

Expert Witness Report

1. In the matter of

South Australian Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education and Care.

2. Witness Details

2.1: Witness Name: Sandra (known as Sandie) Mary Wong

2.2: Witness Address: [REDACTED]

3. Witness statement

I acknowledge that I am responsible for the information provided here.

4. Witness Qualifications & Position

Sandie Wong (Doctor of Philosophy in Early Childhood Macquarie University, 2006), Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood Education) (Hons 1) (Macquarie University, 2000) is a Professor in Early Childhood at the Macquarie School of Education, Macquarie University, and currently holds a Research Fellowship with Goodstart Early Learning (2021-2023). Sandie has worked as an academic, manager, researcher, evaluator, educator, consultant and nurse, within a range of early childhood, academic and health organisations. Her research is driven by a concern with the role early childhood education has in ameliorating disadvantage and reducing marginalisation both contemporaneously and historically. She is committed to working in collaborative, strengths-based ways, with academics from a range of disciplines, early childhood organisations and practitioners, and governments, to lead and support high quality research, evaluation and practitioner enquiry, that contributes to best practice in early childhood. Since 2010, Sandie has been awarded over A\$4.4 million in competitive research income grants, to conduct extensive research and evaluations related to early childhood workforce issues (including educator well-being and educator time-use), practices (including inter-professional practice), and the history of early childhood internationally. Her work has been published widely in 69 scholarly publications (51 journal articles; 3 books; 15 book chapters), 55 research reports and knowledge translation documents, and 18 professional publications; and she has presented her work at 24 keynotes / invited presentations, and over 80 peer-reviewed conferences. Sandie is Vice President of *OMEP* (Organisation Mondiale pour l'Education Prescolaire [OMEP] or the World Organisation for Early Childhood Education) for the Asia Pacific Region, and Board Member of Northside Community Services, ACT, and SPLAT Maths, ACT. She is on the Editorial Committee of *the Australasian Journal of Early Childhood* and Member of the New South Wales Department of Education Early Childhood Advisory Group. Sandie has been an international expert reviewer for research proposals for the *Croatian Science Foundation* (2019), the *National Commission for Scientific and Technological Research (CONICYT)*, Chile (2018), and the *Millennium Science Initiative of the National Agency for Research and Development*, Chile (2021 & 2022). Sandie has also acted as an expert witness in Australia. Sandie has supervised four PhD and three masters' students to completion and is currently supervising three PhD students; she has examined six PhD and eight Masters' theses. She has taught extensively at post-graduate and undergraduate levels at Macquarie University and Charles Sturt University, across multiple early childhood subjects.

5 Details of brief

I have been asked to provide an expert witness statement on early childhood education to the South Australian Royal Commission. In particular, I have been asked to provide a statement on:

- History of provision
- Drivers of innovation
- The dichotomy between care and education,
- Quality; and
- Increased investment in early childhood provision.

My statement is based on consideration of my own and others' scholarly research. My views are mine and do not represent the positions of either Macquarie University or Goodstart Early Learning. **Please note that in some places, the text below is copied directly from my previous published works.**

5.1 Definition of 'early childhood' & 'early childhood education services'

The term 'early childhood' is internationally recognised as the period birth to eight years of age¹. Thus, early childhood education generally incorporates education for children in the years before (what in most countries is) formal compulsory education, as well as the first two or three years of primary school. However, the term 'early childhood education services' generally refers to services providing education and care for children aged six weeks to five years. These services include centre-based services such as long-day care services (LDC -which generally operate from 7am to 6pm, five days a week for at least 50 weeks a year), and pre-schools - sometimes called kindergartens (which generally operate from 9am to 3pm, during school terms), and home-based services such as family day care (which operate similar hours to LDC).

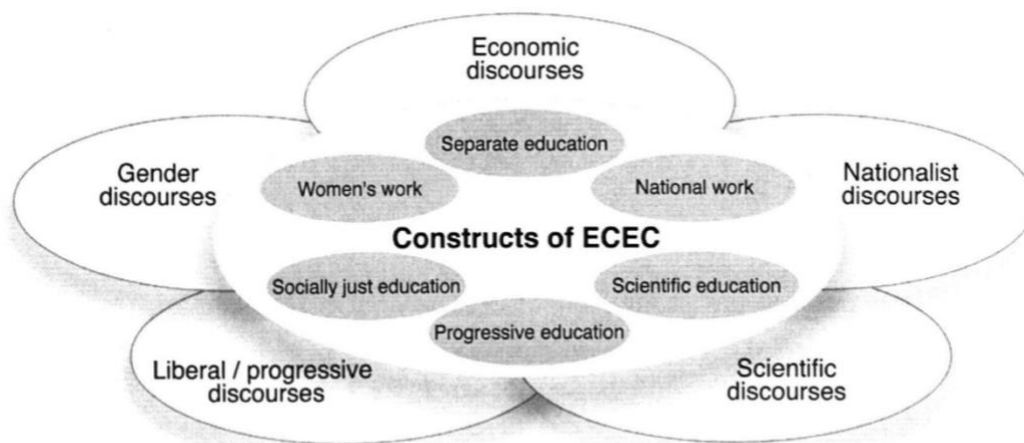
My statement is restricted to ECEC as related to prior to formal schooling (birth to five).

6. Early history of provision of early childhood education in Australia: Setting a precedent

To understand contemporary provision of ECEC in Australia, it is first necessary to understand that how we see ECEC today is inextricably linked to its history and the multiple, sometimes contradictory, conceptualisations of the purpose of ECEC. These diverse conceptualisations are formed within multiple bodies of knowledge or ways of knowing – discourses.

6.1 Dominant discourses underpinning conceptualisations of ECEC

The discourses that have shaped the development of ECEC include: ***nationalistic*** and ***economic*** discourses that frame ECEC as an investment in the future of the country or as a commodity; ***liberal progressive*** philosophical ideas about rights and freedoms; ***scientific*** understandings about how young children grow, develop and learn; and ***gendered*** discourses about motherhood and women's rights (see Figure 1²). These discourses are all evident at any time. They change and shift over history. But some discourses are more powerful, and therefore more productive, than others.



6.2 The history of ECE continues to shape contemporary ideas about ECEC

Multiple discourses and conceptualisations of ECEC were highly evident at the inception of ECEC in Australia, with the opening of the first Free Kindergarten by the Kindergarten Union of New South Wales in 1895 (see below), and remain so today. First, whilst education for children younger than six years was a feature of Australia's early colonial history, and indeed many very young children attended State Schools, within the prevailing ***economic*** discourses of the economic recession of the 1890s, the education of young children became constructed as a waste of public resources and was marginalised outside public provision (where it remains).

Second, ***liberal / progressive*** discourses dominant at the turn of the century, created an imperative to reform the erstwhile predominantly didactic pedagogical approaches –

that were inappropriate for all children – but especially the youngest. Instead, Froebelian Kindergarten became constructed as reflecting liberal / progressive ideals. Subsequently, Free Kindergartens were established to model Froebelian Kindergarten methods (see below). As Free Kindergartens catered mainly for children younger than school age, Froebelian methods became synonymous with ECEC and continue to underpin its play-based, individualised, child-centred curriculum (see below).

Third, the rise of **scientific** discourses and especially the child study movement, created new ways of viewing the child and education, and a space where ECEC could emerge as scientific education and care - based on scientific knowledge - and Free Kindergartens could emerge as scientific teaching. Today, ECEC is still heavily influenced by scientific understandings from, for example, psychology and health (see below).

Fourth, dominant **nationalistic discourses** - a feature of Federation - constructed children as valuable assets that needed to be nurtured, but at the same time, as potentially dangerous threats to society that needed to be shaped into compliant citizens. The construction of ECEC as ‘contributing to the nation’ remains highly evident. But within powerful contemporary economic discourses of neo-liberalism – the responsibility for ECEC provision has resulted in our mixed market economy.

Fifth, the largely middle-class female members of the Free Kindergarten Association drew on first wave **feminist** discourses to argue that ECEC was both work done *for* women as well as work rightly done *by* educated and skilled women. Today, ECEC remains a highly genderised profession - but the skills required are often not valued. ECEC is also often viewed as an important contributor to ‘female’ workforce participation.

Also underlying the development of ECEC in Australia was the fact that the politically astute women of the Free Kindergartens were driven by **social justice** concerns. They utilised all the discourses at their disposal – often framed differently for different audiences - to call for a greater interest in children's well-being, and to advocate ECEC on the basis that it could contribute to improving the life chances of disadvantaged children and their families *and* advance Australian society. Contemporary advocates of ECE are often similarly compelled as our forebears to continue to advocate for ECEC as a child’s right.

6.3 The spread of kindergarten across Australia

The establishment of Free Kindergartens soon spread from NSW to other states, largely as a result of members of the NSW Free Kindergarten moving interstate, including Lilian De Lissa who travelled to South Australia and with others established the Free Kindergarten of South Australia (1905), the state’s first Free Kindergarten in 1906, and its first Kindergarten Teachers’ College in 1907.

The first long day care service in Australia was opened in 1906, by the Sydney Day Nursery Association. Day nurseries were often viewed as problematic – due to maternalistic discourses about the role of women - and their spread to other states was not as rapid. In some states these early education and care settings were called creches.

6.4. The lasting legacy of philanthropic constructions of ECEC

The establishment of ECEC as a philanthropic endeavour has had negative consequences and has been criticised heavily. Writers such as Spearritt³ (1979) and Kelly⁴ (1988), for instance, argue that the work of free kindergartens upheld dominant middle-class ideals and put forward a view that the work of these pioneering women was little more than ‘middle-class do-gooding’. Similarly, Brennan⁵ (1998, p. 14) refers to the work as ‘bourgeois philanthropy’. Indeed, Kelly (1988, pp. 21, 22), in her thesis examining the history of day nurseries in Australia, dismisses the socially just work of free kindergartens altogether, arguing that the Kindergarten Union ‘ignored glaring evidence of children’s mal- and under-nourishment’ and thus ‘betrayed its own welfare objectives’. Moreover, as Kelly (1988) points out, free kindergartens were open for only a few hours each day, so any assistance they offered was hopelessly inadequate.

Of course, from a contemporary viewpoint, the construction of ECEC as a philanthropic endeavour that ‘saves’ children is deeply problematic, not least because it tends to construct children in multiple, contradictory and unhelpful ways as innocent and vulnerable yet also dangerous, and as both asset and burden, rather than challenge oppressive systems, these early forms of ECEC perhaps served to uphold dominant power structures. For instance, by focusing on saving individual children, any ‘failures’ to succeed would likely have been considered due to individual shortcomings, rather than to structural, social or political forces⁶. Moreover, by marginally improving the conditions of the poor, free kindergartens upheld the promise of progress and the capitalist system and contributed to placating the poor. Tiffin⁷ (1982) and Vandebroek⁸ (2006), for example, suggest that early forms of ECEC possibly stifled moves to challenge an inequitable system that had led to poverty and disadvantage in the first place. Further, the establishment of free kindergartens as philanthropic institutions focused on the poor, constructed ECEC as outside the parameters of state responsibility, mitigated against the view of ECEC as a right for all and operated against universal provision⁴.

Indeed, for most of its history in Australia, State and Commonwealth Government investment in early education was largely absent – save for Commonwealth funded Lady Gowrie Centres in the 1930s (see below), and a burgeoning of state funded pre-schools in the 1950s. For most of its history, the development of ECEC was considered primarily for ‘needy’ children, and outside of the responsibility of State Departments of Education. However, in the 1970s, with increased advocacy from women’s groups (see

below), the Commonwealth began to fund community-based 'child care' services as a means of supporting women's workforce participation. Meanwhile, State Governments continued to provide funding for pre-schools. These separate funding streams engrained a misconception that continues to this day, that long-day care services provide 'care' whereas 'pre-schools' provide education (see below). It wasn't until the 1980s, that 'child care' became entrenched as an area of public policy. Later in that decade, the encroachment of economic rationalism into public policy, and especially the growth of for-profit provision, resulted in our mixed-economy provision (see below). The last major development in the history of funding ECEC provision, which aimed to bridge the divide between Commonwealth and State funding were the historic and world leading National Policies for a National Quality Framework and Universal Access to early childhood education in the 2010s. Below I discuss some of the drivers of innovation of ECEC.

7. Drivers of Innovation of ECEC

Throughout history, there have been many innovations in early childhood education. However, they tend to fall into two groups - philosophical and scientific drivers. These drivers have shaped the way that ECEC is developed in Australia.

7.1 Philosophical Drivers of Innovation

A Unique Early Childhood Pedagogy

The importance of the early childhood period and the question of what should constitute early childhood education, has occupied philosophers and pedagogues across international contexts for millennia⁹. Confucius (500 BCE), for example, recognised the holistic nature of children's development within the child, family, neighbourhood and broader society, and argued the need to nurture and care for children. Likewise, both Plato and Aristotle (400BCE), recognised early childhood as an important time for educating future citizens, and advocated state intervention in the care of young children. During the Renaissance, in Europe, many books on child rearing were published, including John Comenius' *Magna Didactic* – which set out how children learned, the role education played in society and the benefits of education. He also published the first known illustrated children's book for young children - *The Orbis Pictus* (1658). John Locke, in the Enlightenment, gave us the notion that children are a 'blank slate' (*tabula rasa*) upon which life's experiences would write, entreating careful attention to the early years of growth and development. Likewise, Rousseau (18th Century) in his *Emile* – a treatise on how children should be educated – gave rise to the notion that children are active learners and that education for very young children should be individualistic and follow the child's interests. These ideas were further developed by Pestalozzi (18th Century) to include the concepts of the child as a self-directed learner; the importance of careful observation of children; the need to engage

children in their learning and the value of child questioning and experimentation. Whilst it was Pestalozzi who gave us the first example of early childhood services in his 'model farm schools', arguably the two pedagogues who have had the most profound impact on early childhood education, and whose ideas are still highly evident in contemporary practices are the progressive educationalists Froebel (19th century) and Montessori (20th Century).

Froebel

Froebel, often considered the 'father' of early childhood education, likened children to germinal seeds in need of nurturing and tendering¹⁰. He was the first to propose the idea of educational settings for young children as 'kinder-gartens' (or child gardens). Froebel believed that children go through distinct stages of development (infancy / childhood / boyhood etc) each building on the previous one – hence the earlier one intervenes the most effect one can have on the developing child. Froebel's kindergarten method was a carefully considered child-centred, and importantly play-based curriculum, that valorised nature and natural materials. He advocated strongly for skilled and knowledgeable (female) teachers. With the help of (mostly female) advocates who saw early education as a means for ameliorating disadvantage and addressing poverty, Froebel's kindergarten method spread widely in the late 19th and early 20th century, including in Australia. Many of Froebel's sentiments and pioneering pedagogical ideas remain at the heart of contemporary early years' pedagogy (see below)¹¹.

Montessori

Similarly, Montessori's ideas that 'play is the work of the child', that children learn through interacting with their environment, and that process not product is of most importance, as well as her introduction of didactic, self-correcting learning materials, child-sized furniture and open-shelving (to facilitate children's autonomy and independence), remain features of contemporary early learning pedagogical practice¹². Moreover, Montessori was instrumental in developing a children's rights agenda in the early 20th Century, including their right to education, that ultimately led to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (see below).

Malaguzzi

The pedagogy of Loris Malaguzzi and the pre-schools of Reggio Emilia, and especially the seminal text *The Hundred Languages of Children* (first published in 1993),¹³ has had a huge impact on early years pedagogy. With a very strong view of the child as "rich in potential, strong, powerful and competent" and researchers and constructors of their own knowledge, as well as the approach's attention to environmental aesthetics and close observation and documentation of children's learning, this approach requires the teacher to develop strong relationships with children and families, become co-

constructors of knowledge and provide natural materials and resources that entice children to explore and enable them to communicate through multiple media.

A Socially Just Pedagogy

Other pedagogical approaches that have had significant impact and continue to inform ECEC practice and policy are related (but are not restricted) to social justice.

Social justice, rights-based, multicultural and antibias education,¹⁴ are critical pedagogical perspectives that view education in the early years that is critically reflective and underpinned by ideals of, for example, democracy, fairness, tolerance, celebration of difference, inclusion and understanding, and is informed by an understanding of Indigenous perspectives, as having the potential to combat racism, gender inequality and ableism, and thus contribute to the promotion of a fairer, more just and harmonious society.

Social Justice & Children's Rights

Social justice conceptualisations of ECEC, largely informed by feminist and post-structural ideas and known as critical pedagogy, argue that ECEC can work towards creating a more just society. Having their historical roots in the civil rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s, critical pedagogues argue that educators who recognise, engage with, interrogate and challenge unjust and intolerant practices associated with, for example, social class, race and gender, challenging stereotypes and oppressive practices, can contribute to a more socially just society (see, for instance refs 15, 16, 17 & 18). A strong argument from this perspective is that ECEC has the potential to contribute to social justice through the process of facilitating greater equity in the distribution of resources. That is, by assisting children from marginalised groups to develop foundational skills, ECEC contributes to children succeeding at school, and ultimately gaining employment, thus ameliorating the effects of disadvantage.

Indeed, so influential is the potential impact of early childhood education for children and society, that it is recognised by multiple international organisations as a way of contributing to human rights objectives, addressing global poverty, and as a way of contributing to global sustainable development. It is now a widely used, rarely challenged, construct underpinning approaches to poverty reduction. For instance, the World Bank¹⁹ asserts on its website that early childhood development programs 'encourage greater social equity ... [and] can modify the effects of socioeconomic and gender-related inequities, some of the most entrenched causes of poverty'. Moreover, in the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child, which commits signatories – including Australia - to ensuring children's basic right to health, education and participation and protection from abuse and neglect, Article 28²⁰ states that children have a right to education. General Comment 7²¹ specifically urges State Parties to

provide comprehensive policies for early childhood - including education. Further, the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal 4.2 target is that by 2030 "all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education"²².

Whilst the UNCRC is intended to steer government policies on matters concerning children in relation to provision, protection and participation, the ideas articulated in the UNCRC also underpin the work of many early childhood advocates. In Australia, for instance, the UNCRC is a foundational document underpinning Early Childhood Australia's 'Code of Ethics'²³ – a statement about the appropriate and expected behaviours of Australian childhood educators. Of particular note, the ACT Education Act 2004 has been amended to "recognise that early childhood education and care has a central role in the realisation of the rights of the child and therefore must be universally available on an equity basis" (see Table 2). Those who advocate educational quality from a child's rights perspective also recognise that equity of access on its own is insufficient and it must also take into account the quality of services. Thus, best practice in this sense is equitable access to ECEC services of equivalent *quality* (see below).

ECEC also contributes to children's understanding of social justice by helping children to distinguish between 'fair' and 'unfair' behaviour, and develop concepts of 'right' and 'wrong' actions. In Australia, anti-bias curriculum, which emerged in the 1990s, for example, is an approach to early childhood education that sets forth values-based principles in support of respecting and embracing differences and acting against bias and unfairness²⁴. Anti-bias teaching requires critical thinking and problem solving by both children and adults. The overarching goal is creating a climate of positive self and group identity development, through which every child will achieve their fullest potential.

Constructs of ECEC as challenging oppressive practices are evident in several international ECEC curricula²⁵. For example, a focus on philosophical perspectives is highly evident in Nordic countries (Finland, Sweden, Norway, and Denmark) where there is "social pedagogical tradition"²⁵. Jensen²⁶ states, for instance, that Nordic countries tend to have in common, to a greater or lesser extent, an holistic approach to child learning that focuses on the child's rights; and development of democratic principles and values (e.g., responsibility, egalitarianism, freedom of mind and tolerance).

The Australian national curriculum document ***Belonging, Being and Becoming: the Early Years Learning Framework for Australia*** (EYLF) has citizenry as one of its foci. The EYLF encourages educators to draw on critical pedagogies that 'offer insights into issues of power, equity and social justice', and has as one of its principles that educators 'take

action to redress unfairness'²⁷. Further, one of the outcomes for children in the framework is 'to become aware of fairness' (for a discussion of social justice in the framework, see ref 28). This form of socially just ECEC requires educators to recognise how power operates through political, economic and social systems and practices, and how this power operates to benefit some and marginalise others, as well as to commit to social reformation by working at the local level. There is some evidence, however, that understandings about best practice in ECEC in Australia are incongruent with Australian Indigenous peoples' perspectives²⁹. The EYLF is currently under review and one of the proposed changes is for a greater focus on Indigenous perspectives.

Women's rights

ECEC is also inextricably linked with women's rights. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, second wave feminists and women's rights groups challenged inequities in employment and educational opportunities as well as income, identifying education as a primary contributing factor in institutionalized and systemic sexism³⁰. Within these discourses, ECEC was constructed as a support for parenting and enabler of women's - who would otherwise be burdened with childcare - access to and participation in education and employment.

(From Wong & Press, 2012³¹). The 1970s marked a significant shift in Australian politics. The election of the Labor Whitlam Government (1972-75) on a platform of social welfare reform, saw significant changes in a range of areas such as, foreign policy, law, education, women's rights, Aboriginal rights, multi-culturalism and the arts. In particular, Whitlam championed active citizenry, community-participation and responsive government, and an accompanying expansion in the role of the Commonwealth in the provision of a range of social services – including ECEC. Childcare became a responsibility of the Commonwealth Government with assent of the ***Child Care Act, 1972*** under the previous Liberal-Country Party Government.

The proclamation of *The Child Care Act 1972* was a watershed in the history of early childhood education and care in Australia. From January 1, 1974, the Act enabled the Commonwealth to provide grants for the establishment of childcare centres run by non-profit organisations, subsidies for the salaries of suitably qualified teachers, and funds for research and evaluation of child care. Subsequently, recognising the inadequacy of child care facilities in Australia (childcare was only available to 7% of working mothers and single parents [Burns 1976; Cheeseright 1971]), Kim Beazley (Snr), Minister for Education in the subsequent national Whitlam Labor government, commissioned The Australian Pre-School Committee (APC) to 'recommend measures ... to ensure that all children be given an opportunity to undertake one year of pre-school education and that child care centres be provided for below school age children of working parents and underprivileged families' (APC 1973: np).

Reflecting the social justice discourses dominant at that time, the APC report - *Care and Education of Young Children* - (referred to as the *Fry Report* after the Chair) identified the inadequacy of early childhood services, particularly for: migrant, Aboriginal, remote and isolated communities; children with disabilities; families in distress; single parent families or families where both parents worked; children in institutions; and in areas of high population density and new growth. It also noted the problematic division between care and education and the disjuncture between early childhood and primary education. These challenges remain pertinent today.

The Fry Report attempted to outline a way forward in the provision of early childhood education and care in Australia. Drawing on a range of scientific discourses (primarily psychology) the Report establishes a set of 'basic assumptions' to underpin the provision of ECEC services, stressing the holistic nature of children's growth and development; the heterogeneous and pluralistic nature of Australian society; and the value of early education for supporting children's later learning. Further, it drew on social justice arguments, to frame children's access to high quality early childhood services staffed by *qualified* early childhood teachers as '... an undisputed right of all children' especially noting that 'Children in the years of early childhood have human rights identical with those of all other members of the community, and their needs are commensurate with those of older Australian children' (APC 1973: 34).

Unfortunately, however, this time also saw 'the child care wars' – where women's rights to ECEC to support work (expansion of services) were pitched against children's rights to high quality ECEC. Even before its release the Fry Report attracted fierce criticism emanating from deep divisions between the preschool movement and the childcare movement, and reflecting changes in the political landscape from the time of the commissioning of the report to its release. The Report was criticised from a number of perspectives. Childcare lobbyists argued it was biased towards pre-school. In particular, its recommendations for childcare expansion was referred to as 'grossly inadequate' in the subsequent Report of the Priorities Report Staff (1976:5); where it was also criticised as being 'unnecessarily concerned' with the professionalisation of staff, largely because it was incongruent with the community participation model dominant at the time. Finally, because the policy context had shifted significantly from when the Fry report was commissioned to when it was released, its recommendations were no longer aligned with the strategic directions of Government. In light of its negative reception from multiple quarters, the Fry Report recommendations were never implemented. The Committee responsible for the report was disbanded and the report was essentially 'shelved'.

It was in the 1980s, however, when Hawke's Labor Government came to power in a landmark majority, that 'child care' became entrenched as an area of public policy. Significant social changes, including women's increasing participation in the workforce,

gave rise to the rapid expansion of public ‘childcare’ places, as an integral component of reform measures designed to improve economic performance. The emphasis of Commonwealth funding was on work related ‘childcare’ rather than preschool – the latter was largely left to the States to fund. Later in the decade, the encroachment of economic rationalism into public policy, and especially the growth of for-profit provision, albeit with the safeguard of a National Accreditation System, was to fundamentally alter the nature of childcare provision. It is the legacy of this period that has resulted in our mixed-economy provision – now with more than half of ECEC services operating ‘for-profit’ – with quality assured through a National Quality Framework.

7.2. Scientific Drivers of Innovation

Early childhood education perhaps more than education at any other time in the lifespan, has been highly influenced by scientific understandings – especially from child development.

A Child Development Pedagogy

Notwithstanding individual differences, the early years period is a time of rapid growth, change and maturation.³² The capacities of children in the early childhood period who attend ECEC services vary and change considerably, moving from an initial period of highly integrated developmental systems, characterised by high dependence, toward increasingly segregated and specialised systems, and increasing independence: Consider for example, an infant of six weeks who, in order get their needs met, is totally dependent on the ability of the adults around them to read their non-verbal, whole body, communication bids. Compare this to a five year old who is reasonably independent, able to eat, dress and feed them self and communicate their thoughts, needs and desires both through verbal and non-verbal communication (e.g. through art, drama and written expression). Given the rapid and holistic nature of children’s growth and development in their early years, in addition to the ideas of philosophers and pedagogues, early childhood education has always been strongly informed by developmental and health science.

The systematic scientific study of children’s development began with the child study movement in the late 19th century³². Since then, developmentalists and psychologists have proffered multiple, diverse theories on how children develop and learn across a range of developmental domains. Some of the theories that have been particularly influential in early childhood education include: learning theories - such as Piaget’s cognitive stage theory, Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory, Bandura’s social learning theory and Rogoff’s cultural learning theory. Other influential theories are Skinner’s behavioural theory, Gesell’s maturational theory, Chomsky’s communication theory, Bowlby’s attachment theory, and Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory. These scientific studies of children, including in recent years from neuroscience, have provided

indisputable evidence that the experiences children encounter in their early life, have long-term and profound impact on their later growth and development.

These scientific ideas influenced ECEC pedagogies. Of particular significance in the 1980s – 2000s was the influential *Developmentally Appropriate Practice*³³. DAP argued that educators must ensure their ideas are informed by current evidence of how children grow and develop and provide experiences that support their learning and development. It also required educators to understand ‘typical’ and development at different ages so that when children’s development is ‘atypical’ interventions can be put in place to ameliorate or lessen the impact.

In the 1990s – 2000s, however, many of these scientific theories came under fierce criticism by ‘reconceptualists’³⁴. Informed by post-modern ideas, these critical theorists questioned the objectivity of the ‘truths’ on which scientific arguments are made. They argued that science tends to privilege Western, middle-class ways of knowing, thinking and supporting children’s development. Some ECEC advocates continue to argue against child development and particularly child assessment in ECEC as a fundamentally flawed exercise.

A Health & Well-being Pedagogy

Similar to understandings from developmental psychology, ideas about healthy nutrition, physical activity, contagions, disease prevention and disability and so on, inform the early childhood educator³⁴. Children in the early years spend a lot of time in ‘routine’ care such as nappy changing, mealtimes and settling for sleep – these ‘caregiving’ episodes provide significant scope for educative experiences (e.g. singing to a child whilst changing their nappy supports their social emotional and language development). Indeed, concerns over children’s health have been highly influential in shaping innovations in ECEC. Two examples of when health concerns drove innovation are the establishment of the Woolloomooloo Mothers and Babies’ Welfare Centre and Lady Gowrie Centres – both of which provided integrated ECEC and health services.

Woolloomooloo Mothers and Babies’ Welfare Centre

(From Wong & Press 31). In the 1920s, it was scientific concerns (along with nationalistic concerns) with the state of the health of children, that created a space within which intervention in the lives of poor mothers and babies was legitimised. One such innovation was The Woolloomooloo Mothers and Babies’ Welfare Centre. The Woolloomooloo Mothers and Babies’ Welfare Centre, opened in October 1921 by the Minister for Public Health and Motherhood (John Joseph McGirr), was established by the New South Wales Labor Government to support the ‘voluntary efforts’ (*Building* 1921: 81) of several philanthropic organisations (Kindergarten Union, Sydney Day Nursery Association and The Royal Society for the Welfare of Mothers and Babies) who

had been providing services for children and families in the poor suburb of Woolloomooloo for several years prior. It was a purpose-built model service 'designed to meet the needs of the childlife and the mothers of the community' with the 'objects' of 'the saving and care of baby life' (*Building* 1921: 81).

Referred to as 'an Australian idea' (*Building* 1921: 81), innovative building design brought together a range of medical, early intervention, preventative health, and care and education facilities in one space. It was claimed at the time that such a thing had never been done before. The ground floor housed a kindergarten (run by Kindergarten Union) and a day nursery (run by Sydney Day Nursery Association). Facilities included: a large 'circle' room; a babies' room; a toddlers' room; a teachers' room; indoor and outdoor play areas; a sleeping room; and an isolation room 'where the wee ones may be isolated in case they develop measles, whooping cough or any of the complaints prevalent amongst those of tender years - here that can be treated and cared for scientifically' (*Building* 1921: 83). The second floor housed a medical clinic and mother and baby clinic (run by The Royal Society for the Welfare of Mothers and Babies); a community milk depot providing milk from Government farms; an open-air play area; and Day Nursery Staff living quarters. The Woolloomooloo Centre was referred to as 'A home for children: building the nation' and it was hoped that it would be a 'forerunner ... of many such buildings' (*Building* 1921: 81). Unfortunately, the vision to expand these services was never realised. A new Nationalist Government took office, and in response to a poor economy, their policy was fiscal restraint. No further centres were built, and the Woolloomooloo centre received only minimal and sporadic Government funding.

The Woolloomooloo Centre was an early, albeit short lived, attempt by those who cared and advocated for young children, to provide a range of ECEC and health services on one site, targeted at one of Australia's most deprived neighbourhoods at the time. It marked a significant shift in Government intervention in the lives of poor families. However, the cessation of funding to the service, failure to fund additional services, and the subsequent removal of 'Motherhood' from the portfolio of the Minister of Public Health (Cummins 1979) by the incoming Government, points to the tentative nature of this intervention. Government support for *health* services for mothers and young children continued to grow, despite a climate of fiscal restraint, suggesting that the provision of health services was considered a legitimate province of Government. Conversely, Government provision of *ECEC* services was minimal – suggesting the care and education of young children, tied as it was to entrenched genderised notions of the role of women, was essentially a private concern, and beyond the role of Government. As such, the provision of integrated ECEC and health services was no longer tenable.

Establishment of Lady Gowrie Centres (1936-45)

(From Wong & Press ³¹) Another moment in history when health and education combined to innovate ECEC services was the 1930-40s – again drawing on nationalistic and scientific discourses. This was another period in Australian history when concerns were raised about the poor health of the nation's children, and arguments were made for governments to invest in early years' services to curb childhood morbidity and its associated social costs, by coordinating and expanding the existing limited provision. Because of the holistic nature of children's development in the early years, it was advocated that these services should include both health and education.

ECEC advocates joined forces with health advocates, most particularly the newly formed (in 1936) National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC), and together argued for services that combined education and health, they were successful in their lobbying of the Commonwealth Government. Cumpston (Commonwealth Director-General of Health) and Heinig (Federal Officer, Australian Association for Pre-School Child Development) note in their Commonwealth Department of Health Report (1944) on pre-school centres (based on an examination of Lady Gowrie Centres), that child health was a major concern for the NHMRC from its inception and by its second session had joined forces with the Australian Association for Pre-School Child Development to successfully lobby for Commonwealth investment in a number of demonstration pre-schools. Cumpston and Heinig (1945: 2) report that in 1938, Prime Minister Lyons (United Australia Party) wrote the following to the Premiers of each State outlining the Commonwealth's intention.

It has been decided that a Demonstration Centre should be established in each Capital City at which not only will the methods of care and instruction of young children be tested and demonstrated, but also problems of physical growth, nutrition and development will be studied.

Named after Lady Gowrie, the wife of the then Governor-General and a strong advocate for early years services, six centres were established in disadvantaged areas of each of the six capital cities. The Centres were administered by the Australian Association for Pre-School Child Development, and were to serve the 'double purpose of the care and instruction of the young child and the study of growth, nutrition and bodily development', and to provide 'special advantages, physical, mental, emotional and spiritual and social' (Cumpston & Heinig 1945: iii). Staff within the centres were expected to understand, acknowledge and accommodate the holistic nature of children's growth '[I]n short we are not mechanists or psychologists, nor doctors or teachers – but **both. The child is not two things, body and mind, but one thing – a growing child** (Cumpston and Henig 1945: 6 [emphasis in original]).

As well as having medical suites and playrooms co-located within the building, the centres were 'co-terminous' (Cumpston & Heinig 1945: 26) with other services such as schools

(Perth); playgrounds (Brisbane) and Infant Welfare Centres (Melbourne). Cumpston and Heinig (1945: 26) note that:

The adjacent grouping of services for children and their parents will be seen as a distinct advantage. Children can go together to school and playgroups, parents can more readily confer with various staff members, and educational, health and recreation staff will find that this nearness greatly facilitates joint conferences in regard to problems of child guidance, and makes for continuity in child training.

The centres also offered opportunities for close medical supervision of well children and for gathering data on the health of children across the nation. Cumpston and Heinig (1945: 7) note that:

The Lady Gowrie Child Centres are therefore demonstration and research Centres, on the one hand schools carrying out a Pre-School Child Educational Programme, on the other hand health Centres in which the physical health and growth of the pre-school child are studied and promoted. The whole programme is correlated and can best be classed as a Programme for Pre-School Child Development.

Lady Gowrie Centres marked the first significant Commonwealth investment in early childhood education services (Brennan, 1998) bringing together the expertise of early education and health. Hopes were expressed that similar centres would come to be 'an accepted part of national life' (Cumpston & Heinig 1945: i). However, they did not expand beyond the six capital cities. This failure to expand was due in some part to their controversial nature. For example, echoing concerns raised in the previous historical example, a number of politicians were opposed to the Centres on the grounds that they marked State interference in the private domain of the home and in particular troubled the 'natural' gendered division of labour (Brennan 1998; Reiger 1985). Further, it seems they may have contributed to rivalry in the ECEC field. According to Brennan (1998), for example, Commonwealth investment in Lady Gowrie Centres engendered resentment amongst a number of ECEC organisations who had been active in poor communities for some time with little Government support. Lady Gowrie Centres were more highly staffed, and pay and conditions for teachers were better than those in existing ECEC services, leading to fears that they would poach the most highly skilled staff from established services. Moreover, they were expensive services. For instance, the Australian Government Social Welfare Commission [SWC] Report of 1974, reflecting on the establishment of Lady Gowrie Centres, argues that the additional expenses associated with these services (due, for example, to the cost of employing staff with high qualifications) meant that they were considered too costly to be broadly replicable.

Nevertheless, sixty years hence, the legacy of Lady Gowrie Centres continues. These six centres continue to provide education and care services to children and families, as well as professional training, support and leadership to the field of early childhood education (Colmer 2008). More broadly, advocacy for integrated services has continued to wax and wain over the ensuing decades. Despite several very successful examples, such as Doveton

in Victoria, and the Children's Centres for Early Childhood Development and Parenting (Children's Centres) in South Australia in the mid 2010s, integrated services are the exception rather than the norm.

7.3. Principles of Early Childhood Education and Care

It is the diverse theories scientific understandings described above, that early childhood educators draw on to assist them to critically reflect on and interpret the behaviours, development and learning of the children in their care, and to plan pedagogical programs that support and enhance children's growth and learning. Taken together, the ideas discussed above underpin a unique early childhood education pedagogical approach that is characterised by the following ten principles:

1. *Philosophy*
 - a. A sound clearly articulated philosophy that underpins and guides the pedagogical practice.
2. *Holistic:*
 - a. Facilitates development of the whole child across multiple domains (e.g. language; physical; cognitive and dispositions for learning; social-emotional).
 - b. Recognises the individual child within the context of the culture of their family and community.
 - i. Enables the child to learn about their place in the world
 - c. Facilitates both independent and group learning opportunities for children to learn from one another
3. *Integrated:*
 - a. An integrated curriculum that incorporates multiple learning areas including content related to literacy and literature, mathematics, science and technology, arts and music, ecology, physiology and health.
4. *Child-centred and individualised:*
 - a. Recognises the child as a social-being with rights and responsibilities
 - b. Centred on the child and individualised to the strengths, needs, and interests of each child
 - c. Promotes autonomy and independence
5. *Play-based:*
 - a. Is fun and engaging (intrinsically motivating) for children
 - b. Facilitates active learning
 - c. Enables self-directed play activities
 - d. Is process rather than product focused
 - e. Draws on children's innate curiosity
 - f. Facilitates children's sustained exploration, investigation, hypothesising, and experimentation (all skills necessary for 21st century living) commensurate with the developmental stage of the child.

6. *Learning environments that facilitate and promote children's active engagement:*
 - a. Offers and makes available for children to self-select, a range of open-ended (e.g. loose parts) and self-correcting (e.g. puzzles) learning materials appropriate to their age, stage of development, capacities and interests.
 - b. Provides a range of media for communication.
 - c. Uses natural materials and resources.
7. *Routines recognised as opportunities for learning:*
 - a. Routine times (such as: mealtimes; settling, sleep and rest times; nappy changing and toileting; managing hygiene; transitioning into and out of the service, across rooms or activities, from inside to outside play) are conducted in ways that respectful and support children's learning.
8. *Intentional and purposeful teaching:*
 - a. Based on a planning cycle of: observation / critical reflection / planning to achieve clearly articulated learning goals and outcomes / implementation / critical reflection / follow-up and extension.
 - b. Is underpinned by theoretical and scientific understandings of how children grow and develop.
 - c. Actively promotes understandings of democracy, fairness and tolerance.
9. *Spontaneous and emergent curriculum*
 - a. Educators actively interact with the children to co-construct understandings.
 - b. Educators are alert to and take advantage of unforeseen / unexpected opportunities or 'teachable moments' – to expand or re-direct children's curiosity, investigation and learning.
10. *Relationship focused:* Educators develop strong relationships with children and families.

The delivery of such programs requires educators to have specialist knowledge of children's growth, learning and development and the practices to support the same. In addition, within the Australian context, early childhood education services must comply with the *National Quality Standards*. This includes meeting regulated structural conditions, such as adult to child ratios, groups sizes and staff qualifications, stability and deployment, that facilitate early childhood education. It also requires social support in the form of Government funding and a broad social culture that values quality early education. In the final part of this statement, I turn to two challenges facing ECEC provision.

8. Challenge of the care versus education dichotomy and conceptualisation of 'quality'.

8.1. Care v education false dichotomy

One of the most significant and persistent challenges facing ECEC, is an unhelpful dichotomising between early childhood 'care' and 'education'. This dichotomy has been evident since the beginning of the provision of ECE in Australia. It is largely framed by maternalistic discourses that construct the care and education of young children as 'women's responsibility', and by conceptions of 'education' that are aligned with 'schooling'. The dichotomy has been ingrained through the separation of responsibility for the provision of 'childcare' and 'early education' services to different levels of Government – largely pre-school as a state responsibility and work-related care as a Commonwealth responsibility. And has been perpetuated through the requirement of differently qualified educators – early childhood degree qualified teachers for older children and lesser (previously no) qualifications for younger children.

In reality, care and education in the early years are entwined, integrated and indivisible. For children aged birth to five years, without education there is no care, and without care there can be no education. But what education looks like for the very youngest children in early years services is necessarily quite different from that for older children in school-based settings. Some of these differences are philosophical in nature, others are based on scientific understandings of how children develop and learn, and the practices that best support their individual intellectual, social-emotional, communicative and physical growth, and contribute to their development of positive learning dispositions. What is clear, however, is that only when children receive 'enough' access to high quality ECEC will it provide the positive learning outcomes that society expects and to which children have a right. But what constitutes 'enough' is unknown (there is currently no evidence about optimal 'dosage' of ECEC, or what threshold is required to accrue gains in children's development); and what constitutes 'quality' is contested.

Quality: A Contested Concept

In ECEC, the concept of quality practice is hugely contested³⁶ particularly because the outcomes at which practice is aimed can differ markedly depending on, for example, diverse cultural understandings about children (e.g., as active citizens or vulnerable) and childhood (e.g., as a 'special time' or 'preparation' for the future), and concepts such as play (e.g., free or structured); or on the differing perspectives of stakeholders (e.g., children, parents, professionals, providers, researchers and policy makers). To illustrate this diversity, Table 1 provides some examples of different desired outcomes evident in the literature for different groups; these are neither mutually exclusive nor exhaustive.

Table 1: Examples of desired outcomes of ECEC for different groups

Group	Example of desired outcome
Child	Positive developmental outcomes
	Enjoyment
	Positive well-being
Family	Affordable
	Accessible
	Available
	Supported parenting
Society / policy makers	Dominant values upheld (e.g. democratic principles)
	Economic (e.g. positive cost benefit ratio)
	Workforce (e.g. skills workforce / increased participation)
	Poverty reduction
	Social inclusion
	Equity
Service provider	Mission accomplishment
	Profit
Educators	Income
	Professional fulfilment
	Safe and enjoyable working conditions

Despite the existence of multiple desired outcomes for ECEC, much of the literature—both internationally and in Australia—on the benefits, or otherwise, of ECEC has focused on whether attendance at ECEC makes a difference to children’s development. This research defines ‘quality’ narrowly in terms of those factors that lead to positive developmental outcomes for children, evidenced primarily through empirical evaluations (see for example refs 37, 38 & 39). These evaluations provide strong and compelling, but NOT unequivocal, evidence, that children’s access to *high quality* education and care in these critical early years, has a significant impact on their lifelong trajectory – and this is especially so for children from the most vulnerable, marginalised and disadvantaged groups (such as those with a disability, living in poverty or with parents with mental health disorders or substance misuse). Evaluations of ECEC, including large scale evaluations (most notable those conducted on the Head Start, Abecedarian and High/Scope Perry Pre-school programs in the US and the NICHD study also in the US, and the Effective Provision of Pre-School Education [EPPE] in Europe), provide compelling evidence that attendance at high quality ECEC services can have positive effects on children’s academic, language, cognitive and social skills, particularly for children living in poverty. However, there are gaps in our knowledge, especially in relation to: children aged birth to three years; Indigenous children, culturally and linguistically diverse and refugee children; and non-centre-based care such as family day care.

This empirical work provides evidence of ECEC practices that enhance children’s development which can be drawn on by practitioners. However, as Bassok and Engel⁴⁰ state that “there is surprisingly little consensus on the specific characteristics or

combinations of programmatic features that are essential for ensuring the effectiveness of ECE programs”. Indeed, many studies that have examined the outcomes for children of attending early learning have been critiqued for suffering methodological issues in regard to measuring the quality of the services. Zaslow et al⁴¹ note that quality is often “incompletely specified”. Where it is measured, quality is often determined in studies based on structural factors as proxies for quality, such as teacher qualifications, class size and adult teacher ratios. A number of studies which have aimed to measure quality have used tools that measure global quality – such as the Infant-Toddler Environment Rating Scale–Revised (ITERS-R)⁴² and its equivalent for preschool classrooms, the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale–Revised (ECERS-R)⁴³. The ECERS and ITERS provide a broad picture of process quality in different domains, such as space, materials, activities and educational programs.

There have been critiques that such global measures may not have the sensitivity to identify differences in teacher-child interactions. For example, Zaslow et al (2016), points to challenges when global measures of quality (such as ECERS) are utilised, rather than measures of specific aspects of quality in the areas of interest (such as scales like the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS⁴⁴) that measures educator-child interactions. Zaslow et al (2016) suggest that failure to use specific measures may be the reason for why some studies demonstrate little, or no, associations between quality and child outcomes.

Moreover, translation of research into practice remains problematic, including in relation to developing mechanisms to support quality. This results in a range of supports from highly prescriptive regulations, through best practice guidelines, to 'looser' pedagogical frameworks. Little is known about which of these approaches is most effective, in what ways and for whom; or the most effective ways to support best practice through the development and implementation of regulations, curricula or frameworks.

A second major way that quality in ECEC is defined in the literature is in terms of those factors that lead to the accrual of ‘social benefits’, particularly economic benefit⁴⁵. Evidence about social benefits of ECEC is limited. However, new ways of measuring the social impact of ECEC through Social Return on Investment approaches are emerging⁴⁶.

9. Increased Investment in the Provision of Early Childhood Education

Increased awareness of the benefits of participating in ECE, especially for children and families experiencing disadvantage, as well as the flow-on benefits for society more generally, has led to early childhood education and care becoming a major international policy issue³⁷, as shown by international policy reports of OESO, UNESCO, UNICEF, the World Bank, and the European Union²⁵. Investment in early education is considered a way of contributing to nations' economic prosperity, promoting equity and ameliorating disadvantage, contributing to human rights objectives, addressing global poverty, and as a way of contributing to global sustainable development goals (SDGs)³⁷.

As a consequence of the evidence and these policy imperatives, access to universal childcare programs in industrialised countries, has greatly expanded since the 1970s^{37,25}. Universal access has led to high levels of children being enrolled in ECE. Indeed, by age 5, almost all children in OECD countries attend formal childcare, with an average attendance rate of 96% as of 2014⁴⁶. Most European countries, such as the United Kingdom, France, Germany and Denmark, and all Nordic countries have publicly provided universal access to pre-school^{37, 46, 47, 37}.

Enrolment rates across the globe for children aged three years and under, however, are more variable, and substantially lower than for children aged 4 – 5 years³⁷. In developed countries, the rate of infant and toddler usage of ECE has increased in recent years along with maternal employment. There is some cultural concern associated with children commencing early learning at a very young age (1 – 2 years - infants and toddlers). Some consider the very youngest children to be particularly vulnerable - largely related to beliefs about the primacy of mother care, grounded in attachment theory⁴⁸. But there are large variations in early commencement in ECE, predominantly related to the provision, or otherwise, of paid maternal and paternal care^{48, 49, 50}. For instance, relatively high percentages of children aged three and under attend early learning in Denmark (77%), The Netherlands, Norway, Finland (68.4%), Sweden (64%) and rather low percentages in Poland (2%), Greece (11%) and Croatia (12%)^{37, 51} (see Figure 1). The responsibility for provision (e.g. market or state), level of access – including across social groups, and quality of provision of ECE, is also very varied across and within international contexts³⁷. By way of example, brief explanations of the provision of ECE in several countries are provided in Appendix 1.

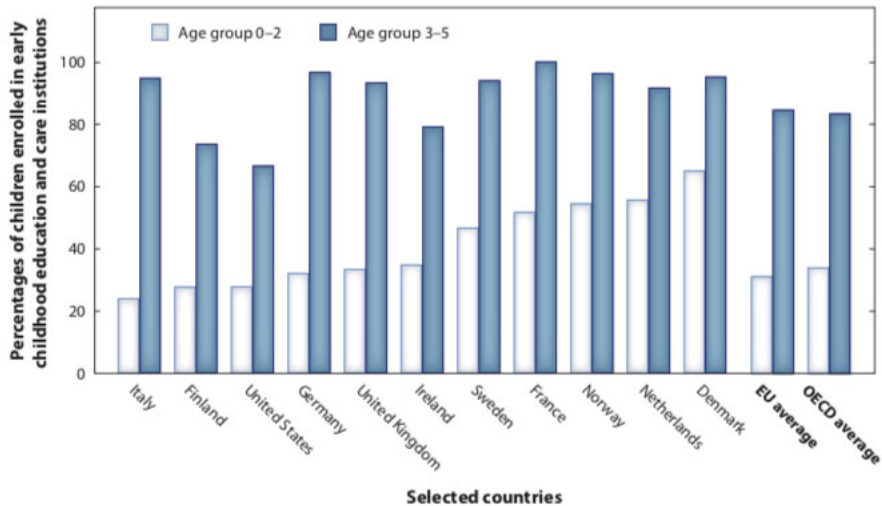


Figure 2

Percentages of children enrolled in early childhood education and care institutions at different ages in selected countries in 2014. Figure based on OECD data. Abbreviations: EU, European Union; OECD, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.

Figure 1: Percentages of children enrolled in EC, from Kulic et al, 2019, p.568

9.1. Access to Early Learning in Australia

In Australia, a number of policies are in place to support the participation of all children in ECEC. Through the National Partnership Agreement (first developed in 2008 and renewed in 2020), the Australian Government, and state and territory governments, have committed to increasing participation in ECEC⁵². The National Partnership Agreement was a microeconomic reform aimed at bringing together all ECEC services under a single national regulatory framework and aimed to bridge the care / education divide.

The National Quality Standards provide the regulatory standards by which all ECEC must comply, and *Belonging, Being and Becoming: the Early Years Learning Framework for Australia* (EYLF²⁷), is Australia’s first national framework for guiding early childhood curriculum and pedagogy. At the Commonwealth level, in addition to Child Care Benefit and Special Child Care Benefit to assist families to cover the cost of their children attending early learning to support parental workforce participation; the Inclusion Support Program is designed to assist childcare services to build their capacity to offer quality, inclusive childcare environments to children with additional needs. Commonwealth funding has been allocated to ensure universal access to 15 hours of preschool education in the year prior to school⁵². Similarly, additional funding is provided at the state/territory level to support early learning, especially in pre-school programs. The nature and value of this funding varies across states and territories, however (see below). So, whilst the NQF has led to a narrowing of the ‘care’ vs ‘education’ divide, ongoing challenges remain. In particular, access to early learning remains inequitable.

Which children are missing out?

Despite a universal access policy, Australian children from a number of groups have been shown to be consistently missing out on access to ECE, over a number of years. From the Report On Government Services⁵³, these groups include children: from low-income families; those living in regional and remote and low-income communities; those with a disability or health care need; children from CALD backgrounds and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children⁵³. Attendance of children from refugee backgrounds is not reported in the Report On Government Services. Moreover, disadvantaged children, are the least likely to be attending the highest quality ECE^{53,54}. As stated by the Australian Government Productivity Commission's *Report on Government Services*⁵⁵ one of the main objectives for ECE is to "target improved access for, and participation by, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, vulnerable and disadvantaged children". Pleasingly, the Closing the Gap target that by 2025, 95% of Indigenous children aged four years are enrolled in ECEC is 'on track'⁵⁶. However, compared to all children, the Closing the Gap targets for literacy and numeracy and multiple other targets are not being met⁵⁶.

Challenges to Children's Attendance in high quality ECE in Australia

Several barriers to children's participation in high quality early learning have been identified in the literature over the past decade. From an ecological systems perspective, which views individuals as embedded within social, cultural and environmental systems⁵⁷, these barriers can be grouped into factors at the personal/familial and interpersonal level; at the early years' service, organisational and community level; and at the broader social, cultural and political contextual level. For example, families may lack awareness of the potential benefits of ECE for their children's learning and development, they may not recognise the importance of regular attendance and/or they may prioritise 'other' family matters over their child's regular attendance^{58,59}. Further, in a system that is largely marketised, families' ability to choose between services based on quality may be impeded by lack of access to information about what constitutes quality⁶⁰. Factors at the service and organisational level that can negatively impact children's participation in ECE include services where educators hold discriminatory values, do not engage in inclusive pedagogical practices and/or services that are culturally unsafe⁵⁸. Another barrier may simply be that ECE service opening hours are incompatible with families' needs. At the community level, factors include a lack of available services in the community, poor transport, and sparse and fluctuating populations that make planning service provision difficult⁶¹. Factors at the social, cultural and political level that affect children's attendance at high quality ECEC include inequitable distribution or location of early childhood services, low levels of competition that constrains 'customer' choice, shortages in the qualified EC workforce, the overly complex nature of the system, and a general lack of understanding about the benefits of ECEC amongst the general public⁶². Kellard and Paddon (2016, p.ix) provide a useful model of how these factors interact (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 Presentation of the connections between factors that can facilitate or create barriers to the participation of Indigenous families in early childhood education

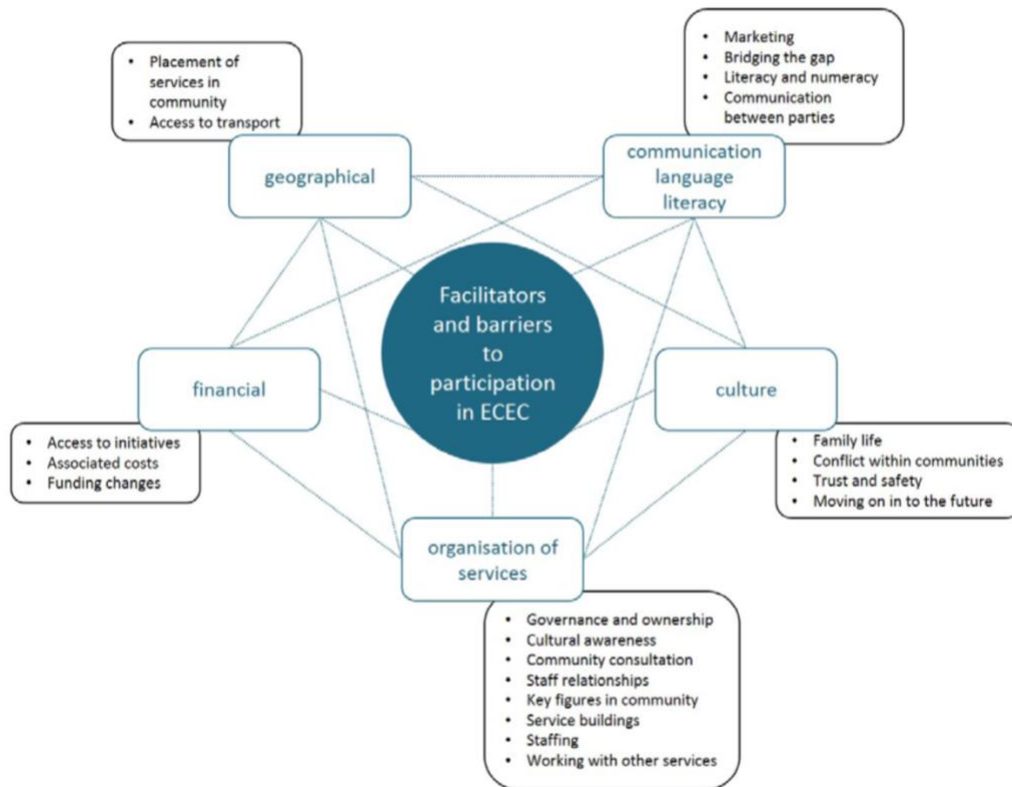


Figure 1: From Kellard and Paddon (2016, p.ix)

State & Territory Responses to Provision of Early Learning

The implementation of the NQF has played out differently in different States. It would be fair to say that whilst most States / Territories have continued to focus primarily on supporting children’s attendance in pre-schools (kindergartens), including providing pre-schools on school sites (e.g. WA & NT), several States - ACT, NSW, Victoria and South Australia- have expressed a strong commitment to increasing provision of ECEC for three and four years old children, and in some cases beyond pre-school settings. Table 1, provides a summary of the different initiatives being implemented in each state – as available on the Government websites.

Table 2: Access to Early Childhood Education across States & Territories

State / Territory	New / existing Policy Initiatives	Documents / sources
ACT	New: <i>Early Years Strategy for the ACT</i> . Transitioning to universal access to preschool for three-year-old children. Of particular note: The ACT Education Act 2004 has been amended to recognise that early childhood education and care has a central role in the realisation of the rights of the child and therefore must be universally available on an equity basis.	https://www.education.act.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0005/1620347/Early-Childhood-Strategy-for-the-ACT.pdf
NSW	New: <i>Early Years Commitment from 2023</i> . Universal access to early learning in the year before school – regardless of service type – to be implemented before 2030. There are pilots currently underway to develop a ‘model’ for provision.	https://education.nsw.gov.au/early-childhood-education/early-years-commitment/about-the-early-years-commitment
Northern Territory	Children in the Northern Territory can attend preschools in the year they turn four. Preschools are mostly connected to schools. No evidence of EC reform was found on the NT Government website.	https://nt.gov.au/learning/early-childhood
South Australia	New: <i>South Australia Early Learning Strategy</i> aimed at improving quality and access for 3 & 4 year olds.	https://www.education.sa.gov.au/docs/early-years/early-learning-strategy-2021-to-2031-all-young-children-thriving-and-learning.pdf
Tasmania	Tasmanian preschools (known as Kindergartens) provide 15 hours of early learning experiences in local schools for children who are 4 years of age on or before January 1 st of the year they start Kindergarten. No evidence of EC reform was found on the Tasmanian Government website.	https://www.decyp.tas.gov.au/parents-carers/early-years/kindergarten/
Victoria	New: <i>Early Childhood Reform Plan</i> – including <i>Early Start Kindergarten</i> , to increase access to two years of pre-school.	https://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/about/educationstate/ec-reform-plan.pdf
WA	Children who are 4 years old by 30 June, can commence pre-school (known as kindergarten). Kindergartens are mostly connected to schools. No evidence of EC reform was found on the WA Government website.	https://www.wa.gov.au/service/education-and-training/early-childhood-education
Queensland	The Queensland Kindergarten Funding Scheme supports participation through funding approved kindergarten program providers. No evidence of EC reform was found on the QLD Government website.	https://www.qld.gov.au/education/earlychildhood

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