' thinking.

The motivation to document children's learning should be about wanting to know more and to engage in critical reflection and debate to comprehend and unravel the wonders of children's thinking and the complexity and inter connectedness that is the fabric of early childhood and education. Following are glimpses of past documented experiences and forecasts for the program, which have been written by the teachers of Mia Mia and include observations and reflections of educators from each group.

Janet Robertson: Outdoor Early Childhood Teacher

An unusual leaping game initiated by one of the children, Noah, is an example of research in collaboration with adults and children. The documentation before, during and afterwards, (the experience lasted a year) made our thinking visible, and enabled planning to support the eventual conclusion.

Noah invented a sideways leap over a barrel, using his arms as a fulcrum. For a few weeks he taught it to other children, and we watched and listened. Re-reading the daily reflective diary, I realised this leap was more than a flash in the pan, and had many curriculum opportunities.

At first I wanted to capture the steps each child took to make the leap, so photographed everyone leaping. The subsequent



examination by children of the photos revealed they were intrigued by the shots when they were airborne. Responding to this and their comments, I challenged them to draw themselves mid-leap, using the shots as an *aide de memoire*.

As they struggled to create their image I recalled previous work with children and introduced the notion of a draft. Plans were made in conjunction with the children, to repeat this until they were satisfied. Each day for several weeks they drew drafts, working together.

We observed, wrote transcripts and concluded that not only were the children capable of drawing a static image, they could strive to draw 'movement'. This long-term goal remained on the back burner while we added the complication of clay. Looking at their work we realised they were unable to conquer the placement of the arms, and felt clay and 3-D would offer them the solution. After several clay drafts, this proved the case and once William managed to model a leaping figure with the arms on the barrel and the feet off the ground, he taught this skill to others. Returning to drawing they were able to transfer this knowledge and their drafts became very realistic. It was at this point that two children offered the representation of movement, one by using arrows, and the other by smudging a charcoal line.

Fleur and Mia suggested 'life drawing' and so for a few days they sketched 'models' hopping, skipping and jumping.

Six months into the investigation, Louis, after a sequence of 31 leaps, said, 'we could make a movie'. As a team we wondered if they could, but offered them the tools, an iPad, movie app and paper to write the script. Over two weeks they made the film, 'Everyone jumping'. At the end of each day, children and adults reviewed their work and a plan was set in motion as to what to tackle the next day. Meetings were arranged, and teams set to organise the 'stars'. Eventually the film was made.

Without the written transcripts, photos, drafts, models, notes and reflective daily programmes this massive work could not have eventuated. It was an example of children co-researching with adults, and an investigation into curriculum.

Meredith Chan: **Early Childhood Teacher—birth to two years**

Documentation is an effective practice in promoting a positive image of the child and highlighting their sense of agency, especially with children aged birth to two. The young child's ability to verbally express him/herself is continually developing, hence it is crucial the non-verbal indicators are carefully observed and analysed. A substantial amount of time is required to ponder on children's learning and reflect on what they are investigating or showing an interest in. It was through this process that the idea of a 'Book Catalogue' was created and documented in the birth to twos' room.

The provocation of this piece of documentation was the observation of a 21-month-old's repeated request for specific books during shared-reading times.

These books were kept in the cupboard and the storeroom and the child would head towards the storeroom or cupboard and point earnestly, indicating that he would like to read this set of books. They have identified they are particularly fond of interactive books that consist of flaps, pop-ups or are textured and these books are kept in a different location to the children's bookshelf.

Such books include *Dear Zoo*, *Three Little Pigs*, *Hide and Seek* and *The Very Busy Spider*. Gradually a daily ritual and a pattern emerged with a few children pointing and indicating their intentions of engaging in a reading experience with these specific stories.

With the knowledge that the children were immensely enjoying this selection of books not directly accessible to them, the idea of providing them with pictorial representations of these books was formed at a weekly curriculum meeting. The book catalogue contained a compilation of photographs, showcasing the different covers of books that were popular with the children and this enabled them to browse through it independently and select the books they wanted to read.

What unfolded thereafter was intriguing as the group of children browsed through the catalogue together, poring over the different book covers and identifying favourites. The children gradually began making sense of what the catalogue was for through repeated browsing. They would point out the books that they were interested in to the adults. This process of making reading choices cultivated a sense of agency and autonomy in them.

By involving the children in the selection of books they would like to read together encourages them to initiate their own learning. They are in charge of their own learning. Documenting this aspect serves as a visible and valuable insight into challenging as well as supporting children in their experiences.

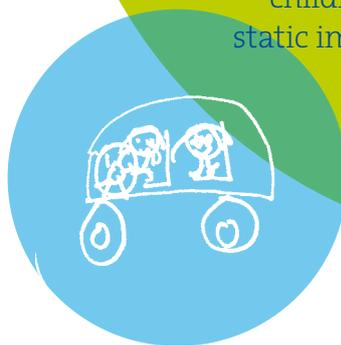
Melinda Ferris: Early Childhood Teacher—two to three years

As early childhood practitioners it is our role to engage in documentation, offering us an opportunity to celebrate children's learning and make thinking visible. The phrase 'following children's interest' is often heard in our sector and is an essential tool in facilitating the learning of children. But how do we move away from approaching 'interests' in a thematic way, how can children's interests be shaped by practitioners in a way that challenges thinking and creates a culture of curiosity and wonder?

In the beginning of August 2013, the children in the twos and threes room displayed curiosity in exploring open-ended materials. A spontaneous moment for investigation occurred as the children became engrossed in investigating the bubble wrap, shredded paper and box that arrived with a delivery one day. Acknowledging the power of materials in children's learning, a large collection of cardboard boxes was gathered and set up in the foyer. Many children explored the sea of boxes, displaying their creativity and flexibility when using an open-ended and 'voiceless' material. The powerful tool of documentation allowed me to not only highlight children's learning, but evaluate teaching opportunities and practices and consider meaningful ways to move forward—beyond just an 'interest' within the learning curriculum.

Countless play sequences and skills were practised and extended through the medium of box play. The children collaborated and negotiated as they constructed and imaginatively played in trains, hide and seek games unfolded, cosy cubbies were made and tall box towers formed. Mathematical notions were also explored, 'That one so small, that one really big... I fit in here', one child explained as he clambered into a box displaying his understanding of spatial awareness and size. 'I'm a turtle', another child exclaimed, as she crawled around dramatically with a box on her back. 'Here, here's your box,' children said sharing and offering boxes to their peers. Imaginative journeys to the beach, space, zoo and shops took place, all in the comfort of the humble box. Wanting to understand the children's intrigue further, I intentionally printed out pictures, sitting with the children at the table to encourage both discussion and drawing. 'I was building. I was building a train', 'I'm making a track for the choo choo,' the children shared as they reflected upon and drew their box work. Box play continued, with the children refining their play scripts and adding new resources to extend their play; for example making tickets and inviting doll passengers onto

'...I recalled previous work with children and introduced the notion of a draft. Plans were made in conjunction with the children, to repeat the drawing until they were satisfied. Each day for several weeks they drew drafts, working together. We observed, wrote transcripts and concluded that, not only were the children capable of drawing a static image, they could strive to draw 'movement'.



their trains. This is only a brief sample of their box work and to reinforce the enormity of this interest, box play persisted from August until the very end of the year!

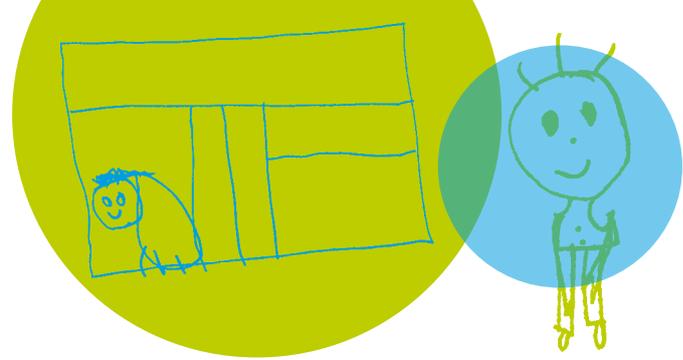
I was able to acknowledge the importance of revisiting play experiences, allowing children the opportunity to re-engage in and extend their play scenarios; the power of memory was reinforced, with children being able to articulate and draw their experiences and recognised the power of resources and time in shaping children's play and learning. Most importantly, documentation does not signify an end point, merely a part of a learning journey; a journey that may well continue to grow.

Angela Chng and Jade Dunne: Early Childhood Teachers—three to five years

We had been working with the children on singing with the keyboard during group time, and over the months the children's song repertoire grew and made its way into various parts of the children's day. On reflection, we decided to embark on creating a songbook, a collection of all the songs the children knew and enjoyed. We wanted to share the core learning concepts with families as the children demonstrated their remarkable thinking when complicating their representation of songs through drawing.

Jade, who was then studying for her degree, was invited to be involved in the experience as this was an opportunity for her to be mentored and to understand some of the decision making and thinking processes along the way.

As we had a number of competent illustrators within the group, we wanted to challenge their boundaries for representation and decided to invite the children to draw images that they deemed representative of the song. This enabled the children to use the songbook independently and at the same time gave us a glimpse of how the children think and perceive something as abstract as a song. It was a task for which the outcome was uncertain. Many contributed but three children became particularly engaged as the 'harder'



songs were left. Rethinking how to represent a song without an animal, vehicle or item as a focus was tricky initially but as soon as they overcame the problem with their very first drawing, their thinking flowed easily for the next few songs. This affirms Einser and Kolbe's views that for children, 'the arts celebrate multiple perspectives. One of their large lessons is that there are many ways to see and interpret the world,' and it is evident that 'children use drawings as a powerful tool for thinking'.

Three approaches were used: (1)'Based on experience'—drawing images of certain positioning of children, adults and furniture within the room when participating in the song, (2)'Based on knowledge of the lyrics'—depicting the various actions when singing the song and (3)'Based on song title'—illustrating based on understandings of words within the titles which at times resulted in their illustrations deferring slightly from the main content of the song.

This documentation was a celebration and showcase of children's remarkable thinking, integrating two art forms; music and representational literature. The flexible and abstract thinking behind each of their drawings demonstrates their ability to act thoughtfully, revealing the meaning and

relevance (specific to the three to five's group time context) when representing. They discovered complexity within the lyrics, title and experience of the songs and acknowledged these ideas through the drawing medium.

The songbook, with over 70 songs, is a celebration of persistence and sustained engagements, abstract thinking and competencies in representational drawing.

Each practitioner in any early childhood setting will have their own unique understanding of and approach to documenting. In contributing our stories we want to make explicit that documentation is such an integral practice, which moves children's and adults thinking forward, provides insights into the complexities of children's and teachers' thinking and experiences and renders the process visible.

Documentation can be seen as much more than an element of the planning cycle, it is in fact the driver of innovation and critical thinking.

Documentation is a powerful connecting agent for families and the broader community. Documentation is not a product or an end in itself; it celebrates the newly discovered and draws attention to the conversations and intentions along the way. ★

The authors: **Wendy Shepherd** is the director and **Meredith Chan, Angela Chng, Melinda Ferris, Jade Dunne, Janet Robertson** are Early Childhood Teachers at Mia Mia Child and Family Study Centre, Institute of Early Childhood, Faculty of Human Sciences, Macquarie University.



For a full list of references, see: cccnsw.org.au/rattlerresources

"Parents trust me with their children. I trust St John with my training."



ARE YOU READY?

Education and Care First Aid
A new course for educators, parents and carers

stjohnnsw.com.au | 1300 360 455



Are you a Childcare Operator?

The City of Sydney wants to work with child care operators to increase the supply of child care in our local area.

We want to discuss what opportunities exist, and what barriers prevent the expansion of existing child care centres and the development of new ones.

Please contact Beth Jewell, Community Facility Development Manager, bjewell@cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au or **9288 5521** if you would like to take part in this discussion.

city of villages

