

Identity Practice Guide



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Introduction

The *Identity Practice Guide* supports implementation of the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework (VEYLDF) (Department of Education and Training 2016).

The VEYLDF describes five Learning and Development Outcomes. The information and reflective scenarios in this guide support engagement with key concepts of the VEYLDF, particularly the Learning and Development Outcome *Children have a strong sense of identity*. This Outcome has four key components:

- Children feel safe, secure and supported.
- Children develop their emerging autonomy, interdependence, resilience and sense of agency.
- Children develop knowledgeable and confident self-identities.
- Children learn to interact in relation to others with care, empathy and respect.

A summary of research about these components and how they can be assessed is available in *Assessment of Children as Having a Strong Sense of Identity in Early Childhood Education and Care: Literature review* (Jackson et al. 2020). This practice guide complements the literature review by describing how the Outcome can be supported in practice.

This practice guide focuses primarily on the Practice Principle *Assessment for learning and development*. It also reflects other Practice Principles, perhaps most strongly *Equity and diversity*, which recognises that ‘children feel welcome and learn well when professionals respect and acknowledge their unique identity’ (DET 2016, p. 12).

Purpose

This practice guide seeks to provide early childhood professionals with a deeper understanding of a strong sense of identity and its importance in children’s learning. In turn, this will support development of assessment practices that enhance understanding of individual children’s development, and inform decision-making.

The purpose of this guide is to:

- strengthen early childhood professionals’ understanding of the importance of children having a strong sense of identity across the birth to eight years age range
- support practices in early childhood education and care (ECEC) and the early years of school that consolidate and strengthen a strong sense of identity in children aged birth to eight years
- promote practices that enhance children’s own ability to recognise how their strong sense of identity is developing
- guide early childhood professionals in implementing quality assessment, reflection and pedagogical decision-making, especially in relation to the VEYLDF Outcome *Children have a strong sense of identity*.

How to use this guide

The first sections of the guide summarise the theory that underpins day-to-day practice, drawing on the *Assessment of Children as Having a Strong Sense of Identity in Early Childhood Education and Care: Literature review* (Jackson et al. 2020) and suggesting strategies for supporting a strong sense of identity in everyday pedagogical decision-making.

The ‘Reflective scenarios’ section describes scenarios to prompt professional reflection and illustrate ways in which early childhood professionals can improve their practice in relation to the VEYLDF Learning and Development Outcome *Children have a strong sense of identity*.

Identity in the early years

What is identity?

Research literature describes identity as having many parts, making it difficult to settle on a single definition of what this Outcome involves. The VEYLDF itself describes identity as follows:

Identity is unique to each individual, and defines who people are, what shapes their interests and how they come to view the people and events around them (DET 2016, p. 18).

The VEYLDF Learning and Development Outcome *Children have a strong sense of identity* includes children’s sense of safety and security; autonomy and agency; sense of self; and respectful interaction with others.

Identity is also defined in human rights law. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), ratified by Australia in 1990, advances every child’s right to:

preserve his or her identity, including nationality, name and family relations (United Nations General Assembly 1989).

In order to uphold this right for children, early childhood professionals need to be aware of what a strong sense of identity looks like in young children, and how it develops over time.

This practice guide helps early childhood professionals to unpack the VEYLDF Outcome, by suggesting a model of what a strong sense of identity involves. This model was developed in *Assessment of Children as Having a Strong Sense of Identity in Early Childhood Education and Care: Literature review* (Jackson et al. 2020) and is shown in Figure 1 below.

Three components of identity are set out in Figure 1 in a way that shows the central place of **personal identity**, supported by the associated components of **social identity (inward)** and **social identity (outward)**. Personal identity is how the child sees themselves. Social identity (inward) is how others see the child, and social identity (outward) is how the child sees others.

Each of these components is itself divided into two elements: awareness and appreciation. These reflect the constructs of the VEYLDF Learning and Development Outcome: that children must have a sense (awareness) of what their identity is, and that this sense of identity must be strong (appreciated or valued).

This model does not focus on attributes of identity (such as physical features, gender, ethnicity, personality or behaviour), but instead helps professionals recognise the components of identity and the constructs that help identity develop over time.

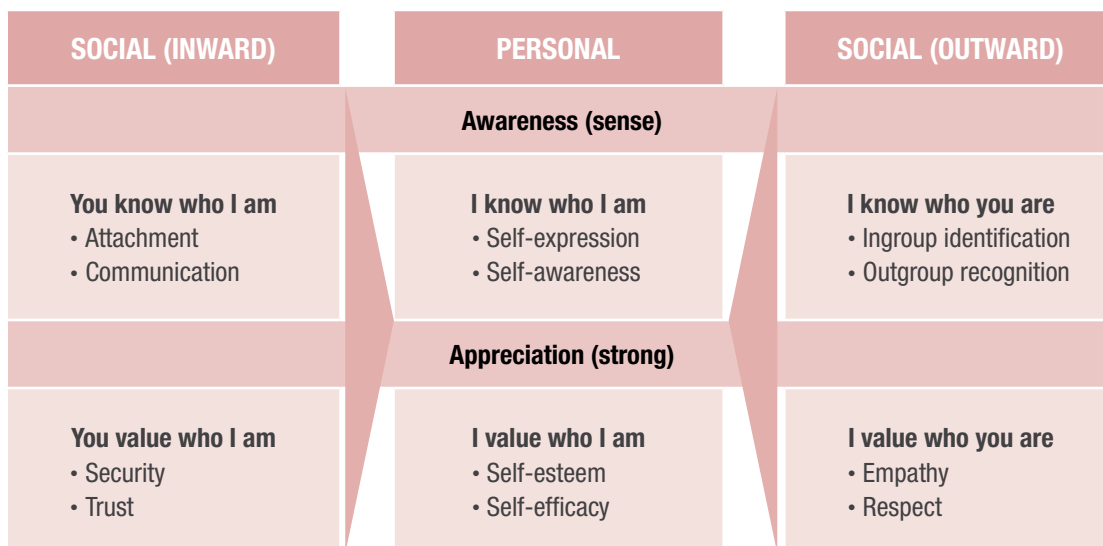


Figure 1: The components of a sense of identity

The components of the model are briefly summarised below. For more details about these components, see *Assessment of Children as Having a Strong Sense of Identity in Early Childhood Education and Care: Literature review* (Jackson et al. 2020).

Personal identity refers to awareness of self, which can be summarised in the statement 'I know who I am'. This sense of awareness of personal identity involves the constructs of self-expression and self-awareness.

- **Self-expression** is the external demonstration of a child's self-concept (Kim & Ko 2007).
- **Self-awareness**, or self-concept, involves awareness of self as a separate, individual person (Hattie 1992), and 'awareness of one's identity in a social world' (Castle 1974, p. 6).

A strong sense of identity requires that a child also appreciates who they are, which can be summarised in the statement 'I value who I am'. The development of self-esteem and self-efficacy supports this appreciation.

- **Self-esteem** is how a child feels about themselves. While self-concept is a form of 'self-description', self-esteem is a form of 'self-evaluation' (Renshaw 2019, p. 11).
- **Self-efficacy** relates to whether a child is capable of achieving a desired outcome in a particular situation (Bandura 1982).

Social identity (inward) is the inward-facing component of a child's social identity, and is related to how the child believes that they are seen by others. Attachment and communication are two key aspects in a child's sense of social identity (inward), and both contribute to the child's sense that 'you know who I am'.

- **Attachment** is defined as a child feeling that an adult is aware of their presence and attuned to their needs.
- **Communication** relates to a child feeling that others understand them, and recognises the importance of a child's first language.

Security and trust are two constructs relevant to the appreciation, or valuing, element of this model of social identity (inward).

- **Security** is a specific quality of attachment, where a child feels safe, loved and valued (Cherry 2019).
- **Trust** involves a child's recognition of 'reliance on others' as well as 'learning to be relied on' (DET 2016, p. 18).

Social identity (outward) refers to how a child's view of other people shapes their view of themselves. This component focuses on the child's awareness of others, which includes identification of 'ingroups', to which the child belongs, and 'outgroups', to which others belong.

- **Ingroup identification** is the extent to which a child includes membership of social groups in their own sense of identity (Tropp & Wright 2001).
- **Outgroup recognition** is the extent to which a child identifies groups to which they do not belong, and incorporates this 'otherness' into their own sense of identity.

Empathy and respect come into play when a child demonstrates that 'I value who you are'.

- **Empathy** is the ability to understand and share the perspectives of others.
- **Respect** for others develops from opportunities to experience diversity and difference in ways that nurture positive attitudes, and care and respect for others (DET 2016, p. 12).

The VEYLDF associates many other terms with the concept of identity, including inclusion, belonging, support, relationships, autonomy, interdependence, resilience, a sense of agency, care and diversity (VCAA 2017). While there are a number of possible models of identity, it is clear that a strong sense of identity involves both knowing and feeling, and integrates cognitive, social and emotional development. The components of a strong sense of identity illustrated in Figure 1 provide a framework that may be useful to professionals, in understanding the many different ways in which identity may be described.

The VEYLDF Learning and Development Outcomes are closely related, and this practice guide can also help early childhood professionals monitor progress towards other Outcomes. For example, children's sense of identity is closely associated with their wellbeing, is dependent on communication skills, and underpins learning, particularly self-efficacy or confidence as a learner.

Identity and executive function

As in other practice guides in this series, the importance of executive function as a critical skill for independence in daily life is recognised, and it warrants specific attention relative to the development of a strong sense of identity in young children.

Executive function is a 'specific set of attention-regulation skills involved in conscious goal-directed problem-solving' (Zelazo, Blair & Willoughby 2016, p. 2). There are three components of executive function, and these develop significantly in the early years. These constructs are defined in greater detail in *Assessment of Children as Confident and Involved Learners in Early Childhood Education and Care: Literature review* (Cloney, Jackson & Mitchell 2019).

Cognitive flexibility (or flexible thinking) involves thinking about something in multiple ways – for example, considering someone else's perspective or solving a problem in various ways.

Working memory involves both keeping information in mind and, usually, manipulating it in some way – for example, when playing a game or listening to a story, a child might remember several pieces of distinct information or ideas, and integrate them into a coherent whole.

Inhibitory control (or self-control) is the process of deliberately suppressing attention (and the subsequent response) to something – for example, ignoring a distraction, stopping an impulsive utterance, or taking turns.

Assessment of Children as Having a Strong Sense of Identity in Early Childhood Education and Care: Literature review (Jackson et al. 2020) explores research that shows how a child's sense of self, and the strength of their sense of self, is strongly linked to components of executive function. It shows that a strong sense of identity can be harnessed to strengthen self-regulation and working memory.

Children will better remember information or solve a problem if that information or problem relates to them (their identity), than if it does not. This connection to children's sense of identity shows up as improved performance on literacy, memory and maths tasks (Turk et al. 2015).

Imaginary role-play allows children to adopt other identities. This can have an impact on children's self-regulation, improving their persistence when attempting a frustrating task. The experience of alternative identities and viewpoints also builds children's cognitive flexibility (Carlson, White & Davis-Unger 2014).

A child's identification with ingroups and outgroups can improve their self-control. In one experiment, children who were told that members of their group showed self-control, compared with members of an 'other' group who did not, exhibited greater self-control themselves (Doebel & Munakata 2018).

Executive function is important for learning and development outcomes in many areas.

VCAA's *Learning Practice Guide* (2019), *Wellbeing Practice Guide* (2016) and *Communication Practice Guide* (2018) all focus on the critical role of executive function and the VEYLDF Learning and Development Outcomes:

- **Children are confident and involved learners**
www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/Documents/earlyyears/LearningPGweb24102019.pdf
- **Children have a strong sense of wellbeing**
www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/Documents/earlyyears/EYWellbeingPracticeGuide.pdf
- **Children are effective communicators**
www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/Documents/earlyyears/CommunicationPracticeGuide.pdf

Strategies for supporting children to develop a strong sense of identity

This section outlines strategies that early childhood professionals can consider in supporting children's development of a strong sense of identity. The strategies presented here are organised by the components of identity discussed earlier. The reflective scenarios in the following section provide additional strategies, presented in an integrated and practice-based context.

Personal identity

To support a child's sense of personal identity, early childhood professionals have to rely on focused observation. What are the clues that can help identify a young child's internal thoughts and feelings about how they see themselves?

Self-expression

Self-expression is the most readily observable component of personal identity in young children. Children express themselves through language, music, drawing and making things, which are a significant part of ECEC programs. Children are also encouraged to express themselves when they are given choices, or asked about their preferences for food, clothing and activities they like. Being attuned to children who seem hesitant to express themselves, or have limited means of expression, is a key way early childhood professionals support development of this component of identity.

Self-awareness

Finding out whether or not a child knows themselves, or the extent to which they could say 'I know who I am', involves listening to children talk about who they are, and noting the ways in which they engage in activities and identify with social and cultural practices. How does a child introduce or describe themselves? Do they use their home language and share aspects of their culture in the ECEC setting? With which activities, toys, stories and other people does a pre-verbal child appear to identify? Role-play and puppets are one strategy for probing children's self-awareness. Older children can also be helped to pay attention to, and name, their own emotions and needs.

Self-esteem

Throughout every child's life, a key to self-esteem is enjoying the close and positive attention of respected others. For the young child, positive attention and support from family members, carers and friends is crucial for developing self-esteem. This component of personal identity is therefore closely related to the social identity (inward) component (see p. 8), but it relates to the child internalising others' regard for them, and learning to value themselves independently.

Early childhood professionals can support self-esteem by providing opportunities for them to feel valued and to share their individuality in personally rewarding ways. As a child begins to compete with and compare themselves with others, early childhood professionals also walk a careful line in the way they provide feedback. They respond in ways that empower and maintain the dignity of all children, and acknowledge that there are many skills, strengths and attributes that are valued.

Self-efficacy

Self-efficacy is also internal to the child, and is best developed by enabling children to experiment with their capabilities and limitations. Children will create their own internal narratives about their abilities based on their experiences of success or failure, creating a powerful internal 'feedback loop'. Educators can look for signs of how these narratives are developing, and nudge children to think about their abilities in positive ways.

Acknowledging when children try things that they find difficult and praising the effort they put into an activity are as important in supporting self-efficacy as focusing on strengths and achievements. Seeing other children succeed can also raise a child's self-efficacy and motivate them to engage in a task. Dealing with failure is a hard but important lesson for everyone. Children learn from everyone around them, especially adults, who can model strategies for dealing with their own failures. When children see adults fail or make mistakes and then try again, they learn that it is a strength, not a weakness.

Social identity (inward)

The inward component of social identity is shaped by how other people respond to the child, and therefore it can be strongly influenced by interactions with early childhood professionals. Interactions with others can impact on a child's sense of identity both positively and negatively, so early childhood professionals have a responsibility to ensure that their relationships with children are as responsive as possible. This should begin with the youngest children, because the foundations for a strong sense of identity should be laid from birth. Hence the importance of building attachment, communication, security and trust in children from birth.

Attachment

Attachment is defined in the VEYLDF as having attentive, affectionate, consistent, available, attuned adults as a source of comfort and reassurance. Routines can be valuable times for building attachment, as children learn to predict, and feel secure in, everyday events. Recognising that children can also feel attachment to special toys, and to physical places, prompts everyone in ECEC settings to be sensitive and responsive to the needs of children.

Healthy attachments help children develop a capacity for independence, and tolerance for uncertainty. Being curious is a key element of learning, and children will be more confident in exploring their world when early childhood professionals are constant and available when they return.

Communication

Knowing that others understand them goes a long way to cementing a child's sense of inward-facing social identity. Early childhood professionals can support a child's sense that 'You know who I am' by communicating to the child that their current interests, skills and level of learning are understood and valued. Recognising that a child's first or home language is integral to their sense of identity will prompt early childhood professionals to engage with families and community networks to ensure there are resources to support this.

Communicating with children requires early childhood professionals to value how the child and their family express who they are, and adapt their own communication respectfully. Educators working in multicultural communities may develop particular skills in adapting their communication, but educators in all communities can be aware of the differences in how individual children and their families interact and demonstrate their awareness.

Feeling known also includes feeling heard. In their practice, early childhood professionals take seriously the fact that a child's right to be known, recognised, consulted and heard means involving them in decisions that affect their lives.

Security

The UNCRC notes the importance of secure family relationships to a child's sense of self, and that all children have the right to feel loved and secure – and this right extends to how children feel in ECEC settings. Children who feel calm, comfortable, secure and safe in their ECEC setting are in a better position to develop executive function. A child will feel secure when schedules and routines that acknowledge the child's needs are established and modelled by adults.

Early childhood professionals should make a priority of identifying children and families who are at risk or vulnerable. A child who is insecure may avoid or withdraw from interactions, and careful observation may be needed to determine what additional support is needed to establish an environment in which the child can feel more secure. Although attachment and security are closely related, a child can be supported to feel secure even when they struggle to form attachments.

Trust

Reliability, emotional trust and honesty are three factors that form the basis of trust. While attachment and security are grounded in the here and now, trust also relates to a child's faith in what will happen in the future, and their ability to depend on others. Early childhood professionals can therefore support trust by fulfilling their commitments to children, and giving them the appropriate opportunities to reciprocate. They can also prepare a child for changes in their relationships (such as a transition between rooms), so that the child's trust is not impacted.

Like security, building trust may require additional effort for children who are at risk or vulnerable. Understanding that a child will not necessarily expect adults to behave in trustworthy ways is a starting point for helping them rebuild confidence. Professionals can also be alert to challenges in a child's learning, which may stem from lack of trust. Reflecting on the demands placed on a child's trust in everyday interactions can help educators to build trusting relationships more intentionally.

Social identity (outward)

A child's awareness of other social groups grows as their circle of contacts increases to encounter more people who are different from them. Drawing attention to the ways in which people are different and the same is a way that early childhood professionals can promote understanding of personal and social identity.

Ingroup identification

Early childhood professionals can help children feel a strong sense of connection with the groups to which they belong. Early childhood professionals have an obligation to 'respect the uniqueness of each family and strive to learn about their culture, structure, lifestyle, customs, language, beliefs and kinship systems' (Early Childhood Australia 2016). This respect is demonstrated when early childhood professionals work with families and communities to determine how to best support group identity. Educators cannot assume that a child from a particular group will express their identity in the same way as another, even if both children seem similar.

Integrating aspects of a child's home and family culture into the program can help the child see their 'ingroup' reflected in the program. This might include simple things like food and festivals, but should also include critical reflection on deeper aspects of identity, such as child-rearing beliefs and world views. Learning about the cultural identities of the families in their ECEC setting, and integrating those identities into the regular program, is the best way to honour the significance of an individual child's cultural and linguistic identity, and strengthen their ingroup identification. Connection to Place or Country, and the natural environment, are other tangible symbols of group identity (DET 2016, p. 18), and learning about and on Country is shown to strengthen the identity of Aboriginal children (Jackson-Barrett & Lee-Hammond 2018). As early childhood professionals build their understanding of other groups to which children belong, they may also reflect on their own ingroup relationships.

Outgroup recognition

Early childhood professionals can help children identify, understand and value groups of people who are different from them, by making diversity a part of all aspects of their programs, including through books, toys, conversations and imaginative play.

When integrating resources to promote understanding of diversity, it is important to avoid stereotypes (positive or negative), and seek advice if unsure. Professionals may see more clearly how other groups are represented in the program if they begin by reflecting on how their own groups (defined by a range of attributes, such as gender, ethnicity, body shape or social class) are represented too. Are there ways of thinking and being that are assumed to be 'normal'? Who might be excluded by these representations?

Educators may observe how children's understanding of outgroups affects their own sense of identity. If a child fears or dislikes another group (such as children of a different gender), it can impact their own sense of security, as well as the other group's sense of self-esteem. Encouraging children to explore different ways of being themselves can help them to understand and appreciate different ways of being in others.

Empathy

Empathy is the ability to understand and share the perspectives of others. There are countless opportunities across any ECEC day for intentional teaching to focus on developing empathy. This could be drawing attention to a child who is excited about a birthday, or who is hurt or upset, naming feelings, or inviting children to point to a relevant emoji. Early childhood professionals can intentionally explore issues of fairness or inequity through stories, imaginary play and group discussion, to lead children to think of others and demonstrate empathy through their actions.

Respect

Learning about different groups, understanding multiple perspectives, and developing empathy all culminate in the ability to respect others. The role of the early childhood professional is to:

maximise opportunities for all children to do well and learn from others, including opportunities to experience diversity and difference in ways that nurture positive attitudes, and care and respect for others (DET 2016, p. 12).

Of course, children's ability to respect others will develop according to their own experience of being respected, and the modelling of respect for others that they observe from trusted adults in their lives. Many early childhood professionals strive to create learning environments in which respect is central to every relationship.

Assessing children as having a strong sense of identity

This section briefly summarises approaches to assessment of a strong sense of identity. It provides a set of principles to guide assessment decisions, and discusses the types of tools that can support the understanding and assessment of young children's sense of identity.

Assessment is the practice and processes in which early childhood professionals engage to collect and analyse information about children and their learning and development, in order to inform planning. The range of techniques for collecting this information goes well beyond individual testing of children, or checklists. It encompasses multiple types of observation of learning and development embedded in everyday practice.

However, assessment also goes beyond observation, and involves interpretation, analysis and making a judgment against a framework (Barnes 2012). Making sure this judgment is accurate and a useful assessment of a child's sense of identity requires that what is being assessed, and how the assessment is undertaken, follows accepted principles.

A strong sense of identity is an especially challenging outcome to assess, as it depends on what children are thinking and feeling, which may not always be easy for them to demonstrate. It may also touch on sensitive issues for individual children, such as their self-esteem. Purposeful assessment of children's identity must always occur within the context of professionals' trusting, responsive relationships with children, and use approaches relevant to each individual child.

Principles for assessing children as having a strong sense of identity

Assessment of Children as Having a Strong Sense of Identity: Literature review (Jackson et al. 2019) identifies six principles specifically relevant to assessing children as having a strong sense of identity. These principles of assessment connect to previous literature reviews in this series, as they are also relevant to other VEYLDF Learning and Development Outcomes.

The six assessment principles are:

- Assessment addresses established components of children's identity.
- Assessment enables early childhood professionals to describe a trajectory of identity development.
- Assessment is valid, reliable and fair.
- Assessment is conducted in a way that enhances engagement and relationships.
- Assessment includes children's self-assessment.
- Assessment involves the child's community and informs professional partnerships.

These principles start with checking the purpose of assessment, move on to consider the design of an assessment, and, finally, highlight considerations related to administration of assessment.

The first principle establishes that the early childhood professional undertaking the assessment should be clear about the purpose of the assessment and what is being assessed. The assessment should relate directly to the assessment of a strong sense of identity.

The second principle reflects that while early childhood professionals should be conscious of the diverse ways that children demonstrate their sense of identity (and whether or not it is strongly developed), a well-designed assessment enables them to recognise a child's development on a continuum of learning.

Validity and fairness are key to ensuring an assessment leads to accurate conclusions about a child's development, and, in turn, informs appropriate planning.

These principles recognise that assessment does not occur in a vacuum. There are many contextual issues to take into account when selecting and using an assessment tool. At the outset, it must be logistically feasible to undertake an assessment, and to 'do no harm' (including emotional harm) in the process of administering it.

Finally, assessment is valuable only if its findings and results are understood and acted upon. This includes providing timely feedback to parents and families, other professionals, and, where appropriate, to children.

Tools to support an understanding of a child's sense of identity

Assessment of Children as Having a Strong Sense of Identity: Literature review (Jackson et al. 2020) identifies tools that have been used in research to assess a child's sense of identity. These tools were selected according to the six assessment principles previously discussed, noting that formal assessments of a strong sense of identity are relatively rare and there are few tools available that can meet all these criteria.

Using the summary table in Section 3 of the literature review, early childhood professionals can explore relevant tools from across the 12 constructs of identity, and across ages. The tools can be used in a range of ECEC and early-school contexts, and assessments can be matched to what is most appropriate for particular children, and investigate a particular component of identity.

Assessment of a sense of identity in young children is a relatively new area, and there are very few validated, direct assessments of this outcome. Personal identity constructs such as self-esteem and self-efficacy are typically assessed via rating scales completed by a parent/carer or another adult who knows the child. There are also a small number of tools that use pictorial scales and puppets to assess a child's own sense of their identity.

Some standalone, single-purpose assessments are available to measure individual components of social identity (inward) such as attachment and trust in young children. There is a communication component to several tools, and early childhood professionals should consider whether or not a tool is culturally appropriate for the child they are assessing.

Central to the assessment of social identity (outward) is the observation of a child's behaviours in social interactions, or a discussion with children about others in their communities. As structured assessment tools for children under three years of age are scarce, early childhood professionals are more likely to use observational methods, such as learning stories and reflective journals, to document children's learning and development.

Any assessment of children's sense of identity must be clear and purposeful, to be useful for informing future program planning and delivery. The reflective scenarios in this guide illustrate examples of educators applying the VEYLDF Early Years Planning Cycle to the focus Outcome, in a range of different contexts.

Additional reading

The Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) published a series of resources in 2019 related to defining and measuring a positive sense of identity and culture in children and young people. The series includes a literature review that provides further definition of concepts related to identity: *A Positive Sense of Identity and Culture: Defining and measuring progress for children and young people in Australia – a literature and scoping review on developing better indicators* (Renshaw 2019) <https://www.aracy.org.au/publications-resources/area?command=record&id=297&cid=6>

Reflective scenarios

About the scenarios

The reflective scenarios in this practice guide illustrate ways in which early childhood professionals can improve their practice in relation to the VEYLDF Learning and Development Outcome *Children have a strong sense of identity*. They are designed to inspire all early childhood professionals to think about new ways of supporting children to develop a strong sense of identity, using the cycle of observation, analysing learning, documentation, planning, implementation and reflection. The scenarios highlight the important role that meaningful assessment of children’s identity has in this cycle – recognising that assessment can take many different forms.

This cycle can occur in many different early childhood settings, responding to the many different challenges and opportunities that they offer. The *Early Years Planning Cycle Resource for the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework* (VCAA 2020) describes the cycle as occurring within or around a particular context, as shown in Figure 2. The context may be defined by many factors, including the type of early childhood setting;

the age and characteristics of the child; the knowledge, skills and values of the early childhood professionals; and the needs and aspirations of the community. All of these factors affect how the VEYLDF Early Years Planning Cycle will be applied in each specific context, with no two cycles ever looking the same.

The scenarios in this practice guide describe the VEYLDF Early Years Planning Cycle in action, across diverse contexts. They illustrate:

- each component of a strong sense of identity
- a range of early childhood settings, and different kinds of early childhood professionals
- diverse philosophies about identity, and how it can be assessed and supported
- the types of situations arising for individual children or groups, at varied points of development.

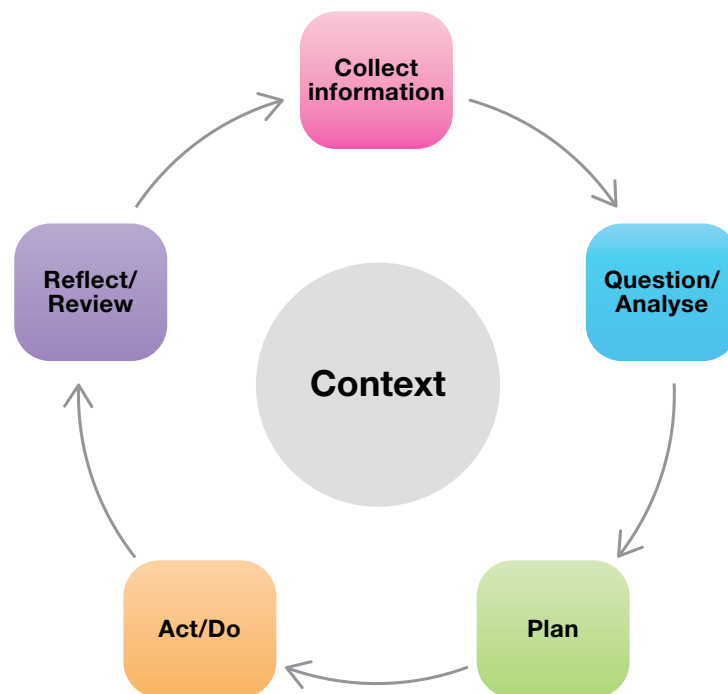


Figure 2: VEYLDF Early Years Planning Cycle

Using reflective scenarios

Each reflective scenario begins with key points, or 'takeaways', for professional learning, and questions for reflection to keep in mind while reading and reflecting on each scenario. Each reflective scenario also identifies the outcomes for children and VEYLDF Practice Principles that are most strongly illustrated in the scenario. This will help you to select a scenario that is relevant to current priorities for the children in your setting, and the issues that you are currently facing in your practice; however, each reflective scenario demonstrates the integrated nature of the Learning and Development Outcomes and Practice Principles, due to the deeply integrated nature of children's learning and development, and of professional practice.

You are encouraged to question, debate, affirm or critique the decisions that the early childhood professionals make in these scenarios, and how they are implementing the planning cycle in their context. Reflection on the scenarios is particularly effective when it occurs collaboratively, so that different points of view can emerge, and colleagues can support each other's professional learning.

... None of these scenarios represents 'ideal' practice, simply because there is no such thing ... You are encouraged to question, debate, affirm or critique the decisions that the early childhood professionals make in these scenarios, and how they are implementing the planning cycle in their context

Reflective scenario 1: I can do that!

Key points for professional learning

- Learning is social, and children’s confidence can be affected by their context and environment.
 - Responsibility, goal commitment, self-improvement and positivity are all characteristics of high self-esteem, and can be practised through everyday activities.
 - Learning to master skills, and exercise them independently, builds children’s confidence and sense of self-efficacy, both of which are important elements of identity.
-

Questions for reflection

- What tasks do you routinely help children to do that they could be learning to do themselves?
 - How can mastery of everyday tasks help children manage fear of failure and risk (which are related to low self-esteem) and help them to manage frustration in the process of learning?
-

Outcomes for children

- Self-esteem
 - Self-efficacy
-

VEYLDF Practice Principles focus

- High expectations for every child
 - Partnerships with families
-

Scenario

Mara has been providing education and care in her home to Jack and Chloe (both aged four) and Jaala (aged two) for over a year. This would be her last year with Chloe and Jack, who are starting school next year. Mara is keen to ensure that they’re well equipped for this important transition, particularly Jack, who doesn’t attend kindergarten. So she was pleased to find out that her family day care and education coordinator would be trialling a new professional development program focusing on the VEYLDF Learning and Development Outcomes and Practice Principles, starting with *Children have a strong sense of identity*. Mara had engaged with the VEYLDF during her training, but felt less confident in areas such as identity and connectedness, compared with learning and health.

Ava, her family day care coordinator, created an online chat group in which educators could share their reflections and pose questions about the Outcomes. In relation to a strong sense of identity, Mara was amazed at how passionately other educators felt about cultural heritage and language. Her service included many educators who worked with children from their own cultural background, and who felt strongly about maintaining their home languages and cultural practices in their programs.

Ava responded to these comments by nudging educators to think about how children might develop a strong sense of identity. Reading what educators had said about the children in their program, she felt particularly motivated to support educators to help the children develop a strong sense of their own capability, given that many would need to adapt to new language and cultural practices at school.

Ava decided to draw educators’ attention to building children’s self-esteem and self-efficacy. ‘These are tightly linked, but distinct,’ she explained. ‘While we’re all quite familiar with independence, self-efficacy and self-esteem are less well understood, particularly the difference between the two. While self-esteem relates to how a child feels about themselves, self-efficacy relates to how confident a child is in being able to complete a specific task or achieve a desired outcome.’

The educators in the online group quickly realised that this was relevant to their concerns about the children’s upcoming transition to school. One of them posted a link to a study that showed self-esteem was critical to children’s success at school, as well as later life outcomes. Another posted a story about mental health problems in her local community that linked self-esteem and poor mental health.

Scrolling through the online discussion, Mara wrestled with how all these ideas fit together. She posted a response, to test whether she was on the right track:

‘So self-efficacy is children feeling like they can do things? Then they try again, and when they do it again, their self-esteem gets better, because they like themselves better too.’

‘Exactly,’ responded Ava, ‘that’s a great way of putting it, like a feedback loop, where effort and achievement build confidence and independence, which builds self-esteem, which in turn builds confidence to tackle new and more challenging tasks. Children can build their self-esteem and self-efficacy when they experience success in any area of learning in your programs.’

Ava challenged the group to think about and share how they currently support these areas in their daily practice. Common responses included selecting books and activities, going to the toilet, and packing bags at the end of the day. Ava asked about other tasks and was surprised to learn that most children were helped with shoes and clothing, and weren’t involved in food preparation and clean-up. Those, she explained, were great opportunities for children to take responsibility and build their confidence and independence. She asked the educators to make a list of tasks that they help children with, or do for them, but which they think children could learn to manage on their own. She suggested educators workshop the list with the children, and share it with the children’s families, explaining that these are skills they’re going to work on together over the coming months, and why.

Mara reflected on this over the next few days. Independently putting on shoes, socks and jackets would definitely be on the list – Chloe and Jack always wanted help with these tasks, and often got angry or upset when they found it difficult. Mara’s final list comprised five items for Chloe and Jack, and two for Jaala. They discussed the lists together, and Chloe and Jack decided to add a final item: ‘making their own morning tea’. Mara’s suggestion that they could also tidy up afterwards wasn’t met with

great enthusiasm, so Mara decided that that could be a next step, once the first list had been mastered. She talked through the plan with the children’s parents, and they promised to work on the goals at home to reinforce learning and create consistent expectations.

When Jack next asked Mara for help, she encouraged him to put on his shoes and socks on his own. As she turned to do something else, the meltdown commenced.

‘I can’t, there’s just NO WAY I can do this!’

Mara sat down beside him, and suggested they work on it together. Jack cried that his socks were inside out and ‘the whole thing was just impossible’. Mara put her hand into the sock, and explained how to pinch the end, and pull the pinch so that the sock was the right way out. Then she put it inside out again, and asked Jack to do it. He managed the socks, but Mara ended up helping with the shoes. Still, this was progress, thought Mara, who noticed that Chloe had watched Mara, and turned her own socks in the right way, and Jaala had also been watching intently. Mara told Jack and Chloe she was pleased to see them working so hard to get the ‘sock trick’ right, and with that kind of perseverance, they’d be putting their own socks and shoes on in no time.

Morning tea preparation happened much more quickly, and the children were clearly proud of their achievements in the kitchen. By week two, Mara was sitting and watching the children prepare morning tea on their own, and they were helping to tidy up afterwards. A few weeks later, success in the ‘getting dressed’ department was finally achieved and loudly celebrated.

‘Look!’ shouted Jack. ‘I can do it!’

‘Me too, me too!’ Chloe and Jaala shouted together, jumping up and down with delight.

Mara cheered the children, and happily realised how proud she was of them mastering such a simple task that she’d been helping them with for so long. Mara recorded all this in her daily observation schedule, and consulted her list of tasks to work out what the children could try next. By the time they reached school, these children would believe themselves to be capable of anything!

Reflective scenario 2: Learning about learning stories

Key points for professional learning

- Relationships and a sense of belonging provide the foundations for a child's sense of identity.
- Describing the development of a strong sense of identity in learning stories requires educators to be thoughtful and purposeful about interpreting what they observe.
- Children develop a sense of identity through narratives, memories and experiences. Learning stories can help them build a sense of themselves, by reflecting on their experiences.

Questions for reflection

- What difference does the quality of observation and reflection make in assessing learning, particularly in relation to complex areas of learning, such as children's identity?
- How do a child's relationships with others support the development of their own sense of identity? How does your relationship with a child and their family shape how you see yourself?
- How can educators most effectively support a child to develop safe and secure relationships with their peers, without being intrusive and instructive?

Outcomes for children

- Empathy
- Trust
- Security

VEYLDF Practice Principles focus

- Assessment for learning and development
- Partnerships with families
- Reflective practice

Scenario

It was after 6pm and Greta, room leader at a long day education and care service, was working on her third learning story for the day. She tried to describe the joy that four-year-old Xavier expressed during his block construction, and peered intently at her photo of his beaming face for inspiration. It was no use – Greta was tired, hungry and utterly frustrated, and wished she could just focus on her planning.

Greta paused to reflect on who the learning stories were really for. When she first began writing learning stories, she was thrilled at the reactions from families to the joyful photographs and stories of the wonderful experiences their children had in her room. She felt then that the stories helped busy parents to understand her practice; but the stories had developed a life of their own. Parents now expected the beautifully formatted documents to arrive in their inbox – although Greta was beginning to wonder whether parents actually read them, or discussed them with their child.

In her next planning time, Greta arranged to call Olive, an educator she had met at a meeting for her service's professional network. Olive had spoken about how learning stories helped her plan her program – whereas for Greta, they just seemed to get in the way. When Greta voiced her concerns, Olive offered to read one of her learning stories over the phone. When Greta said she'd like to see the pictures too, she was amazed when Olive said she rarely used photos. How could she possibly remember what to write about? What would her families have to say?

Olive's story focused on the VEYLDF Learning and Development Outcome *Children have a strong sense of identity*. She said this was a great outcome for learning stories, because children form their sense of identity through narrative and memory. This meant learning stories not only describe a child's sense of identity, but also help them develop a strong sense of who they are, by capturing their memories. Olive often read children's learning stories to them, and took special note of when they asked for 'that story about when I ...' This showed their awareness of who they are, and what they like doing.

Greta noticed that Olive's story had just enough detail to describe what the child did, and then several sentences describing how it related to the VEYLDF Learning and Development Outcome. Olive explained that she had done training in *Te Whāriki* curriculum in New Zealand, where learning stories were integral to assessment. This helped her realise that the adult's interpretation of an experience is what made a learning story – not the description of the experience itself. She called it the 'so what?', and said that this part was most important for planning what would happen next.

Greta was also surprised at the words Olive used. Describing a child who often chose to play in another classroom, Olive talked about outgroup recognition, and how the child had learned to adapt their play to older children in that group, while happily rejoining her own age group later. Olive explained that outgroup recognition meant that the child was learning which groups she belonged to, and how to interact respectfully with different people. Olive planned to investigate this construct for other children in her class, by creating small groups and then changing them around.

Olive set Greta a challenge: write a learning story that teaches you something new. She also gently prodded Greta about her own sense of identity. Did being an educator mean keeping the parents happy? Or did it mean focusing her energy on what mattered most for her practice? By the end of the conversation, Greta felt stronger in her sense of herself as an early childhood professional. Later that day, her educational leader smiled when Greta told her about the call – the effort they had put into setting up the professional learning community seemed to be making a difference.

Greta resolved to put the camera away, and jot down moments when children did something new. The first one she noticed happened in the sandpit the following morning. Xavier was in tears, and most of the children were carrying on playing around him. Suddenly, she noticed Benjy pick up his shovel and hand it to Xavier, who stopped sniffing and started digging again. Benjy then settled down to play with a truck, and calm descended again over the happy group.

Later, Greta wrote a couple of sentences to describe what had happened, and thought hard about her interpretation. Benjy's actions demonstrated a level of empathy that many four-year-olds would not yet have developed; that was worth exploring. The lead educator had been talking a lot lately about 'thinking of the group', and they were starting to see some of the children demonstrate this in

their play. Greta decided to call this ingroup identification, using some new words she had picked up from Olive. Benjy was not only showing empathy, but taking on an identity as a member of his friendship group.

Greta also thought about Xavier's role in the incident. Remarkably, he'd been able to calm down with the support of one of his peers. This, she thought, was likely to be building trust between the boys, and a sense of being appreciated and valued. Xavier was also building a strong sense of identity, with the feeling of security and belonging that he gained with help from his friends.

Once Greta started thinking about this even more, the writing became easier. At the end, she had a short, sharp story, describing a rich experience followed by her own interpretation. She read the first part of the story to Benjy and Xavier later that week, and they spent a good five minutes talking about it. Not only were the boys engaged, but Benjy's parents emailed her to thank her for the story and say that Benjy had been talking about 'thinking of the group, and his friends' a lot at home. He also told his mother that he was a 'caring boy' who helped his friends – an identity well worth claiming.

At the next staff meeting, Greta shared what she'd learnt about the purpose of learning stories, and emailed around some *Te Whāriki* templates that Olive had shared. The other educators sounded relieved to hear that they could spend less time on learning stories, and still be doing well. They decided to create a 'word bank' of vocabulary about the different VEYLDF Learning and Development Outcomes that everyone could add to as they described learning in new ways – including the children, of course.

Reflecting on the last few weeks, Greta realised she was starting to see learning stories as a useful tool, rather than a time-consuming task. She felt confident that as she explored this tool further, she would improve her own ability to observe and extend children's learning and relationships. And who knows, maybe she would even come to love learning stories as much as Olive does.

Reflective scenario 3: Becoming me

Key points for professional learning

- Children start to develop their identities through attachment and communication from early infancy.
- Progress can be assessed by observing and responding to emerging preferences, recognition and gameplay.

Questions for reflection

- What are the early signs of self-concept and identity development that might start to be visible in babies, as they learn to express themselves and interact with others?
- In the context of busy routines, how can intentional teaching be integrated into everyday practices, to support the development of attachment and security?

Outcomes for children

- Self-awareness
- Attachment
- Trust

VEYLDF Practice Principles focus

- Respectful relationships and responsive engagement
- Intentional teaching

Scenario

Alex had recently moved from the toddler room to the six-to-18-months-old room at the children's centre where she worked. She hadn't worked with babies before and was a bit daunted by the prospect. The thought of keeping up with feeding, sleeping and nappies felt overwhelming – work with babies seemed to be all about routines.

Alex wasn't sure how she'd find time to engage with some of the parts of her job that she found most engaging, such as supporting children's skills in communicating and exploring the world around them, and supporting development of their emerging sense of identity. Alex was pretty sure her role in these respects would change, and worried that she'd be doing less of what she loved the most.

Added to this, it was the start of the year, and there were four new babies starting at the service. Alex was familiar with the centre's settling-in policy, which advised several orientation sessions with a parent attending, followed by a week where the parent stayed for some of the session, leaving the centre for an hour or two at a time. From week three, parents were advised to 'kiss and go', ensuring they departed promptly. Alex had seen this work for toddlers, but felt less sure for younger children.

Sure enough, arrivals quickly became Alex's least favourite part of the daily routine. Alex was responsible for settling in Billie, who was not dealing so well with the transition. After five weeks, Billie was still crying inconsolably for an hour after Deb, his mother, left, every day. Deb was finding the transition extremely difficult. Several times she had asked Alex for advice, while in tears.

Alex's room leader advised her to persist with their transition program, but Alex wondered whether the approach might need to be adjusted for Billie and his family. It felt like the situation was causing huge amounts of stress for everyone involved, including the other children in the room. It was also undermining efforts to build secure attachments and trust between Billie and Alex, which Alex knew were critical to his ability to settle in, not to mention his development in the next few months and beyond.

Alex needed a way to think and talk about Billie's transition that wasn't just about policies and routines. She spent some time reading up on babies' attachment, relationship development and transitions, hoping to find something that might help her, Billie and his family through this process. Amid the mountains of theory on attachment, she came across a video about something called the Strange Situation test (Psychology Unlocked 2017), an experiment to test the infant–parent bond that was developed in the 1970s.

Billie realised that the way babies behaved with unfamiliar adults was not just a problem to be managed, but a sign

of their sense of security and identity. While the Strange Situation test was a tool for research, not for everyday practice, it got Alex thinking about what she could observe in Billie's behaviour that would give her clues about how his sense of identity was developing.

Most importantly, these observations could turn Billie's settling-in process into part of their learning and development program for him, rather than just being a routine to be endured before the program commenced. This might mean deviating from the settling-in policy, but it was definitely consistent with the service's policy about intentional teaching and assessment for learning. Best of all, it enabled Alex to follow her own curiosity about how a child's sense of identity emerged.

Alex tried writing a reflection on Billie's morning routine that was focused on his learning. She described his secure attachment to his mother, which was central to his emerging sense of identity. She thought hard about how she and Billie engaged in responsive communication, and times during the day when he had successfully communicated his needs. Alex realised that the stress of the morning routines had prevented her from seeing the progress that Billie was making.

Equipped with a renewed sense of enthusiasm and determination, Alex emailed Deb, and suggested they talk through how things were going with Billie. Over a cup of tea, Deb was honest about the stress and anxiety surrounding the fact that Billie hadn't yet settled in. She'd been advised, and read online, that she just needed to persevere, but she wasn't convinced.

Alex asked Deb what she actually wanted to do, rather than what she felt she should be doing. Deb wondered whether she could slow down the transition, and spend more time with Billie at the centre until he seemed to be settling. Her manager had said she could come into work at a later time if she needed to. Deb had been wanting to ask whether this was possible, but was worried it would be intrusive for her to spend more time in the room, and that the idea of slowing down the transition process wouldn't be welcomed.

Alex reassured Deb that she too had been thinking it was crucial to get this process right, and shared some of the ideas she'd been reading about. Deb was interested in how secure relationships supported babies' and toddlers' psychological and social development, and their emerging identities. Alex noticed a gradual change in Deb's tone, from exasperation to curiosity about what Billie was learning. Alex invited Deb to contribute to her observations of Billie's progress, and to developing intentional teaching strategies to help him learn the settling-in routine. Deb was puzzled by the idea of intentional teaching for babies, but was willing to try anything that might help.

Over the next month, Deb spent an hour every morning in the babies' room, and she and Alex made sure that the two of them spent time together with Billie. They played games, read board books, and spent time on their tummies on the floor, with some of the other babies. They also talked constantly about what Billie was expressing during his play. Alex noticed Deb growing in confidence every day and becoming more attuned to his cues as they shared observations.

Billie himself seemed aware of Deb's change in attitude, and Alex reflected on how empathetic he seemed to how his mum was feeling. She decided that Billie's highly responsive nature might offer them a strategy for smoothing the transition, and watched closely for other times when it emerged. Alex noted that Billie seemed particularly delighted when playing with Jamila, one of the other carers in the room. Jamila had begun to express a special joy when Billie arrived in the mornings. As Billie's tears turned to giggles at the sight of Jamila, Alex was careful to talk Deb through the transition too – while Deb was happy to see him happy, it was also hard to see him letting go. Alex explained how attachments to others were part of Billie becoming himself, outside of his immediate family.

Alex was relieved for Billie and his family that things were now heading in the right direction, and the levels of anxiety and distress had reduced for everyone. She also felt more secure in her own identity as an educator in the babies' room, now that she knew that the parts of the job that she loved the most were as much a part of her role as ever.

Reflective scenario 4: 'Smart kids'

Key points for professional learning

- Recognising children's effort and progress – not only their achievement of a task, or high scores – is critical to building their self-efficacy and sense of agency.
 - Praise can impact on a child's sense of identity negatively or positively. Rather than labelling a child, educators can focus positive feedback on the child's behaviours or decisions.
-

Questions for reflection

- In what circumstances do you think competitive behaviour is appropriate or helpful in the early years, and throughout school?
 - How do you help children to build commitment to perseverance, and put achievement and attainment into context?
 - Do you feel that you maintain a reasonable balance between recognising effort and process on the one hand, and achievement and accomplishment on the other?
-

Outcomes for children

- Self-esteem
 - Self-efficacy
-

VEYLDF Practice Principles focus

- High expectations for every child
 - Reflective practice
-

Scenario

Georgie, a Year 2 teacher in a suburban primary school, had a problem. Some of her students were thriving at school, soaking up the curriculum and taking pride in their emerging capability. While Georgie was delighted with the progress of these students, she had noticed some patterns emerging that troubled her. Her strong students were throwing themselves into their schoolwork with increasing seriousness, while the students in the middle seemed to be losing some of their motivation. Then there were a few students who were falling even further behind.

Georgie was great at teaching Year 2 curriculum – her pedagogical content knowledge spanned a wide range of strategies for teaching all subjects in the early years. But this was different: the issue was more about how children were feeling than what they were learning. Georgie needed a new way to think, beyond her curriculum and pedagogical expertise. She dug out her copy of the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework, to look for inspiration.

Georgie tried using each of the five Learning and Development Outcomes to think about what she had observed. It was like looking through a kaleidoscope, or seeing her problem through five different 'lenses'. The issue was clearly related to children's confidence as learners, but learning wasn't the whole story – there was a social element to what she was observing too. The widening achievement gap was affecting some children's wellbeing (those who were becoming frustrated) but the wellbeing lens wasn't quite right either.

Georgie realised that the Learning and Development Outcome *Children have a strong sense of identity* gave her some useful insights. The issue wasn't just about what children could do, or how they felt, it was about who they were. She had noticed students talking loudly about the 'smart ones' that are 'the best at that'. While it sounded like a compliment, they were also labelling those children as part of an identity group – and excluding themselves at the same time.

These labels affected how children engaged in learning. Georgie had seen children deferring to others while working in groups, and remarking that some of the children were better at some things than others. She reflected on how the 'smart kids' behaved too, and realised that some of their diligence might be motivated by their desire to hold on to the 'smart kids' identity. She wondered how she could help them feel secure in their identity, without feeling overly pressured.

Georgie talked it over with Maia, who taught Year 5. Georgie realised that children's identification as 'smart kids' (or not) shaped their friendships and engagement in learning throughout their primary schooling. Once children had identified as a member of one of those categories,

it was hard to encourage them to think differently about themselves and others. Their friendships were often with children who had the same 'label'. This could create a negative spiral, where children who did not identify as 'smart' lost confidence.

Maia and Georgie pondered how they could support children to develop their sense of identity in more positive ways. Maia had read research that said that the way that adults praise children can make a big difference to the development of their self-esteem and sense of identity – in both positive and negative ways. Some studies had found that children who received higher levels of praise showed lower levels of performance, and shorter task persistence. Some children also became motivated by praise itself, rather than by a love of learning.

Maia reflected that Georgie was teaching children who are at a critical time in their lives, when they experience a huge developmental leap in terms of their self-esteem and their concept of self. While younger children talk about themselves using concrete attributes, such as their physical attributes or what they like doing, from around the age of seven they start to talk about themselves in more abstract and meaningful ways. By describing their own and others' attributes, they are rehearsing these emerging understandings.

Georgie wanted to help them do this more positively. She decided to experiment with two strategies: focusing her positive feedback on the process of completing rather than just the completion of tasks, and changing the way she recognised children's learning. Focusing on the process, rather than the outcome, would build children's persistence in things they found difficult. It would also mean that she wasn't always just praising the children who got their work finished – she could spread her recognition around more, and help every child feel capable and valued. It was a switch from teaching the curriculum, to teaching the children themselves.

Changing the nature of her feedback meant choosing her words very carefully, to focus on behaviours rather than the attributes of children. Georgie grimaced as she reflected how often she said things like 'clever girl' or

'good boy', rather than recognising children's behaviours and choices. No wonder the children had started labelling each other! She resolved to draw children's attention to the choices that they made, to show them that they could determine what kind of child they were.

Georgie started to focus on concentration and thoughtful or hard work, providing specific examples of where she could see the results of children's effort. She reminded children about the progress they had made on tasks that they had struggled with before, and took care to notice skills and knowledge they brought from outside the classroom. She was honest, too. If she could see that something had been rushed, she said so – including to the 'smart kids' who prided themselves on finishing their work quickly – and wondered aloud about what the result could have been if more thought and attention had gone into a task. This was a subtle shift, to focus more on building each child's sense of self-efficacy, balanced with the focus she'd always had on building self-esteem.

Georgie kept a diary to note the effects of this change on how children talked about each other, and themselves. As she delved into the research, Georgie came across several assessments of self-esteem, which gave her ideas for other things to look for. Some psychological scales looked at self-esteem through behaviours such as adjusting to transitions, having perseverance, managing frustration, and taking pride in one's work. Georgie put these ideas into her mental 'toolbox' for assessing how the children's strong sense of identity was developing.

Georgie started to see results very quickly. Many of the children were using strategies she'd commended, such as effort and concentration, and applying these to other tasks. Children who had previously deferred to others showed more inclination to give something a try, even if they weren't confident of success. Georgie felt it was a significant shift in the class dynamic, and she might not have seen it if she had not been willing to try a new 'lens'. While she knew the influences on a child's sense of self were complex and evolving, she felt strongly that she had influenced how the children in her class thought about and valued their own abilities, and the abilities of their peers.

Reflective scenario 5: Someone else's shoes

Key points for professional learning

- Imaginative play can enable children to experiment with different identities, develop empathy, and demonstrate skills that might not emerge in their usual 'roles'.
- Purposeful, child-led imaginative play can support a sense of belonging and security, by encouraging all children to contribute to sustaining a scenario or achieving a shared goal.

Questions for reflection

- How can role-play affect a child's perception of themselves and others?
- When responding to a child's initiatives, how can you support their developing knowledge about themselves as a peer, learner and even teacher?
- What role does peer scaffolding and collaboration play in supporting the development of children's identities, and how can educators support this?

Outcomes for children

- Self-esteem
- Self-efficacy

VEYLDF Practice Principles focus

- Reflective practice
- Respectful relationships and responsive engagement

Parts of this story are based on conversations with and pedagogical documentation by Kylie Lawson from North Brighton Kindergarten; no real names have been used. The whole-group imaginative scenarios idea is derived from Fleer's Conceptual Playlab at Monash University (Fleer 2019).

Scenario

One seemingly ordinary morning at kindergarten, four-year-old Arj suddenly announced to Jenny, the lead educator, that he'd like to be a teacher when he grew up, and would like to practise his teaching at kindergarten. Jenny smiled (as she often did) at the surprises that bubbled up in child-led curriculum, and warmly encouraged Arj to give it a try. They agreed that they would swap roles at mat time that day, and Arj could teach the children something while Jenny would sit and learn.

At mat time, Jenny explained to the children that they had to listen to Arj like they always listened to their teacher. When Arj announced the subject of the lesson – paper 'car planes' – a lively conversation ensued. None of the children had heard of them before, and Jenny watched intently as Arj showed the examples he had brought and painstakingly explained how they were made. She noticed that Arj imitated many of her habits as a teacher, but also brought his own humour and passion for the subject to the discussion, in a way that held the rapt attention of the group.

Jenny decided to help Arj keep practising his new role. She suggested they set up a car plane-making table for Arj to teach at. Because this was a new skill for everyone, she proposed that Arj work with two 'students' at a time, so that they could really pay attention to the craft of making car planes. Her co-educator, Iris, set up a table with plenty of paper, some crayons, and space for three children.

Over the next hour and a half, Arj worked with eight of the children, who took it in turns to work at the car plane table. Jenny was surprised at their ability to wait their turn, with some children returning several times to be told by Arj that his class was nearly finished and that they could go next.

Jenny observed him instructing and encouraging his students: 'Fold it like that, and make these pieces be able to fold in.' At times he offered encouragement: 'Oh, that looks really nice, Jack.'

Over lunch, Jenny asked Arj how the car plane-making table had gone.

'A lot of people wanted to make car planes, Jenny. We had a very good time but teaching is very exhausting. I'm gonna take the rest of my day off now,' said Arj.

Over the course of the week, five other children asked whether they could teach at the teaching table. Responding to this new-found interest, Jenny and Iris kept the teaching table set up for children to teach and learn new skills, based on their own ideas and creations. Some lessons finished very quickly, while others resulted in rich, sustained thinking. All the 'teachers' showed a sense of pride in having a unique skill or interest to share,

and in being ‘in charge’ of a group. Jenny and Iris joined the table if numbers were low, but always as ‘students’ – never as leaders.

After each session, Jenny made sure she debriefed with each ‘teacher’ about how their lessons had gone. This resulted in some earnest discussions about how difficult it could be to get ‘students’ to learn new skills, and how rewarding it was to see learning happen. Jenny shared these reflections with the whole group, as part of their preparation for the transition to primary school. She encouraged children to put themselves in their teacher’s shoes when they were in the classroom.

Jenny and Iris kept the teacher’s table for the rest of the year, and spent several sessions on the mat exploring the children’s ideas about being a teacher, and being a learner. This prompted discussions about who is a teacher and a learner outside of kindergarten and school, and how they can all help each other to learn different things, in different ways. One of the children asked his father, a teacher, to come in and talk to the group about his work and his Year 2 students. This reinvigorated intense interest in the teacher’s table, and some new ‘teachers’ emerged.

Jenny and Iris also used the teaching craze to reflect on the role of imaginary play in developing a strong sense of identity among children. Imaginary play and role-play in small groups were a regular occurrence in their room, but seldom with such clarity of purpose and depth of engagement.

Iris commented that the role-play had enabled all children to experiment with different selves. She was most struck by the way that the new roles revealed higher levels of executive function, as children supported one another

to sustain the ‘teacher–student’ relationship and keep the game alive. Arj and his ‘students’ had demonstrated a remarkable level of involvement and engagement in their learning together, while working on an activity for an extended amount of time. That was a significant development compared with earlier in the year, when it had been a challenge for the children to focus on a task for an extended period, through to completion. Arj’s presentation to the children on the mat, and his teaching, also demonstrated his growing self-efficacy and confidence.

This was the first time a child had initiated a whole-group role-playing scenario, and Jenny felt that its success was significant. It had been embraced by the whole group, who had made it a game in which everyone had a role. They wondered what other purposeful imaginative scenarios could bring out new skills and identities, and how they could encourage children to take the lead.

On her next planning day, Jenny read about new research into whole-group imaginative scenarios, in which children collaboratively created whole worlds in which they could take on new identities and extend their learning. She realised that her own shift in role, from teacher to learner, was just one of many possible ways in which the familiarity and security of the kindergarten room could provide a space for experimentation and reinvention. Jenny was excited to think about what new abilities and identities were waiting to be discovered by the children when they explored new roles.

Reflective scenario 6: Rowdy, funny girls and quiet, gentle boys?

Key points for professional learning

- While biological attributes may be mostly fixed, behavioural aspects of identity are more fluid. Educators can encourage children to experiment with different ways of being and belonging.
- Playful talk about how different aspects of identity are perceived and expressed can help challenge children's assumptions, including stereotypes about gendered behaviour.

Questions for reflection

- How does your learning environment and practice influence, challenge or reinforce children's understanding and expectations in relation to gender?
- What other components of identity start to be recognised and emphasised in early childhood, and how should educators engage with these in their work with children?

Outcomes for children

- Ingroup identification and outgroup recognition
- Self-expression and communication

VEYLDF Practice Principles focus

- Integrated teaching and learning approaches
- Equity and diversity

Scenario

Danielle and Lauren were educators for a four-year-old group at a sessional kindergarten. Despite the kindergarten's best efforts to ensure a gender balance, their group had ended up with 15 boys and five girls. Before the term commenced, Danielle and Lauren had discussed whether their program would need to be adjusted. They reflected on their observations and expectations about the differences in the way boys and girls play, but decided that it would be best to observe the children rather than make assumptions. They already offered a free-flowing indoor-outdoor program, with a wide variety of resources for active and quiet play, so felt confident that they would be ready for anything.

Danielle was also interested in how the gender imbalance would change the social dynamics in the group. She knew that for preschoolers, gender stereotypes can be particularly rigid, involving strict rules about how each gender behaves and looks, which may be enforced among the group members. Danielle had never felt the need to actively challenge these ideas in her previous classes, as boys and girls tended to settle happily into groups that were sometimes gender-based, but were also fluid. However, the girls in her class this year were such a small group that they might become socially isolated if she didn't actively challenge the children's thinking about gender relationships.

Sure enough, within the first few weeks, Danielle noticed the tendency for the girls to form a group during their play. Their favourite game was 'mums and dads', which they played with the dolls and prams. They would start playing outside, but often moved indoors part-way through the session. When Danielle asked them why they had moved inside, the girls said it was because the boys were naughty, crazy, loud and distracting. On another occasion, Danielle observed the girls telling Andy he couldn't play with them, because he was a boy. He persisted and they relented, saying he could only be the daddy.

For the boys' part, they certainly were loud! Their favourite game was baby dinosaurs, which involved a lot of running and flying about outdoors, and loud dinosaur noises. Their enthusiasm sometimes spilled over beyond the expectations for behaviour that Danielle and Lauren had discussed with the children at the beginning of the year. When a horde of baby dinosaurs crashed through the outdoor home corner one morning, the girls took refuge inside.

The incident came up during Danielle and Lauren's regular reflection on their program. They agreed that the gender imbalance did seem to be causing issues for the girls – and for the boys too, who seemed to need constant reminders about their behaviour. In many ways, it

reinforced the assumptions about gendered play that they had discussed at the beginning of the year (boisterous boys and nurturing girls). But what could they do to disrupt these patterns?

As usual in their reflections, the two educators resolved to start with children's strengths. Lauren commented that the children were certainly developing a strong sense of identity, as there were strong bonds between the children in each of the two friendship groups. They knew that being a boy or a girl is one of the most universal ways in which children talk about who they are, and is a central component of their identity. The gender imbalance in their group made it even more prominent.

Thinking more about their challenge from the perspective of identity, Danielle recalled it also included respect and empathy. There was plenty of respect *within* the two friendship groups, but not much between them! Although the stomping dinosaurs were more conspicuous in their lack of respect for the girls and their play, Lauren observed that the girls were just as disdainful of the 'naughty' boys. The strong sense of identity within the groups was partly fuelled by a lack of respect for the others.

If both groups of children were enjoying their play, the two educators didn't want to disrupt them. They decided to focus on their own involvement in the children's experiences, and how they could gently encourage greater respect between the two groups. They resolved to observe one another over the course of the next two days, and to reflect honestly and critically about what they saw. This was a practice built up over years of working together, and always brought up new ideas.

Two days later, clearing up the yard after the children had left, they shared what they had seen.

'You like the girls better,' said Lauren. This is what Danielle loved about her colleague – always straight to the point. It was true, too! She did feel more comfortable with the girls' gentle play.

'You laugh a lot with the boys,' she responded. Lauren chuckled, 'Well the girls aren't as funny.'

As the conversation progressed, the educators realised that the divide was as much about behaviour as it was about gender. The children had created norms for how each group behaved, owning the identities of 'good girls' and 'bad boys'. The educators couldn't disrupt children's gender identity, but they could disrupt behavioural patterns. Their conversation gave them an idea.

Next mat time, Danielle took two puppets from the storeroom, and asked the puppets to describe the children in the class. Taking one puppet each, she and Lauren re-enacted parts of their previous conversation about how boys and girls behaved. Then came the challenge: 'Have you ever seen a rowdy, funny girl?' asked one puppet. 'No, but I'd like to!' said the other. Danielle asked all the girls to be as rowdy and funny as they could be – with some hilarious results.

'Have you ever seen a quiet, gentle boy?' asked the other puppet. Danielle felt the energy in the room change, as the baby dinosaurs experimented with calm and stillness. She observed that some boys seemed to especially enjoy the chance to try a different way of being and belonging.

For the rest of the week, the puppets kept 'talking' about the behaviours they saw, often popping up in the middle of the children's play when a boy or a girl took on a different identity. As the boundaries between the groups broke down, Danielle and Lauren reflected how the prominence of gender in their group had actually enabled them to see past it. The children had learned other ways to describe and appreciate each other – and other ways of being themselves.

Reflective scenario 7: From awareness to respect

Key points for professional learning

- A child's own sense of identity is strengthened by understanding differences in others. By appreciating others' differences, children also become stronger in themselves.
- Some aspects of identity may be difficult for educators to discuss with children. Intentional teaching and assessment can help educators try new strategies, and observe their effects.

Questions for reflection

- Are there gaps or silences in how children talk about themselves and others? What can you do to encourage children to express their thoughts about difficult topics safely?
- What role can early childhood professionals play in actively engaging with issues around social identity? How can you engage families and communities in this role?

Outcomes for children

- Ingroup identification and outgroup recognition
- Empathy and respect

VEYLDF Practice Principles focus

- Partnerships with families
- Equity and diversity

Scenario

'We have to do something,' said Greg, as he and Lashana supervised recess one day. He'd heard two children make disparaging remarks about another child's old shoes, and it niggled. Greg was a teacher committed to social justice, and he was frustrated at the limited awareness of socio-economic inequality in this mostly affluent community.

Greg realised that this was something he had never discussed with his Year 2 class. The children took it for granted that other people in the community were like them, and had similar lives and values. Without any discussion, how could anyone expect them to have a frame of reference, or the knowledge, to understand how and why people might be different, and to understand their own social identity relative to others?

He shared these thoughts with Lashana. Her response was hesitant. 'I've never heard any of the kids say anything about someone's ... economic circumstances.' She stumbled on the words, realising she wasn't sure how to say what she meant. This stuff wasn't easy.

'That's exactly my point.' Greg was on a roll. 'The children never say anything about people being richer or poorer, or at least we've not been part of that conversation. But they do notice differences in how people dress and talk, and we live in an increasingly unequal society. How can we expect them to make sense of inequality, and respect difference, if we never talk about it? Particularly in a community like this.'

Lashana admitted he had a point. There wasn't much socio-economic diversity in their school, and the topic just never came up. In considering children's emerging sense of identity, she might mention their gender, family, or their likes and dislikes. But other aspects of social identity were rarely discussed.

Later, spurred on by a reference Lashana had made to how we engage with children's identity through reporting, Greg decided to do a bit of mapping. He looked at the Victorian Curriculum F-10 achievement standard in Personal and Social Capability for Levels 1 and 2, which referred to students recognising 'the diversity of families and communities ... [and describing] similarities and differences in points of view between themselves and others' (VCAA 2015). He then pulled up the VEYLDF illustrative map for Identity (DET 2017), noting the relevance of social identity to children's development of 'knowledgeable and confident self-identities', and learning to 'interact in relation to others with care, empathy and respect'.

Looking at them side by side helped to confirm the relevance and importance of addressing these kinds of issues with children. The comparison also helped to clarify in Greg's mind how learning progression on social issues could be supported and assessed.

He would start by trying to build awareness of social identity among the children, and discover what they already knew. For some children, this might be their first time thinking about the issue, but he expected most would have some ideas.

Once children understood that people lived in different ways, they could learn to respect social differences as part of other people's identity, and also a part of their own. Honest conversations about discrimination would need to happen in time, but the starting point was raising awareness.

Further down the track, or concurrently, the opportunity to explore these connections with other groups and communities in the real world should be explored. Ideas were already bubbling away in Greg's mind, but he set to work on the immediate challenge before him, to focus on awareness and understanding.

He reflected that children were absorbing messages about desirable social identities all the time, from adults, siblings and the media, and he needed to find out what kind of awareness (or misconceptions) they held already.

One day, during a relaxed whole-group session, an opportunity popped up to introduce the topic, and he grasped it. Two of the boys were telling the class about the new skateboards they had bought on the weekend. New purchases were a favourite topic for many of the children, so this was a natural place to initiate some critical reflection.

Greg asked how they had paid for the skateboards. Aaron said his dad had tapped the money card, of course – how else? A discussion followed about why money cards work for some families, but not for others, even when you're buying regular things at the supermarket. It was a simple conversation, but it kept them engrossed for a good half hour, and clearly raised some ideas that were new to the children.

From there, Greg was more alert to how children talk about children of different backgrounds, and how they represent them in their play. He realised their stories were steeped in social differences – there were glamorous princesses, daring astronauts and even a 'manager' in a

dress-up-box tie – but few people doing everyday jobs. Greg scoured the school library for books that might help his class extend their thinking. Elaine, the school librarian, got caught up in the challenge, and soon the collection was growing:

- *Those Shoes* (Boets and Jones 2009) – the story of a boy who can't afford the shoes that everyone is crazy about – generated a vigorous conversation. The class discussed the difference between wanting, needing and fairness, and how many children's choices were limited by their circumstances.
- *Every Child a Song* (Davies and Martin 2019) explored rights and identity, drawing on the UNCRC. This sparked a conversation about what rights are, and the difference between having them, and being able to exercise them. It introduced issues like child labour and exploitation, which Greg intended to return to later.
- *Yard Sale* (Bunting and Castillo 2017) was about a family having to move from their house into a small apartment, and having to sell the belongings that won't fit in their new home. Many of the children were surprised by the idea that people weren't necessarily rich or poor forever, that this could change.

Greg later reflected to Lashana that he'd underestimated the children's curiosity about social identity – as well as the difficulty of having these conversations. And this was just the beginning. He intended to work with colleagues to develop this component of the curriculum across all levels, working from awareness of diversity through to an understanding of the drivers of injustice, and exploration of solutions.

As for his current students, Greg hoped this represented the start of a journey that would be characterised by curiosity, empathy, and a growing sense of fairness and commitment to making their world a fairer place.

The initial signs – observed through conversations about stories, but increasingly popping up elsewhere in the program – were promising. As the conversations deepened and widened over the course of the year, Greg saw the children's awareness of their own and others' identities expanding before his eyes, and their respect and empathy along with it.

Reflective scenario 8: Strong together

Key points for professional learning

- A sense of identity is a powerful source of strength for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children.
- Aboriginal understandings of identity involve knowing who you are, where you are from and to whom you belong. It is feeling connected to Country and knowing the historical fight for recognition as First Nations peoples, and the ongoing impact that has today and into the future.
- For non-Aboriginal children living in Australia, identity is about knowing who you are, where you are from and to whom you belong, but it's also about understanding the history of the land you are on and your place in that history today and into the future.
- Fostering Aboriginal identity requires partnerships with families, Elders and communities. All early childhood professionals need to take their time in creating these connections and listening to Aboriginal people and Traditional Owners.
- Fostering non-Aboriginal identity is about the rights of children to know the history of the land in which they are raised, understanding the impact that history still has today, and supporting children in ways they can engage with this into the future.

Questions for reflection

- How does your service nurture Aboriginal identity for Aboriginal children, and support them to know who they are, where they are from and to whom they belong?
- How do you empower all children to stand up for their identities, and make their voices heard?
- How does your service support non-Aboriginal children in understanding the history of the land they are on and the impact this history still has today, and prepare them to walk with this into the future?
- How can feeling strong in our own identities help us appreciate the identities of others?

Outcomes for children

- Ingroup identification (who am I, where am I from, to whom do I belong)
- Knowing the history of the land we live on and ways to walk respectfully now and into the future
- Attachment and security
- Belonging, visibility and respect

VEYLDF Practice Principles focus

- High expectations for every child
- Partnerships with families
- Equity and diversity

This story is based on the shared learnings and teachings of CEO Lisa Thorpe, a Gunditjmarra/Gunnai woman, and Education and Training Manager Angie Zerella, a non-Aboriginal early years professional, from Bubup Wilam for Early Learning Aboriginal Child and Family Centre.

No real names have been used and the story aims to illustrate how all services – not only Aboriginal services – can achieve a strong sense of identity for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children.

Scenario

Narlu was a two-year-old Aboriginal child, and Ashlee was a non-Aboriginal child of the same age. Both started early years education on the same day in the Wurundjeri room, which was named to teach the children and educators about the place where they were living. Both Ashlee's and Narlu's families knew about the service's philosophy of embracing Aboriginal perspectives in their curriculum. Educators had a discussion with Narlu's family regarding his Aboriginal identity. His family told them that he was a Yorta Yorta/Gunditjmara boy and they really wanted him to know this. With Ashlee's family, educators talked about her right to know the history of the land she is on, as this is part of her identity, just like the country that her family had migrated from. The family shared photos of themselves and gave the educators insight into their family's migration to Australia.

The Wurundjeri room was full of visual representations of the identities of all the children and families. The Aboriginal flag was prominent, and used as a teaching tool to support the children's understanding of history and of their identity. The Aboriginal Languages map was displayed throughout the centre, and was used in Narlu's room to show him where his Aboriginal Country was, as well as the places his friends were from. By the age of 18 months, Narlu could point to his Country on the map. His educators learnt about Narlu's family from his family and started to talk to him about them.

All the children also participated in the Acknowledgement of Country every day, and even before they could say the words, they connected closely with the daily ritual. By the time they were two-and-a-half years old, Narlu and Ashlee were both starting to say many of the words in the acknowledgement, and by three they could say it audibly to others. They were even starting to use it in their play.

As Narlu grew, his knowledge grew, and his connection to his identity was embedded within him and was the key to his strength. He knew who he was, where he was from and to whom he belonged. He recognised the Aboriginal flag in the community and could proudly say, 'I am Yorta Yorta/Gunditjmara.' Ashlee also drew strength from knowing that part of her identity was living and learning on Aboriginal land. She could say with pride, 'I live on Wurundjeri Country.' When they went somewhere new, each child would ask their parents whose land they were on. Narlu's family shared their knowledge with him, while Ashlee's family learned alongside her.

By age three-and-a-half, both children were learning about walking together and looking after the land, the people and Wurundjeri Country. They knew how to walk respectfully as custodians of that land. If they saw another child throw rubbish on the ground, they would say, 'That's not respecting Wurundjeri Country. That's not respecting the land. You need to put your rubbish in the bin.'

Both children also learned about what it means to look after each other and respect the diversity within their community, and the many places that their peers came from. Ashlee and Narlu shared stories from their own families about who they were, so everyone was then able to learn. The educators encouraged families to talk to their children about family, history and identity, and the families grew stronger too. Narlu, Ashlee and all the other children and their families felt a strong sense of belonging in the early learning community.

The educators had learned as much as they could about local history and Country, and had reflected deeply on how to share this knowledge with the children, and what it meant to their community. By the time Narlu and Ashlee turned four, the educators began sharing deeper insights into Aboriginal life on Country before colonisation, and the complex and ingenious ways they cared for Country and each other. All the children listened closely when the educators talked about how Australia was colonised, and what that meant for Aboriginal people. Narlu learnt about the strength of his people, and how they are survivors, and the fight they had to ensure he knew who he was today. Ashlee grew stronger learning about the strength of Aboriginal people as the first owners of the land on which she lives and learns.

The service invited Elders in to speak to the children. The Elders talked about the fight they had had protecting their identity, and what they had achieved in their lives. They taught the children to be strong and to walk with pride, looking after Country into the future. These stories made Narlu feel proud and strong to be an Aboriginal child, laying the foundation for his lifelong learning, health and wellbeing. For Ashlee, the stories made her feel proud and strong to be living on Aboriginal land, laying the foundation for her understanding and solidarity with Aboriginal people into the future. It gave both children the leadership skills to champion fairness and social justice.

When Narlu and Ashlee started school, they were both ready for what their future held. They noticed that the school was not acknowledging Country, and because this was such an important part of the identity of everyone living and learning on Wurundjeri Country, they went together to tell their teachers that they must acknowledge Country before anything else. The teachers embraced this, and Ashlee stood with Narlu to acknowledge Country every morning before class. They both thrived at school, as they were strong and proud and knew that they had the right to achieve anything that they wanted to.

Glossary

Acknowledgement of Country: An inclusive protocol of respect that recognises Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander rights, identity and ongoing connection to Place or Country. Country is a word for collective spaces, ancestral heritage, values, and cultural obligations associated with its people.

attachment: Having attentive, affectionate, consistent, available, attuned adults as a source of comfort and reassurance.

attributes: Characteristics of a person, such as age, gender, ethnicity, social class, language background, personality, behaviour and physical aspects. Attributes may be changeable over time, or fixed throughout a lifetime.

cognitive flexibility: A component of executive function involving flexible thinking, and thinking about something in multiple ways.

construct: A construct is a theoretical idea, such as a quality or attribute that, while not directly measurable, can be assessed if broken down into observable properties.

early childhood professionals: The term early childhood professionals includes, but is not limited to, maternal and child health nurses, all early childhood practitioners who work directly with children in early childhood education and care settings (educators), school teachers, family support workers, preschool field officers, inclusion support facilitators, student support service officers, primary school nurses, primary welfare officers, early childhood intervention workers, play therapists, health professionals and teachers working in hospitals, and education officers in cultural organisations.

empathy: The ability to understand and share the perspectives of others.

executive function: A set of three attention-regulation skills involved in conscious goal-directed problem-solving. These skills include cognitive flexibility, working memory and inhibitory control.

ingroup identification: The extent to which children include membership of groups in their own sense of identity.

inhibitory control: The process of self-control that enables a person to purposefully ignore a potential distraction, and to modify their response. With working memory and cognitive flexibility, it is a key element of executive function.

learning story: A narrative style of observation that tells a story about, and interprets, an aspect of a child's learning.

outgroup recognition: The extent to which a child identifies groups to which they do not belong, and incorporates this otherness into their own sense of identity.

self-efficacy: Whether a child believes that they are capable of achieving a desired outcome in a particular situation.

self-esteem: How a child feels about themselves.

Te Whāriki: Maori language title of the Ministry of Education New Zealand's 2017 early childhood curriculum, in full: *Te Whāriki He whāriki mātauranga mō ngā mokopuna o Aotearoa*.

transition: The process of moving between environments or routines, including between home and early childhood settings.

United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child: A human rights treaty that sets out the civil, political, economic, social, health and cultural rights of children.

working memory: The ability to hold and manipulate distinct pieces of information over a short period of time. With cognitive flexibility and inhibitory control, it is a key element of executive function.

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