The Five Aspects of Effective Engagement in Early Childhood Education: Approachability, Acceptability, Availability, Affordability, Appropriateness

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Glossary

ACCS	Additional Child Care Subsidy additional fee subsidy paid by the Australian Government to some families who need additional support, such as grandparent carers, families seeking employment, families where children are at risk and families experiencing financial hardship
ACECQA	Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority assists governments in administering the National Quality Framework
AECD	Australian Early Development Census
CCS	Child Care Subsidy, Australian Government fee subsidy paid to families
GIE	The Gonski Institute of Education
ECEC	Early Childhood Education and Care
EYLF	Early Years Learning Framework is a curriculum guide for early education. It is part of the National Quality Framework
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
IRSD	The Index of Relative Socio-Economic Disadvantage (one of four SEIFA indexes)
NGO	Non-Government organisations
NQS	National Quality Standard is a set of benchmarks to guide quality ECEC in Australia. It is part of the National Quality Framework along with legal and regulatory standards and the EYLF
SEIFA	Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas
SES	Socio-Economic Status
SPRC	Social Policy Research Centre

Executive summary

Reviews of international and Australian evidence are unequivocal in finding that high quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) is one of the most significant positive influences on a child's performance in school and across other measures of wellbeing.

Australian Governments have policies in place to ensure all children have access to 15 hours of preschool in the year before school. While there have been increasing numbers of children utilising ECEC services, a persistent minority of children still do not access ECEC even when it is very low cost or even free. Many of these children live in disadvantaged contexts and have the most to gain from ECEC. The Australian Early Development Census shows that nearly 40% of Indigenous children and 35% of children living in low-income areas (Q1 and Q2 on the SEIFA Index of Relative Socio-Economic Disadvantage - IRSED) do not attend early childhood settings (O'Connor, 2016) and thus do not accrue the advantages that a high quality ECEC experience offers.

In 2019, the Gonski Institute of Education funded the Social Policy Research Centre, UNSW Australia (SPRC), to conduct this study. The research was designed to generate evidence on the non-cost barriers to ECEC take-up, and to identify practices that contribute to better than expected ('off-diagonal') patterns of service use among families who tend not to use ECEC services.

The inquiry addressed the questions:

- What are the characteristics of families who find ECEC services hard to use?
- What structures, funding arrangements and practices work and for whom?
- What are the characteristics of high quality in contexts of disadvantage?
- What are characteristics of a competent system that effectively addresses the needs of families experiencing adversities and disadvantage?

This project had two methods: a literature and policy review, and Delphi-style interviews with key policy and data stakeholders.

Findings

We have organised findings in the report into a spectrum of engagement between families and the ECEC system. This family standpoint approach provides a coherent and comprehensive way to identify and work towards raising the proportion of children who engage in early education.

We have named this framework as *The 5 Aspects of Engagement*.

The 5 aspects are:

Approachability means that families know that ECEC services exist, that they might be useful, and know how to connect with them. Approachability is underpinned by the development of trust. Often understood as 'outreach' this aspect of practice was strongly embedded in the knowledge of key stakeholders and the literature. Outreach involves soft entry points where families can observe, and approach to receive information without the need for disclosures or commitments.

Acceptability. Services are compatible with family values, culture and communication styles. Services must be culturally safe for all families. Acceptability, and the cultural safety that flows from it, requires a high level of skill in interacting with families, in order to adapt approaches that may be standard but could be intrusive and not acceptable to everyone.

Availability. ECEC places must be available in the kinds of services families would like to access and in the locations where families wish to use them. Availability is not simply about places but also describes the ways in which services take into account families' particular needs for flexible places over time.

Affordability. Services must be affordable places to families experiencing multiple adversities with sufficient duration to build trusting relationships with families and children. Affordability doesn't just mean fees - the extensive documentation required to access the subsidy system from families in hardship is onerous and off-putting. Complexity works against the grain of building cultural safety for families.

Appropriateness. Families must have access to services they find useful for what they see as their long and short term goals. Some families in high poverty contexts have experienced failure in education systems or are unfamiliar with the Australian system and may believe that they have little confidence in their ability for ECEC to contribute to their children's formal learning. Participants in this study described strategies for partnering with families through building trusting relationships, good communication and trauma and attachment-based strategies. The research indicates that pedagogical approaches that are based in educational partnerships with families is an area of underdeveloped expertise in the sector.

Cross cutting issues

Interagency and community collaborations

Interagency collaboration is necessary in all aspects of engagement. It allows for wrap around servicing to be provided for families facing economic and other adversities. However, participating can be difficult because of its impact on staffing.

Practitioner qualities and skills

Practitioner qualities and skills are the centrepiece of inclusive practice in ECEC services. These qualities and skills are highly specialised and require ongoing professional development and training.

Data and monitoring

Extensive monitoring of inclusion-focussed initiatives is required. Without effective monitoring, successful engagement initiatives cannot be identified, described and shared with other ECEC

services, and implementation gaps and priorities cannot be assessed or addressed.

Costs and funding

The costs to deliver services and connecting with families who find services hard to use are substantial, as are the costs associated with delivering ECEC services to families who face complex adversities.

Policy improvements

There is broad consensus that universal free childcare delivered through a supply side funding model in the year before school would be a key policy improvement. Universalism removes the stigma of targeted services and frees up substantial funds currently tied to assessing and monitoring complex eligibilities.

While universal free childcare addresses many of the issues that are unintended consequences of the current mixed market system, there will remain a need for specialisation in high poverty contexts. This requires policy that continues to support wrap around services for families so that they can easily move between different early childhood services, such as family support, maternal and child health, and schools. It requires policy that delivers financial resources to services that engage effectively with families facing multiple adversities across the spectrum of engagement. Policy support for brokerage and support services are required to connect families into ECEC and address issues as they arise and specialised staff are needed to continue effective engagement.

The evidence base on what works needs more detailed understandings of how to build effective pedagogies that make a difference to the knowledge children carry with them into the school system and there needs to be specialised training for educators working with families with complex needs.

1 Introduction

The Council of Australian Governments 2008 plan to ensure all children have access to 15 hours of preschool in the year before school has seen increasing numbers of children utilising Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) services. However, there remains a persistent minority of children who still do not access ECEC. These children are likely to live in disadvantaged contexts and have the most to gain from ECEC. The Australian Early Development Census shows that nearly 40% of Indigenous children and 35% of children living in low-income areas (Q1 and Q2 on the SEIFA index of disadvantage) do not attend ECEC (O'Connor, 2016) and do not accrue the advantages that a high quality ECEC experience offers. Furthermore, they are more likely to live in areas where there is little high quality ECEC provided in both regional and urban areas. This project will coalesce the evidence on the barriers to ECEC take-up, identify practices that support better than expected ('off-diagonal'[1]) patterns of service use among families who share the characteristics of families who do not use ECEC services, generate evidence on effective ECEC initiatives in different contexts of local area disadvantage.

Socioeconomic inequalities in children's developmental and educational outcomes have been observed in Australia over many years. In communities with higher levels of socioeconomic disadvantage, children tend to have a higher level of developmental vulnerability and face more challenges at school. Reviews of international and Australian evidence are unequivocal in finding that high quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) is one of the most significant positive influences on a child's performance in school and across other measures of wellbeing (Melhuish et al, 2017; Tayler et al, 2016). Recent evidence from the OECD (Balladares et al, 2020) indicates that students who had attended ECEC tend to have higher scores in academic proficiencies at the age of 15 across OECD countries. Concerningly, however, participation in ECEC alone does not reduce the impact of inequality on educational outcomes. Children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are less likely to attend high quality ECEC and often start later than their peers. Higher academic skills at later stages are observed when quality is taken into account. This highlights that mere attendance in ECEC programmes is not enough to ensure better academic performance. To get the educational and economic benefits of ECEC, policy must ensure the quality of the educational provision, with particular attention to and additional resourcing for students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

There are two reasons that underpin why children miss out on the benefits of high quality ECEC. Firstly, ECEC that is *high quality* may not be available, and secondly, families may face barriers to engaging with ECEC. We know from National Quality Standard (NQS) data that there are more poor quality services in areas where there are high levels of disadvantage (Lamb et al, 2015). This suggests that the widespread availability of high quality services is an issue that is not adequately addressed by current policy. Furthermore, we know what comprises high quality ECEC in general terms but know far less about whether quality needs to be understood or enacted differently in disadvantaged communities. Are there additional elements of quality that are important in disadvantaged communities? Does high quality in disadvantaged communities

1 Off-diagonal means services who are doing differently than what might be expected… here we are interested in those that are overperforming

mean services should be presented to families in particular ways? Are high quality practices adequately and universally resourced in disadvantaged communities? This evidence is crucial for building sector capacity to work with children from disadvantaged contexts.

The barriers to ECEC take-up need to be effectively addressed. The costs to families of ECEC participation continues to be identified in the literature as a barrier for some families (Skattebol et al 2014, Grace et al, 2014; Harrison et al, 2017, Fenech and Skattebol, 2019, The Smith Family, 2019) and in particular for those that do not have visas that allow them to access subsidies (Harrison, 2017). However, there are many examples where families from low income, Aboriginal backgrounds as well as families living in rural and remote communities still do not use ECEC services even when there is locally available ECEC provision at low or no cost (Bowes et al, 2011, Fenech and Skattebol, 2019). What other practice elements make services both easy to use? How do these elements articulate with the regulations, the NQS, the EYLF and subsidy systems?

While we have some overarching understandings about how to structure ECEC services so they are easier to use for non-Indigenous and Indigenous families facing adversities (Grace et al, 2014; Bowes et al, 2011, Kellard and Paddon, 2016). We know that quality and cultural safety are very important (Grace et al, 2014) and that community networks matter (Hopkins et al 2017; Skattebol, 2016). However, these understandings are either highly localised, abstract or have an exclusive focus on the needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. We need to know more about the service offerings that can attract families who find services hard to use in the current policy climate. This study aims to contribute to a more effective service delivery system and to identify areas where significant investments are needed.

This project aimed to

- generate evidence about the characteristics of high quality ECEC in contexts of regional and urban disadvantage.
- produce a data set of practices in services that are high performing in terms of their reputation and capacity to deliver high quality services
- identify the service architectures and resourcing levels that make services easy to use and that comprise high quality
- translate this knowledge into digestible forms for use in the sector.

These aims were achieved through a review of grey and academic literature and a Delphi-style study with key ECEC stakeholders who are interested in ECEC in high poverty contexts.

This report presents the findings and implications of the research. The report begins by providing an overview of the ECEC policy context in Section 2, followed by an overview of the grey and academic literature on the efficacy of ECEC service systems, the extent and form of child poverty and exclusion in Australia and the service models that have been identified as effective. Section 3 presents an overview of the methodology used to gather data. Section 4 analyses the findings from the targeted stakeholder consultations across Australia. Section 5 draws implications for the sector, teacher training and policy development.

1.1 Discourse and Language

The under or low representation of families on low incomes in ECEC services has in part been attributed to these families being perceived as 'hard to reach', with service providers not focusing on this marginalised group or perceiving them to be resistant service users (Cortis, Katz, & Patulny, 2009). The Social Exclusion Task Force (2007, 27) presents the issue of how language defines the problem of social exclusion from both sides and lists 'challenges of engagement' under two headings: 'how the system sometimes views excluded families' and 'how excluded families sometimes view the system'. Policy initiatives in the area of disadvantage and ECEC tends to construct the problem as families rather than as systems that shore up inequality (Crossley, 2015). Like Crozier and Davies (2007), we suggest that services are there to support families so the problem of engagement lies with systems and services rather than with families.

Boag-Munroe and Evangelou (2012) found that there were many descriptors used to describe people who do not use services. Synonyms were used for 'hard-to-reach', including: troubled families, hidden populations, vulnerable, under-served, fragile families, socially excluded, disengaged marginalised, non- (or reluctant) user, high risk, at risk, families with multiple or complex needs, minority groups, minority ethnic, ethnic communities, and less likely to access services. In addition they name the terms used for conditions that are associated with non-service use: single-parent family; minority groups, young mothers, fathers, lack of access to services, lack of transport, living in rural isolation, homelessness, low/no income, quality of accommodation, domestic violence, unstable relationships, difficulty organising self or family, chaotic domestic situation, unable to move on after intervention, entrenched behaviours, time poverty, weak social skills, difficulty in asking for help, poor physical health, disability, poor mental health, poor attachments, post-natal depression, chronic illness, HIV positive, no/low qualifications, unable to use the resources on offer, lack of personal resources, weak literacy skills, no work-related skills, invisibility to service.

These descriptors and associations are varied in their value loading. We know that families themselves are very sensitive to the language used to describe them and their living conditions (Skattebol et al, 2012; Skattebol, 2016). It is important to state how terms are used and how we understand them, in both academic outputs (such as this) and in everyday talk with service providers and families. Wong et al. (2016:60) provide an example of this type of explanation:

> We use the term 'disadvantage' to include vulnerability and/or marginalisation occurring as a result of a range of negative, historical (e.g. colonialism) and/ or contemporaneous structural (e.g. unequal distribution of resources), environmental (e.g. physical isolation), sociological (e.g. racism), physical (e.g. disease or disability), and/or psychological (e.g. drug and alcohol dependence) factors, that are deleterious to wellbeing. These factors often coexist, and are cumulative.

In this report we use the terms 'disadvantaged contexts' and 'economic and related adversities' to describe the conditions that people experience and consider families not using services to be underserved and under-resourced.

2 Australian ECEC policy

The Australian ECEC policy landscape is complex and multifaceted. ECEC is provided through a mixed market of services operated by organisations that can be for profit, not for profit or government. All levels of government are involved in ECEC, with the Australian Federal Government acting as the primary source of fee relief, State and Territory Governments overseeing regulatory compliance and quality assurance; and some state and local governments operating ECEC services.

Successive Australian governments have made substantial reforms of the ECEC system over the past two decades. Universal Access to early childhood education for all children in the year before school and the National Quality Framework provide national consistency and a foundation of quality assurance. Australian ECEC is delivered through a mixed market system that has strengths in the diversity in early childhood settings and services, and the flexibility for services to be tailored to the circumstances of different children, communities and jurisdictions. However, there is also a lack of alignment between objectives of different levels of government, inconsistencies in relation to service eligibility and subsidies, and families face navigational challenges in the complex mixed market sector with multiple funders and settings (Pascoe and Brennan, 2017).

In July 2018, the Australian Government introduced new policy regarding the funding of ECEC through fee relief to families. Previous fee relief payments were discarded in favour of the new Child Care Subsidy, which provides assistance to families with the cost of ECEC. The Child Care Subsidy is means-tested, such that the lowest income families receive the highest level of assistance. The Child Care Subsidy is also activity-tested, such that families engaging in the longest hours of employment, training or voluntary work are eligible for 100 hours of subsidised ECEC per fortnight; conversely, families not participating in such activities are eligible for just 24 hours of subsidised ECEC fortnightly. Additionally, families whose children attend state-funded early education services, such as kindergartens and preschools, are not eligible for Child Care Subsidy.

The Child Care Subsidy was the key element of a large package of ECEC policy changes, including extra assistance for families in particular circumstances (primarily through the Additional Child Care Subsidy), support for services in areas where the ECEC market is likely to fail (primarily through the Community Child Care Fund) and support to ensure that services can meaningfully include all children in ECEC (through the Inclusion Support Programme). A detailed description of the policy and early indications of its impact can be found in Baxter et al. (2019), *Child Care Package Evaluation: Early monitoring report*.

All ECEC services in Australia are required to operate according to the National Quality Framework, which includes national law and regulations; national learning frameworks which guide curriculum planning and implementation (for young children this is the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF); and the National Quality Standard.

The NQS is the key tool available to policy makers and ECEC providers and families that indicate whether children are receiving effective ECEC services. All ECEC services in Australia are regularly assessed and rated against seven quality areas:

- Educational program and practice
- Children's health and safety
- Physical environment
- Staffing arrangements
- Relationships with children
- Collaborative partnerships with families and communities
- Governance and leadership

Services are assessed against each of the quality areas and also given an overall rating:

- Exceeding National Quality Standard
- Meeting National Quality Standard
- Working Towards National Quality Standard
- Significant Improvement Required

In addition, services can apply directly to ACECQA to be rated as 'Excellent' the highest rating level given to services demonstrating exceptional education and care, sector leadership and commitment to continual improvement.

Data from the NQS show that the quality of ECEC available in low socioeconomic communities is uneven (ACECQA 2019b; 2020b). Areas of concentrated disadvantage have a larger proportion of services still 'working towards' minimum quality standards compared to other neighbourhoods (Lamb, et al., 2015). Similarly, the E4Kids study reported that only 7% of children from low SES families attend services in the top quintile for quality 'instructional support', compared to 30% of children from high SES families (Torii, et al, 2017). Quality in the areas of educational program and practice, staffing arrangements and governance and leadership are the most challenging for services in disadvantaged locations (ACECQA, 2020b). And, services in the most disadvantaged communities are also more likely to have a waiver regarding levels of qualification among staff (ACECQA, 2020b).

More recent analysis of ACECQA results (Thorpe et al, 2020) indicate this gap in locational distribution of NSQ 'working towards' quality ratings in low SES compared to mixed or middle SES areas is closing. They found the most noticeable area level variation is in the number of exceeding ratings with low SES areas having fewer services rated exceeding or above. This may be a reflection of a shift in ownership type of services in low SES communities. Higher quality services are needed in these areas. ACECQA (2020) analysis of NQS ratings finds that areas of urban disadvantage are rated lower than those in advantaged urban areas. However, recent research suggests that having an NQS 'meeting' rating may well be insufficient to ensure ECEC ameliorates disadvantage (Siraj et al, 2019).

The NQS is one of the few mandated national quality standards around the world and is widely respected. There are some critiques on the NQS focussed on the tensions between compliance and creative practice which enhances children's learning (Dahlberg et al 1999). Siraj et al (2019)

argues that while the NQS has focussed the ECEC sector on delivering quality, the emphasis on child safety and regulatory compliance elements overshadow process elements of quality such as educators' sensitivity and responsiveness, the quality of their interactions, and their ability to extend and scaffold children's learning and thinking. Process elements are higher order elements that can only occur when structural elements (such as educator to child ratios, space requirements, and occupational health and safety requirements are in place). It is process elements that are critical to improved child *outcomes in learning and development* (Howard et al. 2018; O'Connell et al. 2016). Siraj et al. (2019) found that centres rated exceeding in the NQS were typically rated step below in scales more finely tuned to pedagogical elements such as The Sustained Shared thinking and Emotional Well-being (SSTEW) and Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale—Extension (ECERS-E).

This work draws attention to a potential pitfall in assuming NQS measures of quality are sufficiently extensive and detailed to determine whether service quality is high enough to deliver the complex resources needed to ameliorate disadvantage, particularly in relation to children's learning outcomes. It implies that NQS ratings need to be supplemented by more fine-grained attention to process elements such as the emotional climate in settings and the quality of pedagogical and teaching practices - and in particular those which support sustained shared thinking. The high level of regard for the NQS in the ECEC sector suggests that there is a need for a quality rating system, but this should not preclude the development of more finely tuned understandings of quality. This is particularly important in disadvantaged contexts so that the services offered to families and children build the knowledge and skills that equip children to be successful in school settings.

3 Literature review

There is international consensus that sustained participation in high quality ECEC is an effective and proven intervention to improve educational and health outcomes of children who face economic adversity and its related challenges (Wong et al, 2016; Taggart et al., 2015; Sammons et al., 2014). This research suggests that ECEC provides benefits for individual children and their families, as well as for society, as children's educational attainment levels are increased and all community members can participate in civic society and/or the labour force.

This literature review takes stock, maps and synthesises grey and research literature on:

- child poverty in Australia
- exclusion from ECEC
- characteristics of families who find ECEC hard to use
- effective service models and practices, and
- relevant data, monitoring and research methodologies.

3.1 Extent of child poverty in Australia

In 2017, slightly more than one-sixth (17.7%) of Australian children were estimated to be living in poverty (ACOSS and UNSW Sydney, 2020). This measure of poverty was defined as children living in households with equivalised disposable income of half the Australian median income, taking into account spending on housing. These children constituted nearly half of all those living in sole parent households (44%) and 12.7% of children living in couple families. The key factors which contributed to children living in households with few resources were the reduced time parents had available for employment due to their caring responsibilities, the direct cost of raising children, and low levels of income support and other financial assistance from government.

Sadly, this proportion is even higher for children aged less than five years: 1 in 5 children were living in poverty (19.8%), or an estimated 274,000 children[2].

Estimates of poverty among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, using the same measure but not taking into account housing costs, found that one third (31.4%) had incomes under the poverty line in 2016 (Markham and Biddle, 2016). While the overall poverty rate has fallen slowly over the past decade, there is considerable regional variation: rates have fallen for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in urban and inner regional areas, stayed the same in outer regional areas, and risen in remote and very remote parts of the country.

Analysis of what growing up in contexts of economic adversity means for social exclusion found that young people's risk of social exclusion were highest in remote or inner regional areas,

2 The report authors of ACOSS and UNSW Sydney (2020) conducted additional analysis to estimate the proportion and number of children aged 0-4 with equivalised household disposable incomes of less than 50% median, after housing costs.

but that 71% of young people facing social exclusion were living in capital cities (Abello, et al., 2016). This study was with older children, who would be living in very similar circumstances to their younger siblings and schoolmates. Families in these areas were, at 32%, nearly six times less likely to have a car than young people in areas of last risk of social exclusion, twice as likely (18%) to include family members who needed assistance with core day to day activities and nearly four times as likely to live in overcrowded housing (45%). Importantly for initiatives that seek to address poverty and social exclusion, is research that shows that 44% of children (0-15) lived in areas where the ranking (quintiles) for child poverty and social exclusion differed, with one in five children being in a social exclusion quintile higher than their poverty quintile (Miranti et al, 2018). This creates an imperative to deliver initiatives to redress disadvantage in mixed SES areas as well as areas of concentrated disadvantage.

3.2 Extent of exclusion form ECEC services

Children from low income families, including Indigenous and CALD families, have been underrepresented in ECEC services generally, and preschool programs specifically (Hand et al, 2014; Wong, Harrison, Rivalland, & Whiteford, 2014). Precise understandings about the extent of exclusion from ECEC services are difficult to calculate from publicly available data. The Productivity Commission calculated that 94.4% of all Australian children were enrolled in a preschool program (delivered by a variety of service types) in the year before school in 2016. These estimates were the same in both the 2019 and 2020 Reports on Government Services.

Unfortunately, the estimates on preschool enrolment for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are potentially unreliable because of changes in the population estimates on which they are based. In the 2019 Productivity Commission, Report on Government Services, it was reported that in 2016, 90.4% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were enrolled in preschool (Productivity Commission, 2019). A year later, using revised population estimates, the 2016 enrolment rate was calculated at just 76.2% (Productivity Commission, 2020).

Focusing instead on the enrolment numbers (rather than percentages) of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children attending preschool in the year before school, we can see these have increased steadily. In the three years for which comparable data is available, the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children enrolled in a preschool program in Australia increased from 16,582 in 2016 to 18,360 in 2018 (See Table 1).

Table 1 Number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children enrolled in a preschool program in the year before school in Australia

	n
2016	16,582
2017	17,692
2018	18,360

Source: Productivity Commission, 2020

Modelling of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children's participation in early education found that they are less likely than their peers to attend a preschool program in the year before school (Biddle, et al., 2017). Importantly, however, this difference reduced considerably when income, location and household demography are taken into account (for example, number of children in the household, language spoken at home, income, etc). When the models include

whether or not someone in the household has completed year 12 schooling, there is no longer a significant difference between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children. The authors argue, then, that it is the differences in education across Australian households that largely explain the lower participation in preschool among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children (Biddle, et al, 2017).

These figures suggest that there remains a significant minority of Australian children who do not use ECEC services and accrue the benefits of a high quality ECEC experience before starting school.

3.3 Characteristics of families who find ECEC services hard to use

In a review of barriers to ECEC participation, Vandenbroeck et al (2014) found the key characteristics of families not using ECEC services to be:

- low socio-economic status including low level of parental education, low family income or parental unemployment
- ethnic minority background in combination with a shorter length of time parents have been residing in the host country and with their ability to master the host country language
- living in poor neighbourhoods, rural areas, and/or being transient

These characteristics mean that families have fewer of the resources which enable ECEC service use. They have smaller social networks and less information about ECEC and enrolment procedures. There is often a lack of trust in authorities, public systems, and the use of coercive power in these systems, often deriving from historic abuses of trust by these systems.

3.4 Effective service models and practices

An ecological approach is widely accepted as the best model for understanding inequalities in ECEC service use. It acknowledges the interactions between the micro-level of family resourcing, the meso level of services, the macro level of neighbourhoods and the exo-level of public policy (Vandenbreock and Lazzari, 2014; Mitchell, 2019). Lazzari and Vandenbroeck (2012) conceptualised the key factors which enable or constrain access to services from a family standpoint and included: availability, affordability, accessibility, usefulness, comprehensibility. These factors are a way of ordering the complex and emmeshed elements of service systems and services to consider what works and what needs change at a systemic and/or operational level. Importantly, elements affecting engagement with services do not operate in isolation from each other, rather through interplay between public policy, services and families (Vandenbroeck and Lazzari, 2014).

This framework has been further developed by Archambault et al. (2019) using insights from health care services working to adapt to the existing resources and needs of families who are deeply isolated[3]. This focus on the interaction between families and the internal, social and material resources they have and service structures and practices is a feature of emerging practice and theoretical paradigms about how under-resourced people can be better served

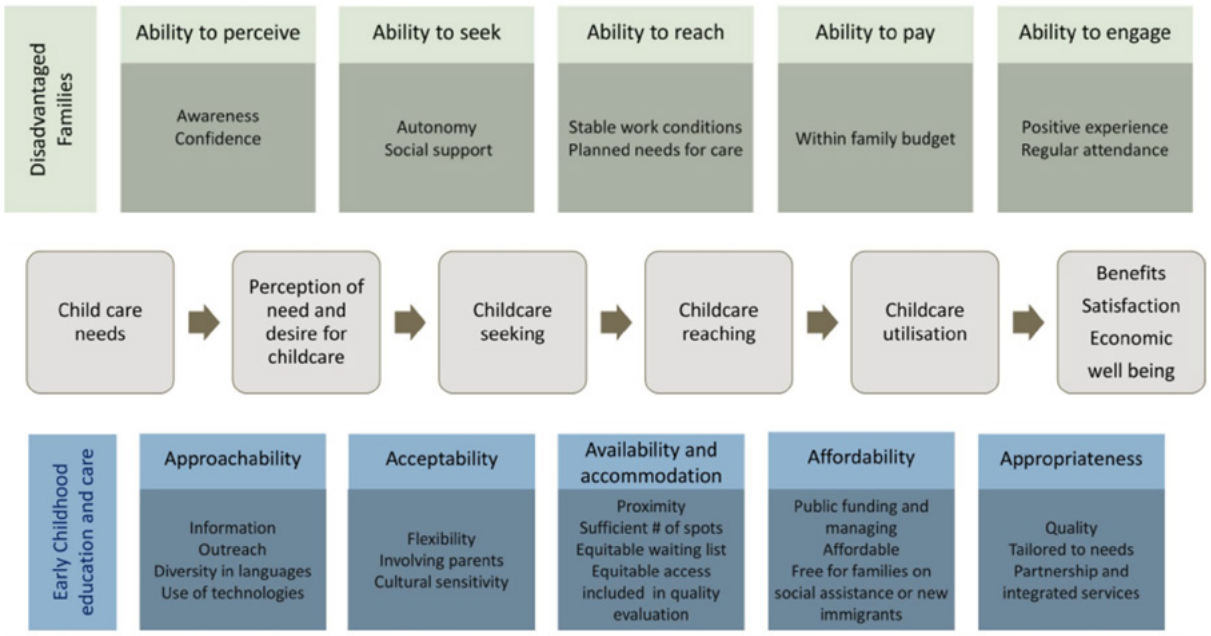
3 This model has recently been used in Australia by to consider services for women with disability experiencing violence. see Robinson, S., Frawley, P., & Dyson, S. (2020). Access and accessibility in domestic and family violence services for women with disabilities: widening the lens. Violence against women, 1077801220909890.

in systems (See for example: Percival et al, 2019:241). Archambault et al's (2019) framework provides a coherent and comprehensive way to identify and work towards effective practice in ECEC. We have made two adaptions to this framework, firstly we have reversed the order in the original so the framework begins with family resources and then illustrates the dimensions of the service system that are required to interact positively with family resources. Secondly, we have added definitions and examples to our discussion of the elements, drawing on Australian ECEC research. Our conceptual framework is presented in Figure 1.

While Archambault et al. (2019) describe their framework as 'a continuum from need to benefit', we conceptualise the aspects as steps in a progression towards deeper engagement between families and services. The five aspects are: Approachability; Acceptability; Availability; Affordability; and Appropriateness. On the left, at the most minimum level, families need to know of a service and connect before any engagement can happen. On the right, at the deepest level of engagement, services are provided in ways that are appropriate to the needs of children and their families. The sequencing of the aspects follows the steps a family in deep isolation goes through as they take their child to preschool. The different aspects may be more or less important as the family's connectedness to the system develops. Furthermore, the aspect of acceptability may be vitally important at every step for some families yet recede in urgency for others. For example, when a family has found a service 'acceptable' for a long time, they may accommodate culturally dissonant practices precisely because they trust they can discuss these with educators. In this sense, the model's linearity may not entirely reflect the interplay of family and service needs. The framework emphasises the importance of the complementarity of interventions between different partners working towards the common goal of equitable access to services. It does not place 'comprehensiveness' as an element of services in any particular point precisely because the need for allied services could arise at any point of the engagement continuum. The role of integrated and allied services has been consistently identified in the literature as critical to service efficacy (Grace et al 2009; Vandenbroeck et al, 2014)

The five aspects are drivers of the desirability and usefulness of services for families. Understanding the extent to which the service system enables access for all children requires that we approach each aspect from the perspective of families. For example, from a policy viewpoint, availability is trackable, enrolment and utilisation estimates provide information about the availability of places. However, from a family viewpoint, availability may be contingent on the timings and practices of place filling and place holding. The five aspects are thus a heuristic device to enable analysis and to support policy and service responses. While heuristically we are reporting on each aspect separately, there is considerable overlap in practice. Importantly, when these aspects are all present in all the places where families make contact with the service system, there is potential for trust to build in the early stage of contact and flow through to the later stages.

Figure 1: A conceptual framework of access to quality ECECs for children from disadvantaged backgrounds



Source: Adapted from Archambault, Cote and Raynault, 2019.

The value of the Archambault et al. (2019) conceptual framework is that it clearly maps the resources in families that enable service use and the qualities inherent in service system offerings that meet families' resource needs. The schema with its use of 'A' words is easy to remember and provides a scaffold for policy makers and service providers to consider whether policies and practices are comprehensive enough to enable children and families who face disadvantages to use and accrue the benefits of ECEC.

In the following sections, we set out key insights related to these aspects from Australian literature. However, to increase the utility of this framework for ECEC providers, policy makers and researchers, we begin each section with a definition of the elements. In each aspect, the policy and service system should be built so it is responsive to family circumstances, background and past experiences.

3.4.1 Approachability

Approachability refers to a service system characterised by initiatives that ensure all families know that ECEC services exist, could work for them, understand the first steps in locating services, and can make initial contact.

As an example, in practice, approachability might be facilitated by a mobile service setting up in a cul-de-sac in an area where there are deeply isolated families, doing a letter box drop of leaflets, and offering a regular visible playgroup so families can watch and then venture out to make contact with the playgroup.

Approachability is typically facilitated by outreach initiatives and/or brokerage organisations. It is about both physical location and the practice architectures of service systems (Kemmis et al., 2013). Outreach activities are consistently stressed in the literature (Lazzari and Vandenbroeck, 2012) as a first step toward building bridges of trust between marginalised groups and ECEC services. Given that families living in disadvantaged contexts might not have social networks

which transmit such knowledge (positively and accurately), there need to be service points where families feel comfortable so this information can be conveyed (Warr, 2008; Warr et al, 2013; Mitchell et al 2017).

Successful outreaching initiatives are frequently linked to or embedded in the work of locally established organisations that might have already developed trustful relationship with marginalised people. Strong outreach initiatives address knowledge barriers that families might face. Families are not likely to enter unfamiliar services and spaces if they do not perceive that early childhood services are a possibility for their family – either financially or culturally. Outreach increases the likelihood of approaching services because they allow families to learn that ECEC services might be a possibility for them. Outreach needs to convey information in a diversity of languages and modes of address. Many Australian studies have indicated that outreach by trusted professionals and community members support families to 'move towards' ECEC services (Fenech & Skattebol, 2019; Fordham 2016; Grace et al., 2014; Moore, et al, 2016; Press et al ND; Press, 2012; Skattebol, 2016; Taylor et al, 2017).

Supported playgroups are a common model for outreach because they provide a safe space where families can enter with children without ongoing commitments or obligations or feeling targeted (Commerford & Robinson, 2016). Playgroups can be delivered through a centre or a mobile service that sets up in a cul-de-sac or local park and is within walking distance for families. They are typically managed by at least one paid facilitator and have a dual focus on support for families as well as children (Jackson, 2013). Supported playgroups create opportunities for social exchanges between families and for children to play, learn and socialise, and provide access to information, resources and referrals to appropriate services (Jackson, 2011, 2013).

Confidence in ECEC services is supported by widespread perceptions of good quality (Archambault, et al., 2019). Brokerage services build understanding of quality by offering trusted insights on the quality of local ECEC (Mitchell, 2017). The NQS, Australia's quality assurance framework, also helps build community awareness of quality, while also providing ratings for families to use when considering services. This contributes to the aspect of approachability in stand-alone services as well as in large organisations that can afford to deliver more structured initiatives.

3.4.2 Acceptability

Acceptability is commensurate with cultural safety. It indicates that services are compatible with family communication styles, protocols and values. Acceptability underpins good-quality interactions between ECEC staff and families. In initial interactions with families, service providers will not know about family communication styles, protocols and values and will need to sound out what is acceptable to ask and do. Cultural brokers and diversity training are important supports for services (Mitchell, 2017; Warr et al, 2013), but some families will be quite particular in their culture, so acceptability requires attention to micro interactions and reflective practice around the enrolment practices that may need to be flexible to be acceptable. Indeed, Lazzari et al's (2013) review of international research on workforce needs for working with children from poor and migrant families suggest it is more important that staff teams reflect cultural diversity and are able to work across diversity than ethnic/cultural matching. Cultural brokerage is widely accepted as an important practice in engaging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families (Kellard and Paddon, 2016; Bowes et al, 2011, Dockett et al, 2007). However, the

qualities and affordances of brokerage remains an under-researched area of practice.

Early childhood education needs to be acceptable to families if they are to take further steps to enrol their children. This means that those in services working at the first point of contact need to be responsive to families, their values, and the meaning they attach to education. Culturally, families may not see the benefits of ECEC attendance. Some parents do not consider accessing an ECEC service to be necessary or important if there is a parent available to care for the child, and some consider parents provide the best care for children (Baxter & Hand, 2013).

Cultural safety is widely accepted as the foundational characteristic which makes services useable for Indigenous families (Sydenham, 2019). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families of multiple generations have experienced discriminatory, exclusionary and harmful practices in education institutions, and these have resulted in a legacy of distrust (Hohepa and McIntosh, 2017). As a result, some families are very cautious about early education and care (Walker and Shepherd, 2008). Knowledge about culture must be locally specific and developed through respectful relationships with local community members and include understanding of specific local family relationships and local cultural child-rearing practices (Sydenham, 2019; Miller, 2015; Fleer, 2004; Warr, 2008).

In case studies examining the factors that contribute to Aboriginal participation in early education and care, Kellard and Paddon (2016:57) observed that successful participation would take place when "relationships were developed from the moment a family walked into a service." They reported that families and service providers said that relationships at a service could feel like an extended family to Aboriginal children (Kellard and Paddon, 2016).

Research has shown that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families feel safest where there is a welcoming atmosphere, congenial physical environment and respectful interactions with staff (Baxter and Hand, 2013, Grace and Trudgett 2012). Making an ECEC environment welcoming means ensuring it meets community needs (Kellard and Paddon, 2016) and includes culturally acceptable and meaningful Aboriginal resources (Mann, et al., 2011). Multifunction Aboriginal Children's Services were developed with this principle, consulting with local families and communities about the design of the buildings, environments and the nature of the services. These approaches led to a sense of community ownership and good community use of the services (Kellard and Paddon, 2016).

Other factors that contribute to acceptability include employment practices which support the use of cultural and linguistic brokers for families, all of which may build the family's perception that the environment is one where their child is safe (Fordham, 2016, Warr et al, 2014, Hopkins et al, 2017). This safety and acceptability is needed prior to, through and after enrolment. Ishimine (2011) found that the employment of bi-lingual staff meant that while English was used in group activities these staff were able to communicate with children in their first language in one on one interactions and their parents.

Acceptability is a dimension that is pertinent before enrolment but also that links into a services capacity to be accommodating and appropriate throughout a family's engagement.

3.4.3 Availability

Availability refers to whether there are places available in kinds of ECEC services families would like to access, in the locations where families wish to use them, often in their

local neighbourhoods. Archambault, et al. (2019) deepen the idea of availability with the interconnected concept of accommodation which describes the ways in which services take account of families' particular needs for a place across a day and across a year. For available places to accommodate families, 'availability' needs to be considered over a range of timeframes - daily accessibility, weekly accessibility and over the stages of a year. Flexible session times might support availability for a family, as might ways that a place can be held while a family meets family obligations and are away for a time.

The question of whether ECEC places are available for families to use is one that pertains to both the system and individual services. At a system level, it can be answered by looking at how many children are enrolled ECEC services, how many are not and whether there is underutilisation in the areas where the children who are not using ECEC are living. In Australia, the federal government provides 15 hours per week of fully subsidised pre-school program attendance to children in the year prior to school, but the data cited above suggests that places are not available to every eligible child.

Furthermore, at the service level, available places may not be accommodating to the needs of families. A significant number of families struggle to find ECEC services in their location that meet their needs and enable them to meet their work and family/self-care commitments. Grace et al. (2014) found that flexibility in mothers' employment hours, facilitated their child's participation in ECE. However, for families in low paid work, their hours of work may be rigid, unstable and constantly changing. So while there may be places available locally to families, service offerings may not accommodate family needs (Blackmore et al, 2016).

Parents are more likely to access an ECEC setting if they considered the service to be convenient to get to (Taylor et al., 2017). Families may struggle to get children to services in the hours stipulated by 'sessions of care' because of transport and other routine needs. Having to negotiate public transport with one or more children can be a deterrent. Hand et al. (2014) highlight the barriers that hours of access and juggling different school and ECE times can pose for parents. In their study, interviewees pointed out that some ECE programmes are provided for half days or on rotating rosters, meaning the child's hours of attendance change. They found it difficult to use these changing hours.

At the level of service arrangements, services may need to change some of their practices and arrangements for children with additional needs. Barco and Carrasco (2020) analysed accessibility in Chile and noted that the locus of decision making about enrolment procedures and utilisation had an impact on accessibility for families. They questioned the literature's focus on family decision making and suggested instead that it is important to consider family decision making in interaction with centre decision making. Services structure their arrangements in ways that can promote or inhibit accessibility. In the Chilean example the authors examined whether services offered homogenous classrooms (in terms of age of child) or heterogenous classrooms. Heterogeneous grouping allows spots for a wider age range and do not involve an additional expense in infrastructure or staff. (The authors also argue that the flip side of accessibility produced by heterogenous classrooms is the greater burden in the planning and pedagogical implementations, since they have children at different developmental stages with the same number of teachers - see Appropriateness below).

The idea that services can accommodate family' needs over a variety of time frames is an important one for families experiencing the upheaval of domestic and family violence. Almost all

families prioritise safety and security over formal early childcare. Skattebol et al (2014) suggest that services staying connected or are able to reconnect quickly with families after experiences such as escaping domestic violence will facilitate ongoing engagement with ECE.

3.4.4 Affordability

Affordability means providing ECEC at a cost that families can manage to pay. The cost of ECEC can be kept low through government funding of services, subsidies for families and service policies around enrolment bonds and fees. Furthermore, the capacity to pay is not fixed and many families may have changing circumstances and needs.

The funding model in Australia is a complex arrangement between the federal government and the state and sometimes local governments. Some jurisdictions provide widespread access to low cost preschool, while others rely heavily on long day care centres to deliver preschool programs. The states do provide some free or very low cost preschool, but this is often oversubscribed and families on low incomes find there are no available places.

Attendance in ECE services decreases the lower the family income and the higher the level of financial stress (Harrison et al., 2009). Only 11% of families with an income of less than $800 per week income were using formal childcare compared to 18% of families whose income exceed $2,000 per week (Brennan & Adamson, 2014). Parents commonly identify the cost of care as a perceived or real barrier to accessing ECE services (Baxter & Hand, 2013), including those in low paid employment (Hand et al., 2014). Skattebol (2016) identified the barriers to fee relief caused by complex rebate systems and a lack of easily available information, entitlements and processes.

Vandenbreock and Lazzari (2014) concluded from their review on access across Europe that the most effective funding for equitable access to ECEC is direct public funding (supply side financing) with additional funding streams for disadvantaged families.

3.4.5 Appropriateness

Appropriateness determines how effectively a service can meet the needs of families over time through both parent engagement and pedagogy. It captures qualities such as responsiveness, usefulness, and comprehensiveness. Appropriateness covers the elements that make services useful for families as well as those that help them support their children to meet family goals, such as learning for school readiness and for cultural group membership.

Services are useful when families' needs are met and when children learn and feel safe (Fordham, 2016; Skattebol, 2016; Skattebol et al., 2014). In this section, we first discuss the structures and qualities that enable families to meet their needs over time, including being able to articulate their needs to the service, and then moving to a discussion of children's learning and pedagogy. This second domain - children's learning and pedagogy - is identified in the literature as a domain that is poorly captured in monitoring systems (the NQS) and an area for improvement in the sector, particularly in high poverty contexts (see Section 2).

The key to offering appropriate services is the idea of an equal partnership with families based on reciprocal dialogue and responsiveness. Involving parents in curriculum development and centre or program evaluations builds a sense of ownership in the setting (Taylor et al., 2017) and in their child's education (Fordham, 2016). It enables families to remain connected to ECEC services. These qualities and practices need to be embedded in service governance

structures and enacted in philosophy. Services that can demonstrate their commitment to fostering community relationships (Skattebol, 2016), family involvement, and inter-professional relationships (Press, Sumsion & Wong, No date; Moore, 2016) attract families who are disadvantaged within the current system. Lazzari et al (2012) suggest that such services are characterised by

- the presence of democratic decision-making structures where the meanings, purposes and value propositions of ECEC are negotiated with families
- an open-minded disposition of the staff toward challenging traditional ECEC practices.

The structures that enable families to fully engage with services are only ever as good as the skills and qualities of staff to engage and respond. Boag-Munroe et al.'s (2012) review of the literature on 'hard to reach' families noted that meaningful engagement with families requires staff time, effort and a high level of professional and communication skills.

Services are useful to families when children's learning is well supported. This is a component of high quality care. Literature on pedagogical approaches to children experiencing poverty- is scarce. We do know that children experiencing poverty are likely to have different needs, assets and experiences to other children (Ridge 2011; Skattebol et al, 2012; Hedegaard & Fleer 2013, Leseman & Slot 2014; Redmond, Skattebol et al, 2016,). Learning experiences are most effective when they are tailored to children's daily experiences so they can engage in sustained shared thinking with educators and peers (Moll et al, 1992, Hedegaard & Fleer 2013, Brooker, 2015; Jannsen & Vandenbroeck 2018).

Children's learning is based in their real worlds. Children seek to understand rules and roles found in the real world through play. Marilyn Fleer's outstanding sustained scholarship deploying Vygotskian informed understandings of play defines play as the presence of an imaginary situation, where children change the meaning of actions and objects to give them a new sense (2018[4]). Children take their play themes primarily from reality, which they then manipulate through imaginary situations and come to better understand the world in which they live. This learning theory gives us direction about the starting points for teaching and learning in early childhood education and care. The arguments for partnerships with families take on a new form when we consider children's 'real worlds'. Partnerships not only generate the trust needed for children to access and keep coming to ECEC settings, they are also the key way that ECEC can deliver to children learning experiences that build on their existing knowledge.

The Early Years Learning Framework is a strong guide to effective practice with all children in the early years. It enshrines respect for diversity and different and children and family knowledges as the cornerstone of effective curriculum. However, there are elements of pedagogies appropriate for children in high disadvantaged communities that exceed and are more specialised than a broad whole of population set of curriculum guidelines like EYLF can support.

Simpson et al, (2017) conducted research across several geographic locations in England and the US to develop knowledge of early childhood education and care (ECEC) practitioners' opinions about child poverty and how they work with poverty. They argued that there was a lack of poverty sensitivity and discernible poverty blindness with limited focus upon inequality as pedagogical space. Their methodology involved surveys and phenomenological interviews

4 Fleer's work is so extensive it is difficult to reference. This recent article captures the central tenets of play and learning.

with practitioners in order to better understand their pedagogical approaches to working with children experiencing poverty. They conducted analysis deploying Carla's Rinaldi's pedagogy of listening (2006) as a marker for good pedagogical practice. Dialogue advocated in the early years with children involves 'purposive conversations' as these support adults working with children to find out about their priorities, interests and concerns therefore allowing children to have some participation within the construction of pedagogical space. Simpson et al (2017) argued that 'listening and negotiating meanings with children in poverty was subordinated by regulating influences attached to quality requirements. educational policy and regulatory burdens. Such normalising practice regimes 'organised out' listening as part of a holistic approach to understanding the existing lives of children in poverty. So this tendency to treat children the same means that children whose lives are affected by poverty do not have the same space for active participation in pedagogy.

A pedagogy of listening is central to the 'Funds of Knowledge' concept first developed by Gonzalez et al (2006). They sought to identify the knowledge of the family, informed through culture and history, and use this to develop future teaching practice. One of the most valuable contributions of this approach is that it challenges the idea that poor families have less knowledge, poorer organisational skills and less capacity to learn than other people.

There is now a growing body of documented pedagogy based in this way of working with children who experience poverty (Llopart et al, 2017, Lampert & Burnett 2016). This work requires teachers well trained in theories of cultural capital, Critical Race Theory, culturally relevant pedagogies, anti-deficit theory and strategies for critical reflection and how to put these theories into practice with children, families and their institutional contexts. Although much of this research is focussed on school aged children (Munns et al, 2008, Lampert & Burnett, 2016) but there are some good ECEC examples (see for example Hedges et al, 2011, Ardnt & Tesar, 2014). However, it is important to note that accessing the funds of knowledge of people who have been stigmatised and excluded can be challenging. Families may doubt their own knowledge due to past experiences of deficits being attributed to them as individuals or to their family situation and may value their privacy (Llopart et al, 2017; Zipin, 2019). Skills to work with these disadvantages requires more specialised curriculum approaches and understandings than those offered in the EYLF.

In this section we have presented a framework for thinking about the dimensions of access to ECEC for families experiencing adversity. We have reviewed Australian research on early childhood to explore each of these dimensions further. But there is a need to map the practices which are already in place in Australian ECEC and to understand how these are supported, or could be supported by policy. Many in the sector have been grappling with these issues for years. In this project we conduct interviews with ECEC directors, services and large providers, as well as other family services, to learn which of the five dimensions are already well established in many parts of the sector, which require further development, and how these key stakeholders regard the impact of policy on access.

4 Methodology

The methodology of this study aimed to capture the perspectives of high level stakeholders in Australian ECEC. Researchers undertook consultations with key stakeholders to identify high quality effective services in disadvantaged communities through an adapted Delphi method. The Delphi method builds consensus and explores dissensus among a diverse range of participants. It encourages the expression of opinions, critique and revisions of judgement by enabling participants to comment on the positions of each other.

The Delphi method is a well-established group communication process that allows "a group of individuals, as a whole, to deal with a complex problem" (Linstone and Turoff, 1975, p. 3). The Delphi method has been used in educational research (Dinnebeil et al, 2006) to address issues ranging from teacher's understandings of pedagogy (Mason et al (N/D), Manizade et al, 2011) to the use of itinerant teachers for educational inclusion (Dinnebeil et al 2006). Importantly for this study it has been used to examine the circumstances of children who are thriving in spite of significant adversities (Eastman et al, 2014). While Delphi techniques have been used in high level policy making since the 1950's, they have more recently been applied to global futures studies and research. Of note, is the Millennium project conducted by the World Federation of UN Associations (WFUNA), an independent, non-governmental organisation with Category One Consultative Status at the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). The purpose of the Millennium Project is to assist in organizing futures research by continuously updating and improving humanity's thinking about the future and making that thinking available for feedback as a geographically and institutionally dispersed think tank (Steinert, 2009).

The broad aim of Delphi studies is to systematically analyse the inputs of selected experts, who remain anonymous in order to neutralise the power relations between experts. However, experts are encouraged to co-think complex problems and to scrutinize each other's responses, to comment on them and consequently to revise or refine their thinking. It is often employed when experts are separated geographically. The key features of the method are anonymity between participants with controlled feedback provided in a structured manner and opportunities for participants to review and revise their understandings. Delphi techniques are typically modified to fit a particular research question, but characterized by four phases: exploring, reaching understanding, resolving disagreements, and confirming results.

Participants are recruited based on their expertise related to a particular topic. The size of a Delphi sample depends on the homogeneity of members. Researchers experienced in the Delphi method agree that little is gained when sample size exceeds 30 participants. Delphi studies traditionally use survey instruments and are conducted in successive rounds during which participants comment on the salience of items, researchers summarize the items, and the participants then review the revised items for further rating until consensus is achieved. This typically involves 2–4 iterations. There are variations of the Delphi such as the dissensus or Policy Delphi methods both of which aim to seek a broad range of opinions without achieving consensus (Steinert, 2009). In a systematic review of research using the Delphi method,

Diamond et al (2014) argue that while consensus is of primary importance in the Delphi method, definitions of consensus are poorly developed and there is benefit in sharing and focusing on dissensus.

4.1 Adaptations of the Delphi Method

In keeping with best practices in Delphi methodologies, this project began with a literature review to develop an initial set of items to provoke discussion on the various components of our research question. Our Delphi technique addressed "what could or should be" policy and practices that support equitable access to high quality ECEC. The method allowed us to bring together geographically distant stakeholders in an anonymous forum. This research design allowed us to engage critically with the halo effect and orthodoxies which mark key ECEC policy architectures - the NQS and EYLF. In the early childhood education sector, these policy architectures were developed collaboratively across the sector and over a long period of negotiation with all sector stakeholders and government. However, 10 years on these policy architectures have yet to be evaluated. We were interested in considering if these architectures are effective enough to support high quality practice in disadvantaged contexts and how they need to be developed to ensure equity of access to high quality ECEC for all families.

4.1.1 Recruitment and sample

We established an Advisory Group of organisational leaders from Early Childhood Australia, Early Learning and Care Council of Australia, KU Children's Services, and the Front Project. This group advised on research questions, methods, potential research participants and practical supports such as help with recruitment. We made a decision to use semi-structured interviews rather than a survey and to capture dissensus as well as consensus between participants. The rationale for this adaptation was that the field of practice that addresses social exclusion in ECEC among families who experience adversity is extremely diverse and fragmented. We wanted participants to be able to explain their context in detail and the depth of their practices in detail. We also want to allow for the inclusion of unanticipated aspects of practice which is more readily accommodated with interview methodologies.

Participants were selected on the criteria they had deep knowledge of ECEC services in communities with better than expected ('off-diagonal') patterns of service use. We approached participants from an array of organization types - large and small provider organisations as well as organisations that were not involved in direct service provision but offered brokerage services. We invited those directly named by the members of the advisory group and recruited a further sample through snowball sampling with participants.

4.1.2 Data collection

We conducted structured telephone interviews with a sample of 23 key informants. The interview schedule is in Appendix A. Of note is the language used to describe families that are not using services. Information letters used the language "how to improve the participation of children in high quality early childhood education and care (ECEC). Families in some circumstances find ECEC services hard to use …."

4.1.3 Analysis

Findings from the first wave of thematic data analysis using Nvivo were then presented to participants for feedback and comment. Thematic data analysis was conducted by examining emerging themes across the interviews using an iterative method (Neale, 2016), and recording outlier and/or novel themes.

The research team then condensed these findings into a summary report which circulated to all participants with an invitation for clarification and further comment. The second round of the method encouraged the expression of opinions, critique and revisions of judgement by enabling participants to comment on the positions of anonymous others in a cyclic data refinement process. This participant reflection and extension was incorporated into the earlier analysis and forms part of this report.

4.1.4 Limitations

The limitations of the current study is that the analysis has not been focussed on the specificities of service delivery in rural and remote communities. While a proportion of the sample were from non-metropolitan areas, they were not forthcoming about the particularities of regional communities with long established social ties and boundaries and facing the current economic challenges in rural communities. There are delicacies in asking about social inclusion and exclusion in non-metropolitan communities and this requires a specifically focussed study.

5 Findings

Findings are organised along the themes identified in the literature review (see Section 2.5): 1) characteristics of families who find services hard to use; and 2) structures and service characteristics arranged in terms of approachability, acceptability, availability, affordability and appropriateness. We then turn to practices which cut across these aspects of the service use experience.

5.1 Finding services hard to use

Participants were asked to describe the characteristics of families who find ECEC services hard to use. There was strong agreement about the diverse types of families not using services and diversity in terms of the barriers they faced. Participants identified the following groups:

- recent migrants
- families with legacies of institutional failures and intergenerational disadvantage
- families with contact with the child protection system
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families
- children and families experiencing trauma
- families living on low incomes
- families with mental health issues
- families with disability

Participants noted there was diversity among families not using services, both demographically and in terms of the challenges they faced. All recognised that some families held beliefs that young children should be reared within the family and that using services provided by outsiders was for them culturally inappropriate.

> Families from non-English speaking backgrounds… would say it's not part of their culture to have their children attend long day care services. Usually, they get cared for at home, by family members, or by the mum staying home.

Families choosing to keep children out of services for these reasons was not seen as a problem in and of itself.

However, many participants noted that a significant proportion of families who do not use childcare carry histories of institutional trauma and that this sometimes dovetailed with an ethic of in-family care. Their reluctance to use services was typically more complicated than beliefs about children remaining with their family. Participants emphasised that such families faced multiple stressors, often had no financial buffers (either in their immediate or extended family) and/or were socially isolated. They recognised that when families face multiple crises and complexities (such as incarceration, drug use, isolation) the family had to prioritise how to use

scarce resources. This could be a driver for them to exit ECEC services or not take them up in the first place.

> There's crisis adversity. Something pops up and they think this is probably more important for me than going to that [ECEC] service or connecting with this. They face complexities of life, you might have several children or needing to go in different directions, multiple other issues.

5.2 Effective service models and practices

> Very few people have ever said, "No, I don't want preschool for my child." Most people say, "Oh, I tried, but I couldn't afford it", or, "I don't have a birth certificate", or something.

This section will note key differences in models that aim to respond to the needs of families who find mainstream services hard to use, outline effective practices and discuss ongoing challenges for the sector.

The key message from all stakeholders was that building trusting responsive relationships with families was essential. Listening to families about what they are looking for is a fundamentally different kind of interaction than offering information about what they will receive. Opportunities for listening and building trust was built into all service delivery from initiatives that sought to be the first contact point to ongoing service delivery that walked with families through to and sometimes beyond the transition to school.

5.2.1 Approachability Initiatives

Participants discussed outreach as an essential activity aimed at bringing ECEC services to families who are isolated or deeply excluded. These activities included delivering resources which address the barriers to access to early childhood and other services that these families experience. Trust building with families was understood by all as the key activity. All informants noted that a significant minority of families had very little information or misinformation about ECEC services. The resources on offer ranged from those designed to build family's knowledge of what is available to families in the early years system, to activities designed to build building participation and trust with professionals, to practical help with administration and fees. Outreach that involves referrals and funding support was also described as brokerage. Participants from ECEC services which were identified as practicing effective outreach included those which operated as part of integrated child and family services, standalone long day care or kindergarten services, to more as informal services, such as playgroups.

As noted, respondents worked in a range of organisational types, large and small provider organisations and brokerage organisations. Successful outreach and access models were often the result from partnerships between ECEC providers and government agencies (like child protection agencies) or non-government organisations who deliver a range of wrap around community services such as refugee settlement and/or domestic and family violence services, the third players in this space are specifically focussed philanthropic organisations that use community development approaches to ameliorate the effects of poverty in young children's lives.

Typically, specifically focussed brokerage initiatives only operate in locations where there are concentrations of families who do not use ECEC. While there are concentrations of these families in areas of concentrated disadvantage, many families who experience economic and related adversities are living in mixed socio-economic areas (Miranti et al, 2018). Furthermore, high quality services are not available in all communities and areas where there is greater density of disadvantage typically have poorer quality services (Lamb 2015). Most respondents noted that outreach initiatives were often high quality and highly successful but that the distribution of such services was 'ad hoc'.

Outreach services were funded in a range of ways, from cross subsidisation, philanthropy and specific government funding. One state representative described their partnerships with brokerage and provider organisations as follows:

> their job is to go out, and be at supermarkets, and community schools, and parks, and find those families. So very intensive outreach, to find those families. And our workers are going to schools … We've got 12 child and family centres who are offering the wraparound support as well. So we've got very high engagement with these families in our child and family centre communities.

Information brokerage was delivered through two key (typically inter-related) models - professional and peer brokers. Professional brokers tended to be attached to large service provider organisations or third party philanthropic organisations. Peer brokers were usually set up by professionals – either in ECEC services or allied brokerage services. Peer brokers were a unique interface for isolated families. This model was sometimes referred to as a cultural broker - a person from a community that has a significant number of families that are not inclined to attend or participate in early childhood services. The peer broker is typically someone who shares their heritage or experience but who has become more familiar with mainstream services and so can facilitate families' entry into that space.

Overall, there was a high level of consensus on strategies for outreach. There was agreement and confidence among participants what effective practices looked like, and why they were effective in reaching families. Examples of access and outreach principles and practices that included:

- Soft entry points – including playgroups, BBQs and other community events
- Building trust over time
- Peer to peer engagement/activities
- Culturally safe processes and structures
    - Explaining the Australian ECEC system to families
    - Assisting ECEC services and families communicate with each other
    - Coordinating transport
    - Supporting families when connecting with other support services, such as disability services, health providers, child protection
- Strong service networks and interagency collaboration

The process setting up environments where providers could approach families was the crucial first step in outreach. Services strove to be visible and available in drop in formats - playgroups and community events. This allowed organisations to establish and build trust with the

community, and slowly build relationships with individual families. In supported playgroups, families could benefit from a slow process of getting to know other families, have introductions to child health services they may have missed and information about the options in the more formal ECEC system. Soft entry points enabled trust building over time through the regular provision of light touch community events focussed on young children:

> We offer a community hall where there might be a day for young parents to come in and just connect with others and it could be focused around reading. Generally, they're fairly broad sorts of occasions to connect community, resident to resident, not-for-profit to not-for-profit. We work with probably a dozen different community groups like this and run a variety of these types of things.

Once families appeared to be comfortable in the space, professionals could then open conversations about what families wanted for their children and what the barriers to these goals were.

> When we started to understand that the barriers were, we couldn't help but sort of step up and roll up the sleeves. We might build a relationship with a mum, and see them at three or four or five events, build some level of trust before we would sort of whack them with the question, "Why isn't your kid in preschool?" Once that trust was there, you start to understand what the barriers are that they're facing. So we had seen ourselves in a broader community engagement role, but realised we had to roll the sleeves up and be that sort of preschool linker type role.

Most brokerage agencies had resources to contribute to transport, bonds required by local child care settings and so on. These resources were leveraged through interagency connections. Brokerage organisations made sure there were connections between agencies through formal meetings or through brokered contact. There was consensus among participants that interagency networking was an advantage in their quest to become easy for families to connect with.

> We were out in all sorts of network things that were in the community, so those relationships that we had outside of the organisation played into how well you could support engagement into the service.

While considered useful, the building and maintenance of formal service networks was an issue for services needing to also direct time to supporting families. Some smaller services with long standing profiles in the local community found less formal approaches more time efficient. One provider commented:

> I would map the most likely intersection of the children in the community… is there a family support service, is there a local hospital? Then, I would make it my business to pick up the phone and get a coffee meeting with the head of each one of those - informally - not create a big meeting, where it's hard for everyone to get to. A coffee meeting in the local community takes a whole lot less time and effort, and you have a whole lot more result, in terms of people knowing each other, and the relationships and connections that come out of those conversations at an individual level, than having 30 people in the room just sharing what's on their calendar for the next six months.

One of the key practices that is essential for service approachability is continual reflection on who lives locally but is not using services and why.

Participants noted there was a need for ECEC providers to habitually ask:

> "Who is not here?" is important for thinking about who is not accessing ECEC services and what could be done differently to support their engagement. A local organisation, agency or professional is likely to know these families and children but an ECEC service might not have any idea or the capacity to identify them.

A participant from an Aboriginal organisation stated that outreach is best achieved by an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander engagement officer at an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander community-controlled organisation.

Monitoring and evaluation of outreach was patchy across the organisations that offered such initiatives. As noted in Section 2, it is difficult to estimate the numbers of children who do not engage regularly in any formal learning before school using ABS and other statistics and thus to understand the scale of the problem that outreach initiatives are trying to address. However, some informants discussed the scale and depth of the access problem and of the initiatives they offered. One area-based initiative servicing a highly disadvantaged area with approximately 15,000 children under school age could attribute the enrolment of approximately 50 children in ECEC programs to their outreach activities within a period of a year. A single large provider organisation could attribute 91 enrolments across a state to their outreach activities. Both organisations reported worked with some families intensively across a period of up to a year before families were ready to enrol. These examples give an indication of the considerable costs involved in outreach and brokerage to ECEC (explored further in Section 5.4).

5.2.2 Acceptability Initiatives

> I think if it's really high quality, you can walk into a service and right from step one, you'd be able to feel that the service really wants to work with me and my child. And even that might take a long time, but you can feel it every step of the way.

Acceptability is commensurate with cultural safety and it is critical for positive affirming interactions between ECEC staff and families. In initial interactions with families, service providers will not know about family communication styles, protocols and values and will need to sound out what is acceptable to ask and do. Cultural brokers and diversity training are important supports for services, but some families will be quite particular in their culture, so acceptability requires attention to micro interactions and reflective practice around the enrolment practices that may be standard but not acceptable to everyone.

Cultural safety is important to all people who have experienced violent interventions from people in power or from lateral violence. Participants identified families who miss out on ECEC as from culturally diverse backgrounds, including recent migrants, refugees and Indigenous children and as people who have experienced intergenerational unemployment and disadvantage. This often means families are not at all comfortable leaving their children in the care of people they do not know.

Staff from a diverse range of cultural groups and who share a broad cultural background or experience was seen as a good starting point for delivering cultural safety and services that are acceptable to families.

Having staff that broadly represent families was an important strategy for fostering inclusive and culturally safe services. One participant explained this as follows: " they can see themselves in there…that their type of family is okay [there]"

> Diversity in the team is important. Families relate to staff members who speak their language, and we encourage that, like to greet them in their native language, especially grandparents who drop off and pick up, they understand what's happening and we can give them feedback. Services are specifically hiring staff who have certain languages as their first language for the area that they know their centre is in. Then I guess, the imagery and the brochures and marketing. They celebrate all different types of cultural religious festivals but then also in their orientational induction packs they're asking questions of the families to tick boxes of festivals that they do or do not participate in. So, I think all of that respect towards individual's culture is what makes people feel valued and included.

'Cultural brokers' from within Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and migrant communities can be but do not necessarily need to be directly employed at the setting. Strong relationships with members of different communities were powerful allies in initiating informal conversations about ECEC with families and with ensuring service offerings and approaches were culturally acceptable.

Building a strong relationship based on trust and mutual respect with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families is crucial to engagement and attendance. Ensuring the service is a culturally safe space and the staff are culturally competent, connected to Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander communities is a pre-requisite to building strong relationships.

> We do have at least around about four Aboriginal staff members, and we have a community liaison officer, an Aboriginal community liaison officer, who helps us support our families, our Indigenous families, with enrolments, and doing home visits, following them up and things like that.

This service had recognised that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are diverse and complex so cultural brokers from several family groups were needed in order to build trust with a range of families. The carry over effects of institutional failures was often explicitly discussed in relation to Indigenous families. For example:

> Aboriginal families are concerned with their children being taken away, I think it's mostly a separation or a trust issue with the system, because they would prefer to leave their children with family members.

In addition to building relationships with community members, services attempted to design their spaces and interactions so they were acceptable to families. To ensure a service was acceptable to families, services focused on making families feel safe.

> Anxiety is a barrier, it was their mental health and a lot of anxiety around the child not being safe in someone else's care.

Participants noted that they had to work strategically bring families towards enrolment and resist assuming enrolling in ECEC services is straightforward for families. One participant described the initial contact process from the standpoint of families.

> I think engagement can be hard because [the family] might be stepping into a very different paradigm around beliefs about children and families, how people should

> deal with you, what you do [with your children] you[families] feel inadequate, because everybody else is an expert, all of those sorts of things that play out in early education and care.

Many of the standard first step procedures were difficult processes for families experiencing adversity. Applications for enrolment and subsidies require birth certificates, complete enrolment forms, access MyGov and fill in online forms and ensure children have the vaccinations needed for enrolment. The processes of enrolment demands a significant amount of documentation and information could have adverse and unintended consequences because the processes interacted with the historical legacies the family had with institutions.

> The families have lots of experience with authority and not positive experience with any kind of authority or formal processing. Some families have had difficult immigration processes, when they've fled from a country and whether they've come to the country through the 'not straight' pathway, or even the legal straight pathway. We were struggling to get a full enrolment process completed and then we realised, "Well, we're throwing all of these documents at families who have just had a life full of documents."

Brokerage organisations and services assisted families to access and gather the documentation required so families could use formal ECEC services.

As indicated by our participant, the requirements of standard enrolment procedures were immediately off putting for families with poor experiences with institutions. Families living with disability sometimes had legacies of poor experiences with institutions and authorities:

> I would say families who have had negative experiences with the service sector, or the service systems that are supposed to support them in the past, so any parent who might be more prone than most to feel judged or feel excluded in the mainstream. Whether that be, say, a parent who might have a diagnosis of intellectual disability and has had their right to parent questioned [by authorities or others] through to a parent of a child who has special needs which the family feel they haven't been understood by mainstream in the past.

Services and brokerage organisations all talked about the high level of skill needed in these initial interactions with families who had experienced stigmatisation.

> Families are often quite fearful to approach another service- there's a fear of letting anybody into their family unit. Just coming to a service can be pretty daunting. So we start to have conversations about enrolling children very gently, as early as possible. Very, very slowly, we introduce the family to the possibilities of what services can offer and then because we do have very close relationships with all of these services, we can introduce them again in a fairly non-threatening way. We know the other providers on a first-name basis, you know, "I know Joanne. She works for this agency and I know she's done this for another family. Can I get Joanne to pop in one morning after you've dropped Joseph off?" and try and keep it really casual, really low-key and take away the formality of engaging with these services.

Furthermore, early interactions needed to be handled with great respect for people's privacy. Many families did not want others in the community to know their business, so first point of contact services needed to offer discreet places where families could engage with a range of services:

> We can bring a service here to our site, also their engagement is a little bit invisible because in a community like ours, everybody knows everybody. So if you're seen to be walking into an NDIS office or if you're seen to be walking into Centrelink, there's a bit of fear that the community is going to start talking and people are going to find this out or that out. So if we can do it here, that takes a bit of that away. We've had some families where Mum's engaging with a speechie but Dad doesn't know about it.

Cultural safety was understood in both practical and psychological dimensions in other communities. Those working with refugees and migrant communities argued the need for translators, interpreters and cultural brokers.

> …also language is hugely powerful. So in any way, if we can offer, especially in these initial stages, information and relationships in the family's first language, we'll go out of our way to try to do that too.

Cultural safety and inclusion, however, extends beyond these practical hurdles. Services talked about symbolic approaches to support culturally inclusive practices, such as through putting up Acknowledgements of Country and rich representations of different cultures.

> There's a lot of CALD families in our services and educators will have artworks up around the room and things like that in different languages and maybe staff who speak different languages as well. That definitely makes people feel more safe and welcomed.

One service talked a lot about their own research into cultural norms and practices, in order to help them relate to families and children, and to ensure their service practices were not in tension with cultural norms.

> Like, thinking about a couple of children, we encourage children to take their shoes off, and run around and play, and get muddy and dirty; but that's not cultural norm for some of our families. Our educators have a relationship with the families, so they have a big conversation about that.

Due to the complex needs of some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, SNAICC agrees that services must be flexible across a range of areas to cater for these needs (including fee support, physical access to the service and attendance).

Peer to peer and cultural brokers were cited as initiatives that supported services to develop their offerings so they were culturally safe or 'acceptable' to families. This kind of brokerage allowed for effective information flow into communities.

> No matter who you talk to, people will say, "I didn't know that was happening." You can have that many flyers and websites [that fail to reach people] so what we are doing now is peer to peer, It's about sitting alongside another person in your community and learning from them rather than from professionals who you do not identify with […] there's a relational connection and they are more than likely to find out more information than they are from a professional or a service provider. So that peer-led approach is really, really valuable in transposing information through communities.

Services working in CALD and Indigenous communities also talked about the need for ongoing updating of their connections to communities in order to better understand cultural values, and ensure these are embedded in everyday practices and program.

> So that's just an ongoing piece of work for us. We try to be connected as often as we can to local elders and community members, some of those religious groups that are in the area […]. We try and do various things, and we try and really embed it into our programs if we identify a need. It's not just doing it for the sake of doing it; we actually try and think, "Well, how can this be a really meaningful thing that we can actually embed, so the families do feel safe and secure?" And for the children as well. You definitely have to have a good knowledge of their culture, and what is cultural norms for them, and how is that reflected in your services

The issues that services face with delivering forms of brokerage was that it was an unfunded or underfunded activity taken on by community-controlled organisations. This was identified as a problem for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander controlled organisations and is further discussed in section 5.4 Costs and Funding.

Importantly, participants identified that not all staff and educators have the skills required to build effective and trusted relationships. This was not necessarily talked about in a negative way, but rather that new educators do not always enter the sector with the appropriate training and experience to effectively work with and value culturally diverse groups. The quality of initial interactions are critically important to families' experiences of services. This is further discussed in section 5.3.2 Practitioner skills and qualities.

In terms of social policy, current requirements encourage but do not mandate services to prioritise families facing complex challenges for available places. Furthermore, the activity test adds substantial disadvantage for families who are not working/studying and can have the effect of making them feel unwelcome or a problem.

5.2.3 Availability and Accommodating Initiatives

Once connected, case workers or brokers provide ongoing, practical support and advocacy for a family and child as they navigate the ECEC system, including help with finding an available place, completing enrolment forms and offering practical supports. These processes are inextricably linked with affordability because many preschool programs are delivered through childcare centres which have high fees and require families to apply for the Child Care Subsidy. For the purpose of this report we are separating availability - finding a place with hours and arrangements that suit families' needs from issues of affordability and navigating the subsidy system. The latter is reported below in 5.2.4 Affordability.

Finding an available place for families is a key challenge in using ECEC services. Brokerage organisations supported families to find available places locally. They offered practical supports to both ECEC services and families.

If small stand-alone providers were not able to provide the support families required brokerage agencies stepped in. One geographical brokerage agency said:

> We've made it really clear with all the centres we support that if you have families who you think are going to walk away, and you need extra help to make it work for them, give us a call and we'll see how we can all come up with something together. And that might just be that the centres don't have the time to sit there, or to go through all the things online with them or apply for birth certificates.

The brokerage organisations we interviewed regarded the work of helping families select and remain with the most appropriate ECEC service as their primary role. Participants talked about

various forms of accommodating family needs. The barriers families faced were often practical barriers such as transport or managing multiple demands.

> We also offer a free transport service for families, that they don't have their own transport, specifically for low-income families. People will come to us if they want to, we'll meet them at Maccas or the park, and we'll just be as pragmatic as we need to be. Drop the forms over, go through them with them, all that kind of basic stuff. But it's just really around being responsive at the right times, and not being too limited in what that can look like. So we… you know, if you need help to book your doctor's appointment to get immunisations, it's cool; if you need to come here and scan your documents, that's cool. And so sometimes a bit of transport involved, and a few coffees, and lots of long appointments at Centrelink to resolve people's accounts issues, and things like that.

Another service talked about some of the practical ways that services are flexible for disadvantaged families, particularly those who have their physical safety compromised.

> It's so important for us not to be rigid because it will sometimes change in an absolute heartbeat. Just thinking about flexibility, we have a standard procedure where if the child is going to cease care with us, we ask for a four-week notice period. But one way that we absolutely need to be flexible is say for instance if we've got a family, which we've had a number, who need to go to protective custody, you know, you can't just say, "Oh, but hang on. We need four weeks' notice" There are times where you just need to go, "Okay. You need to leave the state. Okay. Great. Be safe. If you can give us a call in a couple of weeks to let us know that you've made it somewhere safe, we'd love to hear from you".
>
> Families might constantly be changing their enrolment dates because lots of our families have such a range of appointments - court ordered appointments and whatnot we're just like, "Okay. Let's try and remove as many of the barriers as we can."

These requirements were also stressed by services working with Indigenous families. In addition, Indigenous families typically face community obligations that are central to child wellbeing but difficult to meet in the structures of mainstream services. These structures need to be made more flexible so that families can meet their cultural obligations and continue to use ECEC services. Cultural obligations include responding to the needs of family members, attending funerals and other sorry business, having to go back to country for important cultural events, social and spiritual rejuvenation.

One of the key issues related to availability for brokerage organisations was that there may only be places available in proximity to children's homes in services that were assessed as 'working towards' minimum standards for quality or not accessed at all.

> There might be about 20 services in the area that are really close by, but maybe the service that is the closest don't have quality staff, and they're not high-quality educators, and they're not… it's not a quality workforce for supporting them in their quality development. And the educators sometimes, especially in those low poverty, high needs, they are sometimes really judgmental of those children. Like, "They came in dirty clothes again. They haven't got any food." You know, I think we've got to train up our educators to be responsive, and if they just don't like their job, or they've got that sort of judgment, then maybe that's not the right industry for them.

There are organisations and initiatives that seek to raise the quality of services in areas of concentrated disadvantage. These initiatives offer free and sometimes backfilling support to services in a region so that staff can participate in training with a view to improving quality. These initiatives often run over a significant period of time (from 6+ months to 2+ years) in recognition that the staff skills required are highly complex and require substantial support.

5.2.4 Affordability and enrolment initiatives

Families could access preschool programs through state funded preschools or through childcare services which are subsidised through the Australian Government's Child Care Subsidy. Gathering the supporting documents for a childcare subsidy could be very challenging for some families who had experienced adversities.

A significant number of families are not aware that subsidies are available. The director of a long day care service said:

> I will say 50% or more [of newly enrolling families] are not familiar with CCS. They need advice on how to go about it, what to do, what they need. If we ask, have you enquired about your Child Care Subsidy, some would say, what's that? So, you have to tell them where to go, what to ask for and how that would influence their enrolment.

Another agreed:

> It's a nightmare. A lot of families just can't navigate the system. The [government] website is not user friendly for people who don't have any computer skills. A lot of our families struggle. We have a lot of families that answer the questions incorrectly. For one reason or another their subsidy doesn't get approved for weeks on end or it might get approved, but they get zero hours because they've answered something incorrectly. It's an ongoing, huge challenge.

Specifically, it was reported that the Child Care Subsidy Activity Test mean that disadvantaged families had limited access to ECEC. Respondents said many families had withdrawn their children because of limited hours their children could attend did not meet their needs or allow children to settle in to the ECEC setting.

> We're trying to increase access for disadvantaged children into childcare because it's good for the children. This subsidy really is an economic participation benefit - so if you want to work more and can work more, then the subsidy works better for you. But for those who aren't able to work for a variety of reasons, their children get less access to childcare now.

They said that not all families eligible for the CCS preschool exception were told about or received the exemption.

Slow processing times for families applying for ACCS meant families waited a long time before knowing if their application would be successful. This meant families on very low incomes were unsure if they would end up with a large debt to the ECEC service if the application were not approved. Access to ACCS was not given automatically to eligible income support recipients. Instead, some families were told about this benefit, but others could only apply if they knew about this particularly additional subsidy.

Some organisations responded to these challenges by offering families various kinds of fee relief. This included small enrolment bonds or requesting bond waivers, not charging families

extra if children stayed overtime or if bus transport extended the session time for the day and encouraging families to use payment plans.

5.2.5 Appropriateness initiatives

The appropriateness of a service is determined by how well a service can meet a family's needs over time. It may be that services continue to work with brokerage services to do this, or they may have the internal resources to meet needs as they arise. In this section we discuss orientation strategies and practices that meet the needs of the family in an ongoing way and support children's learning.

Once services and families are in contact and administrative procedures are complete, services need to effectively engage and settle children and their families into the everyday service. Orientation processes are part of this engagement. Some ECEC services offer very structured orientation processes focused on relationship building, while other services found less structured approaches offer opportunities for greater responsiveness to families. Regardless of how structured or informal the processes were. Effective practice contained the following elements:

- Establishing strong relationships with families
- Administrative support through the enrolment process, for example through dedicated staff for enrolment process
- Recognising and valuing cultural difference
- Availability of interpreters or translators
- Familiarisation with daily routines at the service and opportunities for families to ask questions about routines and provide information about their child and their family
- Valuing parents' views and knowledge, for example through opportunities to talk and learn about family values, priorities and needs for children
- Arrangements such as having one educator as primary contact point for each child's family

At the more formal and structured end of the spectrum of orientation processes, families were scaffolded through every element of the service induction via carefully structured relationship building. This was articulated as follows:

> So orientation tours- we sit down with the families, talk to them about their needs. It's sort of like a chat, where we build relationships [and find out] what they want the children to have or experience while they're here, and what experience previously they've had, then we go around, showing them the premises. We talk about what we teach the children, what the children might learn or do while they're here, what services we provide – like meals, nappy changing, all the records and charts that are available to them, or how we document and how we get the parents' input, and what they want the children to learn, too.
>
> Family engagement is a high priority for us. We'll have parent nights, we'll have open-door policies where families can come in. We try and engage volunteers into our services. Family connections is probably one of our highest priorities, we know that if we have a good relationship with the family, that ultimately will support the children to have a good experience in the service.

Highly structured and thorough orientation process were understood by some service providers as central to strong relationship building. The emphasised multiple opportunities for families to share any concerns, the importance of establishing a primarily caregiver for the family, and then follow up with the family six to eight weeks later.

> So when a family approach us, we've got a dedicated employee who does the enrolment process. So they'll book a time to come and go through the enrolment paperwork and then if we need an interpreter, we've got time to book an interpreter and to create a nice safe space where we can sit down, and start to form some kind of trusting relationship with the first port of call at the service. The next major step is to orientate the family and the child into a particular classroom. We'll select one educator to be the primary caregiver for that family. So that educator is then responsible for the orientation process. We link in for the first probably six to eight weeks of their enrolment.
>
> On the first visit, this educator will sit down with the family and have a big open discussion - as much as the family would like to share - around their family history, their value sets, their goals for their child, their goals for their family, any supports that they feel that the child needs first. Sometimes at that point, families will disclose things to us, some of their needs and sometimes they won't and that's cool too.
>
> Then that educator will be the contact point for that family for their first six to eight week. Then there is another more formalised catch-up at about the two-month mark where the family and that educator come together again and have another very similar conversation around how the process is going, how they feel about attending the service, what supports, if any, we can offer the families. So it's all very face to face. It is all based on forming relationships.

At the other end of the spectrum of orientation processes, interactions were deliberately very informal. One participant described the need to set up the entrances to the service in ways that encouraged families to come with their children and observe without having to speak or engage with workers. They suggested that some families want to get the look and feel for a service before they are given information about the processes and requirements. This service set up a welcoming seating area near the street where families could stop, rest and allow their children to wander in. Families were enabled to return and remain in this observing space as many times as they wanted.

Multiple communication channels were important. Services need to be flexible in their communication approaches with families:

> You can offer information either digitally or on paper. Our client engagement team produces visualised help sheets to help some families understand some of the information that's required. One of our main forms of communication is through standardised emails. We 're also talking to families on the phone, ask what is the best way ensuring that we can provide that information or that additional support via mail or face to face visits at some services where they're considering enrolling their children.

Participants argued that strong relationships with families involved recognising and valuing cultural difference. This included providing translation and interpreter support; and valuing the parents' views and knowledge about their children's development; these approaches were identified as best practice.

Some services build on the trust they had established with families to build explicit safety nets around children. One program established an emotional care plan for children with families and any other relevant stakeholders. The plan reflected individual and family needs, identified any court orders in place, outlined learning and developmental support needs and set out strategies that could be used across both home and early learning contexts to provide consistency of care for the children. Working through these complexities with families in an explicit manner can contribute to parents' sense of effectiveness and feelings of family safety.

The idea of parents as partners in children's learning arose strongly in the interviews. Interviewees stressed the need for time and space for families to settle into the service; and to offer opportunities for families to share their values and naming families as partners in their children's learning. When asked about pedagogy there was a high level of consensus in the interviews about the need for quality learning in high poverty contexts. Significantly, however, the notion of a learning partnership was expressed more often as a sentiment than as a concept that had been operationalised in pedagogical practice.

Learning theory tells us that efficacy of pedagogy is reliant on its capacity to start with what children already know and build new knowledge from this base. Most research participants felt the Early Years Learning Framework was a useful scaffold for educators to provide curriculum that builds on children's knowledge. However, they did not articulate how this might be operationalised in high poverty contexts. This indicates there is a knowledge gap in the sector because research tells us there are difficulties in accessing the knowledges that children and families in disadvantage have acquired. Families often require privacy to feel safe and/or doubt their own knowledge due to past experiences of deficits being attributed to them as individuals or to their family situation (Llopart et al, 2017; Zipin, 2019).

Some interviewees discussed pedagogy and practices aimed at improving self-regulation, but there was little or no discussion about how educators might build children's knowledge across other (developmental) domains. While there was potentially a sample bias in our study in that our participants were organisational leaders, not people in face to face education roles. However, many participants did have early education training. The lack of detail offered by participants regarding pedagogy in high poverty contexts was notable when contrasted to the detailed knowledge these stakeholders had about access and outreach.

When discussing pedagogy, participants noted the importance of relationships, as well as the difficulties of having conversations about curriculum content with families.

> I'm not quite sure you need to change the pedagogy. What I think needs to happen is those environments need to be set up to support the families in a way that makes them feel welcome. That is as we know that soft entry point and that the curriculum maybe shifts a bit more around, what does that look like when you're talking about attachment and relationship? So some of that work of Robyn Dolby[5] with play spaces. That's where you're not shifting the intent of the early learning framework [EYLF], but you're actually building on it, particularly in those first maybe 12 to 14 weeks of the kindergarten year, where there's heavy emphasis on building those relationships and building those attachments. Not just for the child, but to the family and the community.

5 Robyn Dolby lead the development of the circle of security approach to enhancing attachment on children who have experienced trauma and attachment disruption. http://www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/our-publications/research-practice-series/research-practice-series-index/2017-issues/circle-security-roadmap-building-supportive-relationships/

> Conversation [about curriculum] has to be held back until the family has engaged more, and is more comfortable, because that just feels like a massive ask, because they don't even know what they want for their child, they're just focused on actually getting them enrolled and getting them through the door, and not having a panic attack before they get out again.

As noted in the literature review Section 3.4.5, there are particular elements of pedagogy that are attuned to the conditions of disadvantage. While the EYLF that was cited by all study participants as an effective approach to pedagogy for young children in disadvantaged contexts, only one participant described how effective pedagogy might emphasise different elements of pedagogy, and in a sense, exceed the guidelines described in the EYLF.

The participant offers specialised professional development to educators in high poverty contexts. She said that educators typically held low expectations of children's learning. Importantly, her observation was that this was never articulated as such, but framed in terms of children's needs in social-emotional and life skill areas:

> I've found that educators already have a belief that children will not achieve because of what the educator sees as the family circumstances in which the children are experiencing their lives. So, they won't say these kids have got no hope. It won't be like that, but it will be, "Oh, we have to take account of the fact that we have to spend a lot of time on routines with these children."

This view that routines, as well as other aspects of child wellbeing, overshadow other aspects of practice was articulated by some of the other respondents:

> Working with families from disadvantaged backgrounds, we work a lot with health and safety, like a big focus on that. Like teaching families about hygiene, about child protection – basically looking after the child's wellbeing. So, more of the health and safety and social wellbeing, emotional, over the academic or the cognitive aspects of ECEC.

In contrast, the respondent who delivers professional development to services in high poverty communities argued that there is not a tension between wellbeing and cognition. She acknowledged that the pursuit of basic health and safety may well be a significant feature of children's lives, but that this was a basis for cognition and academic learning and could be extended to including learning that was related to literacy, numeracy, science and other curriculum areas that are valued in school and support wider explorations of the world.

She proposed that culturally responsive pedagogies required educators to become researchers of their local communities because children learn through playing with familiar things - re-enacting behaviours that they see in the community using pretend and imagination.

> This understanding of how children learn underpins what we regularly see in early childhood settings and kinder classrooms where children are offered a play corner where they re-enact going to a restaurant with menus and tablecloths and so on. However, if this experience is unfamiliar to children it has no meaning. In high poverty contexts, educators need to research the familiar experiences children have like going to the doctor and or a clinic - seeing how oral transactions take place and having a chance to re-enact this experience.
>
> All of those re-enactments of real experiences are actually the way that children, substantially, learn the literacy of their culture and the foundation of what we might

> call literate behaviours. And so, the concept of multi literacy then, it's not reading and writing, but it's how you are in the world.

She argued that many practitioners did not know how to identify these curriculum foundation points and so relied on generic curriculum activities. In part, she felt there was a shortfall in their knowledge about how to approach families for this information.

> What's going on in these family's lives that they are happy to share? Or what are the skills and knowledge that they've got. Because some of those questions might be, what are the things you really like to do? Oh, so you're a dancer, would you be interested in helping us on so and so day. So, bringing the families in. So a big part of it is the educators developing their confidence to know how to interact with families in meaningful ways.

There are high order skills required to work with families in order to elicit information about events and experiences in children's everyday lives that form the basis for effective learning.

> So, some of the interviews we've done with parents, we found that they will say, "I left school when I was five. There's not much I can do with my child. So, you know we just send them to school." So, it's a kind of self-deprecating kind of thing, which is partly abandoning responsibility and handing it to the school. [Families may] lack of confidence in their own resources, or capabilities, or skills. So, when they see that actually some of the things that they've talked about are being valued, they get a different sense of who they are in relation to their children's learning. They become more interested in what else they can contribute.

Of note was a program that was delivered to practitioners and families together:

> We have training, we do a thing called Parents as Active Companions. We do training with our teachers, which is intensive one-on-one with the child and the parent together, around noticing what the child is learning. It's based on looking at their actions and helping the parent understand the repeated behaviour he's doing, and how they can nurture that, because they're the pre-runners for the next steps in their learning.

Pedagogy is a key domain where partnerships with families operate in terms of both their values and aspirations for their child and where they can contribute. The interviews suggest that pedagogical approaches that are based in educator/family partnerships is a key domain of underdeveloped expertise in the sector.

5.3 Cross cutting practices

We have reported on the aspects of effective practice using an analytic model that follows the experience of families as they make decisions about and eventually become ECEC service users. This trajectory enables policy makers and service providers to critique provision and their practices from the standpoint of families. However, there are cross cutting issues raised by study respondents; elements of practice that are important at all steps of the engagement process - interagency collaboration, practitioner skills and training, data and monitoring.

5.3.1 Practitioner skills and qualities

There is increasing recognition that work with families facing adversities requires specialist skills. Many respondents pointed to this need:

> There has been a major shift over the last 10, 15 years from services setting the rules of "This is what we expect and how you should help us look after your child" there's been a clear and obvious shift towards always putting the parent as first teacher and valuing collaboration with the partnership of families. So to do that then I think the flexibility needs to come into the mindset of the educator and how they interact with people in general in any walk of life.

Participants said that all staff - not just teacher trained staff- should have the skills and confidence to effectively communicate with families from all backgrounds. Families' backgrounds were not restricted to their ethnicity and religious background; participants also identified the need for staff and educators to understand and be non-judgemental about family backgrounds and history that included homelessness, mental ill health, issues with drugs and alcohol, domestic violence and trauma.

One of the key areas of consensus among participants was the need for educators have training and knowledge of trauma, usually referred to as trauma-informed practice.

A lot of children who face complex family issues have a lot of trauma, so understanding the behaviour of that child and being able to realise that they're acting in that particular way because of the trauma, the need to know that doesn't mean we blame the parents of the child acting this way, that we understand that it's a complex ecosystem and we're one part of making that child feel safe.

> In a lot of places with disadvantaged communities, the person that will have the most probably trusted relationship with a family, when they walk through the door, is often not the teacher. Often, they're the untrained childcare worker who is there in the morning, who hears 'I'm about to be homeless, and I'm about to be' – you know, all of the stuff that happens. Their training is important because number one, they have the interactions, but number two, they also have the least ability to actually deal with that information and to know what to do with it.
>
> So we spent a lot of resources – and we had to cost subsidise that through the rest of the organisation – to make sure that people were equipped to do the work at every level in the childcare centre.
>
> We spend a bit of time thinking about principles of trauma-informed service delivery, and being intentional in [our approach]. So we don't have any rule about…, "We tried three times; we won't call them again." We just keep trying them a call, and we'll give them a call in another few months if they still don't answer; and we'll send text messages.

Knowledge of the local community is essential to good practice. This knowledge provides staff with the tools to relate to families and provide relevant information about other community resources.

> You've got to have knowledge of your community, you've got to have knowledge of your families; you've got to have a relationship with families, and understand what their needs are, and what their desires or wants are, and be brave enough to ask those questions. I think that you need to have a quality program.

Critically reflective leadership practices are a cornerstone for effective service delivery.

> I think it also depends on who's the director of the team leading the service. How engaged are they in that work, and how passionate they are about trying to find out more, to really be responsive to the families' needs, and think outside the box, and look at things differently. Always reflecting and thinking, "What can I do differently? Is this working? Is this not working? Why not? What are the barriers and the opportunities there?"
>
> Also, and I guess this is different across every community, but real cultural understanding. Here we've got a big Muslim community and when we first arrived, we had very little understanding of the intricacies of the community and their beliefs and their ways of doing things. In the beginning, we judged quite harshly on even family structures and the role of each parent and whatnot because we didn't have a thorough understanding.

This is in keeping with comments from other organisations who noted that the first task was to address "attitude and perception and then in skills and how to communicate effectively with highly stressed vulnerable people or people with a disability".

This requires specialised professional development opportunities. Evaluations of sustained specialised professional learning for educators in high poverty contexts show a statistically significant improvement in the core competencies of educators. Such program need to build awareness of the circumstances of families living below the poverty line, work critically against deficit approaches, and build compassionate productive responses to common issues such as children coming dirty or hungry.

5.3.2 Data and Monitoring

There was no consistent approach to data and monitoring of efforts to include families facing adversities. The organisations that reported they engaged in monitoring were either specialised brokerage organisations or large not for profit providers with a mandate to deliver services to families experiencing disadvantage. One of the most important findings from this organisational monitoring was that many services were not inclined to or did not feel able to provide services to families with complex needs.

> We have more targeted approaches in 40 communities. We started with two measures- an evidence-based measure of disadvantage and a centre readiness to respond to change measure. And we learnt that at least half of the centres were, 'I don't really want to do this'.

While most organisations used evidence to inform their practice, very few evaluated their programs in ways that would be considered to be evidence-based. The work involved in this approach required organisational resources, as one respondent explained in detail:

> When we talk about children who are vulnerable, what we mean is children that are vulnerable to poor outcomes. We use the COAG evidence based definition. So, children right across the social gradient, who are likely to not start school with the outcomes they need to be successful in school and life. That falls into two categories.
>
> So, we're talking about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, we're talking about children from low income families, particularly children who are in sole parent families, or children who are in families where parents are not engaged in work, study or training. Children who are humanitarian entrants, who have a language background

> other than English. We recognise that being in the cohort does not necessarily mean that children are going to be vulnerable, as with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.
>
> Then the second category is children at risk of abuse or neglect, and children that have other experiences in their first five years, that are shown to have a negative impact on learning and development, so things like children who have experienced homelessness, or children who have been exposed to domestic or family violence.
>
> So we started a few years ago with some very detailed impact maps and a qualitative approach – interviewing and [examining] particular participants' outcomes and experiences.
>
> This work [is still underway] and the outcomes … will start to build what the next evaluation metrics could look like.

Other stakeholders reported using tools such as PEDS[6] to identify whether children had developmental vulnerabilities.

It was more common for services to work in collaboration with organisations that measured child outcomes. Some reported that colleagues from child health and parenting nurse measured developmental milestones of children in the centre and these were used to inform shared planning for children.

> Every child has individual goals set for them periodically and then educators collect evidence, predominantly through learning stories, and then we'll write assessments twice a year [and] wrap all that up into a nice consensus as to where the child is at, what support potentially is still required for the child and how the child can be supported both here and in the home.

There are moves in the sector towards better data and monitoring of child outcomes.

> At the moment there is no individual child data. Early Start are developing tools for individual children so educators, using their current practices, are able to understand each child's individual development, and therefore be able to look at how they can support their strengths or their weaknesses in each of those children, throughout the few years of their early childhood.
>
> So we've developed tools around self-regulation, and that was one of the biggest needs… of over of 41 services – all of them wanted that tool. Say for the children where they're climbing the walls, we clearly understand where self-regulation works, so kind of doing all sorts of work to help them understand the children that come.
>
> I'm introducing niches of [formal assessment of child outcomes] to actually start collecting some information around quality or best practise. We are looking at using CLASS with them as well, that's another measurement tool.

A significant issue in developing evidence-based programs that measure outcomes is the level of expertise required to administer tests.

> The problem is you have only one person who's done a university degree, but most of them are working there are Cert IIIs and Diploma staff. To find a teacher [who can do this assessment] is so hard, there's less of them working in the sector.

6 Parents Evaluation of Developmental Status- Murdoch Children's Research Institute https://www.rch.org.au/ccch/peds/

This requires creative approaches to professional learning in centres:

> There's quite a number of quality measurement tools. But my focus in mentoring other pedagogical champions to then also help me go out and work with centres. We have to do inter-reliability-based training. Whilst we're not using it for formalised research, it actually helps us gather some data around some of the quality practices, which can then inform future professional learning, whether that's done at a contextualised service level or whether it's done at an organisational level.

> I find professional learning is more beneficial if it's a blended model. So where I can do on-site visits with the staff through a mentoring program, provide some face-to-face, and I'm also beginning to develop some e-learning resources as well. I'm sort of combining a variety of styles to hopefully meet our educators' needs in terms of monitoring children's learning.

There is a clear need for greater data and monitoring of children's learning and development in high poverty contexts and for that data to be publicly available so an evidence base of what works continues to grow and become more sophisticated.

5.3.3 Interagency and community collaborations

All respondents working across the engagement spectrum emphasised the need for strong interagency supports in their community, in order to effectively reach and deliver resources to families that find ECEC services hard to use. They indicated that the strength of their local professional networks impacted on how well they could support family engagement with ECEC services. Respondents discussed the value of formal networking processes, such as interagency meetings as well as the value of one-on-one conversations with a specific person, such as a worker at a family support service or local hospital.

The role of broker organisations often continued after families and services were connected. Respondents from brokerage organisations noted that there is a need for third party support throughout the period of ECEC service use. One explained that they encourage ECEC services to contact them if they anticipate that a family might leave the service. Another told us of helping a family remain with a service after difficulties arose with the director:

> So there was a couple of young boys and their mother that really came to blows with the centre, and they really didn't see eye to eye. She was doing her best, and she had to get on the bus and go from one school to the next school to drop the children off, and so she was missing the drop-off time, and she was leaving earlier. So this was a centre which gets really strict on their times. So we helped to mediate some of that, helped her to understand, helped them to understand and get them back in the room together.

Some larger ECEC organisations told us they had dedicated workers to support families in this way, while others reported that ECEC service directors or administrators undertook this work.

Once enrolled in an ECEC service, some participants talked about the parallel importance of connecting to other programs and community resources

> In the long day care, we actually offer a team around the child, or a team around the family process; so if there's a child or family that's identified that has a bit more higher needs, and needs a bit of extra support… maybe it's for the child who maybe has a disability, or some sort of trauma; or for the family, just for their mental

> health, we will sort of wrap around that family and be able to offer targeted support. Connect them into the playgroup, and maybe connect them into the child health nurse and do their developmental checks, connect them to community organisations. So we are in a very lucky situation, that we can… identify a few families and do that extra support.

5.4 Costs and funding

Providing additional supports to connect and build relationships with families, and support them through times of hardship, involved substantial costs to ECEC and brokerage services.

Respondents spoke of a wide range of additional costs, resulting from:

- brokerage
- higher educator/child ratios
- lower fees or bonds in higher poverty contexts, or discounted fees or bonds for some families
- staff time spend collaborating with other organisations
- staff time to support families with administration and paperwork
- staff time to build relationships with families
- professional development for all staff

Nearly all respondents reported that their organisations helped families with fees and enrolment deposits or bonds. These included charging the lowest fee possible, covering the cost of fees while families waited for their application for CCS or ACCS to be approved, and waiving or heavily discounting bonds and deposits. Large ECEC providers explained that they set fees lower in communities with the least capacity to pay. Not surprisingly large ECEC providers and brokerage agencies had most often costed the expense of working well with disadvantaged families.

The costs are substantial. For example, a brokerage service in a local government area around a large satellite city with a population of 500,000, told us they employed 20 staff to facilitate connections between families and ECEC services. Another brokerage service, operating in an urban area with a population of 60,000, said two part-time staff should be able to connect 100 to 150 families into ECEC in a year.

Large service providers also incurred considerable costs to support families who needed extra assistance. One told us they employed a staff person specifically to manage child protection issues across the services, another that they had a unit which provided advice to services about any challenges associated with inclusion.

For centres, the cost of supporting families was mostly expressed in terms of staff time. Additional time was needed for administration, for example, to support families through enrolment, applications for CCS or ACCS, providing assistance securing paperwork and support letters for ACCS, and connecting families with other support services. One ECEC service director explained:

> But we also have a high proportionate number of our children with additional needs.

> So navigating that system, the parents...a lot of the parents, their children come to us undiagnosed. So a lot of my time is spent working with families, connecting them with services, helping them with appointments, trying to get that diagnosis in place before their child does come in.

Others noted similar costs:

> A third of all the children enrolled have disabilities, and most of those were on the autism spectrum. We have a model of inclusive, totally inclusive provisions for kids with disabilities. 80% of [those] would have been on the autism spectrum. You can't expect to just have the normal ratio in there, you needed to have somebody who was qualified in the special education stuff. So we would have at least… one teacher over, which was of very high cost, to do that.

One service director explained their approach to supported educators to build relationships with families:

> So what we have done is to give the teachers and the nominated supervisors time off the floor, in a coordinated way. Time to help, to work with families, and to have a coordinated approach to support families, not just the child.

Another said that employing additional educators made this building relationships with families and interagency liaison work possible:

> We have at least one additional educator in every one of our classrooms…And that's a full-time educator because we know that working in a community of disadvantage, there are so many other things that we need to do. So this additional educator allows us to have long counselling sessions with families and allows us to engage with interpreters and translators. It allows us to attend care team meetings and engage with child protection, which we do a lot. It allows us to engage with lots of allied health professionals. So we have speechies [speech therapists] and OTs [occupational therapists] and child psychologists and child psychiatrists and family mental health workers and intensive family services so that we can work in true partnership and create a team around every family. That's really intensive so it costs us a lot.

Other costs came from investing in professional development for ECEC staff. Both service directors and representatives from large providers told us that they funded training to develop the skills of all staff in the organisation to work well with families and communities. One director of a standalone service stated:

> So we spent a lot of resources…to make sure that people were equipped to do the work at every level in the childcare centre… from the CEO down, through all of the services, to admin, we did family partnership training. So, it was a massive outlay for the whole organisation, but it meant that every single person in every centre got the training. It would have been in the vicinity of probably about 20 grand.

Finally, one respondent explained that just operating an ECEC service in a community with lower rates of employment increases costs:

> There's the cost of doing quality well, in disadvantaged communities, …that's because you have less families working, which means you have less children coming for more days, which means your centre is less full, which means it's harder to be efficient, which means it's more expensive to deliver…Whereas in centres where you have high

> employment, or stable employment, by mostly dual income families… you have the critical mass of children, where your occupancy is kind of 80% or higher, and then, you can efficiently be staffed at ratio, all day.

These additional costs were paid for through cross-subsidisation in some large ECEC providers, and all respondents applied for grants from state and federal government, and philanthropic funders.

5.5 Policy improvements

Not surprisingly, given the criticisms above, respondents had suggestions for policy reform that could benefit low income children and their families. Many had an ideal of ECEC policy that involved some combination of being child-focused, universal and very low cost or free.

> A number would like children's participation in ECEC to be universally available, or at least no longer be dependent on parental employment.

> I do think that early childhood services should be universal services that's streamed to access for all.

> So, if it is the blue sky question, early childhood should not be connected to whether a parent works or not. Early childhood should be about children actually going into services, regardless of whether their parents are working or not, and should be available for all children, full stop.

Some expressed a wish that costs be reduced or removed for families.

> The other policy principle in the legislation that is a problem, is that parents always have to make a co-contribution, or someone has to make a co-contribution. That's a real policy problem, because there are some families for whom cost is a significant barrier to access.

> I'd like to see kindergarten free for all families. Completely free. Because I think if it was free, and there was no barrier to cost, I think a lot more children would engage in it.

Given the focus of the study on quality ECEC for families experiencing adversity, some reflections on policy focused on the quality assurance framework, the NQS. All those who discussed the NQS did so positively. They valued the components of quality it describes and appreciated the potential impetus it offers for services to aspire to higher quality.

> I think the National Quality Standard is good, that we started to all come together, and at least there's a lot of people now using the word quality, and [talking about] what high quality means.

In the interview we asked respondents to consider whether quality might be different in different contexts. Respondents roundly rejected any consideration of poorer quality being adequate in some services. All argued that children in lower SES communities should have access to the same high quality as is available elsewhere:

> Well, I've worked in very high affluent communities, and I've worked in obviously very low communities. I think quality is quality

> Quality is quality, so it should be the same no matter where I go.

Some did argue that quality services reflect local context.

> If you're responsible to your community that you're working in, then I think you can have a quality program. I think if you're not responsive to the children and families, and the community that you're actually working in, then I don't think you're going to really have that quality program, because you're trying to maybe do that cookie-cutter thing, fit it into a box where it might not belong.
>
> A good example, an up-to-date example is [a remote town with a small population]… There's no venue. We have to pull a trailer every week and they are stocked and resourced and our facilitators have received enough professional development to be confident to engage with families

And one argued that the NQS takes good account of local context, describing an example of a service achieving an NQS Excellent rating:

> We got our first excellent rate of service last year… I think when they submitted the application, it was something like 62% of children were known to child protection. When I talked with the centre director about, why did she feel like it was important to go for excellence. Her really strong philosophical approach was that every child has the right to the best quality and wanted to be able to help prove that for her community… There's a very strong emphasis around take the child and looking at it holistically, and those support structures for the families, not just for the child… I think about the preschool. It's really old, the buildings old and dated. So, in terms of the environment, I would imagine that they [ACECQA] have taken into consideration that community and where it's located.

Another used the NQS to observe that 'lower socioeconomic communities are more likely to have poor quality ratings, which I think is part of that kind of cost structure outcomes chain we just talked about.' And note that this is related to additional costs required to provide high quality in lower SES communities.

Finally, several respondents argued that, in general, quality at ECEC services should be raised, as one said, 'I think the NQF has it covered, but it's just that we could shoot a bit higher.'

Other policy suggestions included:

- More streamlined applications processes for families so they could more readily access the CCS and ACCS.
- Better coordination between state/territory and federal government ECEC policies
- More wrap around services for families so that they could easily move between different early childhood services, such as family support, maternal and child health, and schools.
- Improved funding models, particularly longer funding periods, for the brokerage and support services which connect families into ECEC

6 Conclusions

In this study, we have explored issues of equity in high quality ECEC. Using a framework we have called *The 5 Aspects of Engagement*, we have examined inequalities in ECEC at the micro-level of family resourcing, the meso level of services, the macro level of neighbourhoods and the exo-level of public policy (Vandenbreock and Lazzari, 2014) in terms of service:

- Approachability
- Acceptability
- Availability
- Affordability
- Appropriateness

We undertook an extensive international literature review and a Delphi Study using semi-structured interviews in wave 1 and written reflections in wave 2 with 23 key informants. We conclude by reflecting on our findings for each of the *5 Aspects of Engagement*, plus cross cutting issues, issues of funding and elements of policy which were discussed in the study.

Approachability is an aspect of practice that is embedded in the knowledge of key stakeholders and the literature. The sector is well versed in enabling approachability in areas of concentrated disadvantage. It is typically facilitated by outreach initiatives and/or brokerage organisations. Many positive examples were identified in local areas run by third party organisations and/or by special initiatives in large organisations. There was strong consistency of approach. There were several good examples of data and monitoring, where services tracked the number of families in deep isolation that connected with ECEC services prior to school but in general more data and monitoring of these activities will strengthen approachability. Outside of areas of concentrated disadvantage the first point of contact was typically through child protection agencies which potentially disrupts the trust flows between aspects of engagement.

Acceptability is well recognised by stakeholders and in the literature. It is commensurate with cultural safety for all families. There is strong knowledge in the literature and the sector about how to build acceptability and cultural safety. Cultural brokers and diversity training were seen as very important, but some families will be quite particular in their culture, so acceptability requires attention to micro interactions and reflective practice around the enrolment practices that may be standard but not acceptable to everyone.

Availability refers to whether or not there are places available in the kinds of ECEC services families would like to access, in the locations where families wish to use them, often in their local neighbourhoods. The idea of availability is deepened with the concept of accommodation which describes the ways in which services take into account families' particular needs. Stakeholders spoke about the need for flexible session times that might accommodate family needs across the period of a day or even across a year if families had obligations and have to be

away for a period of time. In terms of social policy, current requirements encourage but do not mandate services to prioritise families facing complex challenges for available places.

Affordability is an issue for many families and the current policy arrangements make it difficult for services to provide places to families that are affordable with sufficient duration to build to build trusting relationships with families and pedagogical relationships with children. The current system requires extensive documentation from families in hardship in order to be eligible for additional child care subsidies. This is onerous and off-putting and works against the grain of policy intentions to support child wellbeing.

Appropriateness of services ensures that families are receiving a service they find useful for their long- and short-term goals. It refers to be capacity of the service to partner with families to meet their goals for their children. Participants in this study were able to articulate strategies to partner with families but less able to consider how pedagogy might best meet children's existing knowledge and learning needs. There was general agreement that the EYLF offers strong guidance, but little understanding of how this might look different and result in different practices in high poverty contexts. More research and training is required if educators are to navigate the complex ground of working in partnership with families who may believe they have little to contribute to children's learning. The interviews suggest that pedagogical approaches that are based in educator/family partnerships is a key domain of underdeveloped expertise in the sector.

Cross cutting issues

Interagency and community collaborations

Interagency collaboration allows for wrap around servicing which is essential for families facing economic and related adversities. Family needs can arise at all points of the engagement spectrum. There are various models for maintaining interagency communication and cooperation – formal networks and informal networks and the efficacy of these networks does not appear to be linked to their level of formal structure. Nevertheless, it is important to recognise in funding models that interagency work requires funding support. Community collaborations can be highly effective but are rarely evaluated.

Practitioner qualities and skills

There was strong consensus that practitioner qualities and skills are the centrepiece of inclusive practice. These qualities and skills are highly specialised and require ongoing professional development and training.

Data and monitoring

Extensive monitoring of inclusion focussed initiatives is required. Currently this appears to be only undertaken in large initiatives and this means there is significant practice wisdom lost from smaller initiatives. This is in part because much inclusion work is unfunded or funded through programs where administrative data is not available (such as the Inclusion Support Program). Without effective monitoring **implementation gaps and priorities** cannot be assessed or addressed.

Costs and funding

The costs of connecting with families who find services hard to use are substantial. For example, a brokerage service in a local government area around a large satellite city with a population of 500,000, told us they employed 20 staff. Another brokerage service, operating in an urban area with a population of 60,000, said two part-time staff should be able to connect 100 to 150 families into ECEC in a year. There are also significantly higher costs associated with delivering services to families who face complex adversities. These costs are incurred through brokerage, higher adult/child ratios, lower fees in poverty contexts, time costs of collaboration with other organisations, staff time to support families with administration and paperwork, staff time to build relationships with families, and specialised professional development for all staff. These additional costs were paid for through cross-subsidisation in some large ECEC providers and all applied for grants from state and federal government, and philanthropic support.

Policy improvements

There was broad consensus that universal free childcare delivered through supply side funding in the year before school would be a key policy improvement. This model would reduce the complexity for both families and service providers so they can focus on the complex work of building trust and developing effective pedagogies for children. Universalism removes the stigma of requiring targeted services and frees up substantial funds currently tied to assessing and monitoring complex eligibilities. Furthermore, a state funded not for profit system has the potential to address the issues of lower quality in high poverty contexts, in the same way the school system is able to deliver tailored high-quality approaches to students in areas of disadvantage.

While universal free childcare addresses many of the issues that are unintended consequences of the current mixed market system there will remain a need for specialisation in high poverty contexts. This requires policy that continues to support wrap around services for families so that they could easily move between different early childhood services, such as family support, maternal and child health, and schools. Brokerage and support services are required to connect families into ECEC and address issues as they arise.

There was strong support for the National Quality Standards among all participants. The NQS provide an important benchmark for quality that has led to widespread understandings of what constitutes quality in ECEC. Participants argued that quality should be raised so that all children can access high quality ECEC, and that children, no matter where they live, should be able to access high quality services.

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Appendix A

Participant interview schedule

What are the characteristics of families who find ECEC services hard to use?

USING GOVERNMENT SUBSIDIES

Are there any aspects or components of the current subsidy system that are working well to improve access for disadvantaged families? What skills and competencies do families need to access subsidies?

- i.e. literacy, system literacy

What aspects of the fee and subsidy systems are most difficult for families who find services hard to use?

Is there any other resources or documentation that are needed?

- i.e. birth certs, immunisation, computer, bond payment

What are services doing to help families navigate fee and subsidy systems?

For Example:

- Provision of internal subsidies
- Shouldering debt
- IT support
- Getting birth certificates

What supports outside of services are available to help families understand fee and subsidy systems?

- We are interested in both Government and non-Government supports, such as:

PROVIDER COSTS

Are there additional costs to providing high quality in disadvantaged contexts?

How are services/providers generating money to support the family engagement work they do with families facing adversity?

ACCESS & OUTREACH

[for service] Do you have any effective strategies to help families make initial contact with services?

[Other stakeholders] Do you know of any effective ways to help families make contact with services?

Are these strategies used systematically?

How do you find out and monitor how many children in your local area are not engaging?

Do you monitor outreach and community involvement? i.e. through performance measures

Are these strategies effective?

ENGAGING AND INCLUSION

What do effective services offer in terms of

- Interactions with staff
- Interactions with other families

What does flexibility look like for families who face adversities?

What helps families to feel safe and culturally included by services?

How do families engage with families when they have first enrolled in the service?

Settling strategies

- Curriculum and pedagogy
- Interactions with staff (primary caregiver model)
- Interactions with other families

QUALITY STANDARDS & MONITORING

What do effective services offer in terms of curriculum and pedagogy?

Do you use child outcomes to measure quality or inform program development?

What indicators of children's learning inform your programming and/or administrative systems? We are interested in both formal and informal tools, i.e. ECERS (environmental rating scales, learning stories, documentation on funds of knowledge etc?

[IF mention the EYLF, ask]

- Do you find the ELYF effective for informing programs that respond effectively to the needs of children and families in high poverty contexts?
- Do you use any other tools to inform and monitor program development?

Are there aspects of quality that are important in high poverty contexts but not well recognised in quality improvement frameworks?

Is the current assessment system which requires all quality areas to be of a certain standard supportive or unsupportive of work in high poverty contexts?

What are the features of high quality in disadvantaged contexts?

Some people might say that quality looks different in high poverty contexts, while others say that the structural and process quality components should be exactly the same as for other services.

Do you think it varies across contexts?

Should all aspects of structural and process quality be weighted the same?

Are there any particular skills and knowledge that educators need?

- Local workforce
- Long term employees
- Employees with community networks
- Specialised skills
- Community Development skills
- Adult education skills
- Health sector skills
- Curriculum development skills that can coordinate the different contexts of child development
- Cultural competency for staff
- Empathy and acceptance of different world views
- Knowledge of the community

REGIONAL COMMUNITIES

What strengths are there in regional communities to support families who are disadvantaged?

Are different processes of engaging families and other stakeholders possible/desirable?

Are there additional resources needed in regional communities to support high quality?

INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES

How can services work to ensure they work with the strengths of in Indigenous communities to support high quality for families who are disadvantaged?

Are there additional resources needed by services working in Indigenous communities?

Do services working with Indigenous children use different processes to engage families and other stakeholders? Is this possible/desirable?

Are there important components to quality early education that are not covered in the NQS for services who enrol Indigenous children?

What would the ideal ECEC system look like in Australia for families who find services hard to use?

How could Australian government (legislation like CCS, regulations, NQS and EYLF, intersecting policy eg: income management, NDIS) respond to the needs of families who find services hard to use?