

# **Evaluation of the Implementation of the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework: For All Children from Birth to Eight Years**

*Early childhood professionals' perceptions of  
implementation activities and resources 2010–2011*

## **Final Report**

**(Abridged Version: Executive Summary & Recommendations)**

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## Executive Summary

### Context

The *Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework: For All Children from Birth to Eight Years* (VEYLDF) was released in November 2009 for implementation from 2010. The VEYLDF aligns with *Being, Belonging and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia* (EYLF; 2009), and links to the Victorian Essential Learning Standards (2005) in the early years of schooling. *My Time, Our Place – Framework for School Age Care in Australia* (FSAC; August 2011) builds on the EYLF and extends the principles, practice and outcomes to accommodate the contexts and age range of the children and young people who attend school-age care settings.

The implementation of the VEYLDF is a partnership between the Early Childhood Strategy Division, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) and the Early Years Unit, Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA). Implementation of the VEYLDF requires significant cultural change among all early childhood professionals. This is occurring within two key reforms: Council of Australian Governments (COAG) reform in early childhood and in the development of an Australian Curriculum for the school sector.

The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care (NQF) commenced in January 2012 and includes a new National Quality Standard (NQS) linked to approved learning frameworks. In combination, these frameworks outline fundamental components to inform and guide educators in the delivery of nationally consistent and high quality experiences and programs across Australia.

The development of the new Australian Curriculum has a focus on general capabilities and cross-curriculum priorities. This reflects the integrated nature of children's learning in both the EYLF, the VEYLDF and in the FSAC.

The VEYLDF advances all children's learning and development from birth to eight years. It does this by supporting all early childhood professionals to work together, and with families, to achieve common outcomes for all children.

The success of implementation of the VEYLDF is measured in relation to the following outcomes as described in the DEECD–VCAA implementation project plan:

- improved outcomes for all Victorian children aged birth to eight years;
- strengthened practices of all early childhood professionals, particularly in the areas of collaborative, effective and reflective practice as defined in the VEYLDF;
- a common language and improved partnerships and collaboration between early childhood professionals that support common ways of working together and with families to advance children's learning and development;
- strengthened understanding among families and communities of the importance of early years education;
- strengthened understanding by families of how they can further support children's learning and development at home and in the community; and
- strong and equal partnerships between all early childhood professionals.

### Project

The Griffith University Early Childhood Education Centre was commissioned by the VCAA to conduct an independent state-wide process evaluation of the implementation of the VEYLDF from 2010 to 2011.

### Aims

The aims of the evaluation were to:

- measure and report on the reach, engagement and impact of the implementation of the VEYLDF activities and resources; and
- identify enablers, inhibitors and barriers experienced by early childhood professionals and to identify emerging leadership.

## Methods

The evaluation methodology involved three components across a period of ten months: Stage 1 (Survey 1), Stage 2 (in-depth interviews) and Stage 3 (Survey 2). The majority of the 1141 respondents to the two surveys and the 20 interviewees:

- were aged 40 years and above;
- had more than ten years' experience;
- worked within the universal services sector; and
- worked with children aged three to five years.

Analyses showed that the surveys and interviews provided a useful sample of early childhood professionals throughout Victoria, particularly in terms of geographical coverage. The demographic profile is generally representative of the sector given its recognised diversity. Across the two surveys, services from the universal, targeted and intensive services, and tertiary sector were represented.

The 20 in-depth interviews included early childhood professionals in family day care (FDC), long day care (LDC), outside school hours care (OSHC), kindergartens, supported playgroups, primary schools and early childhood intervention services throughout Victoria.

## Parameters of the evaluation

This evaluation is intended as a formative rather than summative evaluation of the implementation of VEYLDF. The implementation of the VEYLDF represents a major change and this evaluation is only able to measure the initial stages of the implementation. For this reason, the main purpose of this evaluation is to inform the ongoing implementation of the VEYLDF.

Similarly, this evaluation does not claim to be based on comprehensive sources of information, and for this reason does not include conclusive findings. The report draws on data from implementation resources and activities in 2010–2011, providing snapshots of early childhood professionals' perceptions across a ten-month period in 2010–2011.

A limitation of the evaluation is the predominance of responses from a particular demographic, this being: aged 40-plus; with more than ten years' experience; from metropolitan regions; working within the universal services sector; and working with children aged three to five years. Reasons for the bias in the respondent profile may be explained in a number of ways, including access to the survey instrument, leadership roles and planning time.

It is recommended that the findings of this evaluation are triangulated with other data sources to further inform future VEYLDF implementation planning. This

would include but not be limited to the views of professional learning consultants, evidence from VEYLDF implementation inquiry projects, and data from the National Quality Framework.

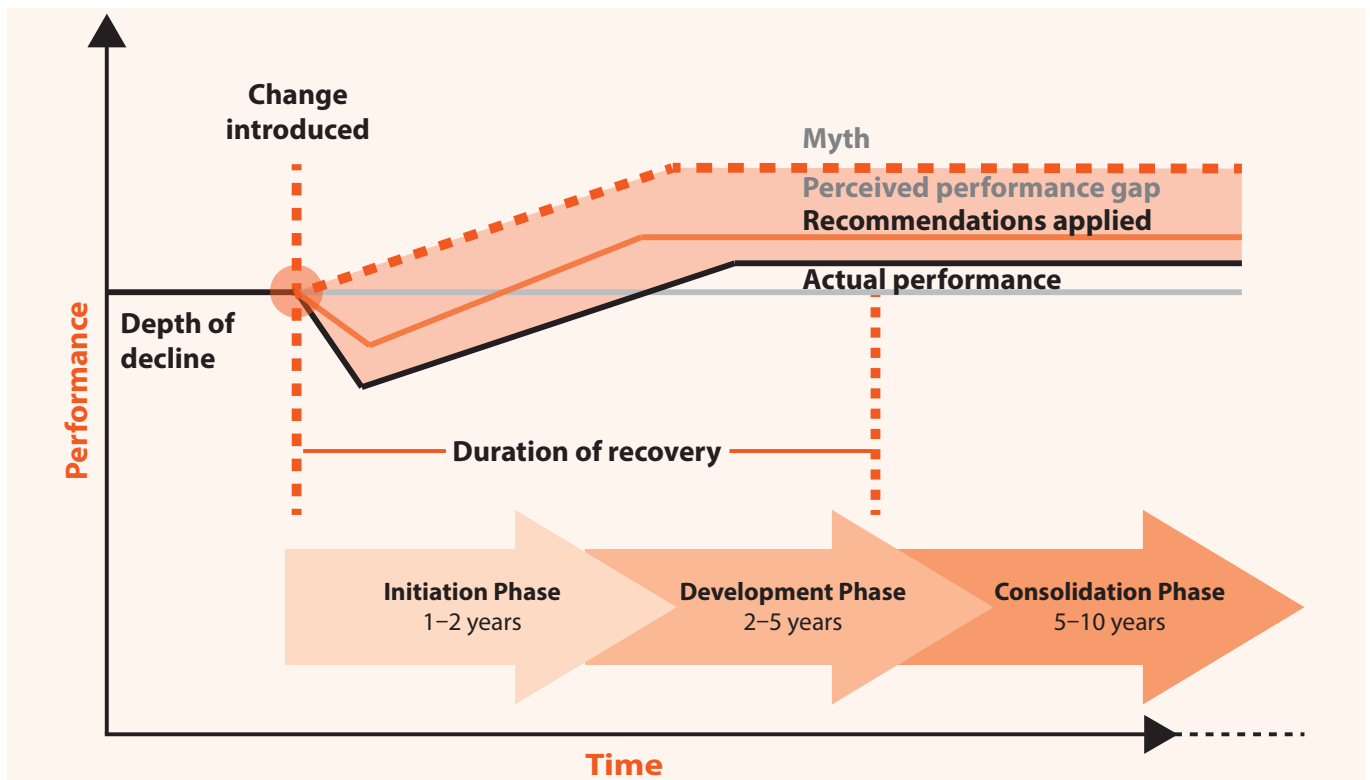
The overall evaluation findings confirm that the early childhood professionals who provided feedback regard the VEYLDF implementation activities and resources as a positive vehicle for change.

The evaluation outlines an Educational Change Model that describes three phases of incremental change across a reform period. This is based on a subjective analysis of early childhood perceptions within the evaluation and is provided to support ongoing VEYLDF implementation.

## Theoretical framework

The evaluation was guided by research, in particular the Educational Change Model developed originally for reform processes in Australian middle schooling (Pendergast et al. 2005; Pendergast 2006). This model has been drawn from an educational scenario; however the principles underpinning the reform model are equally applicable to business, industry and community reform settings. The model has value for an individual, for a site or setting, and at a systemic level. At the individual level it can be used to assist individuals in determining the stage of reform at which they are operating by reflecting on their understandings and practices. Similarly, in a specific site the phase of reform can be determined by auditing the evidence presented across the site. At a systemic level the components of the phases outlined in the Educational Change Model support further progress in implementation. Hence, the adoption of the Educational Change Model (the Model) is applicable to the innovative change in early years reform in this project.

The Model proposes that programs of reform are typically established in three phases, gradually introducing particular core component changes, and spanning a total of about eight to 17 years, depending on circumstances. The Model, and the relevant literature, also recognises that educational reform takes longer than usually expected or normally allowed for in reform schedules. A guiding principle of the Model is the importance of developing 'lifelong learning' for both children and educators, a principle that is also central to the VEYLDF.



**Educational Change Model mapped against a typical reform curve**

The three broad phases can be mapped onto any major reform initiative, and feature indications of time taken to achieve each phase (see above). The Initiation phase typically occupies the first year or two; the Development phase typically consumes the next two to five years; and the Consolidation phase can last over a further five to ten years. The time periods associated with each of the three phases are indicative only and can be accelerated through the alignment of enablers. Similarly, inhibitors can lead to dips in the reform program, adding extra time to the overall reform process.

The staged implementation of the VEYLDF can be mapped to the Model, with initiatives throughout 2010–2011 corresponding to the Initiation phase of the Model. This phase is characterised by activities that include goal setting (e.g., development of vision statements), developing buy-in and information dissemination of the new reforms, what they entail and how they will be achieved (Pendergast et al. 2005, p. 7).

Evaluation of the VEYLDF implementation activities against key elements of the Model revealed:

- critical model elements of visioning, policy development, stakeholder engagement and information dissemination were achieved at a high level
- resources were produced from 2010 and made available to early childhood professionals in a range of formats and mediums

- the importance of early childhood professionals’ leadership in educational change was recognised in the VEYLDF implementation
- inhibitors and enablers to the implementation of the VEYLDF were identified in anticipation of moving to the Development phase of the Model
- the staged evaluation of the implementation of the VEYLDF provided opportunities for progressive feedback on implementation successes and challenges.

## Findings

To address the question ‘Was implementation successful in achieving the project outcomes?’ the evaluation examined the reach and engagement of the VEYLDF implementation activities. Following is a summary of the key findings with respect to reach and engagement.

### Reach and engagement

For curriculum initiatives, there are multiple decision points at which an early childhood professional can choose to engage or reject an initiative (Rodgers 2003). These decisions occur during the Initiation phase of the Model and are affected by process, content and contextual factors.

In terms of reach, the VCAA and DEECD developed a wide range of implementation activities and resources for early childhood professionals to support the introduction of the VEYLDF. These included online and face-to-face implementation activities.

The evaluation found that reported knowledge, access and utilisation of resources and activities varied considerably, as could be expected with such a large and diverse audience. It was noted, however, that 94 per cent of Survey 1 respondents and 96 per cent of Survey 2 respondents had accessed at least one implementation resource and/or activity.

The most frequently attended activities were the regional information sessions and the state-wide modules. These face-to-face activities were considered useful as an opportunity for networking, but some respondents (28 per cent of respondents who attended those sessions) were disappointed that the content was too general.

Professional learning programs through the Bastow Institute of Educational Leadership received the highest mean rating for usefulness. The mean access rate is an average of the proportion of respondents who accessed that type of implementation activity. Fewer early childhood professionals attended the Bastow professional learning program than participated in the state-wide modules. Bastow participants were encouraged, as emerging leaders, to use their professional learning experience to provide support to colleagues and networks as part of ongoing implementation. This is reflected in the responses from Bastow participants to Survey 2.

The majority of respondents in Survey 1 supported themselves in the implementation of the VEYLDF by reading publications and accessing websites related to the VEYLDF (68 per cent), by working in a team that was actively interested in the VEYLDF (65 per cent) or by working in a service where the culture supported the VEYLDF (50 per cent).

These findings suggest that positive implementation of the VEYLDF is largely dependent on the existence of a community of learners at early childhood services who are actively engaged and interested in the VEYLDF. Strengthening this support base at early childhood services is recommended as a high priority for the next phase of the implementation program.

In answer to the key evaluation question 'To what extent have early years professionals utilised the implementation activities and resources, and what is their feedback?' the findings for reach suggest that:

- most respondents reported utilising at least some of the VEYLDF implementation activities and resources;

- the online resources were useful to many individuals for self-directed learning, especially if there was a supportive work environment; and
- face-to-face opportunities to learn about the VEYLDF, network and discuss issues were especially valued when the content was specific to the participant's work setting.

Within localised collaborative learning environments, external facilitators may play a central role in harnessing engagement with an initiative. This occurs through a balanced outside-in and inside-out relationship that moves practitioners to a higher level of reflection on practice (Easton 2008; Hargreaves & Shirley 2007). Early childhood professionals in this evaluation valued face-to-face implementation activities because they provided interactive engagement (for example, conversations, thinking, reflection and sharing of ideas). Frequent and challenging discussion on learning and development is a key characteristic across all effective forms of collaborative learning environments (Rusch 2005).

The online implementation activities had a mean access rate of 45 per cent compared to 32 per cent for face-to-face activities. The lower rate of access for face-to-face activities can be explained by the barriers of time, limited number of places and distance required to attend the face-to-face activities. The only barriers described by participants to accessing online activities were the availability of high-speed Internet connections and time to access the activities during work hours.

Online rates of engagement with implementation activities revealed that online communication about the VEYLDF was considered to be effective by early childhood professionals who have access to the Internet. Results showed:

- early childhood professionals found the following websites effective and/or very effective: Early Childhood Australia website (59 per cent), DEECD website (57 per cent), Gowrie Victoria website (42 per cent) and the VCAA website (40 per cent). Very few early childhood professionals accessed Facebook and wiki spaces for information about the VEYLDF; and
- the VCAA Early Years Alert and the *Early Years Exchange*, Editions 1–6 were rated highly for communicating with early childhood professionals about the VEYLDF.

Taken together these findings suggest that an effective format for future professional learning should combine both face-to-face presentations and Internet technology to provide wider access for early childhood professionals throughout Victoria.

To assist early childhood professionals to engage with the VEYLDF, survey respondents suggested that more plain language statements be used in printed materials. Early childhood professionals further suggested that communication with families could be facilitated by the creation of suitable resources for newsletters, information sheets and brochures. Respondents believed that families see government documents as ‘authoritative’ and these could be used to aid discussions between early childhood professionals and families, as well as be a source of information in their own right.

In answer to the key evaluation question ‘What elements should be included in the next phase of implementation?’ the findings suggest a greater focus is necessary on implementation resources and activities that provide opportunities for:

- self-assessment of current practice;
- examples of, and assistance with, enactment of the Practice Principles;
- examples of, and assistance with, planning for the Early Years Learning and Development Outcomes; and
- increased understanding about how to document and discuss children’s learning.

In order to optimise the implementation of reform, a number of enablers and inhibitors to implementation were identified (see the following sections).

### Enablers and inhibitors to implementation

The Model notes that a smoother transition from the Initiation phase to the Development phase of reform will occur if certain enablers are in place. In the context of schools these include the application of teacher teaming, the development of new models of *innovative leadership*, and a focus on both *social and academic outcomes of children*. These are also relevant in the early years context, from birth to eight years.

In contrast, the reform process may be slowed or derailed by inhibitors such as weak or inconsistent leadership, poorly conceived vision statements, insufficient funding and resistance from the community (Pendergast et al. 2005).

### Sustainable leadership and networking

Emerging leadership is starting to appear in the Initiation phase, with some early childhood professionals supporting and leading others in the implementation process.

Sustained leadership and supportive networks are keys to establishing and maintaining the conditions for effective implementation. Rogers (2003) suggests that an individual’s interest or need governs the rate of

implementation. In the Initiation phase, early childhood professionals provided examples of support and leadership from colleagues as they implemented the VEYLDF. In some early childhood services, time was allocated to allow early childhood professionals to deeply explore content within the VEYLDF together. This approach enhanced relationships between professionals and enabled knowledge building about the VEYLDF to be contextualised within practice. Early childhood professionals appeared to value opportunities for professional learning within their own service and setting.

### Access to resources

The existence of contextual barriers to change may limit opportunities for developing collaborative learning environments. Early childhood professionals in the interviews and surveys listed a number of contextual barriers that limited their opportunity to access implementation activities. Barriers to face-to-face activities included: timing of activities (difficult to find and pay for relief staff, the timing of activities was not suitable); work conditions; capacity to access (limits on number of people who could attend); location (activities required the early childhood professional to travel to another location); and selection process (Bastow Institute).

Identified contextual barriers for online resources focused on finding computer access, work conditions, finding time to log online and accessing reliable Internet connections. Some early childhood professionals also listed their level of technical skill as a barrier to access.

### Understanding the reforms

Early childhood professionals in this evaluation described varying levels of understanding of the VEYLDF resulting in practice change. The majority of respondents rated themselves to be highly confident and capable with the Learning and Development Outcomes and Practice Principles. Research suggests there are multiple decision points for early childhood professionals at different stages of change, some of which serve as enablers and some of which are inhibitors.

These decision points can be aligned with the Model previously described (Pendergast et al. 2005), which comprises three phases: Initiation, Development and Consolidation.

Some early childhood professionals in the interviews and surveys described examples of practice change that were occurring in each of their settings since implementing the VEYLDF, representing the final decision-making stage listed earlier. Changes in language use, and thinking of, and about, the VEYLDF, were the major themes. Examples used by the respon-

dents represent change in beliefs (leading to practice change), and the early childhood professional being able to observe improvements in children's learning and development.

A full analysis reveals the majority of respondents are either at the end of the Initiation phase or beginning the Development phase as outlined in the Model. Investment in the establishment and maintenance of professional learning is essential for effective and sustained implementation as recommended by the Model. Commitment to professional learning, within the VEYLDF, is a key driver, as alignment of beliefs about the VEYLDF evolves across the early years sector.

## Recommendations

The following recommendations are made to effect support and continued and sustained implementation of the VEYLDF. This evaluation has identified that early childhood professionals are at varying stages of implementation; some are at the very early stages of the Initiation phase while the majority are transitioning into the Development phase. The Model identifies the needs of these two groups as different and therefore requiring different support to assist with their efforts to move towards full implementation. The phase most appropriate for the recommendation has been identified in parentheses. The recommendations are:

1. That the findings of this evaluation are triangulated with other data sources to further inform future VEYLDF implementation planning. This would include but is not limited to the views of professional learning consultants, evidence from VEYLDF implementation inquiry projects, and data from the National Quality Framework.
2. To articulate the differences and similarities of the various legislated and regulated Frameworks (VEYLDF, EYLF, FSAC and NQF) and the Australian Curriculum in schools (Initiation).
3. To facilitate professional learning activities and workshops that are large scale (Initiation) and then follow up with smaller local networking opportunities (Development).
4. To coordinate with the larger services and industry bodies to organise localised and integrated professional learning that may include elements of support that are service specific. Support consultants and regional offices to deliver personalised mentoring and or coaching for individual services (Development).
5. To stream workshops and seminars on the Internet so early childhood professionals in regional and rural areas can meet at hubs to watch the broadcast (Initiation). This doubles as a networking opportunity (Development).
6. To create plain language materials about the VEYLDF that double as professional learning for staff and information for parents (Initiation and Development).
7. To create resources demonstrating exemplar practices (Development).
8. To apply the Educational Change Model and continuous improvement theory, to support further progress within this period of implementation reform (Development).



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