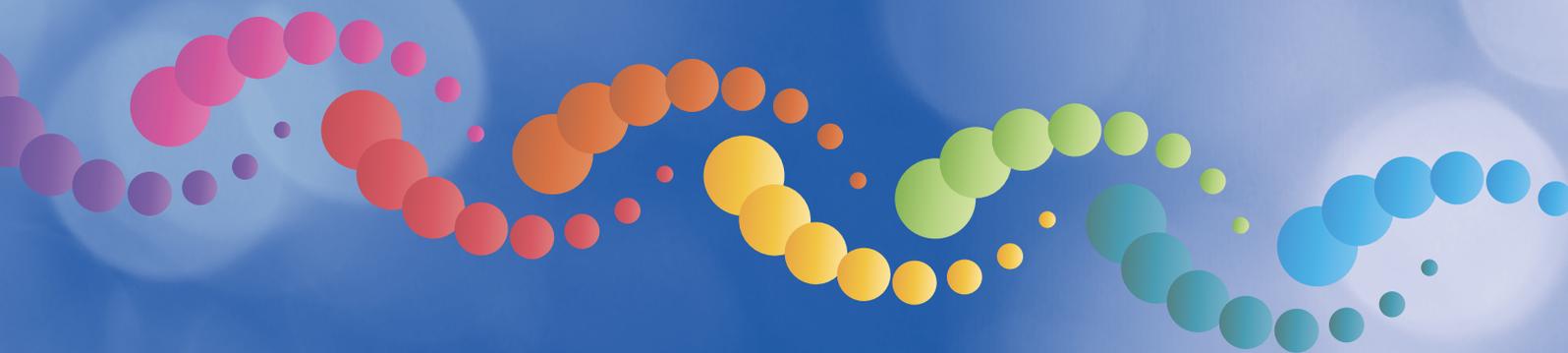




# Age-appropriate pedagogies for the early years of schooling

Foundation paper summary



## Terms of reference

The Department of Education and Training has invited Griffith University to submit a paper that:

- reviews the research literature to identify age-appropriate modes of teaching and learning in the early years of schooling;
- supports the value of active teaching and learning approaches in the early years of schooling in terms of children's engagement and achievement of learning outcomes; and
- links age-appropriate pedagogy to the expectations of existing departmental accountabilities of schools.

This paper (*Age-appropriate pedagogies for the early years of schooling: Foundation paper*) reviews the research literature to inform learning and teaching practices in the early years of schooling.

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**Acknowledgement:** The department acknowledges Griffith University for developing the *Age-appropriate pedagogies for the early years of schooling: Foundation paper*. This document provides a summary of the Foundation paper for the Age-appropriate pedagogies pilot project, funded by the Department of Education and Training.

The *Age-appropriate pedagogies for the early years of schooling: Foundation paper* reviews literature and research of age-appropriate modes of teaching (pedagogies) in the early years of schooling that engage young children and achieve effective learning outcomes. The foundation paper also considers the alignment of these learning and teaching approaches with current school accountability expectations.

This summary provides key insights into the findings of the review of research and literature and identifies the key considerations for school leaders and teachers to inform pedagogical decision-making.

## Why age-appropriate pedagogies?

The Queensland Government has made a commitment to refocus on evidence-based approaches to teaching and learning in the early years of school. This refocus is acknowledged and articulated in the Minister's Portfolio Priorities Statement.

This commitment builds on The *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians* (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, 2008) which outlines a commitment to strengthening early childhood education. The need to establish foundation learning – socially, physically, emotionally and cognitively – as well as to support a successful transition to school – is reinforced by the consequent likelihood of students who access quality early childhood education staying in school, engaging in further education, and participating in work and community life as adults.

However, at the same time there has been a growing trend for national and international comparisons of older children's educational outcomes (e.g., the Programme for International Student Assessment [PISA] and Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study [TIMSS]). As a consequence, reforms aimed at improving results in tests such as these often result in higher standards for academic achievement being set for students in the early years of school. Such reforms have a flow-on effect that formalises curriculum and pedagogy. As a result, play-based and active learning approaches have been increasingly rejected, whilst opportunities for physical activity have been substantially reduced in favour of more formalised, pencil-and-paper related activities. For these reasons, the transition to school has become far more difficult for some children (Dockett, Petriwskyj, & Perry, 2014).

Having a successful transition to school has the potential to positively impact a young child's early learning and development as well as their future academic success. This is why the department is implementing a statewide transition initiative to help support Queensland state schools focus on continuity of learning for young children, leading to better long-term life and learning outcomes.

The Department of Education and Training's (DET) *Strategic Plan 2014-2018* and *Every Student Succeeding: State Schools Strategy 2014-2018* outlines a strong commitment to making children's transition to school successful. The department encourages school leaders to use the *Supporting successful transitions: School decision-making tool* and collaborate with key local partners, including early childhood education and care services to engage with children and families to support positive transitions and strengthen continuity of learning. As demonstrated through the following review of the literature, strengthening effective pedagogy and practice in the early years supports young children's active engagement with, and continuity of, learning.

## Literature review

More than 100 contemporary research articles, studies, papers and texts focusing on teaching and learning in the early years of school were independently reviewed and analysed. Specific attention was given to ten influential international longitudinal studies offering insights into the successes and challenges of various pedagogies in early childhood education. These studies were identified because they focused on the impacts of specific approaches to teaching and learning over time providing rigorous argument and data to support their findings.

The ten international studies are:

1. Cambridge Primary Review
2. The Effective Provision of Pre-school Education project
3. The Early Years Enriched Curriculum Evaluation project
4. Active Learning project
5. Child-initiated pedagogies
6. The High/Scope Perry Preschool study
7. Skills for social progress

8. Supportive relationships and active skill-building strengthen foundations of resilience
9. The impact of pretend play on children's development
10. Creative Little Scientists project.

(For information on the ten international studies see the full reference list in the *Age-appropriate pedagogies for the early years of schooling: Foundation paper*).

These studies identify the themes and key messages that inform pedagogical principles, approaches and practice in early years' education. The strength of these large-scale longitudinal studies is that they provide a strong evidence base for understanding and implementing age-appropriate pedagogies in Queensland schools.

Collectively, these large-scale research studies reveal key considerations that inform teacher pedagogical decision-making. These include an understanding of the characteristics of early learners, the role of the teachers and the influence of their pedagogical decision-making and the characteristics of age appropriate pedagogies.

## The characteristics of early learners

Theories from a variety of disciplines including psychology, sociology, education and science contribute to contemporary views of early learners.

Contemporary views recognise the following characteristics of early learners:

- children's learning and development occurs in a range of socio-cultural environments (including school) that are constructed by culture, traditions, social and economic status, beliefs, and the behaviours and actions of adults
- children contribute to and shape these environments through their own personalities, thoughts and actions, as well as being shaped by them
- children are resilient and competent
- children should be afforded opportunities to be agentic and self-determining
- children's learning is dynamic in nature and involves complex processes
- children have unique capabilities to represent their thinking and learning.

These characteristics of early learners highlight the importance of foregrounding children's holistic development including social, emotional, cognitive, physical, linguistic, spiritual and creative dimensions in providing for optimal learning. These elements are also the foundation of the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) and this suggests they have an important role in curriculum decision-making from birth to five years of age, and into the early years of school. Pedagogies that support children's holistic development are appropriate for young learners, and provide continuity in learning opportunities as children transition from kindergarten to the early years of school.

The literature tells us that children develop their learning capacities through activities that engage and stimulate high levels of concentration, interest and enjoyment. This can be achieved through teachers adopting pedagogies that balance children's academic, social, emotional, physical, cognitive and creative skills while considering the age, background, abilities, interests and characteristics of individual learners.

## The role of the teacher

The teacher's role in guiding and facilitating learning experiences is critical and needs careful consideration. It involves deliberate, purposeful and thoughtful decision making and actions on the part of the teacher to promote children's innate drive for independent learning. The teacher's role changes in different pedagogical approaches, as the balance between planned and spontaneous, and between adult-initiated and child-initiated learning experiences changes. It is also the teacher's responsibility to teach children about their roles in different pedagogies in order to co-construct learning and scaffold their involvement in a balance of adult-initiated and child-initiated learning experiences.

The Framework to guide teacher reflection, presented below, suggests that learning in the early years needs to have range and balance. Extended periods of classroom activity in any one quadrant of the framework will not provide children with the necessary pedagogical support. The framework can be used to guide a teacher's personal reflections in considering whether a range and balance of age-appropriate pedagogies is provided in their program. It can also assist teachers to identify where they need to expand their repertoire of age-appropriate pedagogies.

## Framework to guide teacher reflection

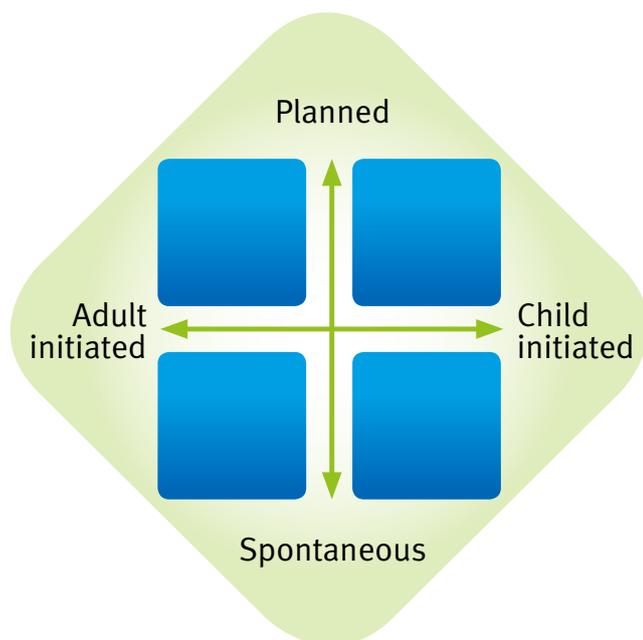


Figure 1. A framework to guide teacher reflection on the use of a balance of pedagogical approaches that respond to children. (Adapted from Fisher, K., 2009, *Exploring Informal Learning in Early Childhood*.)

## The characteristics of age-appropriate pedagogies

To deliver effective pedagogies, teachers need to consider the development, experience and characteristics of the learner, select appropriately from a broad repertoire of pedagogical approaches, and then tailor the delivery accordingly. Effective pedagogies are learner-centred, involve the scaffolding of learning, and actively engage children in learning.

The literature offers various contemporary perspectives on pedagogies, such as pedagogies being:

- both the act of teaching and the ideas, values and evidence that shape and justify it
- a relationship between teacher and learner, rather than a one-size-fits-all model
- co-created by teachers and learners within a community of learners where interactions are motivating, engaging, playful and spontaneous and involve challenge and support.

Whatever perspectives inform teachers' pedagogies, the approaches used must be supported by a strong research evidence base that confirms their effectiveness in facilitating learning. Although complex, it is essential that teachers select and utilise age-appropriate pedagogies that respond to the range of children, cultures, communities, ages and developmental levels, subjects, skills and knowledge.

There is no set formula for the application of age-appropriate pedagogies; however there are characteristics that can guide teachers to create learning experiences that respond to the individual child, context and purpose of learning.

The following table provides the characteristics of age-appropriate pedagogies with accompanying descriptions as identified in the literature review.

## Characteristics of age-appropriate pedagogies

Characteristic	Description
<b>Active</b>	Requiring physical and embodied engagement across all areas of learning. Whether this is indoors or outdoors, activity is essential in order to activate children's full potential. Their focus, concentration, motivation and self-regulation are enhanced through moving, doing, and interacting within a range of learning environments.
<b>Agentic</b>	Ensuring that children have voice in their learning. Their ideas and interests initiate, support and extend learning possibilities in order to build on their real-world understandings and experiences.
<b>Collaborative</b>	Being social and co-constructed. Children and educators work together to identify ways of learning and understanding through sustained shared thinking and action.
<b>Creative</b>	Inviting children to consider 'What if?' They encourage investigation, inquiry and artistry to explore new possibilities and ways of thinking.
<b>Explicit</b>	Making conscious for both learner and educator the relationships between the learning purpose and processes employed and the skills and understandings these processes support.
<b>Language rich and dialogic</b>	Ensuring that learning occurs in environments where rich language is modelled and employed by both children and educators. Meaningful dialogues between children, as well as between children and educators, are created to support thinking, learning, engagement and imagination.
<b>Learner focused</b>	Recognising that all children learn in different ways and that learning is a highly individual process. They also acknowledge differences in children's physical, intellectual, cultural, social and personal experiences and perspectives.
<b>Narrative</b>	Acknowledging the important role that personal, written, oral and digital stories play in all our lives. They support both the production and comprehension of narratives through active processes, especially play.
<b>Playful</b>	Encouraging children to make connections through imagination and creativity to explore alternate worlds and ways of thinking. These worlds, not bounded by reality, offer the freedom children need to innovate and enact new possibilities.
<b>Responsive</b>	Incorporating a willingness to be flexible, to ensure that learning is always child, context, content and discipline appropriate. To achieve this, educators will balance opportunities for structure and spontaneity, open-ended and specific tasks, and child-led and educator-led learning.
<b>Scaffolded</b>	Including such actions as modelling, encouraging, questioning, adding challenges, and giving feedback, provide the support needed to extend children's existing capabilities. Effective scaffolding by both educators and other children provides active structures to support new learning; it is then progressively withdrawn as learners gain increasing mastery.

## Summary

The literature review identifies ten key messages to be taken into account when considering age-appropriate pedagogies to ensure that teaching both responds to learners and attends to holistic and curriculum goals. These messages also provide a platform for reflection and professional conversation about teaching and learning practice and can be applied to whole-school pedagogical frameworks.

The key messages are:

1. A balanced repertoire of age-appropriate pedagogies is needed to ensure that educators are responsive to learners and fulfil teaching goals.
2. A balance is needed between holistic development and academic goals in order to give children a strong foundation for success at school and in later life.
3. A balance is needed between child-initiated and adult-initiated learning experiences in order to recognise children's agency and promote their capabilities.
4. Positive personal relationships amongst teachers and peers are needed to foster motivation to learn, social collaboration, engagement and enjoyment.
5. Playfulness should pervade learning and teaching interactions.
6. High quality verbal interactions are needed for sustained shared thinking in collaborative learning.
7. Adult leadership and scaffolding is needed for cognitive challenge and the development of higher-order thinking.
8. Opportunities for active learning are needed in real-life, imaginary, spontaneous and planned experiences.
9. A change in pedagogies in the early years has a flow-on effect for the following year levels, which must be considered and factored in to the provision of training, resources and support.
10. Professional demands on teachers need to be supported and the lead-in time required to establish new approaches recognised.

DET has demonstrated a strong commitment to making children's transition to school successful and has identified this as a core outcome within the *Strategic Plan 2014-2018* and the *Every Student Succeeding: State Schools Strategy 2014-2018*. This focus on the importance of the transition to school is supported by a collaborative empowerment model and the *Supporting successful transitions: School decision-making tool* which emphasises that pedagogy needs to be appropriate and evidence-based. The tool supports responsive environments and the use of 'a range of early years pedagogical approaches' including differentiation and planning for transitions to support continuity of practice.

The research literature tells us that young children learn best in active, engaged, constructive and interactive environments, where the material they are learning is meaningful to them. Teaching in the early years needs to provide a range and balance of age-appropriate pedagogies. The characteristics of age-appropriate pedagogies include: active, agentic, collaborative, creative, explicit, language-rich and dialogic, learner-focused, narrative, playful, responsive and scaffolded. The research literature is very clear that age-appropriate pedagogies are necessary in the early years of schooling to engage young learners, achieve effective learning outcomes, and set children up for long-term success in the 21st century.

### Get in touch

For any questions about this paper or transitions contact the Early Learning Pathways team on 07 3328 6704 or [Transitions@dete.qld.gov.au](mailto:Transitions@dete.qld.gov.au)

### More support

Regional Transition and Partnerships and Innovation Officers are available to support schools with their transition planning. Find the contact details for appointed officers in your region via this page on OnePortal: <https://oneportal.deta.qld.gov.au/earlychildhood/forschools/Pages/Transitiontoschoolsupportcontacts.aspx>

Access online information and a range of resources including video vignettes via the Successful transitions web pages on the ECEC website: [www.qld.gov.au/transitiontoschool](http://www.qld.gov.au/transitiontoschool)

