This edition of the Early Years Exchange focuses on assessment for children’s learning and development and includes:

- an interview with Professor Collette Tayler, from the University of Melbourne, talking about how early childhood professionals use the National Quality Framework to make a difference to children’s learning
- interviews with early childhood professionals outlining their approaches to assessment for children’s learning and development
- practitioner snapshots of evidence that demonstrates literacy and the link between drawing and emerging writing.

Guest appearance

In this interview Professor Collette Tayler talks about the current period of early years reform and the need to focus on a whole system approach to making high quality early childhood education and care available to children from an early age.

Collette discusses three important areas for focus:

- implementing an agreed vision and learning and development outcomes
- delivering high quality practice
- working closely together with families and colleagues.

Professor Tayler says ‘Everyday talk is really important − children need to have many high quality engagements with the adults around them. They need to be exposed to rich vocabulary and to be given the opportunity to have back and forth exchanges.’ (The Age, 13 January 2014)

This video can be used with other resources to support ongoing implementation of the Victorian and national curriculum frameworks and the NQF.


For further detail on Professor Tayler’s research, visit the University of Melbourne website:

Watch Video >
Snapshots

1. Vicki Gazis

Partnerships with families: Supporting literacy development

Vicki Gazis explains one strategy she uses to both encourage children’s early literacy skills, and to model to families how to continue this learning in the home environment.

The literacy trolley has a variety of stationery – paper, note pads, envelopes, stamps, scissors, staplers, alphabet books, numbers, letters and a magnetic board. The message we like to give to children and parents is that providing a literacy-rich environment is important. It is not about sitting down and teaching the alphabet but encouraging children to play with letters and numbers on the board. It is play-based learning. We model this behaviour very early in the year.

For example, recently I sat at a table and wrote on a notepad: ‘Buy flour for play dough.’ Then the child next to me wrote a letter to their grandma, which consisted of a drawing and the letter G for grandma. She placed it in an envelope and stuck a stamp on it. This child has learnt the process of writing a letter by having these materials available daily and by having this modelled and discussed.

We have many discussions with our families and children about modelling positive literacy. Some examples include:

- before going shopping, write a list with your child
- when shopping, look at the signs that indicate the row where flour can be found. Talk to your child and ask them to help you look for the ‘f’ for flour.

VEYLDF Outcome 5: Communication

VEYLDF Practice Principles

Practice Principle 1: Family-centred practice
Practice Principle 5: Respectful relationships and responsive engagement

In our kindergarten program, drawing is available as part of many play experiences:

- literacy trolley
- collage table
- floor activities in dramatic play, for example, a doctor’s corner, a police corner
- floor activities
- in the block corner.
Talking with children about their learning

Children may be drawing people, animals, buildings and flowers. This starts very simply, and then moves through to show much finer detail, such as hands, fingers and eyelashes, or windows and bricks, petals and leaves.

At first there are only one or two items per page, then many, to describe an entire story or scenario. Planning becomes more evident, and control of drawing materials becomes more proficient.

It is important to talk with children, and listen to children as they draw – rather than after they have finished. This can shed light on children’s thinking and intentions.

Weekly reflection:

“Today we looked at Russian artist Wassily Kandinsky. Kandinsky invented abstract art back in the early 1900s and his Study of Abstract Squares is a fun painting to imitate. Through our own creativity and exploration of circles, the children have learnt about spatial awareness of size and shapes, colouring concepts and introducing the concept of emotions in colour. This activity also links into learning about sizes in mathematics.”
2. Kate Wood

Assessment documentation to support literacy development

Kate Wood outlines her approach to assessing children’s early literacy development, with a focus on children’s drawings.

Drawing and early writing experiences do not need to be set up or designed as formal experiences. There is the element of play in the learning work that children engage in during their early making of marks and images. Drawing on a frosty window with the tip of a finger will always be fun. The externalisation of our thoughts or feelings through image-making can be new, surprising and challenging, and require gentle guidance and encouragement.

Once a month I sort paintings and drawings into each child’s folio. As I do this I write a brief analysis of what I can see using this list:

- use of space across the paper – baseline, horizons, header line, spaces created
- qualities of the lines, pressure applied, relationship between the lines, intent
- perspective, diagrammatical, mapping
- stimulus – life experience, conversation, element from preschool program, physical activity
- labelling or story to accompany painting (notation by an adult or witnessed by me)
- colour – distinct and separate, layered over and over, large blocks, colour selection, intent
- shapes in relationship to each other, symmetry, patterns, emerging or clear
- Representational images, scene and setting, subject matter – same or varied
- Writing or painting letters, name, others names, numerals

The list informs me of a child’s visual language. The anchor to my observation in this area is to gain understanding of a child’s expressive skills. I believe I gain an insight into their ability to order their thoughts, blend, recall and retain information, think and process their life experiences.

I see drawing connected to our communication system and how we relate to our world and others. I track expressive language skill development, progress in drawing and painting and areas of engagement in the program. I do this across months and into terms, and design the learning environment according to what I am learning about how the children are engaging with the space.

How and what children communicate informs my practice. Starting from where they are and creating appropriate communication challenges is important to me. Not distracting the child from the experience of developing their visual language initially is important so I gauge where they are at, where the next challenges could lie, and which materials best support their desire to start making marks.

VEYLDF Outcome 5: Communication

VEYLDF Practice Principles:

5: Respectful relationships and responsive engagement

7: Assessment for learning and development

The kindergarten is located in the region affected by late summer fires. The child has used drawing to convey his experience and response to these events.
3. A parent reflection

Introduction – connections between drawing and writing

Drawing not only helps children to develop their fine motor skills, but also to develop the skills to express the ideas represented by these drawings. Drawing and writing share many of the same purposes – to explore, to remember, to record, to explain and to express are just a few examples. Each purpose produces a different type of written or pictorial text.

In much the same way as we encourage children to use pictures as a cue for their reading, children use their own drawings as a cue for their writing – both to remember what they are writing about, and to demonstrate more effectively the content of their message. They also use drawings as a way to think about and draft what it is they are saying.

Parent reflection:

“In the classroom, my child (seven years old) was asked to draw pictures of her ideas first. This helped her think of how the story will begin, what will happen in the middle and how the story ends.”

Draft story of ‘The Box’: An example of learning in the classroom

These three drawings serve as a memory jog to support what Anthea wants to write about in the classroom.
Interviews with early childhood professionals

In this interview series, early childhood professionals involved in multidisciplinary practitioner research project:

- talk about how they are using inquiry approaches to inform their work with children and families
- provide insights into how being part of a multidisciplinary network influences their practice
- highlight an aspect of their work that they are currently exploring further.

1. Sandy Facey

The Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) and the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework (VEYLDF) provide a solid structure for connecting everyone who works with children and their families. The focus on outcomes for children and families is a positive influence on strengthening our efforts to look at what we are doing and how we are doing it.

A strong feature in the context of our work as an early intervention service is having high expectations for every child.

In using an inquiry approach, my focus in the Inquiry to Implementation Project in 2013 was on leading and supporting colleagues to consider how we could change our processes and documentation to reflect the common language and outcomes of the VEYLDF to support understanding of children's learning and development.

The opportunity to participate in the Inquiry to Implementation Project in 2013 was quite timely. The ECIS sector was already involved in practice change using a strength-based approach with a greater focus on child and family outcomes. For our sector this was a move away from mainly working with therapy-based interventions, which focused more on developmental domains.

Working in a large multidisciplinary team with varying levels of experience presented challenges and opportunities. A key challenge has been around how to continue to support staff through the ECIS sector changes and at the same time support an increased understanding and engagement with the VEYLDF. It is important to allow enough time and not underestimate how long it takes. We have given ourselves permission to stop and think, ask questions, have conversations, reflect and critically analyse our practices and beliefs. This then offers opportunities to move through and with change in a considered approach that is accepting of everyone's ideas, suggestions, fears, apprehension and excitement. I think this way of practising then allows for better outcomes for children and their families.

Documenting assessment for children's learning is an important consideration for our service. The EYLF and VEYLDF can be used as a way to promote a common language and understanding for families and with other significant community connections. For example, we use the language from the frameworks in our documentation and discussions with the maternal and child health services and early childhood education and care services.

I found it helpful to really stop and think about what ‘outcomes’ meant for children and families – what was important for them, what a good outcome might mean to their everyday lives, how we might try to measure outcomes while also looking at what skills, knowledge and support the child and family already have in order to build on this.

My role in leading and supporting colleagues has confirmed for me the importance of understanding change and the need to be aware and supportive of all colleagues no matter where they are in their understanding and engagement in the change process. Collaborative approaches and shared responsibilities are essential to this process. We have developed a sense of active involvement in our professional development program with shared responsibility either through facilitation, delivery and engagement in the program.

Sandy Facey

Sandy Facey is currently working as manager of an early childhood intervention service (ECIS) in the South Western Victoria Region. Sandy has worked in the early childhood education sector for approximately 25 years and during this time has worked in child care, both three- and four-year-old kindergarten settings and as a preschool field officer.
As a team the VEYLDF has given us permission to stop and think, ask questions, have conversations, reflect and critically analyse our practices and beliefs. This then offers opportunities to move through change in a way that is accepting of everyone’s ideas, suggestions, fears, apprehension and excitement. Working through change in a reflective way allows for both personal and professional growth and automatically puts relationships with children, families and colleagues at the forefront of our thinking.

**Strengthening collaborative partnerships** will be a focus for our ECIS team in the next 12 months. We are creating times for joint meetings, building on existing partnerships and making new connections. We have met with local paediatricians, maternal and child health nurses and allied health practitioners at the local hospital. At these meetings we support other services in our local community to better understand the changes in the ECIS sector, which facilitate timely referrals and greater awareness around the types of interventions available to best support children’s learning and development.

This eco-support map is used with families when they are first introduced to the service. It identifies key influences that may impact on children’s learning and development.
2. Sharon Gwynne

With a centre philosophy built around supporting children and families and developing trusting and respectful relationships, we aim to provide high quality flexible care. We see each and every one of our children as being a unique individual and create learning environments to support individual and group learning and development.

During 2013 I used an inquiry approach to strengthen my focus on including children’s views of their own learning and to learn more about my own practice. In my daily conversations with children they are encouraged to make choices about which experiences they would like to use and learn more about. For example, I ask children, ‘What would you like to do today?’ or ‘What would you like to choose next?’

Following my involvement in the Inquiry to Implementation Project during 2013, our centre is using more photo and visual representations to support children in influencing experiences available to them in the program. The ‘photo book of experiences’ supports children to make choices about where they would like to play and what they would like to learn about.

New experiences based on children’s interests and extending their learning are added to the photo book on an ongoing basis. We listen and tune into children’s interests and they are encouraged to contribute their ideas. When children bring toys from home they are included in our program. We extend on their learning, for example, by using toys in role-play experiences and modelling language.

Transitions are an important part of occasional child care. Children are arriving and leaving frequently throughout the day. As part of our partnership with families we talk with them about the best way to support their child to settle. We ask about things such as favourite experiences, songs and books. We encourage children to bring a comfort item if that is going to help them settle and we support children and families to have a sense of belonging and wellbeing at our centre.

The ‘photo book of experiences’ was used to support a transition for a child who was upset when saying goodbye to his mother. I used the book to sit quietly together with the child, focusing on our relationship and making a connection with the child before choosing a play experience. I began turning the pages of the ‘photo book of experiences’. As I pointed to and described the various pictures, each time the child would say ‘no’. When I got to the picture of a Buzz Lightyear toy, the child hesitated and looked at that picture for a longer time. I used this cue and got the Buzz Lightyear toy and held it next to the picture in the book. The child smiled broadly; he then took hold Buzz Lightyear and walked into the central area of the playroom. He was following his own interest and showing increasing awareness.

This book is especially useful for children with limited language and provides awareness of the range of experiences available. It is also useful for supporting early literacy skills as many children enjoy looking through the book in the same way that they look through toy catalogues and it can also be used as a conversation starter. Children are using images, letters and words to express ideas and make decisions.

Documenting children’s learning and development in an occasional child-care setting has its challenges. We see some children regularly and there are others that we may only see once a fortnight, once a month or less frequently.

Throughout the day we write ‘snapshots’ of what individual or groups of children are doing and learning. This may include noticing what language children are using, who they play with and what they know. We also take photographs and collect samples of artwork. This information is used by all educators to support program planning and what’s next for each child’s learning and development.
We value our partnerships with families and use these partnerships to help us document the children’s learning and development. We use opportunities when children are arriving and leaving to have quick and informal discussions with parents. We can learn a lot this way. Parents will often ask about which songs we have been singing or which stories we have been reading as their children will go home singing a new tune or retelling a story.

At the moment we have a poster up in the playroom inviting parents to let us know what their children like to do and learn about at home. We use this information when planning experiences. It also makes families aware that we value and respect their input.

Our centre’s philosophy is built around the idea that families are partners in our work. We build trusting and respectful relationships and believe that our centre fulfils an important and worthwhile role within the community.

As a team we continually increase our knowledge and expertise by working together cohesively and attending professional development programs. Introducing the ‘photo book of experiences’ into daily practice has enabled other educators to add and remove experiences. The contribution of other team members broadens our perspectives on children’s learning and development as we each share what we know about the children and families. It is also a valuable way for casual staff to get to know about the types of experiences available.

I have used the opportunity to share my inquiry experience with team members and this has been included in our Quality Improvement Plan. The ‘book of experiences’ is a continuous quality improvement; it empowers and supports children in making choices and supports educators in program planning.

Through my involvement in the Inquiry to Implementation Project I became much more aware of other agencies in our community and the work they do. Attending professional learning over a 10-month period in a local network enhanced my own work practices. I am more aware of the types of services and support networks that our families can link to or are already linked with.

An example of a new network connection supporting my work is with the maternal and child health service. I have been integrating new knowledge about babies’ learning and development gained as part of professional conversations in the Inquiry to Implementation Project. I have been able to share the new knowledge with team members and also make information and resources available to families.

An area of interest for me is continuing to deepen my knowledge and understanding of the VEYLD Framework. This year I’m working with babies and toddlers and so my focus is on noticing what children are learning and how they are learning. Coming to grips with the framework is ongoing for me. There is always something new to learn.
Mythbuster

Assessment of children’s learning involves copious amounts of documentation

The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia (EYLF) and the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework (VEYLDF) provide new opportunities to respond to children’s learning and to pinpoint what is worth documenting.

Early childhood professionals assess children’s learning in ways that:

- inform ongoing practice
- measure progress in learning
- identify where intervention, focused support or referral may be required (VEYLDF, 2009)

Young children’s learning can look different in different settings. Shared approaches to assessment for learning with families, with children and with other early childhood professionals supports a deeper knowledge of children’s capabilities.

The descriptions of the five Outcomes provide examples of children’s learning and a common language. Early childhood professionals focus on children’s culture, interests, strengths, skills in play, talents and capabilities.

A specific focus on practice means children are provided with multiple opportunities to revisit learning in different ways within different and varied experiences.

Specific examples of both individual and group learning build up a picture of what’s important. The key is to select documentation that demonstrates growth and change in learning over time.

Practitioners then form a view of what they know now about what the child is ready to learn and what this means for ongoing practice decisions.

An educator in the birth-to-two-years room talks about assessment as an ongoing process that involves exploring the question: What is the learning? ‘I have gained more insight into children’s learning by focussing on their strengths.’ (Practitioner in the VCAA Inquiry to Implementation Project 2013)

‘I now involve children more in their own assessment, using their evidence (such as their drawings) and asking questions about what they have learned, and what else they would like to know. The impact of the changes has been the children’s perspectives of their learning and the ability for children to understand and express their own learning.’ (Kindergarten teacher: Report on the Assessment for Learning and Development Project 2012, p. 53)

‘With children, I have taken the time within the writing session to include reflection of their learning. I have more meaningful conversations with them about their progress and what their goal for learning is.’ (Teacher in primary school: Report on the Assessment for Learning and Development Project 2012, p. 54)

Additional information to support documentation of children’s learning

The Early Childhood Australia National Quality Standard Professional Learning Program provides an extensive collection of online resources to support a range of practitioners and services.

Anne Stonehouse has written an article about why assessment is important, what informs assessments and ongoing continual assessment.

The article can be found on the Early Childhood Australia website:


Luke Touhill has written an article highlighting the importance of accurate and meaningful assessments to support children’s ongoing learning. This article can be found on Informit:


Assessment of learning refers to the process of gathering and analysing information as evidence about what children know, can do and understand (EYLF, 2009, p.17).
Resources

Becoming a Writer

A focus on the relationship between talking, drawing and early writing

The Becoming a Writer project has a particular focus on the relationship between talking, drawing and early writing.

Each year since 2007, Dr Noella Mackenzie, from Charles Sturt University, has worked closely with teachers of children in the first year of school and gathered extensive data from young children. Dr Mackenzie has extensive knowledge and experience of early literacy development and how to cater for the diverse literacy needs of young learners.

The Becoming a Writer research led to the development of a short video presentation (12 minutes) that can be used by schools and early childhood education and care services with parents of children starting school and just prior to school age. The video presentation has a focus on:

- what children learn about writing before they start school
- what children learn in the first year of school
- how parents can help children engage with writing.

The presentation is supported by a take-home brochure for parents. Download the brochure from the Charles Sturt University website:


These resources were funded and supported by the NSW Department of Education and Communities, Riverina Equity Programs.

E4Kids

E4Kids is a five-year study that will follow a large group of three- and four-year-olds as they participate in child-care, kindergarten and preschool programs. We will continue to track children and analyse the programs they attend through to the early years of school. The report can be found on the University of Melbourne website:

http://education.unimelb.edu.au/news_and_activities/projects/E4Kids#resources
VCAA website

Resources to support assessment practices in the early years

A PowerPoint presentation developed from the Report on the Assessment for Learning and Development Project 2012: Transforming practice in the early years, with background notes for each slide and suggested activities, discussion ideas and reflection questions.

You will find this resource on the VCAA website: www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/Pages/earlyyears/index.aspx

Evidence collection tool to support documentation of children’s learning

The Early Years Planning Cycle outlines the process early childhood professionals use to collect and interpret evidence that contributes to a detailed, up-to-date, strengths-based picture of children’s learning and development to inform planning and practice decisions.

You will find this tool on the VCAA website:
A resource to support documentation of children’s learning (pdf - 591.41kb)

Have your say

The VCAA Early Years Unit welcomes your comments, suggestions and feedback about the EYE.

Have your say or ask a question about ongoing implementation of the VEYLDF by emailing the VCAA Early Years Unit: veyldf@edumail.vic.gov.au

Your experiences and opinions are important and assist the VCAA in tailoring implementation resources.