

Early Learning Services are capable of becoming an engine that drives the communities' broader sustainability goals.

Summary:

ELEC services are required to respect the rights of children and need transition to ecologically empowering provocations, environments, and programs. This is the responsibility of the approved provider, centre directors, and educational leaders, in that order.

Agencies charged with protecting and advocating for the rights of children and the environment at a local and national level have no strategic plan to help services to transition to facilitate children's access to nature. The recommendations of the UN '*Right to a safe clean healthy environment (report of the special rapporteur 2018)*' and *Comment26 (2023)* have not been included, by these stakeholders with any authority or urgency.

Recommendation 1

Consider appointing a person to a National Nature Pedagogy Leadership position who can advocate for what is possible to provide children in ELEC environments and guide approved providers when creating QIPS around Quality Area 3 of the National Quality Standards.

Recommendation 2:

Transitioning to a nature play based ELEC service should be seriously considered as part of the community's and broader sustainability goals and commitment to children's rights and the environment.

Recommendation 3:

Invest in Nature Pedagogy transition strategies for ELEC services as a world leading approach to solving our current ecological challenges.

Recommendation 4:

Consider a regulatory requirement for approved service providers to have a full time non-contact Nature Pedagogy Leader based on the WVELC model.

Recommendation 5

Create an assessment tool for assessing the quality of environments and children's meaningful access to nature with SMART Goals to help guide QIPs.

To whom it may concern

I am the Nature Pedagogy Leader at Woden Valley Early Learning Centre in the ACT.

With the Productivity Commission's recommendations regarding quality education, and Labors promise for universal access to Early Learning, I wish to shine a light on the importance of the environments children will be spending their formative years in.

My professional concern is that children's access to nature is controlled by adults in environments that offer no ecological literacy opportunities, with educators being asked to teach what they themselves may not have experienced, in environments that are out of touch with how important access to nature is in the early years. I have observed this in services that have been rated exceeding.

The EYLF v2 states "*service providers and educators attend to all aspects of the environment.*"

Children's access to nature in early learning environments is controlled by service providers, who provide the environments that educators are expected to "attend to."

However, when these environments are reviewed with a sustainability and UNCRC lens many services are creating environments for children that are not allowing them to develop ecological literacy or a personal connection with Country. This impacts wellbeing and respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders ways of knowing and being.

"Exposure to Nature has beneficial effects on mental health but many children, especially in urban settings have little or no contact with the natural environment..."

The United Nations ..Report of the special Rapporteur on the issue of human rights obligations relating to the enjoyment of a safe clean health environment 2018

Woden Valley ELC, is a not-for-profit, with a parent committee executive, and has transitioned to a nature based service because that's what our parents, who are medical professionals, wanted for their children.

Woden Valley ELC was the recipient of the 2022 ACT Climate Choices award for Sustainable Business of the Year and Local Business Awards for Outstanding Early Childhood Centre 2022 & 2023. In 2022 our service was selected as one of four centre tours during the ECA national conference and we have presented at the 2020 ECA conference on *Chickens in Early Childhood Settings*. We were invited by CECA to present '*Facilitating Children's access to Nature*', at the first sector meeting of 2023.

We hope our service may be used as an exemplary model for what is possible when giving children access to nature in ECEC settings.

We are asking the question: *"If it can be done, why isn't it being done?"*

As children will be inheriting the consequences of climate change, is it not an ethical imperative that ecological literacy be part of a child's education in the first five years?

This was one of the recommendations of Comment26, a UN invitation to children to give their opinion on the environment in 2023. An invitation that was not passed on to Australia's children by the Human Rights Commission and the PACYPC in the ACT.

As the COP28 major priority is a "Global Stock take on climate action progress" I'd like to request the same for Early Learning Services.

Our service created an Access to Nature Survey so that our children could participate in Comment26. We are hoping to share this with services wanting to create child led data for their Quality Improvement plans. No other assessment tool like this exists.

Investing in Nature Pedagogy transition strategies for ELEC services would be an investment in, solving our current ecological challenges by increasing the number of children who are ecologically literate and confident on Country. It's impact on productivity- Early Learning Services are capable of becoming an engine that drives the communities' broader sustainability goals.

As our Country moves towards universal ELEC ensuring children's access to nature in Early Learning setting will ensure future generations are up to the task demands made of them, in order to take stewardship of an inherited world.

Kind Regards,

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