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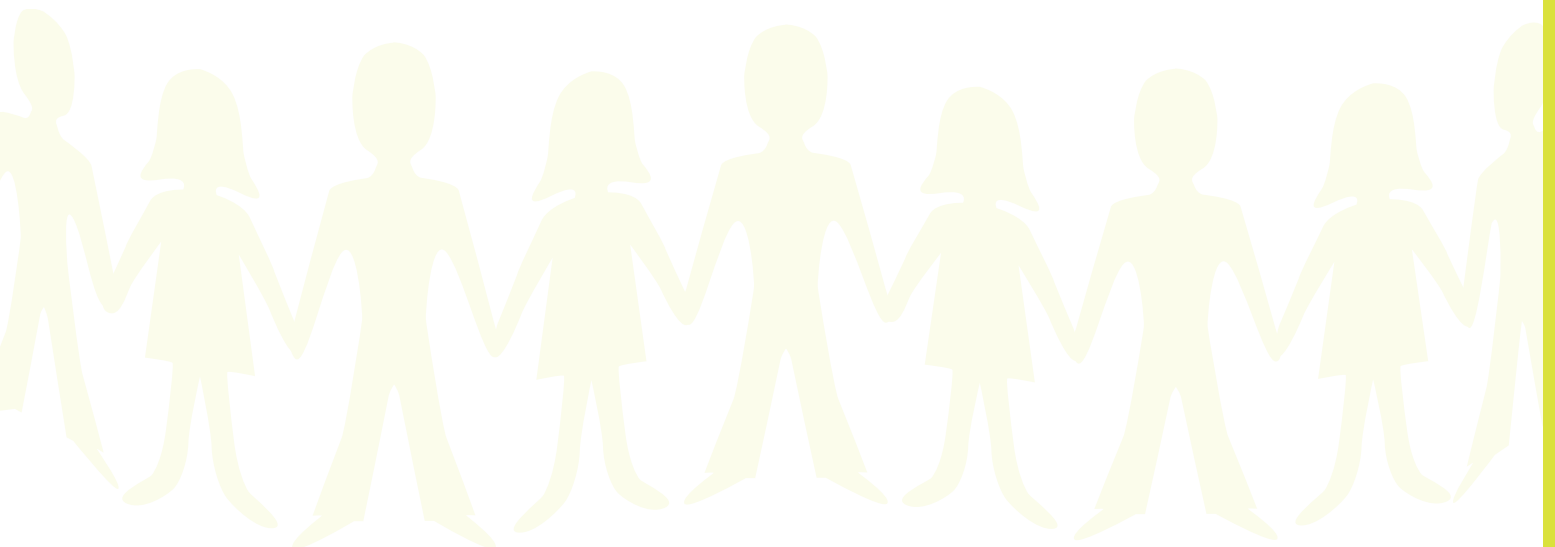
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Early Years Learning Framework Early Childhood Australia Submission



10 December 2008

An Early Learning Framework for the Twenty First Century

Submission from Early Childhood Australia

Early Childhood Australia (ECA) wishes to draw attention to aspects of the draft Early Years Learning Framework (November 2008) that could be enhanced to provide an inspiring and practical document of immense value for early childhood educators at this significant time in Australia's history.

Purpose

Early Childhood Australia is concerned that the opening statement, *Vision and Purpose* of the consultation Draft should focus on our national vision for young children with respect to their early learning, rather than on settings and practitioners as it currently does.

It is not sufficient to 'validate good practice...and 'provide a common language'. This is 'The' national framework that should guide what happens in education settings for young children in the immediate and medium future. We have an opportunity here to provide a common framework that can drive quality provision across the nation and act as a yardstick against which standards of excellence can be evaluated.

Early Childhood Australia therefore believes that the purpose of the EYLF should be to *articulate our intentions for Australia's children from birth to age five* in crisp, unequivocal terms clearly stating what exactly children are entitled to experience and what their families can hope will be gained from children participating in early learning settings. The EYLF should base the description of early years' content on *a vision for the people children will become and they world they will create*.

Context

ECA believes that as a nation we have reached a place where we can acknowledge the legacies of the past face the challenges of the present and plan to create the compassionate, equitable and productive society to which we aspire. ECA also recognises that there is much still to do and that early childhood education has a special role to play in developing children's capacities to contribute to a better future for all Australians.

The Apology to The Stolen Generations has both given hope and set an expectation that people will be brought together. However, there is still much to be done to meet our obligation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians and to respect their right to live their own heritage and to benefit fully from what this country now offers.

As well, across Australia, among all groups, too many individuals and families struggle with obesity, mental illness and substance abuse. There remains an unacceptable chasm between wealth and poverty in this resource-rich country, with many families struggling to raise their children and many children struggling to benefit from educational opportunities. Globally, the survival of the planet is threatened as a result of human actions.

ECA wishes to state the strong view that this national context should have high visibility in the EYLF and influence its content.

A Futures Orientation

In keeping with other Australian national curriculum documents currently being developed, ECA recommends that the EYLF should be oriented towards the future. The document therefore should be based on absolutely current wisdom about young children and their learning and about effective teaching. The kinds of educational outcomes described should recognise the sophisticated challenges young people will face in a rapidly changing world.

ECA suggests that the children we are educating today will need to be resilient, flexible, innovative, clever and connected to their fellow human beings and to the natural environment in order to live fulfilling lives and to contribute to the prosperity of the nation and the well being of global communities.

These goals for our children should be an explicit part of the EYLF vision and the educational processes described should indicate ways to foster these qualities and capacities.

Being Australian

An earlier version of EYLF (20 October 2008) noted, 'The land that became Australia has always been one of great diversity. Prior to European settlement in 1788, there were up to 600 Aboriginal language groups, each with its own political system, laws and language, spread across the vast continent....Ongoing waves of migration since 1788 have contributed further to Australia's social, cultural, linguistic and religious diversity...As a nation, our diversity and our ability to live together democratically and, for the most part, harmoniously, is one of our greatest strengths.'

ECA supports this emphasis on diversity and asks that it be more visible in subsequent drafts of the EYLF.

ECA suggests that as an early childhood community, we need to have a sense of the kind of Australia we aspire to be.

ECA therefore recommends that we should aim for Australian children to develop qualities that include openness, optimism, democratic values and practices, respect for the rights of others, inclusivity and connection to the land.

Educators will need to model such qualities and to foster them in their everyday interactions with young children.

Reconciliation and equity

Notwithstanding that there remain many matters to be resolved before true reconciliation can be achieved; significant progress has been made this year on the journey towards that goal. Australia has recently committed to becoming a signatory to the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007) and the 'Sorry Day' in Canberra in February this year touched the hearts and moved the minds of an enormous number of Australians of every race and creed.

ECA suggests that the context of Australia post-Apology be made prominent in the EYLF and influence strongly the values and vision of the document.

It is in this context that we must place the rights of all children to a fair share of the social goods of education. We are about social justice, and that means that early childhood education has to distribute resources differentially, in order to rebalance the disadvantage of some individuals and groups. Positive discrimination practices apply to all children and early childhood educators have to move from simplistic notions of 'treating all children the same' to sophisticated understandings about 'unequal treatment' to achieve more equitable outcomes.

All children have a right to their cultural strengths and identities *and* a right to the knowledge, skills and capabilities which will enable them to participate fully in mainstream society: 'keep kids strong in culture while they're learning' as one respondent group to the EYLF consultation said. It is important to recognise that 'identity' is not a static concept and that the power lies in enabling children to use different cultural resources in different circumstances and to continually construct 'identities' that give them the best chance to live constructive and fulfilling lives.

ECA also suggests that the EYLF should highlight the positive aspects of Australia's overall cultural diversity and declare that multiple ways of seeing, being and learning are strengths to be nurtured and should be the foundations for new learning.

The many different cultural knowledges brought to this nation by peoples from all over the world, therefore, should be valued and utilised in early learning settings and in society as a whole.

Three motifs: belonging, being and becoming

While accepting that the three 'motifs' – belonging, being and becoming – will find ready acceptance in early years' professional communities, some respondents at consultations have wondered if they distract from the overall cohesion of the Framework.

ECA believes that Delors' 4 Pillars (also referenced in the document) offer a more unifying organiser. The Delors' statements – Learning to be; Learning to live together; Learning to do; & Learning to know – have international credibility as broad purposes for education and ECA recommends that the EYLF explore their particular significance for young children's learning.

If it is decided to use the three motifs' *being, belonging and becoming* ECA believes that they need greater elaboration.

To enact children's right to 'belong' therefore, professionals working with young children will need to recognise the home and community places in which children first belong and provide secure, attached and welcoming places in which children build new relationships and capacities.

To enact children's right to 'be' therefore, professionals will need to value how young children are at a given point in time and to provide an early childhood experience that is full of joy, and fun and challenge.

To enact children's right to 'become', professionals will need to understand the different identities children are constructing and support them in becoming people who will contribute to a caring and just society.

Early childhood

Our understanding about the nature of childhood and of young children has changed dramatically over the past 20 years and ECA encourages the writers of the EYLF to make plain the implications of these new understandings for what educators do. For example, young children are still entitled to the protection of adults, but they have more personal agency than was recognised previously; they still have much that we can help them learn, but they are competent learners who bring much to the learning setting.

ECA recommends that the EYLF make these shifts in understanding about young children and their learning explicit for practitioners and describe what that means for the role of the caring and educating adult.

Further, ECA believes that such a description of role should make it clear that educating involves:

- ◇ intention – planning based on informed observation and the thoughtful provision of key experiences;
- ◇ interaction – based on shared control where the experienced learner works consciously in a reciprocal manner to extend children’s current and emerging understandings; &
- ◇ intervention – based on informed monitoring of children’s progress, so that learners who are struggling can be supported in particular ways, in collaboration with families.

Values and guiding principles

ECA suggests that in the present EYLF draft there are too many items listed and they are not all values. ECA recommends that the Values and the Principles be separated and that a small number of each be described succinctly, but in sufficient detail to inform early childhood professionals about the world view underpinning their work.

In line with comments above, ECA sees the following Values as representing our goals for children:

- ◇ Resilient – from secure attachments and supported independence to develop a strong belief in yourself as a person and a member of many communities
- ◇ Creative – from opportunities to inquire and to construct and to solve problems in divergent ways
- ◇ Capable – from having your knowledges valued and utilised and being given access to new ways of knowing and thinking
- ◇ Connected – from learning to value the difference in others as well as to recognise what Australians hold in common
- ◇ Responsible – from being encouraged to care for others and for the environment

ECA sees the following as key principles underpinning early childhood education in Australia. Professionals working with young children recognise that:

- ◇ Children are competent learners
- ◇ Learner well being lies at the heart of young children’s emotional health and learning success
- ◇ Partnerships with families are crucial to learning success
- ◇ Educating young children is based on quality adult-child interactions
- ◇ Diversity is a fundamental and valuable aspect of Australian life

Outcomes

The current draft EYLF does not provide sufficient detail on what is meant by Learning Outcomes and why they are important. ECA believes that we must be able to describe what we expect children to gain from the early childhood learning experience, so that we can evaluate quality and promote equity.

Educators need to be able to describe significant milestones on children’s learning journeys so that they can lead them on to more sophisticated understandings and skills; so that they can identify delays and intervene; and so that they can support children across key transition points.

An outcomes approach must support planning, programming and the provision of key learning experiences; outcomes have to be observable and reportable. Outcomes should be precise so that educators can ‘map backwards’ from what they hope children will achieve to what experiences are required to make such achievement possible.

Some practitioners may object to notions of ‘outcomes’ on the grounds that they see them as normative, that they devalue child agency and/or that they undervalue the role of the family in children’s learning. ECA does not subscribe to such views, and believes that we can describe expectations for children’s learning, while allowing many ways to achieve them.

ECA therefore suggests the following four outcomes and associated key elements:

- ◇ Identity and relationships – including emotional and physical wellbeing and social skills and empathy
- ◇ Active participation – including learning to act democratically, to value diversity and to contribute to interdependent communities
- ◇ Thinking and investigating – including processes of inquiry, understanding the natural and constructed world and creating sustainable futures
- ◇ Ways of communicating – including literacy, numeracy, IT and creative representation and communication through arts forms

ECA recommends that each of the four outcomes be described along a continuum which specifies key points in children's acquisition of knowledge, understandings and skills. The Framework should also offer precise guidance to professionals about what such outcomes mean for what they provide and do.

Connections and continuity

The outcomes described above relate to current State and Territory curriculum frameworks that tend to categorise learning in the first years as 'personal, social, understanding the world, thinking and communicating'. They easily connect with national curriculum statements currently in progress in English, Maths, Science and History and those planned for other learning areas.

While early childhood educators rightly resist a 'top down' curriculum being imposed on young children, ECA believes that we should be able to describe 'continuity of learning from birth' and show how what is taught in the early years contributes to learning at school and to a disposition to learn that continues throughout life.

The debate about assessment

There will be considerable debate within the early childhood community about terms such as 'assessment' being applied to young children and the role of the practitioners who work with them. Some practitioners may feel that the term resonates from the school sector and implies check lists and other tracking mechanisms that do not capture the complex and non-linear nature of young children's learning. On the other hand, some will assert that 'assessment' is a legitimate part of being accountable.

ECA believes that monitoring children's progress, keeping detailed records of what children know and can do and being able to engage children in the 'next steps' in their learning, are essential professional responsibilities. Lorna Earl's emphasis on 'assessment *for* learning' is most pertinent to the early years, with children and their families being involved in reflecting on progress.

ECA recommends that the EYLF describe why and how to assess and that the supporting document supply detail on gathering evidence, documenting learning and progress and planning for future learning.

Issues around implementation

Professionals operating in early childhood educational environments comprise a diverse group with an immense range of training, knowledge, experience, collegial support and leadership. The EYLF has to connect with them all and to inspire them to move to new levels of insight and professionalism, including seeking appropriate early childhood qualifications.

To do that, the document has to be couched in everyday language, using professional terminology only when absolutely essential, and not flinching from presenting challenges to some long held assumptions and beliefs. For example, it is a common misconception that 'any caring person can be an effective professional in early childhood learning settings'. Instead, ECA asserts that pedagogical leadership, discipline knowledge and theoretical understandings about children and their learning are vital prerequisites for 'quality' in the early childhood sector.

ECA believes, that, as a nation, we need to work to ensure that all early learning settings have these high levels of leadership.