



The Early Years Learning Framework Professional Learning Program



Our 'philosophy'

There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, Than are dreamt of in your philosophy

(W. Shakespeare, Hamlet, act 1, scene v).

Setting the scene

The *Oxford dictionary* (1989) defines philosophy as:

The 'love, study and pursuit of wisdom.'

The *Macquarie dictionary* (2005) defines 'philosophy' as:

A 'system for guidance in practical affairs.'

Together, these definitions encompass some of the ways that we think and talk about 'our philosophy' in early childhood education. We tend to use the term 'philosophy' to include the personal values we bring to our work, the beliefs about 'children', 'learning' and 'families' that impact on how we provide for and respond to them, and the policies and procedures that guide our everyday practice.

The *Early Years Learning Framework* (EYLF) (DEEWR, 2009a) does not define 'philosophy'. Its beliefs about young children and learning are inherent in the '3 Bs'—belonging, being and becoming—and its values are embodied in the five Principles that underpin Practice:

- Respectful relationships
- Partnerships with families
- High expectations and equity
- Respect for diversity
- Reflective practice.



Similarly, the National Quality Standard (DEEWR, 2009b) captures its philosophy in the six Guiding Principles that apply across all seven Quality Areas:

- The rights of the child are paramount
- Children are successful, competent and capable learners
- Equity, inclusion and diversity
- Valuing Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures
- The role of parents is respected and supported
- High expectations for children, educators and service providers.

Different settings, different priorities

Educators in different settings across Australia will be at different stages in the articulation and review of their philosophy. The EYLF, the National Quality Framework (NQF) and the National Quality Standard (NQS) provide an opportunity to stop, reflect and rethink what we do and why we do things in particular ways.

As the *Educators' Guide to the Early Years Learning Framework for Australia* (DEEWR, 2010, p. 3) indicates:

... some ideas [in the EYLF] will be consistent with some of your practices and knowledge, and some will be challenging, new and very particular to Australia.

Example 1:

A setting that has undergone many changes in management and leadership over the past eight years has decided to use the EYLF and the NQS to 'go back to basics'. They are asking educators to reflect on fundamental questions about:

- why they chose to work with young children
- what they enjoy about their daily experience
- what helps them and children feel they 'belong'
- what is their view of young children as they see them 'being' in the here and now
- what kinds of people do they want to support children to 'become'
- what needs to be put in place to facilitate that growth, development and learning.

They will ask families similar questions—why they chose that setting; how they and their child feel about going there; what priorities they have for their child's learning every day; and what their hopes, dreams and expectations are for them into the future.



Example 2:

An established Family Day Care service has taken the opportunity presented by the EYLF to review and articulate their aims. They have been thinking about the kind of place they want the Playgroup to be:

Our Playgroup will aim to:

- be a happy place, where children laugh, play, have fun and where children can be children
- create a sense of belonging, where children can develop self-confidence, feel valued and connected to others and develop relationships
- respect children as competent, capable and active participants in their learning
- be a journey of discovery in learning to learn
- offer opportunities to explore, investigate, experiment and participate in shaping the learning environment
- enable children to learn to respect and care for living things
- provide warm, affectionate and responsive relationships that surround all young children
- show the spirit of community and dignity for all.



Example 3:

In Cairns, a Pre-Prep setting based in the Aboriginal community of Yarrabah makes its core goals clear through its learning program and relationships with children and families:

- Security, identity and belonging—are top priorities
- Learning to relate, cooperate and share—is fostered
- Physical, emotional and spiritual wellbeing—is emphasised
- Engagement with learning—is promoted through 'Stop', 'Look' and 'Listen' behaviours, so that children maximise their on-task learning
- Strong in culture and ready for learning—both 'Yarrie lingo' and standard Australian English are referred to in teaching and learning and their appropriate use explained to children
- Foundations for literacy and numeracy—are firmly established, connecting school and book language with real world experience and building number sense through creative play.



A philosophy is a living document

Example 4:

Wiradjuri Preschool Child Care Centre in Canberra lives its tenets of respect and communicates and negotiates its policies and procedures with families.

As the Director, Carmel, explains in her Research in Practice Series book, *Respecting diversity: Articulating early childhood practice* (Richardson, 2011):

Each setting has a philosophy that guides its practice. This is usually developed over time and in response to the needs of the community who access the setting. A good philosophy is a written document which expresses what stakeholders believe about children, childhood and how children learn and develop (NCAC, 2007). Philosophies should be evolving documents that ... respond to the changing world in which we live.

Wiradjuri reflects the beliefs and values of the broader community and has a strong focus on social justice, equity and inclusion. The recognition of Australia's First Peoples and commitment to Reconciliation is evident in everything that educators and children do. It is evident, for example, in the Reconciliation garden, in the Acknowledgement of Country that children make and in the Smoking Ceremony on Sorry Day which is conducted by a respected Aboriginal Elder from the local community.

Wiradjuri is characterised by:

- respect and relationships
- a belief that 'learning can happen anywhere, anytime'
- sociocultural approaches to learning and teaching
- intense engagement of educators and children
- thoughtful, sustained conversation
- deeply professional planning, documenting, analysing and responding to children's learning.



Example 5:

Gowrie Victoria (formerly Lady Gowrie Child Centre) has been through an extensive process led by its Pedagogical Reference Group to incorporate the values and ideals of children, families and educators in the development and ongoing revision of its philosophy. The notes that follow were gathered in conversation with four of Gowrie Victoria's senior staff.

Gowrie Victoria seeks to:

- build a community of learners and consistency of vision across its centres, sharing knowledge, aspirations, skills and ideas
- build a philosophy that takes into account the complexities of contemporary families' lives
- articulate the reasons behind why things are done, or not done in particular ways—for example, why do we choose not to highlight Mothers' Day?
- create a community in which children's questions, families' expectations and educators' knowledge all have a respected place.

Gowrie Victoria's *Philosophy for the Children's Program* encompasses:

- beliefs about children as capable, competent, co-contributors and active participants in their own learning
- acknowledgement and value for our own Indigenous heritage and that of the wider community—locally, nationally and internationally
- responsibility for the natural environment and awareness of sustainability
- equal opportunities and an inclusive approach
- a commitment to ongoing professional learning
- involvement with contemporary research and investigation of innovative teaching approaches
- partnerships with families and connection to the local community.

The full text of Gowrie Victoria's philosophy is available at: www.gowrievictoria.org.au.

Conclusion

A philosophy underpins everything we do as early childhood educators. It is a living document that should be reviewed regularly as families join and leave the learning community, whenever there are changes in the leadership and management of the setting, and when new knowledge becomes available through sources such as the EYLF and professional learning opportunities.

A philosophy starts with 'what we believe' and moves on to 'what does that mean for what we do?'

As Melissa at the Gowrie Victoria, Carlton North centre says: 'The philosophy should explain the reasons behind the way you implement your program.'

She suggests some questions to guide thinking and discussion:

- How do you believe children learn and acquire new skills?
- What are your views about families and their role in the setting?
- What is the role of educators?
- What is the role of the wider community?
- Can you find examples in your environment that reflect and represent what you believe?

And, as Carmel points out in *Respecting diversity: Articulating early childhood practice* (p. 4), a philosophy has to take into account shifts in educational theory and changing understandings about children's learning:

Where once the philosophy ... may have focused primarily on individual children and their development, it is now just as likely to focus on the interactions and relationships that occur within the learning environment and to see these as highly relevant and significant contexts for learning.

Future e-Newsletters will discuss some of these shifts and changing theory bases that underpin early childhood education.



Early Childhood Australia has developed a *Code of Ethics* (2006) through a rigorous process of national consultation. The *Code of Ethics* 'provides a framework for reflection about the ethical responsibilities of early childhood professionals.'

The *Code of Ethics* is available at: www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/code_of_ethics/early_childhood_australias_code_of_ethics.html.

It offers an excellent starting point for educators who are establishing or revising a philosophy for their setting.

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