

The contribution of learning trajectories to enacting the Early Years Learning Framework V2.0

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Caroline Cohrssen is Professor in Early Childhood Education at the University of New England, Armidale. Her research is underpinned by a systems perspective on early learning and development, and focuses on quality within multiple systems. Caroline's research interests include the home learning environment, and early childhood education and care settings. In addition, she has a strong interest in learning trajectories and their contribution to equipping early childhood educators to enact differentiated teaching based on the early years planning cycle.

Abstract

The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia V2.0 (EYLF) guides pedagogy and practice with children aged from birth to 5 years and states that over time, children engage with 'increasingly complex ideas' (p. 29). With 5 learning outcomes and 8 principles of practice, this requires educators to be highly skilled in facilitating children's engagement with increasingly complex knowledge and capabilities. It presupposes that all educators are equipped to recognise children's demonstrations of understanding, know what knowledge (or capabilities) likely preceded this understanding, and what comes next. As a framework, this specific information is not included in the EYLF. The Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO) learning trajectories may assist educators to recognise demonstrations of knowledge and capability and better equip them to plan opportunities for differentiated teaching and learning that are within a child's zone of proximal development. A focus on learning trajectories thus supports formative assessment and planning for learning, as well as reflective practice. This paper draws on the Language and Communication learning trajectory to discuss the contribution of learning trajectories to teaching practice and the continuity of learning from birth.

Background

Concerted efforts are underway in Australia to both increase access and achieve high-quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) provision (Cohrssen et al., 2023). This is important: maximising child learning and development outcomes depends upon sustainable resourcing for early learning that focuses on quality and equity – and not just access – coordinated at multiple levels of the ecological system (Yoshikawa et al., 2018). An important contributor to quality ECEC is the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) version 2.0 (Australian Government Department of Education [AGDE], 2022), which informs the practice of ECEC educators and describes 5 key learning outcomes for children. The learning outcomes described in the EYLF include guidelines with valuable suggestions of ways educators can promote learning that is aligned with these overarching outcomes. However, the framework guides learning for children aged from birth to 5 years and the learning of an infant differs from that of a 4-year-old child. Indeed, the learning of one 4-year-old child is likely to differ from that of another 4-year-old child.

Contribution of learning trajectories to the enactment of the EYLF V2.0

AERO has developed a suite of learning trajectories (LTs) that align with the EYLF and describe learning and development in 5 key domains: executive functions, social and emotional learning, mathematical thinking, language and communication, and physical development. These describe increasingly complex concepts and capabilities, thus supporting more nuanced application of the EYLF. The LTs align with many aspects of learning and development measured by the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) and other tools used to assess learning and development in early childhood (Jackson et al., 2023) and, importantly, address a gap in their inclusion of learning from infancy. Their free availability to all ECEC educators across all states and territories shows the need for distributed accountability for quality at the service provision level. The LTs assist educators to strengthen the learning lens brought to observations and planning for contingent and differentiated teaching and learning (Cohrssen, 2021). Access to this support is of particular benefit to educators in regional and remote areas of Australia who may otherwise struggle to access professional learning opportunities.

While there are multiple models of early childhood LTs, many share common features (Jackson et al., 2023, p. 6):

- All describe distinct but interconnected domains.
- All describe progressions of learning and development within each domain.
- Most are linked to curriculum documents.
- Some identify specific ages and milestones.
- Some identify specific behaviours for each domain.
- Some include suggestions for practice to support each domain.
- Some are used as documentation.

The AERO LTs notably do not identify specific ages and milestones and do not identify specific behaviours for each domain, since children's learning and development trajectories are 'multiple, fluid and complex' (Hedges, 2021, p. 1056) and manifest in individualised ways. In this way, the LTs simultaneously describe learning progressions that add specificity to the EYLF while acknowledging that children's learning is not linear but iterative, as capabilities and knowledge are revisited, rehearsed and consolidated to form the platform on which new capabilities are built.

Learning trajectories and child outcomes

Australian ECEC educators have been looking for or developing their own tools to assess children's learning and progress over time (Harrison et al., 2019; Keary et al., 2022). This lends itself to potential misconceptions of progressions of learning as well as inequities within the sector that may impact on child outcomes, particularly where measures are being taken to address workforce needs that result in educators teaching beyond their level of qualification (Cohrssen et al., 2023).

National data indicate that Element 1.3.1 (Assessment and Planning Cycle) of the National Quality Standard (NQS) is the element most likely to achieve a 'not met' rating (Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority [ACECQA], 2022). It is this element of quality that LTs are positioned to support as they are designed to assist educators to recognise demonstrations of knowledge and capability and to plan opportunities for differentiated teaching and learning that are within children's zones of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978). In so doing, LTs provide momentum that powers the turning of the early years planning cycle (Figure 1). The very notion of a 'trajectory' indicates a path or a progression and the extent to which educational programs 'support all children to progress towards the learning outcomes' is provided in the Guide to the National Quality Standard to guide reflection on practice for Standard 1.1 (ACECQA, 2023, p. 103).

Figure 1 Early Years Learning Framework planning cycle, AGDE, 2022, p. 27



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Children learn from birth, and learning is cumulative: building on the foundations of existing capabilities, children enhance existing capabilities and acquire new skills (Duncan et al., 2007). Attuned educators who draw on LTs to notice and document evidence of individual children's learning – whatever form that evidence may take – are supporting children's LTs. This busts the myth that LTs are prescriptive and narrow: when applied by educators attuned to the interests of children and their communities, curriculum planning remains grounded in community goals and values.

Evidence of evolving understanding and capability is also relevant to supporting child transitions from ECEC into primary school. Sometimes referred to as 'vertical transitions', focus is often paid to structural features of this process (such as enrolment forms, transition statements, etc) while less attention may be paid to the pedagogical alignment of ECEC and school (Kagan et al., 2006). Play is a critical vehicle for children's brain development (Hassinger-Das et al., 2017) and occurs along a continuum with free play (entirely child-led) at one end and direct instruction (play that is adult designed/controlled) (Zosh et al., 2017) at the other. LTs, through their focus on progressions within the context of play-based learning, may facilitate the pedagogical alignment of learning in the contexts of ECEC and primary school and thus support the transition into formal school education.

Using learning trajectories within an informal curriculum

Assessment *of* learning (also known as summative assessment) determines the achievement of specific objectives or standards at a particular point in time. Assessment *as* learning actively involves the learner in the assessment as children monitor their progress towards goals that they may have set themselves. Assessment *for* learning draws on assessment to inform planning for learning and is also known as formative assessment. Formative assessment is a key component of the planning cycle described in the EYLF (AGDE, 2022).

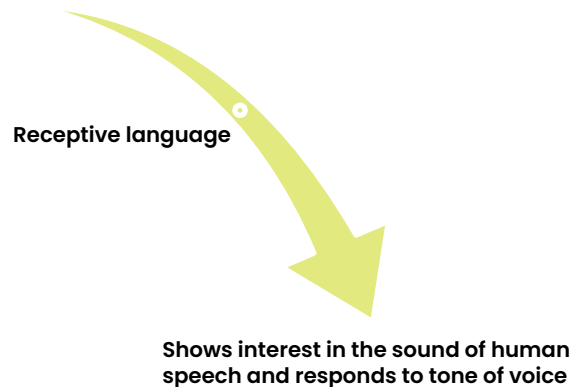
Application of the LTs to focus on children's evolving language and communication skills equips the educator to narrow this focus to one of 4 domains: *receptive language*, *expressive language*, *emergent reading* or *emergent writing*, noting the explicit reminder that many Australian children develop language and communication skills in a language other than English and the importance of partnerships with families in this regard.

The educator may decide to focus on the domain, *receptive language*. Here, one subdomain of receptive language is, *Understands the words and phrases of their language/s* and thus the educator is equipped to look specifically for evidence of understanding of words and phrases.

The first indicator of this subdomain is, *Shows interest in the sound of human speech and responds to tone of voice*. An educator who sets out to observe an infant's communication skills is thus equipped to recognise evidence of the child showing interest in the sound of human speech and responding to the tone of voice.

Figure 2 Arrow indicates how learning trajectories support improved specificity of observations

Language and communication



During play, a child may be observed to respond to a particular word (for example, 'dog') spoken by an educator by pointing to a picture of a dog, pretending to bark, or looking for a toy dog. From these behaviours, it may be inferred that the child discerns specific meaning from this particular word. This may prompt the educator to pay close attention to whether the child discerns specific meaning from other words too. The provision of indicators within subdomains assists educators to recognise – and plan for – progression along LTs. Here, an educator may plan to consolidate the child's knowledge of 'dog' and extend this capability, implementing this by intentionally drawing the child's attention to additional object names during play, shared book reading and routines. Evaluating whether the child discerns the specific meaning from additional words, phrases and gestures over time, is indicative of the efficacy of the implementation of this strategy and sets up opportunities for the educator to reflect on their teaching practice. As the child's learning progresses within this particular subdomain, the child is likely to be observed to *understand speech of increasing length and different grammatical patterns*. How soon this capability is observed will vary from child to child.

No age has been mentioned in this example: LTs take into account that the educator and the primary caregiver have expert knowledge of the child that provides context to the observed behaviours. For example, the child may be learning to communicate, or the child may possess a broader linguistic repertoire and be learning to use English as an additional language or dialect.

Conclusion

Rather than placing responsibility for high quality solely on the shoulders of educators, the development of the LTs acknowledges the need for distributed responsibility for the quality of ECEC across multiple systems within the ECEC ecology (Cohrssen et al., 2023). By supporting the alignment of structural elements of quality in the form of the EYLF and the National Quality Standard (ACECQA, n.d.) and providing an optional research-informed tool to support focused observations and evidence-based planning for learning, LTs may enhance educators' professional learning and encourage professional conversations within and across education sectors. The provision of research-informed tools to support the achievement of Element 1.3.1 of the NQS is also likely to enhance child outcomes as educators are provided with support to facilitate children's engagement with increasingly complex ideas. Systematic research is needed to evaluate the contribution of the LTs to early childhood educators' self-efficacy, the quality of pedagogical practice enacted with children aged from birth to 5 years, and their impact on child outcomes.

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