



# **Australian Education Union**

## **Submission**

**on the**

## **Early Years Learning Framework**

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**Angelo Gavrielatos**  
Federal President

**Susan Hopgood**  
Federal Secretary

**Australian Education Union**  
Ground Floor  
120 Clarendon Street  
Southbank VIC 3006

Telephone: 61 3 9693 1800  
Facsimile: 61 3 9693 1805  
E-mail: [aeu@aeufederal.org.au](mailto:aeu@aeufederal.org.au)

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## **Introduction**

The Australian Education Union represents 175,000 teachers and educators in the primary, secondary, TAFE and early childhood sectors throughout Australia. As such, it is uniquely placed to represent the views of early childhood teachers and educators on the Early Years Learning Framework.

## **Vision and purpose**

The AEU supports the proposal for a National Early Years Learning Framework, which aligns with the AEU's policy of a national plan for Early Childhood Education. Such a framework should reflect the need to provide all children, regardless of sex, language, culture, ethnicity, religion or disability, with quality early childhood education and care capable of maximising their long-term education and life potentials and capacities for lifelong learning.

The AEU also believes effective implementation requires effective system commitments from governments to equity and excellence in early childhood education and care. This means commitments to provide the resources to support ECE teachers, early childhood professionals and learning centres, and to address the issues that impede just and fair educational outcomes for all.

The framework should be an overarching document that describes the broad parameters and should not be over-prescriptive. It should enable states and territories and individual centres to innovate, respond and adapt curriculum to their particular needs. We believe it does this. In addition, it must facilitate professional decision-making by teachers about curriculum and programs, and allow for flexibility for ECE centres catering to different cohorts to achieve consistent educational standards in different ways. It is accordingly necessary for the framework to clearly acknowledge the importance of professional teacher judgement in making the necessary decisions to cater to the differing needs of the children under their care, and therefore welcome that it does so with the recognition of multiple perspectives.

Within this context ECEC learning should be age appropriate, play based and recognise the differences in the ways children learn. Such learning should be holistic in approach, taking as its focus a developmentally appropriate methodology and contextually appropriate strategies.

The framework should acknowledge the importance of early childhood education and care as a tool of social equity and fairness, within the context of fundamental and universal human rights of children. It is accordingly pleasing that the present draft framework situates itself within the context of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, to which Australia is a signatory, and acknowledges our obligations under that agreement.

The AEU believes the three motifs of belonging, being and becoming are effective terms with which to encapsulate the ideals of early childhood education and care. These include emphasising the importance of links with the community, family and relations with others, supporting the right of children to value their identities, appreciate the joys of life and enjoy their childhoods, and supporting the changes and transitions children go through. However, the AEU also believes that it is vital for the framework to acknowledge that these things can

only be effectively implemented by promoting equity, fairness, inclusion and belonging, and that this requires proactively intervening to overcome disadvantage.

## **Values**

The AEU supports the statements in the present draft in support of living with and valuing diversity and the obligation of all to acknowledge, respect, value and nurture many kinds of difference in our society. This includes the right of children to enjoy and express their own culture, practise their religion and use their home languages, as stated in the draft framework. ECEC must also be free, secular, universally accessible and inclusive of all, and treat all the same regardless of ethnicity, religion, socioeconomic background or ability to pay. The AEU accordingly believes that it is vital that ECEC be delivered in a non-sectarian manner and by providers that do not discriminate against children, parents, or staff based upon personal lifestyle or religion, and this should be clearly stated in the framework.

The AEU believes this is most effectively accomplished by delivery through the public education system. In particular, the AEU believes that the profit motive is incompatible with the ECEC's primary ethical obligations to deliver quality education and care for all children, and that for-profit delivery is not an appropriate method of provision of equitable and quality early childhood education and care.

The AEU supports the statement that “Indigenous children, children with disabilities and developmental delays, children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, and children at risk through poverty and other family circumstances, like all children, have a right to have their abilities, strengths and interests acknowledged as a basis for full participation in meaningful ways.” The AEU also supports recognition of the importance of educators responding to the complexities and realities of children's lives, and to work sensitively with families who may have experienced discrimination due to race, poverty or other factors or who have other particular needs.

However, the AEU believes that such responsibilities cannot be placed at the feet of ECE teachers and other professional staff alone. It is important to acknowledge that proactive intervention, including the provision of appropriate resources, is necessary to overcome disadvantage, and for governments to provide system support to support teachers and other professional staff working with disadvantaged cohorts. This section of the framework would be accordingly strengthened by a specific statement in support of the need for such proactive intervention.

## **Indigenous ECE**

The commitment to reconciliation and recognition of the importance of valuing Indigenous knowledge is welcome. The AEU strongly believes that all Indigenous children should be provided with access to and participate in quality early childhood education and care in their home communities, and that this should be provided as part of a broader strategy to improve the quality of Indigenous education and life. This should include building links with the local community, encouraging parental involvement in education and increasing the numbers of Indigenous teachers and education workers and supporting their roles in ECEC settings.

Accordingly, a statement acknowledging the importance of recognising Indigenous culture and working with Indigenous communities should be included in the framework.

The AEU also believes quality cultural awareness training and induction should be provided to teachers, (pre service and in-service) and other professionals being appointed to ECEC services/centres with high numbers of Indigenous students. High quality education and care for Indigenous children is inclusive of local cultures.

## **Families and Communities**

Relations with families and parents are very important, and are appropriately mentioned in numerous places in the draft framework. Actively engaging parents in the expanding development of their children, in acknowledgement of their critical role, rights and needs in caring for and educating their children, is crucial for effective early childhood education and care.

The AEU agrees that families, parents and guardians should be encouraged and supported to engage in their children's learning and that early childhood education and care services should encourage parental participation. This should include all families and communities, and it should be recognised once again in the framework that this requires proactive intervention to support disadvantaged communities, including support from governments and appropriate resourcing.

## **Learning, pedagogies and curriculum**

As previously stated, the AEU supports a flexible approach to curriculum and pedagogy, with states and territories able to innovate, respond and adapt curriculum to their particular needs, for individual ECEC services and teachers to be able to make professional judgements and decisions about curriculum.

Within this context, ECEC should operate within curriculum frameworks established by state governments, taking into account the pedagogy and curriculum frameworks of the early primary years and provide articulation between them.

That said, addressing disadvantage through curriculum should not be left at the feet of teachers or other early childhood professionals alone, and the statement should also contain an acknowledgement of the importance of system support and the proper resourcing of ECEC centres, curricula and programs to overcome disadvantage.

Curriculum frameworks and programs must be child focused and reflect the centrality of play in children's learning.

The AEU believes that Early Childhood Education curriculum should be based on a developmentally appropriate model that responds to:

- knowledge about how children learn;
- knowledge of the individual differences of children;

- the need to provide continuity of learning experiences across, between and within all settings of Early Childhood Education.

Developmentally appropriate early childhood curriculum should display the following characteristics:

- attention to how young children learn through teaching strategies which include observing, modelling, facilitating, supporting and challenging them as learners;
- progression from early to middle childhood;
- a view of learning as an integrated active and interactive process in which the learner constructs his or her own understanding;
- a valuing of the gender, experiences, language and cultures of all children;
- recognition that learning takes place in a context where social, cultural and gender related factors have an influence.

We believe these principles are reflected in the draft framework.

A deep understanding of child development and child psychology will also ensure that children with additional needs or disadvantage can be treated appropriately with access to suitable agencies for assistance, both for the child and the staff. Teachers and other early childhood professionals accordingly need to be well versed in the areas of child psychology and child development so that appropriate and timely learning opportunities are provided for young learners.

The AEU strongly supports the inclusion of a statement on the importance of Indigenous Australian arts, both traditional and contemporary, in the identities not only of Indigenous people but to all Australians.

In the section entitled *Learning and Creativity*, the very general statement in regards to the ‘arts’ needs to be clearly defined so as not to lead to misunderstanding or emphasis only on the visual arts. There needs to be an even emphasis on all areas of the arts, including music, dance and drama. Music especially plays an important role in child development, giving a sense of rhythm, beat, singing and underpinning cultural beliefs and history.

The AEU is concerned by the lack of emphasis on a physical education program and the importance of motor development amongst children in early childhood. The section that talks about *Learning Environments* needs to specifically state the balance between indoor and outdoor environments. Both need equal attention taking into account the weather and the physical opportunities of the students and the healthy outdoor life we are afforded in Australia and the significant role this has in our cultural identity.

The AEU believes that the framework needs to more specifically spell out that ECEC learning should be play-based, and believes that the document would be strengthened by the inclusion of examples of best practice.

## **Learning Outcomes**

The present draft framework identifies four broad areas of learning outcomes, with which the AEU is in broad agreement.

### *Identity and Belonging*

The AEU agrees with the importance of the framework supporting identity and belonging, including the right of children to feel safe, secure and protected and to acknowledge and take pride in their cultural and spiritual identities.

### *Language, literacies and creative expression*

The AEU agrees with the need to promote rich languages, literacies and creative experiences. The AEU also agrees with the appropriate use of IT in achieving these aims, provided it is properly designed to improve the quality of teaching and learning for children and allow teachers and other early childhood professionals to manage their work in more effective and efficient ways. Where IT is used, it is important that early childhood education and care services be provided with adequate IT support and professional development, including as a minimum:

- access to appropriate IT and specialist and qualified staff;
- at least twelve hours IT professional development per year for ECE teachers and other early childhood professionals, directed at an individual needs level;
- access to up to date computers for all teachers and other early childhood professionals, including printers, a personal email address and access to the internet.

The AEU agrees that children should be supported to become competent speakers of their family languages. Accordingly, the framework should support, where practical and appropriate, the use of Indigenous and other community languages within the early childhood setting, a position supported by strong academic evidence of the pedagogical advantages of doing so. This should be complemented by an emphasis on the importance of achieving proficiency in English at an early age, noting that the evidence shows that this can enhance a range of social and academic outcomes for all students.

### *Exploration, investigation and thinking*

The AEU supports the provision of a rich and rigorous pedagogy from an early age, and is in agreement with the statements in the framework in supporting the encouragement of thinking, reasoning, exploration, investigation and problem solving skills. This should be complemented by the teaching and encouragement of an understanding of diverse view and perspectives and an awareness of children's communities.

The teaching and understanding of diverse views, values and perspectives must involve the teaching of the values of acceptance, community, respect and civic participation. These are not only fundamental Australian values, but universal ones as well, and the curriculum component of the framework should reflect a fundamental commitment to these universal values.

### *Civic Participation and contribution to the future*

The AEU supports the statements in the framework in support of supporting the promotion of civic participation and a sense of civic wellbeing. Forming strong connections between ECE providers, parents and the community are central to achieving these goals, and supporting and

facilitating such connections, as well as the need to provide the resources to do so, should be strongly recognised in the framework.

## **Children with Additional Needs**

Children with additional needs must be recognised through the provision of adequate funding above other costs of ECEC to provide adequate support, and the AEU believes this should be recognised in the framework. These include access to specialised multidisciplinary services, professional support staff, trained integration aides and professional development for ECE teachers and staff on issues related to children with additional needs as well as specialist teachers in appropriate ratios. Group sizes and staff/student ratios should be appropriately reduced for children who meet the criteria for this assistance.

## **Transitions**

Effective and quality transitions are vital to ensure that children maximise their educational potentials and outcomes. The framework should accordingly contain a statement emphasising the importance of effective transitions and the support and resources that should be given to them. It is no longer acceptable to identify the critical nature of transitions and the relationships which are important to their delivery and at the same time to expect that they will be delivered through voluntary effort on early childhood and early years staff. The framework should allow for a smooth transition to the early years of primary school and should align with other relevant documents.

Where possible ECEC services should be integrated into or co-located with public primary schools or linked with school services to facilitate integration with the early years of schooling.

## **Pedagogical Leadership**

The AEU agrees with the broad contentions expressed in the framework concerning the role of pedagogical leadership, particularly the importance of leadership creating a culture of consideration for the ethical implications of relationships and pedagogies, and the importance of enacting curriculum as a means of addressing equity and disadvantage. In order to overcome disadvantage, teaching must be appropriate to the community and the cohort, and it is accordingly important that the framework recognises that teachers must be able to adapt their teaching strategies as appropriate. We applaud the recognition therefore that a rigid application of a “one size fits all” curriculum does not support this. Further we welcome the acknowledgement of the importance of valuing professional teacher judgement and supporting services and teachers in their decisions and programs.

The AEU agrees with the importance of professional development, but believes that the statement that teachers and other EC professionals should commit to their own professional development should be balanced with a statement reflecting an equal importance and commitment to the adequate system support for such professional development. Professional development must be supported by adequate resources so that it can be implemented in a beneficial manner that does not conflict with or detract from other aspects of the service

provision or programs. This requires commitments from governments to resources, including time in lieu and where relevant adequate travel and accommodation allowances, especially in rural and remote areas and in situations of particular need. Appropriate recognition should also be given to teachers and other early childhood professionals who have undertaken professional development activities.

To implement the framework, there needs to be on-going training and professional development, plus sufficient resources including support officers. The AEU also believes that a particular area of importance is for multi-cultural/cultural awareness training for educators implementing the framework. Carers, social workers, nurses and others who work in the sector should also have access to this training.

Given the workforce requirements of expanding ECEC provision, the AEU believes a mentoring system should be established, for both ECE teachers and other professionals working in the area, and that the framework should support this.

While the role of school leadership is obviously very important, the AEU believes collaborative school structures involving teachers and other early childhood professionals in decision making are vital to effective school management and the production and implementation of effective school programs.

## **Assessment and evaluation**

The AEU asserts that ECE learning is holistic in approach, taking as its focus a developmentally appropriate methodology and contextually appropriate strategies.

A knowledge and sound understanding of child development and processes of learning underpin the early childhood teachers planning process. The teaching, learning and assessment cycle is characterised by careful observation of each child's developmental level (social, emotional, cognitive, language and physical), considering and analysing it in the context of culture, experience, family, community, the developmental continuum etc, followed by planning of a learning environment which invites children to explore, clarify, discover and progress and by assessment through a variety of mechanisms.

Systematic observation of individual children is used to: find out about a child's strengths and about areas in which they require additional support; study the child's interactions within groups; find out about learning styles and preferences; identify the child's needs and interests; evaluate the effectiveness of strategies that have been used; and to inform on-going planning. The range of techniques used to observe children (e.g. anecdotal records, samples of work, timed sampling, running records, video/audio; photographs; checklists) is broad and will be influenced by caseloads & group size and the resources (human and other) available. Information is gathered in dialogue with colleagues, children, families and other professionals.

Early childhood curriculum must contain planned learning experiences for children based on clearly articulated goals and values; strategies for implementing learning experiences; and processes for evaluating the impact of these learning experiences on children. It must involve children in the evaluation of their own learning.

Assessment however is not a term commonly used in ECEC. Evaluation is a much more frequently used term. Nevertheless early childhood teachers ‘assess’ children on a daily basis by information gathered as children participate in learning and bring to it their professional knowledge, knowledge of the child and context. This requires knowing what to look for and to accurately interpret its significance. These observations are documented. Curriculum decisions are made based upon this observation and interpretation. Assessment is also made of the strategies utilised, the learning environment, materials, and the teacher’s interactions and role.

Within this context the AEU opposes curriculum based on formal assessment in early childhood. Accordingly, the AEU is concerned that the use of the term ‘assessment’ in the present draft framework, should not imply a connotation of formalised testing and competitive grading, both of which are not appropriate pedagogies for children in this age range. We therefore would see that a statement to this effect should be included in the framework.

Learning in early childhood should be about the journey rather than the attainment of formalised standards, and the AEU accordingly also believes that there should be no requirements for formal report cards to parents.

## **Teaching qualifications and terminology**

In addressing the Quality Consultations forum in Melbourne on 8 August, The Parliamentary Secretary for Early Childhood and Care, Maxine McKew, made it clear that a four year tertiary degree in ECE should be the minimum requirement to work as a teacher in the provision of Early Childhood Education. This is a position with which the AEU strongly agrees, and it is supported by academic evidence from around the world concerning the effectiveness of properly trained teachers. While child carers and other staff clearly have a very important role in the overall provision of Early Childhood Education and care, early childhood teaching itself must be undertaken by four year qualified teachers, and the AEU accordingly believes that the framework should explicitly and strongly support this position.

The AEU notes the use of the term ‘educator’ throughout the document.

It is our understanding that the focus of the framework document is all staff employed in ECEC services however with particularly priority for those with a degree or diploma.

As has been acknowledged by governments at both a State and Commonwealth level, the ECEC sector is staffed by a diverse mix of qualified and unqualified staff. They all contribute to the education process in varying ways. Nevertheless we believe that the blanket use of the term ‘educator’ without any reference to the diversity of staff within the sector is an oversight. The AEU believes that the work ‘teacher’ should accordingly be used throughout the document when specifically referring to teachers engaged in the provision of Early Childhood Education. The AEU also believes that a definition or footnote should be included which explains the use of the word ‘educator’ is intended to capture the diversity of qualifications and experiences of staff. This is relevant when we look more broadly at the Commonwealth agenda for quality through the upgrading of qualifications and the universal access to preschool delivered by degree qualified early childhood teachers.