



The Early Years Learning Framework Professional Learning Program



Thinking about intentions

Setting the scene

Intentional teaching is one of the eight key pedagogical practices in the *Early Years Learning Framework* (EYLF) which underpin young children's learning success.

The EYLF (p. 5) explains that intentional teachers:

- actively promote children's learning through worthwhile and challenging experiences and interactions that foster high-level thinking skills
- use strategies such as modelling and demonstrating, open questioning, speculating and explaining
- engage in shared thinking and problem solving to extend children's understanding of ideas and events
- move flexibly in and out of different roles and draw on different strategies as the context changes
- plan opportunities for intentional teaching and knowledge building
- document and monitor children's learning.

But what does this look like in practice and how can 'intentionality' and 'following children's interests' work together?

These questions are being explored in the online Forum currently underway as part of the ECA-led professional learning program: www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/eylfpplp

'how can 'intentionality' and 'following children's interests' work together?'

What's the difference between intentional teaching and taking over?

In the Forum, Sandra puzzled over 'how the Learning Outcomes in the EYLF would fit with a sociocultural approach to curriculum'.

The EYLF (p. 11) includes 'sociocultural theories' in 'the range of perspectives' that early childhood educators draw on to inform their work. Such theories recognise that learning occurs in the social and cultural contexts of a child's family, community and early learning settings. Sociocultural approaches acknowledge the child as an active agent capable of directing their own learning and value the role of the educator in building on, enriching and extending what children are coming to know and do.

However, some Forum contributors have felt a tension between educators 'having clear intentions for a child's learning' and children 'having their own interests and learning agenda'.

Luke, in the Forum helped to clarify the possible dilemma by suggesting that:

That is not to say that we always need to 'take over'—I don't think this is an either/or thing—but rather, that there are times when we may need to make the professional decision that guiding and shaping learning is justified.

Luke drew a comparison with the idea of 'provocation' in Reggio Emilia approaches, where adults may introduce a topic or questions to start a project which children then pursue.

The starting point for an ongoing piece of rich learning therefore, may come from one child's interest being picked up by a group of children and/or from an adult sensitively responding to an emerging interest by making suggestions, providing new materials and engaging in thoughtful conversation.

Sandra explained that perhaps educators are worried about 'intentionality' turning into 'providing stencils and directed work', which is not what the EYLF is suggesting. She quoted from Ann Epstein's book (2007):

Children need opportunities to initiate activities and follow their interests, but teachers are not passive during these child-initiated and directed activities. Similarly, children should be actively engaged and responsive during teacher-initiated and directed activities.

As Luke says:

Obviously all of this is about questions of degree—how much adult direction versus how much child direction.



Intentional teaching in practice

'Being intentional' may mean different things in different early learning contexts. In family day care, for example, it may focus on carefully selecting equipment to put out for the day and creating an environment that provokes thinking, inquiry and learning.

On a recent visit to long day care centres in Brisbane, educators described for me their current understandings about 'intentionality'.



Scenario 1:

Meg, who works with three- and four-year olds, talked about intentionally catering for the needs and interests of particular children when they attend the centre.

For example:

- She puts out an interesting object—such as Jacaranda blossom on a branch—and plenty of visual art materials for those children currently absorbed in exploring different ways to represent experience. She goes to the area, listens and talks with them about their joy in what they're doing; she assists as children indicate a need for new media or techniques and co-constructs a story if they want a written piece to accompany their painting.
- She deliberately interacts with a boisterous group to ensure that all children get a go and extends children's engagement and persistence with their self-chosen tasks through conversation, feedback, modelling problem solving and encouraging collaboration between children.

This example shows how educators are intentional about fostering social and emotional learning and about 'building confident and engaged learners' (Outcome 3).

Scenario 2:

In the kinder rooms children developed an interest in dinosaurs, so their teachers, Megan and Melissa, used a framework to record:

Know—what do we already know about dinosaurs?

Want—what do we want to find out?

Learn—what have we learned about dinosaurs?

They recorded children's ideas about why dinosaurs became extinct:

- A fireball came to earth.
- The food died.
- A dinosaur bee stung them.
- The water dried up.
- They ate each other.
- They froze.
- The earth got too hot.

Then the educators borrowed 'dinosaur bones' from a museum and, with the children, researched through books, films and online. They invited families to contribute ideas and information, had reflective conversations with children—*Which answers fit what we know now? What else do we want to find out? How could we investigate further?*

This example shows how educators respond to children's interests and intentionally build on children's current beliefs and knowledge to create new and deeper understandings.

Fleur, on my Brisbane visits, made an important point when she said: 'The EYLF made me re-think my approach from being intentional at group time, to being intentional across the whole day.'

'Which answers fit what we know now? What else do we want to find out? How could we investigate further?'



'Explicit teaching' or 'making learning explicit'?

In the Forum Tamara raised the question of whether 'explicit teaching' is 'under the umbrella of intentional teaching'.

She wondered:

... intentional teaching seems to take in the whole environment and engagement with children, whereas explicit teaching seems to be about teaching an isolated skill.

Anne gave her thoughts on the matter:

I think that explicit teachings, such as showing children how to wash their hands or how to cross the road safely, are intentional practices as they are deliberate—that is, you have a purpose for them based on what you think children need to know or learn.

Anne goes on to explain that teaching about more complex things, such as being respectful to others, is something that educators consciously plan for, but they know that they cannot be learnt through one-off experiences and that they will need to develop these attitudes and understandings over time through:

- modelling respect for others in their own relationships
- challenging children when they play unfairly
- discussing respect for others in conversations in different contexts.

'To me, the words 'explicit' and 'intentional' complement and support each other.'



Tamara added:

To me, the words 'explicit' and 'intentional' complement and support each other. In literacy and numeracy (for example) you need to be quite explicit about what you are trying to teach and talk with children about what they are doing and learning.

This is explicit 'teaching and learning'. At other times, as Judy has suggested, intentionality is about 'using general strategies, while acting with specific outcomes or long-term goals in mind'.

Conclusion

A number of practitioners in Australia are working with 'emergent curriculum' approaches in which the planned learning program is flexible to pick up topics that children find stimulating and worth investigating. Such approaches seize the 'teachable moment', recognise children's prior learning and experience and respond to their immediate interests.

In conversations with practitioners in North Queensland, we agreed that emergent curriculum models require rich resourcing in a number of ways—deep teacher knowledge, stimulating materials for inquiry, time for collegial planning and reflection, quality leadership and a high level of professionalism.

However, there is no necessary conflict between 'emergent curriculum' and 'intentional teaching'.

In the Forum, Lennie describes the two sides of intentionality:

Part of being intentional is being thoughtful and responding to children in the teachable moment, but part of it is also thinking about and planning for what other information or skills or values or dispositions children would benefit from to expand their conversations and learning.

The conclusion seems to be that '... it's all about balance'—balance between child-led and teacher-led learning and balance between enjoying the experience and using the teachable moment.

Claire Warden, one of the stimulating keynote speakers at the ECA 2010 National Conference, gave a beautiful example of an adult standing side by side with a young child silently gazing at a breathtaking, snow-covered landscape; deciding to stand together in awe and reverence is a deliberate, sensitive, intentional act.

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Reference

Epstein, A. S. (2007). *The intentional teacher: Choosing the best strategies for young children's learning*. Washington, DC: NAEYC.



Australian Government
Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations



Early Childhood Australia
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The EYLF Professional Learning Project is funded by the Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations.