

## Abstract

University Students' Perceptions of Pedagogical Documentation: A Qualitative Research Study

by Nicole Mitchell

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Director: Sandra Triebenbacher, Ph D

DEPARTMENT OF CHILD DEVELOPMENT AND FAMILY RELATIONS

Ten university students attended a two week study abroad tour of the early childhood centers in Pistoia, Italy. Using a qualitative design, students participated in reflective writing activities in order to assess their understandings and perceptions regarding pedagogical documentation practices in early childhood education. Pedagogical documentation is one aspect of Reggio-inspired social constructivist practice that is becoming increasingly important in educational practices and teacher education programs as a form of curriculum development and student assessment. Findings from this study indicate that studying abroad increased students' understanding and influenced their perceptions of pedagogical documentation. These findings provide significant implications to the field of early childhood educational practice and teacher education programs embracing a social constructivist approach.

*Keywords:* early childhood education, pedagogical documentation, Pistoia, Reggio Emilia, study abroad



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Nicole Mitchell

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Nicole Mitchell

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by

Nicole Mitchell

APPROVED BY:

DIRECTOR OF THESIS: \_\_\_\_\_  
Sandra Triebenbacher, Ph D

COMMITTEE MEMBER: \_\_\_\_\_  
Carmel Parker White, Ph D

COMMITTEE MEMBER: \_\_\_\_\_  
Joy Stapleton, Ph D

CHAIR OF THE DEPARTMENT OF CHILD DEVELOPMENT AND FAMILY RELATIONS:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Cynthia Johnson, Ph D

DEAN OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Paul J. Gemperline, Ph D

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## **CHAPTER 1: Introduction**

The early childhood systems in many parts of Italy have become widely recognized for their thriving examples of social constructivist practice. Over the past 20 years, the services provided by the Italian city-run municipal schools of Reggio Emilia have gained increased recognition and acclaim in the United States and other countries around the world (Gandini & Edwards, 2001; New, 1993). Steeped in Italian culture, these schools have evolved from a strong and constantly refined pedagogical relationship between theory and practice (Gandini & Edwards).

Reggio Emilia was the first and is the most widely recognized Italian city in the early childhood academic literature and thus carries the name for the approach: the Reggio-inspired approach. However, there are other notable cities in Italy that provide similar exceptional services to young children. The city of Pistoia, located in the heart of Tuscany, is one such example. The infant/toddler and preprimary services offered in Pistoia are, in fact, attracting attention in their own right for their innovations in early childhood education and work with families (Edwards & Gandini, 2008; Galardini & Giovannini, 2001).

Due to the unique cultural influence fueling their pedagogy, these Italian systems do not consider themselves to be a model or curriculum to be copied and applied elsewhere, but an inspiration or a reference point for schools in other cultures to begin the process around developing and refining their own early childhood educational systems (Hewett, 2001). Other cultures inspired by Reggio pedagogy, such as the United States, have the difficult and distinct challenge of reflecting upon, embracing, and implementing key elements of this approach. Early childhood professionals seeking to embrace key elements of the Italian approach that align with

sound early childhood developmental research provide a way to inform and improve practice in the United States. “It must be carefully uncovered and redefined according to one’s own culture in order to successfully affect practice elsewhere” (Hewett, 2001, p. 99). As a result, groups of educators and leaders from the United States travel each year to observe and engage in dialogue with caregivers, pedagogistas, and others involved with the schools in these systems.

## **CHAPTER 2: Review of Literature**

### **Key Elements of the Reggio-Inspired Approach**

Several key elements that define the Reggio approach and set it apart from other early childhood educational philosophies. These key elements have been identified as having a strong and competent image of the child (Malaguzzi, 1994; Tarr, 2003), teacher as researcher and co-creator of knowledge alongside the child, multiple forms of knowing (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1993), emergent curriculum set up through environmental provocations and manifested in projects (Malaguzzi, 1993; Rinaldi, 1993), and the practice of pedagogical documentation (Gandini & Goldhaber, 2001).

A strong and competent image of the child recognizes that from birth, children are able to communicate their needs and desires and that this ability should be respected by adults working with them. Children are viewed as strong protagonists of their own learning. Teachers study the children in their care, build strong relationships, and collaborate with families and other teachers in order to structure curriculum and support children. It is embraced that there are multiple forms of knowing and processes of coming to understand information. Knowledge is subjective and socially constructed in relational exchanges. Emergent project work provides a rich and flexible parameter that facilitates collaborative work between children, teachers, and families. Teachers thoughtfully set up provocations, observe and interact with children, participate in collaborative discussion based on observations, and plan and structure further provocations. Provocations refer to “invitations to children to engage in (further) investigation of a topic” (Oken-Wright & Gravett, 2002, p. 213). Pedagogical documentation is a tool that teachers use in order to make learning visible, illustrate relationships, and facilitate emergent curriculum. The

Reggio-inspired practice of pedagogical documentation has contributed to many early childhood professionals' views of the assessment and curriculum processes in early educational settings (Kroeger & Cardy, 2006). Each of these independent elements is interdependent on the other elements and can be best understood within the context of the theory of social constructivism.

### **Social Constructivism**

Constructivism has historically viewed young children as scientists actively exploring the world in order to construct a series of mental schemas which represent their understanding of the outside world (Edwards, 2005). Current theoretical discussions, building on Lev Vygotsky's (1934/1962) work, integrate and emphasize the social and cultural functions of learning and development (Carlson, 1999; Edwards, 2005). Social constructivist theory views learning as a social process in which child and teacher engage to co-construct the socio-cultural realm, and their decisions scaffold each other (Adams, 2006). Co-construction not only takes place between teacher and child, but also in interactions between children.

Education takes on specific characteristics when a social-constructivist framework is used to guide practice. Teachers act as supporters of this learning through environmental preparation (Carter, 2007; Gandini, 1993; Tarr, 2004), active engagement (Adams, 2006; Edwards, 2005), and careful observations and documentation (Gandini & Goldhaber, 2001; Lewin-Benham, 2008; Vecchi, 1993). Constructivist teachers of young children use documentation to discover how children think, feel, and come to know, then to plan and structure opportunities to extend this learning through careful environmental design (Kroeger and Cardy, 2006). Ongoing observation of children engaged in a wide variety of experiences provides an authentic picture of the child's

personality, interests, developmental levels, skills and accomplishments, and strategies for problem solving (Forman & Hall, 2005). Emergent curriculum reflects these values.

### **Emergent Curriculum**

Emergent curriculum is a natural extension of social constructivism. It is manifested in project work (Katz, 1993). It is defined as an exchange of ideas, debate, and negotiation among teachers and children that leads to the initiation of a project and determines how a project will continue or branch (Lewin-Benham, 2008). Loris Malaguzzi (1994), founder of the Reggio Emilia approach, posits that “we need to be open to what takes place [in school] and able to change our plans and go with what might grow at that very moment both inside the child and inside ourselves” (p. 53). In this type of curriculum, teachers carefully observe the interests of the children in order to plan activities and help extend the child’s learning (Katz & Chard, 1996). It is manifested in short and long term projects initiated by the children and extended by the teachers. It is a negotiated and flexible process.

Current literature both explores and defends the validity of such curriculum through an emphasis on reflective documentation in which children and teachers constantly revisit previous learning in order to extend this learning (Forman & Hall, 2005; Goldhaber, 2007; Kline, 2008; Lewin-Benham, 2008; McNaughton & Krentz, 2007). Pedagogical documentation is part of a critical cycle of inquiry in which teachers observe, document, analyze and reflect, plan and extend experiences, revisit and revise, and then repeat the cycle (Gandini & Goldhaber, 2001; Tegano & Moran, 2005 ). This concept of flexibility in planning has been embraced and implemented in many progressive early childhood settings. This is not without great controversy. Current educational standards in the United States promote a culture where performance is often valued over learning (Adams, 2006).

Accountability standards often conflict with social constructivist theory and practice. In this increasingly standardized atmosphere, visible assessments of learning standards and progress are often necessary to both assess and defend curriculum goals. “Researchers have found a patterned relationship between the advance of accountability concerns and the retreat of traditional child observations” (Kline, 2008, p. 71). Current constructivist teachers, student-teachers, and teacher educators face the challenge of balancing educational accountability standards with active, child-centered practice. Pedagogical documentation in early childhood classrooms provides a valuable instrument to help bridge this gap. “If done properly, good documentation can serve all masters simultaneously, from individual assessment, to curriculum planning, to instructional accountability” (Forman, Lee, Wisley, & Langley, 1993, p. 249). Documentation can be used as an effective tool to make learning visible to children, teachers, administrators, parents, and the outside community.

### **Pedagogical Documentation**

The element of pedagogical documentation is recognized as a cycle of inquiry that fuels early childhood educational practice (Gandini & Goldhaber, 2001; Goldhaber, 2007). It is understood that documentation is a journey, not a destination (Beneke, 2000) that ultimately brings teachers closer to children’s learning experiences” (Kroeger & Cardy, 2006, p. 389) and “embodies the essence of getting closer to children’s thinking” (p. 391). Seitz (2008) defends the importance of documentation by asserting that it shows accountability, extends learning, and makes learning visible. It draws others into the experience and helps explain learning. Documentation can embody any format that communicates the story and purpose of an event, experience, or development. An important aspect of this communication is to consider the audience and purpose of the documentation. “Successful documentation formats reflect the

intended audience and its purposes” (Seitz, p. 89). It should fully explain the process of an event while highlighting various aspects of that event. “It provides a record of the learning experiences in the classroom, reveals connections between events, and provides children, parents, and teachers with the opportunity to review and plan future experiences” (Fraser & Gestwicki, 2002, p. 129).

Pedagogical documentation illustrates a holistic view on child learning. “All children have the potential, albeit in different ways, to learn and to develop their own ideas, theories, and strategies” (Gandini & Goldhaber, 2001). The Reggio-inspired approach to early childhood education embraces these different ways of learning as ‘languages.’ In Malaguzzi’s famous hundred languages of children poem, he writes that “the child has a hundred languages (and a hundred hundred hundred more)” (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1993, p. v1, see Appendix B for copy of full poem). Documentation is not intended to illustrate only cognitive strides in development, but to view the whole child and the various domains that influence development and learning.

Different types of experiences in the classroom necessitate different formats of documentation. Seitz (2008) states that “the format that documentation takes can be as varied as the creator’s mind permits” (p. 88). This documentation can take many forms. “Depending on the topic and age of the children, documentation may range from a simple photograph with an explanation... to a series of panels that illustrate the process followed in a lengthy project” (Fraser & Gestwicki, 2002, p. 133). Photographs, written or recorded words, videos, webbing charts, books, displays, panels, slide shows, portfolios, and learning stories are commonly used media for documenting children’s ideas and work (Buell & Sutton, 2008; Forman & Hall, 2005; Goldhaber, 2007; Goodfellow, 2004; Kline, 2008; Seitz, 2008).

The documentation panel has become one of the most popular formats that teachers and teacher educators use to document (Kline, 2008; Seitz, 2008). The panel is a type of display that combines photographs and artifacts with words, it provides teachers with a versatile and comprehensive medium that can be used to make children's learning visible (Appendix C). "Panels document the interactions between child/child, child/adult and child/material. They may contain photos, transcripts of conversations, teacher's notes, and artifacts from one child or a group of children" (Kline, p. 71). Panels can be created on any flat display surface in the school such as walls in the classroom or hallway, bulletin boards, or cardboard/foam board displays. The purpose of the panel is to function as a communication tool. It is this purpose that separates it from other types of bulletin boards and displays in the classroom. Kline states that "documentation panels facilitate communication with families" (p. 73). Panels invite parents into the classroom, allowing them to spend more time there, and thus enabling them to become more involved, and strengthen family-school relationships. These panels have been introduced in teacher education programs to help candidates reflect on their teaching practices. "Panel making is a recursive process providing a forum for candidates to revisit children's learning; analysis of the documentation artifacts; and thinking, refining, and clarifying that thinking as they go" (p. 74).

Documentation can embody simpler forms than the documentation panel in order to inform planning practices. Webbing is a popular form of planning in many early childhood settings. Buell and Sutton (2008) moved webbing beyond merely planning around topics and themes and into a form of documentation. They achieved this by placing each child's name in the center of the web, and the extensions became observations of children's actions and interests. This type of web provides teachers with a loose form of documentation that is visible and easily

maintained. “Webbing enables teachers to brainstorm and record ideas in an organized way” (p.100). It is a strong way to organize interests and topics that the children express curiosity in exploring. This type of web is different than traditional forms of planning webs. Buell and Sutton observe that “student teachers often got too caught up in the content and theme of the web and lost some of the focus on the children” (p. 101). In addition, when some children showed interest in topics not on the web, student teachers tended to ignore it. Ideas that did not fit into the theme were often not considered. They found that child-centered webbing helps early childhood education students focus on both developmental needs and the interests of the child as opposed to the themes or content on traditional webs.

### **Documentation Challenges**

Teacher beliefs and attitudes often present a challenge to documentation practices. McCarthy and Duke (2007) identify a variety of challenges relating to teacher beliefs and attitudes: documentation is viewed as “too hard,” “something they don’t have time for,” and as “one more thing to do” (p. 104). Goldhaber and Smith (1997) recognized that documentation demands a high degree of emotional investment. The emotional investment is a result of a process that evokes frustration, confusion, and fatigue. A strong belief in the value of documentation is necessary for teachers to commit to the systematic process that pedagogical documentation demands.

A major hurdle novice teachers and beginning documenters encounter is that of not knowing what to document. A variety of topics are worth documenting (Seitz, 2008). Seitz posits that documentation is most effective if one topic is carefully selected and explored to the fullest rather than trying to document a little of everything. To choose a focus, the teacher would start by observing an interest of the children and show developing progress of that interest. This

process is extremely difficult for some teachers overwhelmed with the freedom of options presented through this style of documentation.

Other challenges regarding documentation are theme-based and pre-developed curriculum guidelines as well as standardized assessments that many teachers and directors are required to use (Kroeger & Cardy, 2006). Theme-based and pre-developed curricula provide a form of environmental standardization in order to “offset low levels of teacher training and wage, and child and teacher mobility in settings serving high numbers of low income families” (p. 393). Assessments in the United States (U.S.) are often standards-driven. These curricula and assessments do not take into account teachers’ responsiveness to the needs of the children. Constructivist views and emergent curriculum hold children themselves as the standards to which they teach.

Finally, this process of documentation is meant to be collaborative and reflective (Gandini & Goldhaber, 2001). In order for this to occur, proper structural supports are necessary to foster documentation. Goldhaber and Smith (1997) describe the University of Vermont’s Campus Child Care Center as an American example of a program with such supports in place. The lead teacher and program faculty co-teach academic courses and continually explore and challenge each other’s understanding of theory and practice. Most significantly, center and program staff share a common vision. It is in this atmosphere that documentation can thrive. Rigid and uniform early childhood settings breed an atmosphere that is passive and lacking in motivation, depth and breadth, and relevancy (Kroeger & Cardy, 2006). Lack of a collaborative atmosphere is a considerable challenge to the practice of pedagogical documentation.

Pedagogical documentation is a difficult process for many teachers in general; however, teacher education programs have a particularly salient role in equipping educators with the

information and tools to make documentation a successful component in early childhood classrooms and programs. It is important to expose pre-service teachers to this process of pedagogical documentation as early as possible in teacher education programs in order to move away from transmission oriented education toward new understandings of teaching through critical thinking and inquiry (Tegano & Moran, 2005). Transmission oriented education refers to an image of the teacher as “one of expert knower and transmitter of knowledge and the image of the child is one of being needy and dependent” (p. 289). Tegano and Moran look toward teacher education programs and posit that “inquiry-oriented practice can and should begin in the earliest practica and develop through a continuity of related experiences” (p. 289).

### **College Teacher Education Programs**

Teacher education programs in many university and community college settings are incorporating Reggio-inspired pedagogical concepts into their curriculum (Buell & Sutton, 2008; Goldhaber and Smith, 1997; McCarthy and Duke, 2007). Improvement in overall program quality has been reported by several teacher educators as a result of the implementation of pedagogical documentation practices into teacher education programs (Goldhaber & Smith, 1997; Kline, 2008; McCarthy & Duke, 2007; McNaughton & Krentz, 2007). According to Kline (2008), these improvements resulting from pedagogical documentation were demonstrated through a respect for children’s ideas and work; providing a structure for continuous planning based on student work in progress; enticing parents to become more aware of their children’s experiences in school; enabling teachers to focus on their role in supporting the learning process; and providing public evidence of children’s cognitive abilities.

Social constructivist teacher education programs preparing students to work as professionals in the field of early childhood often use pedagogical documentation as a vehicle for

reflection. The most common trends among developing teachers enrolled in these teacher education programs include: exposure to literature about Reggio-inspired documentation practices, collaboration using dialogue and reflection, systematic gathering of information through child observations, the creation of documentation, and examination of personal theories and teaching practice (Buell & Sutton, 2008; Goldhaber & Smith, 1997; Kline, 2008; Kroeger & Cardy, 2006; McCarthy & Duke, 2007; McNaughton & Krentz, 2007; Tegano & Moran, 2005). Trends in outcomes included student transformations in theoretical views, classroom 'roles' and educational practice, an increase in self efficacy and competence, and inspiration.

As a result of participating in these teacher education programs, participants reported numerous benefits. The strengths of the findings were inspiring to the teacher educators implementing the programs. Goldhaber and Smith (1997) reported that there were improved collaborative relationships between student teachers and teacher educators. Through sharing stories, students were 'drawn in' to the process of collaboration; the collaboration helped fire intellectual excitement (McCarthy & Duke, 2007).

In many of the programs, students developed greater self confidence and came to see themselves as competent professionals and teacher researchers (Goldhaber & Smith, 1997; Kroeger & Cardy, 2006; McCarthy & Duke, 2007). The benefits of students' improved self-perceptions were especially salient to McCarthy and Duke as they noted that their population of student teachers was mostly women with low incomes who held negative views toward documentation and reflective thinking.

The struggles revealed through teacher education programs were both abundant and representative of larger societal challenges related to documentation. Teacher educators often struggle with helping early childhood student teachers understand and develop the process of

documentation (Goldhaber & Smith, 1997; Kroeger & Cardy, 2006; McCarthy & Duke, 2007; Tegano & Moran, 2005). This can be a result of a variety of factors and overall findings reveal that documentation is simply a hard place to reach (Kroeger & Cardy, 2006).

McCarthy and Duke (2007), along with Tegano and Moran (2005), found that student teachers had preconceived ideas about teaching, and these ideas were largely based on the way that they were taught in school. Students whose teachers modeled transmission-style approaches produced student teachers who valued a transmission-style approach. This represents a fundamental struggle for teacher educators due to the epistemological differences regarding the nature of learning. Tegano and Moran state that “novice teachers must develop both the need to know and dispositions for knowing in order to move away from transmission oriented teaching and learning toward inquiry-oriented practice” (p. 287). McCarthy and Duke found that empowering the student teachers through collaboration as well as educating them about child development helped to transform these preconceived ideas into more developmentally appropriate practice. It was the inspiration that came with the increased competence that ignited the process of change.

Another struggle teacher educators face is students’ misunderstandings of the purpose of documentation. Kroeger and Cardy (2006) explain that students having trouble simultaneously engaging with children while documenting demonstrate this misunderstanding. “These students see documenting as an either-or dichotomy distracting them from valuable processes like structuring the classroom, interacting with the children, and performing other teacherly duties... absent from the teachers’ earliest insights, however, is the deep philosophical rationale behind the practice, which reveals its purpose more fully” (p. 390). Kroeger and Cardy concluded that they try to help students focus not on time or resources that they are lacking, but upon

documentation forms and what those forms have to teach them about what is missing in their understanding of children and settings. They also grouped students into dyads in order to experience collaboration and support through reflective conversations.

Influenced by the social constructivist views of learning shared by all of the teacher education programs in this literature review, students were given space and time within a structured format in order to autonomously and interdependently construct their understanding of pedagogical documentation. Although the challenges were significant, so also were the transformations within the student teachers' paradigms and practice.

### **Problem and Purpose**

Despite progress in national standards, many American early childhood caregivers and educators struggle to embrace, apply, or implement practices that reflect a Reggio-inspired influence into their early childhood environments (Kroeger & Cardy, 2006). A general consensus in the research indicates that there are barriers to implementing key elements of Reggio-inspired practices (Egan, 2009; New, 2007; Strong-Wilson & Ellis, 2007). Research also indicates that teacher education programs play a critical role in helping future teachers overcome these barriers (Buell & Sutton, 2008; Goldhaber & Smith, 1997; Kline, 2008; Kroeger & Cardy, 2006; McCarthy & Duke, 2007; McNaughton & Krentz, 2007; Tegano & Moran, 2005). Illustrating different approaches to teaching adult learners about the key elements of Reggio-inspired pedagogy is instrumental to understanding ways to improve practice in teacher education programs. Although there are examples in the literature (e.g., Buell & Sutton, 2008; McCarthy & Duke, 2007), continued research is needed to illustrate how teacher educators and student teachers come to understand and embrace pedagogical documentation in different contexts and situations. Some of the teacher educators were inspired through actual visits to

Italy (e.g., Goldhaber and Smith, 1997), but nowhere in the literature did any of the researchers take a group of university students studying early childhood to Italy to observe documentation first hand. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine university students' understanding and perceptions of pedagogical documentation in the early childhood environment before, during, and after a study abroad tour of the infant/toddler and preprimary centers in Pistoia, Italy. Two central research questions guided this study:

1. How do child development/family relations students describe their perceptions of pedagogical documentation prior to, during, and following the study abroad process?
2. How do child development/family relations students describe their perceptions of current use of pedagogical documentation in U.S classrooms prior to and following the study abroad process?

## CHAPTER 3: Method

### Participants

Ten university students participated in a two week study abroad to the infant/toddler centers in Pistoia, Italy. All were female and ages ranged from nineteen to twenty-eight years. There were four undergraduate and six graduate students, all from the Department of Child Development and Family Relations at East Carolina University in Greenville, North Carolina. The students had varying interests, majors, and educational backgrounds, including early childhood education, early intervention, and child life.

### Procedure

**Prior to the study abroad.** Students participated in a series of three pre-departure discussion sessions, each lasting two hours, during which they discussed their interpretation of a variety of literature on social constructivist practice, Reggio-inspired pedagogy, and pedagogical documentation (Appendix D). In addition, each student also read the text, *Bambini: The Italian Approach to Infant/Toddler Care* (Gandini & Edwards, 2001), as Donatella Giovannini, one of the contributing authors, was instrumental in facilitating many of the group interactions on the study tour. The sessions were set up to be discussion based, interactive, and reflective. Discussions for each session centered on students' reflections on the literature and written responses to prompts about documentation practices (Appendix E).

**While in Italy.** Over the course of fourteen days, students observed in ten different infant/toddler and preprimary centers, participated in reflective group discussions each day with Italian educators, and kept a daily, reflective journal.

**Upon return from Italy.** Students used their own documentation of their experience to compile a comprehensive, reflective portfolio. Following completion of their portfolio, students responded to the same prompts they wrote about prior to the actual study abroad experience with the addition of one question (Appendix E).

### **Data Collection**

This study attempted to examine students' understanding and perceptions of documentation by using multiple forms of documentation. The data used in this study came from four sources: completed pre-tour and post-tour writings prompts, reflective journals composed daily while in Italy, and a comprehensive portfolio at the end of the study abroad experience. Each of these components illustrated different pieces of the students' growth in understanding and perceptions of pedagogical documentation processes.

### **Theoretical Perspective**

This qualitative study utilized key elements of a phenomenological framework informed by a post-positivist research paradigm. Phenomenological research seeks to understand individuals' lived meaning of phenomena through the first person perspective (Gubrium & Holstein, 1993; Hein & Austin, 2001). According to this perspective, conceptions individuals hold about their perceptions should be sensitive to the notion that reality is an essentially subjective experience (Edwards, 2005). "Studies seeking to examine beliefs, conceptions, or understanding people hold about their worlds and/or work should reflect this orientation and therefore emphasize the collection of data aimed at illuminating the issues as they are perceived or interpreted by the participants of concern" (Edwards, 2005, p.40).

## **Analyses**

All information relating to documentation from each of the data sources (pre/post writings based on prompts, reflective journals, and comprehensive portfolios) was extracted for analysis. A blind analysis of students' writing was conducted first by the primary researcher, then by a secondary source, the primary researcher's graduate advisor, and grouped under broad themes once consensus was reached. In this study, it was very important that each student, regardless of age, educational status (graduate or undergraduate), or major, had an equal voice in the research process. Therefore, statements were included from each student. If more than one student wrote statements very similar in meaning, only one was selected to represent the expressed concept. The culmination of these data resulted in a collective voice that represented each student participating in the study abroad process.

## **CHAPTER 4: Results**

### **Students' Perceptions of Pedagogical Documentation**

The first research question examined students' perceptions of pedagogical documentation prior to, during, and following the study abroad process. Analysis of the data resulted in five common themes that remained present throughout the entire process and the emergence of one additional theme while in Italy. The common themes include that pedagogical documentation a.) involves education, b.) is for the teachers, c.) is for the child, d.) involves families, and e.) is for the school and outside community (see Tables 1, 2, and 3). While in Italy, the additional theme emerged that documentation can give value to the period of childhood (see Table 2).

Although the five broad themes were consistent across the research process, they were qualitatively distinct in many regards. The students' descriptions that supported each theme illustrated that their understanding and reflections evolved during the study abroad process and upon returning home. Students perceived that documentation was for the child, teacher, families, school, and outside community before they experienced the study abroad process, but it was not until they were immersed in the Italian educational settings that they began to understand the distinct ways in which this style of documentation applied to those entities. As can be seen in Table 1, prior to the study abroad, students perceived that pedagogical documentation was a type of documentation that referred to education. During and following the study abroad (Tables 2 and 3), they made the distinction that it does not simply "refer" to education but that it is a method of education that plays a central role in Reggio-inspired schools.

Table 1 <i>Perceptions of pedagogical documentation before the study abroad</i>
Theme 1: Documentation refers to education.
(Quotes from students' writing based on prompts before the study abroad) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "It is the process of creating an archive of the child's learning and may include teachers' notes, pictures, or creations the child has made."</li> <li>• "It is the recording of a child's progress in various aspects or on various tasks, often in the form of teacher recordings and checklists."</li> <li>• "Shows the progression of the child's learning and serves as a reference for improvement."</li> <li>• "Refers to education or teaching, often used to document the progress of students."</li> <li>• "Provides a holistic view of children, their abilities, their influence on those around them, and control over their own learning."</li> <li>• "Creates an atmosphere of openness to new and differing ideas."</li> <li>• "Promotes observations with open endings rather than observations to simply meet standards."</li> <li>• "Helps the curriculum to be child centered and appropriate."</li> </ul>
Theme 2: Documentation is for teachers.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "Allows the teacher to reflect on children in a natural manner."</li> <li>• "Allows the teacher to assess exactly what the child is interested in and support learning through that interest."</li> <li>• "Through this type of documentation, teachers usually observe student behavior in order to reflect on their teaching or why a child is or isn't meeting specific academic standards or goals."</li> <li>• "It is very important in understanding the development of students so that teachers can better create a classroom environment that caters to the special needs of each student."</li> </ul>
Theme 3: Documentation is for the child.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "It establishes individual needs of students."</li> </ul>
Theme 4: Documentation involves families.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "Allows and promotes parental involvement."</li> <li>• "Provides visual and concrete evidence to children and parents regarding development."</li> </ul>
Theme 5: Documentation is for the school and outside community.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "Provides 'proof' of what is going on in a teacher's classroom."</li> <li>• "Can be used as a tool to show principals or directors the benefits of specific teaching strategies."</li> <li>• "Supports the need for funding."</li> </ul>

Table 2 <i>Perceptions of pedagogical documentation during the study abroad</i>
Theme 1: Documentation is an educational method. (Quotes from students' reflective journals)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "It is a daily process that plays a central role."</li> <li>• "It is a method of education that shows and highlights the work of children and gives it value."</li> <li>• "makes learning visible by making explicit things not being seen"</li> <li>• "gives value to the process of learning"</li> <li>• "promotes reflection- it should be thought about and make you think"</li> <li>• "It is used to tell a story."</li> <li>• "Teachers and children construct activities based on reflections about documentation."</li> <li>• "It is a constructive, not passive, process."</li> <li>• "It is about taking a distance from your daily work in order to reflect on it."</li> </ul>
Theme 2: Documentation is for the child.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "can help the children remember what they can do in an area and what they have done before."</li> <li>• "shows the children that what they are doing is important"</li> <li>• "gives children a voice"</li> <li>• "It increases the relationship between children."</li> <li>• "shows how different things work with different children"</li> </ul>
Theme 3: Documentation gives value to the period of childhood.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "It should be about ordinary, daily events that happen- not just extraordinary events; the narration of the story itself makes it come alive."</li> <li>• "The richness of childhood comes to life if we are constantly enriching this time period."</li> <li>• "Talking about what we do enriches childhood."</li> <li>• "Our reflection enriches childhood."</li> </ul>
Theme 4: Documentation is for the teacher.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "requires teachers to take a step back and helps them reflect on their work and on professional practice"</li> <li>• "helps teachers organize their way of thinking"</li> <li>• "builds a common ground between a group of educators within the school"</li> <li>• "provides a common ground between teachers and other professionals"</li> <li>• "Educators share ideas with colleagues to find meaning in what is being done."</li> <li>• "It is important for teachers to talk about what they see."</li> <li>• "confirms teacher identity"</li> <li>• "builds identity of colleagues working together, all teachers feel involved in a common project"</li> <li>• "It is oriented toward knowledge and acquiring a greater critical awareness about practice."</li> </ul>

<p>Table 2 (continued)</p> <p><i>Perceptions of pedagogical documentation during the study abroad</i></p>
<p>Theme 5: Documentation involves families.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “It is important to provide a wide variety of opportunities for parents to be involved in the documentation process.”</li> <li>• “encourages parents to care about school and their child’s experiences at school”</li> <li>• “encourages the parents’ interest in what the child is doing at school”</li> <li>• “smoothes the transition into school by providing a link between home and school”</li> <li>• “Parents rely on good documentation and it helps the families feel involved in the school system.”</li> <li>• “everyone has the opportunity to participate in documentation but does not penalize parents for not documenting”</li> <li>• “It gives value to the words and participation of parents.”</li> </ul>
<p>Theme 6: It is for the school and wider community.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “It establishes a sense of memory in the school.”</li> <li>• “gives an outside view on teaching”</li> <li>• “It provides proof of the abilities of children.”</li> </ul>

<p>Table 3 <i>Perceptions of pedagogical documentation after the study abroad</i></p>
<p>Theme 1: Documentation is an educational method.</p>
<p>(Quotes from students' comprehensive portfolios and writings based on prompts following the study abroad)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "It gives value to the work of teachers and children, expresses not just extraordinary events, but ordinary, daily events and makes things that are not explicit visible."</li> <li>• "A set curriculum is viewed as inhibiting learning, so documentation in a flexible curriculum is not only a record of growth, but can be used as a tool for learning."</li> <li>• "Keeping evidence of very important things, specifically about the development of children. It uses pictures, the words of children, and work samples to show children's development and where they are going."</li> <li>• "Allows teachers, children, parents, and visitors to reflect and learn from various projects."</li> <li>• "Should be looked at as a daily process."</li> <li>• "Sharing is a vital part of documentation. Rather than just exchanging information, it is important to find meaning and explain information through documentation."</li> <li>• "It plays a central role in early childhood education and is a method of education that gives value to the process of learning and helps the curriculum to be child centered and appropriate."</li> <li>• "Documentation can be used through pictures, but not just a picture with a caption, rather a picture that tells a story of that child and more than shows what they are doing."</li> <li>• "Recording happenings of children in many different ways."</li> <li>• "It is a tool used to provide evidence of teaching practices and activities."</li> <li>• "It could be in the form of a weekly journal between teachers and parents, strings of yarn cut to show the physical growth of a child, a child's creations using various materials, and pictures and phrases depicting the children at the center."</li> <li>• "Documentation as a collaboration between multiple teachers and parents in order to discuss the children's interests is key to gaining knowledge and building curriculum that is focused on the child."</li> </ul>
<p>Theme 2: Documentation is for the child.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "It shows the children that their work is important and helps them remember their work."</li> <li>• "Pictures of activities posted on the walls show children how to use certain materials and inspires them to use their imaginations."</li> <li>• "It is used as a form of communication to the child about what is going on around him/her."</li> <li>• "Having actual pictures and phrases on the wall of children performing a certain activity can spark the imagination of other children to perform the same activity"</li> </ul>

or even to explore it in their own way.”

Table 3 (continued)

*Perceptions of pedagogical documentation after the study abroad*

- “Children use documentation as a source of guidance to help them grow, explore, and learn.”
- “Children use pictures as a reference to explore the same materials seen in the pictures.”

Theme 3: Documentation is for the teacher.

- “Teachers gather to discuss activities of the children and document.”
- “Teachers decide as a group what they want to portray in the documentation. It is truly a group effort to provide high-quality documentation.”
- “Teachers all have his/her own voice and opinion that is respected while still keeping in mind that a consensus is often needed.”
- “Teachers should collaborate daily as well as think fluidly throughout the day in order to better guide the children’s learning based on their interests.”
- “In Italy, teachers are given protected paid time during their day to reflect alone and with each other on the day, week, or month of activities in order to document.”
- “The purpose of teacher interactions is for the free exchange of ideas and knowledge.”
- “Builds a common ground among teachers and builds identity of a group of teachers.”

Theme 4: Documentation involves families.

- “Children and families are clearly given a voice.”
- “It creates link between home and school.”
- “Parents, grandparents, and children interact together to create an open environment of support.”
- “Provides parents with a shared understanding and different perspectives on the learning process.”
- “Parents interact with teachers and other parents to gain insight on their own children and the others in the classroom/school.”
- “Various documentation methods allow teachers to show parents the types of activities occurring at the school; these include books, pictures, or the children’s artwork and sculptures.”
- “Pictures of children and families on display give children a sense of belonging and ties home life with the school.”
- “An important link between home and school is formed by having photos and personal items at school. This allows the children to personalize their space and to feel more comfortable to explore within the school setting.”
- “Brings teachers and parents together to learn about each child.”
- “A display where parents can pick up brochures and other materials that inform them as to what is happening at the school and forms a connection between the

school and parents.”

Table 3 (continued)

*Perceptions of pedagogical documentation after the study abroad*

Theme 5: Documentation is for the school and wider community.

- “It is important for educators to constantly share with others within the school and clarify with those outside of the school in order to have an efficient program and understanding.”
- “It forms a link between the child and society.”
- “It establishes a memory and history of what is being done in the schools.”
- “It communicates to the community the potential and value of the children and is a way to improve education for the children.”

### **Students' Perceptions of Current Documentation Practices in the U.S.**

The second research question examined how students perceived pedagogical documentation use in current early childhood classrooms in the U.S. Analysis of the data revealed that perceptions before the study abroad varied on a spectrum from no current use to the idea that it is used in most classrooms (see Table 4). After visiting the Italian schools, reading literature on the subject, and discussing pedagogical documentation, the students' perceptions shifted to a slightly more uniform set of responses (see Table 5). Following the study abroad process, students' perceptions highlighted that pedagogical documentation is under-utilized, being used only by some teachers, or not able to be utilized due to external guidelines. Again, as students 'lived' the experience while in the Italian early childhood settings, they were able to reflect upon early childhood practice in the U.S. with a new set of lenses. There is a more thorough description of these findings in the discussion section.

<p>Table 4</p> <p><i>Perceptions of documentation in U.S. practice before the study abroad</i></p>
<p>(Quotes from students' writing based on prompts before the study abroad)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “While my knowledge is very limited, I do not feel as if the current use is anything significant- if even used.”</li> <li>• “There is not enough documentation in current early childhood practice.”</li> <li>• “I feel that early childhood pedagogical documentation practices are not as common as they should be.”</li> <li>• “It is not utilized enough in the United States.”</li> <li>• “In the U.S., pedagogical documentation is scarce.”</li> <li>• “I am not sure.”</li> <li>• “It is used generally, but in limited instances where each child’s learning is individually documented.”</li> <li>• “I feel that most early childhood teachers use documentation as a tool to assess development and create activities to foster development.”</li> </ul>

<p>Table 5</p> <p><i>Perceptions of documentation in U.S. practice after the study abroad</i></p>
<p>(Quotes from students' writing based on prompts after the study abroad)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Documentation is required, but the type of documentation is not always useful.”</li> <li>• “Caregivers are unable to use this form of documentation as a curriculum guide because of the focus on kindergarten readiness skills and other restrictions.”</li> <li>• “It is not used as much as it should be.”</li> <li>• “I do think that some teachers are utilizing pedagogical documentation through observations and assessments.”</li> <li>• “I don’t think the attitude regarding pedagogical documentation in the U.S. is a positive one; some teachers feel that it is too time consuming or useless.”</li> </ul>

## **CHAPTER 5: Discussion**

### **Perceptions of Pedagogical Documentation**

Analysis of all data sources revealed that students' perceptions regarding pedagogical documentation evolved throughout the study abroad process to produce a more comprehensive and informed collective understanding. Although many of the themes remained consistent throughout the process, the students' writings that supported each theme illustrate that their knowledge base and level of reflection expanded during the study abroad process and upon returning home. The consistencies in these themes, and the writing that supported them, indicate continuity in perceptions, while the inconsistencies signify the students' evolution in their understanding.

Students' perceptions of pedagogical documentation prior to the study abroad experience resulted in five themes (see Table 1). Their collective perceptions demonstrated knowledge that pedagogical documentation (a.) broadly refers to education, (b.) is a process for teachers, (c.) is a process for children, (d.) involves families, and (e.) is for the school and outside community. At the time the students' wrote their reflections regarding these perceptions, they had read some literature on the subject but had not participated in group discussions or direct observation. These themes appear to indicate that students had some understanding of pedagogical documentation before the study abroad process, however, some comments suggest that their understanding included "standards-based" variations of documentation rather than Reggio-inspired pedagogical documentation practices. This is evidenced in quotes addressing such concepts as checklists, recording child progress, and understanding why a child "is or isn't meeting a specific academic standard or goal." These variations in the students' understanding

suggest that early in this process, students did not fully understand the theory behind pedagogical documentation. Findings in this study are similar to Kroeger and Cardy's (2006) observations that their students' early understanding was lacking a deep theoretical foundation behind the practice, which reveals the purpose of pedagogical documentation more fully.

Students' perceptions of pedagogical documentation while observing it first-hand in the Italian centers and participating in discussions with each other and the Italian educators resulted in a much more in-depth understanding of pedagogical documentation as it is used in Reggio-inspired practice. Six themes emerged in their reflective journal writings (see Table 2). Five of the themes are consistent with their previous understanding: refers to (a.) education, (b.) is a process for teachers, (c.) is a process for children, (d.) involves families, and (e.) is for the school and outside community. These themes that are common to both the 'before' and 'during' writings were qualitatively distinct. Before the study abroad, the themes were based on concise written descriptions by students based on a variety of different perceptions and a limited amount of reading on the topic. Their 'during' writings of these same themes were more elaborate, full of examples, and closely aligned to widely held perceptions regarding Reggio-inspired practice. For example, during the study abroad, students made the distinction that pedagogical documentation is more than "referring to education or teaching," but instead, "a method of education that gives value to what the teacher and children are doing" indicating a greater refinement in their understanding. Students had read an eclectic blend of literature on the subject, were immersed in the culture, and participated in direct observation and interaction with the teachers, children, and spaces within the centers. Their writings brought to the surface many components of pedagogical documentation identified in the literature. These include concepts such as making learning visible, telling a story, using documentation to construct future

activities, and reflection (Fraser & Gestwicki, 2002; Gandini & Goldhaber, 2001; Hewett, 2001; Katz & Chard, 1996; Kline, 2008; Seitz, 2008; Yu, 2008).

There was also a qualitative shift from a collective focus on 'education' toward 'relationships.' The focus on relationships is fundamental to the Reggio-inspired approach to education (Fraser & Gestwicki, 2002; Hewett, 2001). This shift was illustrated in the variety of comments written under each theme. During the study abroad, students wrote that documentation "increases the relationships between children," "builds identity of colleagues working together," "gives value to the words and participation of parents," and allows "teachers and children to construct activities based on reflection." In the students' writing before the study abroad, only two indirect references were made regarding relationships and those were that documentation "allows and promotes parental involvement" and illustrates children's "influence on those around them." The explicit references to relationships in the writings indicates an evolution in students' perceptions of pedagogical documentation during the study abroad process. This evolution highlights an understanding that documentation is a multi-faceted and encompassing concept. In Italy, the students were able to experience the parts of pedagogical documentation they already understood and use that experience to expand that understanding to a more meaningful level.

While in Italy, another theme emerged that did not appear in students' writing before or after the study abroad. This theme centers around the concept that pedagogical documentation gives value to and enriches the period of childhood. Students wrote that documentation "should be about ordinary, daily events that happen- not just extraordinary events" and "our reflection enriches childhood." This directly addresses concept that childhood is a unique and valuable stage in life (Fraser & Gestwicki, 2002). Development in and of itself is worthy of being

documented and studied. Making ordinary moments come to life through “the narration of the story” as it is told in documentation, gives value to the socially constructed image of childhood. This theme emerged during the study abroad as the students were engaged in dialogue about documentation with the Italian educators. It was Donatella Giovannini that highlighted this concept and initiated the dialogue. This opportunity attests to the unique and authentic nature of the study abroad process. The emergence of this theme illustrates how the context of the dialogue with Italian educators influenced students’ writings on pedagogical documentation while in Italy.

The themes that emerged in the students’ writings after the study abroad were the same as the themes that emerged prior to and during the study abroad, excluding the ‘during’ theme regarding giving value to childhood (see Table 3). Components of the ‘valuing childhood’ theme were incorporated into students’ ‘after’ writing in indirect ways, indicating that although they did not explicitly make reference of this theme, it did resonate with them enough for it to influence their perceptions in different contexts. For example, in the middle of a quote from the ‘after’ theme of documentation as an educational method, one student wrote that documentation “expresses not just extraordinary events, but ordinary, daily events.” This one continuity suggests that the theme did not disappear in students’ perceptions, but just did not come out as explicitly in their ‘after’ writings.

Overall, the ‘after’ writings were comprised of a rich variety of quotes to support each theme and, like the ‘during’ writings, had a central focus on relationships that permeated each theme. In the quotes supporting the theme that pedagogical documentation is an educational method, students had developed a comprehensive base of knowledge regarding pedagogical documentation. They addressed that it is a daily, central process in Reggio-inspired schools that

gives value to the work of teachers and children. They acknowledged that it is a collaborative, reflective, flexible curriculum guide, record of growth, and tool for learning. Regarding relationships in this theme, one student wrote that “documentation as a collaboration between multiple teachers and parents in order to discuss the children’s interests is key to gaining knowledge and building curriculum that is focused on the child.”

The “standards-based” variations of documentation noted in the students’ ‘before’ writings did not reemerge in their ‘during’ or ‘after’ writings. In the ‘before’ writing, the understanding was that recording child progress was most often done in the form of teacher recordings and checklists. In the ‘after’ writing, the students wrote that the child’s growth illustrates progress and that “it could be in the form of a weekly journal between teachers and parents, strings of yarn cut to show the physical growth of a child, a child’s creations using various materials, and pictures and phrases depicting the children at the center.” One student wrote that pedagogical documentation is about “keeping evidence of very important things, specifically about the development of children. It uses pictures, the words of children, and work samples to show children’s development and where they are going.” The understanding of documenting ‘progress’ shifted from filling out checklists, to illustrating a child’s growth based on authentic recordings of individual development.

In students’ writing following the study abroad, documentation was referenced as providing evidence, but went beyond merely objectively recording. For example, a student wrote that “documentation can be used through pictures, but not just a picture with a caption, rather a picture that tells a story of children and more than shows what they are doing.” A student also wrote that “sharing is a vital part of documentation. Rather than just exchanging information, it is important to find meaning and explain information through documentation.”

Students illustrated that their perceptions of pedagogical documentation involved combining recordings of the child(ren) and event(s) into a story filled with meaning about the relationship between the child(ren) and the event(s). A student wrote that pedagogical documentation records the “happenings of children in many different ways.” The term ‘happenings’ connotes active experience and aligns with the Reggio-inspired view that children are active protagonists of their own learning. Students’ perceptions shifted from an accountability mindset in the ‘before’ writings to a more authentic, holistic understanding in the ‘after’ writings.

In the themes addressing the child, the teacher, the parents, and the school and wider community, students addressed many critical components of pedagogical documentation. One student wrote that documentation “shows the children that their work is important and helps them remember their work.” This is consistent with Fraser and Gestwicki’s (2002) view that “it acts as a memory device, enabling [children] to revisit previous experiences and make connections to past, present, and future events and experiences” (p. 162). This central purpose of documentation was explicitly illustrated in students’ perceptions following the study abroad process.

Students wrote that for teachers, documentation “builds a common ground among teachers and builds identity of a group of teachers” and that “the purpose of teacher interactions is for the free exchange of ideas and knowledge.” Because students spent so much of their time in Italy interacting with teachers, this was a concept that they not only discussed, but were also able to participate in first hand. They experienced this free exchange of ideas on a daily basis, and thus it may have emerged strongly in their ‘after’ writings due to their reflection back on these experiences with the Italian educators.

The role of families in children's education was highlighted in the students' writings. They wrote that documentation gives children and families a clear voice, "creates a link between home and school," and "provides parents with a shared understanding and different perspectives on the learning process." This theme of involving families remained consistent in the 'before,' 'during,' and 'after' writings, but captured a poignant example of the evolution of the students' perceptions. Through the study abroad process, students were able to see and discuss many examples of home-school documentation experiences. The topic of family relationships was discussed/highlighted daily in the conversations with the Italian educators. Students were able to see family-centered documentation: family holiday boxes, photographs of families on the walls and in the children's personal books, journals that teachers and parents share that travel between home and school.

The theme involving documentation in connection with the school and wider community also exemplifies an evolution in student perceptions. In the students' earliest writings, perceptions were grounded in an accountability mindset. Students wrote that documentation "provides proof of what's going on in a teacher's classroom," "supports the need for funding," and "can be used as a tool to show principals or directors the benefits of specific teaching strategies." Although each of these quotes may have merit in the current educational atmosphere, they do not address the heart of the Reggio-inspired view of the purpose of connecting documentation to the school and wider community. While the students were in Italy, they wrote that "it establishes a sense of memory in the school," "gives an outside view on teaching," and "provides proof of the abilities of children." These 'during' quotes demonstrate a shift in perceptions around this theme, but it is not until students write about this theme in their 'after' writings that a clear illustration is provided regarding the depth of the students'

perceptions. Students write that documentation “forms a link between the child and society,” “establishes a memory and history of what is being done in the schools,” and “communicates to the community the potential and value of the children and is a way to improve education for the children.” This journey in perceptions further supports the shift from an accountability mindset of documentation to a more relationship-based, authentic understanding based on children’s strengths. Students seemed to perceive pedagogical documentation, after visiting the Italian schools, to be an active, ongoing process between children, teachers, parents, and the outside community.

### **Perceptions of Current Use**

Students’ perceptions of the use of pedagogical documentation in current U.S. practice before the study abroad ranged from the notion that it is currently not being used to the belief that most early childhood teachers use documentation (see Table 4). Some students wrote that current use is limited, if at all, and that there is not enough documentation used. Other students were simply not sure. Not all of our students had experience in early childhood classrooms (some were training to work with young children in hospital settings or in family services outside of the early childhood classroom). It is important to recognize that perceptions are personal views and are influenced by many factors. Although some of the students had never worked in early childhood classrooms, all have had some exposure to early childhood settings and they each held perceptions regarding early childhood practice in general. The wide array of perceptions represented by these students is interesting and illustrates how subjective personal perceptions regarding current practice are in the U.S.

After visiting the Italian schools, reading the literature, and participating in group discussions, the students’ perceptions shifted to a slightly more uniform set of responses (see

Table 5). Students' new perceptions of current pedagogical documentation practice were that it was under-utilized, being used only by some teachers, or not able to be utilized due to external guidelines. Logically, these perceptions could be influenced by the students' shift in their understanding as to the definition of and theory behind pedagogical documentation after the study abroad. Once students had a more comprehensive and in-depth understanding, they could apply this understanding to their perception of its use in current early childhood practice. When a student wrote that "caregivers are unable to use this form of documentation as a curriculum guide because of the focus on kindergarten readiness skills and other restrictions," it reflected a perception of pedagogical documentation informed throughout the study abroad process. With more informed perceptions of the Reggio-inspired methods of pedagogical documentation, students appeared to have more negative perceptions regarding the current use of it in U.S. early childhood practice.

### **Descriptions of the Influence of the Study Abroad**

Finally, students were asked to write directly about how this study abroad experience influenced their learning regarding pedagogical documentation. The students consistently responded that the study abroad greatly influenced their understanding and perceptions. One student wrote that "the study abroad really gave me a clearer picture of documentation and helped me understand what it really was. I was able to understand better by actually looking at some documentation at the centers which methods work and which do not." For some students, the study abroad was an 'eye-opening' experience because they could experience the Reggio-inspired approach to documentation first hand. For example, one student wrote "it opened my eyes to the different approaches to documentation and the various forms it can have. I loved seeing the teachers value the children and everything the children were involved in, including art

pieces or books they were creating.” Another student wrote “I am a visual learner, so to see these concepts in action was important to gaining a better understanding. Before the trip, I had a general understanding of these concepts, but after seeing them implemented, I feel as though I would be able to transfer and use this information in the future. It definitely opened my eyes to a world of new possibilities for early childhood education.” For some students, the study abroad prompted them to reflect deeper into the roles culture and society play in early educational processes. As an example, one student wrote that “the study abroad experience broadened my understanding of how people are constructed into a society. This experience allowed me the opportunity to reflect on how children are socialized in various early childhood settings.”

### **Limitations**

There are at least two major limitations in this study. The first is that it takes place in a relatively short time frame. Pedagogical documentation is a broad, complex topic with many different components. Most early childhood teachers spend their entire careers refining their understanding of documentation processes; these students’ understanding was similar to a series of snapshots taken over the course of a few months. The second limitation is that these students were discussing their understanding and perceptions at a theoretical level. None of the students were actively applying their understanding in practice during the time of this study. Further, although each of these students was from the department of child development, only four of the ten were preparing to practice in the classroom. The other students were preparing to work with young children hospital settings or in family services outside of the early childhood classroom. It would have been ideal to include a component by which students had opportunities to apply their understanding of pedagogical documentation in early childhood settings and then reassess their understanding and perceptions.

## **CHAPTER 6: Conclusion**

The Reggio-inspired practice of pedagogical documentation is a valuable tool in early childhood educational practice. University programs founded in social constructivism that are preparing future early childhood professionals for practice can play a significant role in shaping students' knowledge of documentation processes. "Since knowledge is perceived... as socially constructed and, thereby, dynamic, it follows that no ultimate truth may be understood to exist, but rather multiple forms of knowing" (Hewett, 2001). This study attempted to facilitate this process of subjective knowledge building by taking a group of students to Pistoia, Italy, in order to observe, discuss, and reflect documentation practices first-hand. The designers of this study abroad sought to understand how immersion into Reggio-inspired Italian practice influenced students' perceptions of pedagogical documentation and its current use in U.S. practice. Students' writings suggest that the study abroad experience influenced their perceptions throughout the process and ultimately collectively evolved to align more closely with the Reggio-inspired educational paradigm.

Traveling to Italy allowed students to experience documentation in a setting that embraced a social constructivist approach to early childhood education. Studying abroad is an intense and culturally rich experience that immerses the participants in direct exposure to the subject matter. Students that participated in this study abroad attested to the concept that they would forever be impacted by this experience as they continue on their journey through the world of early childhood practice.

Leading a group of students on a study abroad is equally as exciting as it is challenging. It is a vastly different process from traditional methods of teaching adult students and filled with

authentic learning opportunities and unique struggles. For the purposes of this study, it was important that students keep a written record of their journey. Not only were the students keeping this record for this study, but also to have their own form of documentation of the study abroad. It was during the process of collecting journals and portfolios that it became evident that the students' perceptions regarding documentation were coming directly from their own authentic sources of documentation. Each student learned about documentation through documentation (Appendix F). Each source provided a different type of insight into their individual and collective journeys through the study abroad process. The pre-tour writings provided insight into their perceptions before they actually participated in the study abroad. The reflective journals served as a daily record of their thoughts, perceptions, understanding, and reflections. The comprehensive portfolio assignment required the students to analyze and synthesize the information they took in throughout the process. Finally, the post-tour writings provided insight into their perceptions after the study abroad process was complete.

This study attests to the capability of study abroad experience to immerse students into subject matter and shape and influence student perceptions regarding that subject matter. Teachers, teacher educators, students, and other early childhood professionals inspired by or curious about the Reggio-inspired approach to early childhood education could benefit from experiencing Italian practice first-hand. It provided an authentic atmosphere for students to learn about and experience social constructivism first-hand.

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## **Appendix A: IRB Approval**

## Appendix A: IRB Approval



**University and Medical Center Institutional Review Board**  
 East Carolina University, 600 Moyer Boulevard  
 1L-09 Brody Medical Sciences Bldg. • Greenville, NC 27834  
 Office 252-744-2914 • Fax 252-744-2284 • [www.ecu.edu/irb](http://www.ecu.edu/irb)  
 Chair and Director of Biomedical IRB: L. Wiley Nifong, MD  
 Chair and Director of Behavioral and Social Science IRB: Susan L. McCammon, PhD

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**Date:** March 19, 2010

**Principal Investigator:** Nicole Mitchell, M.S. Student  
**Dept./Ctr./Institute:** Dept of Child Development & Family Relations  
**Mailstop or Address:** 133 Rivers West, ECU

**RE:** Exempt Certification *WK*  
**UMCIRB#** 10-0161  
**Funding Source:** unfunded

**Title:** University Students' Understanding, Perceptions, and Attitudes Regarding Pedagogical Documentation

Dear Nicole:

On 3.19.10, the University & Medical Center Institutional Review Board (UMCIRB) determined that your research meets ECU requirements and federal exemption criterion #1 & 2 which includes research conducted in established or commonly accepted educational settings, involving normal educational practices and it is also a research involving the use of educational tests.

It is your responsibility to ensure that this research is conducted in the manner reported in your Internal Processing Form and Protocol, as well as being consistent with the ethical principles of the Belmont Report and your profession.

This research study does not require any additional interaction with the UMCIRB unless there are proposed changes to this study. Any change, prior to implementing that change, must be submitted to the UMCIRB for review and approval. The UMCIRB will determine if the change impacts the eligibility of the research for exempt status. If more substantive review is required, you will be notified within five business days.

The UMCIRB Office will hold your exemption application for a period of five years from the date of this letter. If you wish to continue this protocol beyond this period, you will need to submit an Exemption Certification Request at least 30 days before the end of the five year period.

Sincerely,

Chairperson, University & Medical Center Institutional Review Board

Attachment:  
 Informed Consent Document (dated 3.19.10)

Cc: Sandra Triebenbacher, PhD

## **Appendix B: Hundred Languages of Children Poem**

## Appendix B: Hundred Languages of Children Poem

No Way. The hundred *is* there.

The child is made of one hundred.  
 The child has a hundred languages  
     a hundred hands  
     a hundred thoughts  
     a hundred ways of thinking  
     of playing, of speaking.  
     a hundred always a hundred  
 ways of listening of marveling of loving  
     a hundred joys  
     for singing and understanding  
     a hundred worlds  
     to discover  
     a hundred worlds  
     to invent  
     a hundred worlds  
     to dream.

The child has a hundred languages  
 (and a hundred hundred hundred more)  
 but they steal ninety-nine.  
 The school and the culture  
 separate the head from the body.  
 They tell the child:  
     to think without hands  
     to do without head  
     to listen and not to speak  
     to understand without joy  
 to love and marvel only at Easter and Christmas.

They tell the child:  
     to discover the world already there  
 and of the hundred they steal ninety-nine.

They tell the child:  
     that work and play  
     reality and fantasy  
     science and imagination  
     sky and earth  
     reason and dream  
 are things that do not belong together.  
 And thus they tell the child  
 that the hundred is not there.  
 The child says: No way. The hundred is there.

-LORIS MALAGUZZI  
 (from Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1993)

## **Appendix C: Examples of Documentation Panels**

## Appendix C: Examples of Documentation Panels



(Image taken from Reggio Children Website: see references for full citation.)



## **Appendix D: Complete Reading List for Students**

### Appendix D: Complete Reading List for Students

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## **Appendix E: Writing Prompts**

## **Appendix E: Writing Prompts**

### **Questions prior to the study abroad:**

1. Describe your understanding of the term ‘documentation.’
2. Describe your understanding of pedagogical documentation.
3. Describe your perceptions of the role of pedagogical documentation in early childhood practice.
4. Describe your perceptions regarding the current use of pedagogical documentation in current early childhood practice.
5. How do you feel about early childhood documentation practices (as far as the purpose of it, methods, and do-ability)?
6. Describe your understanding of social constructivism and child centered learning.
7. Describe how pedagogical documentation is related to constructivism.
8. Describe your perceptions of potential benefits of using pedagogical documentation in early childhood educational practice.
9. Describe your perceptions of potential struggles early childhood educators and caregivers face in using pedagogical documentation as a curriculum guide.

### **Questions following the study abroad:**

1. Describe your understanding of the term ‘documentation.’
2. Describe your understanding of pedagogical documentation.
3. Describe your perceptions of the role of pedagogical documentation in early childhood practice.
4. Describe your perceptions regarding the current use of pedagogical documentation in current early childhood practice.
5. How do you feel about early childhood documentation practices (as far as the purpose of it, methods, and do-ability)?
6. Describe your understanding of social constructivism and child centered learning.
7. Describe how pedagogical documentation is related to constructivism.
8. Describe your perceptions of potential benefits of using pedagogical documentation in early childhood educational practice.
9. Describe your perceptions of potential struggles early childhood educators and caregivers face in using pedagogical documentation as a curriculum guide.
10. How did the study abroad influence your personal understanding of these concepts?

## **Appendix F: Documentation about Documentation**

### Appendix F: Documentation about Documentation



