A young boy with dark hair, wearing a green hoodie, is focused on playing with colorful building blocks. He is holding a green block in his hands. The hoodie has the text "MSK BIKER CREW" and "M★S" on it. In the background, there is a white cabinet with a brown knob and a green watering can. To the right, another child's hands are visible, holding a red block. The scene is set in a classroom or play area.

A new era in early years learning



Professor Bridie Raban is a Senior Research Fellow in ACER's Teaching, Learning and Transitions research program.

Bridie Raban explains the impact of changes to Australian early childhood education legislation that come into effect in 2012, for which ACER has conducted an evaluation.

Learning begins long before children go to school. From birth, the adults in a child's life play an important role in enriching the child's environment and encouraging development. Adults working in early childhood education and care are usually second only to family members in the amount of one-on-one time spent with children under the age of five. As a result of a number of national and international policy developments, for the first time in Australia we are about to see a nationally coordinated early childhood sector.

In 1990 the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child stimulated discussion and focus around the world on young children, their health, education and welfare generally. This discussion was taken further in Australia by the then Ministerial Council for Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs and embedded in the 2008 Melbourne Declaration on

Educational Goals for Young Australians, in which the Australian governments committed to developing and improving early childhood education. Further to this Declaration, in 2009 the Council of Australian Governments signed the National Partnership Agreement on the National Quality Agenda for Early Childhood Education and Care, and since this time early childhood education and care has gained considerable attention after unanimous acceptance of the significance of the early years of life.

The early years before children begin formal schooling are now recognised as important in encouraging and promoting children's learning across all the domains of development; social, emotional, physical as well as cognitive. Research has provided irrefutable evidence to support this re-evaluation of the purpose and direction of all services for young children and their families. For instance,

to characterise the work of early childhood staff as 'looking after' babies, toddlers and young children while their parents go to work, is no longer an acceptable description of 21st century professionalism around education and care during these significant early years of life.

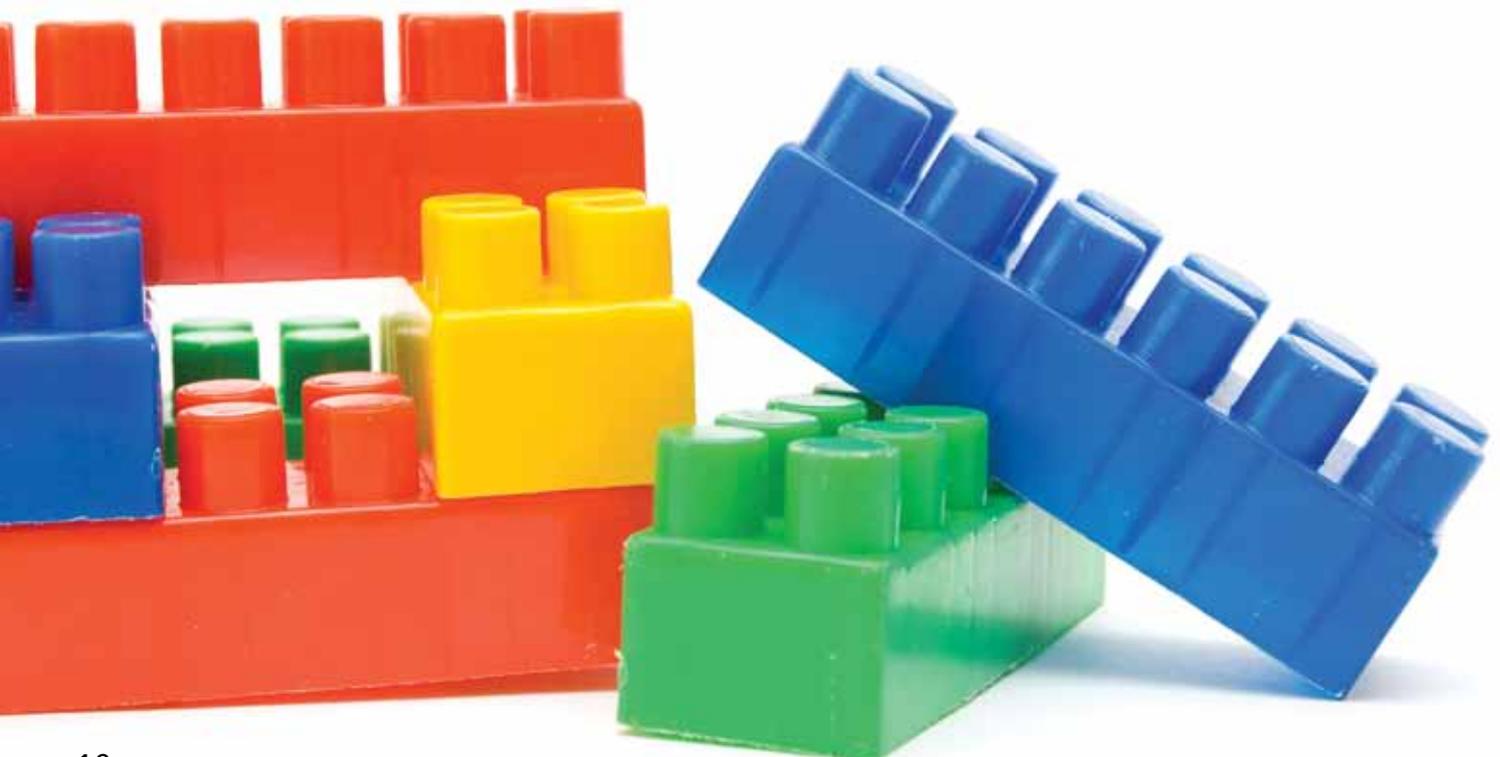
This bringing together of both education and care in the early years of children's lives, rather than leaving education in the domain of schooling, is being supported by a range of legislative innovations. On 1 January 2012 a new National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and School Aged Care will come into effect. The National Quality Framework will cover long day care, family day care, outside school hours care and preschools and is being implemented through two major reforms: The Early Years Learning Framework and The National Quality Standard.

The Early Years Learning Framework describes the principles, practice and outcomes to support and enhance young children's learning. It describes the five principles and eight aspects of practice for effective early childhood education and care, and identifies five learning outcomes for young children; Identity, Community, Wellbeing, Learning and Communication. This

has been discussed further in a book I co-authored, *The Early Years Learning Framework in Practice: A handbook for educators and parents* (Teaching Solutions, 2011).

In order to know that learning outcomes are being achieved, it is necessary for educators to make judgements about each child's learning through different forms of documentation and assessments, and by monitoring their progress and skill development. This is a process known as assessment for learning. I recently wrote another book, *Assessment for Learning: Documentation and Planning for the EYLF* (Teaching Solutions, 2011), aimed at introducing early childhood educators to this new requirement of the profession. Further professional development on the Early Years Learning Framework is offered by Early Childhood Australia. ACER Press nationally distributes Early Childhood Australia's *Everyday Learning and Research in Practice* resources.

The second major reform, the National Quality Standard, outlines seven areas that research has shown indicate a quality environment for young children's learning and development. Early childhood services will be measured against the National Quality Standard and the information shared on the



government's *mychild* website. The seven quality areas are:

1. Educational program and practice
2. Children's wellbeing, health and safety
3. Physical environments
4. Staffing arrangements
5. Relationships – interactions within the service
6. Collaborative partnerships with families and communities
7. Leadership and service management

The Commonwealth Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) commissioned ACER to conduct an evaluation of the assessment and rating instrument and process that has been designed to support the National Quality Standard. ACER's evaluation focused on the application of the assessment and ratings process during trials by assessors in over 200 children's services across Australia. The findings of ACER's evaluation are being used to improve the instrument, resources and the process before it is formally introduced in 2012.

The National Quality Framework has brought about many changes impacting on the profession of early childhood education and care. People working with young children will be called early childhood 'educators' to better reflect the significance of their role in children's learning and development. Staff:child ratios will be improved to enable early childhood educators to interact with each child more frequently and for increased lengths of time. All staff working in early childhood settings will be required to have an early childhood qualification. The exact implementation date of this last requirement is not yet determined but may be as early as 2014. Initially, however, the requirement will be that all staff must be enrolled in at least a Certificate III course.

Furthermore, all four-year-old children will have access to a preschool program staffed by a four-year degree trained

staff member. ACER recently worked in partnership with Monash University to map and analyse currently available early childhood education and care tertiary courses across Australia. The study was conducted for DEEWR and focused on the avenues to becoming a four-year degree qualified early childhood educator. It will be important to ensure that there are enough tertiary places available to satisfy the demand created to meet this new legislation.

A new national body, the Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority, has been established to facilitate the new national approach to early childhood education and care, and to ensure that services meet the quality standards. The success of the National Quality Framework's implementation will be further monitored by studies of children's achieved development and learning outcomes, such as the Australian Early Development Index and the Longitudinal Literacy and Numeracy Study.

The Australian Early Development Index (AEDI) measures how children have developed by the time they start school, within the five main areas of early childhood development: physical health and wellbeing, social competence, emotional maturity, language and cognitive skills, and communication skills and general knowledge. ACER conducted the first national implementation of the AEDI in 2009. Subsequent implementations will enable results to be compared for the purposes of determining if progress is being made and to suggest future improvements to early childhood education and care.

ACER is currently establishing a *Longitudinal Literacy and Numeracy Study: Transitions from Preschool to School* (LLANS:TPS). This three-year longitudinal study, to be undertaken from 2012-2014, is designed to investigate growth in literacy and numeracy achievement in a sample of Australian children in preschools in the year prior to school entry, and in their first two years at school. This study

follows the ACER *Longitudinal Literacy and Numeracy Study*, which, from 1999-2005, surveyed a national cohort of students from the first year at school to Year 6. The *Longitudinal Literacy and Numeracy Study for Indigenous Students* (ILLANS), discussed earlier in this publication, was a parallel study to the LLANS.

The LLANS:TPS will investigate the nature of growth in literacy and numeracy achievement in young children, and some of the factors that influence individual growth trajectories in these two key areas of learning. In the context of the Australian government setting aside funding to ensure that by 2013 every child has access to a quality early childhood education program in the year before formal school, the LLANS:TPS project will be a timely investigation of the developmental trajectories of a cohort of children as they make their transitions from preschool to school.

The new national regulations have led to early childhood settings beginning to review their programs and practice. An enormous amount of professional learning, reflection and development has been taking place, both formally and informally. Staff in early childhood centres no longer see a single focus on 'child care' or 'meeting children's needs' as an accurate reflection of the service they are now required to offer. It is changing from an industry to a profession.

This is a challenging time for everyone working in the field of early childhood and for the families of young children. However, this is a moment for excitement and pride as the profession moves towards more appropriate recognition of the important work they do.

ACER works in partnership with Early Childhood Australia to nationally distribute their *Everyday Learning and Research in Practice* resource series. For further information visit <www.acer.edu.au/eca>. ■