

Pedagogy & Practice Resource

Supporting Multilingual Children in their Development of Identity & Agency

Your pedagogy and practice affords children many opportunities to learn about themselves and others, to engage in experiences that support making meaning of the world in which they live, and to learn to use communication as an effective tool within their daily lives.

To reflect on how pedagogy and practice supports children's strength of identity, agency and development, we must first remind ourselves what identity and agency in the early years looks like for all children.

> "Young children come to know language, and different ways of using language, through their relationships with their family, kin, communities and environments. Children learn and speak the languages that are valued in the environments in which they learn and interact with others.."
>
> VCAA, 2020, *Supporting Bilingualism, Multilingualism and Language Learning in the Early Years*

Reflection checkpoint

Within your programs, how are children encouraged to make choices in matters that impact their lives, learn in a style that best suits them, and communicate in their most confident voices?

IDENTITY

Our identities are shaped firstly by our family and immediate community. Identity is something we all own that evolves throughout our lives. Every interaction, experience, emotion and relationship influences our identity to grow and change.

When children and families enter the early childhood education and care community, they come with a strong foundation of who they are and where they belong. Once immersed in this community, children and families will engage in experiences that inform their growing identity. An important contributor to the development and strengthening of identity is the ways in which we communicate.

It is important to actively recognise that children co-construct their identities with other people. First and foremost, children do this in their interactions with their families. Central to these relationships are the languages and/or modes of communication that families use at home. These languages form the basis of children's first interpersonal relationships and are the first languages of their identity. There may be more than one language involved for children and this may differ according to the family member and the individual relationship. In a paper exploring individual's identities, Fivush et al. (2011, p. 323) highlighted a critical connection between culture and identity, stating that cultures inform individual narrative identities and individual narrative identities inform cultures. They said that 'in a very real sense, this is the point at which the individual and culture intersect.'

'The development of a strong sense of identity is critical in the very earliest years of life ... culture is the fundamental building block of identity and the development of a strong cultural identity is essential to children's healthy sense of who they are and where they belong' (Educator's Guide to the EYLF, 2010, p. 21-22).

Individuals do not exist independently of their own culture or cultures, and cultures do not exist independently of the identities and life stories of individuals. The Identity Practice Guide (2020) can support early childhood professionals in understanding how a child experiences a sense of identity and how it can be supported.

From this Guide, the components of identity model (p. 4) provides early childhood professionals with identifiers that supports critical reflection. Using the phrases 'I know who I am, I value who I am'; 'You know who I am, You value who I am'; and 'I know who you are, I value who you are' early childhood professionals can reflect deeply on their practices and program inclusions. The

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outcomes of your reflections and the changes to practice you implement supports the evolving sense of identity experienced by children and families.

The next questions early childhood professionals must ask themselves and their colleagues are:

- Do children feel supported in, and valued for using their home languages within our context?
- How is our pedagogy and practice affording children to participate actively within their developing identity and agency?

Reflection checkpoint

How do you as an early childhood professional encourage children to express themselves in the language(s) attached to their sense of identity?



The EYLF (2022, p. 57) acknowledges that 'children's use of their home languages underpins their sense of identity and their conceptual development. Children feel a sense of belonging when their language, interaction styles and ways of communicating are valued'. How does this translate within your work with children? Is it visible? Is it valued?

Throughout our daily lives we support the identity of others by listening to their points of view, finding out about their experiences, their likes and dislikes. Early childhood professionals rely on shared verbal language to learn about children's identities. Where children and early childhood professionals do not share a common language, what strategies are relied upon to engage with children and families on the same level as those you share a common language with? What areas of your pedagogy are used to support the active participation, sense of belonging and value of identity of children and families, particularly those you do not share a common language with?

Your most powerful tools in your practice are your skills in observing children's development, and your understanding of how to support their learning and development through your knowledge of their identity, wellbeing and connections with others. It is important to remember that children verbalising their understanding and learning is not your only assessment tool. There is a far more effective tool in your toolbox that demonstrates children's understanding; that is their actions within play. When documented successfully, early childhood professionals can observe the starting points of the learning, the actions taken within the journey to extend and solidify understanding, and how those learnings are transformed and adapted to other areas of learning and development (VEYLDF, 2016).

Reflection checkpoint

- What intentional teaching moments are you embedding into dramatic play experiences?
- How are these experiences supporting children's understanding of identity and belonging?
- How do our cultural identities influence our ideas, actions and ways of being?
- What are you noticing about the identities of the children engaging in the play?

PRACTICE TIPS

- Songs, rhymes and action games in languages other than English support children to feel that their identity and the identities of others are valued and celebrated. These activities promote children's communication, connectedness and sense of belonging.
- Reflect on your own development as a pedagogue.
  - What strategies have you learnt that support your developing relationships with children and families that are not based on shared verbal language?
  - Consider how you learn and connect with children who are pre-verbal. What practice strategies could be used from this stage of learning and development that would positively support your connection to children and families whom you do not share a common language with?

AGENCY

Agency is 'being able to make choices and decisions, to influence events and to have an impact on one's world. The concept of agency applies from birth: children are active contributors to their own experiences, interactions, learning and development' (VEYLDF, 2016, p. 35).

The Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework (VEYLDF, 2016, p. 18) informs us that from 'birth, the concept of agency is closely related to the

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development of a sense of identity' and the National Quality Standard (1.2.3) expects that 'each child's agency is promoted, enabling them to make choices and decisions and influence events in their world'. In order to meet these standards, early childhood professionals must begin by critically reflecting on how they promote children's concept of agency when they don't share a common language with each other.

Early childhood professionals can implement simple strategies to support a child's sense of agency, one of which is to recognise that although English is the dominant educational language in Australia, our services, in many cases, are multilingual. Children, families and colleagues may speak languages other than English within their homes and communities. Within our learning community and care environments, embedding languages other than English has a much wider reach in the learning and development of children than simple translation purposes. The VEYLDF (2016, p. 12) calls upon early childhood professionals to 'recognise multilingualism as an asset and support children to maintain their first language, learn English as an additional language, and learn languages other than English'.

While embedding home languages within early childhood programs can enhance communication between early childhood professionals, emerging English language learners and their peers, it often contributes significantly to multiple and continuing positive outcomes for all children.

Reflection checkpoint

- Reflect on your environment. Are there spaces for children to engage in language, and with the language they are most confident?
- Reflect on how you support children to communicate to each other. Do they rely solely on language? What other modes of communication are children using within your program?

There are many opportunities to support and promote children's concept of agency whether or not they speak the dominant language of the group. It is the lens of the early childhood professional that shapes the opportunity for all children to learn about the vast benefits of multilingualism and learn from the children who have the capacity and encouragement to share their languages. Emerging multilingual learners must have equitable opportunity to "exercise their agency, intentionality, capacity to initiate and lead learning, and their right to participate in decisions that affect them, including about their learning." (EYLF, 2022, p. 8)

DISCUSSION POINTS

When critically reflecting on the impact of agency in this space, we can see that in many cases children are not provided the opportunity to share and communicate within their own cultural identity and language.

- In what ways do children enact on their sense of agency when language isn't shared?
- How would you expect a child of 1-2 years to enact on their agency?
- Are all children in your program able to communicate in the mode of communication they are most confident in and is this mode of communication valued and acted upon by early childhood professionals?
- Are children given the opportunity to share and communicate within their own cultural identity and language?
- What is the impact to the learning and development of children when this is not championed by early childhood professionals?



PRACTICE TIPS

Consider implementing and embedding the following practice tips to support the strength and development of identity and agency experienced by all children and their families:

- Encourage and support multilingual early childhood professionals to use their languages within the program. This can include communicating with families and children, supporting interactions between children, writing simple translations where possible. Use accredited interpreters for larger content, official documentation or discussions.
- Demonstrate value in multilingualism through teaching children songs / counting / words / phrases in different languages. You could invite families to read to small groups of children in their home languages, engage in song, or cooking experiences.

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- Support families to maintain and develop home languages by providing continual encouragement and accurate information about language development and additional language development.
- Ensure important information is translated, available and visible to all families and children accessing the service.
- Ensure multiple languages are visible to all children and families within the education and care environment, including text in multiple languages in the children's program.
- Use the child's strengths and interests to develop simple bilingual games (counting, colour matching etc.). This experience also invites children to communicate across languages, supporting the notions of understanding and respecting the different ways people communicate.
- Support children to engage with others who share their language.
- Provide a listening post with multilingual stories and music that is available to children at all times. This provides an opportunity for children to listen to their home languages, supporting the continuous development of home languages, for children to share language with peers and for all children to develop a respect for diversity in language and communication.
- Send home songs and story books that are often read at your service. This gives the child and family the opportunity to discuss the story in the child's home language so that they are familiar with the story when reading it in the early childhood environment.
- Ask families for help in creating resources. Record family members reading stories or singing simple songs in children's home languages. Share it with all the children in the group as well as those who share that language.
- Access multilingual resources through your relationships with families, *fka*CS membership, local libraries, local councils, community groups and translating services such as Language Loop (previously the Victorian Interpreting and Translating Service (VITS)).

HOW WE CAN HELP

fka Children's Services (*fka*CS) advocates for children's cultural and linguistic rights and provides support to education and care services in the provision of culturally rich environments that support a civil society.

We offer early childhood education and care services access to skilled and experienced pedagogy and practice consultants. We also offer a range of multilingual resources and professional learning opportunities for services, which are customised according to individual needs.

Contact us to discuss support

03 9428 4471 · culturalinclusion@fka.org.au

More resources available at www.fka.org.au

REFERENCES / FURTHER READING

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