

# Evaluation of the Victorian Framework Coaching Program

## Executive Summary

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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 as 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.