Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework

Evidence Paper

Practice Principle 4: Equity and Diversity

Authored for the Department of Education
and Early Childhood Development
by Madeleine Saffigna, Dale Franklin,
Amelia Church and Collette Tayler

Practice Principle 4: Equity and diversity

The Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework (the Victorian Framework) guides early childhood professionals' practice in Victoria. The Victorian Framework identifies eight Practice Principles for Learning and Development (Practice Principles). The Practice Principles are based on the P-12 Principles of Learning and Teaching, the pedagogy from the national Early Years Learning Framework, and are informed by the latest research.

The Practice Principles are interrelated and designed to inform each other. They are categorised as Collaborative, Effective and Reflective:

Collaborative

1. Family-centred practice

2. Partnerships with professionals

3. High expectations for every child

Effective

4. Equity and diversity

5. Respectful relationships and responsive engagement

6. Integrated teaching and learning approaches

7. Assessment for learning and development

Reflective

8. Reflective practice

These Evidence Papers document the research that underpins each Practice Principle. The content of the Evidence Papers will be developed into a series of practice guides which will provide practical advice to early childhood professionals on how to align their practice to the Practice Principles.

Executive Summary

Children achieve better outcomes when their diverse strengths, abilities, interests, and cultural practices are understood and supported. Valuing and respecting diversity is vital for children to develop a strong sense of identity. Principles of equity and diversity are linked to children developing a sense of belonging, identity, and wellbeing so that they become effective communicators and confident, involved learners (DEEWR, 2009; DEECD, 2009). Research demonstrates that children's quality early learning experiences set them up for academic success and personal wellbeing later in life (Sylva, Siraj-Blatchford, Taggart, Sammons, Melhuish, Elliot and Totsika, 2006; Clarke, 2009).

The principles of equity and diversity are recognised internationally and nationally in legislation and professional practice within education. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989) has promoted children's rights and ensured that equity and diversity are prominent in government agendas (Woodhead, 2006; UNCRC, 1989). The principles of equity and diversity in early childhood education are interconnected and cover a broad range of ideas. They require professionals to actively address issues of inequality and to promote the value of diversity and difference.

The Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework (Victorian Framework) recognises that the communities in which children live and the diverse cultures in which they grow are fundamental to children's learning and development. The Victorian Framework specifically recognises and respects our Indigenous cultures and the unique place of Aboriginal people[1] as a valued part of Victoria's heritage and its future (DEECD, 2009 p. 6).

Early childhood professionals need to identify and respond to children's individual strengths, abilities and interests to ensure that all children have the support they need to reach their full potential. This includes early childhood professionals having high expectations for each child, and recognising and addressing barriers to children's learning and development (DEEWR, 2009; DEECD, 2009). In summary, the implications for practice informed by the research evidence and detailed in this review are:

- Early childhood professionals play an important role in supporting and enhancing equitable learning and development outcomes for all children.

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[1] In this paper the word 'Aboriginal' refers to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders.

- Early childhood professionals need to form strong and respectful partnerships with families and communities in order to provide the best support for children's learning and development.

- The early years of life are crucial for young children in developing their first language and cultural identity.

- Children's sense of belonging and identity is enhanced when they have a sense of place and connection to their environment.

- Early childhood professionals' attitudes toward diversity affect children's wellbeing, self-esteem and academic outcomes. Professionals take responsibility for identifying and removing barriers to equity and inclusion.

Introduction

Early childhood professionals' commitment to equity and diversity has a significant impact on children's learning outcomes and their social and emotional wellbeing.

Children's personal, family and cultural histories shape their learning and development. Children learn when early childhood professionals respect their diversity and provide them with the best support, opportunities and experiences. Early childhood professionals:

- support children's evolving capacities to learn from birth

- ensure that the interests, abilities and culture of every child and their family are understood, valued and respected

- maximise opportunities for every child

- identify areas where focused support or intervention is required to improve each child's learning and development

- recognise bi-and multi-lingualism as an asset and support these children to maintain their first language and learn English as a second language

- promote cultural awareness in all children, including greater understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing and being

- support children to develop a sense of place, identity and a connection to the land

- encourage children as active participants for sustainability, influencing the quality of life now, and for future generations.

VEYLDF, p.11

This review of evidence supporting Practice Principle 4: Equity and Diversity highlights the importance of early childhood professionals reflecting the principles of equity and diversity in their daily working practice (DEEWR, 2009; Gunn, Child, Madden, Purdue, Surtees, Thurlow, and Todd, (2004); MacNaughton, 2003). Moreover, this research highlights how children are able to achieve enhanced outcomes when their diverse strengths and capabilities are identified and supported (Freeman, and Bochner, 2008; Rodger, Braithwaite and Keen, 2004; Changying, 2010). Early childhood professionals are integral to this process. When early childhood professionals recognise and understand that diversity contributes positively to the value of Australian society, children's outcomes are enhanced (DEEWR, 2009). Practice Principle 4 focuses on early childhood professionals' commitment to equity, recognising that all children have the capacity to succeed (DEEWR, 2009).

What do we mean by 'equity and diversity'?

The term diversity encapsulates the myriad of differences between individuals. It refers not only to people of differing race and culture but also differing languages, religions, values, abilities, socioeconomic status, gender and any other aspect that makes people different from one another. It therefore recognises that each person is different even if they belong to the same ethnic group, community or family (Durand, 2008; Vandenbroeck, 2007). Diversity is an evolving concept in early childhood education. While it once referred to children from different ethnic backgrounds it now encapsulates every kind of individual difference that exists for children, families and professionals (Durand, 2008; Petriwskyj, 2010). Diversity is the celebration of difference and the acknowledgement that difference is complex and that it exists in some way for every child (Petriwskyj, 2010; Potter, 2007).

> Diversity refers to the myriad of experiences and attributes that contribute to each person's uniqueness regardless of cultural or ethnic heritage or community, such as social class, gender, occupational status, income, sexual orientation, ability, disability, religion and education. (Durand, 2008, p. 837)

This inclusive and positive conceptualisation of diversity reflects the growing diversity of Australian culture and recognises that diversity is the norm rather than the exception (Potter, 2007). When we talk about diversity in early childhood education and care we are referring to the right of every child to be socially, academically and physically included in all facets of Australian life.

This definition of diversity is inextricably linked to principles of equity. While equity is not easily defined and the term can be used in varying contexts, the concept of equity is principally concerned with providing every child with access to fair, just and non-discriminatory education and care. This requires the idea that inequality inherently exists and must be actively challenged in order to provide children with equal opportunities (Hyland, 2010).

Much of the research literature refers to the distinction between equity and equality (Davis, Gunn, Purdue and Smith, 2007). *Equality* refers to the same conduct in communication and contact, quantity or values for all individuals. *Equity* refers to ideas of fairness and social justice which may require challenging the dominant culture in order to provide different treatment, or special measures, for individuals or groups to ensure that they experience equal opportunities to succeed (Hyland, 2010; Lappalainen, 2009).

In early childhood settings equity means providing high quality education and care to diverse learners. Each child has a unique learning and development trajectory that may require individualised or additional support for them to be fully engaged in a quality education and care. Equity does not mean providing

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the same experiences for every child, instead it requires early childhood professionals to recognise sometimes unseen barriers to learning and power imbalances, and to actively address them (Hyland, 2010; Sarra, 2008).

Australia is a signatory to The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). The Convention emphasises the importance of children's right to accessible and affordable education, the child's right to non-discrimination, and practices in the best interests of each child (UNCRC, 1989). The Convention not only governs children's universal rights, but provides early childhood professionals with guidance on principles of equity and diversity.

Article 2 refers to state parties respecting and ensuring children's rights without discrimination of any kind, irrespective of the child's race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, property, disability, birth or other status (UNCRC 1989). Additionally, Article 2 refers to state parties ensuring children are protected against all forms of discrimination or punishment on the basis of the status, activities, expressed opinions, or beliefs of the child's parents, legal guardians, or family members (UNCRC, 1989).

Legislation and policy frameworks in Victoria such as Wannik, Better Opportunities, Better Outcomes, The Equal Opportunity Act, 2010 and the Victorian Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities, 2006 outline the Victorian Government's provisions for the rights of all Victorians, Aboriginal education, children with a disability, and anti-discrimination laws (DEECD and VAEAI 2008, DEECD, 2010, Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission, 2008, Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission, 2011). These policies and legislation provide a statute for equity and diversity in early childhood education and care environments, to support better outcomes for all children.

Why are equity and diversity important in early childhood learning, development and teaching?

Each child has a unique learning trajectory that requires responsive, individualised learning and development opportunities that will enable them to reach their full potential.

The diversity in Australian early childhood settings is growing every day. There are currently almost 400 languages spoken in Australia with 16% of the population speaking a language other than English at home (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2010). As well as cultural, linguistic and ethnic diversity, approximately 8% of Australian children have a disability, with approximately

4.3% of those having a severe disability meaning that they require assistance with communication, self-care and/or mobility (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2009). Other attributes like socio-economic status, family structure, living conditions and mental, physical and emotional health are factors that affect a child's learning and development trajectories, and will affect children in different ways (Woodhead, 2006).

Given these complex and varied factors it is evident that every child has a different learning context that can result in barriers to quality education and care. Research shows that issues of poverty, gender, language, culture, race, ability, disability, and living context mean that each child requires individualised, differentiated support to reach their full potential (Hyland, 2010; Broderick, Mehta-Parekh and Reid, 2005). Pennington (2009) documents an example of the benefits of using storytelling for children learning English as a second or additional language. The study describes how storytelling provided opportunities for children to explore their identity, through culturally appropriate narratives and also begin to engage with English language texts, important for the acquisition of formal language skills. This tailored approach is an example of how diversity can be supported and valued through an individualised approach (Pennington, 2009).

Individualised, varied and additional support is especially important for the meaningful inclusion of children with additional needs. Equity and diversity are based on every child's right to be a valued member of the learning community and to be supported to engage in all learning settings (Petriwskyj, 2010).

Children develop positive self-identities and better educational outcomes when early childhood professionals actively promote inclusion and have high expectations for all children.

It is important to define and critically analyse *inclusion* as it is often difficult to translate the rhetoric into practice. Forman (2008) and Petriwskyj (2010) argue that inclusion is underpinned by the idea that every child can learn and develop and has a right to care and education. Inclusion recognises that the environment presents barriers to participation, access and learning opportunities and aims to reduce these obstacles. Inclusion recognises a child's right to be a valued and active member of their community, meaning that they should have the option to enrol in mainstream settings and engage in age appropriate learning (Forman, 2008; Petriwskyj, 2010). Gunn et al. (2004) advise that inclusion recognises individual needs as well as celebrating difference.

Inclusion has benefits for all children. Children with disabilities or developmental delays show gains in their social interactions, play and peer

engagement while other children respond more respectfully to diversity and better understand human needs (Wong and Cumming, 2010; Forman, 2008).

It is, however, important to understand that enrolling a child into a mainstream setting does not necessarily equate to inclusive practice. In a study of the everyday experiences of mothers of children with additional needs in NSW, many mothers reported barriers to inclusion. They advised that many centres would not accept their enrolments, that staff did not understand their child and were not responding appropriately to their child's needs. Many mothers were the sole providers of information about their child's needs and wished that staff were given time to attend training (Grace, Llewellyn, Wedgwood, Fenech and McConnell, 2008). Some parents also reported having conditions placed on their child's enrolment which resulted in their child's exclusion from some activities or parents being expected to provide additional assistance because their child had been given a place (Gunn, Child, Madden, Purdue, Surtees, Thurlow and Todd, 2004; Grace et al., 2008). Families and children treated in this way are denied their basic human rights to equality and respect.

The Equal Opportunity Act, 2010 in Victoria states that it is illegal to discriminate against a person based on disability. All children, including children with a disability or developmental delay, have the right to education and care that is free from discrimination (Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission, 2008, Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission, 2011).

Early childhood professionals also reported structural barriers to inclusion including inadequate child-staff ratios, lack of training and an inability to access funding to support inclusion (Llewellyn, Thompson and Fante, 2002; Mohay and Reid, 2006; Grace et al., 2008). Research demonstrates that in order for inclusion to effectively support diverse learners it must be an active process that is supported through funding, training, relationships with families and reflection. Inclusive practice recognises difference rather than employing a one size fits all approach (Petriwskyj, 2010). Research also demonstrates that partnerships between professionals can support diverse learners' outcomes by allowing professionals with diverse expertise to share strategies and knowledge (Bagnato, Blair, Slater, McNally, Mathews and Minzenberg, 2004).

A key factor in equity and diversity is having high expectations for every child. Children's self-esteem and motivation to achieve is linked to early childhood professionals having high expectations and communicating these to every child (Rubie-Davis, 2006; Berzin, 2010). This means that early childhood professionals recognise that some children may need additional or specialised support to reach their full potential. Professionals promote inclusion and diversity by enabling each child to experience success and be engaged in challenging, age

appropriate learning experiences. This may involve providing different learning experiences for each child (Broderick, Mehta-Parekh and Reid, 2005).

Children who are highly motivated to achieve, who are resilient, and have high self-esteem and a sense of agency achieve better academic and social outcomes (Ahmed, Minnaert, and van der Kuyper, 2008; Patrick, Mantzicopoulos, Samarapungavan and French, 2008). Children who have experienced success and positive reinforcement throughout their education and care are more likely to have a strong sense of agency which will enable them to persist with difficult tasks and put more effort into their learning (Patrick, et al., 2008). In much the same way, early childhood professionals who have positive attitudes to diversity are more likely to have a strong sense of agency themselves, and to take additional steps to support all children to achieve their goals (Halvorsen, Lee and Andrade, 2009).

Children's learning and development is enhanced when early childhood professionals recognise the benefits of multilingualism and actively support children's home languages.

Language is a social construct that connects children to their family, community and culture (Makin, Diaz, and McLachlan, 2002). A child's first language is linked to the development of positive self-identity, a sense of belonging to family and cultural groups and understanding the values of these groups (Rydland and Aukrust, 2008; Clarke, 2009; Wen-Jui and Chien-Chung, 2010). Research shows that bilingualism and multilingualism have benefits for children's academic success, their motivation to achieve, their connection to their family and community and their wellbeing (Wen-Jui and Chien-Chung, 2010; Clarke, 2009). Conversely when children experience a loss or break in their first language they can find it difficult to connect with their cultural heritage and family values without the use of their first language. This can lead to children feeling excluded from family or community groups and experiencing a lack of connection between their first and second (or additional) language (Yazici, Itler and Glover, 2010). In a study by Wen-Jui and Chien-Chung (2010) bilingual children benefitted from the cultural resources of their families and communities as well as from strengthened relationships with their parents which affected their behavioural and emotional wellbeing.

Language is inextricably linked to all the five outcomes in the Victorian Framework. Language plays a major role in identity development, it facilitates belonging and connection with a community, it affects social development and wellbeing as well as enabling children to think and communicate (Clarke, 2009,). A child's first language is linked to her or his feelings of power and equality.

Evidence shows that when children's first language is not valued by professionals they can lose confidence in their communication and language skills. A study by Changying (2010) revealed that it was common to see and hear children confidently speaking in their first language become very shy and uncomfortable when asked to communicate in English. When asked to speak in their first language in the classroom one child responded that her language was 'ugly' and others refused to use their first language at all. This case study demonstrates the sudden loss of power associated with not being able to effectively communicate and having their first language devalued (Changying, 2010). Similarly, when second language learning is given the highest priority and valued over a first language, children can experience a loss of connection and identity that in turn leads to low self-esteem (Yazici, et al., 2010; Suarez-orozco, Suarez-orozco and Sattin-Bajaj, 2010). Research also demonstrates that competence in a child's first language is linked to success in second language attainment. When a child is competent in their first language they are better able to learn a second or additional language as they have an understanding of how languages work (Yazici, et al., 2010).

Children have better outcomes in early childhood settings when there are partnerships with families and the community.

> "When you enrol a child, you actually enrol a family" Lyn (Imtoual, Kameniar and Bradley, 2009, p. 26)

Equity and diversity are key principles for forming respectful partnerships with families. When families feel supported and included in their child's education and care children have better outcomes. Family-centred practice recognises the key role that families play in their child's development and has been identified in many studies as being the optimal model for ensuring holistic, collaborative education and care (Roger, Braithwaite and Keen, 2004; Imtoual, et al., 2009; Suarez-orozco, et al., 2010). Family-centred practice is defined in detail when looking at achieving best practice.

Children's learning and development outcomes are improved when learning is supported in the home. For example parent-child literacy activities are positively associated with reading interest and print knowledge (Weigel, Martin and Bennett, 2005). Children's belief in their learning ability is influenced by the expectations of parents and educators. When a parent has high expectations for their child's learning this directly affects both the child's self-belief and the child's actual achievement (Neuenschwander et al., 2007). When children perceive support from parents, peers and early childhood professionals this has a positive effect on their motivation to achieve which in turn leads to better

learning and development outcomes (Ahmed et al., 2008, Suarez-orozco, et al., 2010).

Responsive early childhood professionals recognise that each child has a unique context that affects the way that their learning is supported in the home. For example, making connections with home activities, such as storytelling or letter writing, can demonstrate that early childhood professionals respect families' practices and knowledge, and can increase children's exposure to multimodal learning (Macmillan, 2004). Alternatively, enabling children to take home books or mathematics kits can engage families in their children's learning in ways they may previously not have considered (Macmillan, 2004; Freeman and Bochner, 2008). Families should be encouraged and supported to take an active role in their children's education. This may require additional support for families who may not be confident or who feel they lack the resources to extend their children's learning.

Families feel more welcome in professional settings when their culture and child rearing practices are valued and respected. In a small study of Sudanese mothers living in South Australia, there was a common desire to preserve the traditions and culture of Sudanese child rearing. Many mothers felt that child care workers did not understand their children and were not caring for their children in a way that was consistent with their values and beliefs (Ebbeck and Dela Cerna, 2007). This sentiment was mirrored in research with Aboriginal families who felt that their values and child rearing practices were not respected in early childhood settings (Kitson and Bowes, 2010). When considering the values of families in early childhood education and care it is important not to stereotype, but to open communication about child rearing and other values and to respect the expert knowledge families have of their children (Talay-Ongan, 2004).

Early childhood settings that promote Aboriginal culture and perspectives support Aboriginal children's sense of identity and belonging, as well as promoting a culture of understanding and respect towards cultural diversity for all children.

Each child has a unique experience of context and culture. When this is understood children are more likely to feel supported and have a strong sense of belonging (Kitson, and Bowes, 2010). One of the key factors in effective diversity practice is to avoid stereotyping children and families based on their gender, race, culture or other attributes. No two children have the same life experiences so it is important to avoid stereotypes and engage with families on a personal and individual level. In a study of Aboriginal knowledge and perspectives in primary schools, the following story highlighted the image that some children had constructed about who Aboriginal people are:

An Aboriginal principal at one school told the story:

> I said to the kids at assembly, 'would you recognise an Aboriginal person if they walked in here? What would they look like? The kids replied, someone dark, someone from the NT [Northern Territory].
>
> He then announced to the assembled children, 'well one just walked in five minutes ago'.
>
> And the children all looked around to see where the Aboriginal person was. The principal then added, 'that Aboriginal person was me'. (Harrison and Greenfield, 2011, p. 69)

This story highlights the need for Aboriginal knowledge and perspectives in early childhood that are both culturally relevant, local, and acknowledge that every child has culture, not just children from Aboriginal backgrounds or with different nationalities (Kitson and Bowes, 2010; Riggs and Due, 2010). For Aboriginal children to feel supported, early childhood professionals need to support children's sense of place and connection, families' sense of welcome and safety and demonstrate respect for Aboriginal knowledge and perspectives (Imtoual, et al., 2009; Harrison and Greenfield, 2011). The language and strategies that professionals use can either disadvantage or advantage Aboriginal children. Early childhood professionals must familiarise themselves with Aboriginal knowledge and perspectives in order to support children's learning and development (Warren and Devries, 2010; Freeman and Bochner; 2008).

There are many complex, interconnected factors that impact on Aboriginal children's engagement in early childhood settings. The history of discrimination, the impact of the stolen generations, and systemic devaluing of Aboriginal culture, language and traditions in Australia impact on the way that families view early childhood settings today (Kitson, and Bowes, 2010). With this in mind it is imperative that educators challenge the dominant discourses and are active in understanding and incorporating Aboriginal perspectives into early childhood settings. Professionals also need to understand that Aboriginal families, like all families, can be faced with a complex range of issues including poverty, mental illness, loss of family and isolation that will require additional support to thrive in an early childhood setting (Freeman and Bochner, 2008).

Promoting a sense of place and connection to the community and the environment is beneficial to all children's development.

Every child's experience of community is different and therefore complex to define. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model identifies multiple intersecting systems that influence a child's experience of community, both directly and indirectly. Community can be made up of the people, places, values, relationships and outside influences that affect a family including religion, socio-economic

status, crime, employment, safety and dominant culture (Woodhead, 2006). Sense of belonging to place and community is linked to wellbeing and identity (Fettes and Judson, 2010).

The term 'place based' education and care refers to place as a shared, living entity that involves interactions with the environment, people, time and experiences. The term relates to the meanings, feelings, memories and history associated with spaces; places have many voices, not just one (Eijck and Roth, 2010; Kernan, 2010; Fettes, and Judson, 2010). Aboriginal understandings of and connection to place provide a rich foundation for exploring place with young children (Harrison and Greenfield, 2011).

Atkinson (Atkinson, Nelson & Atkinson, 2009) recognises the value and empowerment that Aboriginal elders bring to early childhood education. Through traditions, stories, and Aboriginal ways of knowing, elders connect young children to their community, their personal history and their place, all of which empowers their sense of identity and belonging (Atkinson, et al., 2009; Guilfoyle, Saggers, Sims and Hutchins, 2010).

Children learn best when they can make meaningful connections with their surroundings and environment. As more and more children live in urban environments, early childhood settings can provide the connection points or 'bridges' between the home and the wider community (Kernan, 2010). There are also some professionals who believe that technology and sedentary lifestyles are isolating children from their local physical environments (Lewis, Mansfield and Baudains, 2010). Children's sense of place and belonging is linked to attitudes of sustainability and responsibility towards the environment. A case study of three early childhood sustainability projects in Western Australia revealed that hands-on, child-led projects empowered children to take action and responsibility in their local environment and strengthened their attachment to place (Lewis, et al., 2010). Given these concerns, it is increasingly the responsibility of early childhood professionals to provide spaces that are respectful, inclusive, inspiring, that offer a range of experiences, that encourage interactions with others and the environment and that allow children to experience the world as their own (Kernan, 2010).

How can we achieve best practice?

Early childhood professionals assess children's learning and development and provide individualised support to achieve best outcomes.

Assessment of children's strengths, abilities and interests is necessary to provide responsive care and education. Professionals assess children to learn about what

they know, their strengths and abilities, where they need support and to identify areas where focused intervention is needed. Professionals need both an understanding of child development norms as well as an understanding of equity and diversity to assess children. Families and carers have a wealth of knowledge about their child which should be utilised in the assessment process, as well as considerations of context and child outcomes (Bagnato, 2006). Partnerships between professionals assist early childhood professionals to support diverse learners by contributing to holistic understanding and assessment of each child's learning and development (Bagnato, et al., 2004). It is important to understand that families will respond to assessment in unique ways, and it is important to offer family support or referrals in certain cases (Talay-Ongan, 2004).

Individualised or differentiated support is required for each child to reach their full potential. Equity means recognising the complex nature of disadvantage and acting purposefully to address it. An example of differentiated instruction for Aboriginal students was the 'Bridging the Gap' project that aimed to support children's literacy in the home (Freeman and Bochner, 2008). This initiative was designed to improve children's early literacy which is a strong predictor of school success. The project was based on the need of this particular community to support children's literacy at home and it had positive effects on children's interactions with books, their self-esteem, their parent-child interactions and their early literacy skills. Another example of the importance of differentiated instruction is described in case studies of children studying English as a second or additional language (ESL). For example, Changying (2010) details how mainstream ESL practices in one school were disempowering children and limiting their ability to participate in additional language learning. The introduction of storytelling in the children's first language empowered children and built on their strengths, enabling them to feel confident about their language abilities.

Early childhood practices are inclusive and responsive to diversity and children with additional needs.

Inclusion means removing barriers to meaningful participation and engagement. Foreman (2008) offers some practical ways to support inclusion in early childhood settings through planning to support the child's individual needs. This may involve consideration of physical and mobility needs or the setting of individual goals with attention to learning styles and appropriate level. Adapting the program or approach can ensure that all children are participating at a level that is challenging and meaningful for them so that all learners can actively participate even if they are not able to participate fully. Finally, Foreman (2008) suggests that modifying the environment can remove hidden barriers to

inclusion. This requires knowledge about the individual child's abilities, both physical and cognitive.

Professionals create environments that promote respectful relationships between children, professionals, families and the community. Professionals act as role models by having high expectations for every child and showing respect for diversity. By modelling these attitudes early childhood professionals can have a positive effect on children's peer relationships which in turn leads to better outcomes for children (Montague and Rinaldi, 2001). Professionals recognise that equity and diversity require responsive, individualised care and education meaning that there is no one correct approach or theory to working with families who have diverse needs (Potter, 2007; Reifel, and Brown, 2004).

Early childhood professionals critically reflect on and take action to address issues of bias and inequality.

Ideas about identity, culture and belonging are complex and influenced by a myriad of experiences, relationships and attitudes (Cave, King, and Giugni, 2005). Critical reflection enables early childhood professionals to understand their own views on identity and diversity and to recognise that they also work within a specific context, with a set of values and rules (MacNaughton, 2003). Pre-service training needs to equip early childhood professionals with the skills to develop evidence-based knowledge to critique existing bias (Brownlee, Boulton-Lewis and Berthelsen, 2008), and to practise critical reflection on a daily basis.

Through the process of critical reflection early childhood professionals can better able to identify their own bias and identify hidden barriers to inclusion. It is also important to reflect on how practices, language and the curriculum may reinforce stereotypes or the dominant culture (Cave et al., 2005; Reifel and Brown, 2004). Critical reflection is an ongoing process that requires an understanding that there is no one right approach to working with young children. It is therefore important that professionals look critically at their philosophy, theory and practice to ensure they are providing the best possible support for each child (Raban, Nolan, Waniganayake, Ure, Brown and Deans, 2007).

Early childhood professionals advocate the importance of home languages with families and other professionals.

Research highlights the need for professionals to advocate the importance of maintaining the home language with families. Parents are often unsure whether

to support second language learning in the home or to continue using their first language with their children (Changying, 2010). Yet overwhelming evidence points to the cognitive benefits of multilingualism and maintaining home languages (Dopke, 2000; Clarke, 2009). Research also demonstrates that children who are fluent in their home language reap the benefits of closer relationships with their parents, the cultural resources of their families and communities, and stronger self-esteem and sense of identity (Wen-Jui and Chien-Chung, 2010).

As well as promoting first language use at home professionals need to value home languages in the early childhood setting (Clarke, 2009). Changying's (2010) study detailed the importance of first languages being valued for children's feelings of power and self-esteem. Professionals also have responsibility to provide second or additional language learners with additional or specialised support to encourage their second language skills. This may mean trying creative and individualised strategies based on each child's strengths, abilities, experiences and interests (Pennington, 2009; Suarez-Orozco et al., 2010).

Professionals engage families in partnerships that respect and seek understanding about cultural values and diversity.

Family-centred practice is widely considered to be best practice in the early childhood field (Dau, 2003; Rodger, Braithwaite, and Keen 2004; Espe-Sherwindt, 2008). Family-centred practice can be defined as a partnership approach that values family knowledge, works from a strengths-based perspective and promotes family choice and decision making with regard to resources, goals and planning (Espe-Sherwindt, 2008; Rodger, et al., 2004). Family-centred practice recognises the importance of supporting the family unit, especially in cases where a child may be diagnosed with a disability or developmental delay (Talay-Ongan, 2004). This support should include facilitating social networks (Turnbull and Turnbull, 2000), providing timely information (Bailey and Powell, 2005) and empowering families (Dunst, 2007; Dunst, Trivette and Hamby, 2007; Moore, 2006 and Larkin, 2006).

Partnerships with families require early childhood professionals to open lines of communication and encourage families to share knowledge and ideas (Dau, 2003). Equity and diversity are paramount in engagement with families as some families will require additional time, resources or support to ensure their equitable engagement with the service. Family relationships are complex and affected by a multitude of factors and early childhood professionals should be prepared to work with a diverse range of families who may have different

priorities and values from their own (Dau, 2003). Family-centred practice requires an active and systematic approach to ensure that families are involved at all levels of service provision and decision making (Espe-Sherwindt, 2008).

Aboriginal knowledge and perspectives are actively sought and explored and Aboriginal culture is valued and represented in the curriculum.

In a multi-method study of 'culturally strong' early childhood practice, a diverse population of Aboriginal Australians living in all states in both rural and urban areas expressed a similar desire for early childhood programs that, "reflect the cultural knowledge and practices of their respective communities" (Guilfoyle, et al., 2010, p. 68). The following ideas were common themes in creating a welcoming, culturally affirming space for Aboriginal families:

- viewing the child as strong and competent

- the importance of family and community in the forming of identity

- the role of Elders in developing social and cultural identity

- the learning of mainstream skills in preparation for school.

The study also found that local family and community needs must be met to support practical access and engagement with services. Local knowledge and cultural practices should inform early childhood practice (Guilfoyle, et al., 2010).

A study by Harrison and Greenfield (2011) into the use of Aboriginal knowledge and perspectives in primary school pedagogy found that schools' interaction with the local Aboriginal community was the most valuable way of incorporating Aboriginal perspectives into the curriculum. This local learning engaged children with the Aboriginal communities' connections to place and identity. The complexity of these findings is such that they are not easily replicated *between* schools, as the learning is local and community based, and there is such diversity in Aboriginal culture throughout Australia (Harrison and Greenfield, 2011). Kitson and Bowes (2010) also stress the importance of early childhood programs that are based on local knowledge and culture and that recognise the diversity in Aboriginal culture and beliefs.

There is no one correct way to incorporate and value Aboriginal culture in the curriculum but it must be an active process that values diversity, encourages differentiated practice and actively involves families and the community in the education and care of their children (Imtoual, et al., 2009; Freeman and Bochner, 2008).

Professionals must also reflect on and actively challenge the dominant discourses that may discriminate against or restrict the participation of Aboriginal families. Professionals have a responsibility to recognise the myriad of historical and present day barriers to equity and social justice in service provision (Sarra, 2008; Freeman and Kitson and Bowes, 2010). Creating safe

and welcoming space for Aboriginal families requires reflection on these issues and action to combat the complex nature of discrimination and disadvantage (Freeman and Bochner, 2008).

Early childhood professionals support children to develop a sense of place and connection to the environment.

Place-based education connects children to a location, time, community, and experience (Eijck and Roth, 2010). Professionals can assist children to develop a sense of place and belonging by encouraging them to make meaning through their interactions with people and the environment. MacNaughton (2003) suggests that children need time to construct their own meaning and should have the opportunity to be involved in real world learning, where they can experiment, explore and create their own connections with their environment. Research demonstrates that place has a strong role in identity formation and can give children a sense of connectedness to their community and environment (Fettes and Judson, 2010). Lewis et al. (2010) recommend using hands on, child-led projects to assist children in making connection with the environment and to explore principles of sustainability. Professionals can support children's connections to place through strong partnerships with families and the local community (Imtoual et al., 2009).

Early childhood settings and schools provide additional support, training and funding to provide responsive and inclusive programs.

Equity and diversity are complex, multifaceted principles that require planning, reflection, action and dedication to enact. Adequate staffing and training are necessary for inclusion to succeed. In her study Purdue (2009) cited appropriate resourcing as a key factor in meaningful inclusion. She found that early childhood settings were often under-resourced which resulted in a lack of confidence among both early childhood professionals and families that they could provide the best learning outcomes for children with additional needs (Purdue, 2009).

Studies into professionals' agency when working with children with a disability demonstrate that training, resources and experience are linked to confidence and feelings of control (Mohay and Reid, 2006). Stamopoulos (2006) found that pre-service educators who were part of a 'community links' program where they spent recreational time with people with disabilities reported better attitudes towards people with a disability and that they felt more empowered to support children with additional needs. Purdue (2009) supports this, stating that pre-service and in-service training is needed to strengthen early childhood professionals' skills in providing inclusive environments, foster a rights-based

attitude towards education and care for all children, and give professionals the confidence to support diverse learners. Llewellyn et al. (2002) and Grace et al. (2008) reported that inadequate staffing, difficulties accessing funding and places, and a lack of training for staff were all barriers to meaningful inclusion.

Governments, schools and early childhood settings all have a responsibility to ensure that funding is adequate and easy to access, that staff are well trained and have a commitment to equity, that where required additional staff members are available to support all children to participate fully, and that practical resources are provided, from physical equipment to onsite professional learning and supervision (Llewellyn et al., 2002). These factors all contribute to an early childhood setting that can meet the needs of all children and ensure that each child receives optimal education and care.

What are the implications for achieving best outcomes for children?

1. Early childhood professionals play an important role in supporting and enhancing equitable learning and development outcomes for all children.

Early childhood professionals celebrate diversity and identify and challenge barriers to inclusion. Professionals critically reflect on bias and inequality and act to address these in their practice. Professionals have high expectations for every child's development and provide differentiated or additional support to promote equity in early childhood education and care. Early childhood professionals assess children's learning and development to provide individualised education and care that builds on each child's unique strengths, abilities and interests.

2. Early childhood professionals need to form strong and respectful partnerships with families and communities in order to provide the best support for children's learning and development.

Children develop in the context of their families and communities. Professionals engage in family-centred practice that empowers families and involves them in planning and decision making. Early childhood professionals seek family experiences and ideas to ensure that their programs are culturally relevant and reflect the values of their local community.

3. The early years of life are crucial for young children in developing children's first language and cultural identity.

Professionals understand the importance of the early years for developing children's first language and cultural identity. Identity and belonging are linked to children's self-esteem and wellbeing. Children learn and develop through their relationships with family and community. A child's first language is a connection to their family and culture and provides many benefits in their learning and development.

4. Children's sense of belonging and identity is enhanced when they have a sense of place and connection to their environment.

A sense of place enables children to make meaningful connections with their environment and their community. When children experience a sense of belonging and identity their sense of safety and wellbeing is enhanced. Professionals can help children to make these connections through partnerships with families and the community.

5. Early childhood professionals' attitudes toward diversity affect children's wellbeing, self-esteem and academic outcomes. Professionals take responsibility for identifying and removing barriers to equity and inclusion.

Professionals have high expectations for themselves and are committed to achieving best practice with *all* children. Governments, schools, early childhood settings and professionals actively challenge the barriers to equity through training, adequate staffing, additional resources, critical reflection and collegial support.

Appendix A   Methodology

The following sampling procedures and research methods were used in this Paper. To begin with, an online database search was carried out for current literature using the following search terms;

- equity
- bilingualism
- place
- diversity
- inclusion
- Student outcomes and teacher expectations
- Individualised Learning
- Differentiated Learning
- Disability
- Aboriginal
- Family centred practice

The terms 'Children', 'Early Childhood ', 'Australia' and 'inclusion' were added to create the search parameters relevant to this paper.

Search results were refined by selecting articles that were particular to the Australian context and research that focused on the early years from birth to 8.

The University of Melbourne's online databases were viewed using "Supersearch". This provided a wide selection of electronic journals, scholarly databases, theses and government reports, locally, nationally and internationally, with a particular focus on those abstracts identifying a specific Australian context and a focus on the early years. Only on-line, peer reviewed journal articles and literature published in the last 20 years have been considered.

The databases searched were

ERIC (CSA)

A+ Education (Informit)

Web of Science (ISI)

Education Research Complete (EBSCO)

Expanded Academic ASAP (Gale)

Finally, a number of texts have also been included, because they are especially relevant to the Australian early years context. Specifically, Shaping Early Childhood; Learners, Curriculum and Contexts (MacNaughton, 2003), Inclusion in action (Forman, 2008) Literacies in early childhood: Challenging views challenging practice (Makin, L., Diaz, C.J., and McLachlan, C. (Eds) 2002), Building Capacity Strategic professional development for early childhood practitioners (Raban, Nolan, Waniganayake, Ure, Brown, and Deans, 2007) and Social contexts of early education and reconceptualising play (II) (Reifel, and Brown, (Eds) 2004).

Reference has also been made to early childhood policy papers and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). These were included for their direct influence on Australian early years policy and practice.

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Melbourne Graduate School of Education

Level 2, Alice Hoy Building
The University of Melbourne
Victoria 3010 Australia

Telephone: +61 3 8344 8285
Facsimile: +61 3 8344 8529
www.education.unimelb.edu.au

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MELBOURNE