
Shining a light on children’s learning

(Abridged version: Executive Summary and Findings)

March 2012

A report produced by the Outcomes Project Consortium
Appreciation and acknowledgment is extended to all the early childhood professionals who participated in the pilot Outcomes Project 2010–2011

Early childhood professionals from the following services

Birth-to-three group

Baw Baw Shire Family Day Care, Warragul (Family day care)
City of Ballarat Playgroups, Ballarat (Supported playgroup)
City of Greater Dandenong Maternal and Child Health, Dandenong (Maternal and child health)
City of Greater Dandenong Maternal and Child Health, Noble Park (Maternal and child health)
Cobaw Family Day Care, Woodend (Family day care)
Geelong Children’s Centre, Geelong (Long day care)
Knox City Council, Maternal and Child Health, Wantirna (Maternal and child health)
La Trobe University Community Children’s Centre, Melbourne (Long day care)
Melton Shire Council Playgroup and Children’s Resources Officer, Melton (Supported playgroup)
Mission Australia Early Learning Services, Springvale South, Keysborough (Family day care)
Tree House Child Care Centre, St Kilda (Long day care)
Uniting Care Moreland Hall, Moreland (Supported playgroup)

Birth-to-eight group

Bayside Christian College, Langwarrin South (Primary school)
Bestchance Child Family Care, Glen Waverley (Long day care)
Bundoora Preschool, Bundoora (Kindergarten)
Castlemaine Childcare Co-Operative, Castlemaine (Long day care)
Coolaroo South Primary School and Kindergarten, Coolaroo (Primary school and kindergarten)
Girrabanya Children’s Centre, Ballarat (Long day care)
Yarrunga Primary School, Wangaratta (Primary school)
Monash Special Developmental School, Wheelers Hill (Primary school)
Moyhu and District Pre-school, Moyhu (Kindergarten)
Murray Road Kindergarten, Newborough (Kindergarten)
Our Lady’s Catholic Primary School Wangaratta (Primary school)
Park Lane Kindergarten, Traralgon (Kindergarten)
Ringwood Heights OSHC, Ringwood (Out of school hours care)
Springvale Service for Children, Springvale (Long day care)
St Columba’s Day Kindergarten, Balwyn (Kindergarten)
St Lawrence School, Derrimut (Primary school)
Zubees Pty Ltd, Rowville (Out of school hours care)

Leadership group

Barmah Outreach Kindergarten, Barmah (Kindergarten)
Barwon Specialist Children’s Services Team, Geelong (Early intervention)
Biala Peninsula Early Intervention Centre and Bentons Square Pre-School, Mornington (Kindergarten and early intervention)
City of Casey Family Day Care, Narre Warren (Family day care)
City of Greater Geelong Family Day Care Centre, Newtown (Family day care)
Cooinda Kindergarten, Boronia West (Kindergarten)
Fyans Park Primary School, Newtown (Primary school)
Hallam Gardens Kindergarten, Hallam (Kindergarten)
Hume City Council Family and Children’s Services, Broadmeadows (Long day care)
Joseph Avenue Early Learning Centre, Moorabbin (Kindergarten)
Knox Gardens Preschool, Wantirna South (Kindergarten)
Montgomery Park Children’s Centre, Essendon (Long day care)
Strathfieldsaye Primary School, Strathfieldsaye (Primary school)
St Thomas More’s Primary School, Belgrave (Primary school)
Tree House Child Care, St Kilda (Kindergarten)
University of Melbourne Early Learning Centre, Abbotsford (Kindergarten)
Waubra Pre-School, Ballarat (Kindergarten)
Yarralea Children’s Centre, Alphington (Kindergarten)
Yuille Park Community College, Wendouree (Primary school)

Particular thanks are extended to the Project leaders for their collaborative work in planning workshops and in work with Project participants.

Outcomes Project Consortium

Dr Jane Page  University of Melbourne (birth-to-eight and leadership groups)
Dr Kylie Smith   University of Melbourne (birth-to-eight and leadership groups)
Dr Estelle Irving   Holmesglen Institute of Education (birth-to-three group)
Anne Stonehouse AM Early Childhood consultant (birth-to-three group)
Kerryn Lockett  Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority
Carmel Phillips   Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority
Colleen Watsford  Department of Education and Early Childhood Development

Mentors from the University of Melbourne Graduate School of Education

Cassie Kotsanas, Merlyne Cruz, Katherine Wade and Audrey d’Souza.

Terminology

Throughout this report there are interchangeable terms used for the participants.
They are referred to as early childhood professionals as described in the VEYLDF. This term best captures the multidisciplinary composition of the groups.
The terms practitioner and participant are also used in this report.
The pilot Outcomes Project 2010-2011 is referred to as the Project throughout this report.
The Learning and Development Outcomes from the VEYLDF are referred to interchangeably in the document as the five Outcomes or the Outcomes.
The terms Project leaders and facilitators are used interchangeably throughout this report.
Executive summary

The purpose of the Outcomes Report (the Report) is to provide a detailed summary of the pilot Outcomes Project 2010–2011 (the Project), a key implementation project for the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework: For all Children from Birth-to-eight Years (VEYLDF).

The Report has been developed in a collaborative partnership with the VCAA Early Years Unit and the Project leaders (Outcomes Project Consortium):

• Dr Jane Page, University of Melbourne
• Dr Kylie Smith, University of Melbourne
• Dr Estelle Irving, Holmesglen Institute of TAFE
• Ms Anne Stonehouse, AM, Consultant
• Kerryn Lockett, Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority
• Carmel Phillips, Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority
• Colleen Watsford, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development

The Report draws on findings from fifty early childhood professionals who participated in the Project and includes pre- and post-evaluation information. The Report also details the project leaders’ views about the opportunities and challenges the Project presented for participants and the implications for implementation of the VEYLDF more broadly.

Recommendations from the Report will inform ongoing implementation of the VEYLDF.

Key messages, the narrative around evidence collection and findings from this Report will be communicated to early childhood professionals to support engagement with the VEYLDF and to improve Outcomes for children from birth to age eight. In addition, the findings from the Report will inform the Assessment for Learning and Development Project in 2012.

The purpose of the Project 2010–2011 was to use an inquiry-based model of professional learning with a range of early childhood professionals in the early years services (birth to eight years) to:

• consider what children are demonstrating in the five Learning and Development Outcomes from birth to eight years
• examine and analyse in depth the learning and development outcomes
• use a range of resources to support documentation and analysis of children’s learning and development.

The Project was designed by the VCAA and the Project leaders and involved six one-day interactive workshops over a nine-month period, with mentoring support between workshops.

Throughout the course of the Project, participants documented and refined their understandings and skills in observing, documenting and analysing evidence of children’s learning in the areas described by the five Outcomes. This process supported responsive relationships with children, families and with colleagues.

A draft tool with an accompanying prompt sheet was developed by the VCAA Early Years Unit and Project leaders to support collection of evidence in the five Outcome areas.

The draft tool was used by participants:

• in their settings between workshops
• with colleagues during Project workshops
• with project leaders in workshops in specific coaching sessions
• with mentors and project leaders between workshops.

Participants in the Project made a commitment to work together across service types and to share experiences, strengths and insights. Over time, individuals and the groups together developed new understandings about children’s learning.
Key themes identified by Project participants

1. Changes and growth in professional confidence and capacity
   - Participants reported increased confidence in participating in the Project and in their understanding of the five Outcomes. This was directly reflected in their willingness to engage in written reflection and document evidence over time.
   - Participants reported that regular reflection with a mentor and focused discussions with Project leaders about the evidence in the five Outcomes led to new learning. As a result of these experiences, participants reported new knowledge, skills and confidence gained in observing, documenting and analysing children’s learning.
   - Willingness to engage with and try different strategies emerged over time and confidence increased across the groups.
   - As workshops progressed, the level of discussion and debate expanded. There was evidence of deeper questioning and more listening within the groups.
   - There was an increased capacity for participants to critique and question each other’s evidence and, at times, to embrace this evidence.
   - Participants reported an expanded view of children’s learning and an improved ability to describe and identify the meaning of that learning.

2. Changes in documentation of children’s learning
   - The focus of discussion was the importance of gathering evidence of children’s learning that is specific, targeted and succinct. Participants reported that this generally required a complete reappraisal of current ways of recording documentation and an ongoing review of decisions about what is worth documenting.
   - While changes in documentation were identified, a constraint of all participants was time or lack of it. Participants described difficulty in finding time at work to explore the evidence and there were extensive discussions about making space and finding time.
   - Participants reviewed actions, with an expanded view of what this meant. For example, the actions arising from observing children’s learning could include not only activities, but also further questioning, observing and discussion.
   - Participants reported that the draft tool was a useful instrument to focus attention on recording and analysing children’s learning.
   - Participants reported that looking deeply into the content of the five Outcomes and questioning, interpreting and analysing, enriches and expands what they see as learning.

3. Becoming familiar with the idea of both seeing and responding to evidence of children’s learning
   - Project leaders and participants described the time it takes to look beyond the headings of the five Outcomes and to go back, read, consider and discuss the text under the headings.
   - In considering observations, participants described the changes in thinking: from paying attention to ‘what children are doing’ to ‘what children are learning’.
   - Applying the draft tool supported intentional analysis and impacted on intentional teaching.
   - Participants found that it was not immediately clear what analysis means – it is more than documenting what children demonstrate.
   - Project leaders talked about learning happening across the whole of the child’s experience.
   - Participants focused on children’s strengths, interests, personal styles and temperaments as important details to document.
   - It became clear in the process that supporting the learning of children under three is not well understood and requires specific attention.
   - Recognising evidence of young children’s learning is subtle and tuning into children’s learning requires ongoing reflection and discussion.
4. Developing communities of practice

- Participants described the rewards of working collaboratively with colleagues from a range of early years services.

- Participants and project leaders reported on the dynamic cross-professional work between participants from early childhood settings and those from the early years of school settings.

- The workshops themselves created multidisciplinary communities of practice. This created new awareness about the work of other early childhood professionals and developed and strengthened alliances across service types.

- Participants described an increased understanding of the power of using the planning cycle with children and families. As a result of this, participants described an increase in listening to children, a willingness to keep going back to the five Outcomes to consider the detail and the overlapping qualities across the five, and the focus on attention to children’s learning.

- The six workshops over a twelve-month period allowed participants to look deeply at the content of the five Outcomes, apply the draft tool and enrich and expand the examples of learning.

The Project drew on the expertise of policy makers, researchers and practitioners to provide evidence of children’s learning in the five Outcomes. It has provided a platform to highlight ways of supporting children’s learning and development.

The inclusion of a birth-to-three group in the Project provided a strong focus on working closely with parents to highlight the complexity of the learning, health and development of infants and toddlers.

The opportunity for Maternal and Child Health participants to build connections between the Key Ages and Stages Framework and the VEYLD enriched their concepts of children’s learning.

The opportunities for cross-professional learning between the early childhood sector and the school sector demonstrated the importance of and potential for increasing practice that strengthens continuity of learning for children, with a particular focus on the Wellbeing and Identity Outcomes.
Findings from birth-to-three group

Prior to the workshops the birth-to-three group completed a questionnaire that referred to knowledge of the VEYLDF, challenges in implementation and key areas of interest for the inquiry process. The Project leaders met with the VCAA between workshops to jointly review and plan all aspects of the Project.

A VCAA evaluation survey was completed by all participants at the last workshop.

This section draws on five sources of data:
- pre-program questionnaire (n=11) managed by the VCAA
- project leader/ mentor reflections following each workshop
- participant feedback offered in each workshop
- participant feedback to Project leaders between workshops
- VCAA evaluation survey undertaken on the completion of the project.

Overview of birth-to-three group data

Figure 2: Qualifications and experience

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years</th>
<th>Current position (n)</th>
<th>Current position (%)</th>
<th>EC profession (n)</th>
<th>EC profession (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Less than 2 years</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9%</td>
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<td>2–5 years</td>
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<td>36%</td>
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<tr>
<td>10–20 years</td>
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<td>18%</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than 20 years</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The majority of participants had worked in the fields of early years education and in health services for many years. The pre-program questionnaire data highlighted that while nine (82 per cent) of the participants had been in their current position for ten years or less, two (18 per cent), had been in the profession for more than ten years. This longevity in the field was evident in the types of qualifications held by participants, with six (55 per cent) having Diploma qualifications, one (nine per cent) having a Bachelor degree and four (36 per cent) having Registered Nursing/Midwifery and additional Graduate Diploma qualifications. In addition, one participant was undertaking study at Masters level.

This diversity within the group was both an enormous strength and a significant challenge, but ultimately is considered one of the key contributors to the overall success of the Project. An identified achievement was the bringing together of a range of professionals from diverse services and settings, including services that have not traditionally been regarded as having a focus on learning outcomes for young children.

The professional and workplace diversity was mirrored in other aspects of the group, both at the outset and as it progressed. These included differences in qualification levels, familiarity with the VEYLDF,
varied experience of professional contact with children and their families and capacity and confidence to contribute to the Project.

During the course of the Project some changes to the composition of the group occurred.

In most cases, where one participant left, another was recruited from the same professional work setting/service, so the diversity was maintained. Eleven of the remaining twelve participants attended the final workshop. While attrition was an issue, a core group remained throughout the duration of the Project. This was particularly pleasing, and indicates the commitment of many participants, who faced a range of personal and work-related issues throughout the Project.

### Overview of the birth-to-three group

(A detailed description of birth-to-three group workshops 1–6 is provided at Appendix 1.)

Specifically, the foci for the work of this group were to:

- collect evidence of the many ways children birth to three demonstrate their learning in one or more of the five Outcome areas in the VEYLDF
- discover new evidence of learning
- develop ways to document, assess and analyse the learning
- work in partnerships with families and children
- use what is learned to inform planning and practice.

The group achieved all of the aims to varying degrees. An additional success in this group was the demonstrated value and rewards of working collaboratively. In this way, the Project serves as one model for how professionals from a variety of backgrounds, experience and settings can work together. The gains from this collaborative approach ranged from increased confidence and work satisfaction to an appreciation of work with children and with families in other early years settings.

Two responses illustrate the perceived value to the participants of being involved in this project and how it has influenced their work:

- I’m enjoying my practice more than ever before. I thought my practice was good, but I’ve learned so much more now … I’m having long conversations with parents about their children’s learning, too. I’m focusing more on the children’s learning, not just on my practice. (Child care centre)
- The focus on children’s learning has been very helpful for supported playgroups. I am now conscious of focusing on children’s joy and curiosity … (Supported playgroup)

Many participants talked about the value and pleasure of working collaboratively and sharing experiences with others in the group. The following two examples are representative of this:

- The workshops themselves were so valuable. I felt clearer about what I was doing when I had conversations with others in the group. I learned so much from listening to others’ stories. (Child care centre)
- The group sessions in the workshops were great – both powerful and profound to be able to talk about our work environments with others. (Maternal and Child Health service)

### Role of facilitators

Anne Stonehouse and Dr Estelle Irving co-facilitated the birth-to-three group and participants were assigned to one of the two facilitators as a specific mentor. This arrangement provided individual ongoing support to participants in the form of emails, phone calls and, in a couple of instances, face-to-face workplace visits. Mentors were able to develop deeper and more informed relationships with their assigned participants and also supported links between participants, thereby strengthening relationships within the group.

### Workshops

Six one-day workshops occurred between July 2010 and May 2011. While the overarching aims of the Project were recognising, documenting and supporting children’s learning and development, the workshops developed and evolved in response to issues, questions and directions that emerged as the Project progressed. This flexibility reflected the inquiry-based, collaborative approach employed throughout the Project.

An additional rationale for this approach was the evolving understanding and recognition of the common ground between different early childhood education and care professionals. The workshops provided opportunities for modelling and facilitating respectful relationships within and between professional groups.
Lessons learned from workshop activities

Particularly effective components included participant-led small group discussions, one-to-one discussions between participant and facilitator, and engaging the group in applying the headings in the draft tool to written vignettes of practice. Videoed vignettes would also be a very effective method for engaging participants in reflection on their experiences and knowledge.

Mentoring

Assigning each participant to one of the facilitators who functioned as a mentor was invaluable, in part because it encouraged ongoing communication and use of the draft tool between workshops.

Contextual differences

Surprisingly, the work setting context mattered relatively little in both gathering evidence of learning and using the draft tool. One difference, however, was that in supported playgroups and in Maternal and Child Health services, more of the learning episodes included parents and children together.

VCAA evaluation survey

A total of ten early childhood professionals completed the survey.

The majority were from long day care (40 per cent), with the remainder from family day care (20 per cent), playgroup (20 per cent) and Maternal and Child Health (20 per cent).

Sixty per cent of participants attended all six workshops and 40 per cent attended five workshops.

On a five-point scale of Very Useful to Not Useful At All, 80 per cent of participants in the birth-to-three group who completed the Project rated their involvement in the Outcomes Project as Very Useful, 10 per cent as Quite Useful and 10 per cent as Useful. No participants indicated their involvement in the Outcomes Project as being Rather Useful or Not Useful at All.

Contribution of the Project to practice change

All participants described a difference in their practice. They described the use of a reflective journal and the draft tool as useful resources to:

- see children’s learning in different ways
- use the reflective questions in the draft tool when observing, documenting and analysing
- seek out further information from the children themselves
- be more mindful of discussions with parents and children – reminders to wait for responses and listen more acutely.

I look more deeply into where the child might be coming from, what else is impacting on this child that is either assisting or getting in the way of their learning. At times we are constrained by the medical model which does not encourage you to look outside the square. (Maternal and Child Health service)

I now reflect on how children learn and I am more curious and joyful about children’s learning, behaviour, intentions and conversations. (Long day care)

Contribution of the Project to early childhood professionals’ work with families, children, colleagues and community

In relation to families

Participants described having different conversations with families; documenting and discussing learning and developmental progress more than the acquisition of skills. Participants described being less focused on problems.

The Project has focused my conversations with parents – less on problems and more on noticing what their children are doing, saying, learning and sharing and how we can encourage learning through play. (Supported playgroup)

It has helped me notice and celebrate little things that I would previously have been unaware of and not tuned in to. (Supported playgroup)

Have changed the way I approach families with information about their children. (Room leader, children’s centre)

Supporting families to see the connection between a physical milestone that they think is important (dressing self) and the child’s emotional wellbeing (feeling competent and proud) – I find I am constantly communicating this important emotional and spiritual wellbeing with families and colleagues and how it marries with and supports these physical skills which are more obvious. (Long day care)
I find myself being less judgemental when families respond in certain ways. I also have been able to show more clearly their child’s learning and share my enthusiasm with families. (Family day care)

In relation to children

Participants described having a clearer picture of pathways – and in documentation with very young children, described noting the emerging skills. Participants discussed their increased focus on intentional teaching and an awareness of entering into the play and being more confident in their role to extend children’s ideas.

In relation to colleagues

I now have a better understanding of what is expected of me as a professional and feel I have a better knowledge of the VEYLDF which I can now confidently pass on to my colleagues. (Family day care)

In relation to the community

Participants described an increased awareness and commitment to connecting up with other professionals and services outside their service – and being aware of the importance of these connections in their work with families.

Participants described an increased awareness of the place of children within communities and the importance of making these connections to support children’s learning.

This has helped me to encourage parents to look at how programs in the community such as playgroup, child care, Mother Goose programs and library can play a significant role in the children’s development prior to school. Less formal experiences help to progress to the more formal areas of education (Maternal and Child Health service)
Findings from birth-to-eight and leadership groups

The participants in these two groups completed a pre-program questionnaire developed by the University of Melbourne. Participants in these groups had mentor support from Project leaders and researchers from the University of Melbourne. This was followed up by a post-program questionnaire and the VCAA evaluation survey.

A key difference between the groups related to the mentor support. The birth-to-three group had group supervision/mentor support meetings within the workshops. This approach supported the particular group of participants.

There were different sources of data drawn on and different contexts in work across the three Project groups.

This section draws on six sources of data:
1. pre-program questionnaire (n=34) independently undertaken by University of Melbourne
2. Project leader reflections following each workshop
3. participant feedback offered in each workshop
4. mentor feedback
5. VCAA evaluation survey undertaken on the completion of the project
6. post-program questionnaire (n=12) independently undertaken by University of Melbourne.

Overview of birth-to-eight and leadership data

Figure 4: Qualifications and experience

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years</th>
<th>Current position (n)</th>
<th>Current position (%)</th>
<th>EC profession (n)</th>
<th>EC profession (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Less than 2 years</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8.9%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2–5 years</td>
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<td>29.4%</td>
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<td>8.9%</td>
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<td>0%</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>61.7%</td>
</tr>
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</table>

The majority of participants had worked in early years education for many years. The pre-program questionnaire data indicated that while 26 (76 per cent) of the participants had been in their current position for ten years or less, 21 (62 per cent) had been in the profession for in excess of 20 years and five participants had between 30 and 43 years experience. The range of qualifications held by educators included 19 (56 per cent) with Diploma qualifications, 13 (38 per cent) with Bachelor degrees and two (six per cent) with Masters-level degrees. Eight participants had Graduate Diplomas in areas of specialisation (see Figure 4 below).

The data clearly demonstrate that the program content and design supported participants to achieve the key aims of the Project. Participants gained new knowledge, skills and confidence in observing, documenting and analysing evidence of children’s learning. Participants provided comment that this had impacted on their daily practice with children, families, colleagues and the broader community. Participants also reported an increased understanding and engagement with the Frameworks. They valued having the opportunity to engage with professionals from a diverse range of services over a longer period of time. They demonstrated a willingness to engage in new practices within their services and with professionals in other services. They also noted many challenges and constraints that had impacted on their ability to integrate these new skills into their daily practice.

Composition and profile of groups

Birth-to-eight group

A diverse range of early years settings was represented in this group. It included participants from five long day care centres, one outside school hours care, six kindergartens, seven primary schools and one early intervention specialist school. Two participants left the project due to unforeseen circumstances.
The pie chart below profiles the service types represented.
This is based on the number (19) who completed the Project.

Figure 5: The birth-to-eight group

![Pie chart showing service types represented by participants.]
- LDC 25%
- OSHC 5%
- Kindergarten 30%
- Primary school 35%
- ECIS 5%

Leadership group

The leadership group included a total of 20 participants from a diverse range of settings, including four centre-based long day care, two outside school hours care, two family day care, five kindergartens, five primary schools and two early intervention specialist schools. All participants remained for the duration of the project.

The pie chart below profiles the service types represented and is based on the number (20) who completed the Project.

Figure 6: The leadership group

![Pie chart showing service types represented by participants.]
- LDC 23%
- OSHC 12%
- Kindergarten 12%
- Primary school 29%
- ECIS 12%
- FDC 12%

Pre-program questionnaire data

Thirty-four participants completed this questionnaire, 21 (62 per cent) of whom had primary responsibility for children’s learning and development through direct contact with children. Their roles included kindergarten teachers, room leaders in long day care services and classroom teachers in schools. The remaining 13 (38 per cent) held leadership or advisory roles, including directors of centres, assistant principals of schools, field workers and support officers.

VCAA evaluation survey

Data from this survey indicated that the composition and profile of the groups contributed to the development of greater awareness and understanding of the impact of the VEYLDF across a diverse range of early years services. Participants in the birth-to-eight group provided the following comments on the value of being part of the project:

Great to have time to reflect on practice and talk to colleagues. As a primary school teacher it was enlightening to gain an understanding of various preschool settings and challenges faced by them.’ (Primary school)

It is great to be able to share ideas, fears with others – to listen to other views. (Integrated children’s centre)

Presenters’ and colleagues’ input provided new information, perspectives, opportunities for discussions and reflection. (Kindergarten service)

Participants in the leadership group noted the learning that occurs when professionals engage with other professionals from a diverse range of settings. The following comments were provided:

The ability to engage with educators across different sectors and learn so many aspects of the framework. (Family day care)

Great to hear varied perspectives as well as have a time to consider the VEYLDF/EYLF elements. Invaluable to engage with a diverse group of committed professionals. (Participant 14)

One participant made a comment on the benefit of interacting with other professionals working in different settings, when specific challenges could be raised and discussed within the group:

Excellent opportunity to interact with professionals in different areas of the early childhood sector. Have come away with a better understanding of challenges in other areas. Felt I was able to raise concerns/struggles of Family day care relating to the implementation of the VEYLDF. (Family day care)

The opportunity to learn from researchers and policy makers was also noted:

A great opportunity to debate and discuss, but also the benefit of the expertise provided by Melbourne University to provide a pathway in and around pedagogy and professional reflection!!! (Family day care)

To work with researchers and policy makers has been incredibly powerful in shifting and affirming my understandings of how children learn. It has created a stronger desire to learn more. (Primary school)
Building communities of practice

The pre-program questionnaire data indicated that 22 participants (63.6 per cent) identified the purpose of the VEYLDF as providing a common basis for the early childhood sector. It creates links between the different settings and schools. Participants also noted that the VEYLDF provided an opportunity to speak a common language across early years services. The profile and composition of the birth-to-eight and leadership groups aimed to use and build on this understanding of the VEYLDF. This was facilitated through opportunities for participants to interact with early childhood professionals across service types and to build communities of practice through collaborative learning.

Project leaders implemented a variety of strategies to achieve this aim, including:

- modelling engagement with each other and ideas in respectful and reflective ways
- providing participants with the time to come together to do small-group work focused on developing joint and shared definitions of learning outcomes
- meeting in small groups with mentors.

Usefulness of the Outcomes Project overall

VCAA evaluation survey data indicated that the broad range of workshop approaches adopted within the Project supported participants in different ways to collect evidence of children’s learning. These approaches included use of inquiry questions, focus on mentoring in and between workshops, collaborative learning with colleagues, unpacking the concept of learning and development pathways, partnerships with Project leaders and background reading to workshops. These varied approaches collectively supported participants’ understanding of the VEYLDF, and the analysis of evidence of children’s learning within the Learning and Development Outcomes:

- It gave me the opportunity to become more familiar with the framework and documenting children’s learning more effectively. (Kindergarten service)
- It has helped me to broaden my understanding of what constitutes ‘evidence’ of learning and made me aware of the value of being aware of the lens I am analysing evidence through. (Primary school)
- It gave me the opportunity to explore the learning outcomes in more detail. It has helped me and my staff I work with to analyse what the children have learnt. (Child care centre)
- It helped me to find successful ways of documenting learning and made me much more aware of all the indicators of specific learning in a given observation. It assisted me in detailed analysis of learning. The discussions and presentations have provided excellent learning experiences for me personally. (Kindergarten service)
- It was great to discuss with others what they were finding with the project and to look at how evidence could be gathered in so many ways and how to document and assess children’s learning through the framework. (Primary school)

Birth-to-eight group

Of the 72 per cent of project participants who completed the VCAA evaluation survey, 54 per cent rated their involvement in the Outcomes Project as Very Useful and 46 per cent as Quite Useful on a five-point scale of Very Useful to Not Useful at All. No participants indicated their involvement in the Outcomes Project birth to eight as being Useful, Rather Useful or Not Useful at All.

Participants defined the usefulness in terms of an improved understanding of the VEYLDF, provision of readings to support learning, reflection with professional colleagues, broadening understanding of evidence of learning, connecting with other professionals and learning about the challenges faced by other professionals in the early years sector.

Leadership group

Of the 95 per cent of participants who completed the VCAA evaluation survey, 74 per cent rated their involvement in the Outcomes Project as Very Useful and 26 per cent as Quite Useful. Participants defined the usefulness in terms of using inquiry-based approaches in their work, being provoked to reflect on their work, learning more about the issues faced across the early years sector, engaging more with the VEYLDF, reflecting on the strengths of children, reflecting more documentation and analysis of children’s learning, strengthening practice, supporting and enhancing gaps in practice and exposure to contemporary research.

The majority of participants indicated that the new knowledge and skills they had gained had impacted on their daily practice. In response to a question in
the post-program questionnaire about how often they draw on the skills and knowledge gained through the program, 8.3 per cent stated Always, 58.3 per cent stated Very Often and 33.3 per cent stated Often. Indicative comments included:

By having a deeper vision of the Outcomes and children’s learning in association to the Outcomes. (Participant 1)

Participation in the Project has added insight into my understanding of the Outcomes. I find the more I use them to plan and evaluate learning and the more I read other learning scenarios and how other professionals related it to the outcomes I am becoming more satisfied with my own capacity. (Participant 2)

Three participants reflected on how engagement with inquiry-based learning assisted their knowledge of the Outcomes:

Throughout my involvement I have focused on two main areas of the Learning Outcomes and I feel this work has assisted me to feel more comfortable with these areas and all they encompass and how they impact on and are impacted on by the other Outcomes. (Participant 3)

Working on the question as practical research provided understanding about how to document wellbeing. I have been able to support a family in understanding how their child is learning social and emotional skills as a result of the work I have done in this project. (Participant 5)

By meeting with other educators we have been able to explore further the inquiry-based approach to our planning. After developing individual questions and then implementing these in our daily work the focus was stronger as I was constantly examining my strategies as I kept my question in mind. By engaging in workshops and having the presenters ‘challenge’ our work it was a very supportive means of implementing changes to the methods we had previously used in our work. (Participant 8)

Factors outlined in relation to the usefulness of the Project aligned with expectations of the Project. When asked to describe the knowledge and skills they hoped to gain, 23 of the 29 respondents (79.3 per cent pre-program questionnaire) were directly seeking knowledge and skills about the VEYLDF. Of these, 15 were hoping to gain further understanding of the VEYLDF and eight were hoping to gain skills in its use. The remaining respondents (20.7 per cent) raised issues that were not related to the VEYLDF but more generally to skills and knowledge about being a better teacher and developing skills to support others. These factors will be explored more fully in the next two sections of this document. As the following sections outline, the Project provided the participants with the concept, skills, practice and confidence to address these challenges.

**Contribution of the Project to practice change**

**Birth-to-eight group**

Of the participants who completed the VCAA evaluation survey, 85 per cent believed that their practice had changed as a result of participating in the Outcomes Project and 15 per cent did not believe that their practice had changed.

The two participants who did not believe their practice had changed both noted that participating in the Project had supported them to become more reflective and questioning teachers. One participant stated, for example, that it had reinforced her belief in the relevance of her practices and had encouraged critical reflection on the effectiveness of teaching practices and whether planning was supporting children’s learning. The second participant stated that being part of the Project had provided the time to reflect on and evaluate approaches to supporting children’s learning. It also encouraged questioning how to improve practice.

Examples of how participants believed their practice had changed included:

- exploring different theoretical perspectives when analysing children’s learning outcomes
- documenting different evidence of children’s learning
- using the draft tool with colleagues to enhance discussions of what learning in the outcomes looks like for individual children
- sharing the language of the learning outcomes in the VEYLDF with families and employers
- exploring the interconnectedness of children’s learning across the outcomes
- focusing on quality observations
- viewing the child more holistically
- being more critical of teaching practices
- taking more observations to explore children’s learning in specific situations
- being more aware of the VEYLDF and focusing on the strengths of children’s learning.
Contribution of the Outcomes Project to early childhood professionals’ work with children, families, colleagues and community

Leadership group

All participants who completed the VCAA evaluation survey believed that their practice had changed as a result of participating in the Outcomes Project.

Examples included:

- focusing more on the practice principles that underpin children’s development
- providing clearer evidence of children’s learning, giving confidence to support new practices
- feeling more positive about the VEYLDF and the ways in which children demonstrate their learning within the Outcomes
- adopting different methods of documenting learning to be more useful and meaningful examples of children’s learning
- understanding how the VEYLDF relates to different services, developing personal and team awareness of the VEYLDF and its objectives
- understanding children’s learning, being more reflective
- actively listening to children
- greater awareness of children’s behaviours, attitudes and feelings as well as their skills
- working with colleagues to integrate the VEYLDF into a school setting, practices with families and children
- trialling the draft tool with colleagues, exploring what high expectations for children mean in specific contexts.

These examples highlight the ways in which participants developed confidence to enact the understandings gained through the Project. In the following section participants outline the ways in which they implemented their new knowledge and skills in and through their work with children, parents, colleagues and community. Key to these expressions is a keen commitment on the part of participants to integrate children’s, families’ and colleagues’ perspectives into their planning. There is confidence to share and discuss their evidence of children’s learning in order to develop stronger understanding of individual children.

Birth-to-eight group

Of the participants who completed the VCAA evaluation survey, 100 per cent believed that their involvement in the Project had influenced their work with children, families, colleagues and community.

In relation to children

Participants noted that their understanding of children had been broadened and through collection of evidence they had gained better knowledge of individual children. This had influenced their interactions with children. They also noted their analysis of children’s learning had deepened. They now explored different avenues for achieving learning outcomes with children and could identify different pathways children take on their learning journeys. They had begun to integrate children’s perspectives into their planning and focused more on children’s learning. They acknowledged and valued the diverse ways in which children learn and became more aware of individual learning styles.

It has helped me to value and identify the different pathways that children take in their learning journeys. (Primary school)

In relation to families

Participants felt they shared specific evidence of children’s learning with families and confirmed the importance of collaborating closely with families. They shared more with families about the VEYLDF and felt more confident to discuss children’s learning with families.

In relation to community

Participants stated that they had shared the draft tool with students and recorded relevant information about community in the context section of the draft tool. They explored new ways to integrate the community into the learning program.

In relation to colleagues

Participants noted they had shared different methods of documenting and analysing evidence of children’s learning with colleagues. They shared knowledge of the VEYLDF, ideas and readings and engaged in discussions about professional practice.
The other teachers in the centre are using the tool for recording children’s learning and it has facilitated discussion about the Framework and the learning that is taking place in the kindergarten. (Kindergarten program)

Leadership group

All participants who completed the VCAA evaluation survey indicated their involvement in the Project had influenced their work with children, families, colleagues and community.

In relation to children

Participants noted that they had refined their understanding of children’s learning. Participation in the Project had provided increased direction on how to support colleagues in their work with children, including children’s voices in their observations. They had begun to use a strengths-based approach to learning and to link evidence of children’s learning to the Outcomes more fully. Daily teaching practices have stronger links to children’s learning and they use different forms of documentation to capture children’s learning. They are more confident in discussing children’s learning.

I am able to stop and watch more now than I ever did before. My observation on children has developed incredibly to include more understanding of their learning and how I can support that learning. (Long day care)

In relation to families

Participants believed they used the language of the VEYLD more in their interactions with parents and spoke more to parents about children’s learning. They have become stronger advocates of learning through play with parents and listen more actively to parents to gain a better understanding of their children. They integrate the perspectives of the parents into planning.

In relation to community

Participants noted that they shared knowledge with other early childhood professionals and promoted the value of educators in the wider community. They also shared knowledge across services and were building partnerships with local schools.

In relation to colleagues

Participants noted that they had gained a new focus in their work with colleagues across the group and have begun mentoring colleagues in pedagogy, documentation and assessment. They have assessed what being, belonging and becoming means to colleagues and had more detailed discussions about the VEYLD. Engagement, reflection and discussion between colleagues has increased.

I have used more language with parents to describe children’s learning. I feel more confident with my knowledge when talking to staff. (Kindergarten program)
Implications for further work

Introduction

In this section the opportunities and strengths of the Project from the perspectives of both participants and Project leaders is described.

Qualifications and children’s development

Some professionals will need assistance to appreciate the place of developmental perspectives in interpreting the Outcomes. Some believe that embracing the VEYLDF Outcomes means disregarding what they know about developmental perspectives. Efforts need to be made to see that developmental areas or domains are embedded in the Learning Outcomes and that they are still important. The challenge is to support professionals to move away from a solely developmental focus and to incorporate this focus into the perspectives on learning afforded by the Outcomes. What this highlights is that the quality and level of qualifications, especially for people working in early learning settings with babies and toddlers, is a barrier. This results in educators knowing little about learning and development in children under three years, not seeing evidence or missing out on appreciating its importance.

Qualifications and the limits that this can place on participants’ experience and expertise are noted as a key national reform issue within early childhood. There is an identified need for particular attention to children under three years: what they are learning, the evidence of that learning and practice change to support the learning.

Partnership with families

The potential of using evidence of children’s learning as a vehicle for partnerships with parents is obvious from this Project and is worth more detailed exploration – that is, working in collaboration with parents to build a rich and detailed picture of each child.

Participants noted that discussions in the Project assisted them to move away from an ‘expert model’ to a way of working that involves collaboration with families. Discussions centred around the notion that professionals have as much to learn from families as families have to learn from professionals. Each has unique expertise and knowledge to be shared openly and respectfully.

The critical importance of ongoing professional learning

The Project, particularly the conversations in the workshops, reinforced and highlighted for participants the complexity of their work and a sense of themselves as professionals. For some, participation strengthened and supported an image of themselves as leaders, as they shared their learning with colleagues. Several of the participants shared stories of how they had been able to use the insights they gained through the Project to influence the work of the whole service in which they work.

Holistic view of children’s learning

Focusing on the Learning Outcomes in the VEYLDF has also encouraged professionals to move beyond a pure developmental focus, at times aimed at detecting deficits, to a more holistic view of children and their learning. This view takes account of strengths, interests, personal style, temperament and family, community and cultural context. The discussions in the workshops and the development and use of the draft tool have also helped participants see the limitations of some traditional ways of documenting learning – for example, checklists – and the advantages of more narrative and qualitative assessments for learning.

Culture of learning linked to professionalism

There is a need for advocacy for workplaces to support reflective practice and a culture of learning. While it was clear that some services operate as a community of learners and have a lively culture of critical reflection, others do not. Leadership is no doubt a big factor in this, but working conditions and status and valuing of the work of educating children, contributes. The expectation of working in partnership with families and recognition of the complexity and importance of the work must be actively promoted and supported.

The power of relationships: The way the Project was conducted highlighted the critical importance of mutually respectful relationships as a basis for professional learning. Relationships strengthened as the Project progressed and increasingly participants cited opportunities to talk with each other and share ideas as the most valuable component of the Project. It did not appear that the diversity of type and level of quali-
Strengths of the Project

A key strength of the Project has been the mix of work settings and professional backgrounds that add richness to the workshops, discussions and to the Outcomes Project as a whole. There are major differences among the work settings in the frequency of contact with children and families, ranging from daily (in long day care services and primary schools), to regular weekly timetabled sessions (kindergarten and some child care centres), to weekly (in playgroups), to less frequent contact (Maternal and Child Health services, family day care field officers, early childhood intervention professionals and out of school hours care coordinators).

Participants described a new focus and changing relationships in their work with colleagues in their workplaces. Some participants reported taking on a mentoring role with colleagues to assist in areas of pedagogy, documentation and assessment. They have assessed what being, belonging and becoming means to colleagues, have more detailed discussions about the VEYLDF and the Early Years Learning Framework for Australia.

Participants discussed the creation of links with other services, particularly those working in home-based services or stand-alone services.

The VCAA and Project leaders set up active mentoring periods within workshops to discuss and progress draft evidence. Most participants produced what was expected of them, but it took a lot of encouragement for this to happen.

Structure and duration of Project: Having the Project extend over several months provided several important opportunities for participants to:

- build relationships between participants and between facilitators and participants
- clarify and revise expectations and, given the pilot nature of the Project, identify effective ways to proceed
- make the shifts required by the Project (for example, focusing on learning, going beyond the obvious, looking for learning and learning opportunities in everyday experiences, trying out the draft tool)
- develop confidence to trial approaches in services and provide advice back to Project leaders and participants.

As the Project progressed, the level of discussion and debate increased within and across the workshops. The majority of participants described an increase in confidence linked to practice, and understanding and knowledge of the Outcomes.
The Assessment for Learning and Development Project (ALD Project) in 2012

In 2012 the ALD Project will build on emerging evidence from the pilot Outcomes Project 2010–2011 to further inform implementation of the VEYLDF within early years networks and learning communities.

The ALD Project will have a central focus on assessment for learning and development in a curriculum planning cycle. Assessment for learning and development in this Project is defined as a process of observing, recording and documenting what children do, say, make, write or draw in order to plan effectively for children’s current and future learning.

The focus for participants in the ALD Project is to:
- use the five outcomes as outlined in the VEYLDF as key reference points to identify children’s progress
- apply a diverse range of methods and tools to document and analyse multiple and systematic examples of evidence of children’s capabilities and milestones
- apply this information as part of a curriculum-planning cycle to advance children’s learning
- implement collaborative approaches to assessment learning with children, with families and with other early childhood professionals.

Communication with the early years sector

The VCAA and Project leaders have finalised evidence collection from the Project. The strategies for communication to the sector were designed in consultation with the participants directly within workshops and by drawing on data from the VCAA evaluation survey.

A key communication method will be created through the Early Years Exchange (EYE), a new online resource developed in 2010 to assist early childhood practitioners in getting started with the VEYLDF. The EYE is used by a wide range of early childhood professionals. It is intended to use the EYE to develop a series of video clips and snapshots of learning from the Project to illustrate the evidence collection in the Outcomes.

Other communication initiatives for dissemination of the evidence include:
- social media options to encourage further discussion of ideas and evidence of children’s learning
- ongoing opportunities for Outcomes Project participants within regions to support each other and to provide leadership to colleagues
- joint presentations with Outcomes Project participants at network meetings and conferences from July 2011.
References


Reading material

The following list refers to articles provided to participants in the leadership and birth-to-eight groups. Background reading material provided to all the groups prior to the Project is indicated with an asterisk (*).


