**National Quality Standard**
**Professional Learning Program**

# What have theories got to do with it?

Educators 'use a learning framework that brings together ideas, philosophies and approaches to guide their everyday practice' (*Guide to the National Quality Standard,* ACECQA, 2011, p. 23).

## Setting the scene

*The Early Years Learning Framework* (EYLF) (DEEWR, 2009a) and the *National Quality Standard* (NQS) (DEEWR, 2009b) explain how educators weave or bring together many different elements including their values, beliefs, professional knowledge and skills and experience when they plan for and support children's learning and development. Educators' professional knowledge is based partly on theories about children and early learning; as the *Early Years Learning Framework* states: 'Educators draw upon a range of perspectives in their work' (p. 11).

As we begin thinking about how theories connect with achieving *National Quality Standard,* it's helpful to understand how the terms 'theories', 'perspectives' and 'approaches' are used in the EYLF and NQS.

Theories are the big ideas that come from research and wise thinking over time. Early childhood educators may be familiar with a number of theorists from their studies or reading, such as Montessori, Piaget, Vygotsky, Steiner, Bowlby, Bronfenbrenner, Rogoff, or Foucault. Each of these theorists has a 'perspective' or position that may be quite different on the same issue or topic. For example, many of them hold different theoretical perspectives on the value of play and how young children learn. It is important for educators to know about different perspectives on play when they are planning play-based learning approaches.

Theoretical perspectives, together with our personal and service philosophy, affect the way we approach our work with children, families and community.



*Picture this:*

A group of three girls and a boy aged three to four years are skillfully selecting and cutting pictures out of magazines and pasting them onto paper at the collage table. They have been commenting on each other's work and sharing the magazines and their ideas. After a while, one of the children says to another child who has cut and pasted a photo of a boy, 'That's yukky. I don't like boys'. Another child agrees with this comment and the child who made this selection, says loudly, 'You're not my friend'.

If you were the educator working with these children how would you respond or what would you do next?

- Would you ignore the comment because, at this age, children make lots of comments that they don't really understand or mean?

- Would you redirect the child by focusing her attention on her own work?

- Would you challenge the comments because even at this age, you believe children have or are forming ideas about difference?

- Would you comment on how nice you think the child's picture is because that reinforces a positive message?

- What learning would you identify if you were assessing this experience?

## What have theoretical perspectives got to do with this scenario?

Your response would be based on several things, including the theories about children and learning that guide your practice or pedagogy. Whether you recognise the theories explicitly or not, they are influencing the way you respond to children and families. Each of the above responses has a theoretical foundation.

For example:

- If you focused on the assessment of children's fine motor skills and their independence you might be thinking from a *developmental perspective.*

- If you believed it was important to challenge the comments about a 'yukky boy' or 'not my friend' because they reflect bias and exclusion, you are making a decision based most likely on *post-structuralist perspectives* which recognise that children can use power (via words or actions) to include or exclude others.

- If you decided to focus your actions and future plans on learning about friendships, you might be reflecting *socio-cultural perspectives* that value the social nature of learning and the importance of children as teachers of others.

- If you chose to praise the child who pasted the image of the boy, you are probably influenced by *behaviourist theories* which encourage the use of positive reinforcement for guiding children's behaviour.

It is possible that your immediate response might be based on one theoretical perspective and then later—with time for deeper reflection and conversation with others—you could make a different decision based on a broader range of perspectives.

The *Early Years Learning Framework* in its chapter on Early Childhood Pedagogy (p. 11) makes several important points about the theories that inform or guide our work:

- there are strengths and limitations for every theory—which means it could be unwise to always rely on one perspective about children's learning and development

- educators draw on or use different theories each day

- theories help us to understand what we do and why

- theories help us to deepen our understandings of children, families and communities and pedagogy.

These points resonate with statements in the *Guide to the National Quality Standard* (ACECQA, 2011) which remind us how important it is for educators to:

- 'draw on their professional knowledge when developing the curriculum

- understand children's learning

- develop a greater level of expertise in delivering programs that enhance learning and development outcomes for each child' (p. 21).

## Linking theories to practice: A culture of professional inquiry

Skilled educators think seriously about the theories that influence their work. There are professional networks in Australia whose aim is to promote this type of deep engagement in thinking about theoretical perspectives and links with practice. Since the introduction of the EYLF, all educators are expected to use reflective practice to deepen their understandings about what they do and why.

When educators seek to understand the theoretical perspectives that underpin their practice they are engaging in the type of *lively culture of professional inquiry* that the *Guide to the NQS* (p. 119; p. 171) says is important for achieving National Quality Standard. These lively discussions should be happening well before an assessor's visit so that educators feel confident to talk about what they do and why, including knowing the theories that influence the approaches they take in their pedagogy.

## Philosophical and theoretical approaches in action

In Australia, a number of early childhood settings have been inspired by the work of a particular theorist such as Maria Montessori, Rudolf Steiner or Loris Malaguzzi and the early childhood education projects of Reggio Emilia, Italy. One of the challenges for these settings is to make connections between the *Early Years Learning Framework* and the philosophical and theoretical approaches that underpin their work.

### Practice example 1

The Beehive Montessori School in Perth has a mission statement that reflects the Montessori philosophy:

> *The Beehive Montessori School aims to educate the whole child within a Montessori environment by respecting individual differences in order to foster an enjoyment of learning and a sense of community responsibility.*

There are obvious connections with the EYLF in this mission statement—the focus on relationships, holistic approaches, and community responsibility, for example. As part of continuous reflection on their mission statement and how it influences their work, the education community has developed a School Reconciliation Action Plan as a practical way to acknowledge the Whadjuk Nyungar peoples, the traditional custodians of the land where they are located. They are forging relationships with local Whadjuk Nyungar people to ensure they strengthen the connections and are culturally sensitive in any projects they undertake with the children and families.



### Practice example 2

Tarremah is Tasmania's only Steiner School for children aged from three years to Year 10. The school's early childhood curriculum is based on Rudolf Steiner's philosophy and theoretical perspectives on child development and learning.

According to the School's philosophy:

> *Each child's inner life of imagination and creativity is cultivated, along with an enthusiasm for academic challenge and enjoyment of physical activity. Teachers strive for the balanced development of thinking, feeling and doing.*

This integrated approach matches well with the holistic approaches and the learning outcomes in the EYLF which are 'designed to capture the integrated and complex learning and development of all children' (p. 19).

### Practice example 3

Other early childhood settings use theoretical perspectives drawn from broader research fields or rights-based frameworks such as social justice, equity or social inclusion to inform their philosophy, policies and practices.

At Wiradjuri Preschool and Child Care Centre in Canberra, educators base their pedagogy on the 'rich and powerful child' concept associated with Reggio Emilia approaches to early childhood education and socio-cultural theories which affirm the power of learning with others. The Centre also demonstrates a commitment to social justice through deep respect for the Aboriginal custodians of the land and the right of every child and family to experience a strong sense of belonging and inclusion.

## Conclusion

The NQS states that 'updating and maintaining educators' knowledge is a joint responsibility that requires professional learning opportunities that challenge and extend current thinking' (p. 111). Examining the theoretical perspectives embedded in or informing current practice is an essential part of this updating and enrichment process for all educators. There is no one right way, but there are better ways, and effective early childhood education is informed by sound, tested and diverse theoretical perspectives, that support improved outcomes for all children.

Some educators may be fortunate enough to attend conferences, workshops or network meetings to update their knowledge and engage in challenging conversations with colleagues; others may have a pedagogical leader on site to support a lively culture of professional inquiry. Educators who are relatively professionally isolated are finding these e-Newletters, the online Forum and Facebook give valuable opportunities to debate issues that interest or concern them.

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### Weblinks

www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/eylfplp/

www.reggioaustralia.org.au

www.socialjusticeinearlychildhood.org

### References and resources

The CD Rom in the back of the *Educators' guide to the EYLF* (DEEWR, 2010) – Document 7 provides an overview of the different theoretical perspectives that underpin the EYLF Vision of belonging, being and becoming.

Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority (ACECQA) (2011). *Guide to the National Quality Standard*. Sydney: ACECQA.

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### Biography

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### Coordinating Editor

Jenni Connor wrote the e-Newsletter series in 2011 and is responsible for liaising with authors and overseeing the production of the 2012 series.

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