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ECEY6010

Early Years Curricula

Cover sheet

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AI Cover Sheet

Section 1: A Critical Analysis of the View of the Child in EYLF and NEL: Play, Agency and the Role of the Adult

Section 2: EYLF and NEL: A Critical Comparison of Early Childhood Assessment

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I acknowledge the use of Grammarly (<https://www.grammarly.com/>) on multiple occasions throughout the assignment to check my work using the prompts:

1. Check the text for readability, grammar, and syntax.

I acknowledge the use of Microsoft Copilot (<https://copilot.microsoft.com/>) on multiple dates throughout the assignment, using prompts such as:

1. Find and summarise academic journal articles dated within the past 10 years on the EYLF and NEL, assessment methods, parental stress while awaiting child's diagnosis. I need reliable articles with working links; no placeholders or broken links.
2. Reduce the following text by 10%, do not add/change wording, do not change tone/meaning, do not add any new concepts/ideas, do not add/remove any citations. Just remove unnecessary filler words.

Section 1:

A Critical Analysis of the View of the Child in EYLF and NEL: Play, Agency and the Role of the Adult

Education is an organised and intentional process through which learners acquire knowledge, skills, values and dispositions that support their development and participation in society (UNESCO, 2021). Within this, the curriculum provides a structured plan that outlines what children should learn, why they should learn it and how learning experiences are organised to achieve those aims and support equitable progression (UNESCO, 2015; OECD, 2018). A well-designed curriculum offers a shared framework that enables educators to plan purposeful, developmentally appropriate experiences that respond to children's needs and support their ongoing growth.

A play-based curriculum is an approach in which play is the central vehicle for learning, recognising that play is a natural and meaningful way for children to explore ideas, practice emerging skills, build relationships and make sense of their world (UNICEF, 2018). Research demonstrates that different forms of play, including free, guided, and adult-led, each contribute uniquely to children's cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development (Zosh *et al.*, 2018). Evidence consistently shows that play-based learning supports language development, problem-solving, creativity, and self-regulation and is widely recognised in international early years frameworks as effective practice (Pyle and Danniels, 2017; UNICEF, 2018).

This comparative analysis focuses on Singapore's Nurturing Early Learners (NEL) framework and Australia's Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) to explore how each curriculum views the child and what expectations they set for learning.

Examining the two side by side highlights the philosophical differences that shape their approaches to play, pedagogy and the role of the adult within the child's learning (Ministry of Education (MOE) Singapore, 2013; Australian Government Department of Education (AGDE), 2022).

The Early Years Learning Framework is Australia's national early childhood curriculum and is grounded in a sociocultural philosophy that positions children as

competent, capable and agentic learners (AGDE, 2022). It emphasises Belonging, Being and Becoming, framing learning as a relational, co-constructed process that is shaped by children's identities, cultures and lived experiences. EYLF draws heavily on cultural-historical theory, which conceptualises children as active co-constructors of knowledge who learn through participation in social and cultural practices (Fleer, 2020). This theoretical foundation positions children not as passive recipients of knowledge but as intentional contributors to their own learning. Research shows that educators engage deeply with pedagogical documentation, practice shifts toward foregrounding children's agency, voice and decision-making (Albin-Clark, 2021). The framework therefore assumes that children bring curiosity and intentionality to learning and that adults act as co-learners and facilitators within rich, play-based environment (Hedges and Cooper, 2018; Edwards, 2017). EYLF's overarching stance is that children are capable, relational and culturally situated learners whose development emerges through interaction, collaboration and shared meaning-making (ACECQA, 2022; AGDE, 2022)

Singapore's Nurturing Early Learners Framework is shaped by a hybrid of global early childhood ideas and strong local cultural priorities, a process that is described as "glocalisation" (Yang, Li and Ang, 2021). While the framework uses child-centred language and acknowledges children as active learners, its implementation is strongly influenced by Singapore's emphasis on academic achievement, discipline, bilingual proficiency and national competitiveness (Ang, Lipponen and Lim, 2021). As a result, NEL tends to conceptualise the child as a developing learner who requires structured guidance to acquire foundational competencies, particularly in literacy, numeracy and bilingualism (Yand, Li and Ang, 2021). Although play is present, it is often instrumentalised to achieve predetermined learning outcomes, reflecting a view of the child as needing adult direction to meet academic expectations (Bautista *et al.*, 2023). Teachers typically adopt an instructor-mediator role, structuring guided play to ensure measurable progress (Yang, Li and Ang, 2021). Additionally, cultural influences, including parental expectations, societal values around effort, achievement and policy priorities, reinforce a competency-based, future orientated image of the child (Li, Rao and Tse, 2012). Overall, NEL positions children as active but not yet capable of directing their own learning, requiring structured support to prepare for formal schooling (MOE Singapore, 2013).

The EYLF's view of the child is fundamentally shaped by Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, which positions children as active participants in co-constructing understanding and making sense of their world, rather than passive recipients of knowledge. Vygotsky (1978) argues that learning occurs first on the social plane through interaction, before becoming internalised, which directly supports the EYLF's construction of the child as an agentic, intentional and relational learner. This theoretical stance is extended by Fleer (2020), who applies cultural-historical concepts to show that children construct understanding through participation in culturally organised activities and by Hedges and Cooper (2018), who conceptualise learning as relational and co-constructed within play. Together, these perspectives frame the EYLF child as a competent meaning-maker, whose agency is expressed through negotiation, collaborations and imaginative engagement. Adults, therefore, are positioned as co-participants who share power and enter children's play worlds to support sustained shared thinking (Fleer, 2015; Siraj, Kingston and Melhuish, 2015). In this model, agency is inherent, not conditional and children are viewed as capable contributors to their own learning trajectories.

In contrast, the NEL view of the child is shaped by Confucian heritage culture but in a way that is more practical than theoretical. Rather than seeing children as incapable, this cultural lens emphasises that children become capable through guided effort, practice and adult modelling. Yang, Li and Ang (2021) explain that in Confucian-influenced systems, the teacher is seen as someone who helps children grow into competence, which naturally positions the child as needing structured support. This does not mean children are viewed negatively, instead, they are seen as learners who benefit from clear routines, explicit teaching and adult-led scaffolding. Bautista *et al.* (2023) shows that Singaporean teachers often use play as a way to reinforce skills rather than as a space for open-ended explorations, reflecting a belief that children learn best when adults help them stay focused and purposeful. In this framing, children's agency is supported but guided and adults take responsibility for steering learning so that children can succeed. This produces a view of the child as capable but only through partnership with a knowledgeable adult, rather than through self-direction.

However, a key point of divergence lies in how each curriculum conceptualises agency and power. In EYLF-aligned theory, agency is relational and distributed;

children are seen as co-authors of learning and adults are expected to follow children's intentions, respond to their cues and engage in shared construction of understanding (Sumsion, Harrison and Bradley, 2018). This aligns with Rogoff's (2003) view of children as participants in cultural communities and with Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model, which emphasises the influence of relationships and contexts on development. In NEL-aligned practice, however, agency is conditional. The adult remains the central organiser of learning, structuring guided play and instructional routines to ensure progression towards predetermined competencies (Tan, 2018; Keary, Babaeff and Garnier, 2023). This produces a hierarchical adult-child relationship in which children's choices are permitted only within tightly defined boundaries.

As a result, these theoretical differences produce distinct constructions of the child. The EYLF child is a competent, relational meaning-maker, whose learning emerges through participation, identity and cultural engagement (AGDE, 2022; ACECQA, 2022). The NEL child is viewed as a developing learner who becomes capable through guided effort, whose present experiences are shaped by cultural expectations for discipline, focus and achievement (MOE Singapore, 2013; Ang, Lipponen and Lim, 2021). These contrasting images reflect deeper ideological commitments: the EYLF aligns with rights-based, participatory conceptions of childhood, while NEL aligns with culturally rooted beliefs about learning through guided practice. As a result, children in EYLF-aligned settings experience broader opportunities for autonomy and co-construction, whereas children in NEL-aligned settings experience agency primarily in adult-supported, purpose driven structures.

Ultimately, the comparison shows that each curriculum's view of the child directly shapes how play is understood and used. In the EYLF, where children are seen as capable and relational, play becomes an open space driven by children's ideas and contributions, in NEL, where children are viewed as developing learners who benefit from structured support, play is more intentionally guided to help them meet specific goals. These differences highlight that play is never neutral, it reflects the assumptions each curriculum makes about children's capabilities and how adults should support them. Recognising this helps educators design play environments that genuinely align with the image of the child they aim to uphold (Fesseha and Pyle, 2016; Edwards, 2017).

Section 2:

EYLF and NEL: A Critical Comparison of Early Childhood Assessment

Assessment in early childhood education is widely recognised as a crucial process for understanding and supporting each child's learning, development and participation, yet international guidance emphasises that this must be done in ways that honour individuality and cultural context (OECD, 2018). UNESCO (2021) argues that education systems must move beyond standardised expectations to recognise children as unique, capable and diverse, while OECD (2018) highlights the importance of assessment approaches that capture the complexity of children's learning rather than reducing it to narrow indicators. Within play-based curricula, assessment is understood not as a separate or technical act, but as an ongoing, interpretive process embedded in relationships, interactions and everyday experiences (UNICEF, 2018). Research consistently highlights that high-quality assessment must be holistic, formative and responsive to children's identities, interests and cultural backgrounds (Edwards, 2017; Hedges and Cooper, 2018). This reflects the principle of the Unique Child, which recognises that each child develops along their own pathway and therefore requires assessment that is flexible, contextual and sensitive to individual differences.

This section critically evaluates how two national early childhood assessment methods, the Australian Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) and Singapore's Nurturing Early Learners (NEL) framework, assess children's learning within play-based environments. These systems represent contrasting approaches: Australia relies on formative, narrative and relational assessment methods, while Singapore uses more structured, competency-based tools linked to foundational skills and school readiness (Australian Government Department of Education (AGDE), 2022; Ministry of Education (MOE) Singapore, 2013). Examining these approaches, side by side explores how effectively each method supports the Unique Child, how they fairly represent learning and the implications of their differing assessment cultures (OECD, 2018; UNESCO, 2021).

Assessment in EYLF is grounded in a formative, relational and strength-based approach that positions assessment as an ongoing process that is embedded within

children's everyday play and interactions (AGDE, 2022). EYLF V2.0 describes assessment as the continuous cycle of "collecting and analysing information to inform and evaluate children's learning" and emphasises that this must be holistic, contextual and responsive to each child's identity, culture and capabilities (AGDE, 2022). This aligns with international guidance that early childhood assessment should capture the complexity of children's learning rather than reduce it to narrow developmental indicators (OECD, 2018; UNESCO, 2021). In practice, Australian settings rely on observations, learning stories, pedagogical documentation, child voice and family contributions. These methods are designed to capture learning as it unfolds in play, relationships and their everyday routines. Research shows that narrative documentation allows educators to recognise children's interest, dispositions, cultural experiences and emerging capabilities in ways that standardised tools cannot (Hedges and Cooper, 2018). Learning stories particularly foregrounds children's agency, strengths and meaning-making within their own contexts.

Furthermore, the EYLF's assessment approach strongly supports the Unique Child by positioning children as capable, relational learners whose development cannot be separated from their cultural, social and emotional worlds. Cultural-historical theory reinforces that learning must be understood through participation in meaningful activities and relationships (Hedegaard, 2020). Carr and Lee (2019) argue that narrative assessment captures identity, relationships and context, allowing educators to build a rich picture of each child's learning trajectory rather than comparing them to age-based norms.

A key strength of the Australian approach is its commitment to holistic and contextual assessment, enabling educators to capture learning that is social, emotional, cultural and cognitive, rather than focusing solely on observational skills. Research shows that formative, play-embedded assessment enables practitioners to notice the subtle, relational aspects of learning that occurs through children's interactions, problem-solving and engagement with the environment (Edwards, 2017). This aligns with the EYLF's emphasis on understanding children as whole learners (AGDE, 2022). Another significant strength is the strength-based orientation of EYLF assessment. Rather than identifying gaps or deficits, documentation foregrounds what the child can do, the strategies they use and the dispositions they bring to learning. ACECQA

(2022) highlights that this supports children's wellbeing, confidence and identity by positioning children as capable and resourceful. This is particularly important for the Unique Child, ensuring assessment reflects competencies and potential rather than predetermined expectations (Hedges and Cooper, 2018; ACECQA, 2022).

Additionally, the Australian approach is also recognised for its cultural responsiveness, as narrative and observational methods create space for family knowledge, multilingualism practices and diverse cultural experiences. Puroila *et al.* (2023) argue that documentation becomes more meaningful when it reflects the cultural contexts in which children live and learn, allowing educators to build a more accurate and respectful understanding of development. This flexibility supports children from diverse background and avoids the cultural bias often embedded into standardised assessment tools.

However, the Australian approach is not without challenges. The interpretive nature of narrative assessment relies heavily on educator judgment, because documentation is shaped by what educators choose to notice and record, there is a risk of bias or inconsistency (Alacam and Olgan, 2021). Yoder and Williford (2019) suggests that educators' beliefs and cultural backgrounds can influence interpretations of children's actions, potentially privileging certain behaviours or communication styles. Another challenge is the time-intensive nature of high-quality documentation. Meaningful assessment requires time for observation and reflection, yet workload pressures can lead to superficial or compliance-driven assessment rather than genuinely reflective practice (Grieshaber and Graham, 2017). When this happens, assessment loses its depth and becomes less effective in representing the Unique Child.

Finally, variability in educator training and assessment capability contributes to uneven quality across the sector. While the EYLF provides a strong conceptual foundation, it does not stipulate specific assessment tools or processes, leaving significant room for interpretation. Although, this flexibility can be a strength, it means that assessment quality depends heavily on educators' professional knowledge, reflective skills and confidence analysing children's learning (Albin-Clark, 2021). As a result, children may experience different assessment practices across settings, raising questions about equity.

Overall, Australia's assessment methods strongly align with the principles of the Unique Child by valuing individuality, context and relational learning. However, their effectiveness depends heavily on educator expertise, time, reflective practice and professional learning. Without these conditions, the quality and depth of assessment can vary significantly across settings.

In contrast, assessment in Singapore's NEL framework reflects a more structured, competency-based approach aligned with the national priorities of foundational skills, academic preparedness and system-wide consistency. NEL positions assessment as a systematic process, monitoring progress towards clearly defined learning goals across six domains, including language, numeracy, motor skills and social-emotional development (MOE Singapore, 2013). Unlike the EYLF, which foregrounds relational and narrative assessment, NEL emphasises progression pathways, learning outcomes and teacher-guided evaluation, reflecting Singapore's broader educational culture of rigour and achievement (OECD, 2018; UNESCO, 2021). NEL conceptualises assessment as a means of identifying what children know and can do in relation to expected competencies, enabling teachers to plan targeted instructions and ensure readiness for the structured demands of primary schooling. This framework encourages teachers to use a combination of observations, checklists and performance tasks track children's development over time (MOE Singapore, 2013). However, while play remains a valued pedagogical tool, assessment is more explicitly linked to learning goals and skills acquisition, positioning the teacher as an active guide who scaffolds children's progress towards predetermined outcomes.

This approach offers several strengths. First, the clarity of learning goals provides educators with a shared understanding of expected competencies, supporting consistency and enabling systematic monitoring (Yang, Li and Ang, 2021). Second, structured assessment tools help identify areas where children require additional support, particularly in foundational literacy and numeracy skills prioritised within Singapore's education system (Yang, Li and Ang, 2021; Dyslexia Association of Singapore, 2024). This aligns with national expectations for school readiness and supports early intervention.

However, the structured nature of NEL assessment also presents limitations when viewed through the lens of the Unique Child. Because assessment is closely tied to

predetermined competencies, children's learning may be interpreted primarily in relation to expected norms rather than their individual strengths, interests and cultural experiences (Skedsmo and Huber, 2025). Studies show that when frameworks emphasise standardised expectations, educators may inadvertently prioritise observable, measurable skills nuanced, relational and contextual aspects of learning (Bradbury, 2019). This could constrain opportunities to recognise diverse competencies, particularly for children whose learning trajectories do not align with the linear progression pathways.

Furthermore, the teacher-directed nature of NEL assessment may limit children's agency. Although the framework encourages observation during play, the emphasis on learning outcomes means assessment often focuses on what children can demonstrate in relation to specific competencies rather than how they make meaning within their cultural and social worlds (NAEYC, 2023). This contrast with narratives approaches which foregrounds children's identities, relationships and lived experiences. Another challenge is cultural responsiveness. Singapore's multicultural context means that children bring diverse linguistic and cultural resources, yet structured assessment tools can inadvertently privilege dominant communication styles and behavioural expectations, making it harder to capture the competencies of minority or multilingual children (Goodwin and Low, 2017). When assessment focuses on predetermined indicators, there is less space to recognise culturally situated ways of expressing knowledge, curiosity and capability.

Finally, workload pressures also affect NEL assessment. Although structured tools can streamline data collection, demands of documenting progress across multiple domains can be time-consuming, leading to reliance on checklists rather than deeper interpretive assessment (Grieshaber and Graham, 2017). This mirrors international concerns that structured assessment systems are becoming compliance-driven rather than reflective of holistic learning (OECD, 2018). These limitations suggest NEL as less closely aligned with the principles of the Unique Child, as it prioritises expected competencies over individual development pathways.

Overall, while the NEL framework provides clarity, consistency and strong alignment with national educational priorities, its structures, competency-based approach offers a more limited view of the Unique Child. It supports foundational skills development

effectively but may not capture the richness, diversity and individuality of children's learning as it unfolds in play-based environments.

In summary, the EYLF and NEL frameworks reflect two distinct assessment cultures that shape how children's learning is understood within play-based environments. EYLF's relational, narrative and strength-based approach offers an holistic view of the Unique Child, capturing learning as it emerges through identity, relationships and cultural experiences. In contrast, NEL's structured, competency-based model provides clarity and consistency but offers a narrower lens that may overlook the complexity of children's meaning-making in play. Each framework brings valuable strengths and limitations: EYLF depends heavily on educator interpretation and NEL risks prioritising predetermined competencies over individual learning trajectories. Together, the analysis highlights the need for assessment approaches that balance structure with flexibility so that children's identities, capabilities and cultural worlds are meaningfully represented.

Section 3:

The Battle That Starts With “Something Is Different” And the War That Begins When Someone Says, “We See It Too”

Every parent of a child with additional learning needs (ALN) has had that same moment, a moment that is etched in their mind like the prints on their fingertips. The moment they think “*something is different*”.

It hits you in the chest. All the little things you have been noticing: the lining up of the toys, avoiding eye contact, fear of loud noises or bright lights. The aversions to certain foods, smells or textures. Every transition feel like climbing a mountain. You see the overwhelm before they even say a word. And it all adds up. *Something is different*, and research supports this, showing parents are commonly the first to notice early developmental differences through subtle, intuitive observations (Cuomo, Joosten and Vaz, 2019). These early signs, including sensory sensitivities, repetitive play patterns and transition difficulties are well documented. Williams *et al.* (2018) demonstrate that early sensory patterns can predict later developmental competencies, reinforcing the importance of early recognition.

Then the hardest part: bringing it up with professionals. Most parents hear the same response: “give it time”, “all children develop differently”, “he will grow out of it”, “she is just sensitive”. This experience is widely reported by parents, research shows that early concerns are often dismissed or normalised in exactly these ways (Crane *et al.*, 2016). Parents describe this stage as filled with doubt and emotional strain, echoing wider research on parental help-seeking (Keenan *et al.*, 2026). Boshoff *et al.* (2018) highlight that repeated invalidation compounds stress and delays access to support.

Still, deep down, you want to believe them. Am I being dramatic? Am I imagining it? But even deeper down, a part of you says, “This is my child. I know them best”.

You quietly accept that is something different, and then you start to loudly advocate for your child in ways no one expects. You see, when a parent realises there is something more, and we have been told to “give it time”, it lights a fire in our bellies, a fire that no amount of minimising can extinguish.

This blog is for the parents who knew before anyone else. The ones who trusted their instincts even when professionals did not. The ones who carried the worry

quietly because they did not want to sound dramatic or as if they were labelling their child. The ones who felt dismissed, unheard and brushed aside. The ones who kept going anyway.

Because the truth is, parents often see the earliest signs of ALN long before the system is ready to recognise them. Research backs this lived reality: parents notice the subtle shifts, the tiny cues, the patterns no one else sees. Sacrey *et al.* (2018) found that parents often detect early developmental differences earlier than clinicians, highlighting how parental insight as a sensitive early indicator - not because anything is 'wrong', but because we are the experts on our children.

And realising all this early on is not a burden; it is a gift. It is the beginning of connection, understanding and support. It is the first step in helping your child feel seen, safe and celebrated for exactly who they are. But before anyone else sees what you see, you carry it quietly. You carry the fear, the questions, the guilt, even though none of this is your fault. Research shows that parents often internalise these emotions; guilt, shame and self-blame are common and rarely spoken about (Davis and Carter, 2018). This emotional load is closely linked to non-finite grief and the loss of the parenthood you imagined (Mair *et al.*, 2024; Teachers Institute, 2025). The stress of trying to make sense of what you are noticing long before anyone else does is strongly linked to parental emotional strain (Daniel, Dwidiyanti and Zubaidah, 2025). Parents often manage these emotions silently and privately (Ooi *et al.*, 2016), a silence reflected in research on stigma and hidden emotional labour (Kinnear *et al.*, 2016; Mitter, Ali and Scior, 2019). It is heavy. It is lonely. And it is something parents rarely spoken aloud.

Then, the term after their third birthday arrives. Nursery begins. And one day, a practitioner pulls you aside. Quiet voice. Kind eyes. And say something like, "we have noticed a few things" or "we have been seeing the patterns of behaviour you described to us". Early years practitioners are trained to observe developmental patterns and are often the first professionals to recognise emerging ALN (WG, 2021; DfE, 2024). Their observational role is central to early identification. Siraj-Blatchford *et al.* (2011) and Sylva *et al.* (2010) emphasis that high-quality early years practice depends on sustained, systemic observations across routines, interactions and play. Their work highlights that practitioners are trained to notice small but meaningful

variations in engagement, communication and self-regulation, patterns that may not be visible in short appointments. This structured, evidence-informed approach enables practitioners to recognise emerging needs with accuracy and confidence.

And suddenly, after that conversation, the fog lifts. You are not alone anymore.

All it took was one early years practitioner who was appropriately trained and educated to notice the signs of ALN, one person who truly saw your child. Early years practitioners are required to observe children closely, recognise emerging needs and act on developmental concerns as part of their professional duty (WG, 2021; DfE, 2024). This duty is not optional; it is a core expectation of high-quality practice. Practitioners are obligated to respond when they identify potential ALN, ensuring concerns are not minimised or delayed. Their role includes initiating difficult conversations, documenting observations and beginning the early support pathway so children receive timely intervention (WG, 2021; DfE, 2024).

In that moment, it feels like you have just won a battle you did not even realise you had been fighting

It is validating in ways that are hard to explain. Not because you want to be right, but because you want your child to be understood. Practitioners see your child in scenarios you rarely witness, in groups, routines, busy environments, transitions. They see how your child copes when the world gets louder, faster, brighter and more unpredictable. They see the effort it takes to hold it together in the moments where they withdraw, freeze, cling or melt. These behavioural responses are well-recognised in research on sensory overload and emotional dysregulation (Cibralic *et al.*, 2019; Cook *et al.*, 2021).

So, when that one special practitioner, who will always hold a place in your heart, finally says, "We see it too," something inside you softens. You exhale for the first time in a long time. You feel heard. You feel believed. You feel supported. Parents consistently report that when a professional finally validates their concerns, the relief is profound. The fog lifts and the sense of isolation eases (Crane *et al.*, 2016). This emotional shift is also reflected in research on parent-professional collaboration (McCarthy and Guerin, 2021).

It is the moment the worry you have been carrying alone becomes a shared responsibility. The moment your child's needs stop being invisible. The moment the journey shifts from guessing to understanding. And often, it is the start of hope.

Because now there are people in your corner- people who want to help, who want to understand, who want to make things easier for your child. People who do not dismiss you or minimise your concerns. People who see your child clearly, just as you always have.

But although you may have won this battle, it is now time to go to war. The difference is that this time, you are not going alone.

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