# A pedagogy of inquiry to support integrated teaching and learning approaches

This fact sheet was developed by the Early Years Unit at the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA) and supports information presented in the VCAA on-demand webinar ‘A pedagogy of inquiry to support integrated teaching and learning approaches’. This webinar is available to watch on the [Early Years Professional Learning](https://www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/news-and-events/professional-learning/earlyyears-professional-learning/Pages/Index.aspx) webpage of the VCAA website.

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| What does it mean to work with a pedagogy of inquiry? |

Educators generally rely on a wide range of pedagogical strategies when working with children, and they select specific strategies that help them put their ideas and thinking into practice. Working with a pedagogy of inquiry is to work with a strategy that is woven into everyday practice.

It is important to clarify the difference between inquiry-based learning and learning that is focused on individual projects or specific themes. Inquiry-based learning is about discovering an answer, whereas an approach that foregrounds a particular project or theme will be more concerned with exploring an answer that is already determined. Using an inquiry-based approach requires children to develop their own learning strategies and tools to discover what it is they want to find out more about. It also means that educators and children are testing their theories and ideas, with the result being the changing of existing understandings or the development of new ways of understanding.

When we work with a pedagogy of inquiry, we position the child as a constructor of knowledge. This approach encourages us to view our role as a co-constructor in the learning process rather than a transmitter of knowledge. This might stand in contrast to some less contemporary pedagogical approaches that view the child as a passive recipient of other’s knowledge and thinking. To work with a pedagogy of inquiry requires us to afford children and educators the opportunity and time to follow their own interests and ideas.

This is not a new approach to working with children and it is widely used around the world. It has gained in popularity because as a pedagogical approach, it can assist children to build social and emotional learning capital and life skills. When we work this way, we gather perspectives other than our own – of children, of families and of colleagues ­– and these ideas and perspectives help the inquiry project to become activated.

The Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework (VEYLDF) Outcome 4 states:

Children are confident and involved learners.

* Responsive learning relationships with all children support them to learn successfully. They are encouraged to be curious and enthusiastic about their learning.
* Children benefit from opportunities to discuss ideas, make plans, brainstorm solutions to problems and reflect and give reasons for their choices.

When young children are encouraged to be enthusiastic and curious learners, it becomes more likely that rich learning can happen. A pedagogy of inquiry allows for children and educators to follow their own interests and take an active role in their own learning.

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| Constructing an image of the child |

Teaching and thinking with young children often begins with constructing an image of the child, which is based on your observations of and interactions with that child. What possibilities can you see to support this child’s learning and development? Go back to the documentation materials and look for clues. What are children telling you about their interests, ideas, dreams or questions?

Educators should view early learning spaces as places of research in which they can uncover children’s theories, interpretations, questions and answers. In this process children are very much co-protagonists. The role of the educator is to create a context in which children’s ideas and theories are questioned and listened to.

Children can talk and they have always liked to talk; however, as adults we do not often listen deeply to them. Children have a natural inclination to listen to other children and they enjoy discussion, conflict and confusion in these exchanges. Children like to listen to the ideas of others and have no problem changing their minds or adapting their thinking as new ways of thinking and learning emerge. When you give children a voice and listen to that voice, you are essentially recognising that the child is the primary author of their life.

‘Children have the privilege of not being excessively attached to their own ideas, which they construct and reinvent continuously. They are apt to explore, make discoveries, change their points of view and fall in love with forms and meanings that transform themselves.’ (Edwards et al 2012, p. 51)

Children generally want their learning to focus on things they find interesting and worthy of their attention. This makes the role of the educator critical as when children are provided with materials, resources and interested adults who help to provoke questions and thinking, cognitive disruption and learning are going to be the result. Children’s thinking can then shift from one point to another.

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| Questioning and listening |

Asking questions and then listening to the answers can propel children’s learning, and it is this approach that is at the heart of an inquiry model. Questioning and listening are essential in any learning relationship, and they are both part of an active process where you do not just listen and question children but also interpret, respond to and make meaning of their thinking and learning processes.

The pedagogical strategy of listening can provide educators with a new framework in which to consider their role in children’s learning and development. When educators look deeply at what holds children’s attention, the result is that children and adults are able to recognise capabilities and qualities in each other.

Do not always rely on asking questions and trying to provoke answers as a way of engaging with children. Educators who give children the time, space and resources to think long and deeply are often rewarded with rich responses.

‘The right question at the right time can move children to peaks in their thinking that result in significant steps forward and real intellectual excitement. Although it is almost impossible for an adult to know exactly the right time to ask a specific question of a specific child – especially for a teacher who is concerned with 30 or more children – children can raise the right question for themselves if the setting is right.’ (Millikan, et al 2014, p. 69)

The value of questioning cannot be overstated, particularly when working with a pedagogy of inquiry. You need to consider what directions you are leading children with your questions, as well as what type of questions you ask children. Are they ‘thick’ questions or ‘thin’ questions? That is, are they questions that are open ended and encourage children to think broadly or do they close off children’s thinking?

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| Wonder and uncertainty |

Wonder and uncertainty are necessary dispositions for learning. Both of these dispositions are considered important when working with a pedagogy of inquiry. As Moss says, ‘Such learning is also more likely to happen and be welcomed when wonder or amazement are valued’ (Moss 2019, p. 74).

Rich learning opportunities can happen when you include these dispositions in your daily practice. This is not a closed-off, linear way of working but rather one that allows you to remain open to the ideas of children, their families and your colleagues.

When you work with dispositions of wonder and uncertainty, it encourages a flexible way of thinking and working in which hypotheses might be made but are also subject to change. This is not an approach that has pre-determined outcomes.

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| Top tips for working with a pedagogy of inquiry |

* Read, listen or watch something that might shift your thinking or that supports you to develop a growth mindset. Learn something new to bring back into your work with children. This does not need to be related to early learning. Learn something that fires up *your*neural pathways. An educator’s area of interest or enthusiasm can have an inherent trickle-down positive impact on children.
* Adults can often anticipate difficulties and resolve them for children, and this does not give children the opportunity to think for themselves and provide solutions. Educators should aim to create a culture of ideas rather than a culture that provides all of the answers.
* Design your environments carefully, with attention paid to the intentional use of resources, materials and provocations, and provide children with extended periods of time to re-visit these.
* Educators need to follow children’s footprints – that is, the directions of their learning. This is only possible through a process of reviewing and reflecting on your documentation materials. It can be useful to consider what you know, what you don’t yet know and what you would like to find out more about. Gathering clues about children and then asking rich, deep questions adds great value to the development of any inquiry project.
* Give children time to be curious, to wonder, and to discuss and adjust or change their opinions.

## References

Duckworth, E 1996, The having of wonderful ideas and other essays on teaching and learning, Teachers College Press, New York

Edwards, C, Gandini, L and Forman, G (eds.) 2012, The Hundred Languages of Children: The Reggio Emilia Experience in Transformation, 3rd edn, Praeger, Santa Barbera

Moss, P 2019, Alternative Narratives in Early Childhood, Routledge, Oxfordshire

Touhill, L 2012, ‘Inquiry-based Learning’, NQS PLP e-Newsletter, No. 45

## Using the VEYLDF in your practice

As part of the Education and Care Services National Law (National Law) and the National Quality Standards, the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework (VEYLDF) is an approved learning framework. As an approved learning framework, it has the potential to make you a better educator and your practice more contemporary.

The VEYLDF allows us to reflect on learning and development outcomes for children. As educators, we can reflect on our own practice in supporting all children by considering if our work aligns with the Practice Principles. The VEYLDF provides us opportunities to inform our pedagogical decisions and to critique or challenge our existing practices.

The VEYLDF also provides a shared language and understanding for all early childhood professionals and can inform conversations with families, colleagues and other professionals working with young children

## Additional VCAA resources

Download copies of [VCAA early years resources](https://www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/curriculum/earlyyears/ey-curriculum-resources/Pages/Index.aspx).

Order [free hard copies](https://www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/curriculum/earlyyears/ey-curriculum-resources/Pages/Birth-to-8years.aspx) of VCAA early years resources.

Keep up to date with new resources and professional learning opportunities by subscribing to the [VCAA Early Years Alert](https://v6.educationapps.vic.gov.au/em/forms/subscribe.php?db=696087&s=449602&a=97403&k=ZtEnSTb9XCqhrYLgAXYMIoaqtBfoM8BYs_QzogfLtIo).

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