Review and Evaluation of the Inquiry to Implementation Project

Final Report

September 2014

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Monash University

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Executive summary

The Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA) and the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) work together to support implementation of the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework (VEYLDF).

The IIP was developed by the VCAA as a key professional learning resource to support the implementation of the VEYLDF.

Monash University was commissioned by the VCAA to undertake the review and evaluation that is presented in this report.

The IIP has extended the inquiry research model developed in two previous multidisciplinary practitioner projects: the Outcomes Project in 2010–2011 and the Assessment for Learning and Development (ALD) Project in 2012.

A central focus of the IIP related to assessment practice. Early childhood professionals within the multidisciplinary networks were supported to develop individual inquiry questions to improve outcomes for children and families. The policy context included a specific emphasis on working with families with complex needs.

The IIP aimed to develop the capacity of participants to:

- assess children's progress using the learning and development outcomes outlined in the VEYLDF as part of an ongoing planning cycle
- trial and refine tools and resources to support assessment for learning in the birth-to-three-years period and across birth to eight years
- take a collaborative approach to assessment for learning and development with children, families and other professionals
- draw on the Educational Change Model of continuous improvement and transition in an environment of reform and significant change
- achieve a sustainable multidisciplinary focus, and identify and support leadership in the local network community.

Key design features of the IIP professional learning included:

- **professional inquiry** – with a specific focus on assessment for learning and development
- **critical reflection** – to inform individual inquiry questions and the project review and evaluation
- **knowledge** – integration of contemporary theories, research, frameworks and policy
- **evidence** – documenting and analysing evidence of children's learning to support practice decisions; contributing to assessment of individual and group learning; planning and tracking children's progress in learning and possible referral decisions with families and other professionals
- **peer support** – a new design feature developed for the IIP to strengthen dialogue and discussion, and to contribute to a shared vision and strong and equal partnerships within the early years network (see Appendix 3).

IIP Network locations in the four DEECD regions

The IIP professional learning was delivered in four DEECD regional locations across Victoria, from February to December 2013. Nine networks across the four DEECD regions of Victoria participated in the IIP (see Figure 1 for timelines).

North Eastern Region

Rural City of Wangaratta Early Childhood Network

Yarra Ranges Child, Youth and Family Network

Hume City Early Years Partnership

South Eastern Region

Sale and Districts Best Start Early Years Network

Baw Baw Best Start Network

South Western Region

Wyndham Child and Family Services Network

City of Ballarat Best Start Network

Great South Coast Early Years Network

North Western Region

Mildura Rural City Council Network

Map of IIP networks
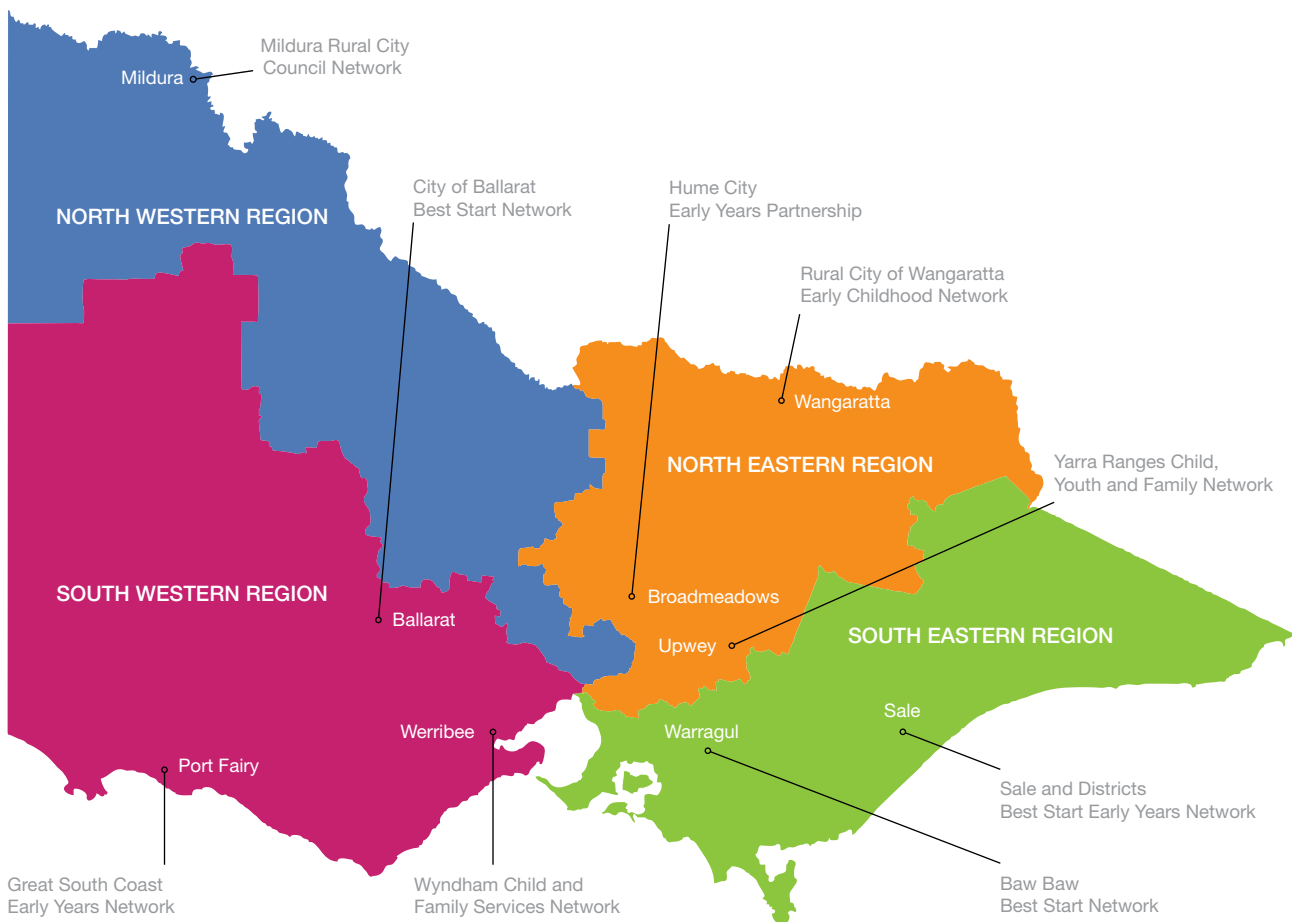
Purpose of the review and evaluation

Using a mixed method approach, the review and evaluation delivered nine case-study reports centred on the activities of each of the nine networks involved in the IIP. Change over time was specifically examined through focus-group interviews and analysis of documentation generated by the IIP process. Due to the complexity, diversity and richness of the IIP data, the analytical concept of relational agency was subsequently applied to generate a framework for collectively analysing the data set and scaling up the work of the IIP.

The review and evaluation sought to determine the key trends across the nine networks, with special attention paid to individual practitioners, service types and the network. The review and evaluation gives insights into the strengths, issues and challenges of multidisciplinary collaboration at the network level, through the presentation of nine network case studies. In addition, the impact of the IIP on professional practice and service type was examined through detailing learning, evidence of enactment of the Practice Principles (VEYLDF), and key themes related to assessment practice, identified in the ALD report.

The review and evaluation analysis supports findings on the impact of the project in relation to state-wide practice, key messages for policymakers, researchers and practitioners, and implications for further work to support inquiry-based professional learning in multidisciplinary networks.

Method

The following data was gathered and analysed.

IIP data included:

- participant reflections during each of the five workshops
- evaluation survey conducted in Workshop 5
- pre- and post-project questionnaire data
- project-facilitator progress reports after each workshop
- focus-group interviews, conducted by the Monash University research team at each network site.

To enable data collection, project facilitators supported participants to:

- develop professional inquiry questions related to assessing for learning from birth to three years, and across the birth-to-eight-years period
- cultivate a multidisciplinary focus within the network
- develop their leadership capacity to ensure sustainability and continuous improvement
- engage with a peer-support model for maintaining and expanding professional connections across the diverse settings
- complete the evaluation survey as part of Workshop 5.

Project facilitators provided a progress report for each network at the conclusion of each of the five workshops.

Summary of findings – key themes

As a result of the analysis of the existing IIP data and the network focus group interviews developed for each of the nine networks, it has been possible to identify **four dominant themes** across the networks.

- New ways of assessing were developed that included involving children and families.
- Inquiry questions changed thinking and professional practice – practitioners as researchers.
- Professional learning took place through being part of a multidisciplinary network.
- Engagement with the VEYLDF provided deeper understandings of Practice Principles and Learning and Development Outcomes.

A further **seven themes** were evident for particular networks. It should be noted that the following themes also came through strongly in the case studies.

- New ways of working with children and families with complex support needs developed.
- New ways of leading, supporting and motivating colleagues emerged.
- Active listening and shared language across service types emerged.
- There was a shift in focus from activities to child learning outcomes.
- Holistic assessment to capture wellbeing emerged.
- Appreciation for the diverse learning communities developed.
- Practitioners moved from a position of authority to having discussions with families.

Together these 11 themes constitute the key outcomes to emerge from the case studies. A summary of these is provided in Table 3, Section 9 and in Appendix 14.

Relational Agency Framework – An overview

A Relational Agency Framework was developed from the analysis of all of the IIP data.

Network engagement and cohesion looked different across the nine networks and this provided insights into how network engagement can develop over time. A Relational Agency Framework is conceptualised as a tool to support the establishment, maintenance and growth in early years professional learning at the level of a multidisciplinary network. The Relational Agency Framework draws on the relevant evidence available for the effectiveness of multidisciplinary networks (for example, Edwards 2004; 2005) and builds on this international research.

Table 1: A Relational Agency Framework for building multidisciplinary networks in Victoria

Phases	Key idea
Foundational	Building a sense of belonging to a network
Phase 1	Finding out about each other's services
Phase 2	Engaging in a common experience or process
Phase 3	Building a common focus for the group
Phase 4	Building a common language
Phase 5	Aligning one's own interpretation with that of others
Phase 6	Thinking about one's own professional expertise and contribution in relation to what others with different disciplinary/community knowledge and practice bring
Phase 7	Enhanced professional practice where one's own contributions are viewed as part of the collectively identified professional inquiry or need

The Relational Agency Framework is a model that can accommodate the practitioner experiences and accounts for the documented professional relationships in the networks. It can be used to further inform the development of existing early years networks and support the establishment of new early years networks.

While indicating progression over time, the phases in Table 1 should not be read as linear and hierarchical, but rather as a continual spiral. The spiralling metaphor (detailed in Figure 8, Section 10) reflects how networks form, change over time as

new members join, where a network's focus or priorities change, and where a new membership configuration is identified in evaluation.

Evidence of building, maintaining and growing relational agency in multidisciplinary networks in Victoria is provided in Table 2. This includes details of the key ideas, a description of each, and examples taken from a range of data types. In essence, the table shows the link between key ideas, description and data. It also gives insights into how this new tool can support action and analysis in the future by illustrating an example of evidence of relational agency.

Table 2: Evidence of relational agency in IIP networks: A snapshot

Phases	Key idea	Description	Examples of evidence
Foundational	Building a sense of belonging to a network	A sense of belonging to a network is critical for all levels of engagement – personal and professional.	'Increased knowledge has led to less 'fear' or apprehension of new practices – greater understanding helps people to relax into it then ideas begin to flow' (Hume City Early Years Partnership, Workshop 5). 'The network helps us to brainstorm and we can talk and work things out' (Rural City of Wangaratta Early Childhood Network, focus-group interview).
Phase 1	Finding out about each other's services	Network members find out what each other member is doing.	'This project allowed time for me to think/rethink my practice and my understandings on a range of areas. It gave me time to collaboratively work with other educators – gain new ideas and better understand different early childhood services' (Sale and Districts Best Start Early Years Network, Workshop 5). 'Great opportunity to network with colleagues across the early childhood sector in Hume and gain a perspective of individual roles and the difficulties people are experiencing with implementing the frameworks' (Hume City Early Years Partnership, Workshop 5).
Phase 2	Engaging in a common experience or process	Network members engage in a common experience of reflection, the development of a professional inquiry, and discussions about the VEYLDF and EYLF.	'The focus on relationships with families, the whole child, the voice of the child has been a refreshing and welcome change from the day-to-day bustle of primary school life, outcomes, etc. It has awoken knowledge from my uni days and early days of teaching – the time to reflect has been most welcome' (Yarra Ranges Child, Youth and Family Network, Workshop 5). 'The IIP has opened my eyes to the VEYLDF, as I was not familiar with it before starting this project. It has challenged me to assess and document children's development within the playgroup I facilitate' (Great South Coast Early Years Network, Workshop 4).
Phase 3	Building a common focus for the group	Network participants build a common focus by discussing the VEYLDF and EYLF and children's 'learning'.	The Y of learning chart: 'Taking a question and all putting down ideas, opens up everyone professionally, making each other think' (Sale and Districts Best Start Early Years Network, case study). Comfort in a 'shared struggle' and having starting points: 'How do services present to families?' (Mildura Rural City Council Network, focus-group interview).

Table 2: Evidence of relational agency in IIP networks: A snapshot

Phases	Key idea	Description	Examples of evidence
Phase 4	Building a common language	Network participants develop a common language through discussing the VEYLDF in relation to service types, individual inquiries, agreed outcomes and what assessment evidence might be.	'Distinction between developmental and learning conversations is very powerful and will support practice change in the workplace' (City of Ballarat Best Start Network, Workshop 3). 'Developing understanding about practice across different services/sectors' (Wyndham Child and Family Services Network, Workshop 4).
Phase 5	Aligning one's own interpretations with those of others	Network participants discuss individual professional inquiry outcomes and support each other with reflections and analysis, with a level of understanding about each other's practices.	'To keep adapting ideas to get parent involvement more ingrained in our program' (Great South Coast Early Years Network, Workshop 4). 'Noticed differences in the language of conversations and the MCH referral language is more about engagement of families – this has shifted' (Rural City of Wangaratta Early Childhood Network, focus-group interview).
Phase 6	Thinking about one's own professional expertise and contribution in relation to what others with different disciplinary/ community knowledges and practices bring	Network participants discuss individual professional inquiry outcomes linked to longstanding challenges or needs for their region, using common language established earlier.	It [the network] has given me confidence to go to different services and say we have the research to back this up – it confirmed everything for me and made me push harder for best possible outcomes for parents and children' (Wyndham Child and Family Services Network, focus-group interview). 'The whole community has come together to support the issue of engagement and building rapport, establishing trusting relationships … [it has] changed my focus to be with parents. What are their concerns, issues and what do they hope for?' (Mildura Rural City Council Network, focus-group interview).
Phase 7	Enhanced professional practice where one's own contributions are viewed as part of the collectively identified professional inquiry or need	Network participants build and implement a collective professional inquiry linked to the longstanding challenges or needs of their region.	Through the network it was felt that crucial relationship building could take place beyond a 'fix this fix that' model: 'We need to spend time to make a relationship as we walk a careful path with families and we need the critical element [provided by the network]' (City of Ballarat Best Start Network, focus-group interview). 'Ability to bring wider voices from our open conversation when discussing with staff and in working with other community networks. Reinforced partnership approach to make best use of data to be collected – consideration of gathering pre- and post-feedback from the sample community' (Baw Baw Best Start Network, Workshop 5).

A more detailed summary is provided in Appendix 14: Evidence of relational agency in networks.

Parameters, scope and limitations

Improved outcomes for children: The analysis of the existing data and focus-group interviews demonstrates that the professional learning model that featured an extended professional inquiry process over 10 months, supports the development of improved assessment practice. Through this process it is assumed that improved outcomes for children have been the result.

Recognition of the ongoing development of a network: It is important to keep in mind that data gathered and discussed in this report needs to be contextualised in relation to the previous engagement within networks prior to the IIP. The Relational Agency Framework in this report provides a useful approach for making assessments of the engagement and development of new relationships and opportunities within an early years network. It is important to recognise that a network grows and develops along a continuum.

Recognition of the continuum for network development: This is important for understanding some of the case studies, as unique issues in individual networks at a point in time affect levels of engagement and the impact of assessment practice.

Interview process

Validation of participant voice was evident. Note that the interviews with researchers were carried out five months after the conclusion of the IIP professional learning. Monash researchers visiting the network participants to document their perspective was highly valued. This study design feature contributed to a real sense of professional agency, because participants' views were being heard, gathered and taken seriously as part of the review process.

Limitations

It is not possible in this review to measure the degree of change in individual practitioners from the pre- and post-data collections. However, comparisons were made between the pre- and post-data. This included an emphasis on written feedback provided by participants that illustrated change in assessment practice and engagement within the network. Service type has been identified in relation to the participant quotes used in this report. However, it is not possible to track change in practice at the level of service type.

Recommendations

This review and evaluation of the Inquiry to Implementation Project (IIP) in nine multidisciplinary early years networks has identified a Relational Agency Framework to support the establishment, maintenance and growth in early years professional learning and assessment practice. A shared vision and the development of new and strengthened relationships between early childhood professionals further inform assessment practice. Growth in early childhood professional assessment capabilities influences improved outcomes for children and families. This marks a critical part of the next steps in VEYLDF implementation and early years reform.

In recognition that inquiry-based professional learning takes time and resources, the following recommendations are provided to support the ongoing implementation of the VEYLDF.

1. That DEECD and VCAA explore ways for existing multidisciplinary early years networks and new networks to access the final *Assessment for Learning – Supporting Early Years Networks Training Manual* that has been informed by the IIP and this review and evaluation. The distribution of the professional learning model more broadly would influence engagement and strengthen a common vision for the VEYLDF, including transitions within and across early years.

2. That a Relational Agency Framework evaluation tool and resources are developed to support sustainable evidence-based assessment practice, and build, maintain and grow new and established multidisciplinary early years networks. Resources would include a mechanism for networks to review and plan inclusive approaches to network membership.

3. That the VCAA develop evaluation processes to test the concept of relational agency in the final *Assessment for Learning – Supporting Early Years Networks Training Manual* along with inquiry-based learning, reflective practice, assessment practice, contemporary theory, frameworks and peer support. Evaluation processes would include measures that include a focus on high expectations for all children and families and, within this, a specific focus on working with families with complex support needs.

4. Continue to develop professional learning resources in this consolidation phase of VEYLDF implementation and reform (five to10 years)[1]. These resources would promote:

    • an ongoing culture of evidence-based assessment practice

    • leadership capabilities across the early years

    • strong and equal partnerships with families and early childhood professionals.

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1. Griffith University, *Evaluation of Implementation of the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework : For all children from Birth to Eight Years Final Report*, May 2012.

5. To continue to communicate progress in VEYLDF implementation of the final *Assessment for Learning – Supporting Early Years Networks Training Manual* in collaboration with researchers, practitioners and policymakers through a range of presentations and interactive seminars.

6. As part of the ongoing implementation of the VEYLDF, continue to promote and develop a range of seminars and conferences for all early childhood professionals working in the early years in rural and urban areas. Include specific opportunities for discourse about evidence-based practice and relational agency. A focus on practitioners as researchers within multidisciplinary early years networks is recommended.

Figure 1: Timeline and key dates for the Inquiry to Implementation Project development, delivery and evaluation

Stage 1

VCAA worked in partnership with DEECD to engage with nine networks across DEECD regions

Stage 2

Communication with networks, October–December 2012 VCAA had briefing meetings in each of the nine networks

Stage 3

Establishing the multidisciplinary membership, VCAA worked with network coordinators to support multidisciplinary representation

Workshop 1

Workshop 2

Pre-project questionnaire

VCAA /Project Facilitators meeting

VCAA /Project Facilitators meeting

VCAA /Project Facilitators meeting

Aug–Oct 2012

Oct–Dec 2012

Dec 2012– Feb 2013

Feb 2013

Mar–Apr 2013

Establishment stage

Delivery

Workshop **3**

Workshop **4**

Workshop **5**

VCAA provides all IIP in analysis to the Monash evaluation

IIP review and evaluation process begins

Case study interviews

VCAA /Project Facilitators meeting

Post-project questionnaire

VCAA /Project Facilitators meeting

Final Evaluation

VCAA convenes Project Facilitators and Monash/Reviewers meeting

Monash University conducts case study interviews in nine regions

Jun 2013

Aug 2013

Oct 2013

Dec 2013

Mar–Apr 2014

stage

Review and evaluation begins

Introduction

The IIP was developed by the VCAA as a key professional learning initiative within nine early years network to support ongoing implementation of the VEYLDF.

The Monash University review and evaluation commenced in October 2013 and concluded in June 2014.

The IIP operated as a collaborative partnership between researchers (University of Melbourne and Community Child Care), policymakers (DEECD and VCAA) and practitioners (project participants).

This project was managed by the VCAA and delivered in nine networks across Victoria. A total of 155 early childhood professionals participated in the project. Of this number, 132 completed the professional learning project.

Each network had up to 18 participants from a range of services, including family day care (FDC), long day care (LDC), maternal and child health (MCH), supported playgroups, early childhood intervention services (ECIS), kindergartens, primary schools and outside school hours care (OSHC). A particular focus in the IIP was early childhood professionals working in specific roles to support families with complex support needs.

The IIP inquiry-based professional learning included a strengthened focus on evidence-based assessment practice, with high expectations for all children and families. The professional learning included a specific focus on significant learning in the birth-to-three-years period, to support critical reflection, analysis and appreciation of babies' and toddlers' learning.

Facilitation of the inquiry-based professional learning

The IIP was delivered by two facilitators in each network. Facilitators from the University of Melbourne worked in three networks, those from Community Child Care worked in five networks and the VCAA facilitators in one network.

The VCAA and the facilitators worked from February to October 2013 to collaboratively plan, develop and deliver the five IIP workshops across the nine networks.

This collaborative partnership between project facilitators and the VCAA was designed to support consistent delivery of the professional learning across the networks and further trial and redevelopment of the draft assessment for learning training manual (as at September 2014). The project facilitators worked in teams across the networks to help develop professional inquiry questions related to assessment across the birth-to-eight-years period.

The VCAA engaged in reflective planning discussions with project facilitators prior to Workshop 1 and between Workshops 2, 3 and 4. A facilitator report from each network was provided to the VCAA at the conclusion of each workshop. Project facilitators provided ongoing advice in individual network progress reports after delivery of each of the five workshops. This included a strengthened focus on:

- learning and development in the birth-to-three-years period
- policy directions and connections to integrated thinking and collaborative approaches to influence assessment of practices
- peer-support and leadership models to support sustainable practice change
- evidence examples that further address specific assessment issues such as collaboration with families and including children's voices
- tracking children's progress in learning across settings, for example, using the VEYLDF and AusVELS to support a continuum of learning
- shared conversations about children's learning and development with families and with other early childhood professionals
- strengthened documentation and practice decisions to provide children with a range of opportunities to practise and master new skills.

These reports and the reflective discussions with facilitators supported further refinement of each workshop.

In December 2013, the VCAA convened a meeting with Monash University and with facilitators to support a collaborative discussion about the delivery of the inquiry-based professional learning model within the networks. This heralded the beginning of the review and implementation period.

This report provides details of the review and evaluation of the IIP, the context of the nine networks that participated, the research approach, the key findings, and key recommendations for future action.

Building a culture of assessment practice

Background

The Assessment for Learning and Development (ALD) Project was delivered during 2012 and built on emerging evidence from the pilot Outcomes Project 2010–2011 to support ongoing implementation of the VEYLDF. The ALD Project had a central focus on assessment for learning and development within a curriculum planning cycle and multidisciplinary context.

An outcome of the ALD Project in 2012 was the development of a draft assessment for learning training manual. The manual materials were refined and trialled as part of the IIP in nine metropolitan and rural multidisciplinary networks across Victoria in 2013.

Data from the ALD Project identified six assessment for learning and development practice themes. These themes describe aspects of changes in practice demonstrated by early childhood professionals as a result of participating in the project.

Practice change was influenced by the design features of this professional learning program, including:

- using a professional inquiry approach that includes formal reflective practice
- a central focus on contemporary early childhood theory and policy
- trial of assessment tools
- the multidisciplinary approach in networks.

Analysis informing the Inquiry to Implementation Project

The diagram below provides an overview of the six key approaches to assessment for learning and development practice identified in the ALD Project and informing the IIP Project. Each wedge highlights one of the six approaches or themes. Outcomes for children are central in the diagram, which recognises that quality practice directly impacts on improving outcomes for children.

The six practice themes

Focus on children's strengths and capabilities

Broaden perspectives of children's learning and development

Track children's progress

Initiate conversations about children's learning and development

Strengthen collaborative partnerships

Lead and support colleagues

The six themes developed in analysis of the ALD Project support growth and change in practitioner assessment capability at practice, policy, management and research levels. The themes support early childhood professionals, both individually and with colleagues, to consider practice in relation to assessment of children's learning and development.

These key themes for assessment practice informed the IIP professional learning program and were used by participants to explore new ideas around approaches to practice change and how these connect to Practice Principles. The themes provided a framework from which practitioners could build actions in professional inquiry questions.

Formation of the networks

Stage 1

VCAA worked in partnership with DEECD to engage with nine networks across DEECD regions

Stage 2

Communication with networks, October–December 2012 VCAA had briefing meetings in each of the nine networks

Stage 3

Establishing the multidisciplinary membership VCAA worked with network coordinators to support multidisciplinary representation

Aug–Oct 2012	Oct–Dec 2012	Dec 2012–Feb 2013

Establishment stage

Stage 1: Establishing the networks, August–October 2012

The VCAA Early Years Unit worked in partnership with DEECD to engage with networks across the four DEECD regions. Best Start Coordinators and DEECD Regional Officers were consulted in this process. Nine network sites were confirmed by the end of October 2012. To support the delivery of the IIP, DEECD provided a $15,000 grant to each network to coordinate the professional learning sessions. Each site had a network coordinator who liaised with the VCAA to support multidisciplinary membership of this project in the establishment phase and to support effective running of all network workshops.

All nine IIP networks were established network sites, and of these, seven were Best Start sites, which provided a strong platform for the establishment of the IIP multidisciplinary groups. For example, for this project, the Yarra Ranges Child, Youth and Family Network group was convened in the Upwey area as it was an area where a network had not recently been active. This provided a new opportunity for IIP professional learning related to VEYLDF implementation and assessment practice across the early years.

The IIP provided a new and specific opportunity for all networks to review and broaden membership across the birth-to-eight-years sector and to focus in this project on assessment practices to support children's learning. The aims of the IIP professional learning are strongly connected to the Best Start aims, a Victorian Government initiative to improve the health and development learning and wellbeing of children from birth to eight years. There are 30 Best Start project sites across Victoria. Local partnerships are the cornerstone of each Best Start project site. Those IIP sites situated in Best Start locations (seven) provided a strong platform for the delivery of the IIP professional learning.

Stage 2: Communication with networks, October–December 2012

The VCAA Early Years Unit conducted briefings in each of the nine networks. These briefings provided background information on the professional learning model. An IIP webpage was established on the VCAA Early Years website, to feature progress reports and updates on IIP.

Stage 3: Establishing network membership, December 2012–February 2013

In the process of establishing the networks' membership, the VCAA worked closely with network coordinators to finalise all participant nominations and recruit new members in order to achieve a broad representation of multidisciplinary service types (Figure 3, Section 7). This meant that even though networks were already established, members were at different stages in engagement. From February 2013, 155 early childhood professionals commenced in the IIP. A total of 132 participants completed the professional learning in October 2013.

Introducing the networks

Nine networks from the four DEECD regions of Victoria participated in the IIP.

North Eastern Region

Rural City of Wangaratta Early Childhood Network

Yarra Ranges Child, Youth and Family Network

Hume City Early Years Partnership

South Eastern Region

Sale and Districts Best Start Early Years Network

Baw Baw Best Start Network

South Western Region

Wyndham Child and Family Services Network

City of Ballarat Best Start Network

Great South Coast Early Years Network

North Western Region

Mildura Rural City Council Network

Figure 2: Map of IIP networks
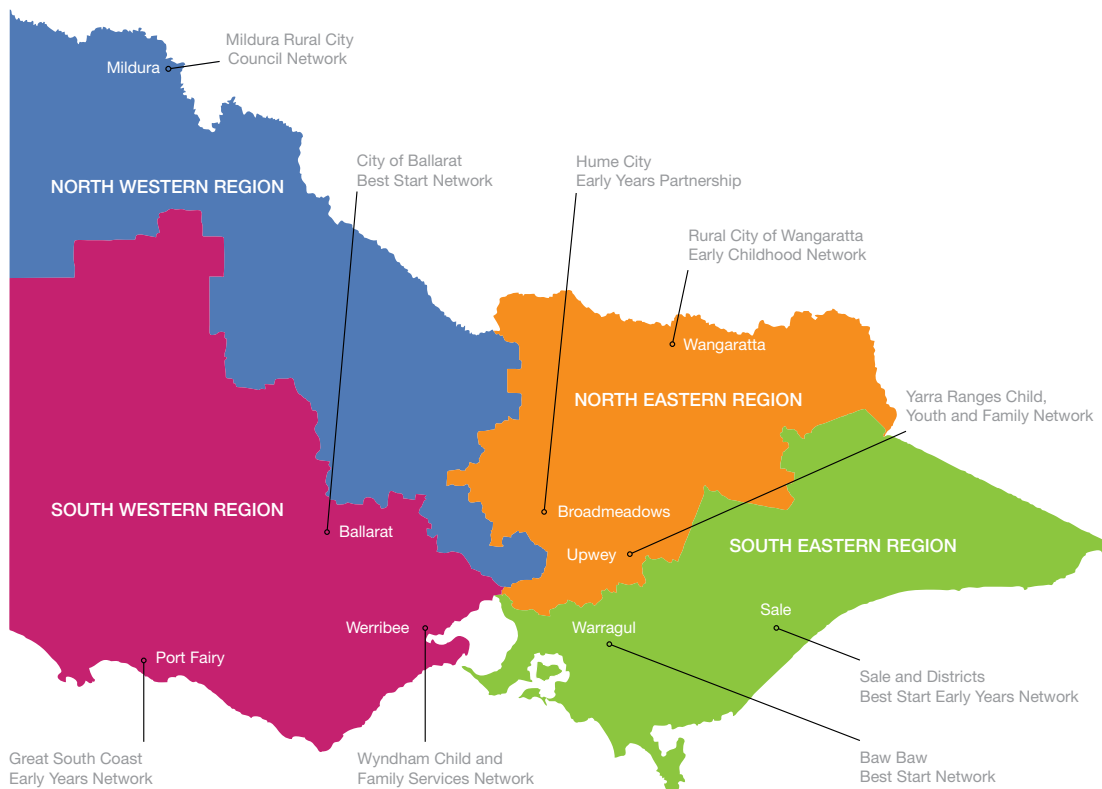
Networks snapshots

The case study reports in Section 9 draw on data provided by IIP facilitators and participants during and after the five IIP workshops, plus data gathered during interviews with network participants four months after the completion of the project. Participants in the IIP represented a wide range of individual services types and a number of participants operated across several service types. The following information provides a snapshot of the network background and participation by service type and number.

Rural City of Wangaratta Early Childhood Network

The IIP workshops for this network were held at Yarrunga Primary School Community Hub, Wangaratta. **Twelve** participants completed the IIP professional learning.	Maternal and Child Health	2
	Early Childhood Intervention Services	1
	Family Day Care	1
	Long Day Care	1
	Kindergarten	1
	Primary School	3
	Early Years Management and Policy	3

Yarra Ranges Child, Youth and Family Network

The IIP workshops for this network were held at Sherbrooke Family and Children's Centre, Upwey. **Thirteen** participants completed the IIP professional learning.	Playgroup	1
	Parenting Support	2
	Long Day Care	3
	Kindergarten	5
	Primary School	2

Hume City Early Years Partnership

The IIP workshops for this network were held at Hume City Council Offices, Broadmeadows. **Sixteen** participants completed the IIP professional learning.	Maternal and Child Health	3
	Parenting Support	2
	Early Childhood Intervention Services	3
	Long Day Care	2
	Kindergarten	1
	Primary School	2
	Outside School Hours Care	1
	Early Years Management and Policy	2

Wyndham Child and Family Services Network

The IIP workshops for this network were held at Wyndham City Council Office and Wyndham Vale Community Learning Centre.

Fourteen participants completed the IIP professional learning.

Playgroup	1
Parenting Support	2
Early Childhood Intervention Services	2
Family Day Care	1
Long Day Care	2
Integrated Children's Service	2
Kindergarten	1
Primary School	2
Early Years Management and Policy	1

City of Ballarat Best Start Network

The IIP workshops for this network were held at Youth Head Quarters, Town Hall, and the Red Lion Conference Centre in the City of Ballarat.

Eighteen participants completed the IIP professional learning.

Maternal and Child Health	4
Playgroup	1
Parenting Support	2
Early Childhood Intervention Services	1
Family Day Care	2
Long Day Care	4
Primary School	1
Early Years Management and Policy	2
Occasional Child Care	1

Great South Coast Early Years Network

The IIP workshops for this network were held at Port Fairy Community Services Centre.

Eighteen participants completed the IIP professional learning provided by the IIP.

Maternal and Child Health	1
Playgroup	1
Parenting Support	1
Early Childhood Intervention Services	3
Family Day Care	2
Long Day Care	3
Integrated Children's Service	1
Kindergarten	4
Outside School Hours Care	1
Early Years Management and Policy	1

Sale and Districts Best Start Early Years Network

The IIP workshops for this network were held at Gippsland Regional Sporting Complex, Sale.

Twelve participants completed the IIP professional learning. | Maternal and Child Health | 1 |
	Long Day Care	2
	Integrated Children's Service	3
	Kindergarten	3
	Primary School	2
	Early Years Management and Policy	1

Baw Baw Best Start Network

The IIP workshops for this network were held at West Gippsland Arts Centre and the Catholic Education Office, in Warragul.

Sixteen participants completed the IIP professional learning. | Maternal and Child Health | 2 |
	Playgroup	1
	Early Childhood Intervention Services	3
	Family Day Care	1
	Primary School	3
	Outside School Hours Care	1
	Early Years Management and Policy	5

Mildura Rural City Council Network

The IIP workshops for this network were held at the Mildura Council Offices.

Thirteen participants completed the IIP professional learning. | Early Childhood Intervention Services | 3 |
	Long Day Care	1
	Kindergarten	4
	Primary School	1
	Early Years Management and Policy	4

The research process

Theoretical underpinnings

The review and evaluation sought to examine how professionals from nine networks came together over five workshops as participants of the IIP, where the focus was on improving outcomes for children in their regions through a focus on assessment for learning. Data from a range of sources (professional inquiries, reflection sheets, facilitator reports, final workshop evaluation, pre- and post-project questionnaires, case-study interviews) were examined separately, using specific categories and identifying key themes and collectively using the concept of relational agency. Longstanding research outlines the impact of multidisciplinary teams working together, and describes how successful partnerships build 'relational agency' (Edwards and Apostolov 2007), giving rise to new narratives about professional practice. As such, this concept is useful for understanding the outcomes of the IIP professional learning model.

Relational agency was first introduced into the literature by Anne Edwards as a result of extensive research into the development of successful networks and agencies in the UK (Edwards 2004; 2005). Professionals have relational agency when they attune themselves to others, and build common knowledge across the partnership or network, set agreed goals, and clearly understand strategies for effective implementation (Edwards 2004). Members of the multidisciplinary teams are able to take the standpoint of the others, can be explicit about what matters, as well as recognise what matters to others, and can attune their actions with those of others (Edwards, Daniels, Gallagher, Leadbetter and Warmington 2009).

The literature on interagency partnerships also shows that there are fundamental reasons why partnerships struggle to form and be effective. The first reason relates to how members within the partnerships view their role. Do members think about themselves as individuals joining a network or do they think about their role in the network in relation to others and how they might collectively address issues of learning and development for their region? The research indicates that successful partnerships conceptualise themselves as a collective, with 'collective expertise' (see Edwards 2004). They do not simply focus on their own expertise, but consider their contributions in relation to others within the partnerships.

The second finding within the international research on interagency collaborations identifies that members of the partnerships must pay ongoing attention to building their partnership. The questions asked centre on how networks form, how they are sustained, how they become effective collective agents of change within their region and what is needed to build these partnerships over time. These themes are most relevant for understanding the IIP professional learning model undertaken in Victoria.

Members know when networks are not working. The international literature gives some guidance about why. What traditionally happens in ineffective partnerships is:

- members assume, rather than know, what knowledge others bring to the partnership
- members build quick understandings without a full sense of the professional background of others
- members use different languages, each of which is profession specific
- different disciplines have different ways of framing their goals, and the communication of these to others can be challenging
- members look for different kinds of evidence for change, which do not easily coalesce.

This literature gives insights into the challenges faced by professionals who seek to build and maintain effective networks. These insights also provide a theoretical context and approach for the analysis of the data presented in this report. A holistic approach to research is featured (see Appendix 2), and a framework for analysis is detailed in this report.

Method

Three sources of data were gathered and analysed. Two comprised existing data while the third source provided new data:

- IIP data, comprising reflections on each of the five workshops, by participants and facilitators, and a final workshop evaluation
- pre- and post-project questionnaire data
- focus-group interviews conducted by the research team at each of the network sites, with some follow-up phone interviews to ensure representation of service types.

Existing IIP data

Data was generated through the process of implementing the IIP. The data included the following:

- **Project facilitator progress reports:** At the conclusion of each network's workshops the external project facilitator wrote a progress report following a template provided through the IIP. One report was prepared for each of the five workshops, resulting in 45 reports of approximately five pages each.
- **Participant reflection sheets:** At each of the one-day network workshops the participants completed morning and afternoon reflections. This data reflects the participants who attended each workshop – and varies across all returns. Time was provided in each workshop for these reflections. In Workshop 5 participants completed a final evaluation survey. Group exercises and a final impact exercise were analysed (see Appendix 6).
- **Evidence of children's learning submitted by participants:** All the professionals were encouraged to submit evidence of children's learning gathered during the IIP. Evidence submissions that were provided by participants connected to inquiry questions and reflections. The final evaluation summary connects with participant evidence as a result of the inquiry process. The VCAA has ongoing opportunities to reconnect with participants in networks to discuss inquiry questions and assessment evidence to inform a range of publications and resources.

Analysis of IIP data

The VCAA developed the draft assessment for learning training manual for trial in the IIP across the nine networks. In the draft training manual, the importance of the enactment of VEYLDF Practice Principles was embedded throughout the workshop material. In addition, the six assessment themes identified in the ALD Project analysis were introduced in the IIP to support the inquiry process further.

Data generated from the activities of the nine networks formed the basis of the analysis for examining change over time. The data provided a rich set of self-reported reflections from the participants, as well as an analysis of the content of discussions by the project facilitator, and the final workshop evaluation. Data was de-identified at the level of network and service type prior to analysis.

Data was systematically examined, using an analysis template drawing on the following categories (see Appendix 5 for the analysis template used):

- trends over time, including strengths, issues and challenges for individual professionals, service types and the network
- impact of IIP material/workshops on individuals and services
- identification of promising practices
- evidence of participants' learning practice
- impact on professional practice for individuals and services through enactment of eight VEYLDF Practice Principles and six themes, with a particular focus on assessment and collaboration.

VEYLDF Practice Principles

1. Family-centred practice
2. Partnerships with professionals
3. High expectations for every child
4. Equity and diversity
5. Respectful relationships and responsive engagement
6. Integrated teaching and learning approaches
7. Assessment for learning and development
8. Reflective practice

ALD Assessment practice

1. Focus on children's strengths and capabilities
2. Broaden perspectives of children's learning and development
3. Track children's progress
4. Initiate conversations about children's learning and development
5. Strengthen collaborative partnerships
6. Lead and support colleagues

Evidence of these six themes was summarised or quoted in the analysis template for each network, identifying service types, and the workshop sequence. These records were reviewed and drawn on to write a summary report for each case study of trends over time, promising practices, evidence of participants' learning,

and impact on professional practice. Key themes describing the strengths and achievements of each network were also identified.

Participants were invited to complete a pre- and post-project questionnaire. The pre-project questionnaire collected demographic information about the participants and asked them to rate a number of statements about their understanding of the VEYLDF outcomes and their confidence in using the VEYLDF in their planning; their understanding and practice in their assessment of children's learning and development; and their experience of partnerships with other professionals. Participants were invited to provide written comments on how they were using the assessment for learning and development of Practice Principles in their work and practice. The post-project questionnaire collected data about the significance and impact of the IIP on professional practice. Completed questionnaires were de-identified prior to analysis.

Who participated?

One hundred and thirty-two early childhood professionals took part in the IIP. As Figure 3 shows, participants came from a range of early years services including maternal and child health (including universal, enhanced, Koorie and maternity services), playgroups (including parenting support), FDC, occasional child care, LDC (including early learning and child-care centres), kindergarten services, ECIS (including preschool field officers and inclusion support facilitators), integrated children's services, parenting support and child and family services, primary school, OSHC and early years management and projects. Service settings were located in nine networks across the four DEECD regions of Victoria.

Figure 3: Proportion of network participants by service type
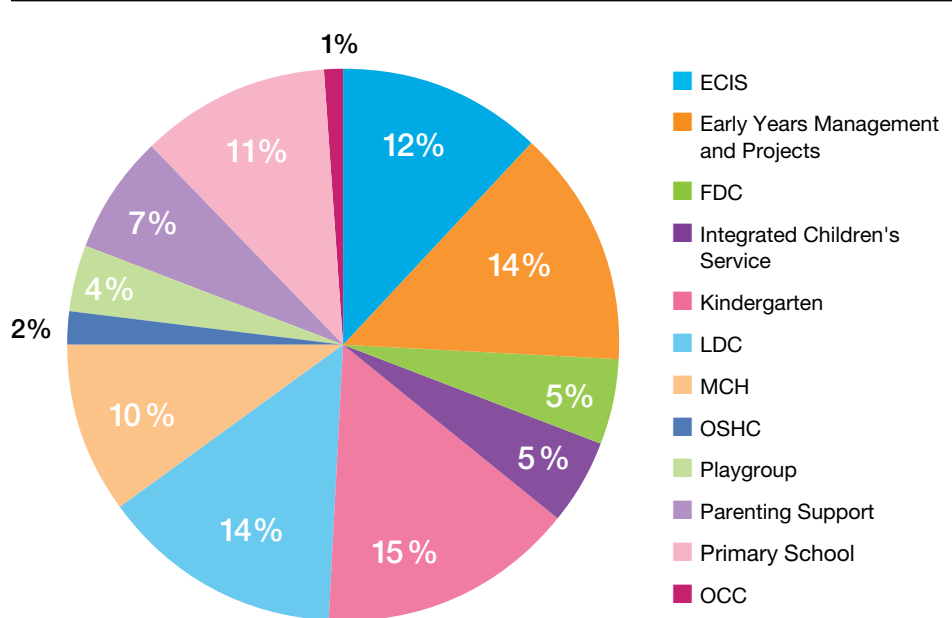
The qualifications of participants in early childhood education, health or welfare studies covered a wide range: 29 (22 per cent) had undertaken post-graduate studies (including certificates, diplomas and masters degrees); 42 (31 per cent) had a bachelor degree; 53 (40 per cent) had a diploma or advanced diploma; and 10 (7 per cent) held a certificate or other qualification.

Figure 4: Qualifications

- Post-graduate qualification
- Bachelor degree
- Diploma/advanced diploma
- Certificate/other
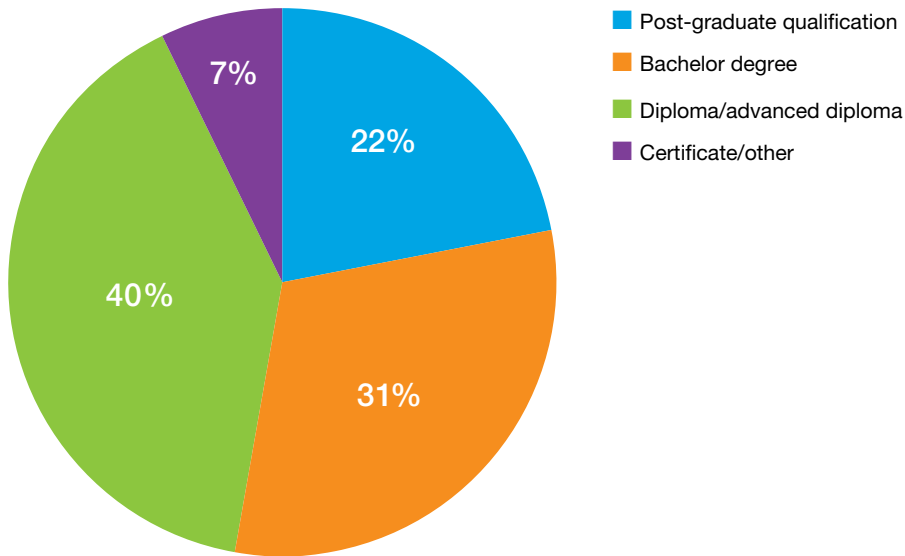
A third of participants (35 per cent) were aged 50 years or over. There was a wide range of ages among the participants: under 30 years (11 per cent); 30 to 39 years (26 per cent); 40 to 49 years (29 per cent).

Post-project questionnaire data

At the end of the project, 79 participants completed the post-project questionnaire. Again, the numbers were distributed reasonably equally across the nine networks, ranging from a maximum of 11 participants in both the City of Ballarat Best Start Network and Yarra Ranges Child, Youth and Family Network to a minimum of six participants in Baw Baw Best Start Network. All service types were represented, and there was a similar age distribution.

Analysis of survey data

Data from the questionnaires were examined for change in participants' ratings over time, from the ratings given at the commencement (pre-) and conclusion (post-) of the IIP. Although it was not possible to show the degree of change for individual participants, because they and their ratings were not identified, comparisons were made between the pre- and post-project data. This provided an effective alternative to recording the impact of the program. Written comments provided by participants were also reviewed and selected to illustrate change or engagement with the program; however, because the data was de-identified in relation to service type in the handover of evidence for the review and evaluation process, it was not possible to link these comments to different service types.

Section 7: The research process

Focus-group interviews

Focus groups were held in each network in March 2014, five months after the completion of the IIP workshops.

The VCAA encouraged networks to nominate participants from a representative range of the early childhood services (see Appendix 9).

Focus-group interview questions were jointly developed between the research team and members of the VCAA and DEECD partnership (see Appendix 8 for the interview questions). The questions were derived from a situated analysis of the existing data (Hedegaard and Fleer, 2010) in relation to trends noted and the requirements of the review and evaluation purpose and outcomes. Here a situated analysis means the identification of patterns of responses from the existing IIP data set and, together with an analysis of VCAA reporting areas, they formed the basis for determining each interview question. One researcher and one note taker ran each focus-group session. Questions were asked by the researcher and the note taker recorded responses. The responses were documented against an agreed proforma (see Appendix 10). Focus-group sessions ran for between one and three hours.

Researchers read the following documents, undertook the focus-group interviews and prepared a report at the network level (where possible identifying service types):

- project facilitators' workshop reports
- participants' final evaluation surveys in Workshop 5 (network and service type)
- participants' reflections within workshops (network and service type).

Analysis of focus-group interview data

The researchers prepared a full set of interview transcripts from the notes taken by the note taker. In following an agreed proforma (Appendix 10), the researcher categorised the notes into a case study format. Quotations were drawn from the data set to exemplify the patterns, and together these representative quotations form the basis for determining a sense of the frequency, detail and fullness of responses for each question. These summaries of the data were then populated into an analysis template for each of the networks (see Appendix 5).

Overall analysis

Overall analysis of focus-group data

Participants' reflections in workshops, the final evaluation survey conducted in Workshop 5, the evidence examples provided by participants, pre- and post-project questionnaires, the participants' inquiry question themes (Appendix 11) and focus-group interviews constitute what was gathered and analysed and presented as key findings in this report. Figure 5 represents the complexity and comprehensiveness of the data, where both quantitative and qualitative data were gathered.

Overall analysis using the concept of relational agency

The data was further analysed using the concept of relational agency (take the standpoint of the other; are able to be explicit about what matters, as well as recognise what matters to others; and can attune one's actions with those of others) in order to develop and propose a framework to further understand how networks form and support the change process.

As mentioned, the literature on multi-agency collaboration has identified that relational agency is central to support multidisciplinary teams in successfully work together (Edwards 2005) to support all families. As such, this concept has the potential to provide a powerful analytical tool to consider in determining how networks function in relation to improving outcomes for children and families. Relational agency is designed to support a broader view of professional identity by taking a network perspective in improving outcomes for children and families. A key finding of the report (which is presented in Section 9) is an analytical framework that can be used for this purpose in the future.

Figure 5: Applying the concept of relational agency to the data

Pre- and post-questionnaire

Workshop 5
Impact exercise

Inquiry questions

Reflection sheets

Relational
Agency

Facilitator reports

Final evaluation
survey

Evidence
examples

Focus-group interviews and
some follow-up phone interviews
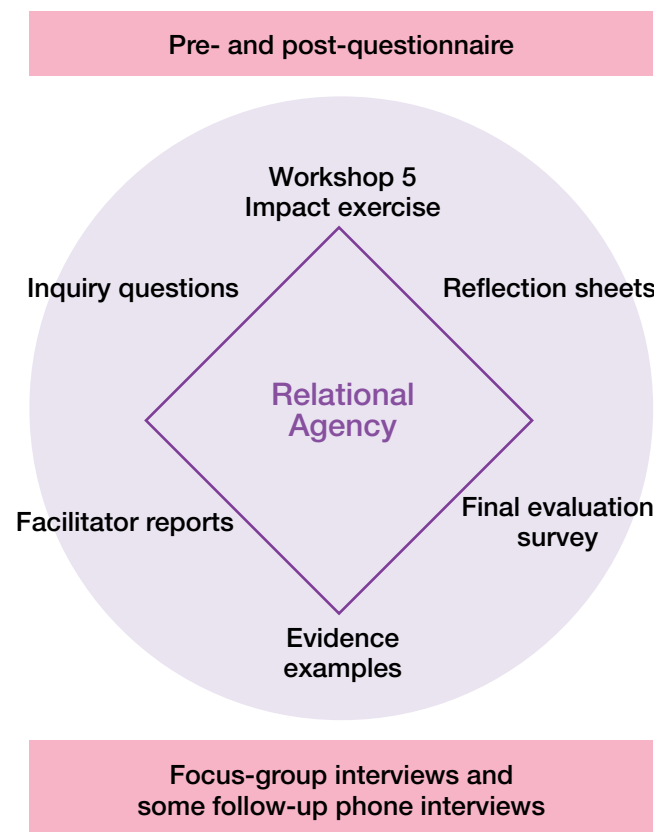
Gaps in the data

The review and evaluation used multiple data sources. Representation at each of the workshops, in the pre- and post-project questionnaires, and at the focus-group sessions varied across the eight months of the IIP or was not complete. For example, the post-project questionnaire comprised only 60% of the participants who had completed the pre-project questionnaire. There were some focus-group constraints, for example, that limited the scope to explore individual responses in a group situation. This included guiding the conversation to ensure all interview questions were covered and ensuring all participants had opportunities to contribute.

However, overall the data was broadly representative of the diverse service types, and because of the multiple data sources, a solid representation of participant responses can be reported.

Findings from pre- and post-project questionnaires

Data from the pre- and post-project questionnaires was used to examine change in participants' self-reported confidence, understandings and practices over the course of the IIP. Written comments were selected to illustrate participants' views and experiences.

Professional inquiry-based approaches

Results showed a marked increase in participants' level of confidence in using professional inquiry-based approaches to support professional practice and practice change (see Figure 6). The number of participants rating themselves as being moderately or a little confident dropped from 57 per cent to 30 per cent. At the same time the number of participants who reported that professional inquiry-based approaches informed all aspects of their work more than doubled: from 9 per cent to 21 per cent.

Figure 6: Change in participants' level of confidence in applying professional inquiry-based approaches to support professional practice
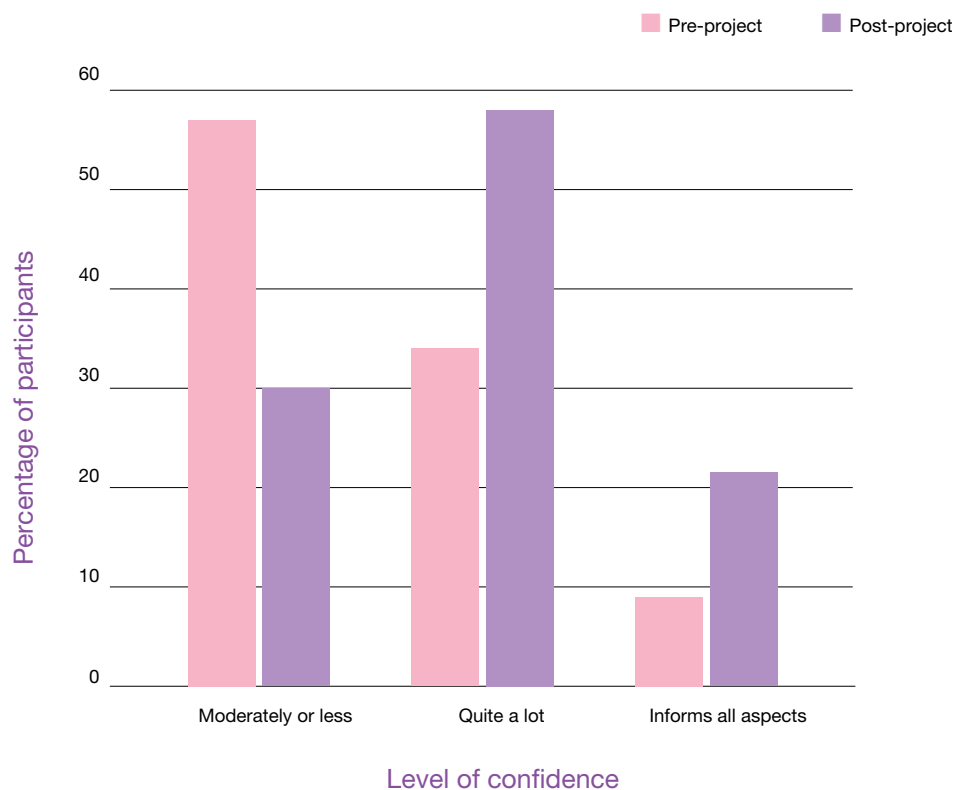
It is likely that these changes reflected the focus of the IIP on professional inquiry. The following comments from participants illustrate the perceived benefits that they had:

To focus on an inquiry question over a period of time has allowed me to go away and then come back and think about it again sometimes in a different light. Participating has also given me an insight into inquiry learning/research. (LDC)

The Inquiry project has given us time to network with professionals and to share our knowledge and work practices to improve our service. It has also given us reason to reflect within our own team on the importance of recording meaningful documentation that will improve the outcomes for children and have relevant meaning to all families. (Early Years Management and Projects)

Critical reflection

At the beginning of the IIP, most participants (62 per cent) felt moderately or less confident in using a reflective journal and critical reflection in their planning and documentation; only 10 per cent of participants reported that critical reflection informed all aspects of their planning (see Figure 7). By the end of the program, participants' confidence in using critical reflection had increased: less than 50 per cent rated themselves as moderately or less confident, 33 per cent rated themselves as having quite a lot of confidence, and 28 per cent had rated themselves informed in all aspects.

Figure 7: Change in participants' level of confidence in applying critical reflection as part of planning and documentation
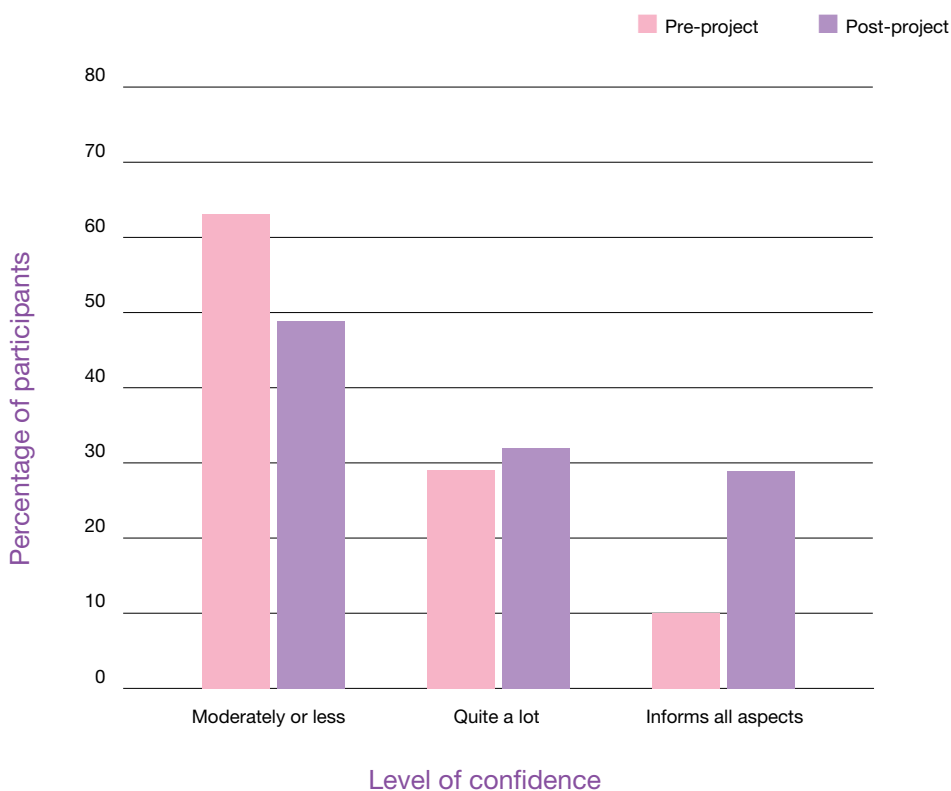
When asked to comment on what was the most significant aspect of their involvement in the IIP, many participants wrote about their appreciation of the importance of critical reflection, and the opportunity and time that participating in the IIP gave them to reflect on current practice and identify challenges and opportunities for change.

Reflective practice is important and needs to be implemented better in our service overall. (Kindergarten)

Being involved in the project has allowed me to reflect in depth on my practices, and to view practice from a different perspective. It has been great to have conversation with others whose views differ from my own. (Early Years Management and Projects)

Assessment for learning and development

Participants were asked to rate their current understandings and practices in relation to nine statements about different aspects of assessment for learning (see Appendix 12), using a five-point rating scale that described a continuum of curriculum implementation from (1) not knowing what the statement means, through (2) knowing what it means, (3) knowing what it means and considering what practice change it will involve, (4) knowing what it means, what practice change it will involve, and being able to explain it to others, to (5) knowing what it means, what practice change it will involve, being able to explain it to others, and implementing it in practice.

At the beginning of the IIP the number of participants who self-rated at level 5 ranged from 19 per cent to 42 per cent, with an average of 31 per cent. By the end of the project the proportion at level 5 had increased from 46 per cent to 63 per cent, with an average 52 per cent of participants achieving this level.

To further explain their ratings, participants were invited to provide a written response to the question, 'How are you currently using the Assessment for Learning and Development Practice Principles in your practice?' A selection of these comments have been included on the following pages to illustrate the changes that occurred as a result of the IIP workshops, and for some participants, the ongoing challenges that they face in their services.

Changes in practice

I have refined my assessment practices and I now use interviews with the prep students to inform me of their understandings of the curriculum. This cumulative anecdotal information has given us valuable information about our teaching and learning practices. (Primary School)

I have been working on outcomes and now I am developing being more mindful and considering how to lead the team to raise this awareness in their practice. I have included Practice Principles in information packs for parents and on noticeboard information for educator teams to peruse. In room workshops I will start conversations about incorporating Practice Principles in documentation, however I am unsure about how to do this. Some educators are recording documentation with having an outcome number or letter identifying which one it is, however I question 'Is this useful and meaningful to parents?' (Early Years Management and Projects)

I am introducing a set agenda item of group activities which focuses on different sections of the framework. This part of the meeting will encourage Early Years Professionals to share their practices with the group. The question I have on the agenda for the next meeting is 'What opportunities are children provided with to engage in conversation about their own learning?' (Early Years Management and Projects)

I provide a visual tool of photos in the form of a diary and written dialogue that is simple, to explain the learning that takes place at experiences at playgroup. I also suggest ideas on how parents can be involved in the practice. This is also shared with the community to support the assessment for learning and development through a digital photo presentation of how adults, parents and/or elders can support children's learning through play and interaction within their community. (Playgroup)

We mainly observe children in their home setting or a familiar setting at child care or kindergarten. I ask children about what they like, to get an idea of their learning style. We affirm parents' knowledge and expertise of their own child. So draw on their knowledge to search for the best intervention strategies. We try to be mindful of various cultures and where the family and child fit, being cautious not to place my own assumptions on families. I am aware of transparency and being objective when working with families to provide best outcomes for both them and their children. I use the knowledge of our ECIS team to further enhance my input in order to give the best possible guidance to families. (ECIS)

My role has involved ensuring all staff are aware of the VEYLDF and all the Practice Principles. We use the guides as a basis for discussion, professional development sessions which focus on information provision and a practical workshop component. Planning for these sessions has been done in collaboration with my senior staff. They take the lead role on presenting the sessions and involve other team members where and when appropriate. (ECIS)

Trialling assessment tools we have developed with staff input. Our tools are evolving in response to our own growth and understandings of the frameworks. Including parents in communicating about, and recording, their children's learning and development. Informal Yarning Circles amongst parents at playgroup – discussing child development, interests for example, books they like reading. (Parenting Support)

We reinforce to educators the importance of drawing on families' perspectives, knowledge, experiences and expectations on our mentoring visits with them to help achieve a holistic view of each individual child's learning and development. We have been gathering templates and resources to help them assess and plan effectively; for example, sending out CDs and books from Curriculum kids, flyers from National Quality Standard Professional Learning Program and run in-house training sessions where each educator brings their documentation to share with each other. (FDC)

Ongoing challenges

Being in OSHC we are time poor and struggle to effectively and efficiently document children's learning. I have attempted a few different ways of doing this but still struggle to successfully do this in a manner that is simple and quick and correct. (OSHC)

I am looking at ways to make to make this more meaningful to other educators and parents. I am also trying to involve the children in this process. (LDC)

Impact

The post-project questionnaire asked participants to provide brief written responses to the question, 'What, if anything, do you do differently as a result of your involvement in this project?' From a review of these brief comments, it was evident that the impact of the IIP centred on four broad areas of change in relation to children's learning and assessment practices. Each of these four themes is illustrated through the participants' own words.

New understandings and practices in assessment for learning and development

My approach to other educators is a little different – I have always been diplomatic but am maybe more so now and I try to be very flexible and open. My observations of children are more specific and I think I listen to and question more carefully and probe a little deeper. My relationships with families are more fulfilling and I'm more aware of giving families more detailed information about children's day rather than the standard comment 'He/she had a good day' – I try to extract information from educators who have been with the child all day about one thing that child has participated in during the day. (LDC)

For me, the child has always been central to my teaching; however, this has been reinforced more so and I am making more time for families. I have always believed in strengthening Indigenous outcomes and partnerships. Through this project I've been able to focus on the strong identity of all children and their awareness of their culture and others. I will continue to develop my practice to embed indigenous perspectives to develop a strong sense of pride, self-esteem and identity. (MCH)

I have also learnt a lot more and am recognising a wider range of learning by each student. (Primary School)

Using the common language of the VEYLDF with colleagues

Utilising a common language from the framework so all team members have shared understanding, incorporate some of this language when describing children's learning to parents, anticipating that this will improve their knowledge of how their children learn. (MCH)

Involving parents in their child's assessment or to support their learning

I can continue to build upon respectful relationships with parents and allow them to have meaningful involvement in the assessment of their children and in particular ensure that my more vulnerable parents feel valued and continue to connect with our service. (MCH)

When I talk to parents at the end of the day I am more mindful of talking about the children's learning. (LDC)

Involving children in the assessment of their own learning

I now take more time in informal one-on-one discussions with children about their learning. (Primary School)

Empowering students to choose whenever possible – what they will write about, what they will read, how they will solve a maths problem. (Primary School)

Network case studies

Case studies are presented for the nine participating networks in the four DEECD regions. Each case-study report presents the key findings for the network, extracted from a detailed analysis of the IIP data and the post-IIP focus-group interviews. These findings are presented as three sections:

1. Findings from project facilitator progress reports
    and participant reflections describing:

    - trends over time

    - promising practices

    - evidence of participants' learning

    - impact on professional practice.

2. Findings from the focus-group interviews:

    - successes and barriers

    - professional learning and practice change

    - being part of a network

3. Final summary identifying key themes that characterise the unique nature and promising outcomes of the IIP for each network. They highlight what participants see as important aspects of change. Each theme is summarised by a quote from participants to let the network 'speak' for itself.

Table 3: A visual summary of key themes is provided below to reference each case study and to highlight the significance of themes identified within each network. This is also provided in Appendix 14.

	Key network themes	Rural City of Wangaratta Early Childhood Network	Yarra Ranges Child, Youth and Family Network	Hume City Early Years Partnership	Sale and Districts Best Start Early Years Network	Baw Baw Best Start Network	Wyndham Child and Family Services Network	City of Ballarat Best Start Network	Great South Coast Early Years Network	Mildura Rural City Council Network
Dominant themes across networks	New ways of assessing were developed that included involving children and families	●	●		●	●	●	●	●	●
	Inquiry questions changed thinking and professional practice – multidisciplinary practitioners as researchers	●	●			●		●	●	●
	Professional learning took place through being part of a multidisciplinary network		●	●	●		●	●		●
	Engagement with the VEYLDF provided deeper understandings of Practice Principles and Learning and Development Outcomes		●	●		●	●	●		
Themes evident in particular networks	New ways of working with children and families with complex support needs developed				●	●		●	●	
	New ways of leading, supporting and motivating colleagues emerged	●					●		●	●
	Active listening and shared language across service types emerged	●	●							
	Shift in focus from activities to child learning outcomes				●		●			
	Holistic assessment to capture wellbeing emerged				●	●				
	Appreciation for the diverse learning communities developed					●				●
	Moving from a position of authority to discussions with families	●							●	

Rural City of Wangaratta Early Childhood Network

The Early Childhood Professional Network Pilot was established in 2010–2011 to increase understanding between early childhood sectors, establish partnerships, provide opportunities and activities to strengthen practice and improve outcomes for children and families in the network area.

The VEYLDF provided a common framework for discussion and collaboration, including the development of an action plan based on the VEYLDF Practice Principles. The VEYLDF provided a common language for partnerships and networking and for professional development planning. This was particularly important to support families and children with complex needs.

The VEYLDF has provided the network with a common vision and goals for early years learning and development. The professional network pilot provided funding for a range of initiatives, including professional learning locally, and an investigation of a best practice model of an early learning and development program linked to schools. As a result of this pilot, it is reported that schools have a deeper appreciation of the importance of early learning and development and a broader role in linking to families and children early, and supporting early years services and programs.

The Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) and National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) data highlighted the link between data sets and the need to develop a coordinated approach to early childhood learning and development. Kindergarten participation rates and MCH and primary school data was used as a basis for network planning.

IIP Workshops

Trends over time

The Rural City of Wangaratta Early Childhood Network built on connections that had already been established. As a result of existing connections, relationships and support structures were evident in the participants' early and active engagement with the IIP workshop materials and with the evidence-based research.

Participants voiced a mixture of concerns and challenges, plus excitement about their plans for the network and their services. For example, in some early years settings resistance to change was described, and in other settings there was concern about whether the language of the VEYLDF was accessible to parents and whether the information in the Inquiry to Implementation Project would build on prior knowledge. A challenge noted by MCH, ECIS and primary schools was the existing requirements to use mandated assessments and the commitment of time required to explore assessment practice in this professional learning. On the other hand, participants were excited about including children's voices in their assessment practices (LDC, Early Years Management and Projects, Primary School) and about forming new professional partnerships (MCH, ECIS, LDC).

The workshop discussions provided opportunities for participants to discuss challenges and leadership opportunities in introducing new evidence-based practices in their services.

In a period of reform, it was noted by participants that there was some reluctance to question longstanding practices. There were some challenges in reshaping daily tasks to make time to consult with children about their learning and in developing reciprocal relationships with families.

These discussions not only led to an acknowledgement of how slow change can be, but also raised issues of power and equity in relation to current practices, and the personal challenges participants faced when leading change. They spoke about the opportunity to reflect, and to review strategies to be more effective; for example, by providing professional development for staff (LDC), developing trust with families (MCH), sharing students' goal setting with colleagues (Primary School), and reflecting on personal leadership styles (MCH, LDC). As a result of using these strategies it was noted that parents showed an increased ability to reflect and a greater understanding of their children's learning (ECIS). MCH participants also noted that parents developed a greater awareness of children's learning, for example, noticing more subtle learning.

Promising practices

The participants' inquiry questions were all related to assessment challenges and assessment practice. The process of identifying a question, collecting evidence and implementing change resulted in a number of innovations in assessment practices, aimed at involving children and families in the assessment process.

- Primary schools devised inquiry questions to find out what children expected to learn at school, and followed this up at later points in the year to ask what they had learnt. They reported that, over time, 'Children speak in a more detailed way about what they are learning'. Teachers were able to link children's responses to the VEYLDF learning outcomes and record how children's views of their learning were changing.

- Prep students' own words were used to interpret learning rather than teachers' words.

- A way was developed for Prep students to self-assess, by asking the children to name the things they are 'good at' and the things they find 'tricky'. Later in the school year the question was changed to 'What have you learnt at school?' The teacher typed the responses, printed the page, and gave it to the child to add pictures and share with parents.

- Children's self-assessment and school learning diaries were used for discussion at parent-teacher meetings, and this helped to bridge the gap between how children and parents discuss learning outcomes.

- LDC educators recorded what children were saying about their learning, what activities they chose and why. From this, new formats for reporting learning were developed and displayed for parents. Educators reported that through giving children a voice, they saw an increase in engagement, confidence, sense of achievement, and the use of goal-setting language. Educators' observations were more meaningful.

- LDC educators were inspired to email weekly reflection letters to families about their children's learning, listen to families' insights about their children, and use this to plan for learning.

- ECIS participants assessed children collaboratively with parents at home, and used information provided by parents to inform assessment.

- FDC involved families in assessment conversations with a focus on everyday learning.

- MCH planned to ask parents about their expectations for the future rather than just focusing on the immediate period of development.

Evidence of participants' learning

Learning in the Rural City of Wangaratta Early Childhood Network was tied most clearly to the participants' exploration of their inquiry questions, not just in relation to the issue being investigated but also to the process of inquiry. Participants shared their growing awareness of the importance of collecting meaningful data, what determined 'quality data', what constituted enough data, and what else might be needed. The challenges they faced in learning how to analyse the evidence collected were also a feature of their reflections.

Participants also sought to link theory to the analysis process. For example, the facilitators commented that 'seeking (to include) children's voices in their assessment has revolutionised how some participants see their assessment processes. It has changed how they view children's roles in the process' and stimulated their interest in post-modern theories, children's agency and seeking different perspectives.

Personal learning was also reported, again based on the process and outcomes of the inquiry question. An early years management and projects participant was prompted to seek more information on children's development prior to school. This resulted in a change in attitude, where the participant reflected on learning behaviour, not just outcomes. For another educator, evidence of learning was about changing thinking, becoming 'more patient, reflective about being an educational leader, and feeling more empowered to discuss with educators possible solutions to difficulties'.

Impact on professional practice

'This model of professional learning has been very successful in motivating participants to engage in critical reflection and make meaningful improvements to their practice' (Facilitator). There were many benefits that arose from the professional exchanges that were part of the network. 'Learning what impacts children later on is paramount to changing the way I practice' (MCH). An early outcome of the IIP was the introduction of new approaches to assessment and to engaging families. MCH nurses and ECIS staff began seeing children in non-clinical contexts, such as playgroups and other services where parents attended with their children, 'working on the floor' with children and families. Participants shared their practice knowledge for engaging families, which influenced change. For example, MCH nurses spoke about using conversational interactions and play-based learning to help parents support their children. There were benefits of the 'shared language' of the VEYLDF, in 'making children's learning visible to families' (FDC). Practice changes also resulted from giving children a voice in their own learning. There was less evidence of structured, educator-led experiences and more diversity in classroom practice, and more parent engagement in planning (Primary School).

Focus-group interview

Eight members of the network attended the focus-group interview, representing the following services: Primary School, LDC, MCH.

Successes and barriers

Successes

A noted success was an emerging sustained focus on reflective practice. Participants emphasised how reflective practices now imbued their work with children, families and colleagues. Participants explored a new range of tools to involve families, with a focus on immediate communication through emails and SMS. This was reported as one of the particularly successful strategies aimed at building relationships with families.

Participants explained how they have changed communication styles with children and families. As a result of the IIP, an awareness of the importance of respectful communication is central to practice now, which includes thinking carefully about how to communicate with all children and families effectively and holistically.

Participants valued the focus on collaboration and used the opportunity of being together for action, such as writing submissions for funding and collective problem solving.

Barriers

A challenge was finding strategies to engage families in children's learning on an ongoing basis. Participants emphasised the importance of having strong relationships with families to support children's learning over time. A point was made about the time constraints for the ongoing process of inquiry.

Professional learning and practice change

New practices that emerged for MCH nurses were communicating and modelling to families that learning starts from birth. A participant gave an example of demonstrating practices such as reading to babies, then encouraging families to observe what the child was interested in.

A focus on children and their families led to the development of a new assessment tool, which involved children's self-assessment. Children were interviewed three times over the course of the IIP with questions such as 'What do you think you'll learn?' and 'How will you know?' The results showed more complex answers given by five-year-olds than were expected by educators, thus challenging assumptions about children's abilities. As highlighted during the interview, patience and commitment were important to improving outcomes through assessment. Participants noted that it takes a year to build up a detailed child's perspective. It was highlighted that families wished to see the child's voice included as an on-going part of children's assessment.

Being part of a network

Participants stated that the network perceives itself as a very capable and supportive body. They emphasised that they had a strong awareness of other services and having been part of the IIP has changed their views about working across services. Specifically, participants commented that being part of the network created an increased awareness of their own service in relation to others. It was noted that, overall, participants have a better understanding of what others are doing and offering, and how their own service can connect with others to create better outcomes for children. For example, educators referred to a shared understanding of learning as a continuum that is developing between schools and early childhood education services.

At times, participants voiced a sense of being undervalued. The IIP was of particular relevance because it included a range of services and created a sense of belonging to a multidisciplinary network of professionals. The network created a sense of leadership capacity for early years professionals.

Final summary

For this network, the five overarching themes that have been identified in this summary highlight the network's emerging capacity for collaboration with others, including children, families and peers. The network's emphasis on inquiry and critical reflection led to practice change across services, including a focus on supporting and motivating staff.

New ways of assessing were developed that included involving children and families

'Consulting with children on what they want to learn'

A major focus of the network was on including children's views on their own learning. Participants spoke about implementing regular interviews with families and with children as part of assessment practices, and using positive language.

Active listening and shared language across service types emerged

'A shared language'

Participants found that the shared language of the VEYLDF supported the development of professional partnerships across service types, allowing for cross-sectoral discussions.

These discussions highlighted common challenges and opportunities, for example in relation to leadership and rethinking practice.

New ways of leading, supporting and motivating colleagues emerged

'My thinking has changed, I'm more patient, reflective, more empowered to discuss possible solutions to difficulties'

A focus of the workshop reflections was acknowledging how slow change can be, and that change can be resisted by colleagues and families. By becoming more aware of different learning styles, changing their approach to working with colleagues, and finding ways to support and motivate staff to think about their own improvement, participants found that confidence increased. For example, LDC educators tried new observation formats and evidence collection tools to assess children's learning.

Inquiry questions changed thinking and professional practice

'Changing the way I ask questions'

Through reflection and cross-sectoral exchange, participants were introduced to other ways of working with families. They were better able to support parents to reflect and think about their children's learning in assessment, such as 'can' and 'is able to'.

Identifying a question, collecting evidence and implementing change led to innovation in assessment practice.

Moving from a position of authority to discussions with families

'Disrupting position of power as experts'

The network members were motivated to address the matter of strong and equal partnerships with families within their services. In working with families, participants sought to gather information from families to inform assessment. In schools, including children's views on assessment provided a means for addressing gaps between how children and families discuss learning outcomes.

Yarra Ranges Child, Youth and Family Network

In Yarra Ranges the endorsement and introduction of IIP was supported by the Yarra Ranges Child, Youth and Family Network.

The Yarra Ranges Child, Youth and Family Network comprises broad representation of agencies that support children, young people and families, with a specific focus on birth to eight years. Its aim is 'To improve the health, wellbeing, learning and safety of vulnerable children and young people and their families in the Yarra Ranges, through community involvement and collaborative planning, coordination and development of services'.

One of the responsibilities of this group is to align planning to the vision of the Yarra Ranges, Child and Youth Strategy 2014–2024.

A number of working groups and local networks report to the Yarra Ranges Child, Youth and Family Network, which includes an Early Learning Working Group for Yarra Ranges Best Start, Supported Playgroups and Playgroups Initiative (SPPI) and an Early Literacy Project.

There is a group of early years networks in Upper Yarra, Montrose/Kilsyth, Mount Evelyn and Woori Yallock. They work together to share information, including new initiatives, resources and service needs. The development of collaborative relationships between service providers is supported.

The Upwey area was selected as a preferred location for the IIP, as it provided a new opportunity for IIP professional learning related to VEYLDF implementation and assessment practice across the early years. It was hoped that the IIP would provide an opportunity to initiate and sustain interest and energy through the professional learning support for emerging early years leaders.

IIP workshops

Trends over time

Participants in the Yarra Ranges Child, Youth and Family Network identified a number of challenges in the early workshops, including limited time to participate, a lack of confidence about seeing themselves as researchers, sharing their inquiry questions, actively involving all educators within their services, and leading others towards change. While many of these were dealt with during the IIP, the facilitators reported that lack of time and resources and difficulties with evidence collection were consistently raised as challenges for participants throughout the workshops.

Despite these difficulties, participants found the opportunities provided by the network and their connections with staff from other services to be highly beneficial. The research and inquiry questions became a shared interest, and participants began to see changes in practice as a direct result of the inquiry questions and the resources provided through the IIP. There were significant discussions about current practices, along with shared examples of evidence. The small size of the network created opportunities for intense group discussions and flexibility during the IIP sessions. Participants set up strategies for meeting between sessions to create sustainability within the network.

By the final workshop, participants stated that the IIP had been very useful – it had stimulated leadership, critical engagement and transformation; generated a better understanding of the VEYLDF and of the purpose of planning and assessment; informed them about what other services were doing, and led to a sense of a common purpose across sectors. The facilitators noted that the workshops had highlighted that participant access to further professional development focused on the VEYLDF would be beneficial.

Promising practices

Participants reported a number of changes and new practices they had introduced during and as a result of the IIP. These included:

- challenging the language that is used in services to assess children's learning

- seeing 'children's voices' as central to assessment practices, and developing questions to help children verbalise their learning (Kindergarten)

- encouraging children to take ownership of learning through student choice and self-regulation (Primary School)

- introducing peer assessment (Primary School)

- making children central to curriculum development, through a sharing of power and decision making (LDC)

- using holistic approaches to child assessment, including the child's 'year-long journey' as a basis for meaningful assessment

- using new tools for learning, such as 'floor books' (Playgroup) and learning letters (Kindergarten)

- using a parent survey to gain deeper insights into the family context (Playgroup)

- introducing a reflective journal with children to support reflection on practice (Primary School)

- using reflection and observation to change the learning environment, implement flexible routines and manage transitions (LDC)

- using the VEYLDF to record students' progress (Primary School)

- providing regular feedback to parents to support children's transition from early childhood education and care to school (Primary School).

Evidence of participants' learning

The small group conversations with a focus on inquiry questions that characterised Yarra Ranges Child, Youth and Family Network were key to participants' learning. For example, the facilitators reported that one of the participants was particularly responsive to the readings and resources provided throughout the project. This information encouraged critical reflection and significant changes to practices. Reflections were shared at each workshop and inspired others to consider the value of research in challenging, informing and reinforcing practice. Another participant made a similar comment regarding progress in learning: 'The inquiry question has been a great way for me to measure progress; it allows me to refer back to my initial goal and identify the changes I have been making as well as the ones I am still working towards'. Participants, in general, were inspired by the readings and resource material, such as the Assessment for Learning and Development Report assessment practice themes, and their research inquiry, and began to be comfortable with the idea of 'self as researcher' (LDC).

Impact on professional practice

In reviewing the overall impact of the IIP, participants highlighted significant benefits and changes in practice. Improved understanding of learning led participants to focus on observing and describing children's progress. This practice encouraged participants to engage with families and children in discussions about learning. The impact on practice was also seen through improved outcomes for children, such as improved family engagement and children having a voice and influencing their own learning. Some of the key changes in practice included making learning visible to families (Kindergarten); realising the great value of partnerships with families (Kindergarten and LDC); making professional connections and gaining a greater understanding of other services and practices (Kindergarten and ECIS); an increased confidence to engage other educators (LDC) and decreased stress regarding assessment and rating processes (Kindergarten).

The impact was seen in evidence given by participants about their collaborative practice with families, including educators 'reaching out' to families, made possible by having good knowledge of existing services to support families with complex needs; encouraging parents to seek support from other families and facilitating conversations between parents; asking parents what they would want their child to learn and how to achieve best outcomes for the child; communicating about children's learning. These practices have changed parents' engagement with the service.

Participants' increased interest in collaborative practice with peers in the workplace, within service types and across sectors provided further evidence of the impact of the IIP on professional practice. This included encouraging others to change and move forward (Kindergarten); encouraging peers to use inquiry questions (LDC); using everyday 'learning conversations' to communicate about assessment; sharing observations of children when in the same space in the service (LDC);

facilitating professional learning for staff, 'sharing practical examples' to implement in their practice (Primary School); using new assessment formats to enable 'all educators to notice and describe children's learning in meaningful and manageable ways' (Kindergarten); reflecting on assessment practices with other early childhood professionals and families to support change and increase engagement.

Focus-group interview

Five members of the network from the following services attended the focus-group interview: LDC and Kindergarten.

Successes and barriers

Successes

Participants emphasised that this network created opportunities for practice change by bringing people together over a period of time. The network was experienced as a positive series of events that enabled professional learning in a community of peers. It created opportunities for shared reflection across services, specifically in relation to supporting children and families with complex needs. For very young children's learning and assessment, participants who worked with infants and toddlers reported that shared network conversations generated new insights for them. As noted by two of the participants, one of the most important realisations for them was that building trusting relationships with families across services is paramount to creating successful outcomes for all children and specifically for children and families with complex support needs.

Barriers

Without a network coordinator to get people together, participants did not consider a future network a viable option. The inclusion of MCH and their significant contribution to family engagement and children's learning and development was highlighted as a future benefit to this multidisciplinary network.

Professional learning and practice change

Participants reported on the introduction of new tools for assessment and children's learning, such as working with floor books. Everyone present at the interview agreed that working with floor books had the potential to provide professional learning opportunities to support the integration of children's voices in learning and assessment. For most of the participants the inquiry question was another important tool that was used effectively to generate individual practice change.

Participants were in agreement that 'the language has changed' as a professional learning outcome of the network. Overall, within and also across services, early childhood professionals now use language with a stronger focus on children's learning. A flow-on effect of the focus on shared language was that conversations and engagement with families have changed. Practice change and professional learning included exploring new strategies for building trusting relationships with families as a foundation for children's learning, such as sharing personal interests with families in newsletters and exploring online communication to engage families in children's learning. This was seen as an effective strategy that led to families approaching educators to share ideas about their children's learning. Conversations about what counts as learning started to take place. Participants

reported on a sense of excitement about shared goals for children's learning as an outcome.

Being part of a network

Focus-group members all agreed that the network created space for new encounters with professionals from other services. Participants stated that they were always pressed for time in their work, and having five workshops scheduled in advance helped them to make the meetings a priority. Prioritising time for professional learning was further enhanced by the opportunity to work intensively with a group of peers in a supportive environment.

While overall every participant found the experience constructive, there were professional anxieties that came to the fore, particularly in relation to providing 'evidence' of children's learning. Participants reported that they were not sure what would be considered evidence, and if the evidence was strong enough. While some early childhood professionals reported that they felt pressure to perform at a high professional level in a group of peers, overall the IIP was considered a highly valued learning opportunity.

Final summary

Across all data, the five overarching themes that emerged for the Yarra Ranges Child, Youth and Family network indicate the network's strong focus on professional learning through inquiry and research, and highlight the emergence of new professional identities.

New ways of assessing were developed that included involving children and families

'Why do we do what we do?'

Across the network, participants' focus on reflection led to deep thinking about the purpose of assessment. Participants asked complex questions that involved children and families ('a ground-up curriculum'). How to do that emerged as an important question for future work.

Participants described extending technology use to make learning visible and reflect on their curriculum and pedagogy.

Inquiry questions changed thinking and professional practice

Becoming open-ended through an inquiry mode: 'What do you see about learning? What don't you see?'

The IIP led to the realisation that the work across different service types is quite similar, yet there are important differences when it comes to detail. Listening to others highlighted that all early years services face similar challenges.

Professional learning took place through being part of a multidisciplinary network

'Talking with others creates the realisation of how much has been achieved, as well as what has not happened'

Network participants spoke about how being away from the job in a different space, and having time to talk and reflect with a 'critical friend' or mentor (Facilitators), supported their professional learning. It allowed them to step away from their day-to-day work and look at the big picture across services.

Participants described significant benefits in practice change: making learning visible with families; appreciating the value of partnerships with families; and reflecting positive changes in everyday interactions, experiences and learning environments.

Engagement with the VEYLDF and EYLF provided deeper understandings of Practice Principles and the Learning and Development Outcomes

'I almost hold it in my hand the whole time'

Participants emphasised the importance of understanding enactment of the Practice Principles as the way into the learning outcomes. Inquiry questions about assessment practices were developed to lead future practice change within and across services; for example, how do we assess collectively to ensure all voices are included? What do children want to learn? What do parents want their children to learn? How do we develop shared learning goals?

Participants described including children's voices in assessment practices: asking questions that encouraged children to think about and describe their learning; and developing new formats with teams to notice and describe children's learning in more meaningful and manageable ways.

Active listening and shared learning across services emerged

'It's good listening to others'

The IIP led to the realisation that the work across different service types is quite similar, yet there are important differences when it comes to detail. Listening to others highlighted that all early years services face similar challenges.

The inquiry-question interviews within the workshops enabled all participants to actively reflect, and share progress and difficulties with peers.

Hume City Early Years Partnership

Hume City Early Years Partnership includes over 28 agencies and 55 individuals who meet regularly, with a common goal of improving outcomes for children and their families.

The partnership began in 2003 with the introduction of the Best Start program in Broadmeadows and has grown in membership and scope since then, now covering the whole of Hume City and with extended coverage from birth to 12 years. The partnership members include council and organisations such as Dianella and Sunbury Community Health Services, Northern Schools Kindergarten Cluster, local child-care service providers, preschool services, early childhood intervention services, primary schools and other non-government agencies such as Lentara Uniting Care, Brotherhood of St Laurence and the Victorian Cooperative on Children's Services for Ethnic Groups (VICSEG).

The Hume City Early Years Partnership aims to:

• champion the importance of the early years of children's development and advocate for the needs of children and families in Hume City

• mobilise resources for children and families in Hume City through community- and capacity-building programs in early years

• promote innovation and improvement in current service systems and existing programs to reflect local needs

• contribute to the monitoring of child, family and community level outcomes in Hume City

• build long-term relationships between partners that support sustainability of action.

Hume City Council has actively supported the implementation of VEYLDF with an extensive series of professional learning forums from 2010 to 2012. These have been planned monthly and have a specific focus on curriculum frameworks and the National Quality Standards for early childhood education and cares settings. The strength of this Hume City Early Years Partnership is the holistic approach to ensure children and families have better coordinated services.

Current challenges are described as ensuring that high quality understanding is embedded in the practice of all early years practitioners.

Several participants in this network also participated in other VCAA inquiry research projects, the Outcomes Project 2010–2011 and the Assessment for Learning and Development Project 2012.

IIP workshops

Trends over time

Engagement with the VEYLDF was identified as a challenge for network participants in a number of services (MCH, ECIS, OSHC, Primary School). For some, the current system was different and not necessarily viewed as complementing the VEYLDF. This posed difficulties in seeking to incorporate the VEYLDF into their assessment practices. In services where the VEYLDF was being used, members noted that they still had a lot to learn with all the changes in early years work (Kindergarten). There were concerns about documentation – 'Is what I am doing with the portfolios effective?' (Early Childhood Education and Care) – and other early childhood professionals' lack of confidence about documentation (Early Years Management and Projects). A further challenge expressed by participants was understanding and working with a diverse family population, particularly in supporting children's learning and making assessment relevant. Reflection on practice was another concern. There was strong agreement that reflection was necessary, but concerns about finding a time and a place to reflect. Individual challenges were also raised, specific to the workplace, about the importance of trust and respect between colleagues in a time of significant reform and change.

Participants found the discussions in the network workshops to be extremely valuable. Over the course of the IIP there was a growing sense of community and trust. Through sharing stories about their own work and how their service had progressed, participants learnt more about the wider Hume community, the challenges and complexities that other services faced, and gained confidence in the directions they were taking. Participants also found it helpful to reflect together on how to address resistance to change. New connections across services were formed, such as between schools and early childhood education and care services to support children's transition, and between MCH and LDC. These partnerships fostered a common language to support families' understanding of their children's learning and development. These and other connections encouraged participants to make plans for ongoing meetings to maintain and extend the network after the IIP workshops ended, to ensure its sustainability.

Promising practices

Participants described many new initiatives in their work with other colleagues, families and children; for example:

- mapping of connections between VEYLDF, EYLF and Parents' Evaluation of Developmental Status (PEDS) at key ages and stages (MCH, Parenting Support, LDC, Kindergarten)

- developing a package on VEYLDF, including staff evaluations to realign their practices with the VEYLDF (MCH)

- developing face-to-face relationships with co-educators rather than exchanging information via documentation (OSHC)

- having reflection time once a week for educators to discuss children's interests, observation and planning (Kindergarten)

- creating of 'talk time' to improve the way playgroups are run and reflecting on what works (MCH)

- surveying parents to get an idea of the best way to pass on information for families and meet their needs (LDC)

- reflecting on kindergarten – a program for parents and children to have input into decision making

- using a 'digital photo frame', which worked well for families with complex needs and those who were hesitant to communicate (Kindergarten)

- supporting children on how to evaluate and plan what they will learn next (Primary School)

- using a learning story format for individual children (Parenting Support).

Evidence of participants' learning

The greatest emphasis in participants' reflections on their own learning and the facilitator's notes was in relation to the VEYLDF. Participants wrote about being able to define learning more clearly and to think about assessment in different ways: 'I have never thought about learning in that way – [what it] feels, sounds, looks like' (Parenting Support). They were also more aware of the community context and had a better understanding of culturally diverse families and families with complex support needs. An MCH member spoke about shifting her practice from a medical model to an educational model, and how she was able to talk with parents about their children's learning: 'I now focus on children's learning and not just health and development when I assess children' (MCH). A parenting support worker spoke about their reflective work with families, explaining how the VEYLDF was relevant for them in terms of outcomes for infant learning and development.

Participants also reported how they had learned to support other staff and early childhood professionals to use the VEYLDF. It provided a better understanding of the value of learning through play and the importance of play in the early years curriculum (Primary School). Discussion of the VEYLDF Practice Principles led to finding new models of assessment based on learning outcomes, for example 'to withhold judgment in learning and reflect critically together as educators' (OSHC). Communication with parents had also become more effective. Greater confidence on the part of early childhood education and care practitioners was also reported;

for example, the inquiry question helped educators be empowered in their own knowledge (Early Years Management and Projects); the evidence-collection tool helped educators re-evaluate their thinking and be less critical and more accepting of parents' involvement (Kindergarten); and teacher efficacy was a focus of the improvement strategies (Primary School).

Impact on professional practice

The positive impact of the IIP was summed up by one participant in the following way: 'I believe the program was extremely beneficial, and a great step forwards to encourage professionals to work together for the benefits of children and families across the early years sector' (Parenting Support). Links between the VEYLDF and professional practice were made by all participants, as they and their staff gained a greater appreciation and understanding of the VEYLDF. Wellbeing was a theme for all services, but seemed to be particularly helpful for MCH nurses as a vehicle for showing other staff the connection between their work and the VEYLDF. MCH nurses gained a greater understanding of the VEYLDF in their work with families and with Koorie leaders. Reflection on practice was another area that showed change. LDC educators created 30 minutes of 'sharing time' to discuss assessment for learning strategies: 'Staff now have reflection time once a week to discuss the children's interests and what they have observed and take more time to plan room and activities' (LDC). Reflection was also used to support documentation that could benefit families. Reflection journals, with photos to show children's learning, were shared with families for whom English is an additional language, providing a positive opportunity to strengthen relationships (Preschool): 'The photo frame has been very successful … as a starting point for conversations with families. This has given me the opportunity to develop bonds with families in a very relaxed way' (Kindergarten).

The impact on assessment practices was a feature of the IIP for all network members. The focus in schools was on how to promote more self-assessment for students, and 'assessment that was useful for children' (Primary School). Giving children the power to control their own leaning saw them become more motivated and enthusiastic.

Focus-group interview

Seven members of the network attended the focus-group interview, from the following Hume City Early Years Partnership: MCH, Parenting Support and LDC.

Successes and barriers

Successes

Developing a shared language was an important outcome for this network. As a participant pointed out, standards across services are not the same, which highlights the significance of using language that is shared to support effective communication across services. Using concepts and understanding from the VEYLDF and EYLF also enabled new language to be shared with families. For some services, changing assessment practices was a successful outcome of the IIP. This involved sharing documentation with families and other early childhood professionals and asking questions about children's learning; being more specific when communicating with families, children and other early years' practitioners; and developing clearer guidelines for how to understand children's learning from more than one perspective. It was acknowledged by all participants that the

inquiry question created thinking about change. Participants pointed out that inquiry means questioning one's own assumptions and beliefs about learning and asking complex questions. The inquiry model led to 'big questions' in relation to professionalism, for instance how to work best with families with complex support needs, in a sector where professionalism is only beginning to emerge.

Barriers

Participants reported that the focus on developing shared language also opened up gaps. When language is not shared, barriers arise. A participant reflected on resistance to change within services and highlighted the importance of finding specific, and often subtle, support strategies for each service as required. It was commented that within services there has been a tendency to focus on deficits rather than strengths. MCH emphasised that the deficit model created barriers for change to children's assessment and learning, and that the VEYLDF provided a model for change and an opportunity for all early years services to align with the frameworks.

Professional learning and practice change

With a high percentage of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) families living in the City of Hume, participants in the IIP have been able to identify particular opportunities and challenges for practice change. Using images has been a success, specifically when linked to learning outcomes. Reflective practice made a difference to some of the participants' sense of professional self and led to ongoing reflective inquiry into practice. Questions such as 'How would you change your practice?' were introduced into informal conversations between early childhood professionals after staff meetings to develop an ongoing focus on inquiry. Participants reported that the IIP raised their level of confidence in the ability to create practice change. One of the interview participants had taken on a leadership role, which led to the realisation that diversity poses particular challenges for improving outcomes for children. This participant stated that a high level of understanding about the challenges around disadvantage is essential for everyone who works with families with complex needs to create change within and across services, and ongoing reflective inquiry helped to develop relevant questions that began to explore complexities.

Being part of a network

As a group, participants reflected on some of the issues that were raised in network workshop discussions. Being part of a network highlighted how challenging and complex the work is, and participants pointed out that many early years professionals feel under intense pressure to respond to constant change. The intensity of the work can lead to indecision and uncertainty, as reported by participants. Big questions were raised in the network meetings about benchmark qualifications for educators and the need for ongoing professional learning. All of these complex issues were seen to have a huge impact on children's learning and development and were considered to be an integral aspect of the ability to develop innovative assessment for learning. Being part of the network created the opportunity to collaborate and thus supported a stronger sense of professional self.

Final summary

Across all data, the four overarching themes from the Hume City Early Years Network speak to its emerging ability to engage with complex issues, and to develop shared language based on the VEYLDF, to support outcomes for children within and across services.

Professional learning took place through being part of a multidisciplinary network

'Being in a community and not alone'

Stronger communication was reported between early childhood and primary settings and other services such as OSHC and parenting support. Sharing and collaboration with other early years professionals, across all services, was 'desperately needed' (Primary School).

Engagement with the VEYLDF provided deeper understandings of Practice Principles and Learning and Development Outcomes

'Creation of "discovery time" using VEYLDF outcomes'

Participants who had not had prior exposure to the VEYLDF, such as parenting support staff and MCH nurses, reported that they had gained greater understanding of the VEYLDF in their work with families, and how the VEYLDF could be relevant for them in relation to outcomes for infant learning and development. LDC and kindergarten participants learned how to support educators to use the VEYLDF in relation to description and discussion of Practice Principles, finding new models of assessment based on learning outcomes, and communicating learning in effective ways to families.

Shift in focus from activities to child learning outcomes

'At a playgroup I was assessing an 18-month-old and discussing his progress with his mother. He brought a puzzle over to us and shared his learning by manipulating the puzzle pieces. I was able to use this to talk to his mother about his learning'

Many participants spoke about building a common language to support families' understanding of their children's learning and development. They applied diverse assessment forms and documentation approaches to show children's progress in visual and verbal, or written, forms. Using photos was a powerful way to show children's learning and an opportunity to strengthen relationships with families and children.

Holistic assessment to capture wellbeing emerged

'Now I focus on children's learning and not just health and development when I assess children'

Participants defined assessment in different ways, which for some meant a shift from what children do to what children learn, and a refocusing on using learning stories and photos as evidence of what children learn and how they meet learning objectives. Educators spoke about meaningful planning. There was also a focus on assessing children's learning through conversations with parents to explore the learning context of families. Schools introduced children's self-assessment and found that when children were given the power to control their own learning, they became more motivated and enthusiastic.

Current professional links and partnerships include Best Start Wellington and Wellington Municipal Early Years Plan 2012–2015.

IIP workshops

Trends over time

Throughout the IIP, participants voiced significant concerns about time pressures and the lack of time to fully engage with policy changes and the VEYLDF, or to read and reflect on the IIP material. There was also an acknowledgement by LDC, integrated children's services, primary school and kindergarten participants that questioning one's own practice was a new concept and quite challenging. In keeping with this concern, the facilitators reported a resistance to trialling new tools and moving away from current approaches and practices'. An area of particular concern, for all participants, was to see themselves as leaders. There was a view of leadership as coming from outside and being imposed on them. Leadership and reflective practice were identified as challenges; in particular, how to lead others. The confusion about their role as professional and pedagogical leaders continued to be discussed throughout the workshops. This influenced participants' practices and growing capacities in responding to the implementation of the VEYLDF.

At the completion of the IIP, however, all the participants agreed that the network workshops had contributed to their understanding of themselves as leaders in their respective fields of work, and that an effective leader for change must be reflective at all times. They felt that networking and collaboration were crucial.

Throughout the workshop materials, participants had been introduced to different leadership styles and the specific leadership skills needed to facilitate change. This understanding on the part of the participants as 'actors of change' rather than 'recipients of change' contributed to their taking a critical look at policy statements and requirements, ensuring that they were not just implementers of policy, but also contributors to it. It was noted that leading change is dynamic and takes time.

Promising practices

Participants reported a number of new initiatives that were useful in addressing the challenges they described. Some of these were:

- working as a team rather than doing everything by yourself (Kindergarten)

- looking more deeply at how children learn and how we teach to inform assessment (LDC)

- involving children as a way of innovating the curriculum framework

- changing the program display to reflect a focused learning process (LDC)

- discouraging excessive use of computers by children to support face-to-face collaboration and address isolation (LDC)

- using supporting services such as MCH, interpreters, FKA Inc to engage families (Kindergarten)

- engaging parents at a personal level rather than distributing forms (LDC)

- using advocacy to inform the community about the significance of investing in family and children's wellbeing.

Evidence of participants' learning

Much of participants' learning centred on their growing appreciation of assessment, as they gained new insights into how different services assess children's learning and development. Early years management and projects, kindergarten, MCH, inclusion support, and school participants began thinking about assessment in new ways, developing an understanding of assessment as a multiple process and an appreciation that children can be viewed from many perspectives. There was a realisation that setting a prescribed template for assessment limits children's learning (Early Years Management and Projects). This learning was extended into practice by developing collaborative approaches to assessment (all participants): 'allowing others to be part of planning and documentation' (Kindergarten), trying new assessment tools (Kindergarten), engaging parents in assessment (all), and incorporating children's perspectives into assessment (all) and children's voices in documentation (LDC). Workshop 2 prompted new learning and a revised approach to the assessment and documentation of children's wellbeing. Kindergarten participants began to take a holistic view of wellbeing (for example, including consideration of staff wellbeing), and applied this by considering a variety of levels and approaches by which it could be assessed.

Another area of learning for the network was time management. This was most evident in the ways that participants found to assess children's learning effectively through collaborative and planned approaches to gathering assessment information. For example, LDC spoke about planning for parents' participation rather than leaving this to chance or engaging them on an ad hoc basis. There was a growing confidence in participants to modify assessment tools or choose tools that fulfilled their needs.

Leadership skills and awareness of what it means to be an effective leader was another area of learning. Open communication came to be understood as a process for building trust and working collaboratively. Also identified was an appreciation of different approaches to collaboration, placing more focus on relationships, networking with other professionals, facilitating team meetings and the imperativeness of staying connected.

Impact on professional practice

At the commencement of the IIP, MCH and LDC participants identified the need to review how they worked with families, to discuss children's learning and to inquire about children's learning at home and in other settings. This area of professional practice was embraced by all members of the network, and many examples of the impact of their efforts were reported. There was an increase in the number of conversations with families (all participants), engagement of complex families through rethinking practice (MCH, LDC), supporting parents' input into the assessment process (Kindergarten) and the continuous pursuit of ways to include parents (Primary School). One of the added benefits of this was that participants found that the contribution from families and other interdisciplinary professionals could help reduce pressures on time management.

A further impact was on early childhood professionals' practices in assessment and their promotion of children's learning. In relation to assessment, the workshops led to a transformation in participants' views of documentation, moving away from collecting many observations and documentary artefacts (quantity), to a focus on quality, and the intentionality and richness of assessment and documentation.

There was a move to spending less time on documentation in order to spend meaningful time with children (LDC). In terms of learning, children's voices became a central focus of their learning and assessment. The participants spoke about 'taking children's openness and feelings seriously to inform practice' (LDC).

Leadership and teamwork were another way that professional practice was influenced by the involvement in the IIP professional learning. A kindergarten member reported that 'the role of educators and co-educators had changed dramatically' through working as a team. Among the network members, there was a focus on maximising collaboration and communication within the service and across sectors to network with other professionals. Enhanced communication led to collaborative goal setting. Participants reported a decrease in their workload because of sharing the responsibility for setting goals for children with co-workers and children. A further benefit for participants was the shift towards seeing change as self-initiated rather than externally driven.

Focus-group interview

Four members of the network attended the focus-group interview, representing the kindergarten service.

Successes and barriers

Successes

New professional conversations within the service have improved the way participants engage and plan with families. Participants reported that they now meet with families to talk about what is important for their children. They prioritised the conversations with families to create space for this to happen.

For these participants, the introduction of a specific tool, the Y chart for learning (Y = see the learning, hear the learning, feel the learning), provided a catalyst for practice change within the service. This tool was used extensively to think about children's learning and development with a new focus on detail. For example, participants asked, 'What does play look like in this kindergarten?' This question created a focus for shared conversations within the service.

Critical reflection enabled ongoing self-assessment of practice changes. Participants commented that learning to use critical reflection as an assessment tool to analyse children's learning is now part of ongoing professional learning.

Barriers

During the interviews, participants identified the challenge of keeping consistent communication between services, and of accessing existing information and communication, to support children's learning and development across services. Participants emphasised that this was especially relevant to their work with families that have complex support needs. Being part of a multiservice network helped to address this issue but success relied on the continuity of the network.

Participants noted that a barrier to practice change was their lack of knowledge about diversity. For example, in some families the grandparents are the main carers, which may generate specific expectations in relation to communication. It was suggested that professional development in an IIP format, relating to equity for all families, could build consistent communication between services as a first response to this challenge.

Participants identified as a potential barrier the strong sense of 'who belongs' within this community. A network community can focus on creating opportunities that are open and inclusive of all services and settings.

Professional learning and practice change

Participants referred to practice change as a direct outcome of the IIP. One of the outcomes they experienced was a growing awareness and better understanding of how to communicate with diverse families. Professional learning in the network created opportunities for changes in assessment of children's learning. Using photos to discuss learning with complex families was a practice change that helped to overcome some of the language barriers.

Emerging leadership capacity was highlighted. A participant who works with two assistants in a kindergarten reported on an increasing focus on colleagues' strengths, rather than the previous focus on areas for development. This led to the realisation that one of the assistants had great skills with special-needs children; planning for learning was changed to draw on the assistant's strength. This was described as an example of how the IIP amplified professional learning within a service.

Participants stated that professional conversations within their service generated shared professional knowledge, which allowed the team to plan for better outcomes for children. One of the strategies to achieve this was to share, and then discuss, ideas from readings. IIP workshop discussions had a flow-on effect: 'We used a reading on learning communities as a basis for discussion.

Being part of a network

All participants agreed that network meetings allowed for reflection, and appreciated the IIP as a place to meet and discuss their practices with others on an ongoing basis. They reflected that the sharing of ideas and practices with others generated a much stronger sense of the context of their work, and of its place within the wider community.

Participants reported an increase in shared leadership with colleagues and families.

Final summary

Across all data, the five overarching themes that emerged for the Sale and Districts Best Start Early Years Network demonstrate its commitment to deepening understandings of children's learning and assessment from multiple perspectives, and growing awareness of the complexities involved in working with others, including diverse families and colleagues.

New ways of assessing were developed that included involving children and families

'We include children's voices … they used to be quiet, now they say what they are learning and what is important to them'

Participants demonstrated a new understanding of the complexity of child development. This meant that no single set template could sufficiently measure children's learning and development. Assessment requires diverse assessment tools and approaches, drawing on the expertise and input of children, families, educators and other professionals.

Participants noted that children's involvement in documentation involves time and innovation.

Professional learning took place through being part of a multidisciplinary network

'Feeling of professional connectivity' versus 'working in silos'

Through the workshops the participants increased their knowledge about other services and how they operate, which helped to dismantle their feelings of professional isolation. The network has also led to understandings about how and where early childhood work intersects within other areas and services, which was seen as important for planning for multiple forms of assessment, that is, including input from families and other professionals.

Time to reflect and rethink assessment practice supported participants to gain insights into what other services do and why. The overarching realisation was that the key focus of all settings is to foster children's learning.

New ways of working with children and families with complex support needs developed

Contemporary family dynamics demand new ways of relationships: 'Letting go of my own stuff and looking at how relationships are important'

The network participants noted that family structure and dynamics in Australia have changed, in particular with the increasing number of families whose first language and cultural background is not English. They felt that the old way of networking and communicating with families no longer delivered support for parents to be part of their children's learning process. New ways of developing cultural relationships are required to reach out and support families with complex needs, so that they can be part of the change process.

Holistic assessment to capture wellbeing emerged

'Building a sense of wellbeing for the whole centre'

An important revelation reported by participants was related to how they conceptualised wellbeing. Rather than assessing this in terms of the child alone, there was a shift towards a holistic assessment in which wellbeing was seen in relation to children, their families and their educators. A major concern for all the participants was feeling rushed through the change process. As the workshop progressed and networking and teamwork intensified, there was an appreciation of how teamwork is a valuable tool for reducing time spent on assessment and documentation and injecting efficiencies into their work.

Participants described the challenges faced by families from day to day, and how focus on wellbeing supported families to affect changes to support learning.

Baw Baw Best Start Network
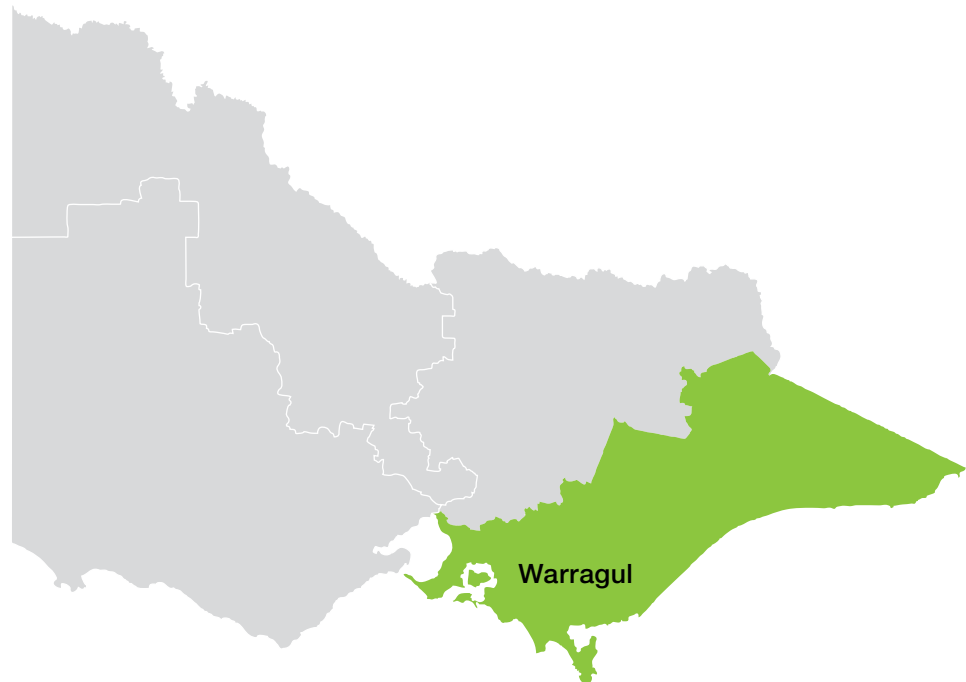
The Djillay Lidji Aboriginal Best Start Partnership and executive group is made up of several mainstream services: Ramahyuck Aboriginal District Corporation, Aboriginal service providers, early childhood professionals, and community members.

The Djillay Lidji Aboriginal Best Start partnership and executive group oversees the programs and manages the Best Start community facilitator roles in Latrobe Shire and Baw Baw Shire. The Best Start program is a Victorian Government early years initiative. It supports families, caregivers and communities to provide the best possible environments and experiences, and health, education and care services for families in the critical years from pregnancy to the early years of school.

The Best Start community facilitators maintain connections with Koorie children and their families to support engagement with a range of early years services and to maintain culturally inclusive practices. Their role includes coordination of playgroups, management of speech therapy screenings and follow-up appointments, linking families into kindergarten enrolments and transition to school services. The Know Your Midwife program (MCH) provides an important early health and development assessment link for families. There is a strong emphasis on prevention and early intervention including antenatal care.

IIP workshops

Trends over time

Despite the fact that many participants did not work directly with children, the facilitators noted that there was broad recognition of the opportunities to improve support for children and families through collaborating with a diverse learning community and network, and supporting peers and colleagues. The metaphor of the 'rugby scrum' visual was used to think about the team around the child and family. Participants agreed there was a need for collaboration between sectors. Four areas were identified as challenges for professional inquiries to work on in

the network: promoting the VEYLDF as a way to develop shared understandings; assisting children's learning; providing evidence of learning and supporting learning; working in partnership with families; using reflective practice and leading reflective practice in the workplace. Participants from the Aboriginal Best Start Partnership raised the specific challenge of improving network participants' connections with Koorie families to uphold culturally inclusive practices and to develop network expertise across early childhood services. A further goal was to support greater 'engagement with Koorie parents with the school community and to support teachers to explore and teach culture, heritage in the classroom' (Facilitators).

Over time, participants who were not connected to the network gained a clearer understanding of the network, the challenges it faces and the collaborative work engagement with Koorie families and children in the region. Partnerships formed across services, local government, and with schools. Learning from each other was a highlight of the network meetings; as described by one participant, it was 'brilliant to hear the passion, observations and focus of others'.

Leadership was an ongoing theme for the participants, as they addressed questions such as 'Who are leaders? Am I a leader?' Participants provided examples of their skilled leadership in the approaches and strategies they used to support their teams and workplaces to really engage with the VEYLDF.

Promising practices

Linking the VEYLDF and assessment was a strong theme in the workshop reports. Several participants described ways in which they had introduced visual forms of documentation of children's learning that help families to 'see' the learning that was taking place. This area of promising practices supported a sharing process with families that enabled them to talk together about the learning that was taking place at home. Participants reported that they were:

- starting to use video recording for their room, to record assessments and collect observations: 'When we do video recordings, children want to be involved and other children want to have a look, so we get the child's perspective on what they see in the video'
- working together with a local kindergarten to develop a 'story board' that incorporates the language and concepts of the VEYLDF. The story board is focused on Aboriginal children and families and the importance of collaboration for improving outcomes (Early Years Management and Projects)
- embedding the frameworks through identity-focused learning, embedding Indigenous culture and language into the curriculum with the support of local elders. Some of the pedagogical strategies included children writing and drawing in journals (Primary School)
- setting up a 'learning space' in the waiting room of a Koorie health service, and using the language of learning in the antenatal discussions with mums (Midwifery)
- collaborating to develop a new flyer that included the language of the VEYLDF (Early Years Management and Projects)
- transitioning children to OSHC through 'buddying' (OSHC).

Evidence of participants' learning

Network members described new learning in relation to their improved understanding of the VEYLDF, children's learning and development, reflection and inquiry. For those who were less familiar with the VEYLDF at the commencement of the IIP, participating gave them 'greater confidence to work with others who know the framework' (Parenting Support). A participant who provides pre- and post-natal support to mothers in a Koorie health support service explained that after Workshop 1 she was very unsure about her participation in the IIP, as she couldn't 'see [herself] in the content'. She went on to explain that she kept reading the VEYLDF and other hand-outs and 'a light bulb went on and I could see how my work does fit with the content and the framework'. For others who were more familiar with the VEYLDF, there was a greater appreciation of the ways it can be used in all early childhood and maternal and child health services (Early Years Management and Projects). A teacher in the early years of school focused on how the VEYLDF fits with the AusVELS curriculum in schools and how the VEYLDF can be used for planning in the school settings. The workshops gave them a deeper understanding of the five outcomes (ECIS) and specific knowledge on identity and wellbeing (all). The facilitators described deep reflective conversations across the group about wellbeing and involvement as important elements in children's learning. It was acknowledged that responsive relationships with children and their families were highly valued and important elements in effective practice. A participant described her experience, as a parent, of discussions at parent-teacher interviews, referred to as 'learning conversations' that included asking what she wanted or hoped for her children.

Many participants reflected on how the IIP had strengthened their ability to assess children's learning and development. They were 'thinking more about what and why, and the evidence of learning' (Primary School) and evaluating the effectiveness of documentation (ECIS).

Learning about reflection and inquiry was expressed as follows: 'I have developed a deeper understanding of the usefulness of reflective practice and keeping a reflective journal. Readings have helped broaden the range of reflective questions I can use. I still need to learn more about how to help young children develop the language to reflect on what helps them learn' (Primary School). I recognise 'the need to always reflect on your work practices' and develop new ways to work with families. 'I feel as if I have just scratched the surface' (Early Years Management and Projects). And from a participant who was new to the professional inquiry approach: 'thinking about the effectiveness of my inquiry project was about finding the process and not the answer' (Primary School).

Impact on professional practice

The impact of the IIP was seen most strongly in the ways that participants and services were engaging families. However, others also set up new systems for staff, for example, the Multifunctional Aboriginal Children's Service provided opportunities for staff to experience networking in visits to other services to see how they work. An OSHC provider set up visits to playgroups, school classrooms and other services as a way of improving community connections.

Participants provided many examples of how they were engaging families. A school participant reported that she was allowing time for conversations with the parents throughout the day as she had informal encounters with them, modifying

the way she communicates to support the way they view their child as a learner and themselves as a key partner in the child's learning and development. An ECIS representative was being proactive in building relationships with parents, and as a result families were more engaged and informed about the child's learning and development. Early years management and projects members said they encourage service providers to make changes to service delivery to be more family friendly, and for playgroups to work towards empowering families to be aware of themselves as their child's first and foremost teacher. An OSHC participant explained how she would improve this aspect of practice by using email to communicate with families prior to starting in the program and throughout the year. Engaging with families who tend to rush in early in the morning and rush out late in the day is a particular challenge in OSHC, and staff need to 'think out of the box'. The participant described looking for informal opportunities to connect with a parent and begin to have conversations about how the child was settling in at the service. This example prompted a network discussion about the pedagogical features of her practice, including: finding new ways or new places to have conversations with families; using information from families to inform planning for individual children; using routines to support children's learning; and building relationships with adults and peers.

Focus-group interview

Four members of the network attended the focus-group interview, representing the following services: MCH, Primary School and Koorie Engagement Support.

Successes and barriers

Successes

For this network, a success was the ability to consider the change-over-time model that was introduced at one of the IIP workshops. Realising that significant change might take three to five years enabled participants to consider long-term goals. All participants emphasised that the wellbeing aspect of the curriculum frameworks had made them reflect on their work in new ways. This included trialling new approaches to encourage better communication with families, such as using language that helped families to absorb information in a meaningful way and making families feel welcome in spaces that were comfortable and inviting.

Awareness of the strengths of individuals and groups, and the influence of the Koorie community, elders and leaders, was described by participants in the interview as very sustaining. Participants considered the deepening of awareness, and the understanding of others that the IIP generated, as a tangible success.

Participants stated that in terms of assessment the most significant challenge was to support individual children's learning holistically. In the network they could have conversations about holistic assessment for children's learning. The MCH participant stated that EYLF and VEYLDF strongly support holistic learning and development, and practices across services should reflect this. The network provided valuable structural support for initial conversations about multiservice practice change.

Barriers

The interviews highlighted that getting services to adapt to working with children and their families in culturally appropriate ways was important, but not always easy for participants. It required flexibility, sensitive communication and openness to

diverse cultural practices. Participants who worked with children from birth stated that they talked about the holistic aspect of wellbeing to families to communicate that wellbeing is about learning to look after one's self, as well as looking after others. This became an important discussion with families as part of antenatal care.

Professional learning and practice change

A participant described using the inquiry approach in school to generate open-ended learning for children by encouraging them to help each other and share knowledge.

For professional learning, the inquiry approach shifted the search for answers to a search for pertinent questions: 'What is a question we need to ask?' This was a very effective approach and a way of beginning to work together within services. A participant commented that working with the question was a process that required commitment over a period of time. The practice change that was identified for this participant included using a professional inquiry as a technique by asking families questions instead of reporting information about their child's learning and assessment.

Being part of a network

Participants commented on the enjoyment they got from getting to know professionals from other services and the shared learning opportunities that opened up through the IIP. Interview participants greatly appreciated that the network membership was inclusive and reflected that the network workshops provided opportunities for everyone to speak and to be heard. Another participant emphasised how powerful it was to hear stories that created a sense of belonging to a larger community of peers. The emphasis on inclusion was considered particularly important to create a network that encourages trust and open exchange of ideas.

Finding time and space for meetings was a concern for continuous networking, and the issue of funding to support involvement of diverse services in a future network was raised. Participants agreed that the inclusion of Child Protection Services would be useful for a future network.

Final summary

Across all data, the five overarching themes that emerged for the Baw Baw Best Start Network are evidence of the participants' willingness to learn from each other and to work towards holistic understandings of children's learning and development.

New ways of assessing were developed that included involving children and families

'Changing the antenatal environment has become a prompt for discussion around the five learning and development outcomes'

Participants described how the increased use of visual information promoted more sharing with families about their children's learning and development. Central to conversations in the antenatal period was the introduction of a pictorial book. This was positioned strategically at the consultation with families to include conversations around their baby's capacity to respond to their new world.

Inquiry questions changed thinking and professional practice:

'It's all about reflection'

Over time, participants began to include 'critical' and 'Where next?' in their reflections. Questioning and professional inquiry techniques were improved and this made it possible to research together. Working with an inquiry question was valued as a way of affecting change in practice. It was acknowledged that it was a process requiring commitment over time. A participant described using an inquiry approach with families to deepen the exchange of information, rather than just reporting to them about their child's learning.

Engagement with the VEYLDF provided deeper understandings of the Practice Principles and Learning and Development Outcomes

'It isn't about taking the VEYLDF and "ticking the child off against the outcomes" but it's about finding the child in the framework'

Through the shared language of the VEYLDF, participants were able to inform parents about learning outcomes and affirm the parent as the child's first teacher. There was a greater appreciation for the way the VEYLDF could be used across all services, for example, to support conversations about children's learning in MCH for personalised learning programs in primary school.

New ways of working with children and families with complex support needs developed

'Working with staff, management, elders and KESOs to improve the way Indigenous cultures, traditions and language is embedded in the curriculum'

School teachers spoke about working with Koorie cultural advisors to improve children's understanding of Koorie cultures, histories and traditions and through this build an improved sense of their own identity. Children have a strong desire to learn more songs and words in their language and can make connection with the texts about Koorie culture. Often this learning is student driven and happens informally.

Appreciation for the diverse learning communities developed
'Indigenous educators have powerful knowledge to offer staff and students'

Similarities and differences in ways of thinking about identity and wellbeing, and about being, belonging and becoming were a feature of the network conversations and reflections.

There was a greater appreciation for the way the VEYLDF could be used across all services. For example, the support conversations about children's learning in MCH and for personalised learning programs in primary schools.

Wyndham Child and Family Services Network

The Wyndham Child and Family Services Network was convened in 2012 to address the growing need for a planned and collaborative approach to the development and delivery of programs for children aged between birth and 12 years. It is facilitated by Wyndham Council.

Demographics in relation to children and family services

Wyndham experienced the largest and fastest population growth in Australia in 2011–12 (7.6 per cent). Areas include Point Cook, Werribee, Hoppers Crossing, Tarneit, Truganina and Wyndham Vale. The high growth in population across the municipality is expected to continue for the next 10 years.

The network comprises a strategic alliance, community forum and working groups.

Specific activities and strategies are undertaken by the network to support implementation of the VEYLDF. This includes an annual series of professional development sessions, which began in 2012. Strategies developed by the working groups provide a shared pedagogical language across the early years. This is supported, for example, by a high level of engagement from the school principals' network.

Current working groups develop and trial innovative ways of working through the sharing of specialised information, skills and knowledge about areas of common interest. This includes a focus on transitions, professional development and early intervention. Current members include child-care centres, family day care schemes, family support agencies, government departments, primary schools, kindergartens, early intervention services and welfare agencies.

IIP workshops

Trends over time

An initial key concern for this network, and a challenge for the facilitators and the network participants, was that many were not working directly with children. This required interpretation of the professional learning and its relevance and application across a wide range of participant positions and responsibilities. A key challenge identified by participants was to bring others (colleagues, staff members) 'on board' in relation to understanding and engaging with the VEYLDF Practice Principles and outcomes. Another challenge was the term 'assessment'; participants felt that assessment for learning could not be covered directly by them, only indirectly through those they support. Reflective practice was also identified as a challenge, as was 'getting the inquiry question right'.

Participants acknowledged the challenge they faced of 'being a leader in times of change' and identified their need to focus on understanding the role of leadership (Kindergarten, ECIS) and building leadership skills (ECIS). The skills learnt in the IIP workshops, such as those of reflection, could be shared with colleagues to reinforce the importance of reflective practice.

Topics for reflection included improving engagement with the VEYLDF across the network. For some, this area affirmed existing knowledge of the VEYLDF (ECIS, Early Years Management and Projects), but for others who were less familiar with the VEYLDF it raised service-specific questions (Playgroup, MCH, Primary School). The network used the VEYLDF as a catalyst and informant for more integrated and collaborative connections and approaches across and within services. Over time those participants who were unfamiliar with the VEYLDF said they felt more confident about 'its intentions, big ideas and language' (MCH); were 'no longer frightened of the language of the framework' (Parenting Support); and were putting the VEYLDF into practice (Playgroup). Changes were also reported by participants who were familiar with the VEYLDF; for example, being aware of the assistants' knowledge of the VEYLDF (Kindergarten), embedding VEYLDF in documentation (ECIS) and 'moving from developmental language to learning language' (Primary School). The facilitator reported a 'depth of conversations in this network about the language of the VEYLDF, and an increasing ability to articulate pedagogy'.

Identifying inquiry questions took a lot of time for some participants, who were taking them back to services and working them out with their staff. However, there was a high level of engagement with the inquiry approach, particularly around the topic of what learning looks like. Conversations about gathering evidence of learning included children's interests (Primary School), transcribed conversations and meetings with families (Kindergarten), changing the focus from academic to social outcomes to take a more holistic approach to learning (Primary School), changing the focus from development to learning and taking a whole child approach (Parenting Support), and consideration that learning is different in different settings (OSHC).

Participants expressed a commitment to continuing the network in some way in the following year and were taking steps to maintain contact by email.

Promising practices

Participants reported a number of examples of using the IIP materials and resources to trial new approaches in their own practice, such as using the child's voice in documentation, trialling the evidence-collection tool, and using the video clip that demonstrated a relaxed conversation during snack time in an LDC service, to implement intentional teaching in the everyday experiences. As the IIP progressed, however, they began to describe changes that were more related to their work as leaders. Examples include:

- making links between the VEYLDF and the AusVELS (Early Years Management and Projects)
- planning a facilitated professional development session to cultivate joint language and understanding (Early Years Management and Projects)
- designing a poster to convey information from the VEYLDF (Playgroup)
- including small-group observations of children's learning (Primary School)
- seeing unique aspects in the implementation of the LDC program, different from school and kindergarten (LDC)
- questioning evidence and reflecting on its quality (Early Years Management and Projects).

Evidence of participants' learning

Learning outcomes for the participants were tied to their growing knowledge of the importance of reflective practice for personal and professional change, rethinking assessment practices, and adopting the new VEYLDF language for naming learning outcomes and assessment practices. They emphasised the value in learning from other services, both within sectors (for example, visiting other LDC services) and across sectors (through the network). Shared samples of evidence, brought to and discussed at the IIP workshops, 'provided new insight about what different services do to assess children's learning and development' and also increased participants' 'appreciation and respect for people's work'. In this network there were constant references to their work with others and how their learning was being used to inform colleagues and other staff. For example, a playgroup coordinator spoke about increased awareness of the adults' role in children's learning and working with parents to help them see the value in attending playgroup. Similarly, a parenting support worker wrote: 'The language I used when educating parents [has changed]; the focus is no longer on development but on how and when children learn'. Support for FDC educators was also expressed: 'I have gained information that enables me to observe, write support meeting notes as I have in the past and link them to the framework'.

Impact on professional practice

Participants reported on the impact of the IIP in terms of the change in practices or new thinking that was occurring in their service. The focus for many was on working as a team; for example, taking ideas from the IIP back to colleagues and services such as occasional child care; challenging others about using outdated metaphors about children, such as 'blank canvas', 'empty vessels' and 'sponges'; using workshop materials to provide ideas about how to build the team's understandings of curriculum and communicating this with families (OSHC); challenging colleagues about how to involve children in self-assessment (LDC); involving co-educators, previously known as assistants, in the implementation of

the framework (Kindergarten); and developing skills of reflective practice among the team (Integrated Children's Service). There were many instances in which this approach brought further challenges for participants; for example, an FDC member indicated that the tool had to be simplified for her group and that there were ongoing challenges in documenting for children with disabilities. Others spoke about resistance from staff and the need to work on new strategies to engage them. Ongoing difficulties were expressed in going from developmental language to talking about learning.

The following examples illustrate the positive impact of the IIP:

- 'we are using the VEYLDF as a holistic framework in our school' (Primary School)
- learning stories now changed to focus more on learning; 'emailed families more information about our program and how children learn through play' (LDC and Playgroup)
- more positive involvement of families – seeing their children's learning more about 'what is taking place, where and how' (Supported Playgroup)
- involving parents in assessment
- including all previous documentation in thinking about children's transition (Primary School)
- 'evidence collection has moved from observing children's learning outcomes to using children's interests to support learning' (Primary School).

Focus-group interview

Four members of the network attended the focus-group interview, from the following services: Early Years Management and Projects, Parenting Support, LDC and MCH.

Successes and barriers

Successes

Participants reported that being part of the IIP helped to build relationships with other services, and with families. Participants mentioned that they appreciated the opportunity to listen to the point of view of others and link this to services. Being part of the network meant being exposed to different ideas; it allowed participants to proceed through 'trial and error' and try different strategies.

Knowing the VEYLDF as a result of involvement in the network made a huge difference and one participant said, 'Now we speak the language of the framework to the parents'. This was seen as a particularly important success with culturally and linguistically diverse families. Participants emphasised their renewed awareness of the importance of respecting culture. Others commented that the inquiry approach was a new and powerful tool that was particularly effective in their interactions with families. It was highlighted that one key area for exploration now was how to enable families to have a voice in the assessment process.

Barriers

For some participants the network provided the opportunity to review practices within services. Older practices and assumptions began to appear as barriers to practice change. For instance, the network foci encouraged participants to use the VEYLDF for children from birth. One participant now introduces the VEYLDF in workshops for new parents, with emphasis on the fact that learning starts from

birth. This introduces an educational approach to families in contrast to the nurses, who 'have the medical model, which is based on milestones'.

Professional learning and practice change

In their comments on outcomes for children's learning, participants focused mostly on the effect of the network on individual practice and also on the importance of linking services. Participants considered practice change by linking with other services, for instance to help mothers with post-natal depression, and having networks that include multicultural workers.

Learning about the VEYLDF supported improved outcomes for children. A participant commented that the views of families are now included in a reflective practice diary. Another participant used learning stories as a new approach to assessment and included children's and families' voices. Participants considered this approach to generate new opportunities for working together with children and families.

The practice of increased reflection encouraged educators to do things differently, as reported by one participant, who felt increased confidence when trying new strategies.

Being part of a network

Interconnections between services were identified as a factor that could lead to improved outcomes for children. For instance, participants highlighted that being connected with MCH was important. They suggested that in terms of future outcomes they had formed links and shared understandings across and within services. They had discovered how important it was to know 'where other services were coming from and where they were going'. The network generated respect for the work that others do.

Participants thought there could be additions to the network and it would have been particularly beneficial to include colleagues who were working directly with children, or as they said, 'staff on the ground'. It would support emergent leadership and foster collaborations. The group members commented that as managers and leaders they worked with people in isolation. Being part of the network created a sense of belonging and connectedness.

Final summary

Across all data, five overarching themes emerged for the Wyndham Child and Family Services Network. These themes reflect the network's foci on deepening their work with the curriculum framework within and across services, and on developing and integrating new perspectives of 'the child' into assessment and practice.

New ways of assessing were developed that included involving children and families

'Some see assessment as only about pre- and post-outcomes and not the distance travelled, and what happened in between'

The focus of assessment was no longer on development, but on how and when children learn. Participants noted that using the language of the VEYLDF not only changed the way evidence was collected, but that the language changed to

talking about learning. There was a greater involvement of others (children, family, community) in the assessment process.

Professional learning took place through being part of a multidisciplinary network

'Seeing members across the network working together and developing an understanding of each other's services for the benefit of children is very inspiring'

The focus on a multidisciplinary approach to the VEYLDF was highly valued in building respect for others and a common language. The network focused on sharing approaches across service types, with attention paid to how to share information on learning.

Engagement with the VEYLDF provided deeper understandings of the Practice Principles and Learning and Development Outcomes

'I use the VEYLDF every day in my reflections and in my language'

For some, the IIP affirmed existing knowledge; for others it acted as a valuable tool for change. Because the VEYLDF is common to playgroups, preschools, LDC and schools, the network fostered shared understandings about relations between play and learning, and changes from the language of development to the language of learning.

New ways of leading, supporting and motivating colleagues emerged

'Challenging outdated metaphors about children'

Because many participants did not work directly with children they needed to see themselves as leaders of change through supporting and empowering others. For example, participants did this by sharing learning from the IIP with staff and families; encouraging staff to include parents' voice within the program and assessment; and facilitating professional development of a joint language and understanding.

Shift in focus from activities to child learning outcomes

Playgroup renamed as a 'play and learning group'

Participants affirmed the importance of play for learning, became aware of what learning looks like within 'play' and thinking about how that can be shared with families. Playgroup leaders were able to use the VEYLDF to help parents see the value of play and playgroups as places for learning.

City of Ballarat Best Start Network

The City of Ballarat is the auspice for the Best Start community facilitator program as part of the funding and service agreement with DEECD.

The City of Ballarat Municipal Early Years Plan (MEYP) 2010–2013 brings together feedback from council, the local community and stakeholders. It strives to achieve positive outcomes for children's health, education and wellbeing in ways that acknowledge partnerships and the importance of early childhood development. The plan also acknowledges the importance of actively engaging children in decision making with the broader community of Ballarat (from Municipal Early Years Plan 2010–2013).

The partnership for the Ballarat Best Start project was established in July 2003–July 2006. A partnership agreement with Ballarat City Council, Ballarat and District Aboriginal Cooperative, Ballarat Community Health Centre, Ballarat Health Services, Centacare and Child and Family Services guided the work of the partnership from July 2003.

In 2010, the second round of community consultations guided the development of a new MEYP and Best Start action plan from 2010 to 2013.

The MEYP stakeholder working groups include parents and professionals, who aim to promote the health, wellbeing, development and learning of young children. Ongoing projects include Child Health, Data and Evidence, Engaging Schools, Integrated Services, Early Years Literacy and Numeracy, Early Years Access, and Engaging Children.

IIP workshops

Trends over time

At the early stages of the IIP, participants were concerned about taking on a professional inquiry-based approach to learning and found it a challenge to formulate a professional inquiry question. Further challenges were: to explain the inquiry question to colleagues and engage them in the work; uncertainties about collecting evidence; and what constitutes evidence for each specific inquiry question. However, participants' reflections and the facilitator's comments showed that their professional inquiry questions were a highly valuable vehicle for facilitating change. Reflection was a key component of the process of professional inquiry and taking the time to think critically and reflect was seen as a positive outcome of the IIP by participants in all services. There was a sense that this expanded and shifted their thinking, rather than seeing it as 'add-on' work. In the words of the participants, the professional inquiry question 'gave permission for time to think and to encourage others (the broader team) to do the same' (ECIS); the inquiry question approach 'now informs all my thinking and work … it has been internalised as a way of working' (LDC, Facilitators); and 'in being reflective during the inquiry process I came up with more questions to think about' (Primary School).

Another feature of participants' reflections on the IIP was in relation to assessment, particularly a greater use of the VEYLDF learning outcomes and a greater focus on collaboration with children and families. An LDC educator wrote, 'I feel it is so important to reflect, change if needed, and move with the children as they learn'. School teachers and MCH nurses were using 'the language of learning and wellbeing', despite other mandated requirements that needed to take precedence. An FDC educator spoke about 'using the learning outcomes to observe children's development and change over time', and added, 'This is an ongoing process I am still working on'. Participants noted that the 'new language' made it possible to have more meaningful conversations with parents. FDC, parenting support and school participants described how they were making links between their services and home to foster a collaborative approach to assessment for children's learning. The benefits of this approach were voiced by a participant: 'The local community are beginning to feel empowered to become involved with their child's learning. There is a breakdown in barriers. Families are engaging with their children and showing an interest in what they are learning. Children are demonstrating more positive learning behaviours because they know that their family is interested in them.'

Engagement with a diverse learning community was identified as part of the changes that occurred for the network participants, particularly in relation to their roles as leaders in their own services. For a parenting support worker, 'Leadership means to influence and motivate others to work towards goals and work within a change process; we have a leadership role regardless of our position'. An LDC educator became more aware of others' ways of working and gained a better appreciation of being a team player: 'I have learnt as a leader to be more accepting of how others delegate time to their professional educational roles – because what I see as important may not be so to them'. There was some discussion, however, on how the benefits of a multidisciplinary focus were emerging more slowly in some services. It was agreed that there were opportunities to broaden knowledge and understanding and to strengthen multidisciplinary collaboration within the MEYP.

Promising practices

New ways of practice were tied to the work participants were undertaking in the area of children's learning. These focused on documenting progress in children's learning and engaging families and children in this process. Highlights of this work are listed below:

- OCC educators began using 'pictorial folders' to help settle children into the child-care setting

- OCC created visual 'toy books' to show what toys and activities were available, to support children's agency, using play opportunities to explore ideas and support children to make choices

- LDC found new ways to share information with families (for example, by email), to achieve more open communication

- FDC reported 'taking more notice of interactions and conversations between families and their children, between families and myself, and between myself and children' as a way of thinking differently about what 'involvement' looks like

- parenting support included families' perspectives on early learning, setting up a partnership approach that helped parents value education and their role as their child's first teacher

- MCH began working differently with parents, finding ways to incorporate treatment (for example, prone position) into daily routines, discuss barriers, and use observation to discuss what the baby is doing and address misinterpretations (for example, smiling, not 'wind').

Evidence of participants' learning

Participants' learning was seen in relation to a renewed focus on children's learning and development, and new sources of evidence, such as findings from brain research and AEDC results for the local region, which could be used to identify pockets of disadvantage. Participants' increased knowledge about how the brain works, what is perceived as 'learning', and levels of speech and language deficits in areas of the community motivated them 'to bring about high expectations and quality learning for each child' (MCH, FDC). Translation of these goals was seen, for example, in the preparation of a resource book about early neurological development from birth to three years. The new information also motivated personal goals, such as 'to challenge myself further, to provide children with opportunities to reach their full potential' (LDC).

Learning about the work of other professionals in the network was an important outcome of the IIP, expressed by ECIS in terms of 'understanding their role and how we could work together to reach outcomes for our children'. Setting up new processes for learning together, within and outside of the network, was another indication of participants' excitement about their professional learning. MCH, parenting support, FDC and LDC organised a peer-support group to talk about documentation for children's learning in different service types. An ECIS worker spoke about 'learning with principals, school staff and family support' as a way toward 'breaking down barriers for Koorie children'. MCH and school participants took their learning from the IIP into their worksites, sharing ideas about the VEYLDF and resources with other MCH nurses and classroom teachers.

Impact on professional practice

Participants' reflections showed that professional practice had been impacted through themselves as individuals, and in their workplaces through the changes they initiated with staff. Personal impact is illustrated, for example, in two comments on reflection: 'I've introduced a daily critical reflective journal … to personally reflect on each day's events' (LDC); the IIP 'made me realise that this area (reflective practice) was lacking in my daily thinking about what worked or didn't, why, and how to make changes' (FDC). More generally, participants commented on their work with colleagues:

- having 'conversations with staff to assist them to clarify their thinking about children's learning', which has 'helped to ensure clarity in what is being communicated to families about their children's learning' (LDC)

- placing a 'higher focus on analysis and reflection when mentoring educators, helping them to understand what it means', for example, with the early years planning cycle (FDC)

- emphasising the importance of early relationships to attachment and learning; 'to support parents and professionals focus on the process of learning' (Parenting Support).

The impact on practice in the workplace was also seen by the move towards taking on a wider variety of assessment tools to assess the holistic needs of the child and put a 'greater focus on the learning that is occurring' (LDC). Participants also spoke about finding ways to present learning to parents, such as through providing sessions for them (Primary School) and 'building partnerships with parents; building their trust in their children's learning' (ECIS).

Focus-group interview

Five members of the network attended the focus-group interview, representing the following services: Playgroup, Koorie Engagement Support, Occasional Child Care, ECIS and Parenting Support.

Successes and barriers

Successes

The emerging interconnections between services were highlighted as important by all participants during the interview. Participants noted that there was a broadening of thinking and reflection about best outcomes for children when the network came together. A measure of the success of the IIP was the forward thinking that began to be articulated during the focus group interview. Participants stated that the multidisciplinary nature of the IIP had opened up new possibilities for working differently together in the future.

In their roles as leaders, participants stated that the IIP supported a shared awareness of the complex issues for families with young children in the community. Participants described growth and change in supporting improved outcomes for children and families with complex support needs. Participants described using pictorial representation of routines as an example of an especially useful new strategy. Ways of communicating with families broadened.

Another success was sustained work with the VEYLDF. Developing increased familiarity with the VEYLDF across services enabled participants to develop stronger relationships with families and supported the use of shared language.

Participants realised that every service used the new knowledge differently and it was finding out about these differences that made the network conversations useful and strengthened participants' ability to sustain each other in the network.

Barriers

Participants were keen to develop future interconnections between services, but they identified that this needed further investigation to become a successful strategy. In discussion, it was suggested that collaborative efforts by the network could assist families on waiting lists more effectively.

Professional learning and practice change

Participants identified targeted observations as an important new tool for assessment of children's learning, with potential for improving outcomes for children. The development of shared language based on the curriculum frameworks was considered a valuable aspect of practice change that generated increased engagement with families.

The professional inquiry question was highlighted as a significant new tool for professional learning. Participants emphasised the potential of working with a shared professional inquiry question. Having something that they all investigated would give the group cohesion and create a shared focus for collective professional inquiry. It was noted that since they were all working with the same families, a shared question could lead to positive future practice changes within a multidisciplinary network.

Being part of a network

Some of the participants said that they were already working across a number of networks. The IIP 'meeting space' was what attracted them to this network. The importance of being in the same space and working collaboratively was highlighted during the interview: this included discussions about the opportunity to develop further playgroups to support Koorie families. During the interview, collegial support for this possible initiative was offered immediately, cards were exchanged and promises made to help set this up. This was a direct result of being in the network, and provided evidence of the effectiveness of a collective, multidisciplinary approach.

Final summary

Across all data, the five overarching themes that emerged for the City of Ballarat Best Start Network illustrate the network's emerging ability to consider assessment for children's learning in a holistic manner, and to work collaboratively across services.

New ways of assessing were developed that included involving children and families

'The local community are beginning to feel empowered to become involved with their child's learning'

A key focus of the network was acknowledging that the family is the first educator of the child, which led to new ways for engaging in learning discussions with families.

Inquiry questions changed thinking and professional practice

'A launching pad of ideas'

There was broad acknowledgement and appreciation by all participants of the need for and benefits of reflection. By setting aside time for professional inquiry, thinking critically and reflecting became internalised as a way of working.

Professional learning took place through being part of a multidisciplinary network diverse learning community

'Share a "good news story" in team meetings to showcase success and highlight practice examples'

Through participating in the IIP workshops, participants gained a better appreciation of being a 'team player' and saw leadership and their role as leaders differently. They were more aware of others' ways of working and were able to highlight different examples of practice in team meetings.

Engagement with the VEYLDF provided deeper understandings of the Practice Principles and Learning and Development Outcomes

'Distinction between developmental and learning conversations is very powerful and will support practice change in the workplace'

Participants spoke about the benefits of having a new language to use when talking about children's learning with parents, and when talking with children about their own learning.

New ways of working with children and families with complex support needs developed

'Wellbeing indicators between the infant and parent in the midst of a complex risk assessment'

Participants found new ways to support parents of children with developmental difficulties, using family-centred Practice Principles and building learning opportunities into everyday routines and activities, rather than as 'treatments' or 'therapy'.

Great South Coast Early Years Network

The Great South Coast Early Years Network encompasses five local government areas: Corangamite, Glenelg, Moyne, Southern Grampians and Warrnambool, and is representative of an open network of agencies working with families and children up to the age of eight years. This includes a focus on antenatal supports. Representatives are from local governments, Victorian Government departments, and community-sector and health organisations.

The Great South Coast Action Plan, developed in 2012, has a focus on:

- strong leadership on early years
- a capable and sustainable regional early years workforce
- a network that supports child health, wellbeing, learning and development
- quality, accessible and affordable early years services.

Joint efforts have included information sharing and networking, implementing centralised client booking systems, dealing with early years workforce issues jointly, and identifying and implementing regional and sector-specific actions. This has included a shared investment in a new network facilitator role to encourage joint efforts between agencies across the region.

IIP workshops

Trends over time

The initial stages of the IIP highlighted some of the challenges participants faced in relation to assessment and documentation, for example, in aligning assessment and purpose (Kindergarten), assessment processes for children with additional needs (ECIS), having limited opportunities for collaboration in assessment (FDC), conveying information on assessment and documentation (Integrated Children's Service), collecting too much information for effective use of it (Kindergarten), and the need for more tools to support assessment (Early Years Management and

Projects). While participants had a basic understanding of and embraced the VEYLDF, concerns were raised about practices not aligning with its objectives (LDC, Parenting Support); how the VEYLDF supported culture and working with Koorie children and families (Playgroup); and how to align the VEYLDF with assessment for children's learning at different ages (Playgroup, MCH). Some participants expressed a lack of familiarity with professional inquiry-based learning (LDC, Parenting Support). Others had concerns about negativity and resistance in services about time for critical reflection. For some early childhood professionals, critical reflection was seen as separate from professional activities (FDC).

The IIP workshops allowed participants to review their approaches to assessment by using a professional inquiry–based approach to inform assessment (LDC, Parenting Support); using evidence-based assessment, aligning assessment within the VEYLDF (Kindergarten); and taking a holistic approach to assessment that involves families, basing assessment on context and making assessment a family-centred practice (Early Years Management and Projects, MCH). As a result, participants reported a greater engagement of families with the assessment process; for example, seeing families as crucial to effective assessment (OSHC) and making assessment relevant to family and child goals (ECIS). Educators developed a greater understanding of how to gather evidence – making it more focused – and how to insightfully use analysis of assessment documentation to inform practice (FDC, LDC). Educators were also more able to recognise what is meaningful documentation (LDC).

Participants reported a general sense of eagerness by all staff to embrace change (ECIS). The use of the Educational Change Model has led to the recognition that everyone is at a different point and level of understanding of change implementation (FDC). They noted that every practice is different, change is a challenge, and it needs time to effect it. Some participants were able to make significant sustainable changes, while others were taking initial steps to implement change. One service devoted staff training days for discussion about change (Parenting Support). Reflection was a key aspect of this process, and was clearly an important feature of the changes that took place over the period of the IIP, particularly collaborative reflection and valuing each other's views (Integrated Children's Service).

A central trend was that collaborative partnerships with other professionals benefited all children and their families. It was clear that this approach was most important for children with additional needs and their families in accessing a mix of services. Creating a common language (through the VEYLDF) across sectors helped families to see continuity between services, and actively engage in shared dialogue to improve service delivery (all participants). Furthermore, by incorporating the language of the VEYLDF in reports, information was shared across services more effectively.

Promising practices

Evidence of changes towards more effective assessment practices and more positive outcomes for children has emerged as a result of the IIP. Some of the outstanding features described by participants were:

- taking the time to reflect on practice as key to quality and successful change in assessment practices (FDC)

- seeking input from the educators to support and increase involvement and ownership of the program (OSHC)

- modifying tools and strategies to improve collaborative approaches to assessment (OSHC)

- incorporating flexibility and focus into assessment (ECIS, FDC)

- informing program practices with assessment and documentation (Playgroup)

- constantly changing tools to find the right fit, using the language of the VEYLDF in documentation and communication, regularly observing/documenting meaningfully, and conducting robust analysis to inform practice (LDC)

- initiating and assisting in the development of a Koorie playgroup network in the region; supporting five other playgroups and mentoring others to 'use the VEYLDF to plan activities and provide family-centred practice'

- introducing a new adapted assessment tool for use in the recently established Koorie playgroup network

- giving staff ownership of the program, respecting their voice and seeing families as crucial to effective assessment (OSHC)

- aligning the learning goals of each child and family to the VEYLDF learning and development outcomes (ECIS)

- incorporating children's voices in assessment (Kindergarten)

- drawing more on context to be innovative in the ways we plan for children's learning (Parenting Support)

- changing the ways we communicate about the VEYLDF and assessment with colleagues (FDC)

- becoming more reflective as an educational leader to help educators reflect on assessment for learning (FDC).

Evidence of participants' learning

Over the course of the five workshops, substantial evidence of learning emerged. Examples of this professional learning process differed according to service and participant. For some, the recognition of assessment as a component of learning (ECIS), and the acknowledgement that assessment is not separated from learning (Early Years Management and Projects), were powerful insights. For others, the deepening of knowledge and extending of understandings of the VEYLDF generated new learning about planning and implementation of programs to provide rich contexts for authentic and holistic assessment (Playgroup). Engaging more deeply with children's learning, and thinking about the integration of children's voices in assessment provided opportunities for pedagogical leadership (Kindergarten). That learning cannot be determined without assessment and documentation was a powerful insight (Playgroup). All participants recognised research as key to assessing children's learning (Facilitators). They also developed shared understandings about children's learning and development across services, and shared assessment practices with other services. This increased their knowledge of how to collaborate within and across services and increased confidence.

Impact on professional practice

The impact on participants' professional practice across and within services was described in terms of improved communication with families, particularly in relation

to documentation and learning conversations that build positive relationships with families. Encouraging families to be part of assessment processes and to see the learning that is embedded in these activities opened up a whole new view of learning, with parents seeing everyday play at home as learning episodes (Playgroup). Participants also highlighted the improved communication, cross-collaboration and sharing of information across a number of services who work with the same children and families. Creating a common language across sectors (through the VEYLDF) enabled families to see continuity between services and to actively engage in shared dialogue to improve service delivery. The increase in shared understandings about children's learning and development that arose through this collaborative sharing were seen as beneficial for practice.

Specific changes in professional practice included:

- making children's learning more visible through documentation and daily conversations (LDC)
- ensuring consistency in assessment reporting (ECIS)
- using reflective practice informed by research to bring changes to practice (FDC)
- keeping a sustained focus on reflection in team meetings (Kindergarten, MCH, Parenting Support, ECIS)
- creating a culture of educator participation in planning (OSHC)
- aligning work with kindergarten teachers to provide a unified voice in practice (Playgroup)
- developing a common vision with others (ECIS).

Focus-group interview

Seven members of the network attended the focus-group interview from the following services: LDC, Koorie Parenting Support, Playgroup, ECIS, Gunditjmara Kindergarten and MCH.

Successes and barriers

Successes

During the interview, all participants agreed that the increase in communication across early years services and between individual services and families was a successful outcome of the project. Trying new tools, such as learning journals, led to a sense of empowerment and generated enthusiasm for practice change. Participants reported that change instigated during the IIP is continuing, particularly with a focus on reflective practice to develop inquiry-based approaches to learning, using the VEYLDF outcomes to communicate with families.

Overall, participants reported that the IIP challenged previous notions or concepts of assessment for children's learning. An example was provided regarding Koorie children and their learning about identity. A participant described beginning to think differently about what identity may mean from a Koorie perspective. This reflection enabled planning in a more reflective way for children's learning.

Barriers

A participant described the challenge of working with the perception that 'education only starts at three years of age'. For this early childhood professional, the IIP generated a new focus on assessment for this age group when in the past 'We never thought about assessing birth to three-year-olds'. Participants

suggested that due to the geographical spread of the Great South Coast region, people find it particularly difficult to come together. This was highlighted as a barrier to practice change and professional learning.

Professional learning and practice change

Participants reiterated during the conversation how highly they value reflective practice. For some, professional inquiry and reflection has now been firmly embedded into practice. It has led to practice change; for instance, it helps to set priorities. Participants reported that reflection helped to clarify what is important ('I had to simplify things, focus on only two outcomes every couple of weeks'; 'We want to be flexible – we use visuals to support families with literacy needs'). For other participants, an embedded professional-inquiry model assists them with dissemination of knowledge. This creates a basis for further shared professional inquiry with colleagues in services.

Being part of a network

Participants valued the opportunity to be part of the network and to learn about other services' practices in a group of peers and over a period of time. The interview highlighted that there is strong interest in sustained professional learning in this area. For the IIP, at least one participant drove for more than an hour each way. As one participant pointed out, 'People in rural areas are very committed to training'. Participants referred to anecdotal evidence where staff set aside entire weekends or evenings for professional learning on the few occasions when events were offered.

Participants saw the IIP as an exceptional opportunity to access sustained professional learning. What was highly valued, according to focus-group members, was the local aspect of the project. The facilitator knew the area and was able to connect with participants through local knowledge. Suggestions from participants to address the difficulties of accessing relevant professional learning were to offer 'webinars' ('So you can link in from your office'); enabling staff to have regular time off for professional learning ('We currently expect staff to do professional learning out of hours; what about curriculum days – invest in staff having time to do this'); and organising multiservice network learning centrally, with local delivery (that is, follow the IIP model). A final comment from a participant was, 'I thought it was great to be asked our opinion. For us to be targeted, we were glad to be part of the opportunity'.

Final summary

Across all data, five overarching themes emerged for the Great South Coast Early Years Network. The themes reflect the deep commitment to professional learning and to reflective practice to improve outcomes for children.

New ways of assessing were developed that included involving children and families

'Having a common language for what we do as professionals, seeking information from others can improve practice'

The project has enabled participants to not only use shared language, but to also communicate children's learning and development to families in meaningful ways. Using the language parents understand places value on their children, which in

turn enhances collaboration with families and encourages participation in children's assessment and planning for learning.

Inquiry questions changed thinking and professional practice

'Inquiry questions have led to self-discovery of information, to better understanding of the role of different services, and have highlighted the importance of research in improving practice'

The IIP provided the opportunity for participants to review approaches to assessment, gain insights into how to focus assessment on VEYLDF outcomes, and think deeply about practice, understanding that there are varieties of ways to go about assessment.

New ways of working with children, and families with complex support needs, were developed

Assessment and observation must be 'well-crafted and conducted to meet specific needs of children and families'

The participants indicated that the workshops afforded them the opportunity to learn about how assessment should be tailored to children's learning and development, rather than as a process of record keeping. By effectively assessing the learning and shared learning practices of children with disabilities, educators can support the learning and development of all children, irrespective of their needs.

New ways of leading, supporting and motivating colleagues emerged

'Effective change requires a visionary and committed leadership'

The participants identified leadership as a complex field of practice that should not be restricted to traditional conceptions of institutional administration, because such practices make leadership a constant struggle and fluctuation, compounding difficulties for educators and stakeholders. Modelling of good pedagogical leadership to other staff members and families plays a crucial role in leading change and advocating for the importance of the early years.

Moving from a position of authority to discussions with families

'Effective reflection is based on intersubjectivity'

Participants repeatedly mentioned reflective practice as a way to deal with the emergent field of assessment, reporting and good networking to improve children's lives. Regular meetings with families, and reflective practice informed by action research in which parents are part of the process, can bring new learning and changes in practice.

Mildura Rural City Council Network
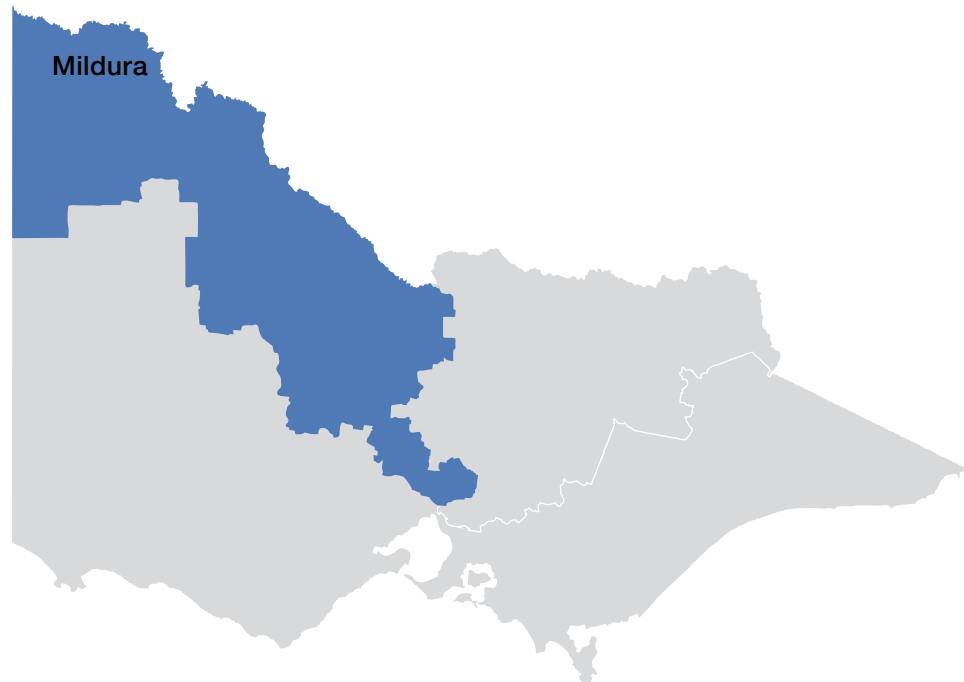
The objective of the Municipal Early Years Plan (MEYP) is to improve the health and wellbeing of young children and their families residing in the largest municipality in Victoria by:

- increasing support for young children and their families
- focusing attention on vulnerable families
- promoting ease of access to services
- increasing the responsiveness of services and efficient use of other resources.

Mildura Rural City Council plays a distinctive role across the early childhood sector to ensure that services are delivered as part of an overarching, coordinated system. This is designed to support families and children in their local communities and is responsive to their diverse and increasingly complex needs.

The cohort of residents includes children and families in:

- a strong urban structure (Mildura and its environs)
- satellite communities (Red Cliffs, Irymple and Merbein)
- an outer regional setting (Ouyen)
- remote and isolated towns (Murrayville, Underbool, Walpeup, Nangiloc, Colignan and Werrimull).

The MEYP supports the work of the Mildura Rural City Council in its cooperation with the community and service providers to identify and support the needs of children in their early years. Mildura has a significant role as a regional centre for north-western Victoria and the regional areas of New South Wales and South Australia. (Adapted from the Mildura Rural City Council Municipal Early Years Plan 2010–2013 Final Report, May 2011, p. 5.)

IIP workshops

Trends over time

All sectors participating in the Mildura Rural City Council network began with a focus on information needs in relation to the VEYLDF, particularly in relation to outcomes and principles. This moved over time to reflecting on what was meant by this new language. That is, what were the concepts and what did they mean for practice? Importantly, participants reflected on how the new language could be embedded into everyday interactions in field and with their teams. Challenges of incorporating the VEYLDF language into non-education contexts were identified. Over time, discussions moved to working with co-educators 'to begin to unpack the language of the VEYLDF, developing a deeper more complex understanding of how to assess children's learning and development' (Facilitators). Participants spoke about the benefits of using a shared language based on understandings of the VEYLDF, although for ECIS there was still a struggle to make the language of the VEYLDF become part of their everyday language.

Reflection was a key focus of this network, particularly reflection on assessment. Participants described pressures of accountability in early childhood education and care services and the time it takes to develop confidence about assessment for learning. Positive assessment practices were described, including the focus in kindergarten on the child's voice being embraced by staff, and the MCH 'Green book', which illustrated cross-service documentation of children's learning to bring together diverse expertise, perspectives and ideas. (This refers to the MCH *My Health and Development* book that is used with all families to keep a record of children's milestones, health, growth and development throughout childhood.) Over time, participants reflected more deeply on assessment, for example, on ways to support learning with families, and involving children in identifying 'what they want to learn' (Kindergarten).

The professional inquiries undertaken by participants also led to their critiquing documentation for assessment, thinking more purposefully on assessment documentation, what was gathered, what learning looks like, what is important to document, and how better assessment protocols could be engineered to give families and children a voice in aiming for authentic assessment. A kindergarten participant described the sequence in their thinking about assessment, which by the final workshop was about assessment practices focusing on 'meaningful reflection'.

Promising practices

There were a number of examples of participants sharing assessment and learning resources and practices they had instituted in their services:

- using AEDC statistics for the region to generate strategies for working better with families
- taking new families with young children on 'tours' of early childhood settings so that they can be helped to get across the threshold for the first time and familiarise themselves with play-based environments
- consulting to prepare a booklet, *Getting Ready for Kindergarten: A parents' guide*, as part of the Mildura Best Start project
- supporting transition for vulnerable children (Primary School)

- changing assessment practices in primary school so they are inclusive of parents and children (Primary School)
- using a team approach to share assessment and plan for lessons (Primary School)
- holding monthly educational leadership meetings, where field officers brainstormed the role of an educational leader (Early Years Management and Projects)
- strategic linking of services such as MCH, FDC, LDC, kindergartens, special services and primary schools, to keep a central goal at the forefront
- attending learning circles for educators in the region.

Evidence of participants' learning

Participants' learning was underpinned by the workshop material, their reflections on assessment and practice, and their professional inquiries. One of the key learnings that emerged early, in Workshop 1, was about new understandings of educational change and the time it takes for change to occur. There was also a sense that the workshops helped participants understand the child within wider contexts, including the socioeconomic circumstances of families with complex support needs, and how this might be taken into account in designing innovative practices. Reflection was seen as a very valuable learning tool, particularly in supporting self-learning and a sense of being a leader in early childhood settings, 'Through better understanding of myself (professional practice), I was better able to support others. As a leader, I have learnt that it is a joint effort, it is about my journey and supporting others through their journey' (LDC). Reflective practices also emerged as a learning outcome, as evidenced by comments on needing to use reflection time more purposefully. For example, through the professional inquiry question, combined with reflection, an early years management and projects participant was not only able to engage her group to join the professional inquiry and work towards the outcomes, but also to establish the role of an educational leader in these services.

Impact on professional practice

A key impact identified by the participants was the strategic linking of services, a sharing of resources, and a 'connection of services together'. Participants spoke about how this helped to start discussions with families about children's learning, with a move towards family-centred practice and greater collaboration. A multidisciplinary approach was taken by primary schools to develop new ways of supporting transition by getting all stakeholders on board. Connections between services also generated a joint project and supported the sustainability of the network. Primary school retention and engagement were identified as significant challenges in the Mildura region. This created the opportunity for the network to pool collective professional knowledge for creating resources to demonstrate the importance of early learning to the community. Finding time was difficult within busy services, but it was acknowledged that 'making time within workplaces to discuss children's learning' was critical to practice change. It produced valuable outcomes, particularly when involving a broad group of people, including families and assistants. It was noted that a collaborative approach to assessment made learning more visible to all. Taking a professional inquiry focus on assessment was a valued way of concentrating on changing practice and involving others. Participants identified a need for quality documentation, rather than quantity, and

underlined the value of assessment being informed by research. FDC participants reported a significant change in assessment practices: focusing on learning, knowing how much documentation was enough, and creating new systems of documentation that were more meaningful.

Focus-group interview

Eight members of the network attended the focus-group interview, from the following services: FDC, ECIS, Primary School, LDC and Kindergarten.

Successes and barriers

Successes

Successful outcomes included new conversations about learning and assessment within and across services, and increased familiarity with the VEYLDF. Participants reported improved levels of confidence in relation to their practice through deeper understandings of expectations and the development of shared language. They built common language within the network and then used team meetings within services to further discuss new concepts. They reported that this strategy had a flow-on effect in improved communication with families, especially in relation to children's wellbeing. Network discussions allowed for reflections to be articulated in a group of peers. A success of the network was the broadening of perspectives through the sharing of ideas and through collective discussion and reflection. Participants realised that across services, similarities in practices exist. This realisation broke down perceived barriers between services and created new opportunities for conversations between them. Network participants reported on a change to mind sets that had occurred for many early childhood professionals, who are now realising that quality means ongoing inquiry and improvement.

Barriers

A barrier noted across services was the lack of time to converse with families, due to children travelling by bus from outlying communities. Geographical barriers were identified as a challenge to accessing professional learning opportunities, and it was emphasised during the interview that the Mildura region has specific characteristics that have to be considered by providers to ensure the relevance of professional learning to participants. There was strong awareness of the enormous challenges for families with complex support needs. To better understand and support families' specific challenges, participants suggested that networks can work towards being more inclusive and reflect the diversity of the full range of services across the early years.

Professional learning and practice change

Over the course of the IIP, participants developed new tools to support improved outcomes. An example was a transition pack for children to ease transition to primary school. Another example was a learning journal that was used to provide continuity between the service and home, and to encourage families to actively participate in children's learning processes. Using documentation that focused on the child as a learner was highlighted as a valuable tool for children's assessment. Participants singled out collaboration as a successful new strategy to support practice change and professional learning. In one instance, video sharing was used for staff curriculum discussions. Video sharing generated professional learning for the group, with the explicit aim of creating better outcomes for children.

Participants highlighted the importance of continuous reflection, documentation and inquiry to improve children's outcomes. Ongoing inquiry was identified as essential for generating practice change from the ground up, to nurture leadership capabilities.

Being part of a network

During the IIP the idea of a local 'pop-up' playgroup was generated and put into practice in places where playgroups are most needed. This was seen as a local response to immediate community needs. Participants emphasised that community involvement and an awareness of children's lives outside of services was important to successful practice. The network provided a forum for shared insights about the connections between children's lives in their communities and in services. It was also a forum where early childhood professionals could share experiences, learn collaboratively, and support each other.

Final summary

Across all data, five overarching themes emerged for the Mildura Rural City Council Network. These themes indicate the network's particular interest in collaborative work with others to broaden perspectives, including children, families and colleagues.

New ways of assessing were developed that included involving children and families

'Helping staff to assess in a collaborative manner'

A major change that featured in this network was a reflection on assessment practices. This led to participants thinking more purposefully on the nature of the assessment documentation they gathered, through to engineering better assessment protocols where families and children were given a voice.

Inquiry questions changed thinking and professional practice

'I have learnt so much from them, when really listening'

The use of a professional inquiry focusing on assessment was highly valued as a way of rethinking and changing practice. As a result of the inquiry, practitioners spoke about deepening knowledge, moving from self-learning to supporting staff learning, through to listening to families and learning from them.

Professional learning took place through being part of a multidisciplinary network

'Reassurance of shared struggles'

The multidisciplinary approach to exploring the VEYLDF and sharing information through professional conversations with familiar people in networks was highly valued. A feature of the network was the review of existing assessment templates in services to see how VEYLDF can be incorporated.

New ways of leading, supporting and motivating colleagues emerged

'Cross-service documentation of children's learning to bring together diverse expertise, perspectives and ideas'

This network came to the position of valuing the existing expertise within the network in Mildura, rather than seeking 'expert advice' from outside. New ways of thinking about leadership emerged, first recognising the need for leadership and then moving to the view that leadership is about supporting others on their journey.

Appreciation for the diverse learning communities developed

'Broke down some silos of practice'

Participants referred to a sense of isolation – 'silos of expertise and information' – and expressed relief at not having to be the sole expert. This network actively built partnerships across the service types in order to deliberately address this problem.

Summary of findings and implications

As a result of the analysis of the existing IIP data and the case studies developed for each of the nine networks, it has been possible to identify four dominant themes across the networks.

- New ways of assessing were developed that included involving children and their families – a multidisciplinary view.
- Inquiry questions changed thinking and professional practice – practitioners as researchers.
- Professional learning took place through being part of a multidisciplinary network – valuing multiservice group participation.
- Engagement with the VEYLDF provided deeper understandings of Practice Principles – common vision and language.

A further seven themes were dominant for particular networks. It should be noted that the following themes also came through strongly in the case studies:

- New ways of working with children and families with complex support needs were developed.
- Active listening and shared language across service types emerged.
- There was a shift in focus from activities to child learning outcomes.
- New ways of leading, supporting and motivating colleagues emerged.
- Holistic assessment to capture wellbeing emerged.
- Appreciation of the diverse learning communities developed.
- Participants moved from a position of authority to discussions with families.

Together these 11 themes constitute the key outcomes to emerge from the case studies. Appendix 14 provides summary information about the distribution of these themes across the nine networks.

From the analysis of the case studies and the existing IIP data summarised in Figure 5 (Section 7), and an analysis of the data set using the concept of relational agency, a Relational Agency Framework in multidisciplinary networks has been developed. The Relational Agency Framework is the model that captures the practitioner experiences and accounts for the documented professional relationships in the networks (all networks), going beyond the key themes. Understanding what was achieved, alongside how networks functioned to support the goals of the IIP gives important insights for planning and supporting networks into the future and for the scaling up of the IIP. The Relational Agency Framework captures important processes learned from this Review and Evaluation about forming, maintaining and developing networks for supporting the goals of the IIP.

In essence, the patterns noted from the overall analysis, where the concept of relational agency was used to theorise the findings, resulted in the Relational Agency Framework and is supportive of what has already been identified in the literature. However, this review and evaluation expands on this original work and includes a more nuanced framework for the context in Victoria. The Relational

Agency Framework can be used to further inform the development of existing early years networks and the establishment and support of new early years networks.

Table 1 (Section 2) shows the Relational Agency Framework that has been developed directly from an analysis of the IIP data and the network activities over an eight-month period and the case studies in Section 9. The Relational Agency Framework allows for a more deliberate approach to building and maintaining effective networks. The model is not linear, as all the elements work together. What is key is that the members feel a sense of belonging to the network, which is foundational to its success. A spiralling metaphor captures the idea of movement, as shown in Figure 8. For example, as new members join a network, priority areas may change and new needs may require specialist disciplinary input; in developing new ways of engaging with families, especially those with complex needs, the active support of child protection services may be deemed critical. This new need changes the membership configuration.

The spiralling metaphor in Figure 8 highlights the fluid nature of the Relational Agency Framework detailed in Table 1.

Figure 8: Spiralling metaphor for conceptualising Relational Agency Framework

The Relational Agency Framework captures the process of building, maintaining and growing multidisciplinary networks. Table 2 (Section 2) provides details of the key ideas, a description of each and some examples taken from a range of data types. In essence, Table 2 shows the link between key ideas, description and data. When taken together, it also gives insights into how this new tool can support action and analysis in the future by illustrating a Relational Agency Framework that is populated with examples of evidence.

Trends across networks

The nine trends that emerged and were introduced earlier can be grouped into four key themes.

Theme 1: New ways of assessing were developed that included involving children and their families – valuing multiservice group participation

Designing new assessment tools

Participants found that the focus on using an assessment tool for identifying outcomes for children gave them agency to redevelop the tool, to critique existing tools, and to go beyond a proforma or a check list, and to really engage in identifying or creating a tool that was geared towards the VEYLDF. A range of innovations resulted. However, it was revealed in the interviews at the conclusion of the project that a number of participants required further opportunities to consider the concept of evidence.

Collaborative assessment was highly valued

Overwhelmingly, participants found collaborative assessment to be a productive way of working in their services. In particular, they noted that having teams doing the assessment, which included children and families, repositioned members of that assessment community in a positive and productive way, with valued knowledge about learning to contribute. One service found that time was saved because of the collaborative approach. Kindergarten teachers in one region found that the co-educators contributed a high level of knowledge to the process of making observations, generating rich discussions about learning in the associated centres. Including the child's voice in the assessment process was highly valued by the professionals in all the regions. It was noted at the conclusion of the project that some networks now included families in the assessment process as a routine practice.

Targeted observations

Participants stated that they now went beyond simply collecting observations, and were more targeted in what they collected, and reflected on what is worthwhile collecting. Participants moved away from collecting many observations and documentary artefacts (quantity), to a focus on quality and intentionality and richness in assessment and documentation.

Purposefully gathering and using evidence

In the final workshop, the facilitator reports and the workshop evaluation tended to support the view that while gathering of observations was more focused and thoughtful, limited discussion centred on how this data was being used. That is, whether professionals were analysing the data gathered and using what they had learned to inform program development, which was not clear. This supports the finding from focus-group interviews at the conclusion of the project that participants were still confused by the term 'evidence'.

Theme 2: Inquiry questions changed thinking and professional practice – multidisciplinary practitioners as researchers

Common vision and common language among all participants

The participants' professional inquiries and the workshops were all focused on the VEYLDF for all the service types. This gave rise to a shared interest and common challenge – how to better understand the VEYLDF in the context of assessment.

The result was a common vision, where participants worked towards developing a common language in relation to their services and practices. Through co-creating understandings about assessment and the VEYLDF, participants came to better appreciate what other services were trying to achieve, what they struggled with, and what language they used to discuss their practices. This is consistent with the international literature (Edwards and Apostolov 2007). However, what is important here is that all the participants were focused on the VEYLDF and this gave them a common challenge to discuss in relation to engaging with all families, but especially with those who have complex needs. Engagement and the sense of community for all the services were developed within an eight-to-10-month period. This suggests that having a common focus (that is, the VEYLDF) is an excellent strategy for supporting change and professional development where multidisciplinary professionals work together.

Feeling less professionally isolated

All regions expressed how important the IIP had been for reducing the feeling of professional isolation. Participants highly valued having access to a greater range of expertise through the multidisciplinary professionals who participated and professionals across sectors (those working directly with children through to policy developers). A sense of collective professional support emerged for the networks.

Theme 3: Professional learning took place through being part of a multidisciplinary network

Who participates in the network matters

Managers: It was noted that for managers not working directly with children and families it was sometimes more challenging to identify an inquiry question. However, in consultation with facilitators, inquiry questions did include strategic decisions, and informed policy directions and local initiatives for children and families.

Diversity: A further challenge related to the mix of voices that featured within the region and that were not consistently represented by network participants. It was noted that although Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, and cultural and linguistic diversity were strong themes that emerged across networks, few networks had represented the perspectives of that diversity through their membership.

Identity in the community in rural areas and regions: It was identified in some networks that being a member of the community was associated with long-term connections within that community. Those who had recently moved into the community, including network members and families, found it difficult to find a place within communities and professional groups.

Theme 4: Engagement with the VEYLDF provided deeper understandings of Practice Principles and the Learning and Development Outcomes

Increased knowledge of the VEYLDF

Considering assessment in relation to the outcomes in the VEYLDF, and discussing professional inquiries also related directly to these topics, helped participants to understand the VEYLDF better, and to know how to use it for their practice. However, it should be noted that during the interviews after the project had concluded, not all individuals continued to work with the VEYLDF.

Section 10: Summary of findings and implications

Increased focus on birth to three years

As a result of the involvement of the MCH in the networks, and the IIP priority for the birth-to-three-years age group, greater consideration was given to engaging with families early, going beyond a medical model and including important education imperatives during home interactions. The result was a more expansive conceptualisation of the child from birth, with a corresponding multidiscuplinary team commitment.

Trends across service types

There were three trends noted in relation to specific service types.

Change of focus by MCH to learning

As a result of participating in the IIP, the MCH nurses in some regions broadened their focus from 'just health' to include learning. In particular, MCH nurses discussed how they could assess infants in new contexts, such as going to playgroups to observe, noting that this allowed for a deeper understanding of the infants' clinical contexts.

For example, MCH nurses described a medical issue with network colleagues and discussed ways of teaching families about the importance of time of the floor as part of everyday routines. From this group discussion, the participant from ECIS was invited to attend the MCH team meeting to talk further about incorporating clinical practice into the everyday routines with families, and the approaches used in conversations with families.

The development in MCH approaches was also supported by the focus-group interviews, where MCH nurses talked about the significant changes in moving from a development focus to using the VEYLDF Learning Outcomes to support their conversations with families about children's learning.

Change of focus in playgroups from providing resources to planning for assessment for learning

Playgroups changed their approach from providing resources for children to thoughtfully planning assessment for learning. A focus on assessment for learning meant that playgroups were talking about how learning could be encouraged through the careful selection and placement of materials, and the planning of ongoing assessment for learning opportunities for the children in their playgroups.

Birth-to-eight-years learning in the VEYLDF

As a result of the multidisciplinary approach, service types tended to have a more holistic perspective of child development, but the birth-to-eight-years continuum, as described in the VEYLDF, was significant for some primary school participants.

Achievements to note as part of continuous improvement

While there were many outcomes, there were eight key achievements that are unique to the IIP.

Valuing multiservice group participation

All groups valued the multiservice participation. However, policy development officers particularly valued the diverse membership because they were able to see examples of how the VEYLDF was used in practice, and, through this, gained a better understanding of what kinds of support were needed for implementation.

Multidisciplinary practitioners as researchers

A professional inquiry focus repositioned participants as researchers. This was highly valued because the approach meant that they were working on professional inquiries as part of their normal day-to-day practices in services. This knowledge generation and professional inquiry-based approach to their work was something that is likely to continue beyond the life of the existing IIP. However, this is the context of network participants identifying that continued resourcing was important for bringing people together to initiate new professional inquiries.

Moving from a position of authority to discussion with families

For some of the networks there was a substantial development in how professionals positioned themselves in relation to families. As a result of the IIP, professionals viewed their role as listening to families as facilitators, while at the same time positioning families as experts in their knowledge about their children.

The IIP professional learning model allowed for sustained focus on self-development of professional knowledge and practice

There was support by all the participants for the professional learning model adopted for the IIP. Participants stated that focusing on a professional inquiry ensured that all the workshops collectively supported sustained learning. This was contrasted with the usual model of disparate one-off workshops for professional development days that were not linked, and did not incrementally build over time to sustain deep learning. In addition, the professional learning was also conducted with the same cohort (or similar) of participants within the same region, allowing for the building of capacity within a region and for the possibility of localised support being readily available for future collaborations or workshops. One region stated that research expertise had to be obtained by travelling for five hours, which was difficult. However, most regions stated that they built knowledge of local capacity through the IIP and were finding they no longer brought in expertise, but looked for it within the local region/group.

More resources were harnessed through the strength of the network rather than as an individual service

It was found that when different services came together they not only had a broader range of expertise at their disposal, but they had more capacity to write submissions for funding, for change and for action. The collective effort was found to be more broadly based, and, as such, had a greater impact within the community because of the multidisciplinary nature of the network.

The multidisciplinary view of assessment for learning led to a shift in focus from activities to child learning outcomes

The IIP allowed for a focus on assessment for learning from a multidisciplinary perspective. Those who traditionally do not focus on education found this focus to be refreshing, because they had to reconceptualise their role and find different ways of interacting with children and families. Many network participants drew on each other as resources, and through this gained a better sense of the work of other professionals, resulting in valuing the work they did across a broad range of services.

A range of assessment approaches for supporting children's learning was identified across the networks, which reflected a shift from what children do to what they learn. New approaches included the following:

- using more visual (photographic) representations to promote more sharing with families about their children's learning and development
- using photos to discuss learning with families to help overcome some of the language barriers
- using holistic approaches to child assessment, including the child's 'year-long journey', basis for meaningful assessment
- promoting regular interviews with families and with children as part of assessment practices
- asking children to name the things they are 'good at' and the things they find 'tricky', and 'What do you think you'll learn?' and 'How will you know?'
- planning for parents' participation in assessment rather than leaving this to chance or on an ad hoc basis
- using positive language in assessment, such as 'can' and 'is able to do'.

A new conceptualisation of assessment for learning was noted during the IIP, where the focus of assessment was no longer on development, but on how and when children learn. Lines of thinking that were opened up were:

- moving away from collecting many observations and documentary artefacts (quantity), to a focus on quality, and intentionality and richness in assessment and documentation
- seeing 'children's voices' as central to assessment practices, and developing questions to help children verbalise their learning
- using the language of the VEYLDF to not only change the way evidence was collected, but to change the language to talking about learning
- understanding assessment as a multiple process and an appreciation that children can be viewed from multiple perspectives

- starting to take to take a holistic view of wellbeing (for example, including consideration of staff wellbeing), and applying this by considering a variety of levels and approaches by which it could be assessed
- using self-assessment for opportunities for children in early years of primary school to contribute to assessment of their own learning and to increase motivation and enthusiasm in participants.

Sharing professional inquiries within the network was highly valued

A key finding of the final workshop was the importance of having the opportunity to share practitioner professional inquiries. Genuine interest in each other's professional inquiries was evident, and this was thought to be a significant component of the success of the IIP.

Developing new ways of working with families with complex needs

Most of the network participants discussed the vision or strategic directions of the council or shire as an important dimension to the development of their professional inquiry questions, as would be expected. Across the nine networks, engagement with family and community was an important part of discussions. Many professional inquiry questions were linked to reviewing ways of engaging with families who have complex needs and how best to present services to families.

Ongoing challenges

The implementation of the IIP was met with some challenges, which are summarised below in the context of how they were successfully dealt with. The first cluster is associated with sustainability, and the second cluster is related to implementation issues and fine tuning of the IIP workshops. These challenges are discussed because they give advice for future implementation of professional learning of the IIP.

Sustainability of networks

Most of the networks indicated that there was a need to have someone to organise the network meetings if they were to continue as a multidisciplinary group after the professional learning was completed. The Relational Agency Framework may be useful for building, maintaining or initiating new networks in the future. The Relational Agency Framework could be a valuable tool for network leaders, facilitators and the VCAA Early Years Unit, in supporting network organisation. Further VCAA projects with networks would do well to use technology such as video conferences to support access and use.

Guided approach to formulating and implementing professional inquiries

Although the professional inquiries were found to be valuable across the networks, and a range of professional inquiry questions were conceptualised and implemented (see Appendix 11), the task of formulating a professional inquiry question was difficult and some participants initially struggled to do this. This is not a surprising finding and reflects well on the expansive nature of the IIP for supporting long-term change. It was found that the facilitators' role was key to supporting this early in Workshop 1 and 2 of the IIP. The depth and relevance of the professional inquiries undertaken by participants suggest that facilitation and IIP design was appropriate and well delivered.

Geography matters when forming and maintaining networks

It was found that those networks who were in rural regions discussed the issue of travel and access to professional experts regularly. Some networks focused on bringing experts into the region, while others looked within the region, recognising what expertise already existed within their community. The IIP encouraged the networks to achieve this through its recognition of the diverse issues with and across networks.

Technology to support network meetings

Participants from many of the networks had access to video-conferencing facilities, but this was not widely used. Other approaches to the use of technology were not reported, for example smart phones for SMS messaging with families as a communications support. Further VCAA projects with networks would do well to incorporate the use of technology to support access and communication.

Professional learning delivery challenges

Three specific features of the professional learning design that were less successful than hoped are detailed below. However, it should be noted that although these findings were identified across the networks, they were not listed as a challenge by all participants. This would suggest that some attention needs to be paid to these three areas through giving them either greater emphasis during implementation across the five workshops, or perhaps identifying which participants within networks have expertise in these areas, and enlisting these people as 'experts' to support others.

Readings were not evenly used across the networks

Some participants found the readings were not as helpful as the IIP had planned, because they were unsure about what to read and why. It was suggested that a guided approach to engaging with the readings was needed, and a thoughtful selection of readings that were shorter and more practical would be better received. However, it should also be noted that for other participants, the readings were an invaluable tool, helping them to reflect on their practices and actively supporting their professional inquiry. Consequently, a mixed response to the readings was noted.

The use of centralised data storage ('cloud storage') for evidence examples was challenging for some participants

A common theme was that participants found cloud storage difficult to access and not user friendly, and as such, this resource was not as useful as planned in the IIP. There was evidence of moving from a singular focus on evidence to strategic planning with colleagues, for example the use of population data to inform collaborative approaches. This emerged as a mechanism for all participants to consider, rather than a management responsibility only.

Evidence of outcomes for children was implicit within the professional inquiry rather than explicitly featured in the IIP data set

Network professional inquiry questions moved participants forward in terms of their professional learning where new approaches and innovations were supported. However, providing evidence samples to the VCAA did not feature explicitly across all networks. The data provided assumed a level of evidence had been gathered (but not submitted to cloud storage) and used for thinking differently about assessment practices, once the participants became more familiar with the

terminology. However, insufficient data 'on the new forms of assessment evidence' were available to confirm this explicitly. Project facilitator reports were used as part of the data sets to establish progression in participants' evidence collection.

Implications and next steps

Network maturity

A recognition by a network of the growth and change within their group is needed for determining what might be the next steps. Successful networks are complex in membership and mature over time. The narratives from the different multidisciplinary professionals as presented in the case studies and the IIP data both reflect the individual experiences of developing professional inquiries, and demonstrate the different narratives and ways of thinking about particular professional practices.

The complexity of the data allowed for an analysis of the convergence of network discussions and facilitated workshop sessions. Individual narratives are important for gaining a sense of the work of others and for supporting the development of a common language. However, in more developed or mature networks the assumption is that a common language has already formed and metanarratives or multidisciplinary narratives can develop in the process of collectively problem-solving and enacting change over time. This was noted, particularly in relation to assessment for learning, and through working more successfully with all families, but especially those with complex needs.

When networks form, the central focus is initially individual (that is, being a member), as shown in Figure 9. Mature networks are a synthesis of members who collectively work towards a joint goal, such as assessment for learning and working with all families. This is represented in Figure 10.

Figure 9: An individual trajectory early in the network
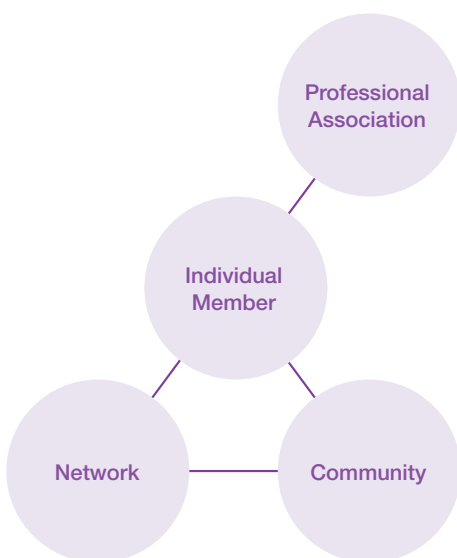
Figure 10: A collective multidisciplinary network that has matured
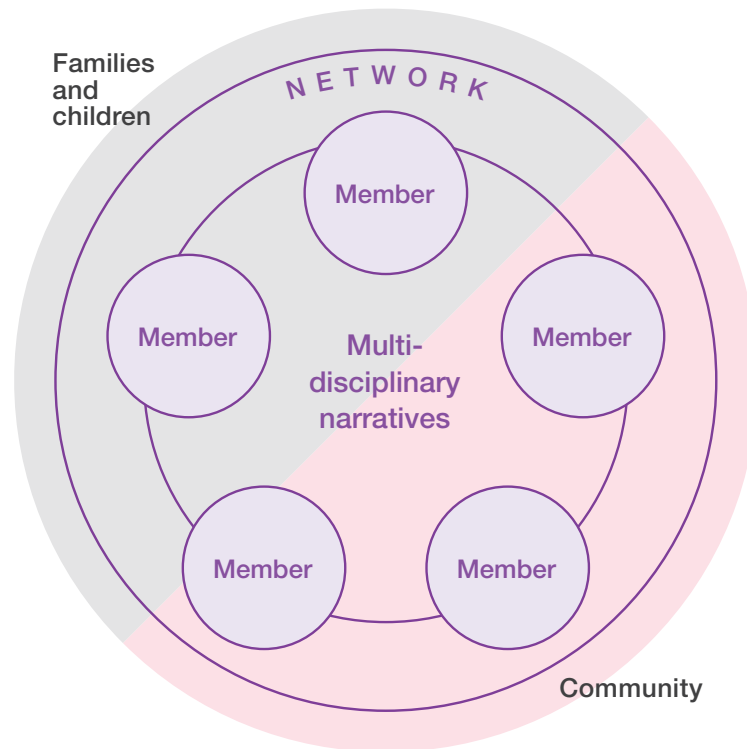
Membership of networks

In the formation of a network, consideration should be given to which are the key groups in the community, so that their representation is automatically included within the profile of the network.

Thoughtful attention to the membership of a network is needed for sustainability. In particular, a continuum of types of staff across early years services is needed (policymaker and practitioner), to strengthen the focus on outcomes for children.

Network self-reflection

In order to support its own development, a network should engage in regular self-reflection, whereby the levels of relational agency evident within the network are noted and used for systematically growing and sustaining multidisciplinary networks.

While this Relational Agency Framework has been conceptualised directly from the existing data, it should support a self-analysis process in the future by acting as a tool for establishing, maintaining and supporting growth within a network. Based on the outcomes of this review and evaluation, it can be argued that participants can continue to review the status or maturity of their network, and can act on what they find – and what they may wish to do in the future – in a more deliberate and focused way.

Through this they can examine at what phase their network is functioning, and see what action might be needed to work towards enhanced professional practice. The details of how the Relational Agency Framework might be put into practice, and how it could be embedded in existing VCAA and DEECD processes and structures, is still to be determined. Here the professional inquiry model adopted

in the IIP could be specifically examined in the context of the Relational Agency Framework, where the professional inquiry process feeds the actions in practice and the Relational Agency Framework supports a critical self-reflection of the growth and maturity of the network – and how it might actually be supporting the activities of its members. Some suggestions are given in Section 11 and in the Executive Summary Recommendations.

Key messages for policymakers, practitioners and researchers

Building an ongoing evidence base

The concept of evidence

It was noted that the term 'evidence' was challenging for some participants from the networks. It added an additional layer of complexity to the professional inquiry process. Using the language of the VEYLDF rather than this term is potentially a more productive way forward for the networks. Consider changes to the draft assessment for learning training manual to ensure that participants have time to bring samples of evidence to discuss them across the workshops, in small groups.

Evidence of diversity

The evidence base should reflect the diversity of voices for conceptualising and gathering ongoing evidence. Networks identified that (1) in rural and regional areas there is the a tendency to look inwards, (2) diversity across communities is complex, which requires more specific attention, (3) there is potential to increase diverse representation of membership in networks. The IIP supports this diversity and it is important to continue to build it into future actions.

The draft assessment for learning training manual developed from the IIP should strengthen content related to evidence collection. This would facilitate partnerships and provide further opportunities for multidisciplinary discussions in networks. This opportunity within the professional learning, to improve fluency in describing evidence within small group discussions, is encouraged as a new feature.

Reflection sheets as evidence of change

There appeared to be a disparity between the five facilitator reports and the final interview that formed the basis of the case study for each region, reflecting the ongoing professional development of participants. Participants initially suggested that they did not enjoy using reflection sheets during the workshops. However, in hindsight, they said they valued the reflection process and the gathering of evidence (which they called 'evaluation') about the IIP process. This tends to suggest that it takes time to build reflection into the process of professional inquiry, and the sustained period of development and investment in participants through the IIP process is clearly successful for achieving this change in thinking and practice.

Focused observations: It was noted that over time there was evidence that the participants valued reflecting on their assessment practices, particularly the gathering of observations so that they were more focused on what counts as assessment for learning.

Range of assessment tools: Although limited data on assessment tools was submitted using cloud storage, the review and evaluation found evidence across the other data sets of comments related to the use of children's voices, talking to parents, and engineering a mix of assessment approaches for gathering evidence of learning that were key for gathering authentic assessment evidence. A number of participants provided final summaries to the VCAA including an overview of their inquiry questions and actions.

Scaling up to support further implementation

To scale up the IIP, the findings suggested the following should be considered:

- Having sufficient time to organise the network meetings is the key determinant to maintaining and developing networks.

- Acknowledgement of the key role that MCH professionals played in the network was identified in the data analysed. MCH representatives had a positive effect on the network as their presence encouraged a discussion about assessment for learning with families from birth.

- The professional inquiry methodology was important for engaging most participants in the IIP.

- Membership should include a mix of practitioners and managers, to ensure a focus on assessment for learning outcomes directly related to existing practices.

- The Relational Agency Framework should be used to support mapping and planning as the networks mature. This supports future implementation plans for the IIP, if existing or new networks are formed.

- Ensuring the diversity of professionals found within the community is reflected in the membership of the network is important and requires review within existing and new networks.

- It is acknowledged that the methodology for data gathering of the IIP process focused on professionals' development rather than on generating data on evidence of child outcomes in the context of assessment for learning. A change in the research method may be needed if measures of child outcomes as evidence of assessment for learning are to be obtained in the future. A specific focus on describing the build-up of evidence over time will support sharing and activity between network group participants.

Strengthening a culture of assessment practice across the early years

Focusing on assessment for learning was positively received by the different service types, even those that traditionally focus on health development. Assessment that was targeted on creating new tools for gathering evidence of learning broadened the perspective of professionals to including the perspective of the child and the family across service types.

In distribution and evaluation of the draft assessment for learning training manual, evaluate relational agency as a network mechanism to strengthen early years practitioner capabilities in assessment practice:

- to build up a picture of accumulated learning with children and families and other professionals

- to develop ongoing assessment evidence that supports planning for potential learning for small groups and individual children

- use data at the local network level to inform inquiry approaches and ongoing assessment practice decisions

- recognise MCH and ECIS professionals as providing significant influence within multidisciplinary discussions across the early years

- support early childhood professionals, and specifically those working with children and families in the birth-to-three-years age group, to see patterns in children's learning over time that are grounded in everyday learning.

Section 11: Key messages for policymakers, practitioners and researchers

The concept of relational agency should be applied to further influence the development of a culture of assessment practice across the early years in the following specific areas:

- intentional conversations with children in everyday experiences
- intentional observations that are accurate, and provide specific feedback to children, families and other professionals to support progression in learning
- high expectations for all children and families as a matter of equity and further engagement to support families and children with complex support needs
- commitment by early childhood professionals to strong and equal partnerships to support assessment practices within and across early years.

Plain language materials and key messages for early childhood professionals should be developed by the VCAA to influence improved acuity and fluency in describing evidence of children's learning.

Recommendations

This review and evaluation of the Inquiry to Implementation Project (IIP) in nine multidisciplinary early years networks has identified a Relational Agency Framework to support the establishment, maintenance and growth in early years professional learning and assessment practice. A shared vision and the development of new and strengthened relationships between early childhood professionals further informs assessment practice. Growth in early childhood professional assessment capabilities influences improved outcomes for children and families. This marks a critical part of the next steps in VEYLDF implementation and early years reform.

In recognition that inquiry-based professional learning takes time and resources, the following recommendations are provided to support the ongoing implementation of the VEYLDF.

1. That DEECD and VCAA explore ways for existing multidisciplinary early years networks and new networks to access the final *Assessment for Learning – Supporting Early Years Networks Training Manual*, which has been informed by the IIP and this review and evaluation. The distribution of the professional learning model more broadly would influence engagement and strengthen a common vision for the VEYLDF, including transitions within and across early years.

2. That a Relational Agency Framework evaluation tool and resources are developed to support sustainable evidence-based assessment practice, and build, maintain and grow new and established multidisciplinary early years networks. Resources would include a mechanism for networks to review and plan inclusive approaches to network membership.

3. That the VCAA develop evaluation processes to test the concept of relational agency in the final *Assessment for Learning – Supporting Early Years Networks Training Manual* along with inquiry-based learning, reflective practice, assessment practice, contemporary theory, frameworks and peer support. Evaluation processes would include measures that include a focus on high expectations for all children and families and, within this, a specific focus on working with families who have complex support needs.

4. Continue to develop professional learning resources in this Consolidation phase of VEYLDF implementation and reform (five to 10 years)[2]. These resources would promote:

    *   an ongoing culture of evidence-based assessment practice
    *   leadership capabilities across the early years
    *   strong and equal partnerships with families and early childhood professionals

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2. Griffith University *Evaluation of Implementation of the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework : For all children from Birth to Eight Years Final Report,* May 2012.

5. To continue to communicate progress in VEYLDF implementation of the final *Assessment for Learning – Supporting Early Years Networks Training Manual* in collaboration with researchers, practitioners and policymakers through a range of presentations and interactive seminars.

6. As part of the ongoing implementation of the VEYLDF, continue to promote and develop a range of seminars and conferences for all early childhood professionals working in the early years in rural and urban areas. Include specific opportunities for discourse about evidence-based practice and relational agency. A focus on practitioners as researchers within multidisciplinary early years networks is recommended

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Participant evaluation survey questions (Workshop 5)

Background and demographic information

- Name (optional or pseudonym)
- Indicate your service type
- Indicate the network group you participated in
- Indicate which IIP workshops you attended in 2013
- Overall, how useful did you find the IIP? Please explain your response.

Practitioner changes in assessment for learning and development

- How has your inquiry question informed changes and improvement in assessment for children's learning and development approaches and practices (for your practice and/or in your work with supporting colleagues and networks)?
- New knowledge and understanding of theory and research
- New knowledge and application of tools and resources
- New knowledge gained about your network and local community
- Change in practice and impact on outcomes for children.

Project aims: influence on practice and impact on outcomes for children

As a result of participating in the IIP:

- Describe any specific changes you have made in your workplace in one or more of the following areas and the impact on outcomes for children (If yes, define what the change(s) looks like in practice and the impact on outcomes for children using an example. If no, please comment on why.
- How do you assess (or support others in assessing) children's progress using the learning and development outcomes outlined in the VEYLDF as part of an ongoing planning cycle? Practice change and impact on outcomes for children (what, how and why?).
- How have you used the Educational Change Model of continuous improvement and transition to support practice change in an environment of reform and significant change? Practice change and impact on outcomes for children (what, how and why?).
- What strategies have you put in place to achieve a sustainable multidisciplinary focus and to identify and contribute to leadership in the local network community? What have you learnt about yourself as a leader through your work on the inquiry question in the IIP? Practice change and impact on outcomes for children (what, how and why?).

Policy informing practice (optional question)

- What practices have you adapted or introduced in your work with families with complex support needs/vulnerable families? Describe any practice change and impact on outcomes for children (what, how and why?).

Design features for professional learning

- Which specific design features supported your learning and practice change with implementation of Assessment for Learning and Development Practice Principles (or implementation of VEYLDF)?

- Rate in order from 1 to 5, with 1 being of greatest importance – inquiry question, knowledge, reflective practice, peer support, evidence collection and other (specify).
- Describe how this contributed and/or supported change. Draw on any evidence used to support and measure change:
    - using an inquiry approach
    - new knowledge and understandings
    - reflective practice
    - peer support
    - evidence collection (reflecting on evidence)
    - other.
- What worked well for you in the VCAA professional learning program?
- What could be changed to improve similar professional learning programs offered in future? Please rate the following (not useful at all, rather useful, useful, quite useful, very useful):
    - length of the IIP (across the10-month period)
    - number of IIP workshops
    - access to Lock Box for evidence collection and project readings and resources
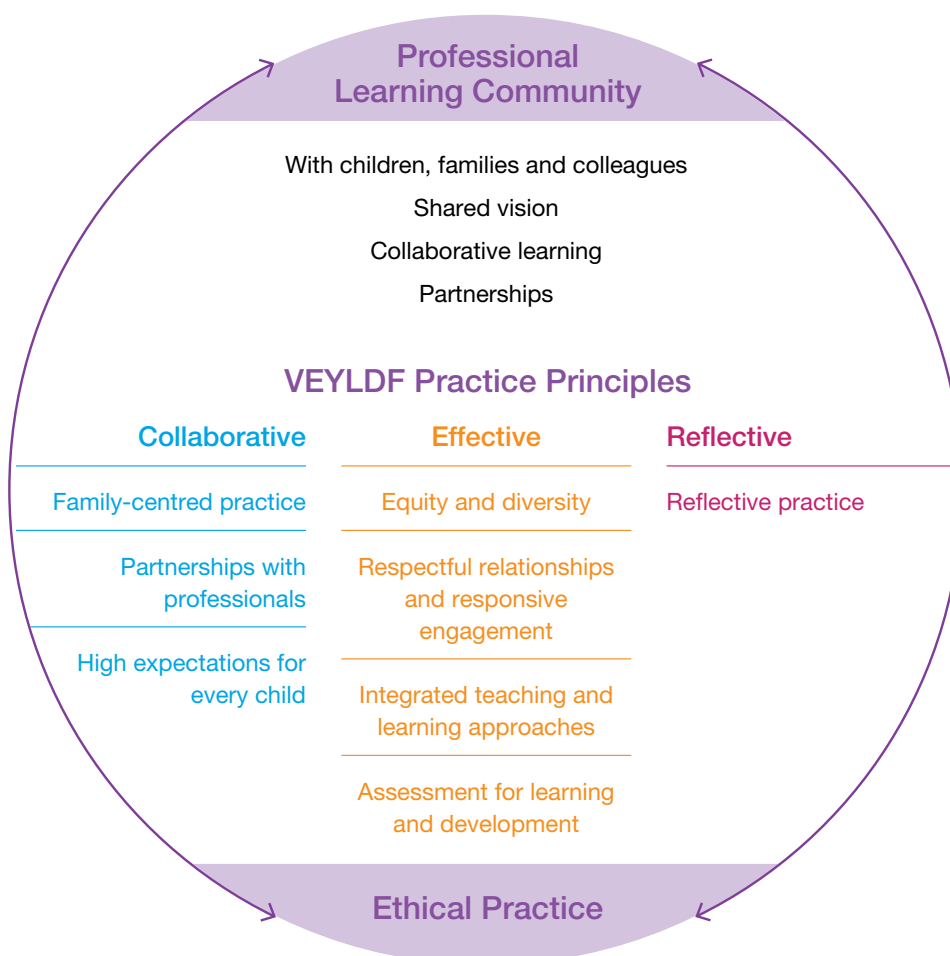   - comment on any suggested changes.

Appendix 2: Holistic methodology

In 1983 Evelyn Fox Keller wrote: 'Scientists make up many communities, and these communities vary by subject, by methodology, by place, and by degree of influence. Science is a polyphonic chorus. The voices in that chorus are never equal, but what one hears as a dominant motif depends very much on where one stands' (p. 174). This statement about science can be applied directly to research with multidisciplinary professionals interested in improving the outcomes of young children. That is, to gain an understanding about how a group of diverse professionals come together to gather and discuss evidence of assessment for learning will be naturally met with a polyphonic chorus of voices. Claims will be made in support of how to gain 'the truth' in research as well as the opposite view about 'how the truth does not exist' (see Fleer & Ridgway 2014). The opposition to truth has also been heard within science, as noted by Barbara McClintock when she said the scientific method 'gives us relationships which are useful, valid, and technically marvellous; however, they are not a truth' (Fox Keller 1983, p. 201). The study presented in this report draws on an assumption that each of the self-reported reflections of the professionals will represent data about beliefs and practices associated with the learning, development and assessment of young children. How the data are analysed will in turn give some insights into what have been the outcomes for the participants. This approach to research represents a post-developmental methodology (Fleer & Ridgway 2014).

In post-developmental methodologies a dialectical model is adopted, because no one part of the system is studied independently of the whole system of interactions. Dialectics is understood in the Hegelian sense as both elucidating contradictions and concretely resolving them. Rather than dualisms, such as universal and particular, dialectical logic seeks to bring together binary opposites as a synthesis, where the general and the particular are both at once the same thing – as resolving contradictions. For instance, dualisms are evident in research when researchers conceptualise their research as either to 'generalise across populations' or as a particular 'case study'. Cartesian logic (mind-body split – as dualism) would support this separation as a dualism that cannot be reconciled. However, dialectical logic would seek to conceptualise the contradiction of the general and the particular as a synthesis. For example, it is not possible to think about a particular case of a professional, unless one also thinks about the professional in relation to the general early childhood setting in which they work, or even to their wider network. A professional is only conceptualised as a professional if we know about the profession. The particular professional is part of a general network of professionals, with all their complexity. It is through synthesising data from a range of professionals at different points in time in relation to the workshops they were experiencing, and the network conversations they participated in, that we gain a sense of the process and impact of change over time.

Appendix 3: A peer-support model

A peer-support model for multidisciplinary practitioner inquiry research

Professional Learning Community

With children, families and colleagues

Shared vision

Collaborative learning

Partnerships

VEYLDF Practice Principles

Collaborative	Effective	Reflective
Family-centred practice	Equity and diversity	Reflective practice
Partnerships with professionals	Respectful relationships and responsive engagement	
High expectations for every child	Integrated teaching and learning approaches	
	Assessment for learning and development	

Ethical Practice

This design model for peer support highlights three key elements to promote learning and development outcomes for children.

1. A shared vision and strong and equal partnerships between early childhood professionals.

2. A culture of collaborative learning with others to strengthen the collective capacity of participants and the network.

3. A strong understanding and application of the VEYLDF Practice Principles within a frame of ethical practice.

The peer-support model used in this project is designed to support sustainable learning in settings and networks.

Process for peer support

Project facilitators help participants to:

- develop a professional inquiry question that focuses on an area of particular interest to the individual participant

- link the professional inquiry question to collaborative, effective and reflective practice (as described in the VEYLDF Practice Principles)

- deepen knowledge of the learning and development outcomes
- strengthen intentional leadership to support others in a dynamic period of national reform and change.

Professional learning conversations in workshops

These include:

- active listening and turn taking in small groups to explore professional inquiry questions, remembering that each person contributes in their own way
- critical reflection with peers connected to workshop content and reflective journals
- formal and informal professional conversations.

Testing the learning together

The professional learning is designed to help participants to:

- find their way, feel more confident, and get the best out of professional learning opportunities
- develop new professional perspectives and test what is learned along the way
- apply active listening and questioning to decision making and problem solving
- develop skills in intentional leadership connected to practice.

Collaborative learning

Collaboration:

- connects people locally within the network, helps combat feelings of isolation and builds the network connections
- develops mutual guidance and encouragement to adapt and apply ideas, resources and tools to support assessment for learning
- develops new understanding of the professional work of network colleagues.

Professional learning conversations between workshops

Peer support between workshops supports project learning. Connecting between workshops to discuss individual professional inquiry questions can take the form of a phone discussion or a face-to-face meeting.

A five-step plan for peer support

1. Start with what you know – your practice, and your professional inquiry question within your setting.

2. Review and reflect in your journal.

3. Collect evidence of children's learning or your practice in relation to phases of change – connected to the professional inquiry question.

4. Use the small-group activities in networks to develop your fluency and test your ideas.

5. Make connections with other network colleagues between workshops.

Appendix 4: Ethics approval

Human Ethics Certificate of Approval

This is to certify that the project below was considered by the Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee. The committee was satisfied that the proposal meets the requirements of the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research and was granted approval.

Project Number: CF13/3881 – 2013002000

Project Title: Review and Evaluation of the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, Inquiry into Implementation Project 2013

Chief Investigator: Dr Iris Duhn

Approved: From 3 February 2014 to 3 February 2019

Appendix 5: Analysis template

Network						
Service types						
Data source	Other notes	Trends over time	Impact at service level	Promising practices	Evidence of participants' learning	Impact on professional practice
Project Facilitator Progress reports (network)						
Workshop 5 Network impact exercise Group critical reflection on assessment practice with Project Facilitators • increase • decrease • innovations						
Final Evaluation survey in Workshop 5 (identify service type)						
Workshop reflections (network)						
Evidence examples						
Individual and collective inquiry questions						

Appendix 6: Impact exercise

Assessment for Learning – Supporting early years networks

Session Five: Network impact exercise

Improving outcomes for children

Innovation

Leveraging the benefits: Multidisciplinary practitioner research

Decrease

Increase

Major themes

Program facilitators:

Date:

Name of network:
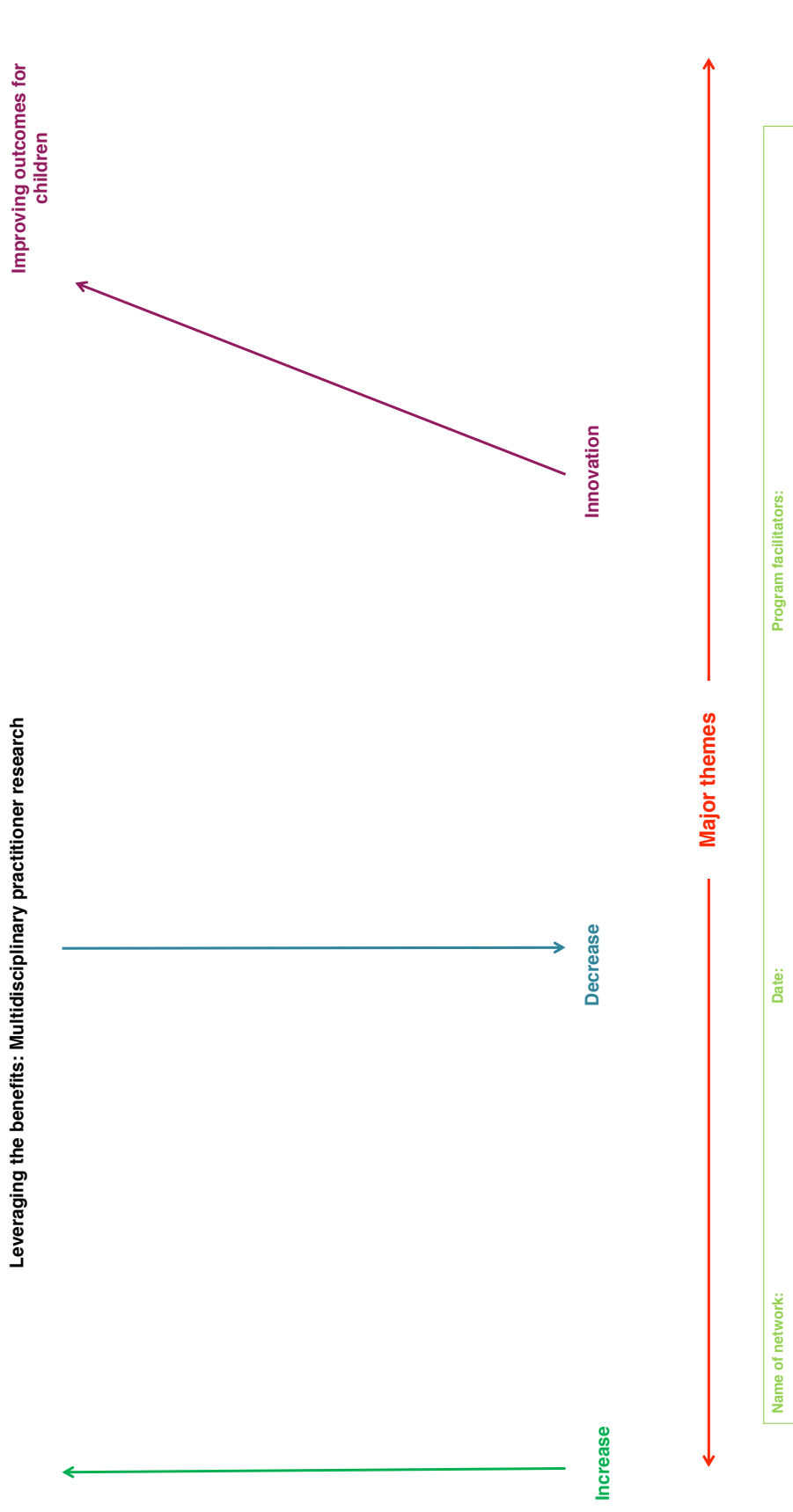
Appendix 7: Focus-group interview questions

- Can you tell me about some of the ways in which being part of the network helped you to have new conversations about assessment for children's learning and development, with children, with families, with colleagues?

- How did your involvement in the network result in improved outcomes for children?

- When thinking about assessment for learning, can you tell me about any ongoing or new challenges that you are facing in relation to improving outcomes for children and families? How might professional development programs, and networks, help you to address these?

- Engaging in professional learning through a professional inquiry approach was found to 'support sustained learning' in all the networks. Can you tell us something about your experiences of working with a professional inquiry question?

- Having been part of the network – what is different for you now? What are some of the outcomes that you are experiencing within your service?

- What is the best way to evaluate the effects that participating in a multidisciplinary network has on professional learning and practice?

- What do you think needs to happen now and in the future to support and maintain your professional learning?

- What was specific about having the network in this place, in this community?

Appendix 8: Framework for developing interview questions

Reporting area	Planning focus groups discussions
Key initiatives and actions implemented	When you think about all of the projects and your participation in the workshops listening and discussing these, what were the stand-out things for you?
Implementation strategies that worked	What organisational or contextual factors influenced implementation?
Initiatives that were less successful	What were the biggest challenges for you with the IIP project? Can you give any advice about how to deal with these challenges?
Trends across networks	In your view what contribution did the project make to improvements in knowledge and skills (1) for you (2) for others (please name service type)?
Trends across service types	What were the best things about reflecting and collaborating with other services during the workshops or outside of the workshops?
Unintended outcomes	Were there any unintended outcomes of the project for you or others (please name service type)?
Knowledge of the VEYLDF	When you reflect on what you knew about the VEYLDF at the beginning and what you now know, what has been the biggest development in your own personal knowledge about the VEYLDF?
Promising practices	What new practices have you adopted? What impact are these practices making in your service/region? What would constitute evidence of this impact for you?
Impact	In your opinion what is key to effective assessment practice? What are your views on the nature of facilitating family-service relations? Do you think differently now, to how you thought at the beginning of the workshops? What is new for you? How has this influenced your own practice?
Multidisciplinary approach to professional learning	Can you explain how collaborating and reflecting with a multidisciplinary group influenced your own professional learning?
Resistance to change	What did you notice was the most difficult thing about changing your own thinking or the thinking of others? What is your concept of play? Has this changed? What view of child development supports your practices? Did you notice others having different views? How did this affect your discussions, reflections or collaborations?

Appendix 8: Framework for developing interview questions

Reporting area	Planning focus groups discussions
Valuing the ongoing process of professional inquiry	Do you have a professional inquiry question for this year? What is it? Why not? What are your views about the value of the professional inquiry and reflection processes?
Capturing the dynamics of learning and development	In your opinion, what constitutes evidence for learning and development in your sector and across sectors? Can you give some examples for your field (playgroups, primary school, etc)? Who is involved in assessment in your service and why? What is your view about including children in assessment? What is your view about including families in the assessment of children?
Embedding new understandings into everyday practices	What has changed for you in practice as a result of participating in the IIP? Can you give one example?
Sustainability: Continuing the networks	What could you do to keep the networks going?
Key messages for policymakers, practitioners and researchers	What would you like to tell key policymakers about the IIP? Impact on you and others? What policies could be changed or developed to help with ongoing change in your region?
Building an ongoing evidence base	What are you now doing to build an evidence base for practice?
Scaling up to support further implementation	If the IIP were to be implemented fully across Victoria, what do you think we would need to pay attention to, and what would need to be done?

Appendix 9: Participation in focus groups by network and service type

Network	Participants	Service types	Interviewers
City of Ballarat Best Start Network	5	Playgroup Koorie Engagement Support; Occasional Child Care; Early Childhood Intervention Services; Maternal and Child Health and Parenting Support	Dr Jane Bone (interviewer) and Megan Adams (note taker).
Baw Baw Best Start Network	8	Early Years Management and Projects; Koorie Maternity Services; Koorie Engagement Support; Family Day Care Coordinator; Best Start Project; Out of School Hours Care; Multifunctional Aboriginal Children's Service and Early Childhood Intervention Services	Dr Jane Bone (interviewer) and Megan Adams (note taker).
Great South Coast Early Years Network	8	Maternal and Child Health; Family Day Care; Parenting Support (Koorie); Long Day Care; Supporting Playgroup; Early Childhood Intervention and Kindergarten	Dr Iris Duhn (interviewer) and Kerry Power (note taker).
Hume City Early Years Partnership	7	Parenting Support; Long Day Care; Early Years Projects; Maternal and Child Health; Early Childhood Development Coordinator; Early Childhood Intervention Services (inclusion support)	Dr Iris Duhn (interviewer) and Kerry Power (note taker).
Mildura Rural City Council Network	8	Early Childhood Intervention Service; Early Years Service Management Service; Primary School; Preschool Field Officer; Kindergarten and Family Day Care	Dr Gloria Quinones (interviewer) and Dr Avis Ridgway (note taker).
Rural City of Wangaratta Early Childhood Network	8	Playgroup; Primary School; Long Day Care; Family Day Care; Maternal and Child Health.	Dr Gloria Quinones (interviewer) and Dr Avis Ridgway (note taker).
Sale and Districts Best Start Early Years Network	5	Kindergarten (including three- and four-year-old groups) and Long Day Care.	Dr Gloria Quinones (interviewer) and Dr Avis Ridgway (note taker).
Wyndham Child and Family Services Network	7	Early Years Projects; Parenting Support; Kindergarten Unit Leader; Long Day Care; Maternal and Child Health and Preschool Field Officer.	Dr Jane Bone (interviewer) and Megan Adams (note taker).
Yarra Ranges Child, Youth and Family Network	7	Kindergarten; Long Day Care and Primary School.	Dr Iris Duhn (interviewer) and Kerry Power (note taker)

Appendix 10: Analysis proforma for focus-group interviews

Reporting area	Findings
Key initiatives and actions implemented	
Implementation strategies that worked	
Initiatives that were less successful	
Trends across networks	
Trends across service types	
Unintended outcomes	
Knowledge of the VEYLDF	
Promising practices	
Impact	
Multidisciplinary approach to professional learning	
Resistance to change	
Valuing the ongoing process of professional inquiry	
Capturing the dynamics of learning and development	
Embedding new understandings into everyday practices	
Sustainability: Continuing the networks	

Appendix 11: Professional inquiry question themes

Six key themes emerged from the analysis of participant inquiry questions.

Theme 1: Assessment with and for families

Professional inquiries focused on families in all networks. Sale (n=5) and Yarra (n=4) had the most professional inquiries explicitly on improving assessment and communication with families, with Wyndham, Hume and Baw Baw having the least (n=1). In the middle were RCDW and GSC (n=2) and Mildura (n=3).

Theme 2: Child's voice in assessment

Including the child in assessment was important for Yarra (n=4) and RCDW (n=3), with some interest in Mildura (n=1), Baw Baw (n=1) and Sale (n=1). The results of these professional inquiries must have had a profound effect on each network, because discussion about the child's voice in assessment was evident in the networks during the final workshop.

Theme 3: Families focused on, and see learning in, play-based settings

A number of participants focused on how to increase families' engagement with assessment for learning in a range of early childhood settings. Six professional inquiries were focused directly on this topic in Ballarat (n=1), GSC (n=1), Hume (n=1) and Mildura (n=1). Professional inquiries in Wyndham (n=4) and Yarra (n=1) also featured this topic, but their professional inquiries were more oriented towards identifying pedagogical practices that would allow families to see the worth of learning through play activity. GSC and Wyndham (n=2 in each network) also inquired explicitly about how playgroups could focus on assessment for learning, where one professional inquiry in Wyndham featured the MCH looking at assessment for learning in playgroups. Family-centred models of practice were also noted in Ballarat (n=1), Baw Baw (n=2) and GSC (n=1).

Theme 4: Meaningful documentation and assessment

Professional inquiries that focused specifically on moving towards more meaningful documentation and a pedagogy of assessment that was purposeful were noted in GSC (n=4), Baw Baw (n=1), Mildura (n=2), Sale (n=1), Yarra (n=1) and Hume (n=1). However, reflections on assessment were also featured by Ballarat (n=4), Hume (n=4), Sale (n=1), Wyndham (n=1), Yarra (n=1) and RCDW (n=1), with Baw Baw (n=2) and Hume (n=1) specifically concentrating on how to help educators do this effectively. In addition, some networks also focused on how educators could be encouraged to value children's learning and development (n=1 for each of Baw Baw, Mildura, Sale and Yarra).

Theme 5: Creating common language of the VEYLDF and pedagogy across sectors

Establishing a common language between services around the VEYLDF was evident in all networks – through explicitly looking at this or through projects that indirectly focused on it. Hume (n=4), Wyndham (n=4), Baw Baw (n=3) and GSC (n=2) had the largest number of professional inquiries about building a common language around the VEYLDF, with the least in Ballarat (n=1), Mildura (n=1) and

Sale (n=1). Of importance were the additional professional inquiries that centred on MCH and the VEYLDF in Hume (n=2), Mildura (n=1) and RDW (n=1).

As part of building common understandings about the VEYLDF, transitions became an important point of professional inquiry by Baw Baw (n=1), Hume (n=2) and Mildura (n=1), where working with OSHC was noted in GSC (n=1).

Theme 6: Inclusion and diversity

A number of professional inquiries focused on inclusion and diversity across networks. Culture broadly, Koorie culture specifically, and vulnerable children were noted. The networks of Ballarat (n=2), Baw Baw (n=1), GSC (n=1), Sale (n=2) and Wyndham (n=1) focused on inclusion and diversity.

Comment

These six trends were also noted in the final workshops, where collaboration with families was a significant focus in discussions. Professional inquiries (and their presentations at the workshops) have had a flow-on effect, providing rich discussion and overall network learning that went beyond the outcomes of the original person's professional inquiry.

Appendix 12: Assessment for learning

Post-project questionnaire: Question 11.11 Assessment for learning and development

In relation to assessment for learning and development, please choose one description (describing a continuum of curriculum implementation) that describes your current understanding and practice for each statement below.

Practice Principle from the VEYLDF: Assessment for learning and development. Response options (continuum of curriculum development) were:

- I don't know what this means.
- I know what this means.
- I know what this means and I have considered what practice change this will involve.
- I know what this means and I have considered what practice change this will involve and I can explain it to others.
- I know what this means. I have considered what change it will involve. I can explain it to others and I implement this in my practice.

As an early childhood professional:

- I assess children's learning in ways that inform my practice.
- I assess children's learning in ways that include children's views of their own learning.
- I assess children's learning in ways that are authentic and responsive to how children demonstrate their learning and development.
- I assess children's learning in ways that draw on families' perspectives, knowledge and experiences and expectations.
- I assess children's learning in ways that consider children in the context of their families and provide support to families where necessary.
- I assess children's learning in ways that value the culturally specific knowledge embedded within communities about children's learning and development.
- I assess children's learning in ways that are transparent and objective, and provide families with information about their children's learning and development and about what they can do to further support their children.
- I assess children's learning by gathering and analysing information from a wide range of sources to support assessment and effective planning.
- I assess children's learning in ways that provide the best possible advice to children and their families.

Appendix 13: Glossary

AEDC............... Australian Early Development Census

ALD................. Assessment for Learning and Development

AusVELS .... Australian Curriculum in the AusVELS

CALD............... Culturally and linguistically diverse

CEO................ Catholic Education Office

DEECD .... Department of Education and Early Childhood Development

ECIS .... Early Childhood Intervention Services (includes PSFO, Inclusion Support, Specialist Children's Services, Paediatric therapy)

EAL.................. English as an Additional Language

EYLF................ Early Years Learning Framework

Early Years Management and Projects ... (includes Best Start, local government and community projects and policy and Multifunctional Aboriginal)

FDC .... Family day care services

GSC................. Great South Coast Network

IIP .... Inquiry to Implementation Project

KESO............... Koorie Engagement Support Officer

Kindergarten... Funded kindergartens/preschools

LDC .... Long day care/early learning centres/child-care centres

MACS.............. Multifunctional Aboriginal Children's Services

MCH .... Maternal and Child Health (includes Universal, Enhanced and Koorie Maternity Services)

MEYP .... Municipal Early Years Plans

NAPLAN.......... National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy

OCC................ Occasional child care

OSHC .... Outside school hours care

PEDS............... Parents' Evaluation of Developmental Status

Playgroup........ Playgroup/supported playgroup

PSFO.............. Preschool field officer

SPPI .... Supported Playgroups and
Playgroups Initiative

VCAA.............. Victorian Curriculum and
Assessment Authority

VEYLDF .... Victorian Early Years Learning
and Development Framework

Notes on terminology

In the VEYLDF the term **early childhood professional** includes any person who works with children aged between birth and eight years. This includes the early years of school: Foundation, Year 1 and Year 2 (VEYLDF, p. 5).

Note: The term Foundation replaces Prep as Victoria transitions to the Australian Curriculum – AusVELS.

Appendix 14: A visual summary of key themes

Key network themes	Rural City of Wangaratta Early Childhood Network	Yarra Ranges Child, Youth and Family Network	Hume City Early Years Partnership	Sale and Districts Best Start Early Years Network	Baw Baw Best Start Network	Wyndham Child and Family Services Network	City of Ballarat Best Start Network	Great South Coast Early Years Network	Mildura Rural City Council Network
Dominant themes across networks									
New ways of assessing were developed that included involving children and families	●	●		●	●	●	●	●	●
Inquiry questions changed thinking and professional practice – multidisciplinary practitioners as researchers	●	●			●		●	●	●
Professional learning took place through being part of a multidisciplinary network		●	●	●		●	●		●
Engagement with the VEYLDF provided deeper understandings of Practice Principles and Learning and Development Outcomes		●	●		●	●	●		
Themes evident in particular networks									
New ways of working with children and families with complex support needs developed				●	●		●	●	
New ways of leading, supporting and motivating colleagues emerged	●					●		●	●
Active listening and shared language across service types emerged	●	●							
Shift in focus from activities to child learning outcomes			●			●			
Holistic assessment to capture wellbeing emerged			●	●					
Appreciation for the diverse learning communities developed					●				●
Moving from a position of authority to discussions with families	●							●	

Appendix 15: Evidence of relational agency in IIP networks

Phase	Key idea	Description	Examples of evidence
Foundational	Building a sense of belonging to a network	A sense of belonging to a network is critical for all levels of engagement: personal and professional.	Appreciate sharing of ideas and practice (Great South Coast Early Years Network, Workshop 5)
			'Decreased need to be the sole leader or anxiety about being in the network' (Mildura Rural City Council Network, Workshop 5).
			'Increased knowledge has led to less "fear" or apprehension of new practices – greater understanding helps people to relax into it then ideas begin to flow' (Hume City Early Years Partnership, Workshop 5).
			'The network has given me confidence in the way I'm thinking and the directions I want to go in' (Wyndham Child and Family Services Network, case study).
			'The network helps us to brainstorm and we can talk and work things out' (Rural City of Wangaratta Early Childhood Network, case study).
Phase 1	Finding out about each other's services	Network members find out what each other member is doing.	The network enabled new connections and created space for new encounters: 'It's taken me out of the kinder and into the community' (Yarra Ranges Child, Youth and Family Network, case study).
			'I found these workshops gave me an insight into early childhood services other than primary schools. Through discussions, we were able to outline the gaps between early childhood services and what we are doing well in supporting children's learning' (Hume City Early Years Partnership, Workshop 5).
			'Lots of general early childhood knowledge in general through conversations throughout the day' (Wyndham Child and Family Services Network, Workshop 4).
			Knowing about other services helped with learning about what others did and offered (Great South Coast Early Years Network, case study).
			'This project allowed time for me to think/rethink my practice and my understandings on a range of areas. It gave me time to collaboratively work with other educators – gain new ideas and better understand different early childhood services' (Sale and Districts Best Start Early Years Network, Workshop 5).
			'Great opportunity to network with colleagues across the early childhood sector in Hume and gain a perspective of individual roles and the difficulties people are experiencing with implementing the frameworks' (Hume City Early Years Partnership, Workshop 5).
			Greater understanding of how others work and use the VEYLDF (Wyndham Child and Family Services Network, Workshop 1).

Appendix 15: Evidence of relational agency in IIP networks

Phase	Key idea	Description	Examples of evidence
Phase 2	Engaging in a common experience or process	Network members engage in a common experience of reflection, the development of a professional inquiry, and discussions about the VEYLDF and EYLF.	Feeling of professional connectivity leading to a reduction in stress associated with working in silos (Sale and Districts Best Start Early Years Network, Workshop 5). 'The focus on relationships with families, the whole child, the voice of the child has been a refreshing and welcome change from the day-to-day bustle of primary school life, outcomes, etc. It has awoken knowledge from my uni days and early days of teaching. The time to reflect has been most welcome' (Yarra Ranges Child, Youth and Family Network, Workshop 5). 'Inquiry means questioning one's own assumptions and beliefs about learning (Hume City Early Years Partnership, case study). 'I have a better understanding of the learning theories that underpin the frameworks' (Mildura Rural City Council Network, Workshop 5). 'The IIP has opened my eyes to the VEYLDF, as I was not familiar with it before starting this project. It has challenged me to assess and document children's development within the playgroup I facilitate' (Great South Coast Early Years Network, Workshop 4). The frameworks gave a new language through which to start conversations about the importance of antenatal care (Baw Baw Best Start Network).
Phase 3	Building a common focus for the group	Network participants build a common focus by discussing the VEYLDF and EYLF and children's 'learning'.	The Y chart of learning: 'Taking a question and all putting down ideas, opens up everyone professionally, making each other think' (Sale and Districts Best Start Early Years Network, case study). Comfort in a 'shared struggle' and having starting points: 'How do services present to families?' (Mildura Rural City Council Network, case study). 'I found the IIP very useful for embedding knowledge around VEYLDF, leadership, evidence collection, research around, breaking down Practice Principles, etc. It has also helped me self-reflect and realise I am more of a researcher than I thought' (Yarra Ranges Child, Youth and Family Network, Workshop 5).

Appendix 15: Evidence of relational agency in IIP networks

Phase	Key idea	Description	Examples of evidence
Phase 4	Building a common language	Network participants develop a common language through discussing the VEYLDF in relation to service types, individual inquiries, agreed outcomes and what assessment evidence might be.	'We share a language with others' (Baw Baw Best Start Network, Workshops 1–4). Familiarisation with the VEYLDF is seen as a bonus and has had a direct impact on the network (Baw Baw Best Start Network, Workshop 5). 'Distinction between developmental and learning conversations is very powerful and will support practice change in the workplace' (City of Ballarat Best Start Network, Workshop 3). 'Thinking more deeply'; 'continue to incorporate VEYLDF language and practice' (Baw Baw Best Start Network, Workshop 4). 'We shared a lot from different assessment areas' (Mildura Rural City Council Network, case study). 'Developing understanding about practice across different services/sectors' (Wyndham Child and Family Services Network, Workshop 4).
Phase 5	Aligning one's own interpretations with those of others	Network participants discuss individual professional inquiry outcomes and support each other with reflections and analysis with a level of understanding about each other's practices.	'We consult with whoever we need to in order to get the job done. We always sit, listen and collaborate.' (Baw Baw Best Start Network, case study). 'To keep adapting ideas to get parent involvement more ingrained in our program' (Great South Coast Early Years Network, Workshop 4). Sustainable multidisciplinary focus: 'Developed further knowledge around the framework in relation to assisting my team with writing an early years strategy – I played a lead role in creating the conversations to get them thinking' (City of Ballarat Best Start Network, Workshop 5). 'We understand the same language' (Baw Baw Best Start Network, case study). 'Recognised that it is important to collaborate and link with other service providers to provide better outcomes for families. Have prioritised linking to services that have an emphasis on working with vulnerable families in our community' (Sale and Districts Best Start Early Years Network, Workshop 5). 'What learning looks like in each other's learning environment' (Wyndham, Workshop 4) and 'Seeing members across the network working together and developing an understanding of each other's services for the benefit of children is very inspiring' (Wyndham Child and Family Services Network, Workshop 4). 'Noticed differences in the language of conversations and the MCH referral language is more about engagement of families – this has shifted' (Rural City of Wangaratta Early Childhood Network, case study). 'Became aware of others' ways of working, gained a better appreciation of being a 'team player' (City of Ballarat Best Start Network, case study).

Appendix 15: Evidence of relational agency in IIP networks

Phase	Key idea	Description	Examples of evidence
Phase 6	Thinking about one's own professional expertise and contribution in relation to what others with different disciplinary/ community knowledges and practices bring	Network participants discuss individual professional inquiry outcomes linked to longstanding challenges or needs for their region, using common language established earlier.	'Thinking holistically about assessment and sharing new knowledge with other networks, changes in format of assessment' (Great South Coast Early Years Network, Workshop 5). 'Evidence collection – input from other people with ways they collect evidence can be very valuable as this is an important part of our job and can be very time consuming' (Yarra Ranges Child. Youth and Family Network, Workshop 5). It [network] has given me confidence to go to different services and say we have the research to back this up – it confirmed everything for me and made me push harder for best possible outcomes for parents and children' (Wyndham Child and Family Services Network, case study). Seeing the network as a resource (City of Ballarat Best Start Network, case study). 'It's strengthened us. Often primary school is seen as the bastion of learning but now we're seen along the continuum' (Rural City of Wangaratta Early Childhood Network, case study). 'The whole community has come together to support the issue of engagement and building rapport, establishing trusting relationships … changed my focus to be with parents. What are their concerns, issues and what do they hope for?' (Mildura Rural City Council Network, case study).
Phase 7	Enhanced professional practice where own contributions are viewed as part of the collectively identified professional inquiry or need	Network participants build and implement a collective professional inquiry linked to the longstanding challenges or needs of their region.	Getting services to adapt to work in a culturally appropriate way was important and 'trying to get them out there understanding families' needs is not that easy … as services we need to be flexible and go where parents want to meet, change practices and still fit with the framework' (Baw Baw Best Start Network, case study). 'Team is transformative. Common purpose, leaders lead from the rim' (Baw Baw Best Start Network, Supported Playgroups, Workshop 4). Through the network it was felt that crucial relationship building could take place beyond a 'fix this fix that' model: 'We need to spend time to make a relationship as we walk a careful path with families and we need the critical element [provided by the network]' (City of Ballarat Best Start Network, case study). 'Disrupting position of power as experts'; 'The network allowed us to see what a common issue was and then have partners to put in a submission to collectively problem solve with knowledge of the issue and go to someone to auspice the application' (Rural City of Wangaratta Early Childhood Network, case study). 'Ability to bring wider voices from our open conversation when discussing with staff and in working with other community networks. Reinforced partnership approach to make best use of data to be collected – consideration of gathering pre- and post-feedback from the sample community' (Baw Baw Best Start Network, Workshop 5).