Welcome to 2014! Our first edition for this year encourages you to ‘go wild’. You’ll certainly find some inspiration to think, act, dream big and wild within the pages of the Rattler.

So, will the Productivity Commission do likewise? While the role of the commissioners is to work to the terms of reference for the Childcare and Early Learning Inquiry—and all within the ‘current finding envelope’—at Community Child Co-operative (NSW) we hope there is still room for visionary recommendations that keep children firmly in view.

Of course productivity, women’s employment and a strong economic future for our country must all be in the mix, but by keeping community and child wellbeing and learning central, the recommendations and resulting action will have the right foundations and driving values. An equitable and just education and care system characterised by quality will definitely need greater investment! And if that is not possible right now, then how about as a sector and government, we use the recommendations to create a great vision for children.

One that is collaborative, forward-thinking and built to circumvent political cycles. One that can roll out over the coming years and not be constantly re-negotiated and re-engineered.

Roll on October 2014 we say, when the Productivity Commission wraps up its part of this important work.

In the meantime, be delighted, engaged and educated by this edition of Rattler, and may your 2014 be filled with great optimism and your continued dedication to children and families.

Leanne Gibbs, CEO
Community Child Care Co-operative (NSW)
in this issue

THE LOWDOWN
Your guide to what’s up, who’s where, and how you can get involved.

EYLF PIRATES AHoy!
Join swashbuckling pirate educators as they navigate the rough seas of the NQS and the EYLF.

FACE2FACE
Rattler talks with Sussan Ley as she outlines her vision for our sector.

MYTH BUSTERS
Educators and experts debunk common myths, whispers and rumours.

‘WE NEED TO TALK’
How to discuss the toughest topic of all with families: child protection.

VOX POP
We ask some of the sector’s best minds for their opinion on the Productivity Commission Inquiry.

NQS CASE STUDY
Practitioners at Mia Mia share stories of documenting children’s learning.

CALL OF THE WILD
The children of Barrack Heights Preschool go on a virtual Antarctic adventure with James MacDiarmid.
Why boys prefer dolls to trucks

New research from the University of Western Sydney confirms what many early childhood educators have perhaps always known—that baby boys prefer objects with faces over machines.

The research shows that gender-specific preferences are not present at five months but develop much later.

Researchers gauged the preferences of four and five-month-old babies by showing them pictures of dolls, cars and stoves and measuring how long their gaze lingered on the objects.

The study, published in the Journal of Experimental Child Psychology, found that like baby girls, baby boys were more willing to engage with dolls than cars. However, more research is needed to determine if it’s nature or nurture that triggers little boys’ interest in toy cars and trucks and other stereo-typically male-associated toys.

A productive campaign

Did you see our Productivity Inquiry animation?
Community Child Care Co-operative (NSW) was particularly busy over the summer months working on the latest advocacy campaign for the Productivity Inquiry into Childcare and Early Childhood Learning.

The Inquiry has been called ‘a once-in-a-generation’ opportunity to affect the future of childcare and early learning and we have left no stone unturned. There were more than 1,000 submissions in total, and it was interesting that PriceWaterhouseCoopers supports greater investment.

This was our chance to send some clear messages to policy-makers in Canberra about what’s important for the future of the education and care sector. The Commission will report by the end of October 2014. You can watch the Productivity Inquiry animation at: www.ccccnsw.org.au/resources/videos
You can download and read CCCC’s submission in full at: www.ccccnsw.org.au/programs/advocacypeak

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Check out this go-to manual for OH&S. Presented in an easy-to-read format with info sheets and sample forms, it will help you create a hazard-free environment at your service with chapters on everything from slips, trips and falls to immunisation of workers.

The booklet meets Work Health and Safety legislation in all states and territories except Victoria. Order your copy for $95 plus GST and postage via www.networksa.org.au

what’s on CONFERENCES AND EVENTS

CREATIVITY PROJECT
13 March 2014
Sydney Opera House

LINKING UP FOR KIDS
Conference Hosted by Children’s Healthcare Australasia and the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY).
14–15 April 2014
Menzies Sydney Hotel, Sydney
www.childwellbeing2014.net.au

TOGETHER WE GROW
30–31 May
Caulfield Racecourse, Melbourne
www.togetherwegrow.com.au

AUSTRALIAN INSTITU TEOF FAMILY STUDIES CONFERENCE
30 July–1 August
Melbourne Convention Centre
www.conference.aifs.gov.au

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“A productive campaign”

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WIN A WORM HABITAT JUNIOR WORTH $440

Tell us about how you incorporate sustainability into your service and WIN!

Thanks to Educational Experience, one lucky Rattler reader could WIN this Worm Habitat Junior. What a wonderful resource for teaching children about sustainability. The worm farm comes with a comprehensive manual and a bedding block so all you need to add is worms!

To WIN, simply tell us in 200 words or less about the meaningful ways your service has embraced sustainability. Email us! Send your entries by 16 May to saraandersson@ccccnsw.org.au

Congratulations to the team at BlueGumCottage in Chifley, Wollongong, who have won the Proprioception and Gross Motor Kit. Well done!

The Little Veggie Patch how-to cards

Early childhood educators and outdoor leaders will enjoy this resource from home-grown veggie authors, Fabian Capomolla and Mat Pember, who encourage people to grow their own food in small no-dig raised gardens.

This gardening trend involves the use of polystyrene boxes or crates to grow food in small spaces. As such, it is highly suited to early childhood environments that may not have accessible soil for a vegetable patch.

The pair are passionate about teaching children about growing vegetables. As a child, Capomolla’s Sunday lunch would consist of pasta, veggies and ripe fruit from the backyard orchard, while Pember’s childhood memories revolve around his Nonna and Nonno’s rambling veggie patch.

This A-Z pack features 26 cards with information on easy-to-grow and easy-to-eat plant varieties. Each card has detailed planting information, tips on companion planting and when to harvest. There are also beautiful fold-out recipes such as beetroot and chocolate cake or zucchini and dill fritters—yum!

The Little Veggie Patch card set retails for $20. For more, go to: www.littleveggiepatchco.com.au
This page, a 700 kilogram male sea lion on a sub-Antarctic island captures the imagination of children. Opposite: James MacDiarmid aboard the Russian icebreaker on his Antarctic adventure.
The word ‘Antarctica’ is not easy for a four-year-old to pronounce, but every single child at Barrack Heights Preschool in Shellharbour can say it! Thanks to technology, the preschoolers went on a once-in-a-lifetime journey to Antarctica from the comfort of their Illawarra classroom. Ingrid Maack reports.

‘Did you know the wingspan of an albatross is this big?’ says James MacDiarmid, stretching his arms out to demonstrate the immense size of the seabird.

‘The wingspan is six feet... that’s as tall as me!’ says James, who in November and December last year visited the land of the albatross: Antarctica.

Back on the mainland after spending two weeks with a team of scientists, oceanographers, marine biologists, tree dwellers and educators on the Spirit of Mawson Australasia Antarctic Expedition (AAE), teacher James popped into Barrack Heights preschool in January to meet the children who had followed his journey.

‘They all knew exactly where I’d been as they’d all experienced the awe and wonder of Antarctica alongside me. They were full of questions about the temperature, the wildlife and what life was like aboard the ship.’

Capturing imaginations
James had been working on an entirely different project in his role as a curriculum consultant for Big Fat Smile (a not-for-profit community-owned organisation servicing the Illawarra) when he briefly mentioned his upcoming Antarctica trip to staff at Barrack Heights Preschool.

The preschool had been trialling an app called Kinderloop and recognised the technology could be used to follow James’ Antarctic journey in real-time through videos and photos. Kinderloop is a secure network that allows families to remotely view children’s learning and content uploaded by educators.

‘Big Fat Smile suggested I take the app with me to stream my experiences back into Barrack Heights Preschool for the children to watch and discuss. I would take a photo of an animal or science activity and that would be uploaded for the children to observe, ask and formulate ideas about,’ he explains.

It also created an opportunity for James to later visit the preschool in person, providing children with an opportunity for deeper thinking or to ask burning questions about life on the frozen continent.

Preschool director, Fay Gowers, told Rattler it was an ‘exceptional opportunity’ for the children and staff of Barrack Heights to follow the expedition and learn side by side.

‘The children really enjoyed the journey which allowed them to learn many new things and experience an opportunity many adults can only dream of.’

Barrack Heights is a suburb of the City of Shellharbour just south of Wollongong. The demographic across the Illawarra is very mixed, with pockets of...
affluence and disadvantage. Traditionally, this part of the Illawarra has a blue-collar history with heavy industry forming the backbone of this community. Barrack Heights Preschool was purpose-built in 1983 and is part of Big Fat Smile network of 40 community preschools.

Fay explains that educators would check Kinderloop daily with the children to see the photos sent through, but says they also observed the children sharing knowledge with each other.

‘By making the photos available to parents via Kinderloop the children could also continue their conversations with their parents at home. It was really very easy to facilitate. Even just a few years ago pulling something like this together would have been difficult.

‘We were entirely amazed by the children’s reaction when James came to meet them. They’d already seen many of his photos but his conversation had them captivated for well over an hour. Once the slideshow of photos started, the children were enthralled and totally engaged in what they saw and the information he was describing. They had prepared questions to ask James and were able to remember them without prompting.

‘James describes the experience again and again as ‘wondrous’. And Antarctica is an environment which enchants children and adults alike with awe.

‘A lot of footage I chose to show to the children is of wildlife—animals in particular engage a child,’ he says.

‘That’s where my wonder comes into play. Since I was a young child I have enjoyed animals. It was a great privilege growing up on a farm and as I have travelled around the world I have experienced great wonder in going into the natural habitats of animals.

‘On this trip I was able to get very close to animals (on land and sea) including a yellow-crested penguin, fur seal, sea lion, elephant seal and even a whale.

‘I showed the children footage of a penguin returning to its den and audio of a 700-kilogram male sea lion roaring. They were fascinated. Sea lions are a great source of fascination. I think even the word sea lion fascinates children because of the word ‘lion’. They know how majestic and powerful a lion can be.

‘He says his favourite experience was being in a small zodiac (inflatable boat) with a group of marine biologists and seeing a southern wright whale of at least eight meters in length.

‘We got so close that I was able to put half my body in the water (wearing a dry suit of course) to take video footage. We could see the whale’s teeth as it took in plankton from the surface of the ocean.

‘I can now take that footage back into the preschools and share the magic of that experience with them. However, I am not going to show them just yet, as I don’t want to bombard them with too much wonder or they might disengage.’

He says he was ‘blown away’ by the
children’s questions, which ranged from what he ate and where he slept on the ship to how he avoided seasickness. The biggest challenge, he told them, was being on the boat for days on end and experiencing big swells that confined the team to their bunks.

James has always had a passion for environmental advocacy and the great outdoors. He grew up in Australia’s Snowy Mountains and worked as a teacher in Sweden at several international schools. While there are some parallels between the Australian and Scandinavian education systems, he says, they are poles apart when it comes to learning through nature.

He has noticed the children of the Illawarra are blessed with a rich natural environment on their doorstep, but which sadly very few children visit with their families and/or educators.

‘They might live 10 minutes from the beach or Lake Illawarra but rarely go. What is so fascinating about Scandinavia is that it’s in the arctic. They have five hours of sunlight a day during winter and nine months of the year they are engulfed in snow and yet every single day in the schools I worked in I saw children outside doing their lessons. We don’t see that in Australia despite having vast lands and year-round sunshine.’

A part of scientific history
The journey came about following a series of serendipitous events and chance meetings. An avid rock-climber, he actually met the co-expedition leader (Dr Chris Fogwell from the Climate Change Resource Centre at UNSW), while hanging on a rock.

Enthused by this chance encounter and inspired by the expedition that would retrace the steps of Sir Douglas Mawson, and conduct important climate change research, James submitted a YouTube application and won a coveted berth aboard the expedition’s ship.

The ship, a Russian icebreaker, later made global headlines when it became trapped in heavy ice on Christmas Eve. Luckily, James was no longer onboard, although he says this would have been ‘an adventure in its truest form’.

‘It’s funny that many people on the expedition are rock-climbers and adventurous by nature.’

While at sea, James did some hands-on oceanography and marine biology alongside scientists, some of which he has been able to share with the children at Barrack Heights. He was also joined by two other educators (primary and secondary teachers) on the ship and together they plan to develop lesson plans based on expedition science.

So what next?
Even though he’s back on the mainland, James told Rattler he is still in touch with his expedition colleagues and is excited to see how the educational program will evolve. He will continue to work with the staff and children at Barrack Heights preschool and several more preschool visits are planned. There may also be another adventure in the pipeline.

‘I met a fellow doctoral student from Massachusetts who is a glaciologist. We got talking on the ship and I mentioned my interest in glaciers. Next year he’s going to the North Pole, and he invited me along. If I can make this happen, then we want to extend the program to 40 Big Fat Smile preschools and potentially primary schools in the Illawarra too.’

Something tells me this story has an adventure-packed sequel. ★

James MacDiarmid trained as a primary school teacher, with a Masters degree in Educational Leadership. He is currently completing his doctorate in educational sciences with a focus on the early years. He is also working for Big Fat Smile (www.bigfatsmile.com.au) as a curriculum consultant.
EYLF
pirates
REFUSE, RESIST, REBUILD
Who are the EYLF pirates? Nobody knows. These swashbuckling female pirates (calling themselves Grainne O’Malley, Awilda Longstocking and Jeanne de Clisson) have agreed to allow Rattler to publish on the proviso we protect their anonymity. (This article was originally published on the blog Anarchy & the EYLF Pirates.)

The rich traditions of rhetoric provide us with many obscure words. Metonymy* is one of them. It means ‘the container for the thing contained’. As I tour the seven seas of the internet, I keep finding people asking ‘can I see how you do your program?’ From the conversations that follow, this question is obviously taken to mean ‘how do you present a written plan for your program?’

I confess I find myself perturbed by the frequent question about how to do this piece of documentation. Not because it is not a question worth asking. It is difficult to work out how to capture all the complexity of a busy early childhood classroom on one piece of paper. It is especially hard if we are being asked to plan well into the future, when we all know that herding cats is far more predictable than the twists and turns of a good day’s play.

The thing that bothers me is that there is not a raging and far bigger conversation going on about how to actually plan the program. Why are we more interested in talking about how to write down what we plan, rather than how to plan what we will do, or how to implement the plan? Why are we not talking more about what is actually worth doing?

Why does the question ‘how do you do your program?’ mean ‘what boxes do you put on a piece of paper?’? Shouldn’t it first mean ‘what do you actually plan for the children you teach?’ and ‘what did you do?’ and ‘how did it pan out in the end?’ and (most importantly) ‘what learning did you see and how did it appear related to what you had provided?’

Refuse, Resist, Rebuild

Shouldn’t it be about how we teach? About what we teach? About how we think children learn?

When I see the question ‘how do you do your program?’ I want it to be a face-value question, not a metonymy. I want the question to be about the program, not the paper representation of the program.

I am also very bothered by the proliferation of templates and questions about templates. I fear that people see templates as not just one way a page can be divided into boxes, but as something quasi-magical that will tell them what to teach and how to teach it.

A template cannot actually tell us how to categorise the activities we decide to provide. An educator has to do the analysis. Each program is unique and particular to that time and place and those participants. The layout of the page cannot tell us how we should be running this class this week.

A good bit of graphic design cannot solve pedagogical problems.

I wish people would stop using the word ‘program’ to refer to the way they publish their plans. I need another word; one that makes it clear we are discussing a stationery issue. Then perhaps we will start to feel slightly embarrassed about how much more effort we seem to devote to discussing our stationery design than we do to discussing our teaching.

("Pedants may like to argue that it is a synecdoche. Be my guest.")

EYLF PIRATE MISSION

Once upon a time, there were three pedagogical mariners navigating the NQS and EYLF seas on their own. The weary seafarers stumbled upon each other and saw mutual dissent reflected in each other’s eyes. Through a shared love of rebellion and a strong desire to belong, the mariners decided to band together and become pirates. And that me hearties, was the beginning of Anarchy & the EYLF Pirates. Our mission? Refuse. Resist. Rebuild. Anarchy.

EYLF PIRATE VOYAGE

Quality. It’s not a journey from A to B. It’s not branded by an X on our pirate map. Can’t wear it like a badge or hat. It’s a quest with no beginning, no end. Always placed somewhere in the middle, we find our ways on different paths. The EYLF helps us sometimes. Restrains us sometimes. Like half the map is missing. It shows us the way, just partially. We can take the EYLF on our pirate quest. Re-write and re-think as we journey.

By Grainne O’Malley (a nom de plume from the blog Anarchy and the EYLF Pirates. Refuse, Resist, Rebuild.)

To follow the EYLF Pirates, visit their website at www.eylfpirates.weebly.com and ‘like’ their Facebook page: www.facebook.com/anarchyeylfpirates
Sussan Ley

From the shearing sheds of outback Queensland to the argy-bargy of Parliament House, meet Assistant Minister for Education, Sussan Ley as she outlines her vision for our sector and her plans for the Productivity Commission.

Tell us about your former role as an air traffic controller and commercial pilot?

I have a passion for the outback and delivering better outcomes for communities in areas like childcare, education and health. This has tied in well with my other great love—aviation. Air travel has fascinated me since I was a young child. After gaining my commercial pilot licence at 19, I was lucky enough to have served regional communities as both an air traffic controller and an aerial stock-mustering pilot.

Both politics and aviation are high-pressure careers and require a great deal of commitment, and, at times, extended periods away from your family, which is always difficult. However, they’re both careers that allow you to make an important contribution to the prosperity and health of local communities across the country and I feel extremely privileged to have had the opportunity to undertake both in my lifetime, let alone one.

One thing a lot of people don’t know about me is that I also spent time working in the shearing sheds of western Queensland, which I can certainly say has helped prepare me for the rough and tumble of politics! You needed a pretty tough skin to survive those days.

Do you still get opportunities to take to the skies?

I do—it certainly comes in handy to be able to fly yourself between towns when visiting constituents, particularly when your electorate covers a third of New South Wales and some of the state’s most remote towns! It’s certainly a great buzz to be able to survey the beauty of my electorate from the air.

What can you tell us about your early years in Nigeria?

I spent my early years growing up in Nigeria and the United Arab Emirates and fell in love with the wind, sand and stars. This is one of the main reasons why I am so attracted to outback Australia and love representing it in my electorate of Farrer in the west of New South Wales. It also meant I was lucky enough to experience the uniqueness of different cultures at a very young age and this appreciation is something I’ve carried throughout my life and into this role.

Tell us about your former role as an air traffic controller and commercial pilot?

As a young child I made the daunting journey to boarding school in England. While the separation from my family was difficult at times, I have long-valued this experience taught me. It’s also given me the drive to ensure Australia’s children receive quality care and learning experiences in their early years.

What is your vision for the childcare and early learning sector?

As someone who has lived, worked and raised a family in rural communities for much of my life, I have seen firsthand just how important it is for our children to receive access to high quality education and learning opportunities from an early age. This is essential if we’re going to build a stronger and more prosperous future for our nation.

Another reality is that we now live and work in a 24/7 world and our Coalition Government understands that childcare has to be more responsive to the needs of today’s families. That’s why, as a priority, we have asked the Productivity Commission to look into how the childcare system can be made more flexible, affordable and accessible. The Inquiry will examine a variety of topics, such as the various work and study needs of parents, including shift workers and those in regional, remote and rural communities, as well as the different types of childcare, the specific needs of vulnerable children and childcare costs and subsidies.

Reviewing the childcare and early learning sector is a big job, but it’s important we get these policies right. There have already been some tough decisions, balanced with positives such as the Productivity Commission and the launch of a professional development programme for long day care educators, because we want to ensure we are delivering better childcare and early opportunities for all parents, educators and operators, not just a select few. This is also about setting an agenda for long-term, sustainable growth in the sector that delivers improved standards, working conditions and staff retention rates.

Another example of this is my recent talks with my state and territory colleagues to see how we can improve the National Quality Framework implementation. The Australian Government is committed to deliver high quality childcare and early learning opportunities through these reforms. However, we want to make sure operators aren’t being bogged down with unnecessary regulation and red tape to keep pressure off of fees for parents and so that services can spend more time on care and education, rather than administration.

What would be the best outcome of the Productivity Commission Inquiry into Childcare and Early Childhood Learning?

The Productivity Commission Inquiry is the first major review of the childcare and early learning sectors since the 1990s. The aim of this is to ensure we take a holistic view of all aspects impacting the sector in order to draw up a clear blueprint for future growth and improvement, rather than decisions being made in isolation.

Therefore, generating a complete picture of the state of childcare and early learning in Australia will benefit all, including governments, childcare operators and educators, parents, the economy and the nation as a whole.

However, I will say there are clear issues regarding the affordability and
flexibility of services across the country at the moment that need to be addressed and we’ve tasked the Productivity Commission to pay specific attention to these areas. It’s also why the Coalition is currently working with the States and Territories to try and relieve red tape pressures on operators in a bid to address rising fees for parents and reduce costs on operators to allow them to spend more time and money educating, rather than administrating.

What is your favourite aspect of visiting an education and care service?
Between my time as Minister and Opposition spokesperson, I have made over 200 visits to a range of different childcare and early learning providers and I have been consistently inspired by the passion and commitment shown by the dedicated staff and operators who deliver these essential services day in and day out. They do a fantastic job, which is why our Coalition Government is committed to improving conditions and processes for operators, staff, parents and children alike.

I’m also a Minister who doesn’t like to be chained to her desk and would rather get out there and talk to people directly about their experiences and how, as a Government, we can do things better to help them—I think it’s the bushy in me!

The childcare and early learning sector is also made up of such a diverse and interesting group of people, so I always love visiting centres and listening to the insightful knowledge and stories they have to share.

And of course, there are the kids. There’s nothing better than a teddy bear’s picnic to get the conversation flowing, particularly if you’re after some honest advice!

How hard is it meeting the concerns of the private sector and those of not-for-profits? Since taking responsibility for this portfolio in Opposition, and now as Minister, I’ve been very clear in my view that we need policies that promote greater equity for all childcare operators and educators. This is because, regardless of whether you’re a private or not-for-profit operator or even a Government Minister, we share a common goal—delivering a stronger future for our children. It’s also the reason why I’ve stood up against some of the unfair, rushed proposals of the former Government, which only managed to create division in the sector and deliver significantly more have-nots than haves.

I acknowledge though that it’s a fine balance managing the expectations and concerns of these two equally important parts of the sector. However, the Coalition has a clear plan to help bridge this gap through the Productivity Commission Inquiry and other policies like our personal development programme aimed at boosting access to qualifications and training for all long day care educators, not just a select few, to help meet the requirements of the National Quality Framework. I will continue to work with both areas to deliver greater equity for all.

What do you think the outcomes of your current policy will be in 20 years’ time? The whole reason we’re undertaking this Productivity Commission Inquiry is because we want to lay a solid foundation on which we can build a stronger childcare and early learning sector and, in turn, a stronger future for our nation. It’s the same reason why we have created a professional development program for all long day care educators.

It’s about delivering long-term, sustainable improvements in the sector by skilling the workforce, rather than short-term cash splashes that throw money at the problem in the hope it will go away. I believe this will have lasting benefits for the standards of education and working conditions of thousands of educators and operators across the country and we will have more to announce about this soon.

This is why I feel so privileged to be the Minister responsible for childcare and early learning and am excited about the opportunity to work with you to deliver real, lasting change together for the children of today and tomorrow.
Did you like our Myth Busters article in the last edition of Rattler? In times of change, common misconceptions crop up and tend to proliferate. Rattler talks to experts and educators to debunk more rumours, myths and whispers and help paint a clearer picture of early childhood education and care practice.

**MYTH 1** Children’s learning must be documented in aesthetically presented portfolios.

Leonie Gabriel, Children First centre manager Balmoral Street Preschool & Occasional Care, Alpha Street Preschool (Sydney):

‘Educators should spend their time guiding children’s thoughts, needs, social and emotional behaviours and individualised learning capacity, not making pretty books full of long-winded written observations, excessive photos and children’s artwork for families. I feel the precedent has been set by services that go above and beyond and perhaps are able to employ extra staff to carry out these detailed documents. It has pressured the sector to compete based on aesthetically presented portfolios. And why? Let us consider the National Regulations and assessment and ratings criteria. Where does it state we must present aesthetically-pleasing documents?

At our service, for example, we now use an online system whereby families log in from home. We began this last year because we felt we needed to ease the burden on recording methods for our educators, allowing them to be with the children first and foremost while maintaining great communication about children for their families.

Do the Assessment and Ratings criteria ask us to present an aesthetically-presented portfolio? I’d like to know where! Educators can interpret these quite differently and while I would like to believe otherwise, from recent conversations and experiences I believe aesthetically-presented styles are viewed favourably by some Assessment Compliance Officers. I hope that this will change to focus on quality not aesthetics.’

Sandra Cheeseman, lecturer, Institute of Early Childhood, Macquarie University:

‘A quick read of both the Regulations and the Guide to the National Quality Standard will dispel this myth. In both documents the requirement for records of children’s learning and development...’
‘Educators should spend their time guiding children’s thoughts, needs and individualised learning capacity and not making pretty books full of long-winded written observations, excessive photos and children’s artworks for families.’
– Leonie Gabriel

Myth 2: You must always include one of the five EYLF outcomes in planning and observations of children.

Luke Touhill, Early Childhood Teacher and consultant:

‘Using the EYLF outcomes as the basis for our planning and teaching is not a bad idea. In fact it is very good idea, and a central part of implementing the EYLF. But we need to be careful about how we do it.

We can’t afford for our focus on the outcomes to become overly prescriptive or simplistic, or for them to reduce our ability to respond flexibly to changing circumstances and events.

It is important to remember while the outcomes describe valuable areas of learning, they are not about the kind of learning that can be easily checked off in a single lesson or experience.

Instead, the learning that the outcomes outline is long-term and will, in most cases, be built up over many experiences.

The very nature of the outcomes therefore encourages us to look at the long-term or big picture. While individual interactions and experiences remain important we need to keep them in perspective. They need to be seen in terms of this big picture rather than in isolation. If we only focus on the individual experiences, and attempt to link them too closely to the outcomes then we risk trivialising the learning that is taking place.

Of course there will be elements of identity, connection, wellbeing, learning and communication in most experiences. But it is only through repeated experiences that children are likely to establish, maintain and progress learning in each of the outcome areas. Highlighting every potential link to the outcomes that
occurs throughout the day is an exercise in overkill.

To take the example of identity, almost everything we do has a potential impact on a child’s identity. To document each of these details however would not only be time-consuming, it would also be meaningless.

The experiences and interactions that go into making up a child’s identity are important because they add up to something as a whole—not because they are necessarily meaningful in isolation. It is a little like trying to appreciate a grand panoramic view through a telescope—the means of looking actually defeats the purpose.

Of course, the telescope has a purpose, and is a valuable tool for focusing on fine detail, but it also has limitations when it comes to getting an overall sense of what it is that you are looking at.

Therefore, while the learning outcomes will have a place in our planning and documentation, they are often better suited to longer term planning and assessment when we have the opportunity to step back and consider learning in the context of the bigger picture, and to think about how all the little things that we do add up to something bigger and more important.

Liam McNicholas, ACT Manager Goodstart Early Learning and freelance writer on early childhood education:

“The Early Years Learning Framework encourages us to plan for children’s learning with five outcomes in mind. The outcomes are broad and guide us to view children’s learning holistically.

However, it is still common to hear educators say they “have to” do a certain amount of learning stories for each child, or “have to” collect five observations per month, or “have to” include at least one of the EYLF learning outcomes in all documentation.

Working as an educator or teacher in Early Childhood Education and Care is a complex job. As with any complex job, we create structures to try and reduce the complexity and find “the right way”.

It’s important to state clearly neither the EYLF or the National Quality Standard (or even the National Law) give any kind of specific direction on the amount, type or template of any documentation of our work. This is important, as any documentation we do as part of children’s learning should be purposeful and meaningful to both educator and child. Meeting an arbitrary quota is neither purposeful nor meaningful.

Documentation should reflect our knowledge of children, as well as our own professional practice as educators. It should provide evidence for the relationships we have developed with children, their families and the wider community, and show how we are planning to extend children’s learning.

The EYLF learning outcomes provide broad guidance for our teaching and analysis of children’s learning. They should be embedded in our work as professionals, and visible in our documentation in a variety of forms.

One of the aims of the EYLF is to promote a “shared language” in the Early Childhood Education and Care sector, so using the terms and themes of the document helps to advocate for the professionalism of the sector as a whole.

Using the language and themes of the EYLF—and also challenging the EYLF—is a far more meaningful way of engaging with the Framework than...
just linking documentation to specific outcomes. But there are no restrictions or templates for how that looks—documentation should be as varied, unique and inspiring as the children, educators, families and communities that produce it.’

**MYTH 3** Only teachers can document children’s development.

Leonie Gabriel:
‘As an early childhood educator of 20 years, this myth pulls at my educational heartstrings. I have managed children’s centres for 17 years and recently did an early childhood teaching degree, however, over the years, many colleagues have commented on my qualifications being ‘only’ a Diploma.

From the day I walked into my first centre as a diploma, I was required to take observational recordings and write analysis. The then-labelled ‘untrained’ educators were not required to do this. I was horrified to learn these knowledgeable educators—the ones with warm, trusting relationships with the children, who knew their strengths and achievements—were not allowed to make these recordings.

Let’s think about the three-year-old Indian boy with a strong attachment to his Certificate III-qualified Indian-Punjabi carer. He only speaks Punjabi and is often distressed. This carer soothes his tears by communicating with him in his language. Is the non-Punjabi speaking ECT qualified educator the only one equipped to share his experiences and development because she is the most highly qualified? The focus here is surely on getting the observational recording accurate and not on who signs their name at the end.’

Emma Cullen, Director of Abbotsford Long Day Care Centre, Sydney:
‘If teachers were the only ones who could document observations then stress levels would be through the roof, the difficulties of attracting and retaining early childhood teachers magnified, and a myriad of important information about children and development missed!

Part of the beauty of early childhood education lies in how different perspectives, knowledge and experiences come together. Similarly, this idea of richness in diversity can also be applied to our work as educators. Each staff member comes with a wealth of knowledge and experience. It is when these different viewpoints come together, that our learning is enhanced, and in the case of observations and documentation, our knowledge about the children furthered.

While some staff may bring a high level of theoretical knowledge, others provide a different lens, resulting in a unique insight and valuable information that may have otherwise been missed. An educator who has spent time forging bonds with a child, and who has also taken the time to build a relationship with the child’s family, will have an unrivalled level of insight about the child’s strengths and interests, and subsequently their learning and development.’

Do these myths sound familiar?
Early childhood educators can overcome the rumours, myths and whispers by rereading the Regulations and NQS documents. Go to: [www.ccccnsw.org.au/resources/nqf](http://www.ccccnsw.org.au/resources/nqf)
Difficult conversations generally involve issues we find hard to talk about. We may be concerned about raising the topic or uncertain how the other person will respond. Difficult conversations can evoke a range of emotions. They can make us feel uncomfortable, nervous and perhaps fearful of the outcome. We might also experience frustration or annoyance, and possibly become judgmental. The topics of these conversations can range from overdue fees to concerns about a child’s behaviour or development. They can also relate to concerns for a child’s safety and protection.

Our duty of care: child protection legislation

Recent changes to child protection legislation require us to report those children we suspect are at risk of significant harm, and to support the child and family when the risk is not considered significant. ‘It is clear that outcomes for children are better, and government services are more effective, if families are supported earlier and problems are addressed before they escalate’ (NSW Government, 2009. p. ii).

The NSW Online Mandatory Reporter Guide (MRG) at www.keepthemsafe.nsw.gov.au has been developed as a useful tool to assist us in determining whether a case meets the new risk of significant harm threshold for reporting. It is available online and in a PDF version.

The MRG is intended to help educators better respond to children and situations that require a statutory response. A further goal supported by the MRG is to ‘provide alternative options for reporters to assist children, young people and families who would be better served outside of the statutory child protection system’ (NCCd, 2013. p.1). Where a case does not meet the significant threshold, the MRG offers advice as to what actions may be taken. We may be advised to ‘document and continue relationship/monitor’, or we may be directed to consult a Child Well Being Unit (CWU) or other professionals for further advice or referral (NCCD, 2013).

[Note: CWUs are available for reporters in large government departments rather than for early childhood professionals.]

In either scenario, the priority is to determine what future actions will best address child wellbeing concerns, and provide appropriate support to the family. In some instances, this
We need to talk...

support may be provided through the ongoing assistance we typically offer to all families. For example, we might continue to create opportunities to talk with families, exchange information, and generate shared understandings and solutions in the best interests of the child and family. In others situations, the family may benefit from additional support services, in which case we will need to discuss this with the family and assist in the referral process.

Family Referral Services (FRS) have been established across NSW to assist us in this process. Information about FRS is available on the Keep Them Safe website. Human Services website www.hsnet.nsw.gov.au also provides information that we can access to learn about available services in our local area. Getting involved in local inter-agencies and networks will also allow us to develop an understanding of, and build relationships with, services available to support children and families. Within our own workplace we must also have policies and procedures to guide us in meeting our child protection obligations.

It’s a trust-based relationship

Before beginning a ‘difficult’ conversation, we should have already invested considerable time in building relationships with families. Families need to feel they belong to our programs as much as their children, and this means time must be spent building meaningful relationships based on mutual trust and respect.

Naturally our interactions need to be warm and genuine, showing a real interest and concern for the wellbeing of the child and family. We need to be non-judgemental, accepting and appreciative of diversity in any form, and we need to provide a program that reflects and celebrates this. We also need to have engaged in numerous conversations with families, over time, about a range of issues, including those that acknowledge family strengths and successes, in addition to concerns and challenges. In such an environment, families may be open to both raising concerns with us as well as listening to concerns we may have.

In working with families it is essential we try to understand and appreciate each individual without stereotyping individuals or groups of people. Not only is there great diversity in the background of each family, but the circumstances of families can change over time, as can the nature and level of support required (Wangnanyayake, Cheeseman, Fenech, Hadley & Shepherd, 2012). Families may also differ in their communication needs and preferences. Talking with families as part of our enrolment process provides an opportunity for us to find out about their preferences for having conversations, including difficult ones, in the future. Within a trusting relationship, families are more likely to listen, share their stories, and appreciate the support and advice that is offered. This is particularly so when we work in partnership with families.

The EYLF context

The Early Years Learning Framework highlights partnerships with families as one of the core principles underpinning practice (DEEWR, 2009). ‘Partnerships are the most effective kind of relationships for adults working together in an early childhood setting’ (Hood, 2012, p.22). Hood describes values, elements, skills and essential personal qualities related to building and working in partnerships. She lists qualities of being respectful, genuine, humble, empathic, quietly enthusiastic, and intellectually and emotionally attuned to others, as well as having personal integrity and professional expertise, including our skills and experience as early childhood...
educators. Working within a partnership framework will allow us to more fully understand the support needs of a family, and support them in their parenting role.

Providing support to parents
Parenting is arguably one of the most challenging and important roles in life, yet one for which there has traditionally been no training and little support. There is now, however, government recognition and focus on supporting parents through various early intervention and training programs (for example, Brighter Futures, Good Beginnings and Triple P).

There has also been an increased media focus and production of literature and other resources to assist parents in their role.

This focus on parenting raises the question of the role of the early childhood setting to address the needs of families and subsequently promote community supports that will provide opportunities for parents to deal with the stresses and issues they face in bringing up children today’. (Waniganayake et al., 2012. p.167).

While the need for us to support families is new within the context of child protection legislation, it is also something that is inherent to early childhood professionals.

We are used to providing information on a range of topics, and sometimes referring families to other services where the support required is outside of our role or expertise. Talking about sensitive issues is never easy, though, and concerns about a child’s safety and wellbeing can be particularly challenging.

Tips for difficult conversations
Regardless of the conversation you may need to have, and the perceived degree of difficulty of that conversation, there are some key factors to consider in doing so. This includes giving consideration to the following:

- Pay attention to where and how you will have the conversation. For example, a face-to-face conversation allows you to better gauge a parent’s reaction than communicating by phone or email. In some instances, a parent’s involvement in the conversation will be enhanced by the use of an interpreter.
- Be mindful of your legal and ethical obligations regarding privacy and confidentiality. Ensure the meeting takes place in a private place and that information is kept confidential unless a parent agrees for you to share it with another professional.
- Ideally, the person having the conversation will be the one most experienced to do so. In most instances, this will be the nominated supervisor.
- Keep the child visible in the conversation. Look for opportunities to highlight shared goals, which focus on the child’s best interests, and your desire to work together to achieve these.
- Be responsible for your message. This includes taking time to plan how you will initiate the conversation. Communicate your message clearly and positively, taking care to check for meaning and understanding.
- Pay attention to any negative thoughts, beliefs or feelings that might come up for you and distract
you from the issue at hand. Where possible, try to replace them with more helpful thoughts so you can stay focused and maintain a more positive mind set. For example, you might replace the thought: ‘This is not going to go well’ with ‘It’s normal to feel nervous. It means I am taking this seriously. I have been nervous before and managed OK’.

- Be open and curious. Avoid making assumptions, judgments or criticisms. Rather, use open-ended questions and active listening to gain a better understanding of the parent’s perspectives, priorities and needs.
- Be mindful of how you interpret the parent’s initial response. While this issue might be something you have been thinking about for some time, it may be a new idea for parents. While you may be ready for action, they may need time to contemplate new information.
- Be clear about what your role is and isn’t in relation to supporting parents. Recognise when parents’ needs might be better met through external resources and supports.
- Stay up to date about local support services available to families and their referral processes. Talk to parents about the range of options available, ask if they are interested to find out more, and check what support they might like from you to do so.
- Understand that while some families may welcome your support, others may not. Whatever their response, even if they decide not to act at this time, it is important to keep the lines of communication open. It is also critical that you continue to monitor the situation, according to the MRG and your child protection policy.

Our intention in having difficult conversations with families is to promote children’s wellbeing and safety, and ensure families are provided with the best support possible to assist them in their parenting role. However, it is also critical that you access the support you need to assist you to initiate such conversations. This might include access to relevant professional development programs, coaching and mentoring, professional reading, and engaging in team discussions. It might also include drawing on a range of strategies to help you manage stress and maintain wellbeing. Enhancing your knowledge, skills and strategies, according to your preferred methods of learning will help you, over time, to feel more confident and competent in having difficult conversations.

Lorraine Madden has worked in government and non-government organisations as an educator, inclusion support facilitator, program manager, trainer and coach, in a career spanning 30 years. She has a Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood) and a Master of Applied Science (Psychology of Coaching).

Karen Roberts has been an early childhood professional for 37 years. She has worked as a teacher, director, special educator, TAFE teacher, guest university lecturer, and currently as a children’s services manager and trainer. Karen has a Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood) and a Master of Early Childhood (Special Education).

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

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As we await a draft of the Australian Government’s Productivity Commission Inquiry into Childcare and Early Learning, we asked some of the sector’s finest minds for their opinion on the best possible outcome of this major public inquiry. Here’s what they said...

Barbara Pocock:

In its second sentence, the Productivity Commission’s Issues Paper around Child Care and Early Learning of December 2013, refers to childcare as a “market”. However, care of children is a fragile “product” like few others.

The quality of childcare is hard to evaluate and errors in its provision have long-term consequences—for individuals, society and the economy.

Unlike aged care, getting care of children wrong can have lifelong consequences—and getting it right can increase an individual’s life chances and society’s productivity.

The appropriateness of the childcare “product” varies by individual families as well as the age and needs of individual children, and demand for it is very geographically constrained. The costs of bad quality care can be huge—and are what economists call an “externality”—that is, costs that accumulate a long way forward in time, and for society, families and individuals in incalculable ways.

They arise through poor cognitive and emotional development, widening social inequality, and high social security costs. However, these externalities are rarely measured but often large.

A childcare system that exacerbates inequality—providing poor quality to the most disadvantaged—creates both economic and social costs: more unequal societies are harder to govern, more costly to manage, and have lower levels of wellbeing and trust for the citizens who live in them.

In this light, the best outcome of the Productivity Commission’s Inquiry would be a system that provides quality, universal care for all infants and young children who find their way into it—regardless of the socioeconomic status of their parents or their labour market attachment. It will allocate scarce government dollars to care that is very high quality for infants in particular, recognising that staffing ratios and staff skills are the key ingredients to quality care. Decent pay is an important part of achieving this.

It will not recommend very costly tax breaks that offer no help to low-income households but are very costly in budgetary terms. It will not recommend the subsidy of in-home care arrangements that result in unregulated, poor quality care that is not open to inspection and does not protect the most vulnerable (babies and young children)—and, into the bargain, add to Australia’s under class of poorly paid workers.
It will recognise that, compared to many other OECD countries, Australia under-invests in childcare.

Achieving quality, accessible, affordable childcare cannot be done within the current funding envelope. It requires more money and an honest review must address this.’

—Professor Barbara Pocock is Director of the Centre for Work + Life at the University of South Australia.

Eva Cox (AO):

‘I want to see the end of the current market model of funding via parents. While profit-based models are useful for the distribution of services where there is both balance between demand and supply that creates competition and informed demand, it doesn’t fit a community service.

The profit driver can not meet complex social needs: the funding is for up to 10 hours a day, no extra for odd hours, so maximising the numbers of children produces the best return. There is demand for baby places ... again these are more expensive to run, but get the same subsidy so most centres limit their numbers. Demand in inner suburbs or the CBD tends to be high but land is expensive, so places are often limited or quite expensive. Fees are the responsibility of the service to set and bear no relationship to subsidies or quality. They range from $65 to $130 plus per day. N.B. Commonwealth data on costs are estimated on average and obviously understate the higher fees.

The best outcome would be to:

- Reintroduce contractual funding links between the Australian Government and service providers that cover what services are to be offered, fees, hours and so on.
- Recognise that services do more than care for children to enhance women’s workforce participation, or prepare them for school, so ensure diverse adequate community services funding.
- Engage parents and communities in the design and provision of a range of services to families and children that are flexible and affordable.
- Create links between early childhood services, other community services and parents to recreate the community networks children and their families need.’

—Eva Cox is an Australian writer, feminist, sociologist, social commentator and activist. She was also the co-founder of Community Child Care Co-operative (NSW).

Zsuzsanna Millei:

‘The Abbott Government election campaign was characterised by slogans of simplicity and repetition. The main ideas were very simple and extremely conservative, repeated continuously in order to create a familiarity for the voters. The statements were developed as “common sense” and therefore “true”. Since the campaign worked, repetition

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SUBMISSION FROM CCC

Did you see Community Child Care Co-operative (NSW) submission? We presented a very convincing argument for more investment in early education and care.

In Australia, only 56 per cent of expenditure on early education and care comes from government, as opposed to an Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development average of 82 per cent.

The Community Child Care (NSW) submission called for:
- a greater emphasis on early education
- assistance for not-for-profit community-based organisations to meet demand via access to capital, specialised assistance and planning
- a commitment to quality provision of early education and care and the NQF
- removal of barriers to improving our education and care system such as low educator and teacher wages
- one layer of government to be responsible for all early education and care
- limits on corporate provision of early education and care
- increased investment in education and care by government.

You can download and read our submission in full at: http://ccccnsw.org.au/programs/advocacypeak

Unlike aged care, getting the care of children wrong can have lifelong consequences—and getting it right can increase an individual’s life chances and society’s productivity.

BARBARA POCOCK

followed in the full spectrum of policy-making: from asylum-seekers to childcare and education policy.

The scope of inquiry is given, the message is clear: we need “specific model(s) of care”, “such as the home-based care model in New Zealand”!

What does this mean exactly?

Home setting, under-qualified (mother) carers (free for the government) thus children can be taught in line with the official curriculum of the government? This is a return to a mythical 1950s.

The inquiry is called a study (based on “evidence” from biased sources) into the “child care and childhood learning market”, which are obviously biased towards a business model and limited by “current funding parameters” and, of course, “cost savings” by overcoming “inefficiencies” (p. 3). The idea of a ‘quick fix’ is insulting, to say the least.

Submitting opinions will simply mean the government will use that to withdraw funding, since “What role, if any should... government play...?” (p. 6). The only suggestion I have is to “comment”... on any or all issues they [educators] believe are relevant to the Inquiry” but have not been covered (p. 2), to unsettle the government’s simplistic and predetermined/assumed set of truths. This is indeed an empty review.

—Dr Zsuzsanna Millei is a senior lecturer Early Childhood and Comparative Education at the University of Newcastle.

Margaret Sims:

The current terms of reference position increased participation in the workforce as more important than optimising children’s learning and development. This is a rather functional view of the importance of ECEC, which in effect, positions children as commodities: commodities who can be pushed aside in order for parents to participate in today’s workforce, and commodities who can be shaped to participate in the workforce of tomorrow (i.e. investing in children now improves long-term outcomes and thus improves their contribution to the nation in the future).

Is it reasonable that we position children both as current burdens and future returns on investment?

MARGARET SIMS

Margaret Sims is a professor of Early Childhood at the University of New England, NSW.

Is it reasonable that we position children both as current burdens and future returns on investment?
The Productivity Commission Inquiry is an extensive review of the provision of Australian Early Childhood Education and Care. Although the terms of reference for the Inquiry were only released in December, the closing date for submissions was 3 February! Given the fact that many services close at the end of the year and the beginning of the year is an extremely busy time with new enrolments, this tight and, frankly, unrealistic time line for the review, does not bode well for the production of a thoughtful, and well-researched Inquiry Report.

The Inquiry places young children’s early childhood education and care within a market framework referring to the need to establish “a more flexible, affordable and accessible child care and early learning market”. It foregrounds affordability, flexibility and workforce participation.

Although children’s learning and development feature within the terms of reference, these assume a secondary position to workforce participation, thus effectively pulling back the focus on the quality of children’s care and education, which assumed so central a position with the Early Childhood Reform Agenda.

At its best the Productivity Commission Inquiry could have provided an opportunity for Australia to re-envision a more equitable and systematic way of envisaging ECEC programs. There is no doubt that current funding arrangements are not the most efficient way of building a high quality, universal ECEC system. Demand side funding (that is fee subsidies and rebates) linked to uncapped fees and untied to any planning mechanism, mean that funding is not efficiently channelled according to need or the best interests of children.

Although it fell short of building a robust and equitable early childhood system, the previous Early Childhood Reform Agenda made important advances toward developing national consistency and to improving the quality of young children’s care and education.

While the importance of the quality of children’s care and education is noted in the terms of reference for the Inquiry, of concern is the assertion that measures to improve quality potentially work against affordability.

This revisits the cost and quality dichotomy of old. In addition, regulatory reform is positioned as an administrative and cost burden rather than a protection for children or a lever to improve the quality of their experiences.

It is cogent to note that typically, more highly qualified workforces require less regulatory oversight, as do systems less reliant on market provision.

There is much to respond to in the Inquiry. Those readers concerned about the “schoolification” of early childhood programs might be interested in the question of the impact of extending the school day. What might this mean for children’s right to play? Is this a policy idea driven by concern for children or workforce flexibility?

The time line is tight and the questions many, nevertheless it will be important for readers to respond to the Inquiry in whatever way they can. Pick the question/s that motivate you most and go for it (even if the response is a little late)!

In responding to the Inquiry we need to think about how to move beyond the collation of ad hoc arrangements, to how to build a system that recognises the multifaceted ways in which ECEC supports children’s, families’ and community wellbeing. Australia is a relatively wealthy country and in a good position to build high quality Early Childhood Education and Care, and an equitable system that operates in the best interests of all its young children.’

—Associate Professor Frances Press, School of teacher Education, Charles Sturt University.

Engage parents and communities in the design and provision of a range of services to families and children that are flexible and affordable.

EVA COX
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.
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 interconnectedness 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

A n 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**

**D**ocumentation 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.
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 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’
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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: ccccnsw.org.au/rattlerresources

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.

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