

# Passionately Interested in Planning. (Still)

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I have used this title to pay tribute to Diti Hill's 2001 article 'Passion, power and planning in the early childhood centre'. I urge teachers to read it. The discussions about planning continue as many teachers struggle with the meaning of the word 'planning' and struggle finding ways to evidence planning.

Recently, I have had the privilege to meet and work with many teachers who have grappled with the concepts which underpin planning. By 'digging-deeper' teachers are realising that the term 'planning' may not fit nor describe the complexities or thinking behind the actions.

Through thinking deeply about intentions and purposes a new vocabulary is emerging that better describes the process of planning. Terms such as 'noticing, recognising and responding' and 'supporting the continuity of learning' often replace the words 'programme planning'. Teachers are discussing, documenting and articulating what 'planning' looks like in their place. Reflecting on the meaning that underpins this word, has enabled teachers to articulate more clearly and with more confidence the many ways that they 'plan for learning'.

Evidence of supporting the continuity of learning is found in a range of areas and the realisation that this aspect of learning is rarely captured in its entirety is quite liberating!

## So where is your planning?

When a visitor asks, "Where is your planning?" walk with them around your centre. Explain some of the work the children are engaged in and how this links to work that has been extended over weeks, months, years. Explain that this is one of the ways to see evidence of planning - in the actions of the children.

Suggest perhaps that 'planning' is what event organisers and property developers do - early childhood teachers foster the continuity of learning and build strong learning communities!

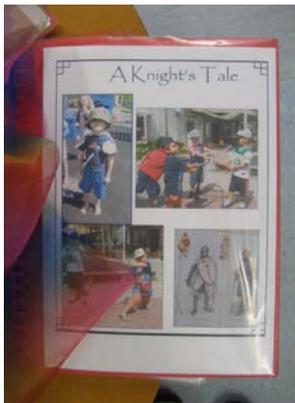
**Next**, show your visitor a child's portfolio. Progress will be visible through Learning Stories showing the acquisition and strengthening of skills, knowledge, and learning dispositions.

Learning will have become more complex and more connected as teachers have fostered interests and provided resources, time and space and become deeply engaged and interested in the learning they have noticed. Teachers' intentions will be clear; illustrated through reflections on the learning that is happening. The continuity and growing complexity of learning and responsive teaching becomes evident in individual children's portfolios.

Many teachers have struggled with documenting 'individual planning', separate folders and seemingly endless paperwork were generated to cover this requirement. Now, we recognise the robustness of Learning Stories. A portfolio filled with meaningful, connected Learning Stories **is** a child's individual learning plan and group planning is richly documented through Learning Stories.



Collective accounts of long term investigations, and complex projects are now often documented as **Stories of Interest (Planning Stories)**. Originally developed by Roskill South Kindergarten teachers, these are now widely used throughout the sector. Documentation such as this shows your learning community at work - the ways that individual interests and passions extend and lead to wider group learning.



This documentation makes visible to a wider audience, the way working theories are investigated and developed over time, the rich interplay of individual and group exploration and the intentional and mindful contribution of teachers and other adults.

Teachers will share their thinking behind their responses, explaining the part they play in the 'dance of learning'. This part is sometimes leading, sometimes being led - but always being deeply interested and ready to learn alongside children. For an example of a Story of Interest see chapter 8 in Lee et. al (2013).

The rhythm of children's explorations is not always continuous. Sometimes their research seems to advance in a regular way, but in other moments the directions they take seem almost incomprehensible to us.

For both children, and teacher the research process means developing sensitive and highly receptive antennas, building a situation of cognitive tension that involves excitement, sometimes disorientation, but always the highest level of interest." (Castagnetti et al. 1997, 95)

### Wall documentation

Explain to your visitor how your wall documentation shows work in progress, the way individual and group interests are being supported and extended. Teachers will be explaining how this learning is linked to prior experiences, prior knowledge and the thinking about how knowledge, skills and

dispositions will be challenged, stretched and taken into new learning spaces. This wall documentation might consist of narratives, photos, art, teachers' reflections, parent comments and connections to the wider learning community.

### In answer to the question "Where is your planning?" - It is evident everywhere!

We know about preparing for excursions, visitors etc., apart from that we can't plan much of what we will be doing a month in advance! We have no idea that a child will walk into our centre with a 'treasure' that will guide new learning and take them and their friends on a deep and challenging journey. Our best 'preparation' is to be open minded, deeply interested and ready to respond in the moment.

We recognise that most of children's learning unfolds before our eyes - as children respond, make plans, change direction and ask questions in the moment. Their questions, intentions and goals will often be different from ours. We may not understand these questions, intentions and goals until much later in the learning journey. This is ok. If teachers are ready, willing and able to set aside their own plans and ideas - and walk or often run beside children - the learning will be rich and complex. Often richer and more complex than the activities that are sometimes placed on tables in response to a child's interest.

### Resist hijacking children's interests!

Planning at certain times of year takes a themed approach - Easter, Christmas, Spring etc. - a rolling out of activities appears and suddenly the walls are filled with art works that look the same! The messages are clear: creativity, real meaningful learning, the exploration of working theories are all put on hold whilst the theme runs its course. The real learning moments are often lost as children move to the peripheral of activities to continue to pursue their goals. Meanwhile teachers spend time and energy maintaining order and coaxing the next child on their 'list' to come and endure the activity. The same teachers are often left abandoned at tables as they finish off children's unfinished work so it is deemed presentable enough to be displayed!

### When does an interest become a theme?

Often this happens the minute an interest is 'identified' and discussed at a 'planning meeting'!

Somehow our drive and good intentions get confused with meaningful teaching. Our enthusiasm takes over. Before we know what we are doing we have made a great leap from a child who has collected a handful of Autumn leaves into a few weeks of activities such as leaf threading, leaf rubbings and so on. The language we use gives us a clue that we have lost the plot - **'doing Autumn'**. The suggestion that we can **do** Autumn through a few superficial activities insults both a child's and teacher's intelligence.

The idea that we can roll out a few activities and call this teaching, I believe, is undermining the professional image of teachers. Perhaps next time an activity is put on a table be brave and challenge the teacher. Ask, "What are your intentions?", "What is the purpose here?" and "Who is this for?"

### Planning meetings

Planning meetings are being reconceptualised and renamed 'research time' and 'pedagogical discussion time'. We talk about researching learning - for that is what we do when we are deeply interested in the learning that is happening. At these meetings, teachers engage in meaningful discussion about 'What learning is happening here' and they think about ways to connect and deepen the learning. This is what engaged teachers/researchers do every minute of the day.



The focus of these meetings is on making connections and thinking deeply about skills, knowledge and dispositional learning. Questions such as, **"How can we strengthen this child's learning capacity?"** and **"How will we foster complexity, sustained engagement and exploring of working theories for these children?"** guide the discussions. Responses are

then purposeful and more in-tune with children's learning journeys.

### What we focus on grows

So let's grow a culture of researching and investigating learning. Start by re-naming your meetings. Then, instead of planning activities days, weeks, or months in advance, plan to be ready, willing and able to respond in the moment. Diti Hill reminds us, "we must avoid removing the learning moment from the control of the child." (2001, p.12) When a child lingers in that puddle, stay there both in mind and body. Try not to make great leaps into activities such as freezing ice cubes, bubble blowing and colouring in. Leave 'kangaroo' planning (making great leaps) to the kangaroos!

Planning to be in the moment is about taking a genuine and keen interest in what the child is interested in. Sometimes you won't have to say anything, your body language and expression is enough. Carlina Rinaldi discusses the intricacies of this way of responding.

"There is also an element of improvisation, a sort of 'playing be ear', an ability to take stock of a situation, to know when to move and when to stay still, that no formula, no general recipe, can replace." (2007, p.73)

Ursula Kolbe more succinctly talks about doing "a special kind of nothing" (2005, p.45).

So, don't spoil the moment by asking an inane question such as "What colour is the water?" When you are needed you will be summoned, with a look, a comment or a question. Be ready for it.

### The challenge now

As a team think about "In our place planning is about....." or "By planning we mean...." , "Planning is now described as....." Then share where evidence can be found. Make a list. You will be surprised at the different ways you document and evidence the continuity of learning. If there are gaps then there is always room to learn more and expand the possibilities.

Look for the ways Learning Stories pick up the threads from prior learning and experiences. Think about how you can make more connections, not just within similar experiences but across learning

domains. Focus on how dispositions drive learning over time - this is often the way we can make connections more visible.

Perhaps now is a great time to start an action research and self-review. Pose a question at your next pedagogical discussion such as "What do we mean when we say we plan from children's interests?". A question such as this ensures that the ensuing discussions will lead teachers into challenging places where planning might be reconceptualised and, in doing so, better understood.



Reconceptualising planning has happened over time for many teachers. They have not been given a 'structure' or a format downloaded off the internet. Rather a process of discussion and debate, trial and error, shaping and reshaping has taken place.

Teachers who have taken the time to think deeply about what they mean by planning, where it is evidenced, and how it is documented and shared, have the confidence to articulate the 'processes', the rich intermingling and interweaving of noticing, recognising and responding that we tried hard to fit into a box called 'planning'. Trusting in the "process of reconceptualising the notion of planning" is what Diti Hill has urged teachers to do (2001, p. 12).

We are now in an exciting space. A space where we can get together 'on the same' page; now that the words on the 'page' are ones that we have written and therefore have more meaning to us.

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