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Quality is key in Early Childhood Education in Australia

Early childhood education

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About the Mitchell Institute

Mitchell Institute at Victoria University works to improve the connection between evidence and policy reform. We promote the principle that high-quality education, from the early years through to early adulthood, is fundamental to individual wellbeing and to a prosperous society. We believe in an education system that is oriented towards the future, creates pathways for individual success, and meets the needs of a globalised economy. Mitchell Institute was established in 2013 by Victoria University with foundational investment from the Harold Mitchell Foundation.

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■ Revisiting the question of quality in early education

Early education benefits all children, and can be transformative for the children with the greatest challenges. But not all children in Australia experience a high quality early education. Getting quality right is the key piece of the puzzle needed to deliver the promise of early education.

Investing in early learning is a widely accepted approach, backed by extensive evidence, for governments and families to foster children’s development, lay the foundations for future learning and wellbeing, and reduce downstream expenditure on health, welfare and justice (Taggart, Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, & Siraj, 2015; Vandell, Belsky, Burchinal, Steinberg, & Vandergrift, 2010).

While all children benefit from high quality early learning, research also shows that children experiencing higher levels of disadvantage benefit the most, and can even catch up to their more advantaged peers (Duncan & Sojourner, 2013; Yazejian, Bryant, Freel, & Burchinal, 2015). Yet, the benefits of early education are only realised if children have access to learning opportunities that are of sufficiently high quality to substantially impact their development.

Too many children in Australia are missing out on high quality early learning opportunities.

Over the last 10 years, Australian governments and the broader Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) sector have been working hard to implement major reforms to improve the quality of the ECEC system. But lifting quality is complex and requires ongoing investment, evaluation and sharpening of approaches.

ECEC is a significant national investment. Last year, Australian governments spent over \$9 billion on ECEC, and parents and families also contributed a significant share (OECD, 2017; Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision, 2017). The nation will only gain the full benefit of this investment when all children can participate in early education programs of a high enough quality to make a lasting difference.

Recent policy debates have had a singular focus on the affordability of early childhood education and care, but it is time to shift the conversation to quality. Drawing on Australian evidence, this policy brief highlights some of the complex barriers to lifting quality across the system and paves a way forward.

Priority actions

The evidence is clear that effective teaching, educators who can skilfully combine explicit teaching of skills and concepts with sensitive and warm interactions, is at the core of quality early education.

Unlike in the school sector, supports that build the capability of the educator workforce have not yet been embedded effectively across the early education system.

Key policy priorities for lifting quality across the ECEC system must address this gap by focussing on:

1. Pre-service teacher education, especially for Early Childhood Teachers (ECTs) and Diploma-qualified staff
2. Pathways that grow pedagogical leaders
3. Ongoing, embedded and evidence-informed professional learning
4. The use of data to track children’s development, and design appropriate, personalised learning opportunities

Components of quality in early education



There are many elements to quality – what’s most important?

Quality early education is about rich interactions

Quality in early education has many components, but to lift children’s educational outcomes, educators who can skilfully combine explicit teaching of skills and concepts with sensitive and warm, play-based interactions are critical.

There are a number of organisational and structural foundations that need to be in place to enable educators to do this important work effectively. Australia has been successfully establishing these structures with the introduction of the National Quality Framework in 2012, which is progressively improving some of the critical elements of quality – including increasing educator qualification requirements, reducing educator to child ratios, and establishing a nationally consistent National Quality Standard.

“By engaging children in deep conversations about what they are doing; by asking open-ended questions to encourage their thinking; and by supporting them to reflect on and evaluate the success or otherwise of their efforts, we can help children to begin to think in more sophisticated and abstract ways.”

(TOUHILL, 2012)

Process quality is the direct interactional experience of children in ECEC – the daily back-and-forth exchanges they have with educators and other children, and their participation in learning activities

HOWES ET AL. (2008); MATHERS, SINGLER, AND KAREMAKER (2012)

While early childhood quality reforms in Australia over the last 10 years have largely concentrated on establishing these structural foundations of quality, the priority now is process quality – the practice of early childhood educators and the everyday experience of children in early education settings.

The positive impact of early education lies in the nature, quality and consistency of interactions between educators and children. These interactions are central to the learning opportunities that educators design and provide, as it is through sustained and reciprocal interactions that educators foster children’s communication skills, extend their thinking, develop their ability to manage emotions and relationships and instil the skills and confidence to be effective learners.

Crafting these learning opportunities requires a great deal of skill and expertise. Educators require deep knowledge of the science of child development, and the learning capabilities and processes of infants, toddlers and preschool aged children.

Across the system, quality is lagging in key areas

Available evidence suggests that in key areas of early education, Australia’s ECEC system is not yet providing enough children with educational experiences of sufficient quality to shift their developmental trajectories, particularly children experiencing disadvantage.

It is taking time for the impact of the 2012 National Quality Framework reforms to flow through to everyday practice. The ongoing assessment of early learning and care providers against the seven key quality standards, has demonstrated that there is still progress to be made.

Quality area 1, ‘Educational program and practice,’ is the area of the standards most strongly aligned with effective educational programs, yet has the highest proportion of services not meeting the minimum benchmark (ACECQA, 2017). An explanation of Quality Area 1 is provided in Box 1.

BOX 1: ACECQA Quality Area 1, Educational program and Practice

Quality Standard 1.1:
An approved learning framework informs the development of a curriculum that enhances each child’s learning and development.

Quality Standard 1.2:
Educators and co-ordinators are focused, active and reflective in designing and delivering the program for each child.

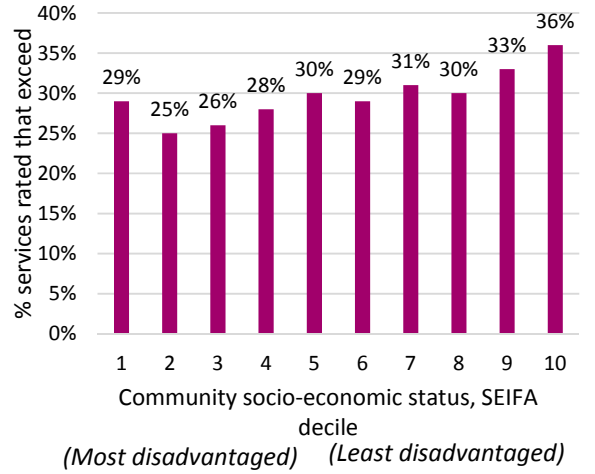
AUSTRALIAN CHILDREN’S EDUCATION & CARE QUALITY AUTHORITY (ACECQA)

1 in 5 services rated failed to meet quality standard 1.2

Since 2012, one in five services rated in Australia (around 2,680 services) have failed to meet quality standard 1.2, which relates to educators actively developing learning opportunities tailored to the needs of each child (ACECQA, 2017). Half of services meet but don’t exceed this minimum benchmark for quality.

The graph below shows the proportion of services that have been assessed against the National Quality Standard that perform above the minimum standard for educational program and practice quality, by different neighbourhood socioeconomic status. Across the spectrum, only around one third of services exceed, while services in some of the more disadvantaged areas are even less likely to meet the key quality benchmark.

Figure 1: Percentage of services rated that exceed the standard on Quality Area 1 (2017)



Source: Data from ACECQA (2017)

The Effective Early Educational Experiences (E4Kids) study, Australia’s most extensive longitudinal study on the impact of early childhood education and care, uncovers some similar findings on quality.

The E4Kids researchers observed the level of quality experienced by 2,494 children in ECEC programs in Australia from 2010, measured on the three quality domains below (Cloney et al., 2017):

Table 1: Domains of quality assessed in E4Kids, and average scores across the sample (using the Classroom Assessment Scoring System)

Quality domain	Average score
Emotional support <i>How well educators respond with enthusiasm, encouragement, respect and sensitivity in their interactions with children</i>	4.85 (out of 7)
Classroom organisation <i>How effectively educators balance classroom time between learning and routines, and how educators manage children’s varying classroom behaviours.</i>	4.9 (out of 7)
Instructional support <i>The strategies that educators use to promote children’s higher-order thinking skills and creativity, how they use language to provide feedback to children on their learning, and to have conversations, and introduce new concepts.</i>	1.51 (out of 7)

Source: Cloney, Cleveland, Hattie and Tayler (2016)

Instructional support is the key domain measuring the quality of teacher-child interactions specific to learning, and most strongly aligned to cognitive outcomes (Cloney, 2016). Across the E4Kids sample, the vitally important instructional support scored significantly lower than other domains of quality (Table 1).

Lowest quality for children with the greatest need

There are significant variations in the level of quality that children in different neighbourhoods experience, with fewer high quality services in the areas that need it most (Cloney, Cleveland, Hattie, & Tayler, 2016).

E4Kids revealed that only 7 per cent of children from low SES families attended programs in the highest 20

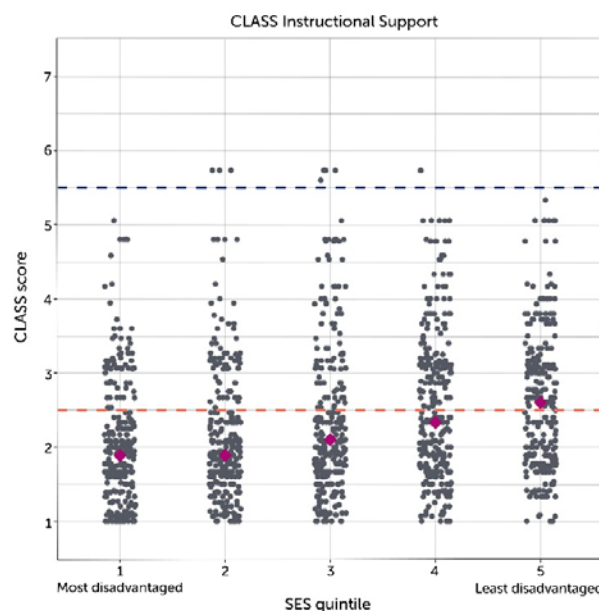
per cent of instructional support observed in Australia, compared to 30 per cent of children from high SES families. If quality was distributed equally, we would expect an even 20 per cent distribution in both cases (Melbourne Graduate School of Education, 2015).

The quality of instructional support of ECEC programs varies sharply according to family SES (Figure 2). It shows that early education programs attended by children from low SES families exhibit lower levels of quality on instructional support than programs attended by children from more affluent backgrounds.

The pink line indicates the point at which programs transition from low quality to medium quality. Across most of the SES spectrum, a significant number of programs fall below the line, but at much greater concentration for children from low SES families.

Similar patterns were observed for the quality of emotional support, however, across the SES spectrum, generally higher levels of quality were observed than for instructional support.

Figure 2: Distribution of the quality of Instructional support by family SES



Source: Cloney (2016)

Quality is more variable when children are younger

The quality of early learning also varies for children at different ages. By tracking one cohort of children over

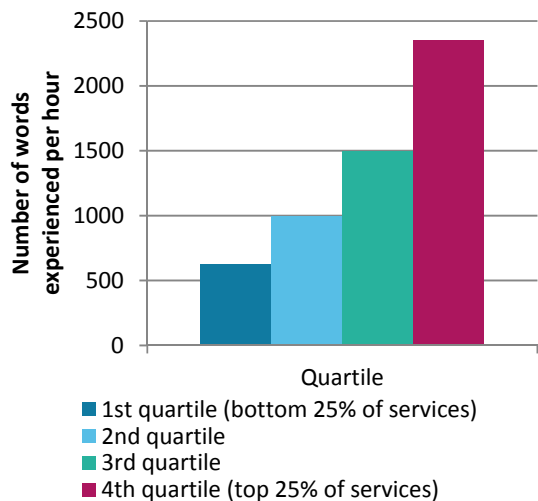
three years, E4Kids reveals a large gap in the level of quality (instructional support and emotional support) experienced by all children in the earlier years of the study, when children are aged around 3-4 years old compared to when the children entered school (Cloney, Tayler, Hattie, Cleveland, & Adams, 2016).

Quality improved for all children in the cohort as they got older, and the gap in quality for children from lower SES families narrowed with from higher SES families (Cloney, Tayler, et al., 2016). This improvement is likely to stem from the National Partnership Agreement between all Australian governments that ensures all preschool programs in the year before school are delivered by 4-year degree qualified early childhood teachers.

Nonetheless, the disparity in quality in the earlier years is a concern. A recent Australian study observing the language environment in infant and toddler programs found that in the bottom 25 per cent of services observed, fewer than 11 words were spoken to children per minute, while in the top 25 per cent of services, over 40 words per minute were spoken (Degotardi & Torr, 2016).

Figure 3 illustrates the different amounts of these direct, high quality speaking interactions that the 57 infants and toddlers in ECEC centres in Australia experienced.

Figure 3: How much direct talking do infants experience in long day care centres?



Source: Degotardi & Torr (2016)

The findings from this study show that broadly, the use of “language-promoting practices were limited” with distinct gaps in quality (Degotardi, Torr, & Nguyen, 2016).

In the lower word count settings, talk was frequently ‘around’ children rather than with children, and interactions were rarely sustained and beyond ‘wants and needs’ talk. In the higher word count settings, educators were observed to actively converse with infants, in a sustained and reciprocal manner that is both informative and ‘learning-rich’ as well as communicating about ‘wants and needs’ (Degotardi & Torr 2016). The frequency and quality of educator-child interactions play a key role in shaping children’s language and vocabulary which is a critical foundation for long-term academic success (Degotardi et al., 2016).

Language development is an important outcome of high quality early learning programs, yet many children across Australia are missing out on key learning opportunities that have the potential to provide long-term benefits.

Significantly, Australian educators report gaps in their confidence and professional knowledge about this critical educator skill (Degotardi & Gill, 2017).

Bottom 25% of services:
< 11 words spoken per minute

Top 25% of services:
> 40 words spoken per minute

■ Policy priorities for lifting quality

Lifting quality is complex, but an achievable and worthwhile investment

The nature and quality of educator-child interactions are what drives positive outcomes in early learning. There are pockets of excellence in early years education in Australia, but cohesive policies are required to lift quality across the system.

The following are a set of challenges which must be considered and addressed by government, and the broader ECEC sector, if we are to realise the potential of early learning to positively impact children's learning and development.

- **Complexities of a mixed market:** finding solutions that work across diverse settings (family day care, stand-alone kindergartens or preschools, long day care centres), management types (government-run, not-for-profit and private for-profit services), and scale (single centres to large national chains). There is a clear role for governments to address these complexities and incentivise better quality provision across the mixed market given the undisputed public benefit derived from quality early learning.
- **Current funding mechanisms are not aligned to need or opportunity for impact:** children with the greatest level need and the most to gain from high quality early education often require additional resources. Yet loadings for disadvantaged students – the core underlying concept of needs-based funding models accepted in other sectors – are not consistently applied to ECEC. Children also have no entitlement to attend ECEC programs, the way they do for school. Families currently access ECEC programs in a demand-side market that does not always meet the needs of vulnerable families. The high cost of ECEC is a barrier for many low income families (Baxter & Hand, 2013).

- **Low wages and difficult working conditions:** long hours, low pay, low levels of recognition for their work, and staff retention in the ECEC sector (Irvine, Thorpe, McDonald, Lunn, & Sumsion, 2016) are barriers to enabling or motivating many educators to invest additional time and resources in up-skilling. Current rates of remuneration make it difficult to retain highly qualified staff – particularly at the Manager level.
- **Coordinating pre-service education and training programs:** there is currently no effective mechanism to ensure that all early childhood courses (both university and VET-based) equip pre-service educators with the skills needed to produce effective teacher-child interactions in early learning.

While these barriers are certainly complex, there are pressing and ready-solutions for lifting quality across the system.

The next step: strengthening educator capability

The evidence is clear that quality in early learning is driven by educators who can provide effective learning opportunities and emotionally supportive interactions with children. In order to lift quality across the system, supports that strengthen early childhood educator capability must be a core focus.

Given the expiry of the Early Years Workforce Strategy in 2016, it is timely that a new cohesive approach to building educator capability considers targeted and evidence-based measures that lift quality.

We identify a range of supports for building educator capability as key priorities for lifting the quality of early education across the system:

Effectiveness of pre-service teacher education, especially for Early Childhood Teachers (ECTs) and Diploma-qualified staff

- Review of pre-service qualifications (university and VET-based) to ensure they explicitly focus on the strategies that produce effective teacher-child interactions and equip educators with the underpinning knowledge about child development needed to effectively boost children’s learning.

Developing leadership for learning in early education services

- Establish pathways to grow pedagogical leaders, mentors, and professional networks in the ECEC sector. Models for developing leaders are well established and systematised in the school system but there is currently no coherent approach and investment to developing leadership in early childhood education in Australia.

Evidence-informed, ongoing and embedded professional learning

- Design and implement models of support for educators to participate in effective, evidence-based professional learning, especially sustained, reflective learning opportunities embedded in everyday practice (Siraj et al., 2017).

Using data to understand and track children’s development and progress, and design appropriate, personalised learning opportunities

- Build the capacity of the sector to collect and use data about children’s developmental progress and on service quality, to inform program design and Quality Improvement Plans.
- Sharpen our focus on tracking impact, for each child and each service, including through strengthening the focus on learning-focused interactions in the NQS and assessment and rating process.
- Establish a culture of practice amongst educators where it is the norm to know the impact ECEC programs are having on children’s learning and development. Establishing models of peer networks where evidence of low-impact is remedied through developing and implementing new strategies.

In developing policy solutions to lift the quality of the early education system, supports for children from low SES families and neighbourhoods who are currently experiencing lower quality services, must be a key consideration. Efforts must be targeted to ensure that additional supports for vulnerable cohorts are systematised, and that investment is directed to the types of interventions that make a difference.

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