The Victorian Advancing Early Learning (VAEL) Study

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The Victorian Advancing Early Learning Study is a three-year research project funded by the Victorian Department of Education and Training. The study is conducted by researchers from the Melbourne Graduate School of Education (MGSE) at the University of Melbourne in partnership with Moonee Valley City Council, Hume City Council and Mission Australia. The research team – Professor Collette Tayler, Dr Jane Page, Nicole Pilsworth, Catherine MacBean and Isabel Brookes – is developing and testing a professional learning model specifically focused on improving the quality of educator–child interactions, and advancing young children’s learning outcomes in the first four years of life.

The study addresses three key questions:

1. How does the quality of educator–child interactions change in settings where educators are coached in the use of specific one-to-one interaction techniques?

2. What strategies and techniques do educational leaders apply to improve the quality of pedagogy in their early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings?

3. What is the impact of consistent implementation of 3a (Abecedarian Approach Australia) by trained educators and parents on vulnerable children’s learning?

What are the aims of the VAEL study?

The professional learning program introduces educators to 3a, and supports them to implement these focused interactive teaching strategies into their educational program and daily practice with babies and children up to five years of age. The strategies – Conversational Reading, LearningGames™ and Enriched Caregiving – place a high priority on language and cognition within play-based settings, and have been demonstrated to raise the social and academic achievement outcomes of young children experiencing a range of risk factors. These strategies collectively help educators to interact intentionally and frequently with individual children during play and caregiving routines to support children’s learning and development.

Researching the impact of evidence-based strategies in ECEC settings is important. It is already known that the quality and scope of adult–child
interactions impact on young children’s learning, health and development. Findings from the Australian E4Kids study also highlight that by school entry, children from less-advantaged backgrounds are already losing ground to their more advantaged peers. The Abecedarian and CARE studies, and the work of High/Scope, link young children’s participation in high-quality ECEC programs with higher education outcomes and better life prospects. This is particularly the case for those children who are identified as possessing multiple educational risk factors.

High-quality ECEC programs, at the core, pay attention to the interactions and strategies used by educators with children. Inquiry processes exist in play, and are blended into informal, everyday talk. These processes have a central place in shaping the verbal, behavioural and cognitive development of infants, toddlers and young children. High-quality interactions that are respectful, supportive and intellectually challenging have the capacity to ameliorate disadvantage early, and to offset growing disparities between children over time.

The VAEL study design involves three key elements:

1. a treatment year involving educational leaders and educators in a program of professional learning and fortnightly on-site interactive coaching sessions that support the implementation of 3a strategies into educational programs
2. a maintenance year that involves the educational leader supporting educators to continue to implement the strategies into their educational program and daily practice
3. a voluntary parent program led by centre educators to support parents to use 3a strategies at home.

A child learning support partnership between educators and families is fostered by the centre, including encouraging parents to visit their child’s room when they can, and the provision of selected books for conversational reading and loose-leaf copies of learning games that their children are experiencing in the ECEC centre.

What does the VAEL study mean for early childhood education and care?

The VAEL study process provides clear strategies for educators to ensure that they enhance the learning and development of individual children, and that intentional, intensive attention is given to vulnerable children everyday within programs.

VAEL is about educator learning and coaching on the most effective ways to work one-to-one each day with the children so that each child’s learning is enhanced. The project works through the culture of continuous improvement in ECEC settings, and tracks the effects on children’s development. There is very little Australian research on the impact of sustained high-quality strategies on children’s learning and development, especially in regard to children who are considered at risk of poor educational outcomes.

We have a particular responsibility to enhance the learning and development of every infant, toddler and young child, especially while they are attending ECEC services. Learning is a relational process that is, all at once, individual, connected closely with family, and paying attention to building every child’s knowledge and understanding. Recent evidence indicates that simply setting up play spaces is insufficient to ensure that all children are well-served as they grow and learn from birth through to age four or five. In particular, young children who are experiencing various risk factors during this phase of life should be assured of consistent, one-to-one engagements with a sensitive educator who works to advance each child’s wellbeing, confidence, learning and overall development.

The role of the educator is vital. Everyday interactions that are individualised, warm and encouraging, support verbal communication, facilitate attention to learning, and scaffold children’s understandings are at the core of effective educational programs and best practice. The evidence from the E4Kids study indicates that there is a low presence of play-based instructional support offered to young children in ECEC settings. This VAEL study is collecting evidence of how children’s development changes when particular strategies are present within play settings.

Even when adult-focused, this professional learning should have significant positive effects on children’s development. The VAEL professional learning process pays attention to educational leaders and educators raising the quality of their interactions with young children, and ensuring sustained improved practice over time. By drawing on the experiences of the educational leaders, educators, families and young children, new knowledge on the impact of evidence-based strategies on Australian children’s learning and development is being generated. This is used to support ongoing reflection about how best to make a positive difference in children’s lives each day, and to ensure their ongoing wellbeing and development.