

# Evaluation of the Victorian Framework Coaching Program

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## Table of Contents

Executive Summary.....	iv
1. Introduction .....	10
1.1 Structure of the Report.....	10
1.2 The Victorian Framework Coaching program: Background and Rationale.....	11
1.2.1 Policy Context .....	11
1.2.2 Support for Early Years Services .....	12
1.2.3 Rationale for the Coaching.....	12
1.2.4 The Victorian Pilot Coaching Program .....	13
1.3 Aims and Objectives of the Coaching Program (2011-2013).....	14
1.3.1 A Program Logic for the Coaching program.....	15
2. Evaluation of the Victorian Framework Coaching program.....	21
2.1 Framing the Evaluation .....	21
2.2 Evaluation Methods and Sources .....	22
2.3 Scope of the Evaluation .....	25
2.4. Audience and Key Stakeholders.....	25
2.5 Limitations of the Evaluation .....	25
3. The Coaching Program (2011-2013) .....	28
3.1 Key Components of the Coaching Program .....	28
3.2 Modifications to the Coaching program - Lessons Learned.....	29
3.3 Services included in the Victorian Framework Coaching Program .....	31
3.4 The Coaches .....	33
3.5 Resources Used by Coaches to Support Services .....	34
4. Evaluation Findings .....	36
4.1 Key Evaluation Question 1: What were the strengths and weaknesses of program design and implementation?.....	37
Consultancy Component.....	37
What was the value of the consultancy visits?.....	38
Coaching Component.....	40
How Did the Coaches Work with the Services? .....	40
Developing an effective working relationship with the service.....	41
Selling the Benefits of Coaching: Using the NQF as a lever .....	42

Structure of the Coaching Visits.....	43
Use of Coaching Resources .....	45
Action Plans.....	47
Facebook Page .....	48
4.2 Key Evaluation Question 2: How did the coaching program influence educators’ practices? .....	50
Educators’ satisfaction with the program.....	50
Outcomes for educators .....	53
Confidence in Explaining the VEYLDF.....	53
Changes in practice and alignment with the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework .....	54
Comparison with Pilot Coaching Program Outcomes.....	58
Influence on the educational leadership team.....	60
4.3 Key Evaluation Question 3: What difference did the coaching program made to services?.....	61
Level of Engagement of Services with the Program .....	62
Service barriers at the start of the program .....	64
Service barriers at mid-point of the program .....	65
Services at program conclusion .....	66
Specific Improvements in Services.....	67
Performance on NQS Ratings.....	69
Service Culture and Educator Practice.....	72
4.4 Service Impact Profiles.....	77
Theme: Building professional identity .....	77
Theme: Increasing educator knowledge.....	81
Theme: Working towards the National Quality Standard .....	84
Case Synthesis.....	87
5. Implications and Recommendations .....	88
References .....	93

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## Executive Summary

The Victorian Framework Coaching Program (VFCP or 'coaching program') was funded by the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, to support early childhood educators and services better align their practices to the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework (VEYLDF). The Department engaged Gowrie Victoria to deliver the program from June 2011 to June, 2013. Four coaches, experienced in early childhood education and care were employed by Gowrie Victoria to provide face-to-face coaching to services.

Fifty-four services were involved in the coaching program. The coaching program built on lessons learned from the implementation of a pilot coaching program with 92 services. A review of this pilot found that coaching was an effective mechanism to support educators in embedding the VEYLDF into practice.

The 2011-2013 program comprised two key components:

- Consultancy services to develop and strengthen leadership capacity and governance mechanisms in services; and
- Coaching services provided face-to-face to support educators to embed the VEYLDF into their work with children and families.

The consultancy component included two initial consultancy visits, followed by 6 face to face days of coaching over 16 months. Coaches developed action plans with the educational leadership team and provided on-site observational support to educators. Print materials and links to online resources were made available to reinforce coaching. A 'Theory to Practice' visit to Gowrie early childhood centres was also incorporated to extend educators' knowledge of potential strategies to improve programming and enhance environments that support children's learning and development.

The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development commissioned an evaluation of the VFCP in June 2013. The intention of the evaluation was to identify and document the processes and outcomes of the program and determine how, if at all the program had supported early childhood educators to embed the VEYLDF into their practice.

A mixed methods evaluation approach was adopted to address a subset of key evaluation questions in three outcome domains – design and implementation, educator outcomes and service level outcomes. Evidence sources and methods included secondary data analysis of consultant and coaching reports, interviews with six managers, conversational interviews with educators across eight services, an end-of-

program survey, and individual and group interviews with coaches and the coaching advisor.

## Findings

Overall, the coaching program was found to be effective in increasing the visibility of the VEYLDF and its implications for practice. It is clear that for many services the program shifted practices in line with the VEYLDF, but it cannot be claimed that the VEYLDF has been embedded into practice across all services.

### Design and Implementation of the Program

- The continuity of coaches from the pilot coaching program (2010-2012) to the coaching program (2011-2013) was beneficial. Coaches in the program were able to flexibly structure their approach according to service and educator needs.
- Interviews revealed that the face-to-face contact with the coach within the service context was important to facilitate reflection on practice and progress practice change.
- The coaches were unable to work with all educators across all services. In larger services the coaches primarily worked with the educational leadership team, relying on these educators to share and spread feedback to other educators within the service. Where possible coaches directly observed practice and provided feedback to other educators while working within the service. Consistency in intensity and scope of these teachable moments was often not possible due to dynamics of an early childhood service environment.
- A range of resources supplemented coaching. Coaches provided educators with materials and templates, and referred them to existing print and online materials. Educators appreciated simple templates and resources to guide improvement. Sixty-five percent of educators responding to the end of program survey reported that the action plans were the most useful resource provided by the coach. These one page templates focused on a specific action and associated strategies to progress the identified action.
- There was a lack of continuity between the consultancy component and the coaching component of the coaching program. The consultancy visits were designed to provide a supportive basis for coaching by strengthening the governance and leadership of services. While the intention was sound, two days consultancy was insufficient to address the structural and operational barriers experienced by some services. The dynamic nature of the services

and the timing of the consultant to coach handover at the end of 2011 also meant that some of this information had changed and/or was no longer relevant by the time the coaches began coaching visits.

- Gowrie Victoria recommended all services included in the program could benefit from coaching following the consultancy visits. It is clear that services with multiple barriers did not gain as much value from coaching as other services in the program. It may be that criteria to inform decisions about progression to the coaching stage were not sufficiently specified.
- The two to three month gap between coaching visits was too long to sustain momentum of educators. Coaches and educators indicated that agreed actions were often not completed in between visits, particularly if the service manager or director did not recognise the need to provide time and focus to progress agreed tasks.

#### Changes in Educators' Knowledge and Skills

- Face-to-face coaching allowed coaches to observe and provide targeted feedback on educators' practice. Educators were highly satisfied with the coaching program. Eighty-nine percent of educators responding to the end of program survey indicated they would recommend the program to other educators. Sixty-nine percent of educators felt that the program was more valuable or much more valuable than other professional development they had been involved in.
- The coaching program made explicit links between observed practice and concepts within the VEYLDF. Coaches linked observations of practice to specific concepts (e.g., intentional teaching) making them tangible rather than theoretical. This process validated and reinforced educator practice in these domains.
- Educators reported that they believed the program had improved their practice in all areas of the VEYLDF, with more educators reporting improvements to reflective practice, ensuring children's success in their learning and development, and providing families with information. Secondary data from coaching reports and interview data from coaches reinforced the improvements observed in reflective practice and environments for children.
- Over sixty-five percent of educators responding to the end of program survey indicated that the coaching program had influenced their practice and increased the alignment of their

practice to the VEYLDF. Coaches noted variability in educators' knowledge and skills of the VEYLDF practice principles across the program timeframe; some educators may be over-estimating their capacity to put the principles into practice. The degree of improvement was associated with extent of contact with the coach and the educators' engagement with the VEYLDF, the individual's motivation and existence of service level barriers, such as turnover, group dynamics or educational leadership within the service that inhibited practice change.

- The 'Theory-to-Practice' visit to Gowrie Victoria reinforced coaching messages and the practice principles. Most educators interviewed as part of the evaluation indicated that the visit gave them practical, low-cost ideas they were able to put in practice within their service. Some of the educators interviewed during the evaluation reported that the Theory to Practice visit played a pivotal role in their understanding of concepts in the VEYLDF.

#### Outcomes for Services

- Most services demonstrated some level of commitment to the coaching program across the program timeframe. By midpoint in the program coaches indicated that 34 of the 54 services were engaged with the coaching program. Engagement was reinforced by two factors, the impetus for improvement resulting from the introduction of the National Quality Framework (NQF) and upcoming service rating visits, and the reputation and credibility of Gowrie Victoria as the coaching provider.
- All services progressed on the Village Indicators, a set of indicators of quality at the service level. Improvements in reflective practice, physical environments, and quality of collaborative reflective practice were highlighted as key outcomes attributed to the coaching program. Specific changes to programming and meeting scheduling were also presented as tangible indicators of change. While there was evidence of the intention of services to maintain the changes, the sustainability of these improvements is not known.
- Classification of services at the end of the program revealed that eleven of the 54 services were identified as consolidating on the Village Indicators, indicating considerable progress across the program timeframe. The remaining 43 were classified as progressing or remaining at a beginning stage. This is indicative of the time that service level change takes to occur, the service



context, and points to the differential value of coaching to services involved in the program.

- Coaching works best when undertaken under the right conditions. The coaching program worked most effectively with services that were highly engaged, had strong leadership supportive of the VEYLDF, and experienced few operational and service level barriers that would inhibit practice change. Improvements were patchy in services experiencing multiple barriers and were limited to changes in specific rooms or attitude or practice change in key individuals within the service. Operational or structural interventions may be required for services with significant barriers.
- Ten of the 54 services have had an NQS visit and rating during the course of the coaching program. Of the ten services, one service was rated as 'exceeding' the standard requirements, three achieved 'meeting,' five services achieved 'working towards' and one service received 'significantly needing improvement'. A comparative analysis of the service classified as 'exceeding' with the service classified as 'significant improvement required' reinforced the importance of engagement, understanding of the VEYLDF, leadership and service capacity.

### Synthesis and Recommendations

In a period of significant reform, support for implementation of new concepts, principles and approaches is required. The Department offers a suite of interventions targeted to identified needs. The coaching program was an initiative that was designed to strengthen educators' practice and enhance service leadership and governance and was developed in recognition of the interdependence of these elements to quality early childhood programs. It is clear that the outcomes of the coaching program at educator and service level have been variable, with some educators and services making significant changes in line with the VEYLDF, while others have found it challenging to align their practices with the VEYLDF.

The following recommendations are proposed on the basis of the evaluation evidence presented in this report. The recommendations are presented in three domains: the design and scope of coaching interventions, strengthening educator outcomes, and monitoring and evaluating coaching initiatives.

## **Recommendations**

### **Design and Scope of Interventions**

It is recommended that criteria for selection of services that may benefit from coaching be more tightly specified to maximise the return on investment. Diagnostic criteria may include evidence of existing leadership and good governance. Other interventions may be more appropriate for services experiencing significant operational or structural barriers.

It is recommended that coaching interventions be tailored to the differential needs and requirements of services. Shorter, more intensive periods of coaching may be warranted to support specified actions agreed by the educational team and to maintain the momentum of change in some service contexts.

It is recommended that professional learning opportunities be extended to educational leaders to enhance pedagogical skills and enhance leadership skills within the service. Enhancing educational leaders' skill base will potentially strengthen the sustainability of support interventions across the service.

### **Strengthening Educator Outcomes**

It is recommended that further opportunities (such as use of social media or educator service visits) be promoted to support services to network and cross-pollinate ideas, strategies and experiences. These opportunities could be explicitly linked with and reinforce existing print form or online resources that support educators' professional practice.

It is recommended that coaching be supplemented by provision of structured materials or resource books that can be used for record keeping and maintained after program conclusion to promote sustainability.

### **Monitoring and Evaluating Coaching Interventions**

It is recommended that a tool or series of tools be developed to enable a more robust and trackable evidence base of educator level or service level change. Ideally, this tool would enable both numerical and narrative comparison of service status and change relevant to service improvement over time.

## **1. Introduction**

The Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) and Gowrie Victoria commissioned an independent evaluation of the Victorian Framework Coaching program in June 2013. The coaching program was funded by the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development and delivered by Gowrie Victoria across 54 early childhood services in Victoria between June 2011 and June 2013.

This report presents the findings of the outcome evaluation of the program. It is intended that the findings presented in this report will be used primarily for summative purposes to shape decisions about the merit and worth of the program, and to inform the development of further initiatives to strengthen the quality of early childhood services to benefit Victorian children.

### **1.1 Structure of the Report**

The report is divided into six sections.

Section 1 provides an overview of the policy context, and background to the coaching program. It includes the aims and objectives of the program and describes the major components. This section presents a program logic diagram to clarify the relationships between inputs, activities and intended outcomes.

Section 2 outlines the purpose of the evaluation, key evaluation questions, audience and the evaluation approach used for the external evaluation. An evaluation data matrix summarises sources of evidence and evaluation methods.

Section 3 presents findings related to the design and implementation of the coaching program. This section identifies the services involved, the key elements of coaching, and the pedagogical underpinnings of the coaching model adopted by the coaches.

Section 4 presents findings related to the outcomes of the program at the educator and service level. The section outlines the strengths and weaknesses of program design, then addresses educators' outcomes and describes outcomes for services. Three service impact profiles are included at the end of the section to reinforce key themes outlined in the aggregated findings.

Section 5 summarises the lessons learned, key implications and recommendations emerging from a synthesis of evaluation findings. The focus of this section is on the implications of implementation of the coaching program for strengthening the application of the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework (VEYLDF).

## **1.2 The Victorian Framework Coaching program: Background and Rationale**

### **1.2.1 Policy Context**

The Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework (VEYLDF) for all children from birth to eight years was released in November 2009. Implementing the VEYLDF is a partnership between the Policy and Strategic Projects Division, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) and the Early Years Unit, Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA). Implementation began formally in 2010.

The VEYLDF aligns with *Being, Belonging and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia* (EYLF) and *My Time, Our Place: A Framework for School Age Care*, and shares of the same five Learning and Development Outcomes. A key feature of the VEYLDF is its scope 0-8 years (rather than 0-5 years of the EYLF) and a set of eight practice principles which provide guidance to all early childhood professionals about the most effective ways to work with children and families.

The approved learning frameworks define a series of expected quality practices in the education and care of children. They are based on a compelling national and international evidence base that points to the critical link between a child's early learning experiences and their educational and social outcomes.

Alongside the development and implementation of the EYLF and VEYLDF is the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care (NQF) introduced in 2012. The NQF requires services to address a series of quality standards that align with an approved learning framework. Together the approved learning frameworks (including the EYLF and the VEYLDF) and the National Quality Standard are key drivers designed to inform the provision of high quality early childhood education and care programs across Victoria.

### **1.2.2 Support for Early Years Services**

The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development has developed a range of initiatives to support services in quality improvement.

Coaching was viewed as one potential mechanism to support services and educators in understanding and applying the VEYLDF in their practice with children. A pilot coaching program was developed and implemented from 2010-2011 with 92 services. This was followed by an extension of the program to an additional 54 services from 2011-2013, and it is this program that it is the focus of this report.

Coaching brings together an experienced practitioner familiar with the EYLF and VEYLDF, and educators who are knowledgeable about the service context and the children with whom they work. Together educators and coaches reflect on, discuss and review observed practices in situ.

### **1.2.3 Rationale for the Coaching**

Coaching can be described as a structured process based on an ongoing relationship between two or more people for the purpose of professional learning and improvement of professional practice (Armstrong & Geddes, 2009).

The relationship between the coach and the educator is critical and the level of engagement of the educator with the coach appears to be an important prerequisite for professional learning (Levin, 2010). While terms such as mentoring or teaching are often used interchangeably with the term coaching, the distinction that orients this evaluation is that coaching is purposefully focused on supporting educators to learn and adopt new approaches to inform their work with children. Mentoring, in contrast, may be designed to support professional goals defined by the educator. Coaching

processes are therefore designed to support the goals of coaching, not necessarily focus on educators' individual or career goals (as in mentoring). It is important to note that as they are external to the service, coaches do not manage the performance of individuals, but rather support individuals through a developmental process.

Simpson (2010) identified the most frequently cited positive attributes of coaching. As a critical friend, with no vested interest in the organisation as an employer or employee, the coach offers:

- the opportunity to talk things through, discuss vulnerabilities and sensitivities
- the opportunity to reflect, to explore actions and their consequences, and to think of other alternatives
- support to the individual in coping with the complexities of the workplace
- an opportunity to explore ways of responding to challenging tasks and difficult people
- a means to assist individuals to identify and affirm strengths and address personal and professional barriers to good practice, and support to learn about new tools and strategies.

Early childhood educators are often professionally isolated within the services in which they work. While they may have some access to one-off professional learning programs, they may have few opportunities for ongoing professional development that supports them in their workplace context.

#### **1.2.4 The Victorian Pilot Coaching Program**

The first iteration of this program, known as the Victorian Early Years Pilot Coaching Program (VEYCP)<sup>1</sup> ran from June 2010 to December 2011 and involved 92 Victorian early childhood services. The intention of this pilot was to align educators' practice with the VEYLDF. Gowrie Victoria was contracted to provide coaching services.

On the basis of review of the pilot and DEECD priorities, the coaching program was extended to a new group of 54 early childhood services. No services involved in the first wave were involved in the second wave. Services were selected for the coaching program on the basis of screening criteria, which is described later in this report.

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<sup>1</sup> hereafter referred to as the pilot coaching program

The focus of this evaluation is on the coaching program, including the two-day consultancy, implemented from September 2011 to June 2013.

### **1.3 Aims and Objectives of the Coaching Program (2011-2013)**

The coaching program is best characterised as a capacity building initiative designed to support the VEYLDF practice principles across early childhood education and care services in Victoria.

The aim of the Victorian Framework Coaching program was to support educators to embed the Early Years Learning Framework for Australia (EYLF) and the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework (VEYLDF) into their everyday practice with children, families and other professionals.

The provision of high quality education and care requires educators with knowledge and skills, and services with strong governance and leadership that support continuous improvement. The program was therefore designed to influence educators within services to align their practice with the VEYLDF and to progress service quality more broadly.

Following two consultancy visits focussed on leadership and governance, the coaching was implemented from September 2011 to June 2013 with 54 services. The program was funded by DEECD. As with the pilot coaching program, Gowrie Victoria was contracted to provide coaching services and manage the program. Four coaches, who had previously been engaged as coaches in the pilot program, were appointed by Gowrie to provide the coaching to specifically selected services across Victoria.

The coaching program was designed to lead to intentional changes at both the individual (the practitioner) and at organisational (the service) levels. The program was conducted over an eighteen month period, including an initial two-day consultancy visit that focused on strengthening leadership and governance. This initial two-day visit was also intended to generate a preliminary assessment of the service in preparation for coaching. Six days of coaching was then provided over the remaining 16 months of the program.

In the mid-program evaluation report (prepared by Gowrie Victoria) the following sub-objectives were defined for educators, educational leaders and services as a whole.

For educators:

- Demonstrate a sound understanding of the VEYLDF practice principles
- Demonstrate a sound understanding of the five learning and development outcomes
- Contribute to a learning community (of professionals) and culture of continuous improvement.

For educational leaders:

- Understand the role of leadership and the process of change
- Develop skills in giving constructive feedback
- Contribute to a learning community of leaders and a culture of continuous improvement.

For the Service:

- Service has progressed according to quality indicators (known as the Village Indicators).

### **1.3.1 A Program Logic for the Coaching program**

In planning the program, DEECD and Gowrie Victoria developed a monitoring and evaluation framework to guide the monitoring and documentation of both program processes and outcomes. A program logic map was initially developed by the Department and Gowrie Victoria to focus attention on the key activities and intended outcomes of the coaching program.



Essentially a logic map is a one-page depiction of the relationship between resources, activities and intended outcomes. In other words, it shows the relationship between what is done and what happens as a result. Such maps are useful in understanding an initiative's intent, and also for developing tailored performance measures and evaluation options. The logic map is important in developing propositions that can be tested during the evaluation.

As this external evaluation evolved, the logic map was elaborated and a slightly revised logic map was developed. The revised logic is presented in Figure 1. The diagram should be read from left to right. It depicts the evaluator's understanding of the key drivers, resources, key activities and the intended outcomes. The external evaluation primarily focused attention on the relationship between coaching program outputs and short-term and intermediate outcomes.

The program was designed to progress a set of outcomes. But the relationship between the work undertaken as part of coaching and the results or signs of progress in services are complex and non-linear. Similar resources and strategies sometimes generate very different results. Outputs are reasonably proximate and traceable to inputs, but outcomes are interdependent and influenced by contextual factors. A brief summary of the key elements depicted in the logic model is presented below.

### **Critical Issues**

The need for the coaching program was based on a consideration of the existing context of reform. Drivers for the coaching program were identified. These drivers were based on evidence derived from the pilot coaching program and from policy insights from implementation of other service improvement initiatives. The three key drivers were:

- There are gaps in leadership and governance in some services that inhibit quality improvement
- Educators struggle with the practice implications of the VEYLDF and the EYLF
- The introduction of the NQF will require services to demonstrate quality practices and alignment of the work with an approved learning framework

## **Inputs**

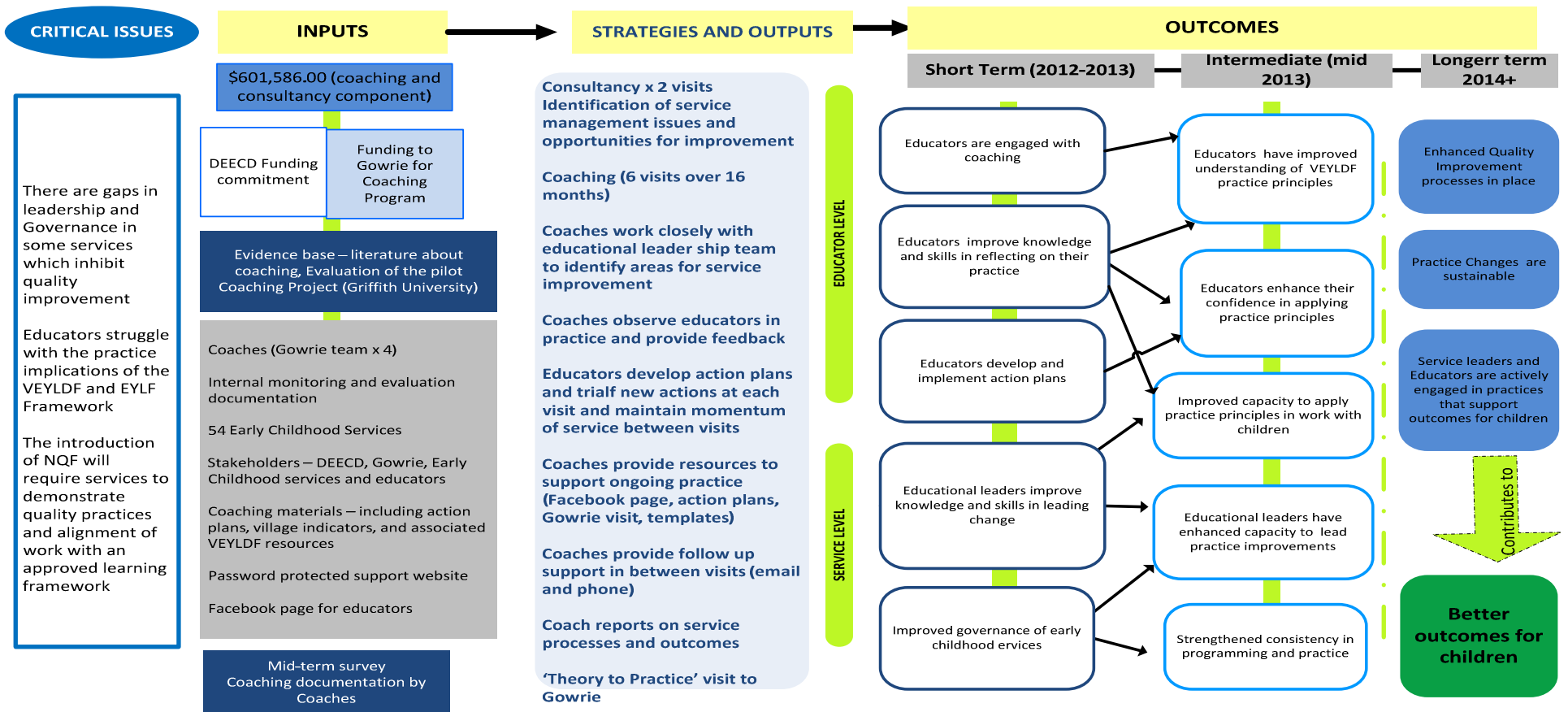
Fifty-four services participated in the program. Gowrie Victoria was contracted to provide the coaching and manage the program.

The total amount of the coaching contract with Gowrie Victoria was \$601,586.00. This equated to an amount of \$186,950.00 for the consultancy component and \$414,636.00 for the coaching component.

Coaching was provided by early childhood specialists who had been involved as coaches in the prior implementation of the pilot program. Four coaches were appointed to provide the coaching.

The coaches made a range of resources available to educators within services that participated in the program. Resources included action plans, a set of service level indicators (the 'Village Indicators') to help services assess current status and areas for improvement, a dedicated Facebook page, reference and use of an Early Years reflection website, and other existing materials, such as practice guides, that were readily available from the DEECD website and on DVD to support implementation of the VEYLDF. While most resources were also used in the pilot program, the Facebook page and the Village Indicators were developed specifically for this program.

# Fig 1: Victorian Framework Coaching Program – Logic Model



A literature review about coaching and a review of the pilot program informed the coaching model.

An evaluation framework was developed jointly between Gowrie and DEECD representatives to guide monitoring and evaluation of the program during implementation.

### **Activities**

Eight days of face-to-face support was provided to the 54 services over an 18 month period. An initial two day consultancy visit was undertaken to facilitate a governance and leadership platform for the coaching visits.

Six days of coaching was provided to the services over the ensuing 16 months of the program, which equated to approximately one visit every two to three months. Coaches worked with the educational leadership team within each service, while also observing and providing feedback to as many educators as possible during coaching visits. In between visits coaches maintained email and occasional phone contact. Coaches also participated in monitoring mechanisms such as a mid-program survey, and discussed and reviewed service progress in monthly coaching meetings with the other coaches.

### **Outcomes**

In the short term (the first year of the program) it was anticipated that there would be shifts in practices at both the educator and service level.

At the educator level it was expected that educators would improve capacity for reflective practice and that educators develop and implement action plans to support practice improvements. It follows that these educators would then develop an improved understanding of the VEYLDF and exhibit more confidence in applying the practice principles to their work with children and families.

At the service level it was anticipated that the consultancy visits and the coaching process would contribute to enhanced capacity of the leaders of early childhood services, and that the services would have improved governance systems in place to support ongoing quality improvement. In the intermediate term these services would then be in the position to provide better support to educators in implementation of the VEYLDF, and there would be improved consistency in programming and practice across the service.

In the longer term, outside of the program timeframe, achievement of these short and intermediate term outcomes was associated with an

increased focus on quality improvement and involvement by all educators and services in supporting improved outcomes for children.

### **Assumptions**

The face to face coaching model is based on three key assumptions. Coaching works when quality improvement strategies are tailored to context, supported by service leadership and personalised to the needs of educators:

- Quality improvement occurs when support initiatives are tailored to context  
Early childhood education and care is provided by services that are diverse in terms of geographical location, leadership and history, qualifications and number of educators, characteristics of children and families attending the service, and many other attributes that influence service provision. An understanding of service context is important in developing effective quality improvement strategies. Support can then be tailored to the opportunities identified.
- The sustainability of quality improvement depends on leadership support, strong governance and sound operational practices within services  
Any targeted intervention has the potential to lift quality temporarily. While pockets of good practice may be identified, educators cannot maintain high quality without support from the service and other educators. Sustainability is threatened when there is a lack of leadership and governance support. Service leaders that encourage and support educators to implement the VEYLDF practice principles will more likely contribute to sustainable quality improvement.
- Educators are more likely to respond to personalised approaches that support practice improvement  
Many early childhood professionals value face-to-face contact and feedback on their practices. Timely feedback and suggestions provided where and as practice occurs are likely to enhance educators' understanding and capacity to change. Direct feedback on practice is an important supplement to professional learning resources provided to support application of the VEYLDF. Conversations about practice and reflection reinforce educators' confidence and capacity to implement change.

## 2. Evaluation of the Victorian Framework Coaching program

The key evaluation question orienting the evaluation of the Victorian Framework Coaching program was, 'How, if at all, did the coaching program support early childhood educators to embed the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework into practice?'

In order to answer the overall question, the following sub-questions were also addressed:

1. What were the strengths and weaknesses of **program design and implementation** (including consultancy phase, coaching phase and materials)?
2. What changes in **educators' practice (knowledge and skills)** resulted from the coaching program?
3. How did the coaching program **influence processes and practices at the service level**?
4. What are the **lessons learned about what is required to support** early childhood services in Victoria?

### 2.1 Framing the Evaluation

The evaluation questions require knowledge about the work undertaken with the 54 services, and rely on an understanding of what outcomes, both intended and unintended, resulted from the coaches' visits.

In an intervention of this nature it can be challenging to disentangle the influence of coaching from other influences in the environment, such as other educational opportunities experienced by the educators, their progressive development as educators over time in a role, and changes in service leadership or approach. In most policy contexts this is a reality that confronts attribution of change to a particular intervention, however the triangulation of evidence across multiple sources, and with multiple methods, contributes to confident and plausible claims about observed outcomes. Attribution of outcomes to the program is made by directly seeking evidence of a causal pathway from the intervention (the coaching) through to the outcomes.

The program logic provided an overview of the linkages between inputs, activities and outcomes of the program and described a set of assumptions about how change would occur. The evaluation focused on documenting the contribution of the coaching program to these outcomes, recognising that many other factors will have potentially influenced educators' practice over the program timeframe.

A set of propositions about the program that can be tested in the evaluation follow from a consideration of the program logic. The propositions are:

- That face-to-face coaching was an effective strategy to support educators to embed the VEYLDF in practice
- That the dose of the program (two day consultancy followed by six coaching visits) was sufficient to bring about intended outcomes
- That the content, structure and frequency of coaching were sufficient.
- That the coach had sufficient contact with the educators at the service (beyond the educational leader/director) to bring about change in their practice OR that the educational leader will coach other educators to achieve the outcomes.
- That the program constitutes an efficient and effective use of government resources (i.e., it generates positive net benefit and is the most efficient means of generating these benefits).

The final assumption was not tested in this evaluation due to the lack of comparable cost data and lack of specificity about the scope of outcomes across services.

The evaluation was framed to understand the ways in which the service context and the intended coaching process influenced actual coaching processes and achievement of intended outcomes. This information will provide important information for future policy decisions to support educators and services.

## **2.2 Evaluation Methods and Sources**

A mixed methods approach to the evaluation was undertaken. Given the timeframe for data collection and analysis, it was decided to undertake evaluation activities concurrently rather than stage them sequentially.

The evaluation included:

- the development and implementation of an end of program survey (end June, 2013)
- Six service visits (four rural and two metropolitan) with three of the four coaches on their final coaching visits (June, 2013)<sup>2</sup>
- Follow up visits to two additional services to conduct interviews with the director or manager of the service
- Topical interviews with 16 service educators across the service visits

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<sup>2</sup> As the evaluation was contracted in the final two months of the program, the evaluator was only able to attend the final service visit with coaches. It is acknowledged that the final visit is likely to be different from previous visits in the nature of coaching activities and in coaching format.

- Attendance at the end of program celebration. Attendance was primarily used as an opportunity to make contact with services for follow-up interviews and to promote survey completion
- Individual and small group interview with the four coaches, and overall coaching advisor at Gowrie Victoria
- Secondary document analysis and review of coaching reports and documentation (including Village Indicators, mid-term reports and coaching survey)
- Three profiles of services (assessed as Beginning, Progressing or Consolidating on final service rubric), and presentation of their response to coaching (positive and negative) based on interviews with the director/manager

A summary of the evaluation methods and sources according to key evaluation question is presented in Table 1.

Specific details of each element of the evaluation is described in the technical appendix accompanying this report.



Table 1: Evaluation Questions and Data Matrix

Key Evaluation Question	Information Requirements	Data Sources	Method of data collection or retrieval
<b>What were the strengths and limitations of the program design?</b>	Description of the coaching intervention and activities undertaken by coaches, quality of content, design (coaching model)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Observation at 6 services (last coaching visit)</li> <li>- Secondary data - coaching reports</li> <li>- Coaches (x 4) and coaching advisor</li> <li>-Educators (16) and 6 managers across 8 services</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Fieldwork notes</li> <li>- Document analysis</li> <li>- Individual interviews</li> <li>- Individual interviews and informal conversational interviews</li> </ul>
<b>What changes in educators' practice resulted from the coaching program?</b>	Views of a wide range of stakeholders about the value of coaching and of this specific intervention (self-report from educators and coaches reports)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-4 coaches plus overall coaching advisor (Gowrie Victoria)</li> <li>- educators participating in mid-program and end of program survey and/or interviews</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Interviews and coaching reports</li> <li>-End of program survey and interviews at service visits (x 8)</li> </ul>
<b>How did the program influence and improve processes and practices at the service level?</b>	What were the most significant changes that occurred in services participating in the program? What is the likely sustainability of these changes?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Managers and/or directors of participating services</li> <li>Coaches</li> <li>Case impact profiles and review of services rated through NQS</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Interviews</li> <li>- Coaching reports and interviews with coaches</li> </ul>
<b>5. What are the lessons learned about what is required to support early childhood services in Victoria?</b>	How does coaching compare with other professional development options? What strengthened and inhibited effective implementation of the coaching program?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Costing information from Gowrie Victoria</li> <li>- Coaches</li> <li>- Service Impact profiles (x3) re implementation of the coaching program</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Retrieval from Gowrie Victoria records</li> <li>- Interviews (individual and group)</li> <li>- Interviews and service visit</li> </ul>

### 2.3 Scope of the Evaluation

The external evaluation was conducted over a four month period – in the final stages of the program and in the subsequent three months post-program. All primary data collection and analysis was undertaken during this time.

In addition the evaluator had access to a range of secondary documentation, including a mid-program report, coaching progress notes and assessments, and service level information about each of the services involved, which had been generated by the Gowrie Victoria coaching team.

This report focuses on the coaching program and its influence on educators and services. Measuring the direct impact of the coaching program on children and families is outside the scope of this report.

### 2.4. Audience and Key Stakeholders

The key audiences for this evaluation are the Early Childhood and School Education Group at the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, and Gowrie Victoria. The report is intended to inform decisions about the future support for educators in early childhood services and to guide decisions about the coaching program's merit and worth as a mechanism for aligning practice to the VEYLDF.

There is a range of key stakeholder groups that will also be interested in the findings of the evaluation, most notably the services that were involved in the coaching program. During interviews and service visits many of the educators expressed interest in reading a summary of the evaluation.

### 2.5 Limitations of the Evaluation

The evaluation relied on a range of methods and sources to generate claims about the value of the program. However, there are a number of limitations that need to be acknowledged.

Limited scope in observing coaching: The evaluator attended service visits with three of the four coaches to six services to better understand the contexts in which coaching occurred and to build engagement with managers and educators to participate in follow up interviews.

As the evaluator was contracted within the final two months of the program only one coaching visit remained at this time. It was therefore not possible to select a spread of services according to criteria of interest (for example, type of service). Instead the visits were largely opportunistic. While diversity was apparent (metropolitan and rural, size of service), these services are not necessarily representative of the broader range of services involved in the program. The information gleaned from these visits was very rich and helpful in exploring reactions to the program, and given their diversity in geography, size and characteristics patterns are apparent. The purpose of the qualitative data

gathered through these visits was depth rather than breadth, and understanding rather than generalisation to other services.

Reliance on either self-report data of change, or on coaches narrative accounts of change: There was no systematic way to systematically track shifts in practice at the educator or service level. The mid-program survey and end of program survey provided a global level of comparison, but as the surveys were anonymous it is not possible to detect individual or service level shifts through the survey. A set of service level indicators, known as Village Indicators (and described later in this report) were used as a global assessment of service progress, alongside other proxy data to generate the report's conclusions. This is not necessarily a limitation in a policy level evaluation where the intention is to understand the mechanisms that supported or inhibited change, but ideally there would have been comparable educator or service level data across the program timeframe.

Limited representation of stand alone kindergartens: The qualitative data gathered during the evaluation painted a rich picture of the way in which coaching worked or didn't work for educators and managers within long day care services. However, there was limited time to conduct service visits and a total of eight services were included in the final sample. No standalone kindergartens were represented and it is acknowledged that these services may have similar or different experiences. Twenty five of the 100 respondents to the survey were from a funded kindergarten program. Overall, no discernible differences were found in responses to the program from other service types, but with the low number of respondents it is not possible to claim this with any degree of certainty.

Response rate to end-of-program survey: The end of program survey was completed by 100 educators and the information was useful in understanding the experiences of a range of educators with the coaching program. The total population of possible educators influenced by the coaching program is not known, but it is reasonable to conclude that this number of respondents is not necessarily representative of the educators that participated in the program across the state. It is inappropriate therefore to generalise findings to the whole population of educators who participated in the program.

The evaluator made several follow ups to increase the number of responses, including posts on the Facebook page and direct encouragement to complete at the end of program forum (held at Gowrie Victoria). There was a similarly low response rate to the mid-program survey, even with the added impetus from coaches working with the service. This may indicate that written or online survey completion is not the most appropriate method for educators working within busy education and care environments, or may speak to a low level of engagement of educators to provide feedback.

Lack of collated comparison data: The evaluation framework developed by Gowrie and DEECD early in the program was very useful for informing the evaluation. The evaluator had access to a range of information generated through the program, including global qualitative assessments from consultants of service status on the Village Indicators pre-coaching, a mid-program survey and evaluation report (Gowrie Victoria), and email correspondence and associated progress notes from the coaches. There was a large amount of uncollated material, and, given the descriptive qualitative focus, it was challenging to compare progress across time across all services.

Classification was based on the evaluator's analysis of patterns in core elements over time (for example, engagement with the program, commitment to embed the VEYLDF), but as the assessments provided were global, the interpretations also remain at this level. Interviews with managers and educators were helpful in understanding the importance of context on these elements.

### 3. The Coaching Program (2011-2013)

This section of the evaluation report provides a descriptive overview of the coaching program, the major components, the coaches' involvement and the services that participated in the program.

#### 3.1 Key Components of the Coaching Program

There were two key components of the coaching program:

- **Consultancy services** to develop leadership capacity and strengthen governance mechanisms in services; and
- **Coaching services** to provide face-to-face to support educators to embed the VEYLDF into their work with children and families.

Two initial visits by a consultant from Gowrie Victoria were conducted in the first part of the program. The intended purpose was to build a governance and leadership platform to support the coaching initiative and to assess their readiness to engage with coaching. The consultants made a judgement that all services could benefit from the coaching program.

A preliminary assessment of the service according to a set of service level indicators of quality (known as the 'Village Indicators') was generated and work was begun on action plans for service improvement. This service level information was shared with coaches to enable them to gain a preliminary picture of the service before coaching began.

Over the ensuing 16 months, six days of face-to-face coaching was then provided to educators within each service by a coach. The coaching process was underpinned by a strength-based philosophy, an approach that identifies opportunities to acknowledge and enhance existing educator skills, through an appreciation of the context in which educators work. Coaches primarily worked with educational leadership teams within the service, recognising their potential influence in spreading coaching messages to other educators, but they made attempts to observe other educators during coaching visits as well.

The coaches focused on making connections between the EYLF, the VEYLDF and the NQF showing educators the synergies among them and linking their observations of educators' practice with concepts in the learning frameworks. For example, coaches talked to the educators about intentional teaching and reinforced the concept by drawing on an example of intentional teaching they had observed within the educators' practice.

Resource materials to support and reinforce the coaching sessions included an online forum for educators, a dedicated Facebook page and support materials, such as action plans and associated templates.

### 3.2 Modifications to the Coaching program - Lessons Learned

Coaching is only one of several interventions necessary to lift quality in early childhood contexts. Coaching had been trialled with 92 services across Victoria between September 2010 and December 2011 and found to be an effective way to improve understanding of learning frameworks (evaluation report, Griffith University).

Rather than reproduce the same model and either extend the timeframe of coaching and/or offer it to additional services, DEECD and Gowrie modified the program on the basis of findings from implementation and recommendations identified in the external evaluation of the first phase pilot coaching program (2010–2011).

The most notable changes to the program model were:

- specified criteria for service inclusion in the program based on need or identified risk,
- including two initial consultancy visits with management at each service to understand and strengthen leadership and governance prior to the inception of coaching,
- a focus for the coach on the leadership team rather than identified change agent to mitigate issues arising from high staff turnover; and
- a Theory-to-Practice visit to Gowrie for educators, which enabled educators to visit Gowrie Victoria (Carlton or Docklands) to observe programming in practice.

The table below outlines the original model and the coaching program model offered in 2011–2013.

Table 2: Comparison of coaching programs

Features	Pilot coaching program (2010-2011)	Coaching program (2011-2013)
Number of services	92	54
Selection of services	Expression of interest and criteria for selection	Specified criteria of service need for coaching  Expression of Interest by services
Types of services involved	4 Family Day Care 4 Out of School Hours Care 1 Kindergarten cluster/OSHC 32 Kindergarten 1 Long Day Care and Kindergarten 44 Long Day Care 3 Preschool 1 Multifunctional Aboriginal Children's Service (MACS)	36 LDC 11 Kindergarten 4 LDC/Kindergarten 1 LDC/Occasional care 1 OSHC 1 LDC/OSHC
Timeframe of coaching process	16 months	16 months
Program	6 visits	2 consultancy visits and 6 coaching visits
Number of Coaches	6	4
Preparation and support offered to Coaches	Professional development offered to coaches in approved learning frameworks and NQF (2011) monthly coach meeting	All four coaches had been engaged in the project so no further professional development in this area was required -Monthly coaching meetings
Working Relationship	Work with change agents in service and other educators where possible	Work primarily with a nominated educational leadership team to enhance spread across service, build leadership capability and foster sustainability.  Reach (observe and provide feedback) to as many other educators as possible in time/scope of visits
Scope of Visits	1. Relationship building 2. Practice principles audit 3. Reflective practice and Practitioner Inquiry Projects 4. Linking learning frameworks to NQS quality areas 1 and 5 5. Quality Improvement Plan 6. Review and Final directions	Consultancy Visit (x2 days): -identify leadership and governance issues in the service - build leadership capacity - initiate a quality improvement plan (QIP)  - Coaching Visits (x6). Specific tools used when judged appropriate by the coach
Materials and other resources offered to services coaching meetings	Monthly phone contact Rural network meetings Practice principles audit Practitioner inquiry project Quality Improvement Plan Online Forum- the meeting place	Coaches maintained the resources used in the pilot in the coaching program. New elements included:  - Discussion and assessment of leadership and governance (completion of village

Features	Pilot coaching program (2010-2011)	Coaching program (2011-2013)
	Chat room Early Years Learning Framework DVD/ppt Early Years reflection website Online photo gallery Reflective journal Gowrie website	indicators with each service in consultancy visit and during coaching program)  -Facebook page introduced for educators - 'Theory to Practice' visit to Gowrie to see programming in practice

### 3.3 Services included in the Victorian Framework Coaching Program

Analysis of National Childcare Accreditation Council data, regulatory information and the CHISOL database had identified the need for additional services to be provided with intensive support. This support was intended to provide the conditions for them to embed the VEYLDF and the EYLF in everyday practice in readiness for the National Quality Standard.

The 54 services involved in the coaching program were not representative or typical of all early childhood services.

Specific criteria for selection in the program were:

- The service was not meeting service quality measures such as licensing (compliance data) and/or National Childcare Accreditation Council data.
- The service had expressed a willingness to work on improvement.
- The service was not involved in other pilots/trials (e.g., Universal Access pilots, NQF field trials) or coaching/mentoring projects led by the Department.

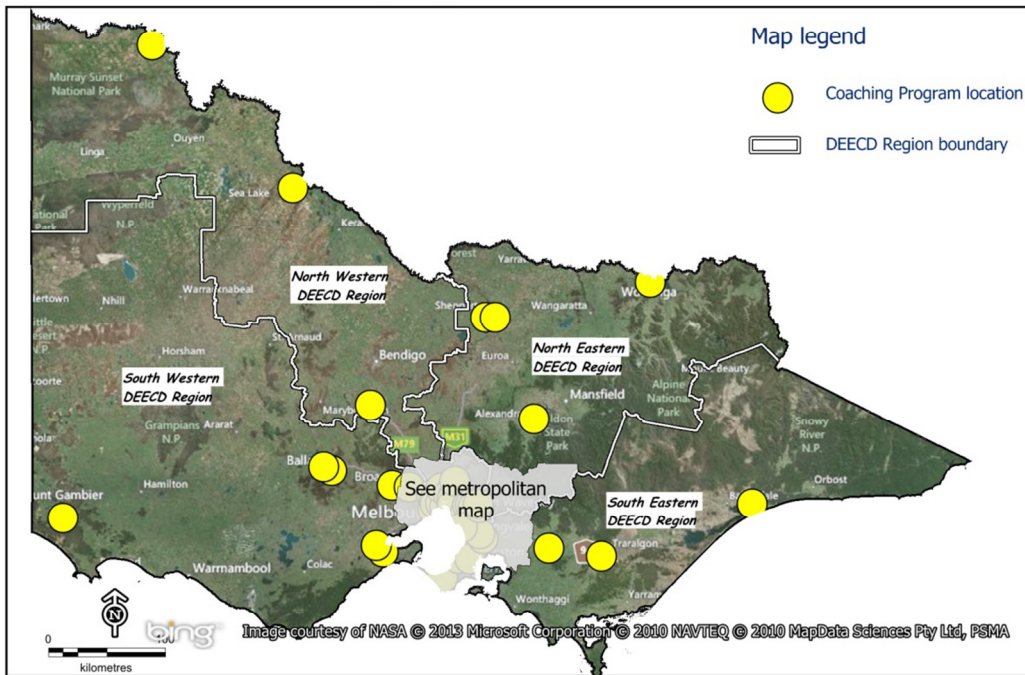
Rural Departmental staff approached services to discuss the program, and services were required to submit an expression of interest form and sign a memorandum of understanding signifying their commitment to the coaching program.

A complete listing of services that participated in the program is included in Appendix 1.

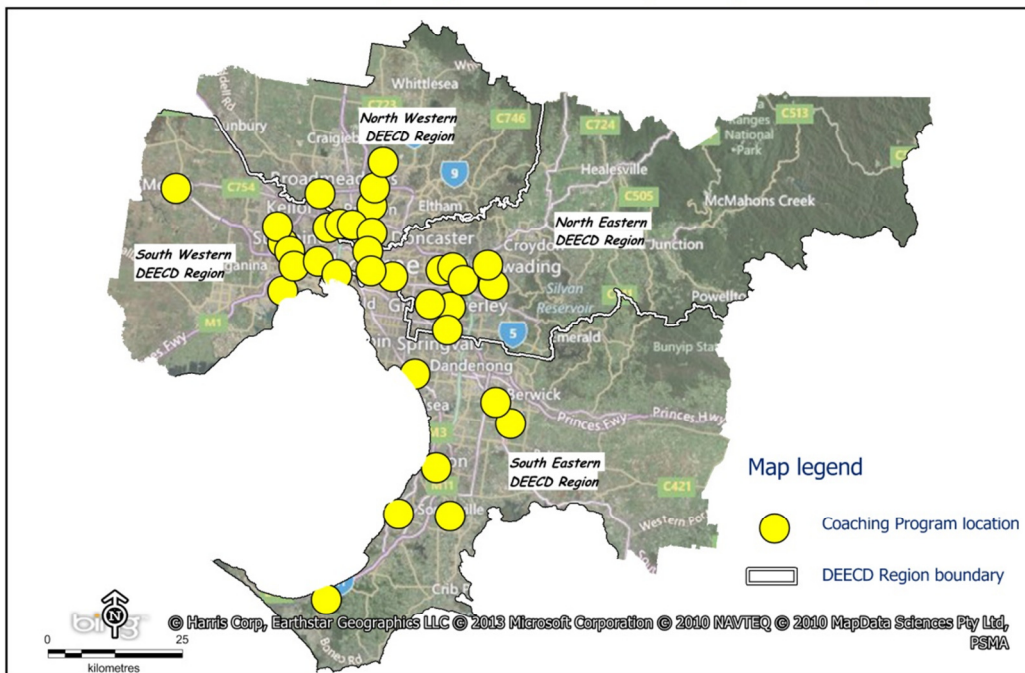
Services were selected from across the state of Victoria. The geographical diversity in location of the services is shown in the following diagrams.



### Victorian Framework Coaching Program 2011-2013



### Victorian Framework Coaching Program 2011-2013, metropolitan map



### 3.4 The Coaches

Four experienced specialists in early childhood were appointed as coaches. All coaches had previously worked as coaches in the pilot program.

Each coach was appointed to coach a number of services depending on full- or part-time employment. Two of the coaches were employed full time and two part-time on two days and one day a week respectively. One of the full-time coaches also took on the role of coaching coordinator, and was also involved in providing coaching services to 13 services. In addition the coaching coordinator for the pilot program provided an overall coaching advisory role to the program.

As the coaches lived in various parts of regional Victoria, they were generally allocated to services within their home region. Some services were, however, some distance from the coach’s home base and significant travel time was required (up to 5 hours car or train travel).

Six coaching days were offered to each nominated service. The coaching visits were to occur over an 16-month period, which equated to approximately one visit every two to three months. Coaches maintained email and phone contact in between visits on an informal basis.

Table 3 provides an overview of the number of services per coach according to employment status.

Coach	Number of Services
Coach 1 (Coaching Coordinator and coach)	13 services
Coach 2 (1 day per week)	8 services
Coach 3 (Full time)	20 services
Coach 4 (2 days a week)	13 services

A feature of the coaching program was that the coaches met with one another once a month as a form of peer supervision and to maintain a track on progress at services. This was also an important opportunity for coaches to debrief about their challenges and share strategies. Informally, the coaches maintained contact via phone calls and email. Protocols were in place for coaches to report serious incidents or breaches of the regulations to the Quality Assessment and Regulation Division (DEECD).

### 3.5 Resources Used by Coaches to Support Services

A range of resources (materials and tools) were used by coaches to support services during the coaching program. Coaches referred educators to a dedicated Facebook page, and to a dedicated website and related practice guides and resource materials supporting the VEYLDF and the EYLF readily available on the DEECD webpage.

In coaching sessions coaches used a number of other tools developed explicitly for the purpose of coaching. The tools included a set of indicators (known as the 'Village Indicators') to assess service status and progress, action plans to guide educators in trialling and implementing specific actions between coaching visits, and the 'Raising the Child survey' developed by Gowrie to enable services to assess the quality of relationships between educators and children and their families. These three resources are described below in more detail.

These resources were used at differing stages according to the coaches' assessment of their potential value. For example, Village Indicators were a key tool to aid the educational leadership team in reflecting on their service as a whole. Action plans were used for specific areas of improvement and to encourage services towards a more comprehensive Quality Improvement Plan (QIP).

#### **Village Indicators**

Village Indicators were developed for use by services and coaches to identify the status of their service, or, as this title indicates, the health of their village. The term references the popular quotation, "it takes a village to raise a child," and reflects the coaches' philosophy that educators practice is situated within a context. If the service and the wider service system and families (or village) is not healthy and strong, it is unlikely that individual educators will be able to sustain practice change, and it is less likely that children will be receiving high quality education and care. The importance of the service governance and leadership base to practice improvements was a key finding from the initial pilot coaching program and it was believed that this tool would assist in identifying issues and progressing changes.

The Village Indicators were reviewed at key points within the program to guide reflection about the status of the service in terms of their service philosophy, continuous improvement, pedagogical leadership, professional development, group dynamics and engagement.

The Village Indicators are included in Appendix 2.

#### **Action Plans**

The action plan was a one page matrix that identified a specific area for improvement. The matrix incorporated a number of headings relating to the

identified area. They were: strengths of the services, goals/priority, responsible person, strategies, evidence/deliverables, target date and progress/status.

Action Plans were related to the services' Quality Improvement Plans. Coaches used action plans as a user-friendly introduction to the more substantive requirements of a QIP.

The consultants undertaking the consultancy visits developed action plans with the educational leadership team. They were intended to assist educators to recall and implement agreed actions in between coaching visits. Action plans continued to be used on a regular basis, when identified as appropriate by the coach, to assess improvement. Coaches also encouraged educators to use action plans themselves to progress practice changes.

The action plan template is included in Appendix 3.

### **Raising the Child Survey**

The raising the child survey was designed as a diagnostic tool for services. A secondary intention was to extend leadership capacity within services. In the coaching program the survey was used in three ways:

1. It was used by coach to assess the quality of the interactions and educational program within the service or any particular room. The indicators were then used as a catalyst for discussion with the educational leader and team within the service.
2. It was used by educational leader to assess the program within a room. The raising the child survey was suggested as a tool for the educational leaders to use according to their readiness to use it in identifying strengths and opportunities for improvement
3. It was used by educators as a tool for self-reflection and to facilitate discussion with other educators within the service.

The raising the child survey is included in Appendix 4.

## 4. Evaluation Findings

The overall key evaluation question orienting this evaluation was 'How, if at all, did the coaching program support early childhood educators to embed the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework into practice?'

The synthesis of the evidence from the evaluation provides a partial answer to this question. It cannot be claimed that the coaching program resulted in the VEYLDF being embedded in all educators' practice, but it is clear that the program has increased the visibility of the VEYLDF in services that participated and contributed to heightened reflective practice of educators. The program has also continued to some tangible improvements, particularly in indoor and outdoor environments for children.

The majority of services in the coaching program still experience service leadership, governance and situational barriers that inhibit consistent application of the VEYLDF.

To more fully understand the outcomes of the coaching program, four specific sub-questions relating to the quality of program design, the outcomes achieved at both the service and educator level, and lessons learned about strategies that support quality improvement are addressed.

The findings from the evaluation are therefore presented according to the following second-level questions:

1. What were the **strengths and weaknesses of program design and implementation**?
2. What changes in **educators' practice (knowledge and skills)** resulted from the coaching program?
3. How did the coaching program **influence processes and practices at the service level**?
4. What are the **lessons learned about what is required to support** early childhood services in Victoria?

## **4.1 Key Evaluation Question 1: What were the strengths and weaknesses of program design and implementation?**

The findings from the pilot program contributed to program design modifications to the coaching program. The three most notable changes were:

- including a two-day consultancy visit prior to commencing coaching to build a leadership and governance platform for coaching
- a focus on the educational leadership team rather than an identified change agent within the service to mitigate risk to continuity in cases of high staff turnover; and
- a theory into practice visit to Gowrie to demonstrate effective programming in practice.

This section provides an assessment of program design. It also provides an overview of how services were recruited into the program, identifies effective elements of the coaching process, and reviews the quality of materials from the perspective of educators and coaches.

### **Consultancy Component**

The introduction of the consultancy component prior to coaching was based on lessons learned from the coaching pilot project about the importance of leadership capacity and good governance as a foundation for a quality service.

These consultancy visits were conducted by representatives from Gowrie Victoria, not the coaches, and completed before the coaching process began. The need for additional consultants to scope the services was required because of the transition overlap from the pilot to the 2011-2013 coaching program. As four of the coaches involved in the pilot coaching program were appointed to be the coaches in the 2011-2013 coaching program they were unable to undertake consultancy visits due to a clash in commitments with the pilot program.

One aim of the initial visit was to build rapport with educators, service management and, if possible licensees of the services. A diagnostic assessment was carried out in addition to time allocated to discuss the expression of interest and the services' commitment to the quality improvement plan. Consultants then spent time with all educators observing programs in action and reviewing the director's response to the initial assessment. At the end of the visit an action plan was devised in consultation with the service director.

The action plan was documented on a single page action plan template relating to one specific area the service agreed needing to improve (e.g., outdoor environments). The development of action plans focused on informing the services' Quality Improvement Plan (QIP). QIPs were a lengthier, more substantive document that included all areas of the service and identified the support required for the educational leadership team within the service.

At the second visit, consultants observed that most services had implemented at least one aspect of their action plan. Discussions centred on the future development of the services, QIP in relation to all areas of the National Quality Standards.

The consultants completed a short report about each service describing relevant issues to support the coaches in their work. An overall consultancy report was also developed by the consultants that highlighted several themes:

- The consultants reported that services were in the process of linking and aligning their service philosophy to the VEYLDF.
- Team building was identified as a key focus in encouraging reflective practice and collaborative decision-making.
- A strong need for networking opportunities for educators was seen as important especially by services located in rural and remote areas.
- Access to professional development in rural and remote areas was identified as a key challenge because of associated costs and requirements to backfill staff.

### **What was the value of the consultancy visits?**

The initial two-day consultancy visits were intended to build a foundation for the coaching program by strengthening service governance and leadership. The stated aims of the consultancy were achieved in part. However, from the perspective of the coaches and managers interviewed during the evaluation, the overall worth of the consultancy phase was questionable<sup>3</sup>.

There are two reasons proposed for this judgement. First, coaches indicated that two days was an insufficient base upon which to build effective relationships, especially with services that identified multiple barriers (for example, high turnover, low educator morale, low levels of engagement or commitment). In these circumstances it was difficult for the consultants to mobilise the educational leadership team to initiate plans to begin to address the issues identified.

Second, there was a lack of continuity between the consultancy visits and the coaching visits. The consultants from Gowrie Victoria who made the visits were not the coaches involved in the subsequent coaching component. While the consultants' reports were thorough, coaches often found the information prepared by the consultant out-of-date by the time they made the initial coaching visit.

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<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that none of the consultants involved in the consultancy phase were interviewed for this evaluation due to unavailability. Three of the four consultants were no longer employees of Gowrie Victoria at the time of the evaluation.



### *Lack of time to build relationships*

A key issue influencing the value of the consultancy visits related to building a relationship with the service. While the initial visits were meant to build initial rapport with services and prepare services for coaching, they did not assist the coach in either way. The two consultancy visits and the introduction of coaches contributed to a disconnect, both for the coaches and for services. All four coaches indicated that it would have been preferable for the coach to also have been involved in the consultancy phase for continuity of process and to progress the coaching relationship. Typical comments are presented below.

'It would have been better if we had done the visits. Some of the services were confused: "Who are you? We just met this person a couple of times, now we have to meet you". Most took that in their stride.' (Coach Interview)

'I don't think the two consultancy visits worked particularly well. I think that the relationship that they may have built or didn't build then had to be renewed with me and so information that she provided and her point of view on what was going on might have actually been different to my own and also different to the services' ideas about where they stood, obviously. So that didn't work too well. So it really was like starting from scratch with the six visits.' (Coach Interview)

'[Not being involved ourselves] was a real difficulty. The consultants would come in, and then later you'd have your first visit which, again, was almost like "Let's see where you are," so it's at the beginning and then you leave them with some things to do. So you're starting again.'(Coach Interview)

### *Lack of continuity between consultants and coaches*

Coaches saw a mismatch between the consultancy reports and their observations of services. They recognised that the consultants were limited to two visits, and also that context can change (for example, if a new director/manager is appointed), but the visits did not appear to have been a useful introduction to the coaching process. One coach commented:

'The consultants' assessment was not what we discovered when we got there...The consultants had little support, they had to get the job done and get it done quickly. So, it was very assessment-like. It was a way of building an introduction to the program. It was helpful and set the tone, but as far as helping us (the coaches) we discovered something entirely different. I found a more positive [picture] than the picture I had been given



by the consultants...They started off an action plan approach.  
We read that and we went in and kept on continuing.'

This point is not a criticism of the work produced during the consultancy phase. Consultancy reports were detailed and thorough. Rather, it points to a lack of continuity between the consultants and the coaches and reflects the impact of the dynamic, changing context of some services in the cohort.

It is understood that the coaches were unavailable for the start-up phase as they were still involved in the pilot program. Ideally, coaches would have performed this role to foster relationships with the services in the early stages of the program, and to strengthen the alignment of coaching to service context.

Implication 1: Continuity across program stages assists in the development and enhancement of the coaches' relationship with services. Continuity is supported by consistency in personnel, and clarity about the intention of each program stage.

Implication 2: The length of time required to influence governance and leadership may differ across services. The scope of these visits needs to be tailored to the context and characteristics of services to ensure an effective foundation for coaching is established.

Implication 3: Criteria for the selection of services that will engage in a coaching program may need to be clearly specified to ensure that base conditions support program success.

## Coaching Component

### How Did the Coaches Work with the Services?

Coaches involved in the coaching program had previously worked as coaches in the pilot coaching program. They believed their work in the pilot program enhanced their knowledge and skills and informed the selection of strategies adopted in the coaching program. Coaches indicated they had more confidence in coaching processes and that they felt more able to draw on a range of strategies to foster educators and services' engagement with the program.

While coaches share a high level of knowledge and experience in early childhood contexts, each coach has her own style and approach to coaching. Interviews with coaches revealed a similar philosophy underpinned their work with services, with their personal style mediating the actual structure of the coaching sessions. The philosophy that informed the coaching is discussed below.

### **Developing an effective working relationship with the service**

Both the evaluation of the pilot program and the mid-program evaluation of the coaching program identified the importance of relationships that develop between the coach and the educators.

All coaches emphasised the importance of the relationship that is built with the manager/director and educators during initial phases of the coaching. An effective relationship was characterised as having both rapport and trust in the coach and the coaching process.

It appears that many factors influenced the speed at which an effective working relationship developed. In some services coaches felt welcomed from their earliest point of contact and this initial enthusiasm from directors and educators appeared to be associated with high levels of engagement and a willingness to improve their practices in line with the VEYLDF. In other services coaches spoke about some initial resistance by some directors and managers to being involved in the coaching program. This resistance was based on a real or imagined view that the Department felt the service needed additional support, and there was a perception that coaching was being imposed upon them. In these circumstances coaches claimed that rapport and trust was not established until the fourth visit.

One coach commented:

“It’s a hard gig because there is a fear element of anyone that comes into a service because we’re so highly regulated that they fear us and even when you’re working at building trust and rapport, it can take a long time. And with some educators, you never get through that.”

Trust is a fragile quality in a coaching relationship. It can be generated quickly, but can be just as quickly lost. There is also no predictable trajectory of trust, yet it appears to be important in effective coaching relationships. From the coaches’ perspective, trust was an important pre-requisite for engagement, and facilitated implementation of the coaches’ suggestions for improvement.

The conditions that seemed associated with the services that took longer to trust in the coach and the coaching process included high staff turnover, lack of initial engagement by the director of the service, and service stress. Service stress can include external factors putting pressure on the service, for example the need to fulfil other requirements that are seen as competing with participation in the coaching program, or educator staffing issues, such as conflict between or among the educational team.

The coaches adopted a range of strategies to encourage rapport and trust. They indicated that they maintained an attitude of friendliness and interpersonal warmth and affirmed promising practices observed in services. Coaches elected to maintain a relaxed informality during coaching visits, rather than a more distanced observer role.

'To get them onside – (I would) give them lots of examples of services that have achieved things and done things. They need to see it. Encourage them and provide support. Listen to them. I always said "I am here to help you." I am not here to tick what is bad or right.' (Coach)

'Every service has actually improved. It has meant building that relationship first. Some people have done things reluctantly because they said "Well, I'll do it because I have to, but I don't like it." "Well just do it anyway...". (group interview with coaches)

Coaches balanced skills in the substantive content of early education and care with a knowledge of adult learning principles. This dual skill base appeared to be very important to building effective relationships with educators. As the coaches were working with adults, they required a toolbox of strategies for making effective connections, for building enthusiasm, and for supporting educators to trial new ways of working.

### **Selling the Benefits of Coaching: Using the NQF as a lever**

The coaches also used the introduction of the NQF as a context for initiating discussions with the service directors/managers and educational leaders. Coaches made links between the VEYLDF and the NQS visits to help educators understand how they mutually influence and support quality in early childhood services. The following comments by coaches illustrate the way they integrated the NQS with the VEYLDF.

'We used the standards as a tool. From a coaching perspective they're helpful. You need the stick to encourage them to engage with the coaching. "This is an indicator of quality and if you do these things you will be succeeding."

'Engagement with the practice principles sets you up to be engaging with the National Quality Standard. We make a link so we get a result from the benefit of having the tool and they are starting to engage with practice principles and not just outcomes. It's a balance for us. We would rather embed the [VEYLDF], but we do it in conjunction, and the way we talk about the links depends on the service.'

'The Framework provides an opportunity for the educators to apply the principles in a way that fits what they do. A quality standard is quite static, until it is reviewed. You cannot remain static. I think the combination was of assistance in a coaching program. This is a requirement. Come on board with this. Let's start here.'

Implication 4: The quality of the coaching relationship with educators is important. The relational elements of coaching are no less important than the technical skills coaches bring to the service. Rapport and trust are critical pre-conditions for an effective coaching relationship and it is clear that these conditions take time to develop.

Implication 5: The NQF represents a pull factor for improvement. Services are more likely to be engaged in programs that support them in achieving desired outcomes relevant to their needs.

### **Structure of the Coaching Visits**

Coaches broadly followed a sequence of activities over the six visits. In the initial visit the focus was on developing the relationship between the coach and the manager or director of the service, and nominated educational leader. Prior to the coaching program educational leaders did not exist in a formal sense. The coaches had learned from the coaching pilot that improvement needs commitment and carriage by groups of committed individuals within services. This was one of the reasons for a focus on the educational leadership team or nominated educational leader in the coaching program.

The process adopted by the coach varied and was tailored to the service context, and tools were used in services when the coach identified it was appropriate.

An initial staff meeting was scheduled with educators in the service to introduce the coaching program and to encourage educators to begin reflecting on their role. One coach explained the rationale behind this meeting and the flexible structure coaches used to progress coaching within the service:

'On our first visit this time, we would try and have a staff meeting. [This was a] change from [the] last project, on the premise of getting people together, to do the ra ra and encourage people, get people on the same page, rather than just walking around...to set them off with a few options. If we thought the service was relatively high functioning we used the raising the child survey, it was more precise and specific advice,

if we thought they needed to recognise what practice principles were, and perhaps what they were already doing that met that, we would do an audit using the practice principles.'

Coaches provided observations across all rooms in the services they visited, but the scope of contact and likely influence on educators appeared to be influenced by the size of the service. In smaller services, coaches were able to conduct observations and provide feedback, engaging more staff in the coaching process. In larger services, the coaches worked primarily through the educational leadership team, but attempted to get around the rooms to support other educators when possible.

Initial opportunities to observe practice in rooms were used to inform feedback, to encourage the development of a working relationship with educators, and to highlight potential areas of practice that could be worked on.

All coaches indicated they focused on the strengths of the educators, noting good practice and effective ways of working. Coaches identified options that the educator might consider, usually encouraging shifts in small elements of practice rather than encouraging them to institute radical changes. Coaches indicated that they asked educators how they think about the issue or problem rather than resolving it for them.

One of the coaches explained the emphasis the coaches placed on the practice principles in working with services.

'We go with the...vision, but move then into practice principles with the Victorian document (VEYLDF). We suggest people put these up on the wall. That we see evidence of that...these things are at the heart. And we have encouraged them to do that. When the [VEYLDF] came out everyone was focused on the outcomes. Our goal in the coaching program has been to bring them back to the practice principles. These are at the heart of a quality early childhood program.' (Coach 1)

The coaches would then work with the educators on specific action plans related to observations. Between visits, coaches actively encouraged educators to reflect on their practice. One coach explained:

'Because I think in our understanding of wanting people to change we focused on getting people to realise it is the responsibility of the educator. We got them to reflect on why they did the things they did. And then we would have an educator say, "Oh, I don't know why I am getting all the children to line up and making them wait in a line for five minutes". If you can get them to reflect on the things they take for granted, then they can see other ways. "Oh yes, it's not the best decision

and I could have done something different” then they are more likely to try a new way.’ (Coach 3)

In larger services the educational leader was seen as the main conduit for sharing feedback and encouraging practice change with educators. Ideally, the educational leader will share the issues, observations and coaching discussions with other educators during the program. A further reason for working closely with the educational leadership team was to promote sustainability of ongoing improvement processes.

One coach explained the rationale for the focus on educational leaders:

‘Staff changes [and] swapping rooms is challenging. Stick with [an] educational leader as it teaches them to distribute information, as when I am gone they will need to do that. I am here to give you the tools. You can keep doing this. I like them to work on something even when I leave. I like them to leave them with something to keep working on.’ (Coach 3)

Over the course of the coaching program coaches also facilitated staff meetings or training sessions with educators. These sessions addressed topics such as, alignment of philosophy or goals of the service, or were targeted to VEYLDF practice principles and learning and development outcomes. A manager of a rural long day care service commented on the value of these meetings to her service:

‘They allowed us to talk about the importance of developing service philosophy; understanding what that actually means. The service philosophy is not just a piece of paper on the wall that you don’t need but if you’re getting employed by somebody, that’s the first thing you want to read. “Does that service philosophy fit with my personal values and beliefs?” ...Starting to think down those terms I think will help to support a professional development or belief.’

The full complement of the staff team did not always attend these meetings as they were often held out of hours, or in the educators’ own time. Coaches offered services two or more sessions that were incorporated into existing staff meeting times to attract as many educators as possible.

In the final visits the focus of the coaching was on supporting sustainability, by identifying further things to work on, to celebrate accomplishments and to bring closure to the coaching relationship.

### **Use of Coaching Resources**

Coaches made available a range of materials and resources to support services outside face-to-face coaching sessions. Assessment of the value of the materials

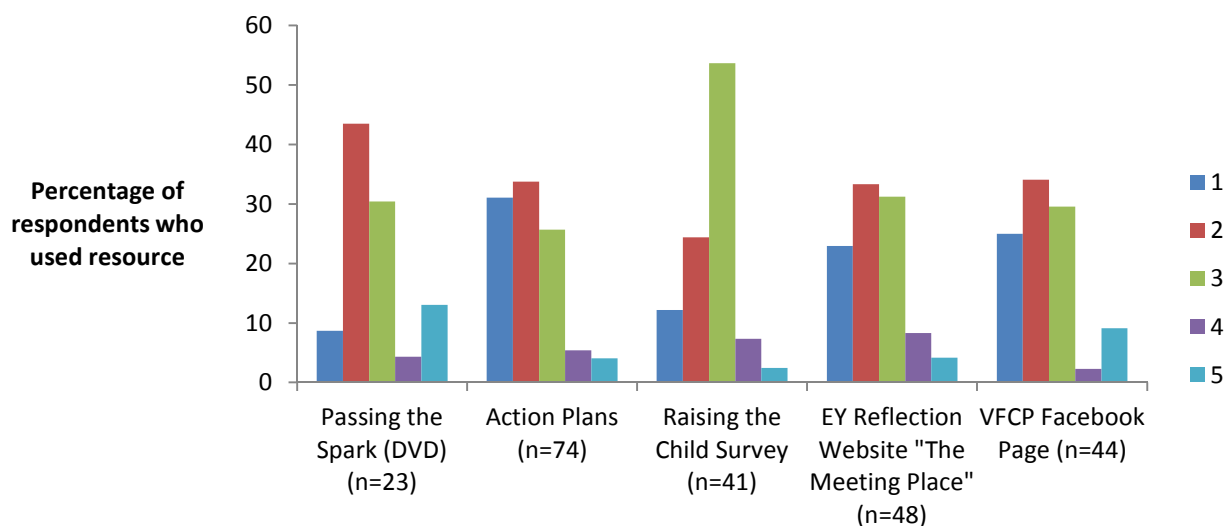
to educators was based on findings from the end-of-program survey and interviews with coaches and educators.

Coaches referred educators to VEYLDF and EYLF resources, and shared specific resources such as action plans, a dedicated Facebook page, a survey to assess educator interactions with children ('raising the child survey'), and encouraged educators to access the 'passing the spark' DVD, and a dedicated password protected website to share stories and experiences.

The most used resource was the action plan. Eighty-seven percent (n=95) of educators responding to the end of program survey reported using these during the course of the coaching program. The next most used resources were the Early Years Reflection Website 'The Meeting Place' (56%); the VFCP Facebook Page (52%) and 'raising the child survey' (49%). Only 28 per cent of respondents reported having accessed the 'passing the spark' DVD.

Fig 2 shows how respondents who reported using each resource rated each for usefulness. Educators were asked to rate the usefulness of each resource on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is very useful and 5 is not very useful. Please note that, as above, some resources were used more than others and the chart compares proportions not absolute numbers.

**Fig 2: Rating of each resource**



Based on the combined one and two ratings for each resource by respondents, the relative usefulness of each resource is compared in Table 4.

**Table 4: Ranking of each resource’s usefulness to respondents**

Resource	Percentage of respondents rating resource as useful( 1 & 2 (combined)
Action Plans (n=74)	65
VFCP Facebook Page (n=44)	59
EY Reflection Website "The Meeting Place" (n=48)	56
Passing the Spark (DVD) (n=23)	52
Raising the Child Survey (n=41)	37

Ten percent of respondents to the end of program survey indicated that their coaches had shared other resources with them that they had found useful, but did not specify these resources.

The most useful resources were rated as the Action Plans and the Facebook page. The use of these resources is discussed further in the following section.

### **Action Plans**

Action plans focused on specific areas for improvement. The consultants during the consultancy phase developed action plans collaboratively with the educational leadership team. A one-page matrix, the action plan identified the priorities for improvement so that the educators could work on these in between service visits. These action plans continued to be used on a regular basis by coaches to progress improvement.

Action plans were the most used resource in the coaching program according to educators who responded to the end of program survey. Eighty-seven percent of survey respondents reported they had used action plans and 65% of respondents regarded them as the most useful resource.

A manager at one service shared her view about the usefulness of the action plans developed with the coach and indicated that educators within the service continue to use them:

‘Action plans were excellent. We already had actions going on but what’s come out of that is we had whole service actions that we were working on but now every room has their own action plan. So that worked really well for us that the staff were able to look at it...It’s ongoing now. We all have action plans now. We’ve got one action plan and as we get through that we do another one at that level and then the whole service of course has an action plan anyway.’



Several educators and managers indicated that the length of time between visits reduced their focus on the agreed actions. The time period between visits (two to three months) was too lengthy to maintain educators' focus on action plans, and without additional internal support and time to progress the agreed work, the momentum for change was reduced. Email and phone contact in between visits occurred, but the extent of this support and its influence on progressing action plans is not known. Two educators suggested that contact in between visits was encouraging, but did not indicate that this contact had progressed their agreed plans.

While the theme of momentum in between visits was identified as influencing the progress on action planning, the gap between coaching visits was highlighted more broadly as an issue. Findings from both the end-of-program survey and interviews identified that the most prevalent feedback was that respondents wanted the coach's visits to be more often; and that when they visit they should spend time with each of the staff one-on-one, not just focus on the educational leadership team.

Implication 6: Services require differential levels of support. Some services may require more intensive coaching over a shorter period to progress change and maintain momentum

Implication 7: Tasks and actions will only be completed in between coaching visits if the educators perceive there is an impetus to do so. Momentum and encouragement is important, but there also needs to be sufficient time allocated within the service for follow through on action plans or tasks.

### **Facebook Page**

The Facebook page was created partly in response to the low level of usage of the website in the first phase of the coaching program. It was also felt that social media would be more attractive to the majority of educators, given the predominance of educators aged under 35 years.

At the end of the program (reviewed on 4 July and again on 20 September 2013) the Facebook page had 107 subscribers. The site was a closed page accessible only to subscribed members. Subscription was moderated by the coaching coordinator and all coaches posted encouraging comments, as well as pictures and images of creative use of materials for working with children. As the page evolved, educators shared information and photos from their service.

Subscription meant that educators could read comments from other members and post comments in response.

An explanation was provided about how the Facebook page worked by coaches involved in the program.

'If there's a notification (of a post)...in they go and they have a quick look...We are not getting so many comments from the

educators, but lots of people are obviously looking and saying "like, like, like", and seen by x amount of people. So sharing ideas that way, lots of people are actually engaging in different types of networking, which is good.' (coaching group interview)

While the subscription to the Facebook page was relatively low, this mechanism was highly valued by some educators. On evaluation visits to the service several educators commented on the value of the page and inquired if it was going to be continued after the end of the program. Of the 16 educators interviewed during the evaluation, nine made specific reference to the value of the Facebook page.

One of the educational leaders noted the value of the Facebook page to her practice, and indicated its value in extending networks among educators around the state.

'The Facebook page is fantastic because social media is the way of the future, so I think definitely more of that sort of thing and talking to people who know what you mean and who can relate to what you're talking about. I mean you can read things in textbooks, you can get told things by professionals and it's boring but if you're talking to people who are in exactly the same situation as you, you can really relate to that. People get told things by authority figures and they think, "oh yeah, yeah, yeah". But you get told things by your peers and you think, "oh okay" and you're more likely to give it a go rather than if you're told things by people that are higher above you. So, I think social media is a really good way.'

Implication 8: There is clearly an interest among educators in connecting and linking with one another to share ideas and practices. The interest in the Facebook page indicates this is one mechanism for creating and maintaining linkages between peers.

Use of social media or other mechanisms that link educators across geographical boundaries could be further developed as a low cost option to foster improved networks.

The likely sustainability and utility of the page will be limited if there is no active moderation of the site to ensure it continues to offer subscribers useful and targeted material on children's development, and to protect the site from any potential misuse.

## 4.2 Key Evaluation Question 2: How did the coaching program influence educators' practices?

This section relies on a combination of self-report by educators on the influence of the coaching program on their practice and evidence provided by coaches and managers of practice changes they attributed to participation in the program. It is not possible to ascertain whether the reports by educators of improvements in practice have occurred without systematic observation and records of individuals at various stages in the program. Given the number of educators within services this would not have been feasible to expect as part of this program, nor would it be a straightforward task as there are many other factors that may contribute to improvement to practice outside the program. Although coaches kept records of visits, these attribute global change at the service or room level, and are not specific to individuals with whom the coaches worked.

The focus of the coaches' work was to promote more global changes in awareness of the practice principles, particularly reflective practice, and to inspire engagement to be more responsive to children. The qualitative interview data shed light on the way the program has influenced educators. As an evidence base it also provides a compelling picture about what changes resulted and how these were facilitated by the coaching program

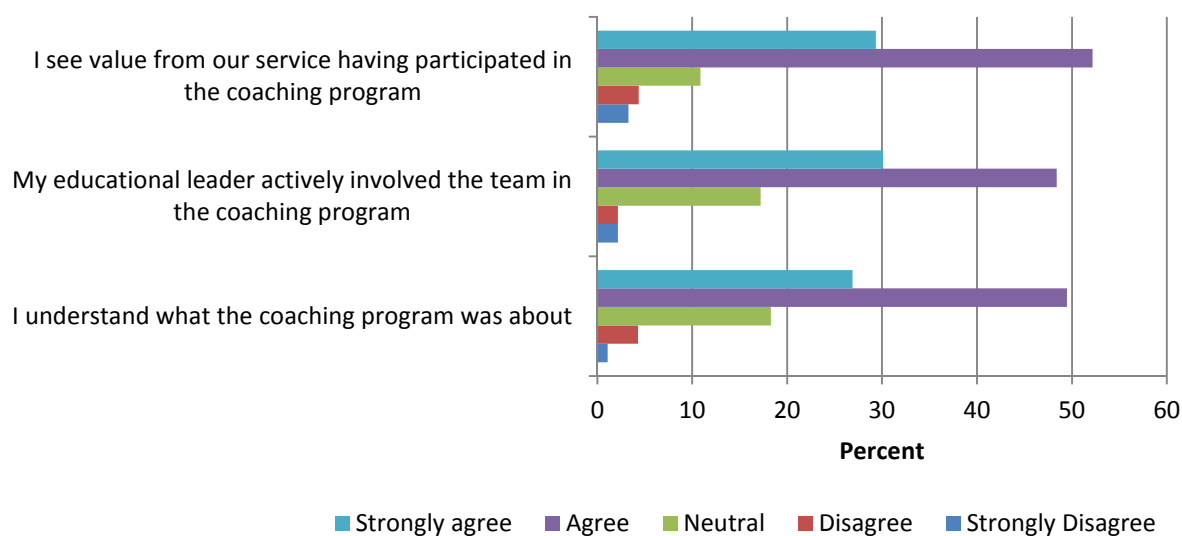
### **Educators' satisfaction with the program**

Educators' satisfaction with a program may be an important precursor to application of new knowledge (Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick, 2006). Most respondents to the end-of-program survey reported that the coaching program was of great benefit and used positive words, such as 'fantastic', 'informative', 'helpful' and 'rewarding', to describe their experience of the program.

Respondents indicated a high level of agreement to statements about the coaching program in their service (see fig 3):

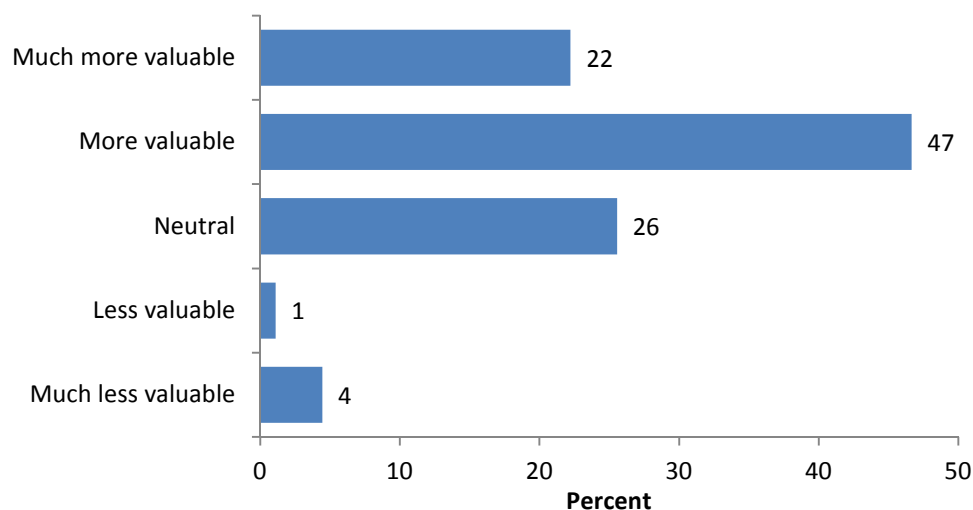
- 82% agreed that they saw value in their service having participated in the coaching program
- 78% agreed that their educational leader actively involved them in the coaching program
- 76% agreed that they understood what the coaching program was about.

**Fig 3: The coaching program (n=93)**



A further indication of satisfaction with the coaching program is educator perceptions about the comparative value of the coaching program with other professional development they had accessed. The majority of educators (69%) who responded to the end-of-program survey indicated that the program was more valuable or much more valuable to them than other professional development they had been involved in. Only 5% found it less valuable or much less valuable. Comments associated with this perspective indicated that they were dissatisfied with the coaching style, the lack of follow up from the coach, or believed that the coaching had 'wasted' their time. Just over a quarter of the respondents reported a neutral response to this question, which may indicate that they felt that they could not make a valid comparison between the coaching program and other programs. Responses are shown in figure 4.

**Fig 4: Value of the coaching program to practice compared to other professional development programs (n=100)**



The two consultancy visits and the six coaching visits were provided face-to-face to educators within the context of their service setting. Interviewees valued the face-to-face coaching experience, which provided an opportunity for educators to gain feedback on behaviour in the context in which it occurs, validating good practice and supporting practice improvements in line with the VEYLDF. Interviews with educational leaders and managers highlight possible reasons that the program was valuable to educators. From their perspective coaches had the capacity to directly observe educators and provide feedback. Coaches identified practices that either the educational leader had not noticed as good practice or requiring improvement, or served to reinforce the educational leaders' views about practice improvements. Two quotes illustrate these perspectives:

'I think them coming here has been good, because that's the best way for them to see what's actually happening. I mean you can say "we're doing this, this and this" and they can say "that's great now how about you do this, this and this". But if they're not actually coming in, they're not seeing those changes. And sometimes they see things that we don't see, that we think are occurring that might not necessarily be because we're inside our little box and they're coming in. So I think it is really beneficial for the visits to take place here.' (educational leader)

'Coaching really helped us...as much as it might come from myself and my educational leader, some or a majority of educators still require someone who's outside and is quite well developed in that framework to say "all right this is really good we can improve in this way or you're doing a great job". So we're not making up our own rules so to speak in the service

itself but it's lovely to know that someone else with a specialised qualification will actually come through and go "you know what they're saying is true they're not making it up"...It's great support for them to know that professionals on the outside are doing the same things. And it might be small things that they're already doing but not really recognising that it is working towards the Framework.' (Manager)

There were a few respondents to the survey and one service manager interviewed as part of this evaluation who did not think the coaching program was beneficial to her service. An analysis of these responses indicated that there was a mismatch in their expectations of the coaching program, and/or disappointment with the intensity of the program. These educators felt that they had not had much exposure to the coach, or perceived that the coach did not spend sufficient time with them.

### **Outcomes for educators**

Coaching was offered to educators at 54 services and during the 16 months of coaching, the coaches worked with a number of educators. It is not possible to specify exactly how many educators were reached through the program, nor to quantify the extent of change in practice as no individual or service level reports of individual educators were maintained. However, it is feasible to draw on coaches' assessments of educator practice change overall and educators' perceptions of the impact of coaching. The following section therefore relies on coaches' reports, educators' assessments of their own practice changes identified in the end-of-program survey, and from interviews with educators conducted during the evaluation.

Changes identified were classified into two key domains:

- Confidence in explaining the VEYLDF
- Practice change in educators' work with children.

#### **Confidence in Explaining the VEYLDF**

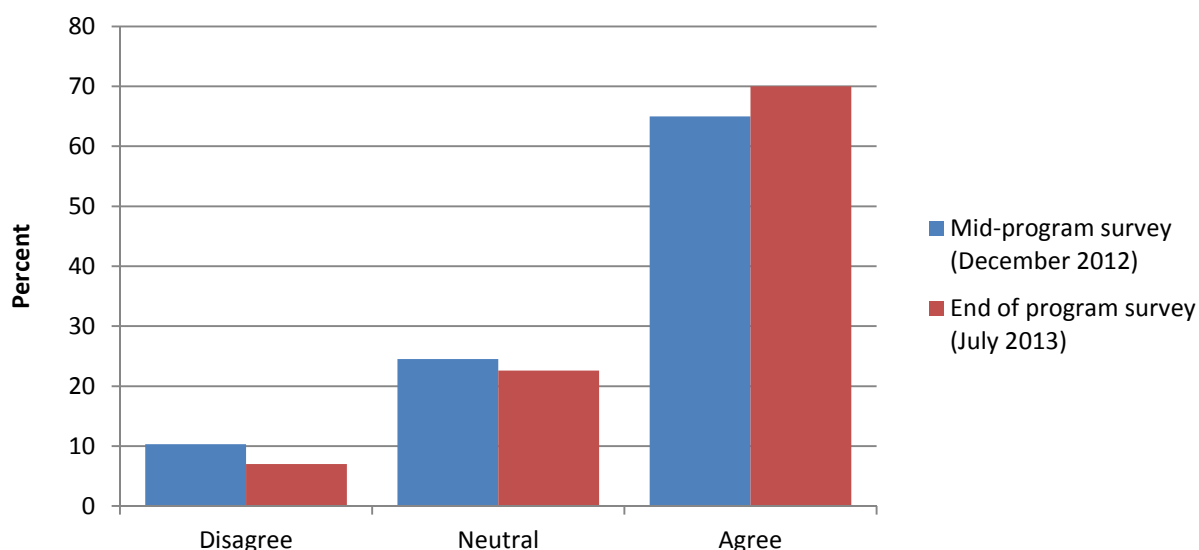
Both the mid-program and end of program surveys asked respondents about their confidence to explain the VEYLDF to others. Confidence indicates a belief in one's capacity and may be a proxy for knowledge of the VEYLDF.

As seen in Figure 5 both groups of respondents indicated confidence in explaining the VEYLDF to others. While this is an encouraging finding and may be a precursor to application of the principles in practice, confidence does not necessarily reflect capacity. Educators may feel confident in explaining the VEYLDF, but may not have the knowledge or capacity to explain it appropriately to others.

Coaches identified that understanding of the VEYLDF was a key barrier for most educators within the services at the midpoint of the program, which contradicts educators’ expressed level of confidence at that stage. It is possible that educators’ confidence and knowledge in the VEYLDF has continued to increase, but caution should be exercised in equating confidence with capacity.

As both surveys were anonymous there is no way of tracing whether the same individuals or specific centres participated in both surveys, and therefore it is not possible to claim from this question that by the end of the program agreement had increased or decreased as a result of the coaching program.

**Fig 5: Comparison of level of agreement to the statement across mid- and end-of-program evaluative surveys: “I can confidently explain the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework to others”**



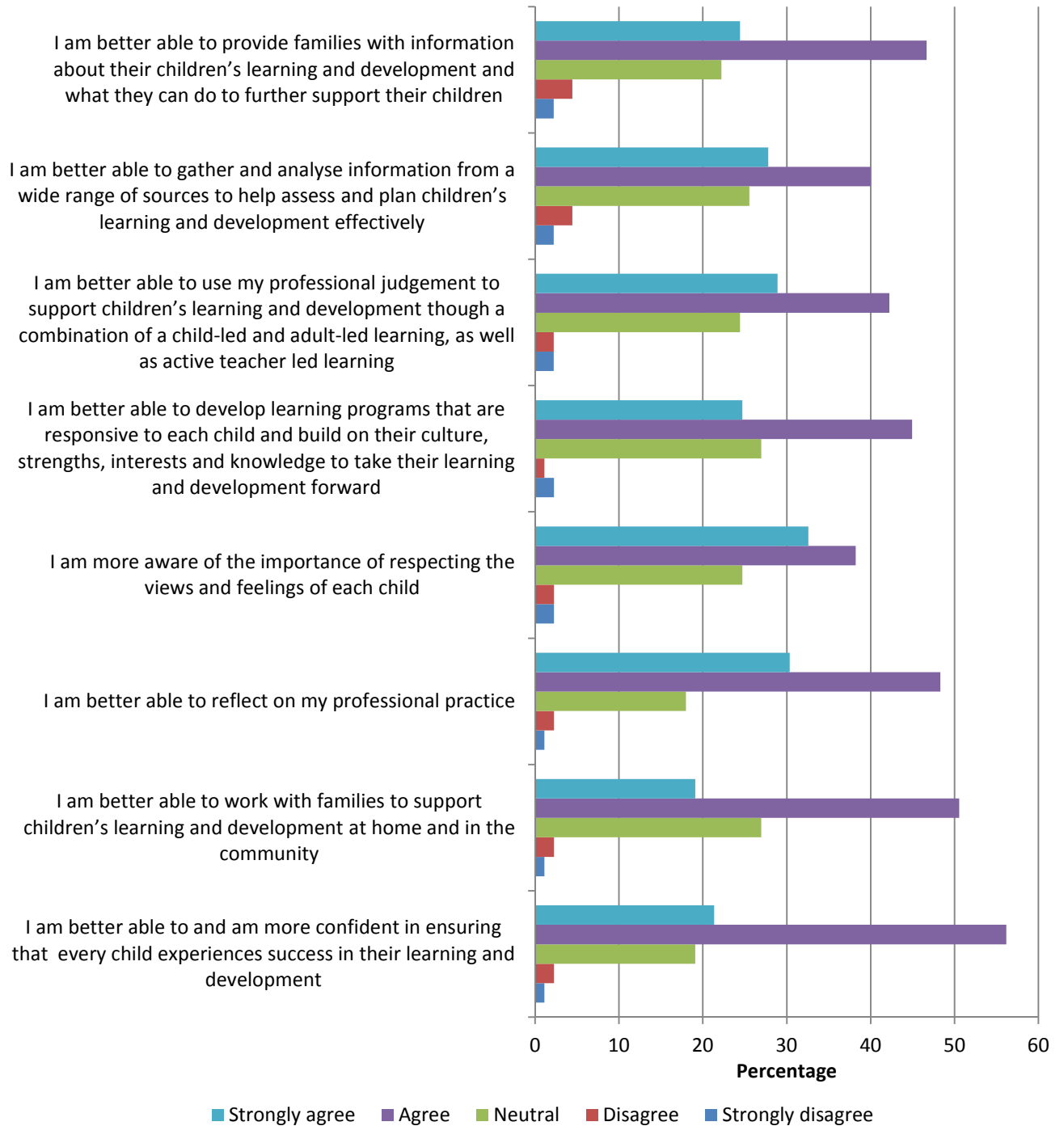
### Changes in practice and alignment with the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework

Interviews with the 16 educators in evaluation service visits and findings from the end of program survey identified a range of practice changes attributed to the coaching program.

In the end-of-program survey educators were asked to read eight statements developed to reflect the eight practice principles for learning and development in the VEYLDF, and determine how or whether their practice had changed as a result of their involvement with the coaching program.

Educators were asked to indicate their level of agreement with each statement. Overall, more than 75% of educators agreed that the coaching program had

influenced their practice and increased the alignment of their practice to the principles. Figure 6 presents these findings. **Fig 6: Degree to which respondents agree that their practice has changed as a result of the coaching program (n=90)**



A key message from these findings is that educators believed that the coaching program has extended their capacity in all practice domains. The coaching program enhanced the educators' understanding of the VEYLDF practice



principles, and progressed their attention to the value of reflective practice in particular.

As can be seen in Fig 6, the majority of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the coaching program had helped them to be better able to reflect on their professional practice.

Although the level of disagreement is low across all the statements, 20-25% of respondents to each question rated the impact of coaching as neutral, indicating a view that the program had either made little difference to their practice, or that they did not believe their practice had improved.<sup>4</sup>

Interviews with coaches and educators across eight services reinforced the value of the program in stimulating reflective practice; encouraging educators to think through their decisions, question the way they have always done things, and trial new approaches.

Changes in capacity to reflect individually on one's own practice and with other educators was the most commonly identified contribution of the coaching program and the coaching process. One coach commented on her perception of the impact of the coaching process on reflective practice:

'It has made people be reflective. It has made people stop for a minute and go, "yes, why do I do this particular practice?" or, "what do I believe about early childhood education?" So, in the first instance it's reflective and I think it moves onto hopefully becoming collaborative, to highlight points of interest, points of their practice, points of best practice, and have a conversation about it.'

The way in which the coaching program worked to shift practice appears to be linked to two features of the coaching process:

- support provided to the educators to translate the VEYLDF principles into practice, and
- the provision of direct feedback on practice

To further understand how the coaching supported practice change in line with the VEYLDF it is important to understand the perspectives of educators towards the VEYLDF. Several educators interviewed during the

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<sup>4</sup> Analysis of the results of these eight questions against respondents' age, level of education and involvement with the program showed no consistent pattern of relationship between the variables to suggest that these factors had an influence on findings. A larger number of respondents may have yielded different results in these tests.

evaluation reported that they had felt that they had largely been left on their own with the VEYLDF. Comments from two educators illustrates the way in which coaching reduced the professional isolation they experienced by assisting them to interpret the VEYLDF and how it related to their practice.

'My planning was all over the place and I didn't know whether I was coming or going. And then the coach explained it better, and then I had a better understanding. It was all confusing...We need things like that [the coaching program] to learn, otherwise we're not going to learn...You have this Diploma but you have no idea, and then all of a sudden there's a coaching program. Even if you get this much, a little bit, it's still good, isn't it? It's better than not having anything...Before that we just had the books' (educator in metropolitan long day care service)

'The coach came around the room and I had changed my room around and was taking cues off the children at one stage. [The coach] said, "that is an example of emergent curriculum." I felt more confident after that. I knew what to call it. We are here every day and we now know what it means. Before it was just a word in a book. I went and googled the term straight after we talked and I thought, yes, it's working.'

An open-ended comment on the end of program survey reinforced the value of coaching in translating the VEYLDF into practice. In her view the coaching program was:

'... supportive of improving our work with children. It made it practical. The Framework is not living until you see it working in a real context. I understand ideas in the Framework now because of application in my real work. I write much more now and document what I do and how children are learning.' (28 year old, Certificate III qualified educator in a long day care centre)

A key benefit of contracting Gowrie Victoria for the coaching was that this afforded educators the opportunity to visit the Gowrie Victoria centres in Carlton or Docklands ('Theory to Practice' sessions) as part of the suite of support offered to them. Several educators interviewed in the evaluation noted the visit as a key turning point for them in putting the principles into action, and in gaining insight into the features of effective programming.

While several educators noted the constraints within their services in relation to provision of resources, they recognised the potential of some low-cost options for programming and for the creation of new spaces. The visit provided a rich context for exploration of the elements of the VEYLDF that they had discussed with coaches during coaching visits.

An educator in a metropolitan long day care service who worked with children 18 months to 3 years commented,

'When we went to Gowrie it gave me a real sense of what childcare can really be. We had been told about learning stories, but it wasn't until the Gowrie visit that I really understood what they were. I got to see examples and I starting thinking how I could put that into practice here.'

Six educators interviewed as part of the evaluation pointed to specific changes in room spaces, wall art and changes to the environment influenced by the Gowrie visit and reinforced by the coach. These were changes that supported improved environments for children within their service, and they believed the changes were sustainable.

Implication 9: The Theory to Practice visits allowed educators to see, experience and explore how principles and outcomes can be realised through the creative use of everyday resources and materials. The visit inspired educators to consider practical options they could implement within their service and reinforced coaching messages.

### **Comparison with Pilot Coaching Program Outcomes**

The eight statements developed to reflect the eight Practice Principles for learning and development in the VEYLDF were also included in an end-of-program survey of the pilot coaching program in January 2012. While the two cohorts of educators were different, it appears that the coaching program has continued to highlight the importance of children's learning and development, and in reflecting on practice with most educators reporting improvements to practice in all domains. This finding indicates that the coaching program has maintained a focus on these practice principles in the VEYLDF, and that educators believed that their practice has changed as a result.

**Table 5: Comparison of responses to statements in end-of- program evaluative surveys 2012 and 2013**

Alignment with the Principles	Survey					
	July 2013 n=90			January 2012 n=55		
	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree
	%	%	%	%	%	%
I am better able to and am more confident in ensuring that every child experiences success in their learning and development	3	19	78	6	21	73
I am better able to work with families to support children's learning and development at home and in the community	3	27	70	6	27	67
I am better able to reflect on my professional practice	3	18	79	8	15	77
I am more aware of the importance of respecting the views and feelings of each child	4	25	71	10	24	67
I am better able to develop learning programs that are responsive to each child and build on their culture, strengths, interests and knowledge to take their learning and development forward	3	27	70	10	17	73
I am better able to use my professional judgement to support children's learning and development through a combination of a child-led and adult-led learning, as well as active teacher led learning	4	24	71	12	13	75
I am better able to gather and analyse information from a wide range of sources to help assess and plan children's learning and development effectively	7	26	68	12	27	61
I am better able to provide families with information about their children's learning and development and what they can do to further support their children	7	22	71	16	14	71

As can be seen in Table 5, when comparing the proportion of 'agree' responses across both surveys, there are three areas in which the level of agreement dipped compared to other results within the same survey across both time periods. They are:

- I am better able to work with families to support children's learning and development at home and in the community;
- I am more aware of the importance of respecting the views and feelings of each child;
- I am better able to gather and analyse information from a wide range of sources to help assess and plan children's learning and development effectively.

These results could be a consequence of educators assessing their competency prior to the coaching program as high, meaning they interpreted the intervention as having less impact. Alternatively, educators may have been reflecting that the coaching program did not offer them enough in these areas, and thus they felt they still needed to improve their capacity in this area.

### **Influence on the educational leadership team**

A key benefit of working closely with the educational leadership team seems to have been the enhancement of skills in working with educators. All educational leaders interviewed linked coaching with increased skills in providing feedback to educators.

Coaches worked to support the educational leaders in improving their leadership capacity by modelling skills and making suggestions about potential options for practice improvement.

Coaches challenged educators' processes and practices in a way that educational leaders may have had difficulty doing within their own service. There were two sides to this. First, the coach modelled skills with staff that the educational leader could incorporate into her own leadership practices. Second, the coach was able to challenge staff or point out contradictory practices in a way that educational leaders often felt they could not.

All three educational leaders interviewed during the evaluation referred to the skills they had developed in watching the coach 'at work'. Improvements in the confidence and skill of nominated educational leaders appears to be a positive spin-off of the coaching process, is likely to contribute to the sustainability of improvement processes beyond the program. One educational leader commented,

'It's a learning curve for me to take on what she's teaching me to teach the other staff so that's been a really good process for me, it's not always easy, but I feel that I've learnt a lot of people-management skills and all that sort of thing because I've had to take on that coaching or mentoring role because the visits weren't able to be with everybody. In terms of my own personal professional development that's been great but in terms of helping the service as a whole it may have been more beneficial

to have more time spent with everybody together.’ (Educational leader)

Coaches indicated that it is important that the educational leader understands the intention of their role as an educational leader and has the confidence and skills to lead within their service. The educational leaders require support from the service director or manager if they are to be successful. They also need further opportunities to develop capacity in working with the facilitating and inhibiting practices they observe.

Implication 10: Nominated educational leaders are a key resource for services in supporting practice improvement. Further opportunities to extend their skills in leadership and in coaching educators may be valuable in progressing and sustaining improvements.

### **4.3 Key Evaluation Question 3: What difference did the coaching program make to services?**

Coaches worked closely with the educational leadership team to foster improvements at the service level as well as at the individual educator level.

It was necessary to examine secondary documents prepared by the consultants and coaches during the program to ascertain the contribution of the coaching program to improvements in service processes and practices.

The evidence documented demonstrates that some services have improved in significant ways across a range of areas, but it is not possible to know if these changes have occurred in all services, or to assess the sustainability of the improvements. Change at the service level is complex and non-linear. There is a range of factors that will influence service engagement and improvements in the Village Indicators, including increased familiarity over time with the VEYLDF, changes in light of NQS ratings, and impetus by the service to improve.

The consultancy reports and the accompanying assessment in the initial two consultancy visits included an assessment of baseline status of the services. A mid-program evaluation report prepared by Gowrie provided an assessment of service engagement and commitment to embedding the VEYLDF at the mid-point period of the program. This report and the accompanying documentation was also reviewed for information that demonstrated shifts in service status over time. Evaluation evidence in the form of interviews with the four coaches and six service managers/directors provided supplementary information about the influence of the program on service level outcomes.

Indicators of shifts in services that support improved education and care include:

- Levels of engagement of services with the program
- Improved service rating on Village Indicators pre-program and post-program
- Performance in NQS ratings (only for those services that have had service ratings)
- Coaches' perspectives on service improvement generated through the program (program mid-point and at end)
- Educators' perspectives on services' engagement with the VEYLDF and associated support (mid-program and end-of-program survey).

### **Level of Engagement of Services with the Program**

Engagement of services with the program and its intent to assist services in embedding the VEYLDF was identified as a critical pre-cursor to service level change.

Herscovitch and Meyer (2002, p. 22) observed that members of organisations can commit to implementing change because they want to (they value the change), because they have to (they have little choice), or because they ought to (they feel obliged). Commitment based on 'want to' motives reflects the highest level of commitment to implementing organisational change. Given that the services within this program were invited to apply because of a perceived need or risk, it is notable that most services demonstrated a relatively high level of commitment to coaching.

In the mid-program evaluation report, coaches indicated that 34 of the 54 services were engaged with the coaching program (scoring the level of engagement at 4 or 5 on a 5 point scale with 5 representing highly engaged). Only four services were classified by the coaches as not engaged with the program, with these services experiencing high turnover of staff, evidence of poor or limited leadership and low levels of commitment to embedding the VEYLDF in practice.

Qualitative data gathered during the evaluation reveals possible reasons for the relatively high level of engagement. Interviews with the six directors/managers at the end of the program indicated that they welcomed the opportunity to be part of the program.<sup>5</sup> While most were aware that their service had been nominated for involvement because of perceived service issues, they expressed a willingness to be involved.

'I was excited about the program. I want to improve things. I wanted change.' (Director, rural long day care service)

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<sup>5</sup> Three of the six Directors/Managers were initially on leave or away from the service when the Coaching program started. These three managers were enthusiastic about the potential of the program in improving educators' practice.

'We were recommended by the Department to become involved in the coaching program. We had received a warning. They had picked up on our programming, maintenance and supervision. So, we needed to improve in those areas if we were going to get through the quality standards. [A DEECD representative] suggested we should apply for it and we got it and I emailed her and said "thank you, thank you, thank you. We are in!" (Director, metropolitan long day care service,)

Services' initial engagement with the program appeared to be related to two perceived benefits:

- The coaching program would support the service to improve practice and to better understand the VEYLDF.
- The coaching program would be beneficial to the service given impending NQS assessments

One Director of a rural long day care service indicated that she was initially willing to be involved, in part because the program had been 'sold' to her as a way to increase her service's performance on an upcoming NQS visit. She expressed her disappointment with the coaching program on the basis that it did not appear to have influenced the outcomes of the NQS or specific ratings of assessment components.

'They rang us and told us we have this coaching program and [said] "we think you would benefit from being in it..." We just needed someone to direct us, help us and make sure we were on the right track. We got the impression it would be easy to get accreditation as we would have all this support. And, that was not the case.' (Director, rural long day care service)

Another factor that appeared to be related to coaching engagement was the reputation of the coaching provider. Gowrie Victoria's reputation in early childhood education and care contributed to the credibility of the coaching program with services.

All educators interviewed in the evaluation associated Gowrie Victoria with high quality education and care without prompting. Gowrie Victoria as an organisation was well known for its provision of professional learning, training and development of support resources for early childhood educators. Educators did not associate Gowrie with a regulatory function. Some educators expressed some anxiety about visits from the Department and a suspicion about the intention of visits as enforcement rather than assistance.

A quote from one of the managers interviewed illustrates the reputation of Gowrie Victoria in early childhood education and care:



'I know what the services are like there [Gowrie Victoria] and what educators are capable of and what management must be doing to encourage that sort of capability...It opened my eyes up in management as well to have a representative from that type of service come and give us her views...It was encouraging to me and it's encouraging to my staff to know that there is a lot more things that we can do, the doors were just opened we're not limited to what we can or can't have.' (manager)

### **Use of Village Indicators in the evaluation**

As a consistent piece of evidence collected from all services, the ratings provided by coaches of the services have been used, in part, to understand the patterns of outcomes that have occurred over the coaching program from the assessment in the initial consultancy visits to the program end.

The comparison task was challenging as the initial consultants' reports, while thorough, incorporated qualitative assessments of the services according to the Village Indicators, not formal ratings according to criteria that could easily be compared. As part of this evaluation a preliminary thematic analysis of these qualitative assessments was undertaken to inform an understanding of services at entry into the program. These assessments were then compared with later assessments by the coaches.

### **Service barriers at the start of the program**

In the first consultancy visit an assessment was made according to the Village Indicators and an action plan put in place. Comments were specific to each service and it is difficult to disaggregate the assessment from the particular service characteristics observed by the consultant. However, a review of all consultancy reports revealed a range of themes that were identified as inhibiting service quality.<sup>6</sup> They included:

- Staff and leadership turnover, which contributed to instability and disruption for children and educators (for example, in one extreme case a service had experienced a turnover of 37 educators within the previous year)
- Irregularity of staff meetings
- Theme-based rather than integrated teaching and learning (child-directed play and learning, adult-led learning, and guided play and learning)
- A service philosophy that was not regularly reviewed and did not reflect an approved learning framework (VEYLDF or EYLF)
- Poor knowledge of the VEYLDF

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<sup>6</sup> Not all services were identified with these barriers. An emphasis here is on highlighting the service issues that may inhibit coaching and the sustainability of coaching improvements. Consultants' reports highlighted good practices and strengths that could be built on through coaching,

- Environments that were identified as static, particularly indoor/outdoor play spaces
- Lack of resources or poor use of existing resources
- Poor staff dynamics (for example, evidence of poor communication, low morale among educators)
- Inconsistency in support for professional development from service leaders and/or management
- Limited opportunities for networking (particularly in rural areas)
- Inconsistency in discussion or development of Quality Improvement Plans.

The services were selected into the program according to criteria of need or risk, indicating that service quality, at least in some areas, needed improvement. Consultants' reports emphasised both the strengths and weaknesses of the service in narrative form under the key indicators.

In the second visit the consultants reported on progress with action plans and further improvements that could be worked on during the coaching program. Consultants noted that several services had put strategies in place to progress plans for improvement which would support a strong base for coaching.

### **Service barriers at mid-point of the program**

Coaches were asked to assess the progress of services against the Village Indicators at the end of 2012 through completion of a mid-program survey.

Coaches reported in the mid-program survey that all services had made some progress through individual elements of the Village Indicators, with some services progressing more slowly than others. The rate of progress appeared to be related to the persistence of service barriers.

The three most commonly identified barriers in order of salience in the mid-program service assessment were:

- educator knowledge of the VEYLDF and EYLF (87.8%)
- educator understanding of high quality early childhood learning environments and experiences (73.2%); and
- educational leadership (53.7%).

While most educators were aware of the existence of the EYLF and the VEYLDF, the deeper knowledge and application in practice was not evident. Coaches also reported that many educators were unable to articulate the Practice Principles or explain how they appeared in practice (mid-program evaluation report, Gowrie Victoria).

The coaches reported that they used this information formatively to identify further strategies to support services in the final six months of the program.

## Services at program conclusion

An assessment of progress against the Village Indicators was made at the program conclusion by the coaching coordinator. This assessment was validated by a second coach post program. A rubric was developed, based loosely on the classifications of change identified by Pendergast in her educational change model (Pendergast et al., 2005). While Pendergast’s classification refers to stages services progress through in change efforts, this rubric classifies services according to their progress along the trajectory of change at a specific point in time.

Services were classified as beginning, progressing or consolidating on the Village Indicators. The criteria used as the basis for allocation of services into categories is included in Table 6.

**Table 6: Village Indicators - Classification criteria**

Classification	Criteria
Beginning 23 services	<p>Services have multiple barriers that prevent them from fully engaging with the coaching program and committing to implementation of the VEYLDF.</p> <p>Improvements in specific rooms or areas within the service can be seen, but these are patchy and the sustainability of the improvements generated from the coaching program is unlikely if service barriers remain. Some of the services classified as beginning will require more directive intervention to implement the VEYLDF.</p>
Progressing 20 services	<p>These services show evidence of a good knowledge base of the VEYLDF across the educational leadership team. Leaders are committed to the VEYLDF. Many of the educators within these services have improved knowledge and/or capacity to implement the VEYLDF.</p> <p>There is some inconsistency across rooms or programs, but educators have a commitment improve practice and the service has a solid foundation for continued improvement efforts.</p>
Consolidating 11 services	<p>Services designated as consolidating have few barriers that will limit or prevent implementation of the VEYLDF.</p> <p>The service has a strong educational leadership team that is committed to the VEYLDF. Educators are engaged with, and implementing most aspects of the VEYLDF. Coaches observed attitudes and practices that reflect the VEYLDF across coaching visits. Sustainability of the improvements is likely because of the high level of engagement and commitment to continuous</p>

	improvement.
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The rubric is included in Appendix 5 and describes the level of service engagement with coaching, level of commitment to VEYLDF and barriers noted in the coaches’ mid-program evaluation. The rubric also outlines the most significant changes made by the service during the coaching program, as well as their status on NQS ratings (if appropriate).

The classification indicates that there are twenty-four services identified as beginning, nineteen services classified as progressing, and eleven services classified as consolidating. An examination of the rubric reveals that many of the services in the beginning category have a range of barriers that have inhibited their full engagement with coaching, and influenced their capacity to make changes recommended by the coach. Those services classified as consolidating generally had higher levels of engagement with the coaching process, and implemented coaching recommendations. There is a greater proportion of standalone kindergartens represented in the consolidating classification. While no standalone kindergartens were visited as part of the evaluation data collection, coaches commented that while some kindergartens were initially resistant to coaching, the educators understood the relevance of the VEYLDF principles to their practices with children. Kindergarten teachers also understood their professional role as educators, which supported a focus on ongoing practice improvement.

Implication 11: Coaching works best when undertaken under the right conditions. The coaching program worked most effectively with services that were highly engaged, had strong leadership supportive of the VEYLDF, and experienced few operational and service level barriers that would inhibit practice change. Improvements were patchy in services experiencing multiple barriers and were limited to changes in specific rooms or attitude or practice change in key individuals within the service. Operational or structural interventions may be required for services with significant barriers.

### **Specific Improvements in Services**

Coaches identified the most notable changes in services at the end of the program in services’ understanding of the VEYLDF, particularly in relation to evidence of collaborative reflective practice, interactions, and understanding of high quality early childhood environments, noting specific improvements in indoor and outdoor spaces.

A selection of examples of specific changes is included in Table 7. Table 7: Specific Improvements – Service level

Domain of Change	Changes	Example comments
Environments for children	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Outdoor environments, particularly a shift from synthetic, plastic materials to natural materials</li>   <li>Spaces were shifted to stimulate children's interest</li> </ul>	<p>'We've always had resources available to children, it was just outside here that we were concentrating on because the (name of service chain) had come along and stripped all of us of our nature and natural environment. Everything was plastic. ...you've got garden beds on top of the turf in play areas that we've created to go on top of there...it was introducing natural resources back into the rooms.' (Manager, rural service)</p>
		<p>'The look of the Centre is much more homely and inviting, and that I think will stick. We've got now a buzz between the educators of people always trying new things, which is a really huge difference because, as I said, when I got here there was nothing on the walls in the corridor at all, and the rooms were very stark except for things that had been up for a very long time.' (Educational leader, metropolitan service)</p>
Programming	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Documentation of children's learning</li> </ul>	<p>'They [the educators] would write "The children had fun outside today, they all enjoyed the sunshine, we walked around together, we sat under trees, we sang a song, it was a lovely day in care today" no more substance than that, nothing about "We talked about the shadows, we looked up and somebody saw that the moon was still there in the sky so we talked about that. When we went inside, we got books out and we did such and such. The children today learnt such and such". So I'm seeing more of that happening.' (Coach)</p>
Routines	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Involving children</li> </ul>	

Domain of Change	Changes	Example comments
	<p>in their learning, less structured, more relaxing spaces. Educator becoming part of children's routine and not dominating</p>	<p>'There is more belonging in the centre – own spaces, shared rooms and integration across spaces.' (Coach)</p>
<p>Leadership and Staff interactions</p>	<p>Increased regularity of meetings or introduction of additional meetings</p>	<p>'We've changed the way in which we hold meetings. We used to have just the one meeting for the entire service, and one between myself and my educational leader. We found that it wasn't working. So we've got two meetings happening a month; one for the entire service and everybody is invited...And we discuss what issues we're having, strategies we could change to make it work.' (Manager, rural service)</p>

One manager in a rural service spoke of the influence of the changes in the service environment on children's learning:

'It gives them a sense of responsibility because it's something that's living and you've got to look after it now, it's just not you and your plastic grids and your books that just get packed away. Some rooms have little grass heads that they've got to water and they've got to trim, taking care of different plants, edible plants, even outside yards. So it's that role and responsibility and knowing that there's a place for them to actually grow as well as living things like their chickens and their rabbits and all the animals that we've got on site.'

### Performance on NQS Ratings

Coaches identified the importance of making links with the NQS during coaching visits to build engagement and to support services in embedding VEYLDF practice principles.

Interviews with directors and managers indicated that the coaching program focused their attention on the VEYLDF and the need to demonstrate adopting and applying across the service – in philosophy statements, in team relationships and in practice in activities within the rooms with children. As alignment with an approved learning framework is central to quality area one in

the NQS it is likely that coaching conversations influenced service ratings. For example, one manager explained that for an upcoming visit, the coach and the educators focused on educational programming and practice (Quality area 1) within the service as it had been identified as a particular weakness. This manager indicated the value of the coaching in generating new ideas and implementing simple sustainable options based on the practice principles that the educators could work on developing before the assessment visit:

'[The coach] really helped us with that [the NQS visit]. I didn't feel so alone. We discussed it together and [the coach] gave the [educators] a few other ideas as well such as "It doesn't always have to be like this – you could look at it this way" which is good as well. If she hadn't come out [to us], one [quality area] wouldn't have been met at all, it wouldn't [even] be close for us. We would have been able to meet some of the things but things like reflective practice is always hard because they're doing it, it's just they were not writing it down.'(Manager, Diploma qualified)

Coaches recognised that services were focused on the implications of the NQS for their services. Coaches worked with services to engage them in using the VEYLDF, but used the NQS requirements as a lever to encourage engagement with the coaching process. Coaches made links between the VEYLDF and the NQS, but encouraged services to build in practice changes that reflected the VEYLDF, rather than focus on a reactive response to the quality standards. A manager explained the way in which the coach used inquiry and feedback processes to assist the service.

'The hardest thing about the Framework is that they said here is the book you are on your own. I thought "hang on a minute. I don't really know what I am doing". It didn't explain things that well. But, having [the coach] explain and say more about it and ask "What are you struggling with? How are you going with things?" [was really useful]...The coach was able to look at our QIP report to point out some things we might consider doing. [After the NQS visit] she gave us ideas for the areas that we hadn't met and said, "You could try doing this, this and this" and was able to help us a lot with the results that we've got.'

(Manager)

The majority of services in the coaching program had not been rated through an NQS visit by the time the program concluded. However, during the program timeframe 10 services received NQS rating visits. If the assumption was correct that these services were initially at risk of not addressing NQS standards, it is plausible that the coaches assisted services in areas of quality assessed in the NQS visits.

Of the services rated under the NQS during the program, one service was rated as 'exceeding National Quality Standard', three were classified as meeting the standards, five as working towards and one service received a 'significant improvement required' rating.<sup>7</sup>

A presentation of the defined differences between the services rated 'exceeding' and 'significant improvement required' reinforces the importance of service context. Table 8 illustrates the contextual differences in engagement and in service context that may, in part, explain the reason for the NQS rating. A support intervention such as coaching is likely to have minimal influence in services with the characteristics of the service designated as 'significant improvement required', and thus will be of limited value. A more directive intervention may be required.

**Table 8:** Contextual differences between NQS rated programs

Service rating (NQS)	Context for assessment (from coaching reports)	Engagement with the coaching program (coaching reports)
Service assessed as <b>'exceeding national quality standard'</b>  Kindergarten	-Strong leadership. Director is also a manager of BPA services - Director and educators regularly attend training with other services Networking meetings with services occurred monthly -Two hours set aside each visit for discussion with educational leadership team -Used reflective journals and Raising the Child survey to prepare for assessment visit	High level of engagement with the coaching program  Improvements suggested by the coach were made
Service assessed as <b>Significant Improvement Required</b>  Kindergarten  8 rooms over 2 levels with playgrounds on balconies	-Poor Leadership. -Team morale low with team members experiencing little sense of belonging in the service - Poor access to resources (indoors and outdoors)  - Educators running rooms qualified with Certificate 3; inadequate training in programming and documentation etc. -QIP process hurried. Previous QIP written solely by the director	During coaching the director would appear to be in agreement with suggested actions, but would not follow through  Opportunity for coach to engage was difficult as constant interruptions.  Lack of drive for improvement. Some lapses between visits

<sup>7</sup> The services are listed in the overall service rubric in Appendix 5.



### Service Culture and Educator Practice

An indicator of service level outcomes particularly as they pertain to improvements in the education and care of children is to understand the degree to which educators believe their service supports them.

Survey findings from the end of program survey reveal that the majority of the educators who responded feel supported in their service. Figure 7 shows responses from educators at the end of the coaching program relating to:

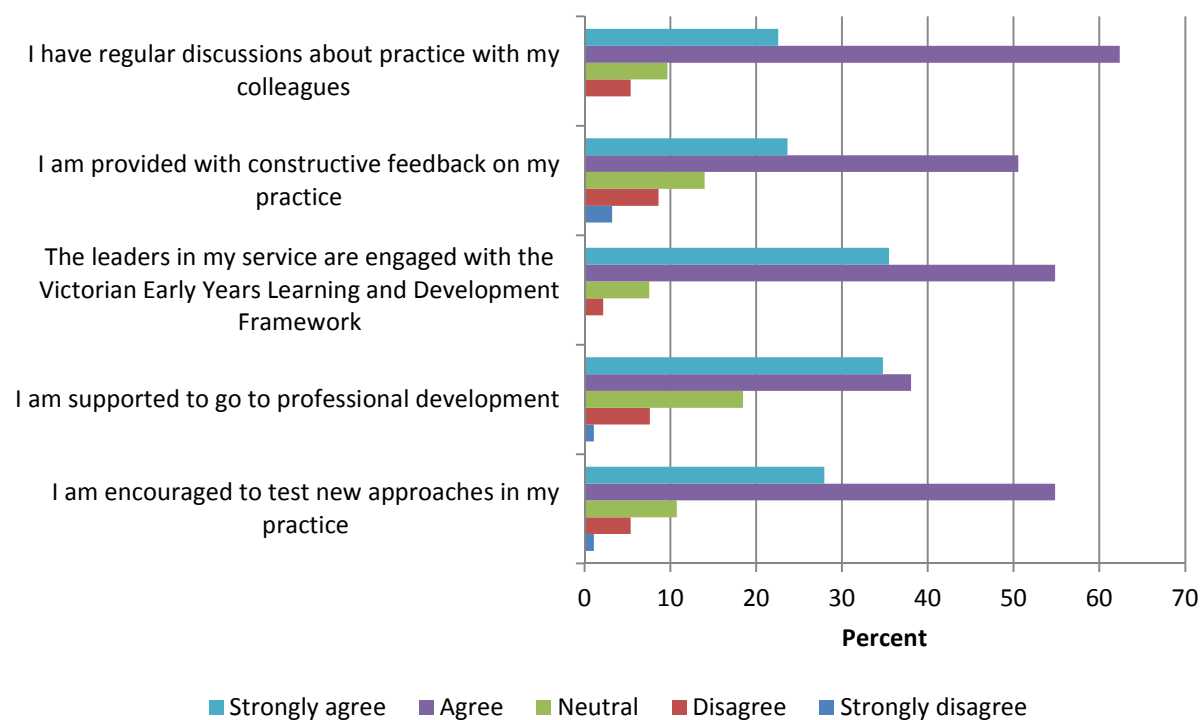
- the service's engagement with the VEYLDF
- the level of discussion about practice with colleagues that occurs in the service
- the amount of constructive feedback received
- support for professional development, and
- support for trying new approaches in practice

There were relatively high levels of agreement with each statement. Ninety percent of educators who responded to the survey agree or strongly agree that their service is engaged with the VEYLDF<sup>8</sup> and 83% agreed that they are encouraged to test new approaches in practice. While 73% agreed or strongly agreed that they are supported to attend professional development, there was a relatively high proportion (almost 20%) of respondents that indicated a neutral response to this question.

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<sup>8</sup> Approximately 8% did not answer this question

**Fig 7: Working in the service (n=93)**



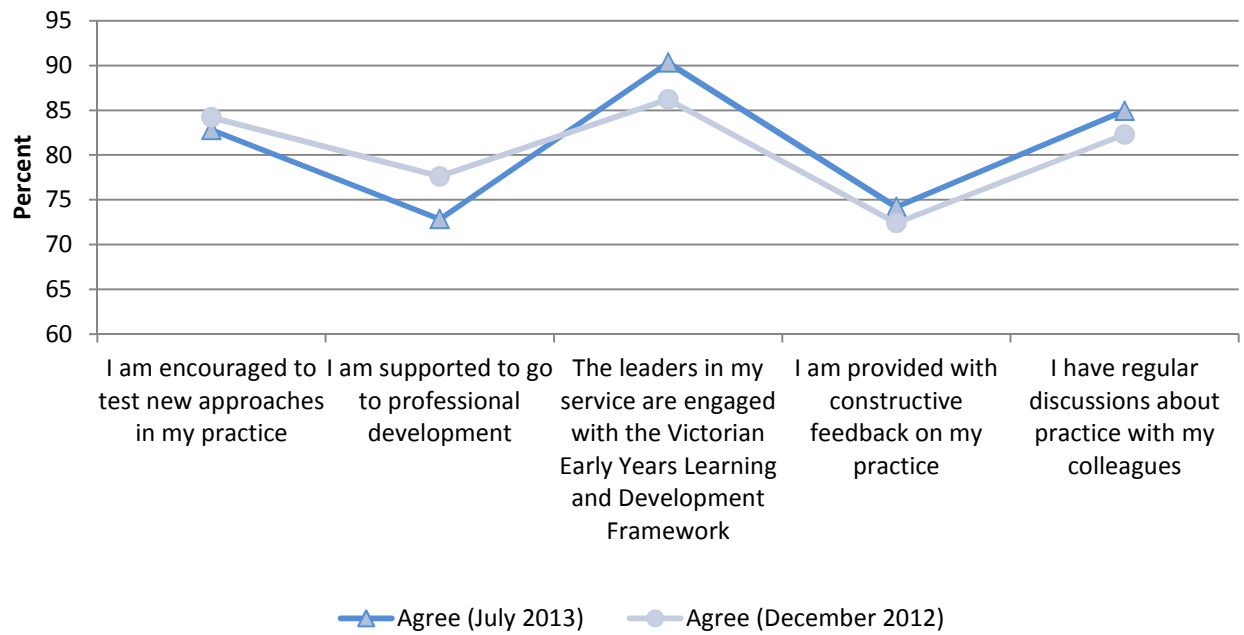
These five statements were also tested with respondents to the mid-program survey conducted by Gowrie Victoria in December 2012 (n=155). There is no way of tracking and matching individuals between surveys, nor is it possible to determine if specific centres participated in both surveys, but the overall pattern and level of agreement for each statement is very similar from one survey to the next.

These findings (see fig 8) indicate some level of stability in service philosophy and approach from mid-point to end-of-program. While responses were largely positive, it is interesting to note that there was less overall agreement across both survey phases in two items:

- I am supported to go to professional development
- I am provided with constructive feedback on my practice

These patterns may indicate that the educators feel support for professional development is lacking or is inconsistent within their service and that this did not shift from midpoint of the program through to the end point of the program.

**Fig 8: Comparison of level of agreement to each statement across mid- and end-of-program evaluative surveys**



The global shifts in services across the program timeframe described in the section above are summarised in Table 9 below:

**Table 9:** Summary – Service Level Shifts

	Consultant Phase (Pre-coaching)	Mid program	End of program
Assessment on Village Indicators	<p>Service themes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- knowledge of the VEYLDF</li> <li>- understanding of early childhood learning environments</li> <li>- educational leadership</li> </ul>	<p>Most salient barriers - in rank order:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) level of educators’ knowledge of the VEYLDF</li> <li>2) level of educator understanding of quality early childhood learning environments</li> <li>3) Capacity of educational leadership within the service</li> </ol>	<p>All services had progressed on Village Indicators (coaches’ assessment).</p> <p>Coaches noted specific improvements occurring in some rooms rather than the service as a whole</p> <p>Greater improvement evidenced in services with fewer barriers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Heightened understanding of the VEYLDF at service level</li> <li>- Attention and improvement to indoor and outdoor environments</li> </ul> <p>At end of the program                  24 classified as beginning                  19 services classified as progressing                  11 services classified as consolidating</p>
Performance	Not applicable	Not applicable	Of the 54 services 10 have had NQS

	Consultant Phase (Pre-coaching)	Mid program	End of program
on NQS ratings			<p>ratings</p> <p>5 working towards NQS                      3 meeting                      1 significant improvement required                      1 exceeding</p>
Coach interviews (end-of-program)	Not applicable	Not Applicable	<p>- Improvement in educators' understanding of the VEYLDF, and in particular in reflective practices</p> <p>-Improvements in understanding of high quality learning environments</p>
Educators' perspectives on service engagement with the VEYLDF (end-of-program survey)	Mixed responses about level of service engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 87% (134/155) of participants saw value for the service in being involved in the coaching program</li> <li>• 80% (123/153) agreed that their educational leader actively involved them in the coaching program</li> <li>• 72.6% (113/155) agreed that the leaders in the service were engaged with the VEYLDF</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 82% (75/92) agreed that they see value from the service having participated in the coaching program</li> <li>• 78% (72/92) agreed that their educational leader actively involved them in the coaching program</li> <li>• 90% (82/92) agreed that the leaders in the service were engaged with the VEYLDF</li> </ul>

## 4.4 Service Impact Profiles

Six managers of long day care services were interviewed to gain their insights into the impact of the coaching program on their service, and to elicit their views about their experience of the program. Three profiles are included here. Although the case profiles have been approved by the services for use in the report, names have been changed to limit service identification.

The first profile is derived from a manager whose experience of the program was extremely positive. The second profile highlights tangible changes in the service attributed to the coaching program. Only one of the six managers did not regard the program as ultimately of value to her service and her experience is included here for comparison, and as the third profile.

These profiles highlight contextual and personal differences. They provide personalised accounts of the program, and illustrate the diversity of services, leadership and service characteristics the coaches needed to take into account in working across services. A limitation of this presentation is that there are no standalone Kindergartens included in the profiles.

### **Theme: Building professional identity**

#### **Rural long day care service - identified as consolidating (Village Indicators assessment rubric)**

The service is located in rural Victoria and has 31 educators with approximately 18 on the floor on any given day. The centre has capacity for 118 children, but prefers to host about 80 per day. It has a large outdoor space and a number of resident animals. Laura, the owner-manager of the service, is an ex-primary teacher who is very supportive of the VEYLDF, has extensive experience in early childhood settings, and is committed to improving the education and care of children. Laura attributed two key changes in the service to involvement with the coaching program. In her view, the program provided the opportunity to increase the professional identity of the educators, and improve the environment for children attending the service.

The service has had an NQS rating and achieved an overall 'meeting' rating for quality areas 1,2,4 and 7 and achieved 'exceeding' on quality areas 3,5 and 6.

#### *Getting involved in the coaching program*

Laura had recently been appointed to the manager role when she heard about the coaching program. She believed that one of the reasons the service was nominated for involvement was prior training the educators had attended at Gowrie. She had also been in contact with Gowrie Victoria for professional support when she began her role.

Laura was excited about the coaching program, seeing it as an opportunity to help progress service improvement plans. Her long-term experience in early childhood had fostered a strong belief in the VEYLDF. The service was growing rapidly and with new educators on board she welcomed 'all the help [she could] get'.

She explained:

*'When the coaching program came up I thought "wow this is great" because I had been out of this industry for 30 years. I'd been out doing all kinds of program development and I thought "this is the person I need to support me". And, then I read more into it and I was really looking for some support myself but the best thing was we were all supported at our own level throughout the whole thing which was fantastic. So when I first thought about it I thought "yes we're there" so I chatted with [the educators] and they were pretty keen.'*

Laura was aware that the introduction of the NQF required services to demonstrate their performance in the quality areas. She saw the coach's help as an opportunity to progress the required work sooner rather than later. By engaging with the program she believed she would obtain instrumental help with her task and would be able to ask the coach 'all the questions I want to ask her and she can help me to get where I want to go'.

#### *Making a commitment to the program*

The manager's initial meeting with the coach sealed her commitment to the program. She spoke of the connection she felt with the coach immediately and praised her warm and non-judgemental attitude, even though Laura knew there were aspects of the service environment that needed improving:

*'She just came in, she was relaxed, she was confident in what she was about to achieve or what she wanted to achieve with us. She was very personable so by the end of the first visit I thought "yep I can spend 18 months or so with you" because that's really what it was about. I really didn't need any more than that to know I could commit to this project with her for the next 18 months.'*

While the educator team was relatively large, the manager felt that the coach initially worked across all to build a relationship and establish rapport. The coach then began to channel her efforts into the leading educator in each room. This did not mean she ignored other educators – she was open to questions and comments – but she focused her observations and feedback on a core team. The manager felt confident that the coach had a clear structure and set of goals she was pursuing with the service.

The manager noted the coach's focus on reflective practice. Supportive but challenging questions from the coach encouraged educators to reflect on the rationale and basis for their practice, and to consider new ways of doing things:

*'Self reflection and reflective practice were a big part of what [the coach] did. It was about "stop, think, what are you doing? Why are you doing this? How can we make this better?" So they did start to stop and think about that and there was a huge improvement in their capacity to provide care or education to children. So out of an opportunity to stop and think "why am I doing this?" then of course everything changed from "well I don't really know why I'm doing this. I'm not really sure if I really like doing this. What else could I do? Hmm, could I do that? Let's see where it fits in the framework – there it is, alright I'm doing that".'*

#### *Changes in professional identity of educators*

Laura noticed several changes in the educators' practice that she attributed to the coaching process. She believed the coach brought a level of professionalism about early childhood that reinforced the messages she was also trying to convey to educators. This reinforced her own practice as service manager and educational leader. In particular, she noted a change in the confidence of educators about their role as early childhood educators:

*'I watched every educator's mind move from "I am a childcare worker" to "I am a children's educator" and they took their sense of themselves to a new level of professionalism. That was where I could see [the coach] really trying to raise the bar. Think of who you are, you are not a babysitter, you are not there just to feed and water children you are there to educate them, engage with them, support families. I think their minds opened up to the entire role of children's services and started changing their language...So for the [educators] to hear it from [the coach], they either had a bit of clarity or confirmation around where we were supposed to be going because she was the professional coming in to help us with this.'*

#### *Improving the outdoor environment*

With the coach's support, this service increased the attention they pay to the quality of their outdoor environment. The outdoor space is large and now incorporates several distinct but connected areas to support children's play. In her view these changes in the physical environment also reinforced the educators' attitudes towards the children's education and care. This service has a garden development plan, which Laura indicated will support quality area 3 (Physical Environment).



While the coach shared action plans and templates, the manager and the educators adapted these to suit their service needs and context and to foster a sense of ownership. Action plans were particularly useful in focusing the service on areas for improvement. The service has now developed action plans for each room as well as an overall action plan for the service as a whole.

#### *Maintaining program outcomes*

Laura hopes there will be continued Department support for improvement of early childhood services. In a busy service context it is sometimes difficult to keep up to date with new requirements. She indicated she developed a good relationship with one of the authorised officers but was unsure if she was able to maintain contact with this person to ask questions or seek further information. Laura suggested that a nominated liaison person may be an important mechanism to ensure that her service keeps up to date with expectations. She stated,

*'This person would be my support person (in preparing for external assessments). They would be person who could help get me ready for assessment or make sure that before a spot check happens that I have got my 3cms on my fence or whatever it may be.'*

Embedding the VEYLDF will take some time. In her view there are many educators who have not been trained in the VEYLDF who need to get up to speed with the language and expectations. She also believes training institutions should be reviewed to ensure those providing training are using the VEYLDF terminology and practices. She would have liked to have seen more opportunities for networking between services during the program, and would value ongoing opportunities for information sharing, support and professional development.

Laura sees the coaching program as a tool that helped her be open to new perspectives while she was also attending to the NQF assessment process. The coach helped her 'think outside the square' and Laura was keen to progress improvements the coach suggested.

## **Theme: Increasing educator knowledge**

### **Inner metropolitan long day care service – identified as progressing (Village Indicators assessment rubric)**

This Melbourne metropolitan long day care service has capacity for 50-100<sup>9</sup> children. There are between 16 and 20 educators and the service also includes a funded kindergarten program.

The coach assigned to this service worked with June, the director, who, due to her experience, also took the role as educational leader in the coaching program. As a recent appointee, she was not at the service during the initial phase of the program when the consultancy visits were conducted.

June is a strong advocate for the value of the coaching program, nominating several practice changes and programming improvements in her service that she directly attributed to the program. The three main areas of sustainable change she noted were changes in educators' enthusiasm for trialling new practices aligned with the VEYLDF, physical environment changes and changes in programming and documentation.

#### *Willingness to engage with the coaching program*

An authorising environment was identified as a key contextual factor supporting coaching success. June noted that service leaders must be willing and supportive of the coaching process:

*'I think if the owners of the centre had still been directing here the result of the coaching program would probably have been different because they were less willing to work with it. I think you've got to be willing.'*

June would recommend the program to other educators and to other services. She can see positive improvements in the service, and she also believes the program will contribute to the service receiving a better NQS rating than otherwise would have been the case.

#### *Initial meeting*

June felt the initial meeting with the coach was challenging for some of the educators as one educator was concerned that her current programming in the babies room did not reflect the VEYLDF expectations. The manager explained that this staff member had little guidance about programming before the coaching began but that during the program she developed a reflection book and

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<sup>9</sup> The number of children attending the service is intentionally broad to protect service identity

learning stories. As a result, her enthusiasm about integrating the VEYLDF into her work with children and families grew.

June talked about the impact of the coaching program on the service and recounted the initial meeting with the coach and the education team:

*'I think the difference [in our service] is night and day, to be honest. I wouldn't say that they're where they need to be but from where they were to start with, leaps and bounds, because some of the educators didn't know what the Framework was. Now they know what the framework is, they know how to use it and they're using it; they probably could be using it better. It's been helpful to help embed the Framework because I know when [the coach] came out here and she said to everyone, "Alright, tell me what the practice principles are?" and nobody could answer her, and she said, "How many are there?" and nobody could answer her. I was sitting there going, "Oh no". I was mortified because I had just gone through it with them, I had given them a sheet – everyone had a sheet up on their walls; there was on the wall behind her as she was asking. So [the coach] and I talked about ways to get them thinking more about it, and so it's just been a matter of talking about it all the time, questioning them all the time about it. And, certainly we're still working on that but the basic bits, the five outcomes, and that was something no-one knew what to do with before and now they're using it and they know it. I was talking to one of the educators the other day and I said, "So what does this relate back to?" and she goes, "Oh, I can tell you what it relates back to in the outcomes, I know those off by heart". In October last year she didn't know what they were.'*

#### *The coach's work with the educators*

The coach worked across the service during the coaching sessions and used a collaborative approach that engaged her in discussions about her observations of educators' practice within the service:

*'[The coach] tried to spread herself out across all the rooms, so she spent a lot of time going into the rooms and having a look around and taking a backseat so she really knew what was going on. Then, she would come in and speak to me and say, "Look, these are the things I've noticed, let's talk about them, what do you think?" From there we would talk about where it might be most valuable for her to spend a little bit more time and what to speak to the educators about. So it was really good because I*

*always knew what was going on, I didn't feel like she was off doing something and I was wondering what she was saying.'*

As the service's nominated educational leader, June was also aware that some practices within the service did not reflect the VEYLDF. She felt that, as an external person, the coach was able to identify and communicate observations about practice in a way that she could not as an internal educator:

*'... sometimes as the director I can say to someone something 300 times and say, "Well perhaps we should do it this way" but then when somebody external comes out and then says, "Perhaps we should do it this way" it's like, "Oh, that's a great idea". It's new eyes on the situation and an expert coming in, so sometimes it just pushes those changes, or maybe it's that so many people have said it and then [the coach] tips it over the edge because she's said it as well.'*

June felt she was supported by the coach and, as a relatively new manager, welcomed her involvement in the service.

#### *Translating the VEYLDF into practice*

As well as identifying areas for practice improvement, the coach validated the educators' practice and provided guidance about how to translate the VEYLDF into practice. In June's view, the coach's feedback gave educators the confidence to trial new practices:

*'People get worried, they look at the documents and they look at all the different ways that you can plan, and they just throw their hands up in the air and say, "I can't do it, it's all too much. How do I know what to do?" Whereas, she was able to come in and say, "Look, there's no specific way you have to do it but perhaps you could try this way, see if it works for you. See if you can have a goal of doing this many observations if that works". So the people get the confidence to try it out and then if it doesn't work they can say to [the coach] "Well this bit doesn't work", and she has the background knowledge to be able to say, "Oh, well maybe this will fit in with you then, try this way".'*

#### *Changing attitudes and the environment*

June felt that the Theory to Practice visit to Gowrie Victoria was pivotal for educators in identifying possibilities for improving the service environment for children. Educators saw tangible examples of low-cost options they could put in place. In her view, the messages being shared by the coach were reinforced by the visit and 'clicked' with the educators:

*'After the educators went to Gowrie and saw it all in practice they all came back and hung up fabric and started to bring in more natural things. So that's been a huge change. I know the toddlers' room brought in flowers and they were trying to encourage parents to bring in flowers as well so they could have fresh flowers in the room. The outdoor area is another one; it's still not where I would like it to be, but it's come a long way. When I first got here there was just the big play equipment that's a permanent fixture and the cubby house and the sandpit, and I think that was it...Children would go outside and of course they would run around and they would run around and they would run around, and they would fight and they would yell at each other. So we started to talk about how we could make it a calmer environment, so that there were spaces for children as well.'*

June emphasised the changes in educators' attitudes and in the way the service looks as being two key changes resulting from their participation in the coaching program. In her view these changes are likely to be sustainable:

*'The look of the centre is much more homely and inviting, and I think that will stick. When I got here there was nothing on the walls in the corridor at all, and the rooms were very stark except for things that had been up for a very long time...We've now got a buzz between the educators and people are always trying new things, which is a really huge difference.'*

### **Theme: Working towards the National Quality Standard Rural long day care service (with funded kindergarten) identified as Progressing (assessment rubric)**

This service sits on a corner block in a modern housing development in rural Victoria. The centre opened in November 2006 as a long day care centre. The service offers places for up to 66 children and currently employs four full-time educators who work directly with children.

The centre is divided into four rooms – the 0-15 month room (babies room), 15 month-2 years room (toddlers), 2-3 years room (juniors) and the 3-5 room (Kindergarten). Each room has a group leader and other educators available to care for the children.

Susan is the owner of the service. As centre director, she is a hands-on owner and is present most days. Susan values the opportunity to have a business in the early childhood sector and working with children. As she put it, *'Children are so inquisitive. I see the spark in their faces. You want to make the first steps in their lives as positive as possible. It is a step in making them into good citizens.'*

### *Getting involved in the coaching program*

The service was invited by the Department to be in the coaching program. However, Susan believed that this invitation was because the service was perceived as 'difficult' or non-compliant in some way. Susan had concerns about participating in the coaching program; the main one being educator time off the floor.

Susan felt the initial two consultancy visits were a '...waste of time. The individuals that came were nice enough, but the process did not help the service in any way'. Susan initially held an expectation that the coaching would assist the service in rating visits by the National Quality authorised officers, and indicated that this message had been implied in early conversations with the coach. In her view the coaching was too open-ended and there were inconsistencies in the coach's presentation of materials compared to the expectations of the assessors. The extended quote below provides an example of her perceived inconsistency in approach:

*'We wanted more insight into what was going on in terms of requirements for planning. It was very open-ended. Lady Gowrie probably didn't know what they were looking at. Some of the material that was shared with us by the coach was totally different from what we were validated on. For example, intentional learning. We were told it was very open-ended. The children were the focus and you worked from what the children's interests are. And, in accreditation they [the authorised officers] said there needed to be intentional teaching to guide the children, not open-ended stuff. The coach didn't pick it up and we didn't realise it had to be more teacher directed.'*

The service achieved an overall rating of 'working towards National Quality Standard'. Susan expected this rating as at the time of the assessment two of the four educators, had left employment, and the service was planning for the new year. Susan felt the coach was generally competent and professional in her role, but she was disappointed that the service performance assessment did not reflect their work with the coach. She expected that the service would have 'flown through the regulatory visit' given their involvement.

Susan indicated that the coach's focus when working with staff was the VEYLDF and its practice principles, but she was somewhat cynical about the value of increased documentation required. Acknowledging the impetus to use less paper and ensure resources are sustainable, she felt the increased amount of paperwork seemed contradictory. From her perspective, the coach perhaps could have spent more time in the room with staff, observing their practice and sharing potential strategies. She thought that many educators learn better with practice examples rather than being required to read a book about the VEYLDF and in her words, *'we just needed someone to direct us, help us and make sure we were on the right track'*.

### *Value of training session and reflective practice*

For Susan, one of the most useful elements of the program was a training session the coach held with staff early in the program. While she saw the session as a little long, it provided the educators with tools to reflect on their practice and work more effectively together as a team. In Susan's view it is difficult to keep the momentum of reflection going during the busy day-to-day schedule of the centre.

Susan believes that the educators in her service get to know the parents and carers of the children extremely well. In part this is due to the size of the service, but also is in part due to their approach to engagement. It is important to Susan that parents are happy with the care their children receive. Susan explained:

*'I get to see them and I run into them around town...Parents want you to look after their children during the day. They want their children to be happy and learning. They don't care about ratios as long as you are looking after their kids as best as you can. Some parents don't know about the Framework and some parents don't care. Many parents don't want to deal with the politics of it all. While we try to engage parents as much as we can, parents don't come to meetings. Parents come and see you if things are not going well. We have asked parents to do some things, but we don't want to burden them too much.'*

### *The values of the manager*

One of the things Susan feels strongly about is being transparent in her values about what works in the education and care of children. There are some aspects of the Framework that she does not fully support, and she feels a good case can be made for her perspective:

*'I am not going to bow to the views of others on everything. Children need structure and too much freedom can be bad for them psychologically. Some of it [the Framework] is too airy-fairy. We have structure because we don't want it to be too open-ended for them. Children need to have expectations around routine...what they are expecting to happen. If parents weren't happy with that there would be no children here. I want to keep children here. It is my business. I want to keep parents happy.'*

If this type of coaching program were offered again, Susan would hesitate to become involved. In her view the coaching program added to educator workloads, and the costs outweighed the benefits to the service. She suggested that a shorter, more intensive program might have been sufficient to improve educator knowledge and skills. *'If we had been pushed more intensively, knowing that we had to act within a time period and respond to actions we*

*would have done it. What happened is that I think we just thought, well we have another two months to do this. No rush.'*

### Case Synthesis

A number of outcomes attributable to the coaching program are evident from the case profiles, particularly changes in professional identity of educators (Case profile 1), changes in environments for children (Case profile 1 and 2), changes in quality of reflective practice (Case 1,2 and 3), and changes in attitudes of educators towards the VEYLDF (Case profile 2).

The three managers' perspectives provide insights into the ways in which coaching worked, or was perceived not to work at the service level. They also illustrate how readiness to be involved and enthusiasm about the VEYLDF can facilitate engagement with the coaching process and contribute to meaningful changes across the service.

The evidence presented here, along with findings generated from survey results, coaching reports and educator interviews conducted through the evaluation suggest that other improvements may be occurring more widely across the services involved in the coaching program.

Table 10 summarises the key themes identified from each case profile.

**Table 10:** Key Themes across Service Profiles

<b>Case Profile</b>	<b>Key Themes</b>
Case Profile 1: Supporting Continuous improvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Coaching offered an opportunity to build on existing quality improvement plans</li> <li>• The coaching relationship with manager and educators was important in building engagement with the coaching process</li> <li>• Coaching increased professional identity of the educators and contributed to improvements in the children's environment</li> </ul>
Case Profile 2: Enhancing educator's knowledge and skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Coaching reinforced the improvement agenda of the director</li> <li>• The director felt validated and supported by the coach. The coach reinforced messages she had been communicating to educators</li> <li>• External person (coach) providing face-to-face feedback to educators was valuable in shifting attitudes and behaviour of educators</li> <li>• The Theory to Practice visit to Gowrie was important to educators' understanding of potential low-cost changes that could be incorporated in their rooms</li> </ul>



<p>Case Profile 3: Working towards the NQS</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The purpose of the consultancy visits was perceived as unclear</li> <li>• There was an expectation that the coach would assist the service in addressing NQS requirements</li> <li>• A shorter and more intensive program may have worked better for this service</li> </ul>
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## 5. Implications and Recommendations

There are three key evaluation sub-questions that, if addressed, will shed light on the role of the coaching program in supporting early childhood services in quality improvement. These questions are:

- What facilitated and inhibited the success of the coaching program?
- How does coaching compare with other professional development options?
- What are the implications of the evaluation findings for future planning for quality improvement?

This section is based on a collective review of the findings. While the evaluation is independent, the recommendations were informed by discussion of the findings with Gowrie representatives and staff from the Early Childhood and School Education Group, DEECD.

The coaching program was not a standalone improvement program; the Department offered it as part of a suite of interventions. While a proposition can be made from the evidence that the coaching program improved services' alignment with the VEYLDF and achieved a range of knowledge, skill and application outcomes, it cannot yet be claimed that the VEYLDF has been embedded in all elements of practice across the 54 services. This may be a function of the time it takes for change to occur, or point to the need for a match between intervention and the service characteristics.

According to coaching reports most services were engaged with the program and all services made gains in their awareness and knowledge of the VEYLDF.

The evaluation has identified that the coaching program was well regarded by services that participated in the evaluation. Educators valued the coaching program with the majority of educators participating in the evaluation survey indicating this was the most valuable professional development they had experienced.

The coaching program has clearly contributed to the visibility and accessibility of the VEYLDF, but coaching has not led to the VEYLDF being embedded across all services.

### Lessons Learned 1. Service Context

The services involved in the program were characterised by issues such as high levels of turnover of educators, low levels of morale and inconsistent access to professional development. These issues were sometimes associated with governance and leadership assessed as needing improvement, but in some cases these issues were influenced by the manager's capacity or willingness to engage the service in quality improvement and applying the VEYLDF.

All services have made gains in implementing practices that reflect the VEYLDF, and some services have made significant changes in quality improvement processes they adopt and in the quality of environments for children. It appears, however, that many of the services that participated in the coaching program still experience persistent barriers that inhibit their embedding the VEYLDF.

The face-to-face consultancy visits and coaching have contributed in some way towards shifting these structural or systemic barriers; but these initiatives are not sufficient. A more intensive focus on operational issues and governance with services confronting a range of barriers may be required.

### Lesson Learned 2. Design of the Coaching Model

The intentions of the consultancy component were sound, but the implementation lacked continuity and two days was insufficient to address the extent of operational or leadership barriers in some services.

Most managers and educators interviewed in the evaluation indicated that the gap between coach visits was too long to maintain momentum. Coaches reported that the time between visits influenced the level of commitment to action plans. Delivery of shorter term coaching opportunities with follow-up support provided online, by phone, or in networked meetings with other educators could be more effective in supporting educators to embed the VEYLDF.

### Lessons Learned 3. Coaching in the Early Childhood Context and Building Relationships

The relational elements of coaching were important in fostering engagement with the process. Coaches indicated that rapport and trust sometimes did not develop till midway through the program, however where it was developed early in the program (such as the way it occurred in the first service impact profile) it appeared to strengthen program outcomes.

Coaching occurred within the busy context of an early childhood service. In most cases coaches observed and worked with educators on the floor and in recognition that most educators could not leave their rooms to speak one-on-one with the coach. Educators were often interacting with children while the coach was sharing observations. These in-situ observation opportunities may have been valuable for the coach and for the educator, but may also have

distracted the focus of coaching in some circumstances. Monitoring and assessing changes in educators' practice in a systematic way was not possible because of the range of educators the coaches worked with, and because of the nature of the coaching context.

Meaningfully monitoring and measuring coaching effectiveness requires systematic methods and performance tracking over time. There needs to be a mechanism for tracking change at the educator and service level with clear dimensions specified for both narrative and numerical information. This mechanism will also support educators in reflecting on gains made through participation.

#### Lesson Learned 4.Coaching and collaborative potential of educational leaders

Educational leaders are an important resource for educators in early childhood services. Educational leaders interviewed in the evaluation valued the knowledge and skills they had developed in coaching from watching the coach at work with educators. A collaborative approach was valued highly and could contribute to better outcomes for educators, services and the children in their care.

There is potential for leadership and coaching skills of educational leaders to be further enhanced through professional development options, and further targeted coaching or mentoring. Further assessment of the commitment or needs of educational leaders in this area may be beneficial.

A toolkit of coaching strategies and materials, including a needs analysis tool could be a useful resource for educational leaders seeking to build additional leadership and coaching capability.

#### Lessons Learned 5.Creating Sustainable Change and Improvement

There were differences in the level of support for, and knowledge of, the VEYLDF among approved providers, directors and/or managers according to educational leaders and coaches interviewed in this evaluation. Coaches and managers reported that low levels of knowledge and support were a barrier to progressing shifts in practice. This was particularly highlighted by educators trying to get additional resources, or in some cases fix or maintain equipment to an appropriate standard.

Coaches noted that coaching had little influence on service quality if the manager or director resisted change. They noted that progress in some services could only be made following a change in leadership.

In circumstances and contexts where directors and managers do not support the intent or philosophies underpinning the VEYLDF, it is doubtful that gains made at the service level will be maintained unless there is another impetus for maintaining quality. The introduction and ongoing assessments that form part

of the NQS are likely to maintain a focus on service quality, but there will need to be tailored support and consequences for services not meeting service standards.

### Lesson Learned 6. Optimum Conditions for Coaching

Coaching undertaken under the right conditions – where there is commitment by the approved provider, manager, educational leadership team and educators – is likely to be effective in changing practice. Where there are multiple barriers or intractable leadership, coaching may not have much impact, and sustainable change is unlikely. Providing face-to-face coaching support is comparatively costly relative to other support interventions and the investment required will produce better outcomes if the service is engaged in a multi-faceted program of reform.

### Lesson Learned 7. Sustainability of Practice Changes through Networks of Support

Educators sought more opportunities for networking outside their service. While network meetings were offered during the program, low attendance was attributed to meetings being scheduled out-of-hours or because they were held at a rural centre some distance from the educators' work or home base. It may be worth exploring low-cost options to maintain the engagement of educators (for example, the Facebook page) and to strengthen support networks among educators.

There is an opportunity to build cross-service professional learning among educators in neighbourhood services. Exchange service visits may generate cross-fertilisation and opportunities for learning and gaining insight into ways to strengthen practice from peers.

## **Recommendations**

### **Design and Scope of Interventions**

It is recommended that criteria for selection of services that may benefit from coaching be more tightly specified to maximise the return on investment. Diagnostic criteria may include evidence of existing leadership and good governance. Other interventions may be more appropriate for services experiencing significant operational or structural barriers.

It is recommended that coaching interventions be tailored to the differential needs and requirements of services. Shorter, more intensive periods of coaching, may be warranted to support specified actions agreed by the educational team and to maintain the momentum of change in some service contexts.

It is recommended that professional learning opportunities be extended to educational leaders to enhance pedagogical skills and enhance leadership skills

within the service. Enhancing educational leaders' skill base will potentially strengthen the sustainability of support interventions across the service.

### **Strengthening educator outcomes**

It is recommended that further opportunities (such as use of social media or educator service visits) be promoted to support services to network and cross-pollinate ideas, strategies and experiences. These opportunities could be explicitly linked with and reinforce existing print form or online resources that support educators' professional practice.

It is recommended that coaching be supplemented by provision of structured materials or resource books that can be used for record keeping and maintained after program conclusion to promote sustainability.

### **Monitoring and Evaluating Coaching Interventions**

It is recommended that a tool or series of tools be developed to enable a more robust and trackable evidence base of educator level or service level change. Ideally, this tool would enable both numerical and narrative comparison of service status and change relevant to service improvement over time.

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