



## **Trialing the draft Early Years Learning Framework: Our experience**

**Dr Susan Irvine (CEO, The Gowrie Qld Inc.)**

**Ms Debbie Verstege (Director, Lady Gowrie Warry St Child Centre)**

### **Introduction**

On 2 July 2009, the Council of Australian Governments<sup>1</sup> (COAG) endorsed *Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia*, and implementation in early childhood education and care services (ECEC) in all states and territories. This is a significant milestone in the history of ECEC in Australia.

The aim of the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) is to:

*...extend and enrich children's learning from birth to five years and through the transition to school (Australian Government, 2009:5).*

The EYLF has been written by early educators for early educators. It is intended to guide and support planning, implementation and evaluation of quality curriculum in ECEC settings. It is important to note the difference between the EYLF and a school curriculum or syllabus. The EYLF should be viewed as a professional resource and is not prescriptive in the same sense that a curriculum or syllabus may be prescriptive. The EYLF is informed by and supportive of a range of different theories and approaches to ECEC, and values and enables local curriculum planning and decision-making.

While there seems to be a general sense of enthusiasm and optimism surrounding the EYLF, there is also some anxiety and lots of questions about the process for implementation, expectations and support for services. Recognising and responding to the growing thirst for information about the EYLF, PSCQ asked us to share our experience of participating in the national trial earlier this year. The idea being that this might answer some questions about the EYLF and promote thinking about ways to begin to implement the EYLF at your service.

Here we reflect on the trial, our approach to implementation, and staff share their views and experiences of the draft EYLF. Remember, the trial was designed to test and refine the EYLF, and, remaining true to this, there are a number of new developments in the final EYLF.

## **Why did you decide to participate in the trial?**

Debbie (Centre Director) and I had attended the EYLF Forum in late 2008 and generally felt comfortable with the proposed themes and directions in the framework. Some weeks later, we received a letter from the EYLF Consortia, inviting us to be one of 29 case study sites (4 in Queensland) for the national trial of the EYLF. While we were excited about the opportunity, we

1. COAG comprises the Prime Minister, State Premiers and Territory Chief Ministers.

knew this would mean additional work, so thought it appropriate to invite staff views on participating in the trial. At this time, it was a matter of choice! Collectively, we identified mutual benefits. The trial would provide opportunity for us all to learn about the EYLF prior to its implementation, and opportunity to have a say and try to influence something that was going to impact on our work with children and families.

### **Some staff comments**

- *To be aware of the requirements and to become familiar with the various aspects of the framework before it is needing to be implemented*
- *So the transition into using the ELYF is not so intensified*
- *To be a part of a wonderful new development that will lift childcare to the next level*
- *It is a privilege to actively contribute to a national Early Years Learning Framework*

### **The Trial**

To kick off, we received a package of information from the Consortia, identifying the purpose and broad nature of the trial, the timeframe (from 23 February to 3 April 2009), and the process for data collection. The primary request was that staff 'engage' with the draft EYLF and supporting documentation – and provide feedback. We were given multiple copies of the draft framework and there was plenty of scope to think about how we would implement this. To assist us in thinking this through, and to monitor our progress, we were assigned a 'critical friend', Associate Professor Donna Berthelsen from the School of Early Childhood at QUT. Donna's role was to listen, stimulate thinking, and to ask questions to help us to get the most out of the framework.

As the trial timeframe was relatively short, we started out with a planning meeting, to determine how we would implement the framework, and then gather information from stakeholders. This meeting involved the Centre Director, Assistant Director, Pre-prep Teacher, our Operations Manager (Child Centres), Donna and myself. We decided on the following key steps:

- Memo to all staff outlining our trial process, opportunities to be involved and expectations of staff. The memo asked all staff to begin by reading through the draft framework.
- Letter to parents – providing an overview of the EYLF initiative, the trial and inviting parents to participate in the discussion.

- A desktop mapping exercise – to map our existing child outcomes to the EYLF learning outcomes – to see how our current work linked to the framework. This was followed by a further mapping of our educational philosophy against the outcomes and teaching strategies.
- Nominate a lead person in each room – to gain different insights we sought a mix of staff with different qualifications and levels of experience (ie. not simply the group leader in each room).
- Data collection - via individual interviews (conversations) with lead staff, and a final focus group that involved all centre staff, interested colleagues from other Gowrie services, senior Gowrie staff and a member of the Board of Management.

### **How did the staff find implementing the Early Years Learning Framework?**

We had a very positive experience and attribute this broadly to three things. To begin, we all saw value in the EYLF. Having read through the EYLF, staff felt comfortable and positive about the EYLF and eager to put this to use, as illustrated by the following comments:

- *... we believed in the content of the document – it was a good fit with our values and beliefs about education and care programs for young children.*
- *...it was backed up by sound early childhood theory and pedagogical practice.*

Second, we weren't starting from scratch. Only last year, The Gowrie embarked on a lengthy and consultative strategic planning exercise, that included the review and updating of our educational philosophy and identification of a set of priority child outcomes. This was a collaborative process, engaging staff, family day carers, parents and management. The result is a strategic framework that underpins all of our work across services (centre-based and home-based) that has a high degree of ownership by all stakeholders. Naturally, we were eager to build on this – and were not looking to simply replace it with a new framework.

With this aim in mind, senior staff mapped the Gowrie child outcomes against the EYLF learning outcomes (see Table 1). Perhaps not surprisingly, given we are drawing on the same research and practice wisdom, there was a high level of correlation between the two sets of outcomes. Having done this, we linked our educational philosophy to the EYLF. We then asked staff to review this work, and to add their thoughts. Staff were asked to use the EYLF to identify gaps and/or areas they felt we could strengthen, and to draw on their own professional knowledge and practice to expand on the related indicators and teaching strategies.

**Table 1: Example of mapping exercise and proforma used for staff feedback**

Learning Outcome 1: Children have a strong sense of identity and wellbeing		
EYLF outcome: Children feel safe, secure, and supported		
Gowrie outcome: A sense of emotional wellbeing including a sense of belonging, self worth, an understanding of personal feelings and a developing sense of empathy for others		
<p><b>This is evident, for example, when children:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• build secure attachment relationships with familiar educators</li> <li>• communicate their needs for comfort and assistance</li> <li>• establish and maintain respectful, trusting relationships with other children and educators</li> <li>• openly express their feelings and ideas in their interactions with others</li> <li>• respond to ideas and suggestions from others</li> </ul>	<p><b>At Gowrie, we facilitate this learning for example when we:</b></p>	<p><b>Key links to Gowrie philosophy:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create a safe, welcoming and stimulating learning environment to encourage thoughtful play</li> <li>• Promote secure attachments and warm trusting relationships and interactions</li> <li>• <i>Promote...</i> social learning and awareness, and capacity to express and acknowledge feelings</li> <li>• Recognise parents as their child's first and most influential teachers</li> <li>• Share knowledge and promote confident parenting</li> <li>• Build genuine reciprocal relationships between children, families, staff and carers that are strengthened and sustained over time</li> </ul>

Third, we promote a work culture of critical reflection, open discussion and shared decision-making. This certainly supported the active and meaningful engagement of staff in the trial, and good data collection. In turn, we also found that the EYLF and trial process offered a tool and process to promote and strengthen this culture.

### **How did the Early Years Learning Framework help the service engage with families?**

We have a commitment to two-way information sharing (ie. sharing information with parents and seeking information from parents). As noted, all families received a letter providing information about the EYLF and trial. This prompted some questions and one-one conversations with parents. There was also a need to reassure some parents that this was about play-based learning and good early childhood practice – and not an attempt to promote more formal (school-based) learning at an earlier age. Our sense is that, with this proviso, parents were generally supportive of a resource that would inform and support educators to design curriculum to meet local needs and context.

It's our experience that different parents have different views and expectations of ECEC, and so we were also interested in looking at how these compared to the EYLF outcomes. Using a graffiti board approach, we asked parents: *What do you most want for your child from time spent at this centre?* At the time, we only received a small number of comments – too few to draw any overarching conclusions. However, this is a discussion we intend to pursue.

#### **Some staff comments:**

- *Through displays and information given to families and an opportunity for families to make comment it has helped families to become familiar with the document and what is happening in high quality services.*
- *There has been an increase in parent participation and support since the draft EYLF.*

## **What practical changes did your staff make to their everyday practice to implement the Early Years Learning Framework?**

Collectively we viewed the EYLF as a thoughtful and useful resource. Applying a strengths-based approach, implementation validated our current thinking and work, and enhanced this by offering new insights and strategies and highlighting areas where we could do more.

### **Some staff comments:**

- *More reflection and building on the areas of play that sometimes get missed – creating more learning opportunities.*
- *In the Pre-prep room it has increased our emphasis on belonging to communities and the rights and responsibilities necessary for civic participation. Eg. Police visitors and fire fighters as examples of how people serve each other in the wider community.*
- *There is a strong emphasis on fairness and friendship amongst our group in reflecting how 'big people' deal with fairness by having rules and the 'law'.*
- *We found that we were implementing many of the indicators across the outcomes*
- *We did identify some gaps in some of the areas which we will reflect on further and add more opportunities to learn in those areas or resource and focus on them more in our program.*
- *It is similar to our current practice.*

## **What do you think the sector will gain from having the Early Years Learning Framework?**

We believe that development of a curriculum framework spanning all formal ECEC services is a welcome development that is somewhat overdue. Development of the framework acknowledges the significant contribution of ECEC services and educators to a child's education and lifelong learning. (It's about time!). Promotion of the EYLF, within the sector and broader community, will hopefully go some way toward raising this awareness and value and respect for the work that we do.

From a professional perspective, we gain a thoughtful and useful resource that can be used by different services to promote and support high quality ECEC curriculum.

### **Some staff comments:**

- *A higher standard of practice.*
- *A base that we can all reflect on and develop into our everyday practice*
- *It is a national framework and this benefits every staff member, family and child.*
- *On a practical level it is to be hoped that staff who move positions and services and service types will have gained a good broad knowledge of the outcomes and how it relates to their pedagogy and to the learning of the children they are working with and be able to transfer these skills as they move to new services or positions.*
- *A stronger link in the two way communication that we have with families – sharing views on what is important for young children's learning.*
- *It is a way to promote our contribution and place in the lives of children.*

## **Did the service have any concerns whilst trialing the Early Years Learning Framework?**

No concerns as such. Feedback on the draft EYLF included the need to promote a holistic approach and to value all areas of learning (not some above others). We also felt that the EYLF needed to be accessible to a wide audience (staff, carers and parents), and could do with a good edit to remove unnecessary jargon. There was also a feeling that insufficient attention had

been directed toward reconciliation and Indigenous knowledge and culture. We feel that these concerns were considered and have generally been addressed in the final EYLF.

#### **Some staff comments:**

- *The original draft seemed to have a stronger emphasis on intellectual/cognitive learning without enough regard for the necessity to establish a secure emotional base for infants and children before learning /development can smoothly progress. This was rectified by the March '09 Draft.*
- *There was a general concern about the roll out of the Framework and the time to support all staff to feel familiar with the document and be clear on the ways they might use with children, for themselves as professionals and with families and the wider community.*

#### **Next steps**

Through recent meetings and forums, we have heard a little about plans to promote and support implementation of the EYLF in Queensland. In preparing this article for Loop, we followed up with the Queensland Office for Early Childhood Education and Care and the state branch of the Commonwealth Office for Early Childhood Education and Child Care. Both were happy to share the following plans and broad timeframes.

July 2009	Information sharing commences via DEEWR website, sector meetings and letters to services. See <a href="http://www.deewr.gov.au/EarlyChildhood/Policy_Agenda/Quality/Pages/EarlyYearsLearningFramework.aspx">http://www.deewr.gov.au/EarlyChildhood/Policy_Agenda/Quality/Pages/EarlyYearsLearningFramework.aspx</a>
Aug 2009	Start six week trial of the draft Educator's Guide in 30 locations across Queensland.  Online Forum (similar to earlier online forum).  An Online Learning module is also currently being developed.  Ongoing discussion with universities and TAFE to embed EYLF in ECEC courses.
Sept 2009	Printing and distribution of EYLF and supporting documents to ECEC services.
Oct 2009	Release of the final Educator's Guide – to be distributed to ECEC services.
Nov 2009	Capacity Building programs to be delivered in various locations across Queensland.
Jan 2010	Professional development to be offered through PSCQ – ongoing.  Professional development package for remote and Indigenous ECEC services.  Translation of the EYLF Families' Guide into 20 different languages.  Support from leading ECEC organisations (eg. Early Childhood Australia, NIFTeY, ARACY and the Centre for Community Child Health).
Jan 2011	Evaluation of the implementation of the EYLF commences.