

# Analysis of Curriculum/Learning Frameworks for the Early Years (Birth to Age 8)

April 2008



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## Background

The Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA) requested an analysis of curriculum/learning frameworks for the early years (birth to age 8) following a review of the literature in 17 national and international jurisdictions. The project was to focus on national and international initiatives and current directions in the development of curriculum and/or learning documents for the early years (birth to age 8). The project report was to include an examination and analysis of the documents issued and currently in use by Australian states and territories and nine selected international education jurisdictions. In discussions with VCAA staff, it was agreed that, considering the timeline, the source of the findings would be readily available curriculum documents and commentary found on the internet.

A wide range of curriculum frameworks and guidelines have been written in the last ten years. Each curriculum guideline presents a unique focus on learning areas and the specific dimensions within the learning areas it presents. Many curricula include suggestions for planning, teacher interactions, monitoring and assessing learning and reflection. Both nationally and internationally the age range catered for in the curriculum documents varies. To provide for continuity of service for young children in Victoria it is important to ensure continuity of curriculum for children building on the best of both the early childhood and primary aspects of curriculum, to support and promote the learning of children from birth to 8 years.

Within Australia each state and territory has worked independently to produce their own curriculum documents for their early childhood and primary sectors. These documents vary in terms of the age ranges covered as well as in the conceptual underpinnings and framework that structures each document. To add further complexity to the discussion and components of these documents, the terminology for the year prior to school and the first year of school represents one thing in one state and a different thing in another state. For example the term 'kindergarten' refers to the year prior to school in Victoria while the same term refers to the first year of school in NSW. Likewise, the term 'preparatory year' refers to the year prior to school in Queensland and the first year of school in Victoria. The age for starting school also differs across the states and territories, so a child could be eligible to commence school in one state, but on moving states would not have reached school entry age.

Expectations for a 5 year old might be vastly different in different systems. For example, the 5 year old child can be included in an early childhood curriculum document for birth to 5 years which caters for their characteristics and dispositions for learning while at the same time the 5 year old child can have a set of expectations in terms of 'areas of learning' or subjects with a set of learning outcomes if in their first year of primary school.

Both nationally and internationally the literature supports the notion that the early childhood years cover the age range from birth to 8 years. Children within this age range are characteristically different from children at older ages. When describing programs for children in the birth to eight age range within Australia, the provisions represented in each state and territory vary from no early childhood curriculum provision for the birth to five age range in Victoria, to provision for birth to 5 years in Tasmania and New South Wales, and three to five in Western Australia, ACT, Northern Territory and Queensland and birth to Year 12 in South Australia. Some states such as Tasmania have used common language and organisers across all children from birth to sixteen years.

Internationally the provision for children birth to 8 years is just as varied as within Australia. Some countries do not cover the birth to three years age range at all while others comprehensively cover birth to three or birth to five, or six or 8 years.

The 6 year old child is often represented in both the early childhood setting and the school setting curriculum document in most European countries just as the 5 year old child is within both systems in Australia and New Zealand.

With the move towards a national curriculum in Australia imminent, it is timely to examine the educational provision for children in the birth to eight age range and work towards a cohesive approach which provides continuity of provision for children and their families in these vital early childhood years within Australia.

By closely examining the curriculum frameworks in Australia and nine international jurisdictions some key features of effective curriculum provision will be highlighted. It is timely to evaluate the curriculum and early learning documents in terms of world's best practice and pinpoint implications of these for policy directions in Victoria.



## Executive Summary

The Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA) requested an analysis of curriculum/learning frameworks for the early years (birth to age 8) following a literature review of 17 national and international jurisdictions. The project was to focus on national and international initiatives and current directions in the development of curriculum and/or learning documents for the early years (birth to age 8). The project report was to include an examination and analysis of the documents issued and currently in use by Australian states and territories and nine selected international education jurisdictions.

Following consultation and discussion between the VCAA and the Consultancy and Development Unit, School of Education, RMIT, it was agreed that the eight jurisdictions in Australia would be analysed: ACT, New South Wales, Northern Territory, Queensland, South Australia, Tasmania, Victoria and Western Australia as well as nine international jurisdictions: Canada, Finland, Italy (*Reggio Emilia*), Korea, New Zealand, Singapore, Sweden, the United Kingdom and the United States of America (High/Scope and National Association for the Education Young Children (*NAEYC*)).

### National and International analyses

The various approaches taken by jurisdictions were first individually analysed in terms of their conceptual basis:

- the structures of the framework
- related support materials
- implementation strategies and processes
- links between early childhood frameworks and frameworks for older children
- suitability of the curriculum to a wide range of audiences
- identification of the key components of an effective curriculum
- the principles underpinning and guiding the curriculum
- opportunities for linking teaching, learning, assessment, monitoring reporting, planning and reflection
- opportunities it offers for continuity of provision for children birth to 8 years
- identification of expectations explicit and implicit in the document and
- how well the document caters for the inclusion of families and children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds with different learning needs.

Following individual analysis of the seventeen jurisdictions, they were compared in terms of emerging themes and evaluated in terms of best practice.

The key principles from all the jurisdictions were identified and discussed in terms of implications for Victoria developing a unique early childhood curriculum that caters for the diversity of services that support young children aged birth to 8 years, and their families.

The literature review concludes with opportunities for policy directions in 2008 that will ensure the development of a national curriculum and will include the key principles necessary to meet the unique characteristics of children aged birth to 8 years.

## What the literature reveals

- Both nationally and internationally the literature supports that the early childhood years cover the age range from birth to 8 years.
- Children within this age range are characteristically different from children at older ages.

### 1. Early years lay the foundation for future learning

- Current research globally has established the importance of the early childhood years in laying the foundation for the future.
- Recently brain research has highlighted that investing in children's services impacts on children's success (Shore, 1997).
- Nationally, there has been a focus on providing quality programs for children. In the past 10 years most states in Australia have introduced early childhood curriculum guidelines.
- Early childhood education is important in its own right as a time when children inquire, explore and discover a great deal about the world around them and establish attitudes to learning that remain with them throughout their lives.

### 2. Changes in family lifestyles require change in provisions offered

- Studies by the Australian Institute of Family Studies confirm the changing needs of Australian families in terms of the growing requirement for quality early childhood provision.
- The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC) (Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2006) found that a large number of Australian parents are accessing a range of formal and informal care arrangements for their young children.
- There has been an increase in the number of parents returning to work before their children reach school age.
- The increase in the number of families with two parents working, and the increase in single parent families has led to an increase in the need for the provision of quality early childhood care and education for children from six weeks of age.
- Flexible education and care arrangements have been needed to cater for this increase in both parents working.
- In the past kindergartens have offered what was described as sessional programs which do not currently meet the needs of many families.

### 3. Changes to age range coverage

- The brain research (McCain, 1999) and lifestyle changes have emphasised the importance of quality provision for children from birth to three years in particular. Previously there had been a national and international focus on early childhood provision for children over three years of age.
- Nationally and internationally children from birth to three years have become the focus of discussion in relation to curriculum.
- There is increasing interest in the importance of quality experiences in the first three years.

### 4. Economic impact of quality early childhood provision

- There is growing evidence and awareness of the substantial benefits that accrue from investments made in the first few years of life.

- The concept of human capital is recognised.
- The positive impact of improving the health, wellbeing and productivity of an individual child accumulates over a lifetime, with clear flow-on benefits for individuals, families and the broader community.
- In Australia, child care choice and work decisions are sensitive to the price of care and families with access to more financial resources or who have fewer children use more non-familial care.

## 5. Diversity of approaches to and definitions of curriculum

- Within Australia, there is a complex set of arrangements for children aged birth to 8 years seeing provision that differs between the states and territories.
- Children in the birth to eight age group fit into preschool provision for part of this time and compulsory school provision for the remainder of this time resulting in at least two curriculum offerings.
- The curriculum or learning framework varies from guiding principles, principles and characteristics through to key learning areas and descriptive outcomes.

One of the factors influencing what is written as a curriculum appears to be the definition or perception of what constitutes ‘curriculum’.

- In the New Zealand curriculum guidelines *Te Whāriki*, the term curriculum is used “to describe the sum total of the experiences, activities, and events, whether direct or indirect, which occur within an environment designed to foster children’s learning and development” (*Ministry of Education, 1996, p10*).
- In contrast, the New South Wales early childhood curriculum framework defines curriculum as “*the intentional provisions made by professionals to support children’s learning and well being*” (*Board of Studies NSW, 2005*).
- Definitions also vary when children are under the school system and the term curriculum tends to focus on learning areas or subjects.

## 6. Education and care

- In New Zealand the early childhood curriculum brings together the inseparable elements of care and education from birth to school entry age. This curriculum document was the first to value the interrelated nature of care and education as an example for others to follow.
- In the New South Wales early childhood curriculum framework, care and education are interwoven.
- Some countries such as Korea and Canada are still struggling with the integration of care and education in their early childhood provision.

## 7. Accessibility of curriculum to a wide range of audiences

- The birth to eight age range is serviced by many different early childhood and school organisations including both for profit and non-profit organisations.
- The range of services include schools, child care, family day care, occasional care, community based programs, private providers, corporate providers, kindergarten, pre school, early learning centres, mobile children’s services and outside school hours care.
- Principles for early childhood or guidelines for birth to 8 years would need to be mindful of this wide range of services.

- There are early childhood centres and schools that have their own particular philosophy and/or pedagogy and these provisions would need to feel their uniqueness was not being compromised by a prescribed curriculum or framework.
- Language would also need to be inclusive for educators, families and the community.

## 8. Partnerships in education

- True partnership has been described as - “those efforts that unite and empower individuals and organisations to accomplish collectively what they could not accomplish independently” (Kagan & Rivera, 1991 p.52).
- Partnerships can create opportunities for the development of shared understandings of learning.
- Collaboration can also lead to the provision of curriculum that is culturally and individually relevant and to the promotion of social justice and equity (Gestwicki, 1992; Apple & Beane, 1995).
- “When educators respect the unique strengths of each family, collaborative partnerships are strengthened and the continuity of learning between homes and educational settings is enhanced” (Arthur, Beecher, Death, Dockett and Farmer, 2005 pp2-3).
- Assessment or *Learning stories* are one area around which a partnership can be realised if families and the community are empowered to contribute.

## 9. Changes of views and images of children

- Malaguzzi, one of the founders of the *Reggio Emilia* early childhood centres in Italy, views children as strong, capable and resourceful (Malaguzzi, 1993).
- This image of children has challenged educators in the early childhood field to reconsider the types of programs they offer young children. This has added to the pressure to provide flexible high quality care and education for young children.
- This image requires adults to partner with children in the decision-making process (Lancaster, 2006).

## 10. Recognition of the importance of quality provision for young children

Doherty-Derkowski (1995) presents two essential aspects of quality:

- structural quality, the regulated environment of space, teacher training, group size etc.

and

- process quality, which is concerned with such things as relationships, stimulation within the learning environment and social emotional security.

Today educators would also

- consider such characteristics as cultural awareness, an appreciation of diversity, a comprehension of environmental, historical and technological influences on experience.
- acknowledge the importance of the immediate context and its influence on well-being and development.

as well as recognising that

- Low staff/child ratios are essential in the provision of responsive care and education.
- The presence of highly qualified and experienced staff has been consistently linked to high quality interactions.
- The qualifications and competency of staff to implement curricula are critical to success.

## 11. Recognition of the importance of play

- Marcon's (1990) research showed that, in both the short term and long term, gains were higher for children who experienced a 'play based' early childhood program compared to more structured approaches.
- Play encourages exploration, risk taking, socialisation and engagement in learning.
- Through play children can explore and reflect on interests and issues relevant to and meaningful in their lives.
- In the Swedish preschool curriculum play is described as an 'omnipresent activity' and central to children's learning.

## 12. Recognition of the social nature of learning

- Vygotsky's (1978) work on the socio-cultural approach to education stresses the importance of the social nature of learning.
- This not only influences the type of learning experiences to be provided, but also the role of the teacher in scaffolding and supporting children's learning during their social interactions.
- Collaborative partnerships with much dialogue between educator, children and families are one of the cornerstones of *Reggio Emilia* schools (Abbot & Rodger, 1994).
- In Sweden the preschool is described as a 'social and cultural meeting place' (Skolverket Lpo98 2006: 5).

## 13. Changes to approaches in the ways we observe and plan for children

- In New Zealand *Learning stories* have set a high standard as a process of documenting children's learning in the context of their social relations, and as a basis for collaborative planning.
- *Learning stories* are used to find children's emerging skills, interests or dispositions.
- Documentation through *Learning stories* values children's ideas and helps 'make their learning visible'. Documentation is also a key feature of the work in *Reggio Emilia* early childhood centres.
- In Queensland the *Early Years Curriculum Guidelines (EYCG)* provide suggestions for planning, interacting, monitoring, assessment and reflection described in terms of 'phases of learning and development'; becoming aware, exploring, making connections, and applying. These phases of learning also promote close observation of children to support and facilitate future learning.
- A strength focus approach has the ability to enhance the parent-child relationship by sharing what the child can do well and all parties then work together to build on this (Wilks, 2004).
- A strength focus also builds confidence and self esteem both leading to further success.

## 14. Importance of continuity of provision

- With a growing number of children accessing early childhood services from six weeks of age, many children will use several different early childhood provisions in their years prior to school entry.
- Some children will use several early childhood services simultaneously.
- New curriculum documents can promote continuity of experience for the growing number of children who access several early childhood services and school, from birth to 8 years.
- Dialogue between staff, families, and the community will be needed to arrive at a set of shared goals and philosophies that children and their families are comfortable with.
- Key principles and values that are inclusive of all ages from birth to 8 years will be required to provide consistency of approach for young children and their families.

## 15. Importance of implementation processes

- There is a growing emphasis on “evidence based” practice and research.
- In Queensland guidelines were trialled and evaluated internally and externally prior to formally being adopted.
- The New Zealand curriculum, *Te Whāriki* was well received because implementation involved:
  - consultation with the early childhood field
  - extensive professional development programs and
  - ongoing support for practitioners in implementing the guidelines.
- In Finland, the development of the curriculum required extensive stakeholder involvement underpinned by “respect for mutuality (the possibilities of all different participants and stakeholders to be involved in the development process in an open dialogue)” (OECD 2006 p 319).
- Participation by parents, extended family, local community, professional staff and governments to ensure that effective early childhood education and care is the outcome (Tayler, 2008b).

## 16. Importance of resourcing

- Investment in early childhood education should match that in the rest of the public education system (Tayler, 2008).
- A particular focus on the quality of provision is required, as well as an increase in the provision of early childhood services for children particularly under three years.
- Paid parental leave for about the first year of a young child’s life, as is the case in Sweden and Finland, is desirable.
- Currently there is a three tiered system for staffing with some staff having degree status qualifications while others have certificate and diploma or no qualifications.
- With the increase in the number of early childhood service providers has come pressure to have highly qualified staff in all early childhood services.

## 17. Education for sustainability

Early Childhood Education for Sustainability (ECEfS) is an empowering education underpinned by both humanistic and ecological values that promote change towards sustainable early childhood learning communities (Davis & Elliott, in press).

- “An ecological approach and a positive belief in the future should typify the preschool’s activities” (Skolverket Lpo98 2006, p7).
- “Children think and enquire by investigating features of and ways to sustain environments” (Queensland EYCG 2006, p74).
- Work with children to help them understand that they are global citizens with shared responsibilities to the environment and humanity (ECA, Code of Ethics, 2006).
- The time has come for all curricula at all levels to be inclusive of education for sustainability (UNESCO 2005).

## 18. Outdoor and learning play spaces

- Australians are recognised as outdoor, active citizens.
- Indoor and outdoor learning environments are equally important for all ages (UK Department for Children, Schools and Families, in press).
- There are significant opportunities for exploration, discovery and learning for children aged birth to 8 years in outdoor environments or play spaces.
- The ‘aliveness’ and ‘uniqueness’ of natural outdoor play spaces ensures that with each new day there are new discoveries and new sensations for children to experience (Elliott 2008).
- Dwyer (2007) recommends a combination of large spaces for running, intimate spaces for children to play alone or in a small group; places for water, spaces where children can play above or below others; spaces that give different perspectives of size and location; materials that are flexible and easily manipulated by children; areas that are aesthetically beautiful; places for animals; spaces where children can easily connect with the natural world and spaces for artworks.

## 19. Literacy and numeracy

- Language and language development is the single area given highest priority in the Swedish preschool review.
- Research has consistently shown a high correlation between quality language experiences in early childhood and literacy competencies.
- To provide for continuity and consistency of provision for children from birth to 8 years in relation to literacy and numeracy there would need to be a strong language focus including many opportunities for listening, speaking and discussions as well as engagement with a wide range of books. There will also need to be recognition of the role that the range of expressive arts have in enriching children’s language and literacy understandings. The importance of having a print rich environment to support learning, as well as the importance of embedding mathematical and scientific language in the early childhood program to accompany children’s explorations and inquiries.

- The *EYCG* in Queensland (2006) is one of the first early childhood curriculum documents that uses learning areas and in particular places emphasis on the importance of literacy and numeracy. These guidelines are a framework for interacting with children in their preparatory year only.

Their learning areas were derived from the factors identified as associated with later school success:

- social and personal learning,
- health and physical learning,
- language learning and communication,
- early mathematical understandings and
- active learning processes.

## **Opportunities from the literature for development of an early learning and development curriculum framework in 2008**

- To provide for continuity of service for young children in Victoria it is important to ensure continuity of curriculum for children thus seamlessly supporting children's learning from birth to 8 years.
- It is important not to confuse continuity of provision with the same provision.
- Sweden recommended that preschool should influence at least the first years of compulsory school. However, the school culture is dominated with:
  - more subject and skills oriented teaching;
  - expectations regarding outcomes;
  - traditional classroom organisation, and
  - methods that do not cater for the 6 year olds need for physical activities.

Educators did not stress play, art and experimentation, or organise learning experiences that were flexible around each child's individual pace and interests. (Kaga, 2007).

- Effective programs have been found to be flexible and responsive to children's ideas, yet include careful planning and resourcing. They enable children to engage in exploration, investigation, problem solving and discovery in collaboration with others (Arthur et al, 2003).
- Essential to quality program delivery in all early childhood settings is high quality teaching staff.
- An early childhood curriculum that values the professional knowledge of teachers will have overarching principles, but will rely on the competence of teachers to interpret these principles for the contexts and the individual children with whom they work.
- It is necessary that teachers are critically reflective practitioners who will constantly evaluate their own practice.
- Critically reflective practitioners will co-construct understandings about children's learning with other staff, children, families and interested community members.
- A curriculum is a living document, ever changing to meet the needs of children, families and communities.
- There is the opportunity for Australia to develop a common curriculum framework or guidelines for children from birth to age eight which could promote equity and bring about quality improvement in provision.



## **Essential Principles of quality provision for children birth to 8 years**

### **A. In recognition of how our views or images of children impact on both how we interact with them and the types of experiences we provide:**

1. Viewing children positively as capable and competent
2. Acknowledging children as having rights
3. Valuing the richness that cultural diversity brings to learning situations
4. Recognising children as being literate within the cultures of their communities and families

### **B. In recognition of the special characteristics of children from birth to eight:**

5. Focusing on a sense of well-being and belonging
6. Acknowledging the importance of relationships
7. Recognising play is central
8. Enabling environments: Learning through exploration, engagement, enquiry, investigation, hands-on real life experiences, risk-taking and problem-solving

### **C. In recognition of the importance of collaboration and partnerships in education:**

9. Empowering children, families and communities
10. Viewing teachers as scaffolders and co-constructors of learning
11. Valuing and embracing diversity
12. Acknowledging the multicultural nature of Australian society

### **D. In recognition of quality teaching and learning approaches:**

13. Interweaving teaching, learning and assessment
14. Learning through play
15. Using teachable moments for focussed teaching and learning
16. Embedding rich literacy and numeracy experiences into programs
17. Acknowledging the environment as the third teacher
18. Recognising the quality of teaching staff as critical to quality program delivery

## Analysis of curriculum/learning frameworks for the early years (birth to age 8)

### Context

In recent years we have gained a much clearer understanding of the ways in which children grow, develop and learn. Within Australia the recognition of the importance of the early years is also reflected in the development of a national vision for children, the National Agenda for Early Childhood (Australian Government Taskforce on Child Development, Health and Wellbeing, 2003). Early childhood education is a time when children acquire language, knowledge of their culture and become adept at symbol use. During these early years they develop attitudes and dispositions to learning that have lifetime implications. Careful planning and development of the child's experiences, with sensitive and appropriate intervention by the educator, will help nurture an eagerness to learn as well as enabling the child to learn effectively (Department of Education and Science 1990:9).

Brain research has also brought a strong emphasis to the importance of experiences and relationships in the first three years of life (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2001). The neuroscience research has highlighted the significance of experience on the developing brain and has underlined the developmental risks of poor quality environments for children under three. As human capital theory becomes increasingly popular amongst policy makers, new models of targeted early intervention have been explored. Sure Start in the UK is probably one of the better known examples (The National Evaluation of *Sure Start* research team, 2008).

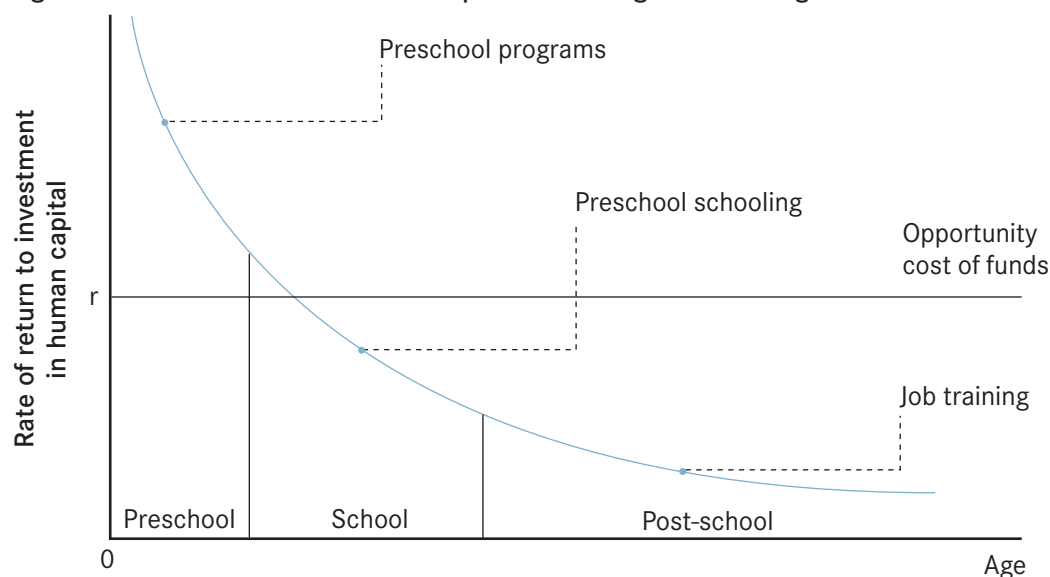
Children who enjoy rich engaging early childhood educational environments have the foundations laid to become successful learners on their education journey. They commence school with an eagerness to learn and the dispositions to be fully involved in their learning.

Internationally there has been an increase in recognition and expenditure to support the importance of early childhood offerings.

The importance of the early years of the child is now internationally acknowledged as the time of most rapid learning and development (Duffie, 1991, p10).

In the 1980s and 90s the *Head Start* and *Perry Preschool* projects in the USA produced an abundance of data demonstrating that 'investing' in quality early childhood programs has a long term benefit not only for the children who attend the services but also for the society as the children grow up and become productive, well adjusted citizens. Educational research shows the lasting importance of early childhood experiences to a child's later development and success.

**Figure 1: Rates of Return to Human Capital – Investing Across All Ages**



This slide (Edwards, Gandini and Forman, 1994) has become very familiar to the Australian early childhood field. It was presented by the economist James Heckman in various public forums (2006) and has been cited extensively (eg. Victoria, Department of Premier and Cabinet, 2007; Rudd & Macklin, 2007) in Australian reports and policy documents. The slide depicts one of the major thrusts of the economic argument for investing in early childhood and that is the earlier the better. Hence, this is a reason for increased interest in education and first three years.

Investing in early childhood is proving to have long term benefits and can have a rights and ethical base as well. In *Reggio Emilia*, Italy where there is world recognition of the exceptionally high standard of early childhood education programs, 12% of the council budget was allocated to the early childhood centres. Australia invests 0.45 per cent of its GDP in care and preschool education combined, compared to 2% in Nordic regions. Different funding levels result in significant differences in quality and access.

The percentage of children between the years of birth and eleven, in Australia, in formal or informal out-of-home care is approximately half (ABS, 2003). About 80% of children from birth to five participate in an early childhood service. The following table from A Elliott (2006, p 8) shows children aged birth – four who use formal early childhood services.

**Table 1: Children birth – four in formal early childhood services in June 2002 and June 2005**

Service type	Birth – 4 years 2002	Birth – 4 years 2005
Long Day Care	282,200	302,900
Occasional Care	33,800	47,200
Preschool/ Kindergarten	195,200	159,200
<b>Total centre based care</b>	<b>477,400</b>	<b>599,900</b>
Family Day Care	76,800	90,600

Unfortunately there are inconsistencies in child care data from year to year which A Elliott (2006) attributes to “different counting methods, definitions and collections points” (p. 8).

In the past 10 years there has been an increase in the number of parents returning to work before their children are of school age. 73% of 3 or 4 year olds were in formal care in 2002 (ABS 2003a). In 2002, the most common family structure was where both parents were working (43%). Flexible education and care arrangements have been needed to cater for this change in trend. In the past kindergartens have offered what was described as sessional programs which did not meet the needs of families where two parents work. There is also emerging research that links full day kindergarten and literacy growth that suggests for disadvantaged children a full day program is educationally more effective than the sessional model (Zvoch, Reynolds, Parker, 2008). The change in family needs has led to the broadening of what is offered in early childhood education to meet market demand.

With the increase in the number of families with two parents working and the increase in the number of single parent families there has been an increase in the need for the provision of early childhood care and education that matches the busy working lives of families. The trend for more two parent working families is continuing. This has resulted in a need for quality provision for children from birth. The number of families seeking child care provision has grown so rapidly over the past ten years that the number of service providers has struggled to keep up with demand. There are multiple settings involved in the early childhood sector including child care, kindergarten, family day care, play groups, out of school hours care, occasional care and the early years of school. A child may be using several services simultaneously. As well as this families use a range of informal care arrangements with grandparents taking an ever increasing role.

Grandparent care is becoming a focus of research as grandparents are the primary non-parental form of care used for young children (Gray, Misson & Hayes, 2005; Brandis, 2003) and therefore are an important determinant in children's growth and well-being. Whilst many governments are paying increased attention to raising parenting skills to meet global educational demands there is less attention given to grandparents and there are calls to address this gap and extend parenting supports and services to grandparents as their role, both within the family and as educational and workforce supports expands (Gray et al, 2005; Clarke, 2003; Goodfellow & Laverty, 2003).

With the increase in the number of early childhood service providers has come pressure to have highly qualified staff in all early childhood services. There currently is a three tiered system for staffing with some staff having degree status qualifications while others have certificates and diplomas and 34% of child care staff do not have a qualification (Tomazin, 2008). Historically, in Victoria, degree status teachers have worked with older children three years and above while certificate and diploma trained staff have worked with babies however this trend is starting to change with some degree qualified staff choosing to work with infants and toddlers.

As well as research and evaluation of programs presenting a strong case for highly qualified staff in early childhood settings there is also the question of what type of staff will be needed in the future. As we move towards more integrated service delivery staffing becomes an issue (Moss, 2002; Cameron, Mooney & Moss, 2002). In New Zealand considerable government expenditure has been directed towards achieving a fully qualified teacher workforce by 2012 (New Zealand Education Review Office, 2006). In the UK the Children's Workforce Development Council has released plans for an integrated qualifications framework for the children's workforce (Vevers, 2006). However, there are fears such a move could lead to greater uniformity and the higher education sector is concerned about employer involvement in content of courses and impact on scope for innovation (Calder in Vevers, 2006). A report from Community Services (2006), *The National Children's Services Workforce Study* found that:

The most common job category in the sector was unqualified (less than diploma or equivalent) contact worker, with 41 per cent of staff employed in that role (p.3).

One of the most striking findings of the *EPPE* project (Effective Provision of Preschools Education – A major European Longitudinal study which investigates the effectiveness of preschool education in terms of children's development) was that the quality of the individual settings attended by children has a measurable impact on their progress up to age 7 (Sylva et al, 2003). Most importantly, the project found that “settings that have staff with higher qualifications have higher scores and their children make more progress” (p. ii).

A major international influence on policy making and the regulatory environment since the 1990s is a growing awareness of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and the existence of this instrument has had an impact on the participatory learning literature. There is an identified need for early childhood policy-makers, practitioners and researchers to understand the content and spirit of the concept of children's rights as part of their advocacy for children. Smith (2007) has pointed out that in Australia the idea of children's rights has received little attention. As most countries in the world have signed the UNCRoC there is also a responsibility to recognise children's rights and assist them in an awareness of the rights of others. Smith (2007) has argued that this rights perspective is strengthened when socio-cultural theory is also used. She emphasises the importance of voice and says:

Social interaction and participation with others in cultural activities with skilled partners leads to the internalisation of the tools for thinking, enhancing children's competence (Smith, 2007: p.4).

## Themes from national and international curriculum/ learning frameworks

The following themes have emerged from the curriculum/learning frameworks documents reviewed for the 17 jurisdictions of interest. Each theme will be discussed in relation to the development of the curriculum/learning frameworks documents and the implications of these for practice with children from birth to age 8.

### 1. Early years lay the foundation for future learning

Current research globally has established the importance of the early childhood years in laying the foundation for the future. The early years are now seen as important in determining future life outcomes. However, it is critical to recognise that early childhood education is important in its own right as a time when children inquire, explore and discover a great deal about the world around them and establish attitudes to learning that remain with them throughout their lives. It is important to place value on the learning occurring in the early childhood years. This learning should be seen as legitimate rather than being seen merely as a preparation for the future steps in education.

Children who commence their first formal educational years in an early childhood setting where they develop a thirst for learning and view themselves as inquirers and explorers are able to construct their own understandings in a collaborative setting. Supportive teachers are able to extend their investigations and scaffold their learning. Children who come from rich, engaging early childhood educational environments have the foundations laid to become successful learners on their education journey. They commence school with an eagerness to learn and the dispositions to be fully engaged in their learning.

More recently brain research has highlighted the importance of government and community as well as families investing in children's services as the learning at this time has a significant impact on children's success (Shore, 1997). Also, there is a government focus on strengthening families and communities in order to provide children with a good start. Locally in society there has been an emphasis on 'community' and the early childhood service provides a vital link in the suite of offerings that support families to have a sense of belonging and opportunity to contribute to their community.

Nationally there has been a focus on providing quality programs for children. In the past 10 years most states in Australia have introduced an early childhood curriculum document. Victoria is the last state to introduce a curriculum document for children prior to school. South Australia was the first state to include children from birth in their curriculum document in 2001 and developed the one document for children from birth to year 12. In the Northern Territory and the ACT an integrated approach to services for children has been taken. However a birth to 3 year component was not apparent. Tasmania also takes an integrated services approach. Here all children are included in the provision from birth to 16 years. In 2001 Western Australia strengthened its commitment to early childhood education through the introduction of a new school starting age and expansion of the kindergarten and pre-primary programs. These changes mean all children meeting the age eligibility criteria are guaranteed access to a pre-compulsory program. The *Curriculum Framework (K-12)* outlines the scope of the curriculum and identifies the Early Childhood phase as one of four overlapping phases of development. Queensland focussed on the preparatory year provision which was introduced in 2007. New South Wales has a framework for children aged birth to 5 years and the five to 8 years are catered for under the primary curriculum.

It is very important to recognise the unique characteristics of young children and this is explained in the curriculum guidelines of Finland where "the intention is not for children to study the content of different subjects, but to start to acquire tools and capabilities by means of which they are able to gradually increase their ability to examine, understand and experience a wide range of phenomena in the world around them"(STAKES, 2003, p.24).

## 2. Changes in family lifestyles require change in provisions offered

Studies by the Australian Institute of Family Studies (2006) confirm the changing needs of Australian families in terms of early childhood provision. The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC) found a large number of Australian parents are accessing a range of formal and informal care arrangements for their young children. When looking at care arrangements for infants

The type of care used by parents was related to overall family income, with families only using formal care arrangements having higher yearly incomes, and those using only informal arrangements having lower yearly incomes (Harrison & Ungerer, 2005 p 29).

There are a significant number of grandparents providing care. Families not located near their extended family have a greater need for supported child care services.

Most of the LSAC infants who were in regular child care (75%) received only a single type of care: however, 22% of infants experienced two types of care arrangements and 3% experience three or more arrangements each on regular basis each week (Harrison & Ungerer, 2005 p 27).

These figures are particularly note worthy given the research findings that quality child care can provide support for children's learning socialisation and development particularly in the transition to school years (Press and Hayes, 2000). In contrast research in poor quality care may be exposed to some level of developmental risk (Love et al, 2003 and NICHD Early Childhood Care Research, 2005: Sims et al, 2005).'

There continues to be a large number of children accessing early childhood education programs in the year prior to school

The large majority of 4 to 5 year old LSAC children (95.7 percent) were participating in early childhood education and care programs either in schools or prior to school settings (Harrison & Ungerer, 2005 p 33).

In the ACT in 2005, the provision of preschool education increased to 12 hours per week for all 4 year olds and this is flexibly delivered in long or short day programs. In Tasmania where 97% of 4 year olds are enrolled in preschool programs in schools there is 10 hours per week.

## 3. Changes to age range coverage

Perhaps one of the most significant moves has been an increasing interest in the importance of quality experiences in the first three years. Nationally and internationally children from birth to three years have started to become the focus of discussion related to curriculum and quality provision. Historically early childhood provision has centred on children of three and four years old however, the brain research (McCain, 1999) and lifestyle changes have seen a greater emphasis on children in their first three years. A main research focus is brain development in the early years (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). It is now accepted that brain development begins in-utero and this process continues in the early years at a rate not exceeded at any other stage of life (McCain, 1999). This emphasis on the first three years has also been taken up by many economists.

A further change has been the attention to age based transitions and the curriculum documents profiled for this report have indicated the different approaches that can be taken to breaking childhood up into discrete parts. As was identified earlier the NT, ACT, Western Australia and Queensland curricula all focus on the year or two prior to school entry and do not include children from birth to three in their curriculum provisions. Many of the documents reviewed now start at birth and some continue throughout the school years (eg South Australia and Tasmania).

Internationally the age range covered in early childhood curricula also varies. In 1996, in New Zealand the Early Childhood Curriculum Guidelines, *Te Whāriki*, was one of the first curriculum documents to comprehensively cater for children from birth. However in Sweden, a leader in early childhood education, curricula for children under 1 year is not offered, although 76.6% of women with children under 6 years participate in the workforce. Maternity and parental leave arrangements support parents staying home with their children during the first year (OECD 2006:p.408). While the focus of this report is curriculum and not a debate about school starting ages, the later school starting age of 7 years for compulsory school in Sweden and Finland supports the notion that play based curricula as prescribed by the Swedish and Finnish curricula for children 1 to 6 years are appropriate for younger school children in Victoria.

In contrast, the Singapore curriculum has underlying 'desired outcomes' to give a cohesive focus to the different age levels of education and there is an emphasis on lifelong learning even though each age phase is considered to require varying emphasis on the need for formal education.

#### **4. Economic impact of quality early childhood provision**

Not surprisingly, given its close association to supporting workforce participation economists are notable for having sustained a contribution to the child care choice debate. Most economic contributions have at the centre of their analysis a model of household utility maximisation that focuses on how households allocate their time between paid and household production, access, the impact of subsidies, and the extent to which parents are willing to pay a premium for quality child care. Thus, Powell (2000) and Andren (2003) show that child care choice and work decisions are sensitive to the price of care and that families with access to more financial resources or who have fewer children use more non-familial care. Similar contributions have shown that the presence of alternative carers (relatives and friends) increases the likelihood that the mother is employed and that a reduction of the price of child care has a large effect on social assistance utilisation.

The emphasis economists place on utility maximisation is also manifest when they discuss the quality of child care. Here attention centres on the extent to which parents are willing to pay a premium for higher quality care and the difficulties parents experience in gaining knowledge of what constitutes high quality care. Utilising child-to-staff ratios as a measure of quality (Hagy, 1998, p704-705), found that "none of the economic variables matter: the mother's wage rate, her spouse's annual earnings, and the implicit price of staff-to-child ratio have almost no influence on the demand for improved staff-to-child ratio." This finding led Hagy to conclude parents resist paying a premium for high quality care in many cases because they lack knowledge of its importance to the child and he advised policy makers to concentrate on educating the public to the benefits of high quality care.

Hagy's conclusion that the price mechanism is not an effective regulator of child care quality reinforces the value of the contribution advanced by Chipty (1995) who has revealed that state regulation of child care tends to have a positive effect on price, quality, and hours of care (Knitzer 1996). And it has been further reinforced by research that has shown parents tend to convince themselves the type of care they utilise is in fact the type best suited to the needs of their child. This is a conviction maintained across all social groupings and is clung to even if external circumstances cause parents to adopt a different child care situation. When the latter occurs, parents' beliefs regarding the child care arrangement best suited to their child's needs tends to change in tandem, a process that enables parents to continue believing the choices they have made are not trading-off the wellbeing of their child (Himmelweit and Sigala 2004).

Of special interest to the Australian federal government and the Victorian state government is the concept of human capital. The following is a quote from the *National Reform Agenda*, developed in Victoria by the Department of the Premier and Cabinet, and released in March 2007.

This focus on early childhood development and child care is aimed at providing children with the best possible start in life, making sure that they are born healthy and equipping them with the skills for life and learning.

The Council of Australian Governments (COAG) recognises that the positive impact of improving the health, wellbeing and productivity of an individual child accumulates over a lifetime, with clear flow-on benefits for individuals, families and the broader community .

There is growing evidence and awareness, both in Australia and internationally, of the substantial benefits that accrue from investments made in the first few years of life. In Singapore ‘economic functionality’ remains a cornerstone of educational policies (Tan, 2007, p.36). Many of the Australian curriculum documents made mention of the benefits economically of quality early childhood provision for example, the ACT defines curriculum as a framework within which learners are developed in all areas, to become valuable community members and contributors to society both locally and globally. The Northern Territory early years framework has the underpinning belief that it is more cost effective to meet children’s needs earlier rather than later. The Queensland *EYCG* recognise the contributions of early childhood education to lifelong learning and the foundation for successful learning. The South Australian curriculum was designed to meet rapidly changing needs for children’s future engagement in society.

In the UK, the *Early Years Foundation* has one of its five major aims as helping children achieve economic well being.

## 5. Diversity of approaches to curriculum

When examining the approaches to curriculum taken for young children from birth to age eight, within Australia it is obvious that there is a complex set of arrangements for this age group that differs between the states. Because children from birth to 8 years fit into preschool provision for part of this time and compulsory school provision for the remainder, at least two different curriculum offerings occur in most states.

In Victoria there is only one curriculum document in use, the Victorian Essential Learning Standards (VELS), catering for children in school from approximately age five through to year 10. These “learning standards provide a framework for planning the whole school curriculum by setting out standards for students to achieve in core areas” (Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 2004, p2). VELS was introduced for a validation year in 2005 then implemented in schools from 2006 onwards. There has been no early childhood curriculum document that has been actively used for many years within Victoria. Although in 1991 the Curriculum Guidelines for children from 3 to 5 year olds was introduced by the Office of Preschool and Childcare, this document has not been used by early childhood teachers. The guidelines were not found to be very helpful as they lacked detail and the neglect of consultation processes with the early childhood field prior to their introduction resulted in early childhood practitioners feeling no ownership having made no contribution to the guidelines. Victoria has never produced a curriculum document catering for children from birth to three years. As a result of pressure to produce an early childhood document in line with all other states, in 2003 a curriculum working party, was set up and auspiced by Early Childhood Australia Inc. (Victoria Chapter). The working party produced a discussion document as a framework for practice entitled *Beliefs and understandings: a conversation about an early childhood curriculum framework*. The resulting consultation and ‘conversations’ about this document reported that the early childhood field saw the guidelines as somewhat limited, especially for programs for children in the birth to three age range. The development of curriculum guidelines or a framework for Victoria has not eventuated as a result of this process.



Since 2003 other states within Australia have written new curriculum documents specifically catering for young children prior to school entry. In 2005, New South Wales produced a curriculum framework for all children prior to school catering for children from birth, the NSW *Curriculum Framework for Children's Services: The Practice of Relationships: Essential Provisions for Children's Services* (New South Wales Department of Community Services, 2005). This document provides a framework for children in all children's services prior to school. The framework is not a manual for practice because it recognises that professionals bring substantial knowledge, skills, values and perspectives to the framework. Also, the NSW Primary Curriculum: *Foundation Statements* has been produced for children in the school system and the five to eight year olds are catered for in the Stage 1 and 2 section of the document (Board of Studies NSW, 2005).

Queensland, on the other hand, has produced one curriculum document specifically for the preparatory year and another for children once they commence school at age 6 (Queensland Studies Authority, 2006). The discussion on the Queensland provision in this literature review will focus on the preparatory year curriculum as this is a unique offering catering for one year only. The preparatory curriculum for children aged 5 was designed to provide continuity of provision for young children between their early childhood services experiences and school experiences.

In 2001 Western Australia changed the school entry age from 6 by 31 December to 6 by 31 June in any given year. At the same time the kindergarten program, two years prior to school entry was made available to all eligible children at no cost and was increase form five and a half to eleven hours a week. The program is conducted by qualified teachers and is part of public schooling. Community kindergartens are an integral part of the Government's kindergarten program with staffing (teacher and education assistant) and an operational grant provided by the Government.

The *Early Childhood (K-3) Syllabus* provides teachers with support and clarity on what should be taught in the early childhood phase of development to support teachers in the development of learning, teaching and assessment programs (Department of Education and Training, 2007). The *Early Childhood (K-3) Syllabus* is an advisory resource that explicitly supports the principles articulated within the *Curriculum Framework*. The syllabus encourages teachers to continue to make professional judgements about when to introduce content, taking into account the developmental needs of their students.

Tasmania's early years curriculum has a number of features that make it a valuable resource when considering how to design a developmentally appropriate and contextually relevant early childhood curriculum. As from the beginning of Term 1 2008, the *Essential Learnings Curriculum* (Department of Education Tasmania, 2002) has been fully replaced by the *Tasmanian Curriculum*. A whole of government policy framework establishes schools as community centres with specific sustained funding for this role. In Tasmania early childhood teachers are seen to be in the best position to decide on program content. The *Essential Connections Curriculum* is currently viewed as a guide for those working in the years prior to Kindergarten who plan programs for individual children (Department of Education Tasmania, 2004). Five curriculum areas underpin the *Essential Learnings Framework* and therefore the *Essential Connections Curriculum*: Thinking, Communicating, Personal Futures, Social responsibility and World futures. Learning markers in the *Essential Connections Curriculum* describe interim steps in children's progress leading up to outcomes at Standard 1 (approximately 4 year olds).

Internationally there is again a wide range of approaches taken to curriculum. The Nordic countries have long been acknowledged as leaders in early childhood education and these countries spend over 2% of GDP on preschool services (OECD 2006:p.408). In Sweden in 1998 amid debate about lowering the school starting age from 7 years to 6 years, concerns about continuity and economic consideration of the comparative costs of school and preschool provision the Swedish Government implemented significant

changes. The responsibility for preschool provision (including centre and home based programs) was brought under the Ministry of Education, a preschool curriculum document was developed (Skolverket Lpo 98 2006) and a voluntary preschool class or transition class established for 6-7year olds. The preschool curriculum document (Skolverket Lpo 98 2006) is a succinct document that provides fundamental values and guidelines for local implementation in various preschool settings and aims to integrate care and education. The priorities of the Swedish preschool curriculum are summarised thus,

The preschool should lay the foundations for life long learning. The preschool should be enjoyable secure and rich in learning for all children. The preschool should provide children with good pedagogical activities, where care, nurturing and learning together form a coherent whole. Children's development into responsible persons and members of society should be promoted in partnership with the home (Skolverket Lpo 98 2006: 4-5)

The preschool class or transition class curriculum is covered by the *Curriculum for the compulsory school system, the preschool class and the leisure time centre* document (Skolverket Lpo 94 2006), a document that shares many underpinning values with the preschool curriculum. Introduction and implementation of the two curriculum documents has been accompanied by the explicit aim to bridge preschool and school pedagogies, the former intended to be the dominant pedagogy in both preschool and the early years of school.

In the United States of America, according to the OECD Report (2006) there is an emphasis on individual responsibility for early childhood and limited government intervention, therefore there is much diversity in what and how early childhood services are provided, regulated or accredited. With respect to curriculum, broad curriculum typologies exist in some areas, but generally curricula are eclectic or independent.

Commercially available curricula such as *High/Scope*, *Creative Curriculum* and *Pyramid* and the national curriculum guidelines for birth to 8 years formulated by the peak body the National Association for the Education of Young Children (*NAEYC*) offer direction for individual services to develop a curriculum. In this literature review two approaches that are used widely in American early childhood settings will be discussed, *The High/Scope* curriculum and the *NAEYC Guidelines*. Reviewing the *High/Scope* and *NAEYC Guidelines* (2003) provide limited inspiration for this report. The former is inclusive from birth to youth and offers the potential for continuity through an active participatory approach to learning. The *NAEYC* guidelines (2003) are based on Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) which has been much debated (Fleer, 1995) and reflect a somewhat outdated developmental assessment driven approach to curriculum.

In 2003, the Singaporean Ministry of Education launched a new pre-school curriculum as a national framework for both child care centres and pre-schools. The curriculum entitled *Nurturing early learners: A framework for a kindergarten curriculum in Singapore* caters for children from birth to 8 years.

Like Australia, Canada is a socio-geographically diverse country with provincial/territorial autonomy. Immigrants continue to play a major role in shaping Canada's pluralist society as they do in Australia. Education is a provincial/territorial responsibility with Federal overarching policies and most provincial/territorial governments recognise that the lack of coherent early childhood education policies across the country is problematic. Child care is usually privately operated, not-for-profit and regulated by provinces/territories. In the child care sector there is generalised under funding and an inefficient subsidy system. In 2004, the two predominant approaches in Canada were social pedagogy and pre-primary that had representing two completely different philosophies (Bennett, 2006).

However the overarching Canadian federal government policies offer a conceptual basis for the development of early curriculum documents by individual territories and provinces. The following four areas of focus are highlighted:

- All children should be as physically, emotionally and spiritually healthy as they can be, with strong self-esteem, coping skills and enthusiasm;
- All children will have their basic needs for food, shelter clothing and transport met and will be protected from abuse, neglect, discrimination, exploitation and danger;
- All children should have opportunities to reach their potential for good physical and social development, language skills, numeracy and general knowledge; and
- All children should be helped to engage with others, to respect themselves and others, and to develop an understanding of their rights and responsibilities of belonging to a wider society.

The design of territorial and provincial early curriculum documents varies according to the jurisdiction with some having developed early childhood frameworks: Ontario-*Best Start Early Learning Framework*; New Brunswick-*Curriculum Frameworks for Early Learning and Child Care*; Quebec-*Jour C'est Magique* (OECD Report, 2004).

The United Kingdom *Statutory Framework for Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS)* (Department for Education and Skills, 2007) sets the standards for learning development and care for children from birth to 5 years in the UK. The *EYFS* aims to help children achieve the five *Every Child Matters* outcomes of staying safe, being healthy, enjoying and achieving, making a positive contribution and achieving economic well being.

New Zealand was one of the first countries to introduce an early childhood curriculum document that catered for children from birth, *Te Whāriki*. *Te Whāriki* Matauranga mo nga Mokopuna o Aotearoa: Early Childhood Curriculum (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 1996). This document caters for all early childhood services in New Zealand for children from birth until they enter school. *Te Whāriki* covers infants from birth to 18 months, toddlers from one year to three years and young children from 2 years to school entry. There was deliberate overlap in ages to recognise the differences in children's development. *Te Whāriki* sets out the unique characteristics and key curriculum requirements for infants, toddlers and young children. There are four overarching principles of empowerment, family and community, holistic development and relationships and within these principles there are five strands: well being, belonging, contribution, communication and exploration which support practice.

The *Reggio Emilia* schools for the early years from birth to age six located in the north of Italy, demonstrate a distinctive and innovative curriculum, pedagogy and method of school organisation which recognises the potential of children. The *Reggio Emilia* approach involves a clear philosophy and principles that underpin practice. There is no written curriculum document. Instead teachers share a common set of principles of practice and continually dialogue and debate about their pedagogical practices to challenge and modify their understandings. The experiences of educators of *Reggio* schools cannot be copied, but rather provide the opportunity for dialogue that will create opportunities to innovate, rethink and explore new ways of educating children in the 21st century.

Part of the reason for such diverse approaches to curriculum may come from the fact that there is not an agreed definition of curriculum. The reviewed curriculum documents took a range of different foci placing children, subjects or learning areas centrally and describing values, principles or guidelines. Some documents focussed on the process or 'how' learning occurs while others focussed on 'what' was to be learned.

This contrast in curriculum definition is seen in New Zealand where their birth to 5 years curriculum for early childhood *Te Whāriki* (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 1996) conveys a very different understanding of the term curriculum compared with the primary curriculum:

- In *Te Whāriki* the term curriculum is used “to describe the sum total of experiences, activities, and events, whether direct or indirect, which occur within an environment designed to foster children’s learning and development” (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 1996, p10).
- In contrast in the New Zealand curriculum for schools: consists of the ways in which a school puts into practice the policy set out in the national curriculum statements. It takes account of local needs, priorities, and resources, and is designed in consultation with the school’s community (New Zealand Ministry of Education 1993 p4).

The New South Wales Early Childhood *Curriculum Framework: The Practice of Relationships*, defines curriculum as the “intentional provisions made by professionals to support children’s learning and well being.” In the framework it emphasises that a framework both provides definition and supports uniqueness (New South Wales Department of Community Services, 2005, p.33).

These different definitions help to highlight the differing underpinning assumptions and indicate that clarity of definition is essential to understanding the intention of any curriculum document.

## 6. Education and care

The integration of education and care components is best exemplified in the Swedish curriculum documents (Skolverket Lpo 98 2006 and Skolverket Lpo 94 2006). Both documents are explicit about the universal values that underpin curricula irrespective of the context. For example, individual rights, democracy, equity and inclusion are readily applicable to any context. Further this is supported by prioritising co-operation and teamwork across the different contexts i.e. school, preschool, leisure time centre (after school care) and preschool class (transition class) as a goal within the curriculum documents. Education and care are viewed as a coherent whole, not differentiated aspects of a child’s experience. Singapore is attempting the same integration by having one curriculum document for early childhood services even though they might be under differing statutory authorities.

Similarly, the *EYFS* in the UK comprise legal requirements relating to learning, development and welfare. It brings together the learning, development and welfare requirements and ends the distinction between care and learning and between the birth to three and three to five provision. In New Zealand the early childhood curriculum *Te Whāriki* brings together the inseparable elements of care and education from birth to school entry age. This curriculum document was the first to value the interrelated nature of care and education throughout the document and provided an example for others to follow. In the New South Wales early childhood curriculum framework, care and education are interwoven.

The Finnish understanding of curriculum is one that integrates care, education and pedagogy and this is evident in the curriculum document which emphasises how children should learn rather than what children should learn.

In other jurisdictions such as Canada, care and education are currently treated separately and a National and Provincial Policy for Early Education and Care promoting coherence for care and education is in its initial stages. The consensus is that care and education are not to be differentiated.

Likewise in Korea several attempts have been made to have care and education integrated however, this has not yet been achieved.

## 7. Accessibility of curriculum to a wide range of audiences

The birth to 8 age range is currently serviced by many different early childhood and school organisations including both for profit and non-profit organizations, for example, child care, family day care, community based programs, private owners, corporate owners, occasional care, kindergarten, pre school, early learning centres, mobile children's services and outside school hours centres. The development of any overarching principles for early childhood or guidelines for birth to 8 years would need to be mindful of this wide range of early childhood offerings as well as the diversity of children and families that use these services. Therefore, the wording of any principles or guidelines would need to be inclusive of all audiences.

Any curriculum document that is developed for children from birth to age eight will need to be mindful of the structural and organisational differences between the services catering for this age group. For example, sessional kindergartens, long day programs and occasional care as well as schools all differ greatly in their hours of operation and daily organisation and these are only a few of the many services catering for this age group. The development of a curriculum document will need to cater for the range of different ages, infants, toddlers, and young children prior to school as well as young children in their early years of school. The curriculum will need to cater for centres that follow a range of differing philosophies such as *Reggio Emilia* approaches, Steiner or Montessori as well as many other individual approaches suited to the particular community or school environment. The curriculum will need to be suitable for children attending a range of different services such as centre based care, mobile preschools and home based care as well as kindergartens and school settings.

The New South Wales early childhood framework acknowledges that the implementation of the framework in each service should be unique. The K to Year 6 Foundation statements for schools on the other hand is very school focused with key learning areas stating 'what' is to be learned compared with the early childhood framework that often focuses on 'how' learning is to take place.

In Queensland the *EYCG* is very suitable for the audience of the preparatory year. However, the characteristics of the learners in the document are not inclusive of children from birth to four years.

The language used in the early childhood syllabus for Western Australia is oriented towards primary teachers. Without a birth to three curriculum, the early childhood sector in Western Australia remains fragmented. There are two pre-compulsory years of schooling-kindergarten for 4 year olds, and pre-primary for 5 year olds. Formal schooling begins at 6 years.

The New South Wales Board of Studies (2005) recognised the importance of the language in the curriculum documents being suitable for all audiences. They are currently working to write their curriculum documents into plain language as they are aware of the importance of it being accessible to parents without the education jargon that often makes it difficult for parents to understand. As a result of this process they have found that teachers have also found the documents easier to follow.

Tasmania has also found a way of supporting all early childhood settings in a community, from parent run playgroups, formal child care, sessional kindergartens, to the early years of school, by making primary schools the HUB for early learning. Early Childhood Education in Tasmania is moving away from a model of service provision towards a whole-of-government approach based on core beliefs relating to partnerships, learning, education and diversity. Programming is based on the individual needs of children. Within this model the school principal has been supported to provide leadership in early childhood education.

In the UK, the *EYFS* caters for all children prior to school but does not include provision for the 5 to 8 year olds who are in the school system. The 5 to 8 year old children are catered for under the national curriculum which has a subject focus. This focus contrasts with learning and development areas for children from birth to 5 years Department of Education and Skills (2007).

In New Zealand the early childhood curriculum, *Te Whāriki* is also inclusive of all children prior to school entry. However, the 5 to 8 year old children are catered for within the school curriculum document. *Te Whāriki* is written for all early childhood services and the language is inclusive for all families. It is a bicultural document (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 1996).

## 8. Partnerships in education

Since the 1960s research findings have demonstrated the connection between parental participation in programs and children's educational achievement (Rodd, 1998). Empowerment of parents has led to children achieving at a higher level compared with when teachers work independently. The involvement of a parent has also been found to have a lasting effect on the parent's feeling of investment in and attachment to their child (Apple & Beane, 1995; Griffith, 1996).

Current educational research recognises the benefits of a true partnership with parents. McGilp and Michael (1994) highlight the benefits of a 'learning connection' between home and school where home and school work together, listen to each other, and make good use of a variety of learning experiences available in the school, home and community. When home, school and the community understand the contributions that each can make to children's learning, and use this, all parties stand to benefit from the outcome. Partnerships can lead to a shared sense of responsibility and shared commitment to children and their education.

True partnership has been described as "those efforts that unite and empower individuals and organisations to accomplish collectively what they could not accomplish independently" (Kagan & Rivera, 1991 p.52). Collaboration can take place during the assessment process between a number of parties: between teachers; between children; between teachers and children; between teachers and parents; between teachers, parents and children; and between teachers, parents, children and the community (Puckett & Black, 2000).

Partnerships can create opportunities for the development of shared understandings of learning. With this shared view the children's home and school experiences can be brought together and built upon for further success in learning. This collaboration can also lead to the provision of curriculum that is culturally and individually relevant and to the promotion of social justice and equity (Gestwicki, 1992; Apple & Beane, 1995). Collaborative assessment provides the opportunity for strong positive relationships to be developed between staff, children and the community. The socio-cultural perspective values reciprocal relations and views children as being literate within the cultures of their communities and families, hence making learning and culture inseparable (Kantor, Miller & Fernie, 1992).

"When educators respect the unique strengths of each family, collaborative partnerships are strengthened and the continuity of learning between homes and educational settings is enhanced" (Arthur, Beecher, Death, Dockett and Farmer, 2005 pp2-3). Gestwicki, (1992) suggests that teachers and parents can make community connections to use natural, people and material resources.

There are many examples from the curriculum documents reviewed that highlight the key role of partnerships in education. One of the key principles of the New Zealand early childhood guidelines is 'family and community' as this is seen as an integral part of the early childhood curriculum. Likewise the ACT curriculum stresses the importance of building strong partnerships with parents and families. The UK stated that partnership underpins successful curriculum. The *NAEYC* also recognised the importance of partnerships with families. One of the core beliefs of the Tasmanian early learning documents was related to partnerships, learning, education and diversity. One philosophical belief underpinning the NSW curriculum framework is that parents and community share responsibility for all children. Children, teachers and families are the central focus in the *Reggio Emilia* approach. In Singapore adults are seen as

active supporters of learning and home school relations are encouraged. Finland recognises parents as ‘pedagogical partners’, they describe the journey from cooperation to partnership as one which requires mutual, continuous and committed interactions (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, 2004).

In contrast, the Korean educational system values the authority of the teacher.

## 9. Changes of views and images of children

In the last decade, the image of the child has changed and young children are viewed as capable competent learners who are able to co-construct their own learning in the context of their family and community. Malaguzzi, one of the founders of the *Reggio Emilia* early childhood centres in Italy, viewed children as strong, capable and resourceful (Malaguzzi, 1993). This image of children has challenged educators in the early childhood field to reconsider the types of programs they offer young children. This has added to the pressure to provide flexible high quality care and education for young children.

Children learn best when the curriculum is connected to their everyday lives and interests. Children come to early childhood settings with a range of diverse experiences and competencies, and therefore early childhood professionals need to respond with a range of pedagogies for different children in different contexts to support and extend children from their point of entry. Part of the change in image involves listening to young children and this aligns with a rights-based approach. This move towards viewing children as subjects of rights, rejects viewing young children as passive recipients of adults’ decisions. This image requires adults to partner with children in the decision-making process (Lancaster, 2006).

The image of the child is central to the *Reggio Emilia* approach. Children are seen as curious, full of wonder, rich in resources and able to construct and co-construct their own learning. The programs aim to support children to become competent thinkers, problem solvers, inquirers, negotiators, inventors and life long, self directed learners.

The role of children has also changed within the assessment process. These changes reflect the changes in the way children are viewed. Children are no longer seen as passive recipients of knowledge, but rather viewed as active constructors of their own learning. The social nature of this learning is starting to be recognised and accommodated in teaching and assessment situations (Berk & Winsler, 1995). Jones and Nimmo (1994) suggest that child-initiated curriculum should be related to the child’s developmental readiness, interests, questions, dreams, style of learning and cultural contextual experience.

In the Swedish preschool curriculum, the image of ‘the child as competent learner, active thinker and involved doer’ is evident (OECD 2006: 412). The child is central to the curriculum. Under the heading ‘The Influence of the Child’ the Swedish curriculum states “The needs and interests which children themselves express in different ways should provide the foundation for shaping the environment and planning pedagogical activities” (Skolverket Lpo 98 2006: 11-12). The child is not a passive recipient of education and care.

## 10. Recognition of the importance of quality provision for young children

There is a vast literature on policy and quality in early childhood services. The very notion of quality itself is problematic. Moss and Petrie (2002) argue it is our social and political image of the child and ideas about the purpose of care and education that will dictate policy and provision. Doherty-Derkowski (1995) discusses the quality research and presents two aspects of quality, structural quality (the regulated environment of space, teacher training, group size etc) and process quality, which is concerned with such things as relationships, stimulation within the learning environment and social emotional security. Today educators would also include a global aspect for such characteristics as cultural awareness, an appreciation of diversity, a comprehension of environmental, historical and technological influences on

experience as well as acknowledging the importance of the immediate context and its influence on well-being and development.

One of the most striking findings of the *EPPE* project (Effective Provision of Preschools Education – A major European Longitudinal study which investigates the effectiveness of preschool education in terms of children’s development) was that the quality of the individual settings attended by children has a measurable impact on their tested progress up to age 7. If this is the case there needs to be a greater investment in early childhood education so that there are future gains in educational outcomes.

Research demonstrates that effective programs are flexible and responsive to children’s ideas yet include careful planning and resourcing. They enable children to engage in exploration, investigation, problem solving and discovery in collaboration with others (Arthur et al 2003). A range of different approaches have been used to provide this type of programming. In the U.K., the early childhood curriculum guide for the *Foundation Stage* (Qualification and Curriculum Authority, 2000), provides principles that should underpin both learning and teaching. The guide states that effective early childhood education requires a relevant curriculum, one that builds on what children can already do and which includes opportunities for children to engage in activities planned by adults as well as those children plan or initiate themselves. Children are innately curious and eager to learn. They learn best through play, through talk and through direct experience; and they learn when they feel confident and secure (Pugh & Duffy, 2006).

Small group sizes are another factor that impacts on the quality of early childhood provision. Small groups make it easier for the adult to have true verbal exchange with children, to interact with them as individuals and to spend less time in routines or behaviour management (Howes et al, 1998). When staff have a large number of children in their care, staff/child interactions tend to be superficial. Programs where there are a large number of children per adult have been found to be associated with preschoolers who have a short attention span and poor verbal skills, relative to age mates in other programs (Doherty-Derkowski, 1995). When children are placed in larger groups there is less adult/child interaction, less social stimulation, less active involvement in experiences and higher levels of apathy and uncooperative behaviour. Lower group size is related to more positive interactions between young children and educators, while higher group size forces adults to be more managerial and controlling with children (Huntsman, 1989).

The Vinson Report (Physical Disability Council of New South Wales, 2002) also advocates small class sizes in early years of school. They point to several research studies in the US that confirm the benefits of smaller classes for children’s academic achievement. Advantages were sustained into high school. They also found major benefits when class sizes were less than 20. In Sweden, increases in group sizes mitigated against the implementation of the new preschool curriculum (Skolverket, 2004).

The number of children per staff member is referred to as the staff/child ratio and research shows that this has a definite impact on both adult behaviour and child functioning. Low staff/child ratios are essential in the provision of responsive care and education as demonstrated by Howes et al, (1998). The higher the ratio of adults to children, the more positive and frequent the interactions. Doherty-Derkowski (1995) suggested that the ratios of 1:8 or 1:9 are desirable for three year olds in providing optimum quality programs.

The presence of highly qualified and experienced staff has been consistently linked to high quality interactions between children and adults, and this is an important factor in the social, language and cognitive development of children in group settings. Research indicates that specialised early childhood staff engage in substantially more developmentally appropriate interactions with children of all ages (Phillips, 1987). The links between higher levels of qualified staff and positive outcomes for children have been established (Phillips, Mekos, Scarr, McCartney & Abbott-Shim 2001).



The qualifications and competency of staff to implement curricula are critical to success. A significant point made in relation to the *NAEYC* Guidelines is that “Effective implementation requires: Professional development/mentoring; qualified staff who understand the curriculum; and, on going assessment of children” (*NAEYC* 2003: 9). Dunn and Kontos (1997) assert from their experience that ‘teachers may endorse DAP, but struggle to implement it’. The latter is in keeping with the OECD (2006) comment on the paucity of well qualified early childhood educators in the USA. In Sweden the importance of qualified staff to successful curriculum implementation is also acknowledged (Skolverket 2004).

Similarly, at the centre of the ACT curriculum renewal was recognition that quality teaching is the key to student achievement and in the NSW curriculum framework under the core concept of ‘About professionals’ the decisions, judgements and choices made by professionals are major contributors to children’s experiences. Well qualified staff are essential to quality teaching and professional practice.

## 11. Recognition of the importance of play

The Rumbold Report (Department of Education and Science (DES), 1990, p8) emphasises the role of ‘play’ in supplying the foundation on which learning is built. “Play that is well planned and pleasurable helps children to think, to raise their understanding and to improve their language competence. It allows children to be creative, to explore and investigate materials, to experiment and to draw and test their conclusions” (DES 1990, p11).

This type of play will also help to sustain children’s interests and motivate them as learners both individually and collaboratively with others (DES 1990). In 2003 the Australian Government Taskforce Child Development, Health & Wellbeing released a report *Towards the development of a national agenda for early childhood*. The report’s focus on children’s learning in the early years has resulted in some administrators, educators and families perceiving that young children need an academic, teacher directed curriculum. However, early childhood educators warn against a push down curriculum and encourage developmentally appropriate programming for young children. “Educators should guard against pressures which might lead them to over concentration of formal teaching” (DES 1990, p9).

Marcon’s (1999) research compared three approaches to curriculum, an ‘academically oriented’ curriculum, a ‘play based curriculum’ and a combination of an ‘academic and play based curriculum’. The results of her research showed that both the short term and long term gains were higher for children who experienced a ‘play based’ early childhood program. Play environments enriched with culturally relevant resources provide opportunities to explore processes and concepts, develop positive dispositions to learning and use literacy and numeracy in a range of contexts. Play encourages exploration, risk taking, socialisation and engagement in learning. Through play children can explore and reflect on interests and issues relevant to their lives.

In the Swedish preschool curriculum (Skolverket Lpo98 2006) play is described as an ‘omnipresent activity’ and central to children’s learning. ‘Activities should promote play, creativity and enjoyment of learning as well as focus on and strengthen the child’s interest in learning and mastering new experiences, knowledge and skills’ (Skolverket Lpo 98 2006: 9). Similarly in the UK *EYFS* notes that the delivery of the six early learning goals should be through planned purposeful play, with a balance of adult led and child initiated activities. The UK curriculum acknowledges that children learn best through play, through talk and through direct experiences.

In Tasmania learning through play is promoted in all preschool programs by the *Essential Connections* framework (Department of Education Tasmania 2004). Extensive guidance is given for teachers but not a prescriptive content. Many stories of teachers putting the *Essential Connections* framework into practice in their own early childhood contexts are given online and provide a rich resource for practising early childhood teachers. In addition to this a comprehensive resource for parents, the *Starting Kindergarten Information Kit* promotes “play” as the way young children learn.

## 12. Recognition of the social nature of learning

Within the early childhood field, arising from developmental psychology theories there has been a focus on individuals and their development in each of the domains of development (physical, social, emotional language and cognitive development). This approach tended to “break children up” into separate parts rather than contextualising their learning in their social environment which can provide a much richer and authentic picture of children’s learning.

Vygotsky’s (1978) work on the socio-cultural approach to education stresses the importance of the social nature of learning. He recognised the role of talking and working with others as important in the process of learning. This not only influences the type of learning experiences to be provided, but also the role of the teacher in scaffolding and supporting children’s learning during their social interactions with peers and adults. Many of Vygotsky’s views on the social nature of learning have influenced the work of early childhood educators, in particular the *Reggio Emilia* educators who, have a focus on working in small groups. This is seen as a valuable approach to learning where there is the opportunity to listen to the ideas of others as well as communicate your own ideas. Children have many opportunities to communicate with each other regarding the projects they are working on as well as sharing ideas with a range of peers and adults. Collaborative partnerships between educator, children and families are one of the cornerstones of *Reggio Emilia* schools (Abbot & Rodger, 1994).

Similarly, in Sweden the preschool is described as a ‘social and cultural meeting place’ (Skolverket Lpo98 2006: 5) where peer scaffolding, as emphasised by Vygotsky is valued and co-operation between children, parents and educators is fundamental at all levels.

## 13. Changes to approaches in the ways we observe and plan for children

The changes in assessment processes were summed up by Daly (1989) who stated:

The notion of assessment has finally changed from that of measurement of skills to the gathering of layers of information which, together, provide rich and rigorous data about children’s development. This data will establish not only where children are ‘at’ but also will assist in their future learning (p.19).

This change in assessment has impacted upon both the pedagogy and the learning opportunities provided. It has also resulted in teachers, parents and children all being given a more active role throughout the assessment process, where they are involved in the planning and actioning of the new learning experiences.

An educationally sound assessment practice has been described as one that alerts teachers, parents and children to what they might do next in the learning process and provides opportunities and experiences for teachers and children to become more effective and more successful (Ayers, 1994; Makin, 1996).

In New Zealand *Learning stories* have set a high standard as a process for documenting children’s learning in the context of their social relations. The reflective stories about children provide rich descriptions of children’s interactions and learning processes in early childhood contexts. These *Learning stories* are used to find children’s emerging skills or interests. Scaffolding is then used to extend the learning of children, or complement their learning, to reach the next step in their understandings. The documentation through *Learning stories* values children’s ideas and helps ‘make their learning visible’. This approach to observing and planning started in New Zealand and has now influenced early childhood practice in many other countries throughout the world including Australia (Carr, 2001).

The early years curriculum guidelines that were produced for the preparatory year in Queensland provide suggestions for planning, interacting, monitoring, assessment and reflection. Children’s learning is described in terms of phases of learning and development; becoming aware, exploring, making

connections, and applying. There are examples of early learning record templates which describe actions rather than outcomes that are provided to promote teachers' reflective practice.

Reporting practices require strong partnerships between schools and parents. Formal reports are sent home for each student, each semester. Whilst there is no standard format for kindergarten and pre-primary, the style of reporting is determined through consultation with parents. Overarching this process are the requirements that the foci for reporting are: social and emotional development, physical development and literacy/ numeracy development. Years 1-3 use the Department of Education's reporting template- which uses grades A-E with personalised comments for English and Maths and an overall comment.

A post implementation review of the Swedish Preschool curriculum (Skolverket Lpo98 2006) in 1998 has revealed that documentation of observation and planning in various forms is more common post implementation of the new curriculum although subject to constraints such as large group sizes, lack of time and professional development (Skolverket 2004, p23).

The new role of the teacher in the assessment process requires teachers to collaborate with children and scaffold their efforts to master new skills. The importance of working within the child's 'zone of proximal development' or their 'buds' of development, rather than only examining their final 'fruits of development' has been recognised (Vygotsky, in Berk & Winsler, 1995). This is significant as it changes assessment from summing up children to describing their emerging abilities that can then be used for creating new teaching and learning experiences. Griffin (1997, p4) says that the purpose of assessment should be "to identify the threshold of performance and knowledge in the development of the individual rather than to provide a list of isolated achievements and deficits".

When the assessment uses a 'strength-focus' approach, rather than focusing on areas needing improvement, it provides opportunities for assessment to have positive outcomes for all those involved (Rosenthal & Young Sawyers, 1996). A strength-focus approach has the ability to enhance the parent-child relationship by sharing what the child can do well and all parties can then work together to build on this (Wilks, 2004). Self esteem is enhanced as another positive outcome. When weaknesses are focused on, there is the potential for assessment to have a negative effect on the parent-child relationship as well as on the child's confidence. The benefits of collaboration have been highlighted along with the need for parents to have clear expectations of their own roles and the roles of others, in the assessment process for them to make real contributions. Information needs to be freely shared so parents will be empowered to contribute their perspective on how to facilitate their child's development.

#### **14. Importance of continuity of provision**

As can be seen from the ABS statistics on page 14, there is a growing number of children accessing early childhood services from six weeks of age. Many of these children will use several different early childhood provisions in their years prior to school entry. Some children will use several early childhood services simultaneously. It is therefore essential that all personnel who work with children in their early childhood years from birth to 8 years share a common set of beliefs and practices that will provide continuity for children as they move between and within the different early childhood services and on to their early years of school.

There has been much written on the importance of continuity of provision for children in the year prior to school as can be seen below. However, the research has not kept up with the discussion on the continuity of provision for children from 6 weeks old and throughout their early experiences. Many children experience several different early childhood provisions before arriving at the year prior to school provision. New curriculum documents can help with providing continuity of experience for this growing number of children who access early childhood services as infants and toddlers as well as children from 3 to 5 years and 5 to 8 years.

The importance of providing programs that facilitate a smooth transition for children as they move from their kindergarten year (or year prior to school) to primary school was demonstrated in Chancellor's (1999) qualitative study that followed this process for four Victorian children. By considering the ecological model when viewing the lives of these four children, it became clear that the most significant factors that enhance a smooth transition are continuity of friendships for peer support, continuity of programming and continuity of environment (Chancellor 1999). Renwick, (1984) and Chancellor (1999) both discuss the familiarity with the physical setting as a key influence on a smooth transition to school for children. They both suggest a minimum of '5' visits to the physical setting of the first year of school for a smooth transition. If children were located on the site or nearby where they could have frequent interactions with the school physical setting it would help greatly with the ease of transition. This happens frequently in some localities and hardly ever in other locations. For example, in Tasmania and in Western Australia, kindergartens are often located at primary schools. This provides children with the opportunity for continuity of friendships, programming and environment.

The other area to be considered is continuity of approach by staff. In Tasmania and in Western Australia, the majority of teachers in the kindergarten year, working in the primary school environment, are required to have early childhood degree qualifications. However, teachers in the early years of primary school are not. Teachers in the primary school are not required to have undertaken early childhood studies.

Throughout Australia, all kindergarten teachers working with four year old children in their year prior to school must have early childhood degree qualifications. Significantly though, teachers working in the child care industry, with children ranging from birth to 5 years of age, are not required to have a degree in early childhood education. Given the currently available data relating to children's learning in the years from birth to eight, the importance of early childhood qualified staff planning and delivering programs is imperative.

When staff work collaboratively to arrive at a set of shared goals and philosophies children and their families will feel familiar and be comfortable with the consistency of approach.

However, it is important not to confuse continuity of provision with the same provision. Kaga (2007) warns of the phenomenon experienced by Sweden as they attempted to link preschool and compulsory school at the systematic level. Despite the fact that the Prime Minister, Goeran Persson, stated that preschool should influence at least the first years of compulsory school and gave endorsement to importing early childhood pedagogy to compulsory schools, an evaluation of the education reforms showed "that school codes are more prominent in the preschool class than those of the preschool. Examples include more subject- and skills-oriented teaching; expectations regarding outcomes; traditional classroom organisation, and methods that do not cater for the 6 year olds need for physical activities (as opposed to pedagogical work), stressing play, art, and experimentation, organised flexibly around each child's individual pace and interests" (Kaga 2007, p2).

In Tasmania an attempt to address continuity of provision has been made by the state government. The *Essential Connections* document, used in the provision of programs for the years prior to compulsory school, has been positioned within the *Essential Learnings* document, used for provision of programs in the years of compulsory school (Department of Education Tasmania 2002, 2004). This has linked the overarching foci in both age groups of children. In addition, primary school principals in Tasmania have deliberately been positioned as leaders within local communities who promote the early childhood education and its links with primary education. In Tasmania the same language in assessment of learning in all early childhood settings and in schools is now used, so from birth to 16 years, all students will be assessed under the same five curriculum areas.

In Western Australia early childhood teachers use progress maps (*Curriculum Framework Progress Maps/ Outcomes and Standards Framework*) to monitor children's progressive achievement of learning outcomes, and may use other tools (Curriculum Council Western Australia 1998). Use of progress maps inform the early childhood teacher's planning and assist with decisions about what knowledge, understandings, skills and values are appropriate for children with whom they are working. Early childhood teachers continue to use their professional judgement in making these decisions. The *Kindergarten and Pre-primary Profile* supplements the progress maps and supports teachers to monitor children's progress and achievement in the pre-compulsory years. The K and PP Literacy and Numeracy Nets, and the *First Steps English and Mathematics* materials also supplement the progress maps. These materials have been designed as diagnostic and monitoring tools and include checklists against which teachers assess skill acquisition.

In West Australia, children in the Early Childhood phase of schooling who have a disability are monitored and assessed with diagnostic intervention. Schools enrolling targeted students with disabilities are provided with supplementary resources through the *Schools Plus* program.

The transition year between preschool and school is recognised by some curriculum documents as a unique year requiring specific acknowledgement. For example, in Queensland a curriculum document has recently been developed for the transition year only to build continuity between children's prior experiences and their future learning in schools by acknowledging the many experiences influencing children's learning prior to school.

In Sweden a voluntary transition year with 96% of children attending, is described as the preschool class where play based learning is implemented for half the day (UNESCO 2007). The intention of this is to promote a gradual progression from holistic play based learning to skill or content focussed learning opportunities.

In Canada, the OECD visited four territories and found a general stagnation across the board (OECD 2004). In common with many child care centres in Australia, safety issues dominated activities and environment. Like Australia also, there was a lack of direct access to outside space and little emphasis on programming in the outdoors. Importantly implementation varies between centres and between territories in Canada.

## 15. Importance of implementation processes

There is a growing emphasis on 'evidence based' practice and this has brought a welcome move for governments, policy makers and researchers to work collaboratively to achieve more informed results when embarking upon interventions or new models of provision. Educational projects that have been heavily supported by research are the implementation of the first three years of SACSA (Winter, 2004), the *Singapore curriculum project* (Tan, 2007), *EPPE* in the UK (Sylva, 2006) and *Sure Start* which has been very comprehensively designed and evaluated (Melhuish, 2008).

In Queensland the *EYCG* were trialled and evaluated internally and externally prior to formally being adopted. This process allowed contribution from a wide range of practitioners and ensured a feeling of ownership with the document. The New South Wales early childhood document acknowledges the need for leadership from skilled and knowledgeable professionals in supporting and collaborating on the implementation of the framework.

Importantly, the Tasmanian *Essential Connections* has been designed in a consultative manner with genuine and valued input from all stakeholders. One of the reasons that many believe *Te Whāriki*, the New Zealand early childhood curriculum guidelines became so well received and became a model for successful early childhood curriculum provision was that it was developed through wide consultation with the early childhood field. It is a bicultural document. Added to this positive start to the curriculum

development, the introduction was followed up with extensive professional development programs throughout the country to support practitioners in implementing the guidelines.

The implementation process varies considerably across the curricula reviewed from self guided training modules attached to the commercial High/Scope curriculum to intense localised professional development and monitoring as noted for New Zealand. The type of implementation processes depend to a large extent on how 'loose' or prescriptive the curriculum is. In Sweden the preschool curriculum is concise at 14 pages (Skolverket Lpo 98 2006) and correspondingly 'loose' in that it provides only values, goals and guidelines. The Swedish Ministry of Education acknowledges that each preschool setting is unique. Staff, parents and children are to determine how the curriculum goals will be worked toward in each setting (Skolverket 2007). Local level implementation is important in creating opportunities for teamwork and a sense of ownership, however a curriculum review has identified local resourcing of implementation as inequitable in parts noting 'preschools in high resource areas enjoy better conditions and generally succeed in implementing their task with greater success than preschools in low resource areas' (Skolverket 2004:32). The size of the local municipality was an indicator of the level of resourcing available (Skolverket 2004:30) for implementation. A further concern of loose frameworks identified in the Swedish review is the potential for misinterpretation of goals at the local level. Implementation processes are critical if goals are to be consistently interpreted within a jurisdiction (Skolverket 2004).

In Finland the development of the curriculum guidelines required extensive stakeholder involvement underpinned by "respect for mutuality (the possibilities of all different participants and stakeholders to be involved in the development process in an open dialogue)" (OECD, 2006, p319). There are national guidelines and local communities are supported to develop curriculum based on these guidelines.

## 16. Importance of resourcing

The following is a quote from Professor Collette Tayler in a recent article in Melbourne University's Voice, (Tayler, 2008a) called *Rethinking early childhood education*. Collette sums up some of the pressures and challenges that face early childhood education provision in Australia. She calls for an end to the false demarcation between child care and education and expresses worries about threats to provision when many of our services are vulnerable to the vagaries of the stock market. Here, the case is made for public investment in early childhood education, for a systematic and integrated approach to policy in this area, and for a strong and equal partnership with the public education system.

The report also argues for a universal approach to accessing quality early childhood education and care for all 3 to 6 year-old children. It encourages increasing the public provision for children under three years of age, in combination with paid parental leave for about the first year of a young child's life. All of these directions are grounded both in empirical research of children's development and learning and in the evidence of effective systemic provision for early childhood education across the OECD group of countries.

The report also argues for participation – the participation of parents, extended family, local community, professional staff and governments to ensure that effective early childhood education and care is the outcome. This level of engagement and public responsibility is encouraged because the benefits of good early childhood education flow not just to the child and family receiving the service but to society at large, across the child's lifetime. The distribution of benefit, in fact, is mainly to society, justifying public investment.

## 17. Education for Sustainability

Education for sustainability (also often referred to as environmental education) is frequently evident in school curricula and the subject of a national Australian curriculum statement (Commonwealth of Australia Dept of Environment and Heritage 2005), but only a rapidly emerging theme in the early childhood sector and yet to be widely addressed in early childhood curricula. Some current early childhood curricula where education for sustainability is addressed include the Swedish curricula (Skolverket Lpo98 2006, p7) which states ‘an ecological approach and a positive belief in the future should typify the preschools activities’ and the Queensland *EYCG* (2006, p74) suggests that in the context of active learning ‘children think and enquire by investigating features of and ways to sustain environments’.

Further support for the inclusion of education for sustainability as an emerging theme can be garnered from the range of Australian authored publications in the last 5 years (Davis and Elliott 2003; Davis and Elliott 2008; Early Childhood Australia 2007; S Elliott 2006; Kinsella 2007; KU Children’s Services 2004; Gosford and Wyong Councils 2007; NSW EPA 2003; Tilbury Coleman and Garlick 2005; and Young 2007) and the lead that the peak national early childhood organisation Early Childhood Australia has taken in promoting education for sustainability. The revised ECA Code of Ethics now states early childhood educators must ‘Work with children to help them understand that they are global citizens with shared responsibilities to the environment and humanity’ (ECA 2006). Looking beyond Australia declaration of the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development 2005-14 (UNESCO 2005) suggests that the time has come for all curricula at all levels to be inclusive of education for sustainability. Davis and Elliott (in press) provide the following descriptive statement of education for sustainability for the early childhood context,

‘Early Childhood Education for Sustainability’ (ECEfS) is an empowering education underpinned by both humanistic and ecological values that promote change towards sustainable early childhood learning communities. As a consequence, ECEfS seeks to empower children and adults to change their ways of thinking, being and acting in order to minimise their environmental impacts and to enhance environmental and socially sustainable practices within their early childhood settings and into their homes and communities.

Early childhood education is described as foundational and so is education for sustainability, it must be a curriculum priority if future generations are to capably address the growing diversity of global environmental issues for a sustainable future.

## 18. Outdoor and learning play spaces

Australians are recognised as outdoor, active citizens. In this context it is important that when working in early childhood or school settings with children from birth to age 8 years that consideration be given to maximising the learning that occurs in both the indoor and outdoor environments. While early childhood services frequently promote Froebel’s original notion of the kindergarten as a ‘garden for children’ to explore outdoors, the valuing of learning outside the classroom is foreign to many schools. A literature review commissioned by the UK Department for Children, Schools and Families (DFCSF in press) entitled *Every Experience Matters. An evidence based review on the role of learning outside the classroom for children’s whole development from birth to eighteen years* (in press) affirms the importance of learning outside the classroom and concludes that indoor and outdoor learning environments are equally important for all ages.

There are significant opportunities for exploration, discovery and learning for children aged birth to 8 years in outdoor environments or play spaces, particularly natural outdoor play spaces. Current literature indicates a trend emerging away from generic synthetic outdoor play spaces towards more natural or

landscape based play spaces to support children's learning (Elliott and Davis 2004; Elliott 2008; Lester and Maudsley 2006; Louv 2005; The National Arbor Day Foundation and Dimensions Educational Research Foundation, 2007; Wilson 2008; and Young and Elliott 2005).

Further these trends are well supported by research around the importance of natural environments in promoting children's learning, health and well being (Bagot 2005; Herrington and Studtmann 1998; Kahn and Kellert 2002; Kylin 2003; Maller 2007; Malone 2004; Taylor, Kuo and Sullivan 2001a and b; Wells 2000). For example, Herrington and Studtmann (1998) investigated the impact of natural or landscape-based and equipment-based play spaces in early childhood services and identified that the latter promoted primarily physical development, while the former promoted learning in a range of areas including physical, social, cognitive and emotional. Also there are significant behavioural benefits for children in natural play spaces supported by Wells (2000) and Taylor, Kuo & Sullivan (2001a; 2001b) who considered the effect of leafy green spaces on children in inner urban areas and those with Attention Deficit Disorder.

The 'aliveness' and 'uniqueness' of natural outdoor play spaces ensures that with each new day there are new discoveries and new sensations for children to experience (Elliott 2008). Dwyer (2007) suggests that creative play spaces outdoors have the greatest capacity to influence how children grow, develop and interact with the natural world. He recommends a combination of large spaces for running, intimate spaces for children to play alone or in a small group; places for water, spaces where children can play above or below others; spaces that give different perspectives of size and location; materials that are flexible and easily manipulated by children; areas that are aesthetically beautiful; places for animals; spaces where children can easily connect with the natural world and spaces for artworks. The flexibility and moveability of larger materials and natural loose parts ensure that high levels of challenge and engagement in play and learning can be maintained. Also, a natural play space evolves over time with generations of staff, children and families and fosters collaborative engagement such that a sense of ownership and place is nurtured. As Sobel (1990: p.12) states "If we allow people to shape their own small worlds during childhood, then they will grow up knowing and feeling they can participate in shaping the big world tomorrow".

Since schools were first built in Australia, the outdoor environment, or playground, has not been regarded as a place of learning. Recent research of children's play in the primary school playground has alerted educators to the diversity of learning that occurs there and has indicated that in the early years of school, more emphasis should be placed on scaffolding this learning by teachers (Chancellor 2007).

In Australia where compulsory schooling begins at 5 years of age, there is a strong argument for promoting the school playground as a place of learning. Unfortunately, most Australian primary school playgrounds are devoid of the features required for enriching play based experiences. With increased awareness, the potential of outdoor environments in schools can be shown to value outdoor learning in the way many kindergartens do. By drawing on the intrinsic nature of children's play and recognising the importance of promoting links with the natural world, school playgrounds can enrich the learning and development of children.



## 19. Literacy and numeracy

Literacy and numeracy experiences in the early years have been identified as key factors leading to success in school and for effective life skills. Raban and Ure (2000) found that young children benefit from early education programs as shown by performance indicators in English and Mathematics Key Stage 1 testing in the UK. They also described quality programs in early childhood improving behaviour as well as literacy and numeracy performance. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds particularly benefit from early childhood experiences. Two other positive influencing factors on literacy and numeracy performance were parent's active participation, and teaching quality and group size.

“A child who does not have a good start in the early years will be disadvantaged in their later performance as the cumulative effect of such lack of skills and knowledge becomes increasingly problematic and difficult to overcome” (Dole et al, 2005, p21).

Makin, Hayden and Jones Diaz (2000) found there were many features of rich literacy in the environments of early childhood centres. These included a positive physical environment conducive to play and warm staff child interactions. Functional and environmental print were an integral part of the environment. However, links in play to metalinguistic awareness were not strong. Staff in high ranking centres regarded art and music as important contributors to children's communication skills, awareness of transformation and ability to represent meaning in different forms. In contrast low ranking centres focused on individual instruction for children having problems.

Raban, Bridie and Coates (2004) found that the best literacy learning opportunities can be achieved through a “print enriched pre-school play environment “ (p10). However Ure and Raban (2001) found that preschool teachers were limited in their understandings about how to support young children either to become interested in print or in extending an interest in print related materials and experiences.

High quality early childhood literacy and numeracy experiences will support equity as considerable differences in the language experiences at home are evident. In the United States the *Head Start* programs were shown to have positive impacts on the literacy skills of children when compared to non preschool attenders.

Some content focused curricula highlight literacy and numeracy while other curricula embed literacy and numeracy into a play based approach.

“Language and language development is the single area given highest priority in school plans, as well as in preschool in the case studies” (Skolverket 2004:30) that informed the Swedish preschool review.

In the Queensland *EYCG* the early learning areas were derived from the factors identified as associated with later school success. These were social and personal learning, health and physical learning, language learning and communication, early mathematical understandings and active learning processes. This is one of the first early childhood curriculum documents that uses learning areas and in particular placing emphasis on the importance of literacy and numeracy within two of the learning areas. The interrelated nature of learning within these areas is emphasised similarly with the *EYFS* in the UK, which comprise early learning goals around six areas: personal, social and emotional development, communication, language and literacy, problem solving, reasoning and numeracy, knowledge and understanding of the world, physical development and creative development.

## 20. Influence of ‘best practice’ programs

*Reggio Emilia* early childhood settings have been recognised throughout the world as leading the way in providing quality programs for young children. Without doubt the visions and values of *Reggio Emilia* schools in Italy have contributed immensely to improvements in images of children and the subsequent quality of the program and experiences provided as a result of this image. The *Reggio Emilia* centres have key principles that inform their practice. The Reggio approach to curriculum fosters children’s intellectual development through a systematic focus on symbolic representation (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman 1993). Children are encouraged to represent their ideas and understandings through their ‘hundred languages’ or modes of expression, including speaking, writing, drawing, painting, building and sculpting as well as shadow play, dance, collage, dramatic play and music. Contributions to quality early childhood programs have also come through the ‘emerging curriculum’ approach (Jones & Nimmo 1994) as well as ‘interest based projects’ (Katz & Chard 1989). The project approach aims to provide children with opportunities to engage in in-depth learning of events and phenomena in their world.

The New Zealand curriculum guidelines (1996) *Te Whāriki* also sets a high standard in curriculum guidelines with strands of: Well being, Belonging, Contribution, Exploration and Communication. These guidelines have influenced practices in many other parts of the world.

Howard Gardner’s multiple intelligences (Gardner, 2003) have influenced education practice by encouraging a breadth of offering where the ‘intelligences’ or strengths of individuals can be supported and built on.

Inclusive curriculum which acknowledges and embraces diversity and difference, and multicultural and multilingual curricula have also been incorporated into quality early childhood programs. Teachers using a multicultural approach to curriculum are knowledgeable about the cultures and languages that children bring to the setting from home. The resources, experiences and interactions in the early childhood setting reflect children’s everyday experiences in their families and communities. When developing a philosophy early childhood practitioners need to be mindful of the contributions of many different approaches so that sound ideas can be incorporated into best practice programs.

Carr, (2001, p19) states “governments are requiring national curricula and universal measurements of individual achievement”. This implies there are one set of ‘best practices’. In contrast with prescription guidelines on content or method or accredited schemes, the world’s leading early childhood programs in *Reggio Emilia*, have an emphasis on contextualised practice rather than a set of abstract external standards.

A range of different philosophies and approaches can be incorporated to provide quality provision for young children. Early childhood educators who are recognised as setting a high standard in the quality of their program, are clear about the philosophies that have influenced and informed their practices. It is possible to consider a range of approaches that can be incorporated together to provide a strong framework for quality early childhood practice.

## Essential principles underpinning quality provision for children birth to 8 years

### Introduction

A range of principles that underpin the theoretical framework and practice in the range of curriculum documents investigated in this report, have been highlighted and will be discussed in depth in this section.

Some of the key principles that inform practices in *Reggio Emilia* schools are: empowerment of children, empowerment of families and communities, learning through exploration, engagement with ongoing projects, the role of the teacher as both a ‘scaffolder’ and ‘co-constructor of learning’, valuing and embracing diversity, documentation of children’s learning and collaboration. The Reggio educators speak of the environment as the ‘third teacher’. Each of the principles that underpin practices in *Reggio Emilia* centres are interdependent and cannot be viewed separately.

*Te Whāriki*, the New Zealand curriculum also speaks of the interrelated nature of their principles. The Queensland *EYCG* list five components of an effective early years curriculum, they are understanding children, building partnerships, establishing flexible learning environments, creating contexts for learning and development and exploring what children learn.

In the U.K. *EYFS* the key principles are recognising children as capable and competent, positive relationships including the importance of secure relationships, respectful partnership with parents, enabling environments for supporting and extending learning, recognising that children learn in different ways and at different rates.

It can be seen from the international and local curriculum approaches above that the principles go hand in hand rather than being presented in isolation, however, for the purpose of discussion each of the key principles will be discussed separately in the following pages.

Decisions about resources and teaching approaches are often made in and through the process of working with children. A practical curriculum is organic and uses holistic, ongoing evaluation strategies. Curriculum based on practical reasoning requires well educated staff with clear values, theories and practices. Both staff and children are involved in decision making. Emphasis is placed on doing, teachers as facilitators and children’s control over how and when learning takes place. Staff value children’s views, their knowledge and learning processes. Creativity, as well as the use of open ended materials and open ended questioning is evident (Department of Education, Tasmania, 1999).

A ‘critical curriculum’ is very similar to the ‘practical curriculum’ however it aims for empowerment and a more equal and just social world through all curriculum decisions. There are similar principles, however, the role of critical reflection and critical reasoning is used in decision making and efforts are made to avoid bias (Department of Education, Tasmania, 1999).

It is not by accident then that the following principles were evident in many of the curriculum documents studied.

### **A. In recognition of how our views or images of children impact on both how we interact with them and the types of experiences we provide:**

#### **1. Viewing children positively as capable and competent**

This view was presented as a key principle of the *Reggio Emilia* approach to early childhood education and the results of this assumption have influenced practices internationally.

The child is valued as a co-constructor of knowledge. The child is seen as a researcher. The child’s strengths are focussed on. All children are challenged and extended in their learning. Children are acknowledged as having rights. They are listened to and their ideas acted upon. Children are central. Empowerment of children stems from having this belief and trust in children.

## 2. Acknowledging children as having rights

‘Communication’ and ‘contribution’ are two of the five strands that sit alongside the four key principles of *Te Whāriki*. *Te Whāriki* emphasises the critical role of socially and culturally mediated learning and of reciprocal and responsive relations for children with people, places and things (New Zealand Ministry of Education 1996). There is an identified need for early childhood policy-makers, practitioners and researchers to understand the content and spirit of the concept of children’s rights as part of their advocacy for children. Smith (2007) has pointed out that in Australia the idea of children’s rights has received little attention. As most countries in the world have signed the UNCRoC there is also a responsibility to recognise children’s rights and assist them in an awareness of the rights of others. Smith (2007) has argued that this rights perspective is strengthened when socio-cultural theory is also used. She emphasises the importance of voice and says:

Social interaction and participation with others in cultural activities with skilled partners leads to the internalisation of the tools for thinking, enhancing children’s competence (Smith, 2007 p.4).

As a rights paradigm gains more currency in early childhood literature (Woodhead, 2006) it becomes a powerful tool when combined with a theory that emphasises the diverse social and cultural worlds that children encounter. Therefore, using a socio-cultural approach, the daily experiences of infants and toddlers can be explored especially in relation to the articles 12 and 13 of the UNCRoC. These are two of the six participation articles and are applicable in the everyday. When the UNCRoC was developed the participation element of the convention was considered to be representative of a new way of seeing young children. Previous approaches to rights had very much concentrated on children’s needs; for example, the right to shelter, clothing, education and a family. This needy child is gradually being replaced in the early childhood literature with the child that has agency, is an active player in learning and re-creating culture and has enormous communicative competence to make this possible.

In Western Australia the *Curriculum Framework* and supplementary support materials such as the *Early Childhood (K-3) Syllabus* promote the provision of a balanced curriculum for all students including the learning needs of individuals and groups as part of the process of classroom planning (Curriculum Council 1998). Students participating in kindergarten who have English as their second language have their progress monitored and formally reported each semester to parents. The *ESL/ESD Progress Map* allows teachers to monitor students’ acquisition of Standard English. There is a specific map of development for early childhood learners. In addition to the monitoring section these maps provide a range of teaching considerations for each level of progress.

A range of targeted literacy programs have been developed to cater for the specific learning needs of Aboriginal students. The *Aboriginal Literacy Strategy* is a highly structured intensive literacy program which has been implemented in all Remote Service Schools in Western Australia. The *ABC of Two-Way Literacy and Learning* is a professional development program that focuses on improving literacy outcomes for Aboriginal students whose first language or dialect is not Standard Australian English. The entry of Aboriginal students who have been identified as having a barrier impending participation in the classroom in English is being facilitated by the *Indigenous Language Speaking Students’ Program*. Identified schools with high Indigenous populations and remote community schools may enrol 3 year old Aboriginal students if there are places available. Additional support is provided for families with English as their second language in the form of ‘post card’ which are available in five community languages. The purpose of the post cards is to inform non- English speaking parents about Kindergarten and Pre-Primary enrolment processes.

In Finland the early childhood policy promotes universal access and equal opportunity and this is reflected in the curriculum document where languages other than Finnish, including sign languages diverse cultures and abilities are specifically recognised. They have an early detection and intervention with respect to learning difficulties is identified as a part of the pedagogy identified in the curriculum document. There is an emphasis on supporting each child's self concept and a healthy self esteem.

An example of focus on needs, rather than on strengths, is seen in the UK *EYFS* document which states 'every child matters'. The focus is on helping overcome barriers for children so all can be successful. Staff respond quickly to early signs of need, rather than on building on children's strengths.

For early childhood policy makers, researchers, trainers, providers and practitioners it is in within the area of participation that children's rights in everyday interactions can be most easily ignored. In child care there is research evidence to suggest there is a lack of everyday individual interactions in the experiences of many children (Smith, 2007). There is also a question of the quality of interactions that take place. In early childhood group settings many interactions are based around routines. Children have little freedom during the day but are constantly organised through daily schedules. The quality of interactions within routines and the ability of children to express an opinion are dependent on how group interactions are arranged. How children's rights, for example, the right to be listened to, are respected in everyday practice will vary depending on the age of the child, the philosophical beliefs about children and childhood held by the practitioners and constraints within the physical, social and regulatory environment. Children may have no choice (voice) about such basic daily experiences as whether to play inside or outside, when they will have snacks or meals, what they will eat, when they will rest or whether they will sit in a group for songs and stories. These considerations have the potential to challenge how we work with children.

Since the *Salamanca Statement* (UNESCO, 1994) the concept of Inclusion, as part of the education social justice project, has been increasingly emphasised. Australia has responded with a variety of policy shifts.

### 3. Valuing the richness that cultural diversity brings to learning situations

Children learn best when provided with developmentally and culturally appropriate learning and teaching opportunities.

The UK embraces positive attitudes to diversity and difference in their curriculum document (Department of Education and Skills 2007) and the NSW *Practice of Relationships* (NSW Department of Community Services, Office of Childcare 2005) early childhood document also honours diversity. One of the core concepts of the NSW document describes a framework as "both a definition and supporting uniqueness" (p33). This balance seems something very worthwhile to strive for in any curriculum guidelines.

Like Australia, the Federal government in Canada acknowledges multiculturalism and indigenous culture in overarching policy with impact on education policies. Federal multiculturalism policy supports Canada's diversity and encourages the preservation of different languages and cultural practices.

Also the *EYCG* in Queensland illustrates developmentally, socially and culturally responsive learning opportunities that acknowledge equity and diversity.

### 4. Recognising children as being literate within the culture of their community and families

Tomasello, Kruger and Ratner (1993) state, that cultural learning manifests itself through imitative, instructed and collaborative learning. This has implications for many aspects of the teaching and learning processes. The approach taken to teaching, learning and assessment will help determine to what extent the diversity of cultures within the community have been considered and therefore whether it is in the interests of all members of the education community. Harris (1996) argues for an examination of classroom practices

and a critical analysis of how teachers relate to the linguistic and cultural practices of their students. She reports on the mismatch between the language valued by school and that valued by different socio-economic communities. The value placed on different linguistic practices creates disadvantages for children where their home language is not given respect.

Siraj-Blatchford (1997) and Robinson & Jones Diaz (1999) also discuss the importance of teachers considering social and cultural backgrounds and taking a proactive stance to counter inequities. Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory views learning from within its broader contexts. The socio-cultural perspective defines literacies in cultural terms and views children as being literate within the cultures of their communities and families (Kantor, Miller & Fernie, 1992). Thus, making learning and culture inseparable.

## **B. In recognition of the special characteristics of children from birth to 8 years**

### **5. Focusing on a sense of well being and belonging**

A key principle that has emerged from the curriculum documents under investigation is the importance of children's broader concepts within the social nature of learning. *Te Whāriki* curriculum approach emphasises the importance of children's well being and sense of belonging and demonstrates that without this, the learning of children will be impeded (New Zealand Ministry of Education 1996). By viewing children within a bio-ecological model (Bronfenbrenner and Evans, 2000), the importance of both their genetic make up and their environment is given consideration by teachers. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model views the child as developing within a series of contexts, each of which interact with and influence the other. His model represents a complex system of relationships that provide overall context for development and explains the different levels of the environment - micro, meso, exo, and macrosystems, the interactions of these systems on the individual, and of the individual with the systems. Interconnections across systems add another layer of complexity (Arthur, Beecher, Death, Dockett and Farmer 2008).

The *Reggio Emilia* curriculum also views the child within this complex ecological model and demonstrates this image of the child throughout their programming. In other words, partnerships in learning are highly valued between all members of the child's world and consideration is given to all aspects of the child's world that influence his sense of belonging and his well being. Famously the philosophy behind this curriculum approach clearly states that 'it takes a village to raise a child', articulating the importance of the relationships, interactions and contexts of every child's world.

While valuing the child's sense of belonging and their well being is clearly stated in both *Te Whāriki* and the *Reggio Emilia* approach, it is *Te Whāriki* that uses this principle as the starting point of formal observations and documentation in *Learning stories*. This focus then drives the planning process for teachers and therefore, the sense of belonging and the well being of every child cannot be ignored.

### **6. Acknowledging the importance of relationships**

In recent decades much research has taken up the idea of the importance of relationships in the early years and has examined the intersubjectivity between infants and toddler peer groups as well as with adults (Trevarthen, 1998). This has led to studies of infants communicating with infants and has brought new understandings of the social world of the young (Woodhead, Faulkner & Littleton, 1998).

*The Practice of Relationships*, the title of the New South Wales early learning curriculum framework; brings the prominence of this principle to the fore. Again, the relationships of all parties, teachers, families and children are included.

*Te Whāriki* clearly acknowledges that relationships and the environments that children experience have a direct impact on their learning and development (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 1996).

## 7. Recognising play is central

Play is central to a high quality early childhood curriculum and in a number of the curricula investigated in this report the importance of play is emphasized. Exploration during play is one of the five strands that sit along the key principles of *Te Whāriki*, and the importance of documenting the learning that is occurring during this play is central to opportunities for teachers to scaffold learning. Play is also one of the contexts identified for learning and development in the Queensland *EYCG*, the Tasmanian Essential Connections and the Western Australian *Early Childhood Syllabus (K-3)*.

The notion that play is important for children's learning is not a recent one. One of the earliest advocates of children's play was the Greek philosopher Plato who viewed play as preparation for life. By the start of the 20th century, values and beliefs about play varied widely, and there were disagreements about play's particular role in development and education (Frost, Wortham and Reifel, 2008). Today the growing field of scientific child study, has combined with the respected theoretical perspectives that have emerged over the last century from many parts of the world and an overarching common belief has emerged that much of the young child's learning takes place during play.

In line with this view, many early childhood educators, both in Australia and in other parts of the world, believe that children are constructors of their own knowledge. A constructivist view of learning means that children build knowledge and skills through a slow and continuous process of construction. Children actively explore their world, building on what they know, developing new understandings and skills. As children play and explore, they encounter new and unexpected things which challenge them. The play process involves playing with what is already mastered and known; encountering an interesting problem to solve during play, solving or mastering the problem in play and having a new concept or skill to work on in play.

## 8. Enabling Environments: Learning through exploration, engagement, inquiry, investigation, hands on real life experiences, risk taking and problem solving

Enabling environments are provided where children are invited to learn through interactive participation, exploration, inquiry and investigation, hands-on real world life experiences and open ended problems solving. The environment is described as the third teacher. Experiences are intellectually engaging, play is central to the learning approach and the indoor and outdoor environments recognised as important places of learning.

One of the principles underpinning the Northern Territory framework *Strong Beginnings* is that learning should be based on sensory experiences and play is the essential method of learning (Northern Territory Department of Education, 2007). Further, quality environments are vital where teachers need high levels of qualifications and a commitment to the field.

In the Queensland *EYCG*, mention is made of the importance of high quality environments in terms of space and furniture, and resource, aesthetic and sensory characteristics. The characteristics of high quality social environments are also included such as: partnerships, transitions, as well as aspects of temporal learning environments including routines, learning and planning time.

Finland suggests that when the environment is rich and flexible, and conducive to learning, it attracts interest and curiosity in children and encourages them to experiment, act and express themselves.

## C. In recognition of the importance of collaboration and partnerships in education

### 9. Empowering children, families and the communities

There is a recurring principle recognising the importance of partnerships with families and the community in several of the curriculum documents. In *Te Whāriki*, empowerment of children, families and the communities as well as the empowerment of staff supports the notion of a community of learners, co-constructing knowledge and supporting each other. This fosters good communication, collaboration and sharing of decision making and partnerships in education. In *Te Whāriki* it is recognised that children learn through collaboration with adults and peers, through guided participation and observation of others, as well as through individual exploration and reflection. One of the key principles of *Te Whāriki*, the New Zealand curriculum guidelines is ‘family and community’.

One of the core concepts of the *NSW ECCF* views children’s services as ‘communities of learners’. The framework states that parents and community should share responsibility for all children. This is also strongly evident in the Tasmanian Department of Education’s *Essential Learnings* where communities of practice are built around local schools.

Partnership with families is valued in the *EYFS UK* framework, and also in the Queensland *EYCG*, where again the need for partnerships within communities of practice is a guiding principle.

### 10. Viewing teachers as scaffolders and as co-constructors of learning

Central to the *NSW ECCF* are ‘communities of learners’ which recognise the co construction of understandings. Another core element is ‘promote and support respectful life enhancing relationships’ which focuses on the quality of the interactions and the relationships.

### 11. Valuing and embracing diversity

There have been changes in attitudes to the importance of culture within the teaching, learning and assessment practices in recent years. Where children were previously described as being from ‘non-English speaking backgrounds’ (NESB) which presented a deficit ‘non-English approach’, these children are now being described as being from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds (Clarke, 1999). This change in terminology reflects a valuing of the richness that cultural diversity brings to learning situations.

‘Diversity’ is one of the learning areas in the South Australian *Curriculum Standards Accountability Framework* (SACSA 2001). SACSA paid particular attention to the entitlements of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders; learners from linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds, learners who have English as a second language; learners with disabilities or learning difficulties; learners from low socio economic backgrounds; particular groups of boys and girls and learners from isolated and rural backgrounds.

In New South Wales the curriculum framework promotes a major obligation of professionals to ‘honour diversity’. In the framework, children and their families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families are acknowledged.

In the Northern Territory there are Student Diversity Policies and Guidelines titled: *Indigenous Languages; Education of Gifted and Talented Children; English as Second Language and Revised Special Education*. The document states that celebrating the diversity of children will help to develop tolerance and understanding for children and staff alike.



## 12. Acknowledging the multicultural nature of Australian society

The multicultural nature of Australian society cannot be ignored. A recent census recorded that 3.9 million Australians were born overseas in one of 200 countries and a further 3.8 million Australians had one or both parents born overseas (Press & Hayes, 2000). This makes for a very large cohort of children and families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds in education settings and deserves a re-evaluation of how culture is considered by teachers. These figures show increased cultural diversity and at the same time the curriculum is being kept within the boundaries of a mono cultural tradition (Apple & Beane, 1995).

In most schools the gap between democratic values and school practices is as wide now as ever (Apple & Beane, 1995). Schools are asked to educate all children yet at the same time are blamed for the social and economic disparities that detract from their chances of successfully doing so. It is possible to work with the whole school community towards more democratic practices in teaching, learning and assessment. Apple and Beane (1995) provide examples in their book *Democratic Schools* of rich learning experiences where the school and its community work together to reflect democratic practice. Democratic schools seek to change the conditions that create inequities.

## D. In recognition of quality teaching and learning approaches

### 13. Interweaving teaching, learning, and assessment

Collaborative assessment processes can be used to improve teaching and learning and provide a joint understanding of realistic and attainable goals for individuals. The process of collaboration itself is valuable as well as creating positive outcomes for all those involved. The input of the community as well as the parents can make a difference to the cultural and individual relevance of the program and curriculum offered to young children. Programs are being developed which are sensitive to and supportive of family strengths.

In the Queensland *EYCG* children are viewed as actively involved partners in learning, co-constructing their learning with 'teachable moments' used to make learning explicit. This is echoed in Tasmania's *Essential Connections* curriculum where both planned and spontaneous experiences are encouraged (Department of Education Tasmania, 2004).

The NSW *Practice of Relationships* framework states that it is not appropriate for young children's learning to be designed according to key learning areas because young children learn in holistic ways so their experience must reflect the breadth of possible learning. This focus on holistic development is also one of the key principles of *Te Whāriki* (New Zealand Ministry of Education 1996).

In *Te Whāriki*, *Learning stories* are used to build rich pictures of children and their understandings. The reflective stories about children provide rich descriptions of children's interactions and learning processes during play in early childhood contexts. The process of documenting *Learning stories* has set a high standard for understanding children's learning in the context of their social relations, for illustrating the learning that is occurring during play and these stories can be easily understood and shared by a broad range of audiences.

This pedagogical documentation makes children's learning visible, prompts discussion about children's learning by all the members of the community of practice. The *Learning stories* celebrate children's competence with communities, thus strengthening the partnerships and relationships within these communities and allowing all to contribute to planning for children's future learning (New Zealand Ministry of Education 1996).

In *Reggio Emilia*, pedagogical documentation is the means of making children's learning visible. This documentation uses visual images combined with the voices of the children, to provide a picture of learning that is accessible to the wider community. This approach not only documents children's learning, but importantly, also celebrates it.

## 14. Learning through play

From an early childhood perspective, it is considered that all types of play are equally important for optimal child development. Early childhood teachers, plan both the indoor and the outdoor environment to encourage opportunities for a full range of play. They believe that a child's social development occurs through interaction with peers. Children can build their social understandings and bring what they already know about being with others to each new situation. When children engage in rich and meaningful play, they can exercise judgment, get to know and enjoy their power, and experience autonomy, mastery and competence. If they are unable to experience these emotions, their emotional development will be jeopardized (Levin 1996). From a constructivist perspective, cognitive development is also enhanced via play opportunities. Play provides opportunities for symbolic and conceptual manipulation. The cognitive skills which children learn to use as they play are necessary prerequisites for later academic learning. As children persist in problem solving, they become creative thinkers, problem solvers and risk takers. Constructivists believe that play requiring active use of the body enables children to build their fine and gross motor control, enabling them to gain more and more control over their bodies. Children will practice the motor skills they have mastered and encounter new challenges requiring new skills, which are in turn mastered through further play. Children learn through relating space to their own body and movement, engaging large and fine motor skills as well as cognition.

Other early childhood educators who follow a developmental approach to children's learning believe that play is a developmental activity, where children move through a series of stages and along the way, discover their identity in relation to others. Advocates of this theoretical approach also believe that play has a positive impact on the learning of the young child. Children who are able to play will have more resources to draw on, both in childhood and adult life. Within this framework, dramatic play is seen as an important coping mechanism that allows children to process material that they do not understand and put it in a context that makes sense to them. It can provide a playful space where life can be experimented with and choices explored.

The value of play to the learning process has not been entrenched as widely within the primary school setting as in early childhood contexts, although there are some strong advocates for its inclusion. If play is defined as intrinsically motivated, children who are directed will find it difficult to incorporate play into their classroom practices where there is an emphasis on procedure, timetabling and order. In Australia today, play at school is widely accepted in the outdoor environment but not within classrooms. Children come to school to work, not to play. Chancellor (2007) describes this phenomenon as the undervaluing of play by adults.

## 15. Using 'teachable moments' for focused teaching and learning

Teachers take on the role of facilitators rather than experts with the necessary knowledge to scaffold the children's learning and use 'teachable' moments for focused teaching and learning. Importantly, this principle underpins both the *Te Whāriki* and *Reggio Emilia* curriculum approaches where the teacher is empowered to work alongside children in a collaborative manner, thus facilitating the co-construction of knowledge that these approaches strive for.

## 16. Embedding rich literacy and numeric experiences into programs

A program including expressive arts and the exploration of the environment plays an important role in enriching children's language and literacy understandings and ways of expressing themselves. The importance of having a print rich environment to support learning, and embedding mathematical and scientific language in the early childhood program to accompany children's explorations and inquiries has been recognized.

In Finland, “Language has a vital role in children’s learning and the abilities related to the command of language are the key to the child’s ability to learn” (STAKES, 2003, p18). Language is envisaged broadly as self expression, interactions with others, literature/story telling and as part of routines, play and culture.

Numeracy learning occurs best through “active exploration, inquiry and problem solving in authentic contexts” (National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCMT) p29). In this way children can actively build new knowledge from experience and prior knowledge. Teachers have a key role in assisting children to become mathematically literate through the communication of mathematical concepts and strategies to support children in expressing their ideas and discoveries.

### 17. Acknowledging the environment as the third teacher

When discussing a play based approach to learning in the years birth to 8 years, the outdoor environment is an equally important space as the indoor environment. Early childhood educators plan for learning in both environments, with high quality programs often allowing children to move freely between the two spaces.

In today’s urban society, it is an urgent matter that we motivate children to engage in active play in the outdoors (Chancellor 2008). It is possible for children to spend their early years mostly indoors, completely disconnected from the natural world. Australian preschool children commonly spend their days in child care centres where the outdoor area is completely plasticised (Australian Institute of Family Studies 2006). It is important for the outdoor environment to be equally well resourced and today, prominent research shows that the outdoor learning environment should link children with the natural world in as many ways as possible (Chancellor 2007, Elliott ed 2008).

Young children have innate connections with nature and such connections are instrumental to the construction of values and understandings about nature. Direct contact with nature in a natural play space is fundamental as “this generation, more than any other before, will need the environmental awareness and citizenship that is instilled through exploration of the natural environment in childhood” (Thomas & Thompson, 2004: p.21). Lester and Maudsley (2006) describe both play and nature as innate for children; therefore the provision of natural play spaces is obvious to facilitate children’s engagement and learning outdoors. In summary, Elliott (2008) asserts that the aim is to develop natural play spaces, landscapes for children to embroider with the loose threads of nature. In such landscapes children can create meaning, develop a sense of place, connect with the natural world and feel empowered to live healthy, sustainable lives. On the basis of the above discussion outdoor learning environments, particularly natural ones are an essential aspect of curriculum for children birth to 8 years.

### 18. Recognising the quality of teaching staff as critical to quality program delivery

Critical to quality program delivery in all early childhood settings is high quality teaching staff. Teachers who are well qualified, who engage in critical reflection and who practice a code of professional ethics are in the best position to interpret curriculum documents for all children.

Teachers who are critically reflective practitioners, will be constantly evaluating their own practice in relation to observations they are making of children’s learning, theoretical perspectives that influence their own practice, current research in the early childhood field, peer debriefing with colleagues and discussions with the range of members of the community of practice in which they work. In addition to this, critically reflective practitioners will co construct understandings about children’s learning as they work beside the children. As observers they will constantly re evaluate their own understandings about how children learn and how they can best assist in this process.

Early childhood curricula that value the professional knowledge of teachers will have overarching principles but will rely on the competence of teachers to interpret these principles for the contexts and the individual children with whom they work. This makes a curriculum a living document, ever changing to meet the needs of children, families and communities. The quality of such a curriculum approach is indisputable because it offers the possibility of programming for every individual child to meet their changing needs. Outcomes based curriculum with lists of competencies that children must achieve, can lead to a deficit model rather than a strength focus, therefore limiting the possibilities for both children and teachers (Wilks 2004).

New Zealand has recognised the importance of all early childhood staff being well qualified and have set the target of 2012 for all early childhood teachers to hold degrees.

## Implications for development of a curriculum/learning framework for the early years (birth to age 8) in 2008

The strongest early childhood programs have had very clear well defined principles that were understood by teachers, families and the communities. All parties were able to work together to uphold and implement the principles into their early childhood practices. This feature of an effective curriculum appeared to be more important than the learning areas or curriculum frameworks themselves. This view could be supported by the example of *Reggio Emilia* early childhood schools that are recognised internationally as world best practice, however they do not have a written curriculum document at all. Very strong prominent principles guide decision making. The teachers, children, families and community work collaboratively together to develop programs for children. The major view of children as capable and strong, results in intellectually worthwhile experiences and engaging programs that challenge and build on children's real world experiences. New Zealand is another country that has a strong set of principles and strands for all children prior to school, unfortunately these principles do not cover the children in the five to 8 years age range. There are attempts made to link the early childhood document to the early years of the school curriculum to help with continuity of provision.

In developing a curriculum framework for Australia, we can learn from the way that our image or view of the child impacts on the types of provision we offer them. If we view children as strong and capable it will result in quality provision for children. If we value children as learners, they will be recognised for their abilities and their learning will be extended and built upon and they will be offered programs that are intellectually engaging. By taking a strength focus approach to assessing and planning for children, all parties can work together to recognise achievements, build self esteem and provide programs that are locally, socially and culturally relevant. The assessment practices will reflect assessment as an integral part of teaching and learning process and will be undertaken within the contexts of children's play. Planning for children will flow from the assessment of individuals or small groups of children in the context of them working together or playing together. Learning will be extended and promoted through the planning process with the provision of resources to extend their ideas, through open ended questions to challenge or move the play to another level, or by scaffolding the learning through a range of techniques including using teachable moments for explicit teaching.

The opportunity exists for a unique set of principles to be developed that align with the special nature of Victoria and that will lead into the Victorian *Essential Learning Standards* in a seamless manner. To arrive at a set of guiding principles that are inclusive of the birth to age eight age group, and that meet the needs of the many different audiences and interested parties, one of the first steps that are needed is to use wide consultation and collaboration. To decide upon a common set of principles that are relevant to the diversity of provision within the early childhood and early years of school sectors, will provide children and their families with the benefit of continuity of provision throughout their early childhood years.

The Queensland preparatory year curriculum sets a good model for describing the characteristics of children in their year prior to school. However, it is essential that the development of guiding principles are the key feature of the birth to five curriculum and the school curriculum for children 5 to 8 years, so there is continuity of provision for children from birth to eight irrespective of the sector they are in. It would be important for Australia to come up with a strong set of principles for the birth to eight age group before developing a separate document for children in the year prior to school.

In Sweden and Finland, the curriculum consists of guiding principles which recognise each centre as unique and trust local communities to interpret goals and create their own curricula. This requires staff to be adequately qualified and empowers them to support children and families in the context of their particular setting.

When developing a national curriculum document, we can learn from the experience of Western Australia and Sweden where the early childhood pedagogy was overridden by the more dominant school pedagogical practices when the early childhood centres were physically located within the school grounds. When a small minority group moves into an already established larger group such as preschools moving into schools, it is difficult for the smaller group not to be overpowered. There has been a trend in other states of Australia to move some or all early childhood services into the school sector for the year prior to school. This has been the case in Tasmania and Western Australia. In Victoria in the independent school sector there are many examples of early learning centres for 3 and /or 4 year olds and in a few cases infants and toddlers also being catered for under the one school provision. There have been some examples of the early childhood sector positively impacting on the primary school levels, rather than the early childhood pedagogy being unduly overridden by the primary school sector in many independent schools. There are examples of early childhood centres being physically located within the state school sector in Victoria however these numbers are relatively small. There are reasons for considering locating some early childhood settings into school sites, such as the benefit of passing over huge administrative responsibilities to schools and providing collegial support for early childhood teachers who often work in isolated settings. However, if early childhood centres move into schools there are the possibilities of the economic expenditure of the school not putting the learning needs of the early childhood group ahead of other works, which may result in the outdoor play spaces and play needs of young children being compromised. Sweden sets an example by ensuring the values that underpin their preschool curriculum document are consistent with the values that underpin the later sections of schooling provision. Western Australia has also made an effort to move towards a set of principles that overarch all the curriculum documents, the same seven principles overarch the documents for the different stages of education.

The changing lifestyles of families in Australia means that it is timely to change the early childhood offerings to meet the needs of all families. It is now important to provide quality early childhood provision from birth. One of the reasons for the fragmentation in early childhood provision has been exacerbated by the range and levels of qualifications associated with teaching children of different ages.

Education and care for children from birth to 8 years has long been interwoven in many other jurisdictions. Young children from birth to age eight share many common characteristics and therefore require unique educational provision to match their unique characteristics. Children learn through investigation, exploration and play. The environment has a strong influence on the opportunities for learning that eventuates within the early childhood context. Rich environments support teachers to maximise opportunities for learning by creating rich indoor and outdoor spaces.

The role of the early childhood teacher differs from that of teachers in the school system. Teachers in early childhood scaffold learning in relation to child initiated ideas and interests, and engage in explicit teaching in teachable moments that occur within the contexts of the children's play, rather than teaching taking place around pre determined curriculum standards or goals.

It is timely to examine the qualifications of staff working with children in this age range so that the level of qualification is not associated with the age of the child being taught. Early childhood education requires a depth and breadth of knowledge and skills to work with infants, toddlers, young children prior to school or with young children in their early years of school. It requires as much knowledge, skills and attitudes to work with infants and toddlers as it does to work with older children. Historically in Victoria, people working in the child care sector received their qualifications of a certificate level or diploma level from TAFE institutions. However, in the past ten years in Victoria, universities have offered degree status qualifications for early childhood educators and this has started to change the dynamics of the qualifications of staff teaching children in their years prior to school. We now find early childhood staff working with infants and toddlers who hold degree status qualifications. To add complexity to the qualification discussion in Victoria, teachers who work in the kindergarten or preschool sector have been required to hold a degree status qualification for many years. New Zealand is moving towards all early childhood staff having degrees by 2012. Many Asian countries have also set timelines by which they intend supporting all early childhood staff to upgrade their qualifications from diploma to degree status. Early Childhood Australia Inc. supports the move for all early childhood staff to hold degree status qualifications and there has been some financial support from the Department of Human services to support the upgrading of qualifications. There have also been incentives in the form of scholarships for staff holding degrees to work in the child care sector.

A unique aspect of early childhood curriculum reform in Sweden, was a common core year in their teacher education courses for early childhood, primary and secondary teachers to facilitate greater understanding between the sectors and stimulate collaboration.

The development of a curriculum needs to particularly address how literacy and numeracy will be accommodated within the early childhood years birth to 8. In early childhood it is acknowledged that children bring a wealth of prior learning and a diversity of cultural experiences to whatever early childhood setting they attend. It is essential that early childhood teachers use the prior learning and experiences of children to build on and extend their understandings. This requires building a rich picture of each child in order to understand them and undertake short and long term planning with individual goal setting for each child. If this planning takes place collaboratively between teachers, children, families and the community, all can work together to support the child in a relevant and meaningful way within their particular context.

The early childhood setting provides opportunities for children to engage in investigation of numeracy through rich environments that stimulate curiosity and exploration of concept. Early childhood teachers need support in maximising the opportunities that are created for numeracy experiences within rich indoor and outdoor learning environments. Historically there have been excellent language rich environments within the early childhood field, where children interact with adults and other children in their play and engage in discussion around their understandings and through role play. The early childhood setting provides opportunities for singing, drama, stories, poetry and many other forms of rich language learning. Print rich environments support children to understand written language as well as spoken language as a valuable means of communication. The valuing of children and families from culturally and linguistically diverse background ensures that the communication within the early childhood setting acknowledges a valuing of languages and that children and families often bring other rich language experiences with them to the early childhood setting. Canada, Sweden and New Zealand all value the mother tongue as the language where concepts are first understood. The curriculum documents support first language learning and encourages this additional strength and experience.

In Sweden, in both the *Curriculum for the preschool* (Skolverket Lpo98 2006) and the *Curriculum for the compulsory school system, the preschool class and the leisure time centre* (Skolverket Lpo94 2006), literacy and numeracy are recognised within an extensive list of goals under the general headings of Development and Learning or Knowledge respectively. This contrasts with *High/Scope* (USA) that singles out literacy and numeracy as significant content areas within a list of five curriculum content areas to be addressed. Furthermore formal assessment of literacy skills has no part in the Swedish *Curriculum for the preschool*, but is strongly emphasised in the *High/Scope* curriculum with universally applied assessment tools available to support monitoring of the curriculum implementation.

An implication of creating a coherency for education and care in a new early childhood curriculum is a reduction in the care and education dichotomy in early childhood. However, the system will not be truly continuous or coherent until all services are described as 'educational' with qualified staff employed, and only differentiating on the basis of context i.e. home based, centre based, school based and time spent in the service i.e. part time or full time. The new learning framework or curriculum presents opportunities to take coherency to the next level in the early childhood sector. There are implications here from the basics of nomenclature to training, funding and infrastructure beyond the scope of this review, but not inconceivable if one considers 'best practice' examples from the national and international literature.



## Conclusion

The government's positive focus on children aged from birth to 8 years provides a timely opportunity to re evaluate the provision needed for this age group. Victoria has the opportunity to develop an inclusive approach to early childhood education that ensures continuity of provision for young children and at the same time caters for the uniqueness of Victorian families.

There is the opportunity for Australia to develop a National curriculum guideline for all children from birth to 8 years that will provide continuity of provision for this age group, but at the same time provide for interpretation of these guidelines at their local level.

The analysis of the curriculum/learning framework documents from within Australia and internationally has highlighted important themes and key principles that were evidence of quality practices and provision. These overarching principles and guidelines can be used as a starting point for discussion and consultation around 'best practice' with the wide range of different service providers, and other interested parties including children and their families who have an interest in quality early childhood provision.

In addition to considering important overarching principles that underpin quality provision, it will be important to support a move towards having all early childhood staff being well qualified so that all staff who work with young children are as well qualified as those who work with older children in the state. Only by doing this will we have staff who are able to appropriately interpret and implement principles, curriculum or learning frameworks in collaboration with their local communities.

Funding will be required to provide leadership in the development and implementation processes. Initially to support wide consultation so that early childhood educators and other interested parties have the opportunity to contribute to the development and implementation processes. Resourcing for professional development will also be required during this time so that all staff will be supported to actively participate in the process. A range of resource materials will also need to be developed to provide ongoing support to practitioners as they implement the ideas from the new initiatives that result from the collaborative curriculum development process.

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