Discourses of the Early Years Learning Framework: Constructing the early childhood professional
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ABSTRACT
In Australia, as elsewhere, many factors have contributed to making the struggle for recognition of the professional status of early childhood difficult and ongoing. Arguably this has led to instabilities surrounding professional identity and how members of the field regard themselves and their work. The development and release of The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia (EYLF) was perceived by many as an opportunity to raise the status and standing of the early childhood professional within the early childhood field itself and in the wider community. The EYLF positions all those who work directly with children in early childhood settings as ‘educators’ and sets out the expectations for children’s learning and what educators can do to promote that learning. In doing so the EYLF produces, reproduces and circulates both new and familiar discourses of early childhood education. In this paper we draw on research capturing the perceptions of the early childhood practitioners who took part in the trial of the EYLF across Australia in 2009 to investigate whether and how curriculum interventions such as the EYLF have the potential to shape/reshape early childhood professional identity. Utilising the concepts of discourse, subjectivity, power-knowledge and agency we explore the possibilities and dangers of the construction of an early childhood professional identity in and through the EYLF.

Introduction
At its simplest, professional identity can be understood as how members of a profession ‘define themselves to themselves and others’ (Lasky, 2005 p.900). In Australia, as elsewhere, the struggle for recognition of the professional status of early childhood has been difficult and ongoing. The lack of common credentials
(unqualified through to degree qualifications), low pay and poor public perception of the work of early childhood practitioners (as play rather than teaching) has led to instabilities surrounding professional identity. Teacher identity is seen as a major determinant of how teachers teach and their development as professionals and it impacts on intentions to leave the profession (Schepens, Aelterman & Vlerick, 2009). A strong sense of professional identity has the potential to reduce attrition rates for beginning teachers (Cattley, 2007) who make up the majority of those who leave the profession. In Australia, low pay, poor working conditions, lack of professional status and clearly identified career paths, and incommensurately highly demanding responsibilities have led to sector-wide attrition rates of around 30-40% (Sumson, 2005). Staff continuity, along with qualifications, commitment, beliefs and practices are key components in quality early childhood education and care (OECD, 2001).

The recent development and promulgation of Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia (EYLF) (Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009a), intended for use across all Australian early childhood settings, is a significant intervention in the field. The EYLF is the first national learning framework for early childhood in Australia and it is the first time that learning outcomes for children in the prior to school sector have been specified. It’s development has occurred within the context of a broader international focus on early childhood education, and a national quality reform agenda which pays attention to workforce reform, increased requirements for teacher qualifications, new quality standards and a commitment to universal access to preschool education for all four year olds (Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009b). One of the Australian government’s aims in introducing quality reforms is to raise the status and standing of early childhood education (Rudd & Macklin, 2007). This invites exploration of the impact of the EYLF on professional discourses, including those associated with professional identity. Given the widespread international interest in early childhood education, and the recurrence of themes of poor professional status, such explorations are of broader relevance internationally.
Professional identity
Traditionally, understandings of professional identity in early childhood have been framed by constructions of professionalism as solidified, fixed and related to constructs of autonomy, and as codified knowledge within defined relationships (Thomas, 2009). More recently, poststructuralist perspectives see identities, including professional identities, as being constructed in and through discourse (Stronach, Corbin, McNamara, Stark, & Warne, 2002). Discourses are systems of knowledge, often institutionally based, that act as the truth according to which individuals understand the world and their life in that world (MacNaughton, 2000). When identity is viewed as discursively produced it is understood to be ‘contingent and fragile, and thus open for reconstruction’ (Zembylas, 2004 p.936). In this study, we draw on poststructuralist conceptions of identity ‘as something which is not solely determined by one’s own narrative, but which is also shaped by social and structural relations both within and beyond education’ (Dillabough, 1999 p.22). Taken from a poststructuralist perspective, identity is conceived of as multiple, contingent and ambiguous. It is possible to be more than one type of person depending on the discourses to which the individual has access and chooses to access. Identity is ‘the fixing of a subject in a position that cannot occur independently from the normative views of the world created by a particular discourse’ (Walkerdine, 1987, in Cannella, 1997, p. 146). For example, within a developmental discourse of early childhood education the teacher is positioned as someone who sets up developmentally appropriate experiences, provides children with choices and the opportunity to take some authority over their learning. The teacher is a facilitator of children’s learning through play. However, within a feminist poststructuralist discourse the early childhood teacher is positioned as an interventionist; a teacher ‘who takes a proactive and explicit political stance with children against social inequities’ (Ryan & Oshner, 1999, p.15). Multiple discourses of professionalism and pedagogical practice result in multiple positions or multiple identities which early childhood practitioners can choose to take up or resist/reject. This suggests the possibility of agency in the formation of a professional identity.

Understanding professional identity as provisional and discursively produced allows the prospect of reshaping professional discourses in the context of changing social and historical conditions, contributing to expanded possibilities for new forms of
professional identity. There are a number of elements implicated in the production and circulation of professional discourses and the subject positions made available within these discourses. These include the theoretical and conceptual resources on which the field draws, such as standards and professional codes of ethics, the national policy context, the structural and institutional relationships and the language that is used to communicate with others. When there are changes in these elements there is the possibility that different professional discourses are produced which in turn impacts on the development of professional identity (Kuisma & Sandberg, 2008; Sachs, 2001). For example, the current interest in and uptake of sociocultural theory as a basis for early childhood pedagogy has produced the possibility of a more active early childhood teacher who is positioned as a co-learner with children. Early childhood teachers who see themselves as someone who ‘scaffolds’ children’s learning, someone who works with children within their ‘zone of proximal development’ and leads children’s learning rather than following it can be seen to be taking up sociocultural discourses of education and the subject positions made available within those discourses.

Our review of the literature indicates no studies exist that have specifically investigated how early childhood practitioners in Australia conceive of themselves as professionals. What we do know is that the fragmented nature of the early childhood field in Australia makes it difficult to identify a shared professional identity across a workforce made up of unqualified and certificate level childcare assistants, two year diploma qualified childcare workers and three to four year degree qualified teachers (Tayler, 2000). Our concern, therefore, is not so much how identities may have changed as a result of the introduction of the EYLF but how the EYLF constructs early childhood professionals and whether and how these identities are being spoken into existence by practitioners through their engagement with the EYLF and how they might impact on the status of early childhood education.

The impact of curriculum documents on professional identities
An examination of the literature from countries such as New Zealand, Greece and England, where national early childhood curriculum documents have been
implemented, indicates that the perceived benefits include providing a ‘shared framework of guiding principles’ (Oberhuemer, 2005 p.30) and shared goals and visions for children (Alvestad & Duncan, 2006; Sofou & Tsafos, 2010). This universal language better enables parents’ understandings of early childhood curriculum and provides a ‘reference point for professional discourses’ (Nuttall & Edwards, 2007 p.12). There is some evidence to suggest that this shared language might also contribute to improving the status of the early childhood profession. The introduction of the New Zealand early childhood curriculum (TeWhāriki) established a unified language that helped to make the work of early childhood teachers more visible to others, contributing to the formation of a New Zealand early childhood professional identity (Alvestad & Duncan, 2006). In qualitative studies both New Zealand and Greece (involving 11 teachers in the Greek study and 9 in the New Zealand study) teachers working with national curriculum documents believed they enhanced the status of the early childhood profession because, as one Greek teacher put it, it ‘codified’ everyday activities and this provided ‘confirmation of her professional work’ (Sofou & Tsafos, p. 415). They believed that the introduction of subject learning areas linked to school curriculum improved their professional status and confirmed for parents the professional nature of their work. Similarly in Queensland, Australia, Grieshaber and Yelland (in Oberhuemer, 2005) found that early childhood teachers working with the Queensland Preschool Curriculum Guidelines perceived that the codification of their practices improved their status. These findings suggest that when others are better informed about what early childhood educators do they are more likely to see this as professional practice and this outside positioning can impact on how practitioners see themselves.

While there are benefits in terms of recognition and status in aligning discourses of early childhood more closely with the discourses of schooling, there are also concerns that the reification of educational (i.e. schooling) discourses will result in the marginalisation of other aspects of the early childhood educators’ role, such as care. In Greece, for example, teachers found the alignment of the preschool curriculum with the language of school gave them greater respect, but were also concerned about the ‘schoolification’ of early childhood education (Sofou & Tsafos, 2010).
Questions also arise about the extent of the impact of curriculum documents on teachers’ practices and their professional identities. While both Sofou and Tsafos (2010) and Alvestad and Duncan (2006) found that the teachers in their studies used curriculum documents to guide their practice, closer analysis in the Greek context illustrated that the less experienced teachers were more likely to view the preschool curriculum as necessary and indispensable to their work than those teachers with more experience, who sometimes did not use the document at all (Sofou & Tsafos, 2010). These findings suggest that curriculum documents may have a greater role in shaping the identities of new career educators than in reshaping identities of mid and late career educators.

Despite some teachers’ resistance to imposed documents, the mandating of early childhood curriculum and/or learning outcomes for children signals a move away from the autonomous professional to a regulated profession. Nuttall and Edwards (2007, p.13) contend that curriculum frameworks have the power to ‘lift professional standards to a more sophisticated level’ but note that there is no evidence that they have actually done this, even in countries such as New Zealand where there has been a national curriculum framework for over 10 years. This suggests that curriculum documents cannot make practitioners practice in particular ways and they cannot make practitioners understand themselves more strongly as educators. To have an effect, curriculum documents and the discourses they produce and circulate need to be taken up and enacted by professionals.

Concerns are also raised in the literature about the extent to which state-controlled curricula, particularly those with detailed or prescriptive guidelines, might de-professionalise early childhood practice (Alvestad & Duncan, 2006). The teachers in the Greek study emphasised the importance of the curriculum being flexible, allowing them to make the professional judgements necessary for the development of curriculum responsive to their particular context (Sofou & Tsafos, 2010). This study found that teachers ‘made sense of a national curriculum text within complex and contradictory contexts and discourses’ (Sofou & Tsafos, 2010 p.419). Enhanced professionalism, where practitioners have exercised autonomy in making their own interpretations and curriculum decisions within a unifying framework, allows practitioners to take ownership of the curriculum (Oberheumer, 2005; Alvestad &
Duncan, 2006). Oberhuemer (2005) argues that early childhood educators need the opportunity to clarify their own thinking on professionalism, and to reposition themselves in ways that can accommodate the new expectations that come with new curriculum documents.

The literature suggests that while national early childhood curriculum documents can provide a shared language and work to raise the status of the early childhood profession, there are also concerns that in drawing on discourses of education and teaching these documents marginalise discourses of care. The codification of early childhood educators’ work also has the potential to de-professionalise the educators’ role, although there is debate as to whether the discourses in national curriculum documents are taken up and enacted by educators.

This paper builds on the international literature to examine what happens to professional discourses in the early childhood field when a new material condition such as the EYLF is introduced in Australia, and considers its potential to shift or remake professional discourses and influence professional identity. We examine the discourses of early childhood embedded in and produced in and through the EYLF and the subject positions made available in relation to professional identity and analyse whether and how these discourses and subject positions are being taken up or resisted by early childhood practitioners who participated in the trial of the EYLF.

**Methodology**

**Background to the study**
The development of the EYLF was undertaken by a multi-agency consortium led by Charles Sturt University. As part of this development process a draft framework was trialed for six weeks at 28 early childhood sites across Australia. Each trial site was allocated a ‘critical friend’ to support educators in their work with the EYLF and to interview participants about their experiences and expectations of the EYLF. This process generated data on many aspects of the participants’ engagement with the draft EYLF. The data collected was analysed by each of the critical friends/researchers and each researcher wrote a case study of their site that was
reported to the funding body and used to inform further development of the EYLF. The authors of this paper were members of the consortium and acted as critical friends to some trial sites (two authors were critical friends to one site each, and one author worked with two sites).

There was no intention at the time of the trial to undertake a study of the impact of the EYLF on professional identity. However, as critical friends involved in the trial, we were aware that the interviews with practitioners could be a useful source of data to inform thinking about the material effects of the introduction of the EYLF in terms of professional identities. The subsequent de-identification of all the case-study data and contractual agreements with the data archive managers and funding bodies provided an opportunity to undertake a secondary analysis of the data (Hinds, Vogel and Clarke-Steffen 1997; Szabo & Strang, 1997) to explore possible relationships between the EYLF and professional identity. This re-use of the data fits ethically with the consent given by the participants as it is consistent with the original study. We believed that the data collected at the time of the trial of the EYLF was a rich data set that warranted further analysis. Secondary analysis reduces the burden placed on educators to be involved in research and enables the most effective use to be made of data (Heaton, 1998).

**Data sources**

There were two sources of data for this paper. The first is the Early Years Learning Framework itself. The second data source for this study comes from the interviews with educators involved in the pilot of the EYLF over a six week period in March and April 2009 in 28 case study sites across all states and territories in Australia. In total, 98 early childhood practitioners and managers were interviewed. The number of people interviewed at each setting varied depending on the size of the site and the number of people directly working with the EYLF who volunteered to participate in interview. In some settings two staff members were interviewed while in other settings with a large number of staff up to five staff were involved. In some instances group interviews were conducted with three to five staff. Because the staffing requirements vary across states and service types, the practitioners interviewed had qualifications that ranged from a certificate in child care, to diplomas and university degrees in early
childhood education. The levels of experience in early childhood education ranged from as little as three months to 33 years.

Some sites self-nominated to be considered for the pilot and others were suggested by government agencies and employing authorities. Within the available pool, the sites were then selected to approximate a sample of the diversity of services that characterise early childhood provision in Australia and to include a broad range of locations as well as targeted populations. The sites that participated in the pilot included four long day care centres, three preschool/long daycare centres, eight preschools, five integrated child and family services, two Indigenous specific services, one early intervention service, two family day care schemes, one occasional care setting, one supported playgroup and one mobile service across the government, community and private sectors. These sites were small in number and although there was a diversity of services they cannot be said to be representative of the complexity of the early childhood field. Consequently this study is considered exploratory and the findings indicative/tentative rather than definitive.

**Data generation**

At the end of the trial period the critical friend attached to each site conducted interviews with key educators. At this point in time each critical friend had visited the service at least once and had been in telephone contact on a weekly basis to discuss participants’ engagement with the EYLF. Interviews were conducted at the early childhood service. The interviews were of half to one hour duration and were semi-structured to provide consistency in data collection while also enabling the interviewers to probe and ask for clarification and extension. All critical friends were asked to cover some key topics in the interviews, for example: overall impressions of the EYLF as a document that will inform practice, the extent to which the EYLF reflects current and emerging views of early childhood education, key elements and aspects of the EYLF that are likely to lead to changes in programming and practice, changes that had already occurred as a result of engagement with the EYLF, the potential of the EYLF to make a difference for Australian children, their families and communities, educators, the status and standing of the early childhood profession, and to relationships and linkages between early childhood and school sectors and other broad topics related to the participants’ perspectives on particular elements of
the document (outcomes, assessment) and suggestions for ensuring effective implementation of the EYLF. The interviews were digitally recorded and later transcribed.

**Consideration of validity**

This study is situated within a poststructuralist paradigm. This paradigm acknowledges the relationship between the postmodern view of the world and the poststructuralist view of the individual as ‘fundamentally incoherent and discontinuous’ (Hughes, 2001, p.45). Such a position makes notions of validity in poststructuralist research problematic. For poststructuralists, knowledge is valid in relation to ‘the authenticity of the research participants’ voices’ and ‘to the extent that it expresses the discourses(s) that produced it’ (Hughes, 2001, p. 48). What is important in poststructuralist research are ‘the assumptions made about the nature of, and relations between, subjects, the texts they produce and the conceptual tools and strategies that are used to analyze them’ (Davies & Gannon, 2003, p. 7). The researchers cannot claim that what is described is true because particular strategies have been put in place through method. Instead, the aim is to make the process of data generation and analysis as visible and transparent as possible (MacNaughton, 2001).

In reporting on this study we have aimed to provide sufficient details about the generation of the interview data with specific acknowledgement that we were not responsible for the generation of the entire data set and that data from the EYLF trial used in this study are treated as secondary data. In addition, we have made our role as members of the consortium that developed and trialed the EYLF visible and transparent. As members of the consortium and critical friends we were aware that we had an investment in the outcomes of the trial of the EYLF, including its potential to enhance early childhood practitioners’ sense of professionalism. We took a collaborative approach to data analysis which allowed us to question, challenge and reflect on our interpretations with each other in an attempt to achieve a level of reflexivity. Below we describe our approach to data analysis and provide extensive examples from the data to support analysis.
Data analysis

The conceptual framework used to analyse the data drew on the findings of international research on the impact of early childhood curriculum documents on professional identity and the poststructuralist concepts of discourse, subjectivity, power-knowledge and agency. These sensitising concepts were used as a lens through which to view the data, to look for patterns and to interpret the themes identified as a result of comparison with the findings of the international research. Discourses, as systems of knowledge, provide norms, values, principles and rules which act as the truth upon which individuals are constituted, and constitute themselves, as particular types of people, for example, how to be an early childhood educator in Australia (Nuttall & Ortlipp, forthcoming). An individual’s subjectivity, or way of understanding the self in relation to the world, is formed as the individual participates in the discourses available and to which they have access. The constitution of subjectivity in and through discourse is understood as an exercise of power (Weedon, 1987).

We drew on Foucault’s analysis of power-knowledge (1972, 1980) to theorise the potential effects of the EYLF on the formation/reformation of professional identity in the early childhood field in Australia. Within this framework the EYLF is understood as an ‘active agent’ (Urban, 2008 p.140) in the production, reproduction and circulation of what is considered to be desirable practices in early childhood education. The process of speaking/writing about desirable knowledge and practice actually forms or produces the knowledge and practices, the discourses, and the subject of those discourses (Foucault, 1972). It makes possible a particular Australian early childhood professional identity. From our perspective, curriculum guidelines (including learning frameworks such as the Australian EYLF) are products of discourse, whilst working simultaneously to produce discourse. There is the possibility, therefore, that they can shape/reshape what practitioners believe and think and how they act in relation to early childhood practice and to themselves as professionals.

We undertook a discourse analysis (Foucault, 1972) of the EYLF to identify ways in which it constructs early childhood practitioners. We looked for what the EYLF says (and does not say) about the professional knowledge, skills and attributes early childhood practitioners should possess and how they should practice. We examined
the document for examples of text that constituted a ‘discursive object’ (the early childhood professional) and formed ‘conditions of possibility’ (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine 2008, p.98) for this discursive object (ways of being, thinking and practicing). This involved counting the frequency of key words related to professional identity such as ‘play’, ‘care’, ‘teaching’ and ‘learning’ and words used to refer to or describe the early childhood practitioner.

After we analysed the EYLF we then examined the interview data from the trial of the EYLF and did a secondary analysis of the data with a new conceptual focus on professional identity. Secondary data analysis allows for a more in-depth and focused analysis of data in a particular area and can also allow for a more detailed analysis of a sub-set of the original data (Szabo & Strang, 1997). The semi-structured nature of the interviews provided rich data for further scrutiny. We were interested in whether and how the discourses identified in our analysis of the EYLF were being reproduced in and through the language of the interview participants.

We analysed the entire set of 98 interviews collected in the trial of the EYLF to identify whether professional identity was a recurring theme. We then selected the data sets that indicated that there was useful data on professional identity, for example, those in which participants spoke about what it meant to be referred to as an educator or talked at length about how they thought the EYLF would impact on professional status and standing, and did a more in-depth investigation of this data. These data comprised 23 interview transcripts from 19 of the case study sites. All states and territories were represented and there was a range of services representative of the entire data set. Additional in-depth analysis and sub-set analysis of data with a new conceptual focus are methods of secondary analysis well documented (see for example Szabo & Strang, 1997). As we were involved in the data collection at four of the sites we were aware of the contextual issues and we were able to bring these understandings to the secondary analysis of the data.

The transcriptions of the interview data were read and analysed by each of the authors. We each looked for the words participants used to describe their roles and community perceptions of the work of early childhood educators and then came together to identify common themes and then to reduce and refine these. Drawing on
the poststructuralist concepts outlined above we looked for evidence of the discourses of early childhood education and care produced, reproduced and circulated in and through the EYLF being taken up by the participants in the trial. For example, instances where participants talked about being teachers and highlighted the role of the early childhood practitioner in children's learning. We were interested in whether or not the EYLF provided access to new or different discourses than those historically privileged within early childhood education that participants could draw upon to construct alternative professional identities or strengthen current identities (subjectivities), for example, how they responded to the use of the term educator and to the EYLF’s explanations of teaching and learning. In addition we looked for evidence of agency in terms of participants’ ability to position themselves in particular ways, actively take up available subject positions, or resist/reject the discourses being privileged in the EYLF.

Constructions of early childhood educators in the Early Years Learning Framework: New possibilities, risks and challenges

Discourses of the Early Years Learning Framework

The EYLF functions as a form of discourse because it embodies ‘both a language and requisite social practices’ (Weiner, 1994 p.79). The EYLF seeks to produce a new discursive organisation of early childhood education and care. Our analysis of the EYLF shows that the document marginalises what have historically been the dominant discourses in early childhood (care and development), maintains the dominant discourse of play, reproduces what have more recently become mainstream discourses such as relationships and partnerships, and privileges new discourses for the early childhood field of education and learning. For example the term ‘educator’ is used 127 times in the document, ‘teach(ing)’ is mentioned 27 times and the word ‘learning’ is used 220 times. Fifty-eight of the references to learning are linked specifically to ‘children’s learning’ and often the educator’s role in that learning, as is evident in the following statements:

Educators draw on a rich repertoire of pedagogical practices to promote children’s learning (DEEWR, 2009a, p.16).
They (educators) also recognise spontaneous teachable moments as they occur, and use them to build on children’s learning (p.17).

In contrast, there are 19 references to ‘development’, 10 of which refer to ‘learning and development’. There are only three references to the term ‘care’ in relation to what early childhood educators do, two references to ‘caring’ and four to nurturing, with both terms used in relation to educators developing ‘nurturing relationships’ (p.13) or ‘caring relationships with children and families’ (p.12). The word ‘play’ is used 68 times in the document, most often in relation to learning, for example, ‘play-based learning’ (p.5) and ‘learning through play’ (p.16). Finally, there are 45 references to ‘relationships’ and the word ‘partnership/s’ is used 13 times in relation to educators working in partnership with families, with statements such as:

They [educators] recognise the connections between children, families and communities and the importance of reciprocal relationships and partnerships for learning (p.16).

Educators’ practices and the relationships they form with children and families have a significant effect on children’s involvement and success in learning (p.8).

The EYLF identifies five broad principles that underpin early childhood practice: secure, respectful and reciprocal relationships; partnerships; respect for diversity; ongoing learning and reflective practice. These principles include statements about the beliefs, values, practices, and dispositions that educators working in ways consistent with these principles will demonstrate. Such descriptions could be seen to constitute the early childhood practitioner in particular ways. For example, someone who ‘work[s] in partnership with families’, is ‘committed to equity’ (DEEWR, 2009a, p.12), ‘respects the diversity of families and communities’ and ‘take[s] action to redress unfairness’; someone who is a ‘co-learner with children, families and community’ who ‘value[s] the continuity and richness of local knowledge’ and ‘examine[s] what happens in their settings and reflect[s] on what they might change’ (p.13). In addition, the EYLF specifically describes the desirable practices linked with the principles: adopting holistic approaches; being responsive to children; planning and implementing learning through play; intentional teaching; creating learning
environments; valuing the cultural and social contexts of children and their families; providing for continuity in experiences; assessing and monitoring children’s learning to inform provision and to support children in achieving learning outcomes (pp.14 - 18).

The principles can be seen to function as discourses, constituting the beliefs, values and practices produced within them as normal, right and desirable. For example, within a relationships discourse, it is desirable to be ‘attuned to children’s thoughts and feelings...’ (DEEWR, 2009a, p.12), and it is viewed as normal to ‘give priority to nurturing relationships’ (p.12). To be the right type of early childhood practitioner within equity and diversity discourses requires the individual to ‘believe in all children’s capacities to succeed, regardless of diverse circumstances and abilities’ (p.12), ‘challenge practices that contribute to inequities’ and ‘value children’s different capacities and abilities...’(p.13). The discourse of diversity constitutes practitioners as ‘culturally competent’ (p.16). Life-long learning and reflective practice discourses constitute early childhood practitioners as researchers ‘continually seek [ing] ways to build their professional knowledge...’ (p.13). As Macfarlane and Lewis (2004) point out, ‘[d]iscourses constitute the subjects - including human subjects - that they appear to simply describe’ (p.56).

The EYLF positions everyone who works ‘directly with children in early childhood services’ as an ‘educator’ by overtly stating this in the introduction (DEEWR, 2009a, p. 5). The use in the EYLF of terms such as ‘intentional teaching’, ‘pedagogy’, ‘learning outcomes’ and ‘assessment’ signals a shift in emphasis away from more traditional views of nurturing and care as the dominant discourse towards discourses of teaching and accountability. The identification of five learning outcomes, each with between two and five more specific key components and numerous indicators, or examples of ‘evidence that educators may observe in children as they learn’ (p.19), points to the possibility of the emergence of a more technicist discourse (Moss, 2006) of education, within which educators focus their teaching on the achievement of government initiated and mandated outcomes.
Taking up the education discourses of the Early Years Learning Framework

Intentional teaching is identified in the EYLF as one of the key pedagogical practices that early childhood educators draw on to promote children’s learning. It is stated that intentional teaching involves educators being ‘deliberate, purposeful and thoughtful in their decisions and actions’ and furthermore that ‘educators who engage in intentional teaching recognise that learning occurs in social contexts and that interactions and conversations are vitally important for learning’ (DEEWR, 2009a, p.15). Engagement with the EYLF makes the subject positions of professional and intentional teacher visible and thus accessible to practitioners, as is evident in the following comments from the EYLF trial participants:

So it is actually seeing the difference in those things that happen in front of you every minute of every day. You know we can go in there now and we can document in every room something and we can find it in the framework and that’s what I think will actually make the difference …..to realize the importance of what you’re doing and why you’re doing it.

It [the EYLF] makes you feel more of a professional than if you go into the room and come out each night just having changed nappies and patted babies. Because that’s what you think you’re doing but when you realise what you’re actually doing - you’re teaching children through this - it makes a big difference because a lot of them may be unaware what they’re actually doing when they are performing these tasks. It makes a greater awareness about your own profession.

In being able to articulate what they are doing these educators speak themselves into existence as intentional teachers and professionals. Subjectivity, according to Weedon (1987), is ‘the conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions of the individual, her sense of herself and her ways of understanding her relation to the world’ (p.32). As the second quote above demonstrates, feeling ‘more of a professional’ and realising she is ‘teaching children’ suggests that this practitioner might incorporate these subjectivities into her professional identity whereas she had previously understood herself from within the subject position of caregiver, as someone who just changed babies’ nappies.
The EYLF makes it possible for practitioners to mobilise the education, teaching and learning discourses produced within it and position themselves as teachers. For example, the EYLF states that ‘educators who engage in intentional teaching … actively promote children’s learning through worthwhile and challenging experiences [and]… plan opportunities for intentional teaching’ (DEEWR, 2009a, p.15). A family day care practitioner expressed her understanding of the impact of working with the EYLF in a way that suggests she is taking up the education discourses and actively positioning herself as an ‘intentional teacher’:

If you’ve got a framework to follow it’s probably a little bit more about defining it rather than letting it just sort of happen... Maybe when you set up an activity try to focus a little bit more on the learning outcome of it … [the EYLF] makes you more aware of what you’re doing.

In this practitioner’s words there is a sense that she knows she can make a choice, that she can define what it is she does, she can focus on the learning and thus be(come) an intentional teacher.

Engagement with the framework through individual and collaborative reflection on practice in light of the content of the document brought ‘new awareness’ to practitioners of what they were already doing and also provoked a review of practice. In the following quotes participants speak the discourse of reflective practice into action and in doing so actively take up the subject position of teacher as reflective practitioner:

Doing a lot of reflecting.....It's just good to read and then think 'yeah we’re doing that', or how we could make changes in our practices.

(It) makes me reflect on my teaching practices and it’s something we always need to do as teachers all the time and therefore I find it a very reflective document.

**Taking up official curriculum discourses**

Consistent with findings from international research (Alvestad & Duncan, 2006; Nuttall & Edwards, 2007; Oberhuemer, 2005; Sofou & Tsatos, 2010) was the way the EYLF provided a language and a vehicle for articulating the work of early childhood
educators. In addition, the EYLF seems to have given authority to the education discourse of early childhood because of its positioning as ‘independent’, ‘national’ and supported by research and government. As one practitioner put it, the fact that the EYLF is a national document ‘confirms the value placed on early childhood education’. Others highlighted the independence of the written document:

*Giving authority... you’ve got a document that is actually by somebody other than, you know, anyone of our names, that is actually backed up by good research and understanding. It often gives the whole argument more importance I suppose...*  

*Independence and authority I think are important.*

Within modernist, rational discourses something that exists in a written form, is independently produced by ‘somebody other than’ individual practitioners, and is universal (national) has the necessary authority to be taken as the truth. This leads to an authoritative version of what constitutes valued early childhood practice and desirable early childhood practitioner identity. Being ‘backed up by research’ the EYLF appears to be scientific, objective, believable and true. Correspondingly, the educational discourses of early childhood produced, reproduced and circulated in and through the EYLF function as a discursive truth. As institutional, official, authorised discourses they give the ‘whole argument’ about the value of early childhood ‘more importance’. The potential power of curriculum discourses is evident in the following practitioner statements:

*If they [school teachers and families] know that there is a curriculum so that everything that we do are not random experiences for the sake of entertainment, that there is actually purpose and intention behind what we do, I think it would raise their awareness and then ultimately their expectation.*

*I also think that it should make a difference to the early childhood profession that we have something that we can say we actually have a document. Not just ‘oh, I just make up what I do’. 
These practitioners seek to exercise power, that is, to act upon the actions or thoughts of others (school teachers, families and the early childhood profession). Providing others with the knowledge that there is a learning framework; pointing out that there is a document that guides curriculum decisions, is an exercise of power. In the above statements the practitioners are demonstrating an awareness of their capacity to enact and circulate particular knowledge, to raise people’s awareness about early childhood education and care and their role as educators. By drawing on curriculum discourses and aligning the early childhood profession with what is powerful in the school system - official curriculum documents – the practitioners position themselves as intentional teachers, who have ‘purpose and intention’ behind their practice, who don’t simply ‘make up’ what they do, but are guided in their practice by a research based learning framework.

Across the field, both in sites of policy production, and sites of practice, the development of the EYLF was widely seen as having a significant role to play in raising the status of early childhood and contributing to the recognition of all forms of early childhood education and care. Participants in the trial confirmed the perception that the EYLF has the potential to do this:

For staff I think it would have a very positive impact on the status of professionals. They would be looked upon as professionals I think more than just, you know, ‘oh they look after children’ because quite often they’re looked upon as just babysitting agencies.

It (the EYLF) shows a respect for the industry in that it’s showing a respect for the children. Its saying that our children are very important, this is a very important stage of life and that they’re that important that we do need frameworks, we need objectives, we need professionals... so to me it’s bringing the industry also up a notch.

These sentiments are in keeping with the perceptions of early childhood practitioners in other countries where national curriculum documents were introduced (see for example Alvestad & Duncan, 2006). Couldron and Smith (1999, as cited in Beijaard,
Meijer & Verloop, (2004, p. 113) claim that ‘being a teacher is a matter of being seen as a teacher by himself or herself and by others; it is a matter of arguing and then redefining an identity that is socially legitimated’. Wider recognition, both from within and outside the field, of the educational nature of early childhood practice helps to circulate discourses that position early childhood practitioners as educators and professionals. The discourses of the EYLF, because of their institutional location and potentially wide social circulation, have more social and institutional power than discourses produced locally (by individual services or practitioners), suggesting that subject positions within such discourse may be more desirable, more justifiable and more accessible (Grant, 1997). An institutionally and socially legitimated identity as a professional educator could contribute to early childhood practitioners’ capacity to redefine their identity.

**Dangers, resistance and agency**

Osgood (2006) argues that educators are often ‘seduced’ by mechanisms of control because of the pay-off of an increase in professional status. There is a danger that the EYLF heralds a shift towards a standardised curriculum that de-professionalises early childhood educators by placing control of the curriculum in the hands of policy makers and limiting opportunities for autonomous decisions (Grieshaber, 2000; Osgood, 2006). Fenech and Sumsion (2007) found that for many educators regulatory frameworks do act as a constraint, and can produce conforming technicist discourses. However, their research concluded that educators can use standards to enhance informed decision making and critical reflection and as an ‘ally to resist perceived threats to themselves and to quality practices’ (p. 111). Osgood (2006, p. 6) also contends that ‘the regulatory gaze can be, if not resisted, at least negotiated/challenged’ when educators are actively engaged in the negotiation of discourses.

Fenech and Sumsion’s study (2007) investigating the effects of regulatory frameworks on early childhood professionals showed that the impact of this regime of truth was dependent on the individual and that individuals produced practices of resistance. Similarly, we propose that whether or not the discourses of the EYLF are taken up by the early childhood field will depend to some extent on what those who use it bring to the process - their discourses of early childhood education and how
they are constituted and constitute themselves within the discourses that they have access to. As one practitioner put it when asked who would feel most comfortable with the EYLF and who it speaks to:

_It depends on the person and their background and their understanding of childhood pedagogy and maybe even their training. It depends on the person and what’s their background and their understanding of childhood pedagogy and maybe even their training._

Those who have a strong sense of who they are as an early childhood professional and a commitment to their current practices may choose not to take up new discourses of professional practice as the following practitioner suggests:

_ I already come with a sense of who I am and who we are as a team and the goals that we’re working towards and the practices that we have in place._

Because subjectivity is constituted through discourse and there are multiple discourses in circulation at any one time there is always the possibility of agency and resistance in the individual’s construction of their subjectivity. There was evidence that some participants resisted taking up the discourses of the EYLF or that they would resist a discourse of early childhood education and care that privileged practices that were contradictory to their long held beliefs. Some read the EYLF as circulating accountability and technicist discourses (Moss, 2006), or at least pointed to the possibility and the danger that it might be interpreted in this way:

_ I could see that practitioners in the childcare setting might look at this and see ‘oh, that looks very schooly and how are we going to get the children to do this in a 0-1 year old room?’_

_[We need to be] mindful of how the assessment document is used because I’d hate to see that just becoming a checklist again that we’ve had in the past and not really looking at development of the whole child - looking at deficits, rather than the things that they can do._
There was resistance from some practitioners to an outcomes-based learning framework. These practitioners understood themselves as flexible, child-centred, context responsive professionals. One participant talked about how in the past when different companies tried to introduce their approaches to programming:

*In the end I always went back to my own programme, and I just sort of said, well I’ll take a bit of this one, and a bit of that one, and it’ll be a bit of mine as well, and if they don’t like it, well, they’ll have to send someone else down, because, this is what seems to work.*

These practitioners’ words point to practices of resistance whereby they oppose or reject outright particular subject positions such as ‘school teacher’ and ‘assessor’. The final comment suggests practitioner agency in positioning herself as someone who can come up with her own eclectic approach to programming that works in her context.

**Conclusion**

The privileging of discourses of education presents both risks and opportunities. While the EYLF has the potential to raise the status and standing of early childhood education/educators, there are risks associated with the emergence of an authoritative view of what it is to be a ‘good’ early childhood educator within the educational discourses that are clearly privileged in the document. This could lead to the dominance of a technicist discourse and the consequent de-professionalisation of early childhood educators. It is also perhaps naive to assume that because Australia now has an early years learning framework that all educators will embrace this document and that the EYLF on its own can address issues of status.

Our analysis of the EYLF showed that there is a focus on the educative role of early childhood staff, which challenges the traditional view of staff in long day care as carers not educators. Because all staff working with children are positioned by the EYLF as educators, the status of staff with vocational training and staff with no formal qualifications is raised, potentially leading to greater professional recognition for these practitioners. Conversely, it might be argued that in positioning all staff working
directly with children in early childhood settings as educators, university qualified early childhood teachers may experience de-professionalisation and a loss of status.

The shift from discourses of care, which as Macfarlane and Lewis (2004) argue, are not ‘powerful’ enough to gain professional status, towards a stronger focus on education, may be a positive outcome for the early childhood sector in terms of professional recognition. At the same time, there is a danger that in privileging education discourses the role of care as an important dimension of the early childhood professional role is lost. The work of Woodrow (2001) indicates that an ethic of care is a core component of professional identity for early childhood educators, and as Barblett, Hydon and Kennedy (2008) note, care is also central to the Early Childhood Australia Code of Ethics. A strong focus on education, along with the hegemonic masculine discourse of rationality and the marginalised discourse of emotionality (Osgood, 2006), may result in a silencing of pedagogies of relationships and care and a lack of recognition of the multifaceted work and multiple professional identities of early childhood practitioners.

The creation of the EYLF as a national framework for early childhood teaching and learning is a significant symbol of the growing recognition of the importance of the early childhood years within the Australian policy landscape and has raised hopes and aspirations for what it might achieve for the field. Our findings indicate that the EYLF has already generated a kind of authority that is seen to have the potential to raise the status of early childhood work and locate early childhood more powerfully within authorised education discourses, and in doing so impact positively on practitioners’ view of themselves. While the language of the EYLF constitutes early childhood practitioners as educators, teachers and reflective practitioners, it does not ensure that practitioners will consciously (or unconsciously) constitute/reconstitute themselves to take up these identities, but it does allow this possibility. The potential power of the EYLF to change ways of thinking about early childhood education and those who practice it resides, at least to some extent, with those who take up the discourses, enact them and in doing so mobilise them. Our findings suggest that engaging with the EYLF and having the opportunity to reflect on their practice in light of the framework, individually and with others, did lead to changes in practitioners’ ways of thinking about practice and what it means. It did make education discourses
visible and accessible and lead to some practitioners re-positioning themselves within those discourses as educators, teachers and professionals.

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