



Submission to the Productivity Commission Inquiry into Early Childhood Education and Care

2023

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1 Early childhood education and care research program at the Social Policy Research Centre

Researchers at the Social Policy Research Centre (SPRC), University of New South Wales (UNSW), Sydney, are among Australia’s lead experts regarding early childhood education and care (ECEC) policy. Our particular focus is the impact of policy on children and families living in high poverty contexts.

The Productivity Commission is seeking submissions on ECEC which include exploring options that improve or support

- the affordability of, and access to, quality ECEC services that meet the needs of families and children;
- developmental and educational outcomes for Australian children, including preparation for school; and
- outcomes for children and families experiencing vulnerability and/or disadvantage, First Nations children and families, and children and families experiencing disability.

Our submission addresses the above three elements of the terms of reference drawing on multiple current and past research projects, the most recent of which are listed below.

Title	Engaging Families in Early Education in the Context of Disadvantage
Funder	Australian Research Council Linkage Project
Researchers	Dr Jennifer Skattebol, Dr Megan Blaxland and Dr BJ Newton (SPRC, UNSW), Prof A/Prof Marianne Fenech (University of Sydney), A/Prof Christine Woodrow (Western Sydney University), Frances Press (Griffith University)
Research Partners	KU Children’s Services, Goodstart Early Learning, The Creche and Kindergarten Association, Family Day Care Australia and Early Childhood Australia
Timeframe	2019-2024
Summary	This research responds to enduring inequalities in children’s participation in high quality early childhood education and care (ECEC). Contemporary families face precarious labour markets and a childcare system with stringent workforce participation requirements. This project will illuminate the affordances of everyday life for families most challenged by these emergent conditions and develop understandings of how to calibrate services accordingly. Findings will support universal ECEC access through knowledge translation about contemporary disadvantage to policy and practice forums. A strong Indigenous component contributes to researcher training and knowledge about effective practice for Indigenous children and their families.
Publications	Skattebol, J, Hind, P., BJ Newton, M Blaxland (in press) Smoke: enablers and barriers for sustainable engagement with local Aboriginal communities, <i>Australasian Journal of Early Education</i> .

Title	KU Survey on Workforce understandings about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities
Funder	KU Children's Services
Researchers	Dr BJ Newton, Dr Megan Blaxland, Dr Elizabeth Adamson, Neika Tong
Timeframe	2022-23
Summary	KU Children's Services commissioned the Social Policy Research Centre to engage educators and staff in a workforce survey to inform KU of the levels of knowledge, awareness and understanding that KU employees hold of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, cultures and histories. The project is the first stage of KU Children's Services' Education and Communication Plan which is being implemented to support KU's Statement of Commitment to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Title	Disability Inclusion Program (DIP) Evaluation (to be published)
Funder	NSW Department of Education
Researchers	Prof Ilan Katz, Dr Gianfranco Giuntoli; Dr Megan Blaxland; and Dr Jennifer Skattebol (SPRC, UNSW), Dr Megan Carroll and Dr Jennifer Baxter (Australian Institute of Family Studies)
Timeframe	2022
Summary	Overall, the evaluation found that the Disability Inclusion Program provides critical supports for NSW community preschools to meaningfully include children with disability and high learning support needs in early education programs with benefits for all children.
Publications	Report unpublished, executive summary forthcoming on Department website

Title	Child Care Package Evaluation
Funder	Australian Government Department of Education, Skills, and Employment
Researchers	Prof Ilan Katz, Dr Jennifer Skattebol, Dr Megan Blaxland, Dr Elizabeth Adamson, and Anna Jones (SPRC, UNSW), Dr Rob Bray, Prof Matthew Grey, Richard Webster and Ben Phillips (Australian National University), Dr Jennifer Baxter, Dr Megan Carroll, Kelly Hand, Cara Rogers, Mikayla Budinski, Jessica Smart and Diana Warren (Australian Institute of Family Studies)
Timeframe	2021
Summary	In July 2018 the Australian Government introduced the 'Child Care Package' as a significant reform to childcare provision and funding. It involved a major restructuring of subsidies and a range of other measures, and significant additional government expenditure. The core objectives of the Package are to support families to be able to access quality early learning, enable and encourage greater workforce participation and simplify childcare payments, and targeting assistance to low and middle income families. The evaluation primarily considered the impact of the new childcare subsidy system.
Publications	Publication available at: https://aifs.gov.au/research/research-reports/child-care-package-evaluation-final-report

Title	Challenges of work, family and care for Australia's retail, online retail, warehousing and fast food workers
Funder	SDA
Researchers	A/Prof Natasha Cortis, Dr Megan Blaxland (SPRC, UNSW), Prof Sara Charlesworth (RMIT)
Timeframe	2021
Summary	<p>In this first ever study of its kind into work, family and care in retail, a national survey of 6469 SDA members asked workers about how they manage their responsibilities to care for children and vulnerable adults; how workers arrange their care responsibilities while they are working; the challenges arising from employers' working time practices and their engagement with Australia's early education and care system.</p> <p>The research found that formal systems and arrangements – at workplaces, in employment conditions, and at formal care and education services, were frequently failing to help families care for their children. Families with highly unpredictable rostering, widespread shift work and low incomes mean that retail workers struggle to access formal early education and care for their children, which tends to require regular bookings within standard work hours.</p>
Publications	<p>Cortis, N., Blaxland, M., and Charlesworth, S. (2021). Challenges of work, family and care for Australia's retail, online retail, warehousing and fast food workers. Sydney: Social Policy Research Centre, UNSW Sydney.</p> <p>Publication available at: http://unsworks.unsw.edu.au/fapi/datastream/unsworks:77843/bin5df0551d-5d63-41be-993e-f098287c1b1c?view=true&xy=01</p> <p>Cortis, N, Blaxland, M and Charlesworth, S (2023), Care theft: Family impacts of employer control in Australia's retail industry, <i>Critical Social Policy</i>, https://doi.org/10.1177/02610183231185766</p>

Title	The Five Aspects of Effective Engagement in Early Childhood Education: Approachability, Acceptability, Availability, Affordability, Appropriateness
Funder	Gonski Institute for Education, UNSW Sydney
Researchers	Dr Jennifer Skattebol, Dr Megan Blaxland, Dr Elizabeth Adamson
Timeframe	2021
Summary	<p>In seeking to determine why families might not engage in early education and care (ECEC), rather than labelling these families 'hard to reach' the research team inverted this concept and examined what might make services 'hard to use'.</p>
Publication	<p>Publication available at https://unsw-primoxhosted.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/f/a5fmj0/unsworks_modsunsworks_73053 Skattebol J, Adamson E and Blaxland M (2023) Serving families who face economic and related adversities: the '5 As' of effective ECEC service delivery. <i>Frontiers in Education</i>. 8:1182615. doi: 10.3389/educ.2023.1182615</p>

Title	Pockets of promise: exploring innovation and complexity of remote ECEC service delivery in Australia
Funder	Faculty of Arts, Design and Architecture, UNSW Sydney
Researchers	Dr Elizabeth Adamson and Dr Jennifer Skattebol
Timeframe	2022-23
Summary	Given the ongoing underrepresentation of children from remote and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in early childhood education and care, this project undertook interviews with key stakeholders, and aimed to produce new knowledge about the complexity of funding and regulation for remote communities, as well as identify existing innovative models.
Publication	Publication available at: https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/feduc.2023.1233372/full Adamson, E. and Skattebol, J. (2023), (2023) Pockets of promise: exploring innovation and complexity of remote ECEC service delivery in Australia. <i>Frontiers in Education</i> . 8:1233372. doi: 10.3389/feduc.2023.1233372

Title	Evaluation of SDN Beranga Autism Specific Preschool
Funder	SDN Children's Services
Researchers	Prof Ilan Katz, Dr Elizabeth Adamson, Ms Sandra Gendera, Dr Ciara Smyth
Timeframe	2021-2022
Summary	This research used qualitative and quantitative methods to examine the impacts of the SDN Beranga autism specific preschool. The findings provided an evidence base to build from and improve the service delivery model. These findings contributed to the preschool, and broader early childhood, sector about the effectiveness and viability of service delivery models for children with autism, and other learning disabilities.
Publication	Publication available at: https://www.unsw.edu.au/content/dam/pdfs/unsw-adobe-websites/arts-design-architecture/sprc/our-projects/2023-03-SDN-Beranga-Report-SDN-SPRC-FINAL.pdf Adamson, E., Katz, I., Gendera, S., and Smyth, C. (2022). Evaluation of the SDN Beranga Preschool: Final Report. Sydney: UNSW Social Policy Research Centre.

2 Ensuring a Universal System through 5 Aspects of Effective Engagement

A universal system of early education and care delivers services that are accessible and of benefit to all children. We know 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. Yet access and participation inequalities endure. Australian Governments have made considerable investments in the ECEC system since 2009 including the commitment by the Council of Australian Governments to 15 hours of early education for all children in the year before starting school (Pascoe & Brennan, 2017). These investments have not been enough to deliver a universal high quality ECEC system that supports strong educational outcomes for all children and some of our most disadvantaged children are still missing out.

Ensuring universal access to quality ECEC is a multifaceted undertaking. Children and families need a system that they understand, that meets their needs, and makes them feel welcome and safe. This will mean services are different in different communities. In a project with remote services in the Northern Territory, participants noted the complex considerations necessary in the design of a truly universal system across different environments, observing, “universal access will look different for different children’ (Adamson and Skattebol, 2023:7).

Our discussion in this submission is limited to the **aspects of service delivery which make services easy to use for families**. There are additional dimensions of a competent system (such as workforce development, evidence/knowledge production, capacity to collaborate with allied systems, service viability and sustainability) and these are addressed by others with a direct research focus on these dimensions. In our research, we have developed a framework that is based in a family standpoint and focuses on the aspects of service delivery necessary for services that respond to family needs. We have named this the Five Aspects of Engagement Framework (5As) (Skattebol, Blaxland, Adamson, 2021; Skattebol, Adamson and Blaxland, 2023).

The Five Aspects are as follows:

Approachability means that families know that ECEC services exist, that they might be useful, and know how to connect with them. Effective services make themselves easily approachable through outreach initiatives or brokerage organisations which intentionally place key service information in places where families go – near supermarkets, health services and local parks.

Acceptability: this aspect is commensurate with cultural (in the broadest possible sense) safety. Services are acceptable to families when they 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, and forging and maintaining strong and respectful connections with local communities.

Availability. ECEC places must be available in the kinds of services most suited to families in the locations where families wish to use them. Availability is not simply about places but also describes the ways in which services can respond to families’ particular needs for flexible places over time – across days, weeks and years, thus maximising continuity in the child’s experience and allowing family trust to develop.

Affordability: Families experiencing multiple adversities sometimes struggle to put food on the table and petrol in the car. Affordability does not just mean fee relief - the extensive documentation required to access the subsidy system from families in hardship is onerous and off-putting. Where there is fee relief, families need services to put time into supporting them to gather required documentation and navigate subsidy systems.

Appropriateness: Sustained attendance at ECEC requires that services that are useful in the eyes of families and help them meet the goals they have for their children, for example preparing for school, establishing cultural group membership, learning about culture or country. Learning experiences are most effective when they draw on children's knowledge from home, so they can actively engage in shared thinking with educators and peers.

The Five Aspects of Engagement have implications for how we ensure that ECEC meets the needs of families and children, especially marginalised families. In the remainder of our submission, we raise the importance of staffing, funding, flexibility and access to early education for a universal system. High quality on all aspects is difficult to achieve, especially when faced with structural and policy barriers. However, our research has found examples of quality service provision, which involves time to build relationships in communities with complex needs, that highlights how the Five Aspects of Engagement could be supported in a universal high quality system.

3 Staffing and ratios

Our research has found that staffing and staff:child ratios are integral to all of the aspects outlined above. Services that work with marginalised families and those experiencing adversity need to be proactive in providing multiple soft entry points of contact so families can connect. Accordingly, services require ratios that give directors, teachers and educators time to be out in the community, attending events, networking with allied health and other services, meeting and forming relationships with community leaders and building trust with community members. This is especially important in areas that are highly culturally diverse, and/or include communities that may have reason to be cautious about connecting with ECEC services. This may include some First Nations communities, refugee and migrant communities, and communities and neighbourhoods with high concentrations of families experiencing economic adversity.

Relationships with families, with community members and with allied services are key to developing the wrap around supports needed by many families. In recognition of the need for staff to have time to develop these networks of relationships, some early childhood providers are staffing services in low socioeconomic communities at higher ratios of staff to children. Staff in the positions that lift these ratios need secure employment so that relationships which take time to develop and sustain, can be maintained.

Engaging Families in Early Education has found that forming relationships with First Nations Elders can take many years, and that maintaining relationships means being responsive and available when Elders are available – one service described this as ‘Uncle Time’ (Skattebol et al, in press). Such flexibility required ratios that mean staff could spend time with Elders with little or no notice. Such relationships are essential for quality service delivery for First Nations children (Adamson and Skattebol, 2023).

In addition, *Engaging Families in Early Education* has found the importance of employing staff with cultural backgrounds that reflect those of local communities. Ensuring services are acceptable, appropriate, and culturally safe, first requires these relationships with key leaders in these communities. However, as with First Nations communities, relationships need to develop further into deeper, sustained connections, to ensure meaningful cultural recognition and inclusion within the service. Long standing, multiple connections are critical for service/community relationships to continue when staff and/or community leaders move on. Employing staff from community backgrounds is part of this, but cultural safety also requires staff having time to talk to families, to engage in training and to put new ideas into practice, including in the curriculum (Skattebol, Adamson and Blaxland, 2023).

Families living in high poverty contexts or who have recently moved to Australia can have a higher need for information and support and this means educators may need to spend more time than usual with them. Families may be learning about Australian systems, and/or have complex family lives that require an array of support services. Services working with these families need staff/child ratios that allow time to talk with families, share information about allied services, and time to support children and their families to attend initial appointments, for example, with paediatricians or therapists.

Current policy settings recognise that appropriate services for children with disability require higher ratios so children's needs can be met. However, usually additional staff funded through federal and state funding streams ensure higher staff: child ratios only when the child is in attendance. Instead, we argue below that additional staff need time off the floor, should have expertise, not just be an extra pair of hands, and should have job security so they are able to develop the relationships required to undertake inclusion work.

Our research has found that children with additional learning needs thrive in ECEC environments staffed by skilled educators who can respond flexibly to their needs (Engaging Families in Early Education, Disability Inclusion Program Evaluation, SDN Beranga Evaluation). Parents will often move their children to a service that is recognized as employing staff who are skilled in working with children with additional needs. In the NSW Disability Inclusion Program evaluation, services said that they would appreciate the capacity to employ staff with specific skills, such as a speech pathologist or occupational therapist, to work across their service, assisting in enhancing the inclusiveness of their whole program, so that it accommodates the diverse needs of the children. Currently, inclusion funding does not support the employment of specialist therapists.

The Evaluation of SDN Beranga found that children attending an autism-specific preschool program in the year before formal school improved on average across all developmental domains (Adamson et al, 2022). This can be attributed to the high staff:child ratios that allows for a child-focused approach. A parent survey and interviews found a high level of parent satisfaction with their children attending an autism-specific preschool program, compared with a mainstream setting. The findings also identified potential benefits to more inclusive mainstream settings, whereby trained educators work in inclusive or mixed settings (Adamson et al, 2022). One way to increase sector capacity, and acknowledge the specific skills of inclusion specialist teachers, would be for early childhood teachers to participate in additional study, such as a Masters in Education with a focus on inclusion or trauma informed approaches, which would provide them with additional skills above baseline education degree. Current funding models do not support Early Education Teachers to undertake such study and pay levels and conditions are a deterrent to study. Scholarships, such as those available through some state inclusion funding, for example NSW Disability Inclusion Program, may incentivize this upskilling.

Federal and state inclusion programs enable the casual employment of additional staffing but only for the hours that children proven to have inclusion needs attend, and at the lowest casual rate of pay. Such employment conditions do not create an environment that can appropriately meet children's needs. They do not reflect the high levels of and knowledge that inclusion-funded staff have about cultures and disabilities, nor the high level of team work required. Lifting the sectors capacity for inclusion requires staff working in these contexts to have security of tenure and time off the floor to work on relationship building with families, the ECEC team, and allied service providers. Security of tenure is critical as much of this work is relationship based. In addition, pay rates and working conditions should reflect staff's training and experience (Engaging Families; Disability Inclusion Program evaluation, SDN Beranga).

Similarly, First Nations staff are often employed as support workers, or similar, rather than as educators, and often paid at a lower rate (Adamson and Skattebol, 2023). This reinforces a hierarchy of knowledge in which Indigenous knowledges are valued less than Western knowledges. Findings from our research demonstrated the importance of prioritising Indigenous knowledges, including reconsidering how local knowledges are recognised in quality frameworks

and pedagogical practices. In addition, the design and mode of training courses, such as Certificate III and Diploma level qualifications, must be adapted to remove barriers to remote educators, and potential educators, from successfully accessing and completing the qualification. For example, current requirements to complete practicums in other locations creates practical and cultural barriers for some educators living in remote locations (Adamson and Skattebol, 2023).

Finally, Engaging Families in Early Education has found that leadership is important for staffing a service that meets the needs of local communities. Directors can influence the which new staff are appointed to a team and shape the ethos of staff at the service, towards a commitment to professional development, for example, or responsiveness to the needs of low income families.

In summary, staffing arrangements should reflect the needs of particular communities. **Services in low socioeconomic communities need staffing ratios that are higher** than in other locations to ensure they are approachable and appropriate for children from many cultural backgrounds, children living in economic adversity and children with disability. **Inclusion work in these communities requires staff with a high level of skill and knowledge**, including managing children's complex behaviours, managing a wide array of health conditions and disabilities, building relationships with families who are experiencing crisis, responding to financial and related crisis, responding to the high information needs of families relating to subsidy and service systems (for example to navigate Centrelink, education and/or health systems).

4 Funding

There is a need for multiple funding streams, where mainstream funding streams are accompanied by parallel streams of targeted funding. These could support First Nations services, services which are located in high poverty contexts, services working with large refugee or new migrant communities, or services which have high levels of expertise including children with disability. Importantly the multiple streams should be streamlined to reduce the administrative burden on services who apply for and account for funding.

In *Engaging Families in Early Education*, we have found that the Inclusion Support Program is not being accessed by Family Day Care (FDC) educators who are working with children with additional needs. Services report that they have stopped applying for inclusion support funding to change staff:child ratios because their applications have never been successful. They feel that it is not possible to successfully demonstrate a need for inclusion support funding under current criteria. This is despite FDC being a service of preference for some children with disability whose families feel the consistency of a single educator and a small group is better suited to their children. Standalone services are also less likely to be successful in applying for inclusion funding without the support, insights and systems of a large provider (NSW Disability Inclusion Program evaluation).

Participants in research in remote Northern Territory reported that all funding streams are a poor fit for their communities' needs (Adamson and Skattebol, 2023). They argued the market model of Child Care Subsidy (CCS) funding was ill suited. Instead, they called for supply-side funding that would allow for higher quality, greater equity and better participation in ECEC. These participants identified the complexity of different funding streams and advocated for community-led decision making that would allow communities to determine how funding can best meet the needs of children and families (Adamson and Skattebol, 2023). Such funding would facilitate the provision of additional supports that some ECEC services offer, which can be essential for children's attendance and parental economic activity, eg food, transport (CCP Evaluation). Flexible funding models are essential for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander services to respond to the needs of their communities (Adamson and Skattebol, 2023). As one stakeholder explained,

Aboriginal services are not just trying to provide childcare for kids, they are trying to empower a community, trying to provide cultural safety for children, and CCS doesn't recognize that. So, I think those services are really really struggling, so no, I haven't seen anyone thrive under the new model (in Adamson and Skattebol, 2023)

The current funding landscape is difficult to navigate for many services. Families rely on services to successfully navigate these systems to ensure quality ECEC for their children. The existing demand-driven funding model creates inequitable outcomes, with a particularly negative impact on children and families living in remote and low socioeconomic communities. The CCS model creates limitations and barriers for both families and services. Findings from our research demonstrated that services in remote communities require flexible funding models that allow community-led organisations to determine what types of services are required for their community.

We recommend a needs-based funding model in addition to CCS. This funding would have two components. Firstly, **services in low socioeconomic areas automatically receive additional funding** for staffing at a higher ratio in recognition of the greater complexity of providing

services to their local communities. Secondly, **services could apply for funding to meet specific community needs**, for example employing a speech pathologist, family liaison worker with particular cultural knowledge, disability specialist or networking with another service to provide culturally responsive services to a particular local community. Currently, these initiatives would far exceed what is currently possible. Applications would need to provide evidence that children from the local community need such support. In FDC, additional specialist staff could be based in the coordination unit and work with different educators as needed. While services with large providers have significant support to apply for such funding, small and stand-alone services will likely need additional support to develop strong applications.

5 Flexible hours

Our research shows that ECEC services are not always available at the times that families need them. This makes it difficult for families to ensure the care and education they want for their children, as well as making ECEC more costly. This is particularly true for families who are shift workers.

The Report on Government Services is to be commended for starting to report on nonstandard hours of ECEC. In 2022, 42.5% of services offered non-standard hours, by operating outside of 7am to 6.30pm Monday to Friday (Table 3A.26). This included 41.5% of centre-based services and 53.8% family day care services. But closer investigation shows this is a very limited offering. Among long day care services, most of those offering nonstandard hours (40.7%) are opening prior to 7am. Typically, however, we know they would be opening just 30 minutes earlier, at 6.30am. And while more than half of family day care services open early, late or on weekends, most often just a few educators in a service provide such flexibility.

It is also important to acknowledge that providing flexible child care comes at a cost. The Child Care Package Evaluation found that failure of services, particularly centre based services, to respond to demands from families for more flexible care was due to the financial sustainability. ECEC services face regulatory and workforce constraints that mean providing flexibility is either not always possible or comes at a significant cost to the organisation or to staff (in the case of split shifts). Constraints include adhering to staffing ratios (regulatory), which require significant levels of workforce planning to ensure adequate coverage at all times of the day, or paying penalty rates to educators who work extended or non-standard hours (workforce).

For example, findings from the case studies from the Child Care Package Evaluation, provided insights into the decision making involved by services as to whether they would offer shorter session lengths. Most centre based services offering different session lengths charged families either the same daily rate for the session options, or a marginally lower rate for the shorter session (e.g. up to \$5 per day difference). Taking this approach, meant that these services did not have to be rigid about specific start and finish times for the shorter sessions, because the service income, and subsequently their staffing arrangements, remained largely unchanged. It was the services offering a 6-hour session at a lower daily rate that needed to carefully consider staffing arrangements. These services tended to be more rigid about what hours the shorter sessions were available. They also acknowledged that offering a 6-hour session came at the expense of maximising their occupancy levels (i.e. it cost the service).

There is, therefore, a tension between the workforce pressures on families requiring greater flexibility in ECEC service provision, and the economic realities of ECEC services being able to provide this flexibility.

Not surprisingly, then, in our research with shift workers, many reported that ECEC operating hours did not match their working hours (Child Care Package Evaluation). Many retail workers have highly changeable rosters, or receive their schedules with little notice, while ECEC services prefer that children have long term bookings for regular days of the week. Plus, retail workers often work short shifts of just 3 hours. These mismatching factors combined means that families report booking and paying for days, or parts of days, they don't need in order to ensure that care is

available when they need it. As a result, ECEC is more costly for these workers than workers with standard and predictable full day employment. Finally, many retail workers said they worked short hours because they could not access flexible, affordable, high quality childcare (Cortis, Blaxland and Charlesworth, 2021).

Some highly responsive services offer examples of how greater flexibility might be incorporated into a universal system. The Child Care Package Evaluation found one example of a service adapting to meet the needs of local families working shifts at a major hospital. An Outside School Hours Care (OSHC) service adapted to cater to preschoolers who attended a co-located state-run preschool. This service recognised that some families wanted their children to attend preschool, but also needed longer hours. The OSHC service increased their ratios so they could collect preschoolers from the preschool when it closed, and then supervise the children during the afternoon OSHC hours. In our research with FDC services, we found another example. A service in a rural community who provided seasonal flexibility and very early start times during harvest time and ad hoc flexibility for emergency workers (Blaxland, Adamson and Cortis, 2016). Other innovative services might offer further insights into how ECEC might provide meaningful flexibility for families.

FDC, In Home Care and Occasional Care offer more flexible alternatives. However, unfortunately these cater for too few families. As noted above, only some FDC educators offer flexible services, In Home Care is inaccessible and unaffordable for many families that need it (Child Care Package Evaluation), and there are very few occasional care services (in 2018 there were 105 in Australia, 0.6% of all services) (Report on Government Services, Table 3A.8). Nonetheless, these more flexible models are already elements of our ECEC system, providing a starting point for expanding flexible options.

Responsive services which offer **flexible hours to match community needs should be encouraged in a universal system**. Otherwise too many families struggle to find services that offer care and education at the times when they need it. Funding should support services offering flexible hours.

6 School readiness

6.1 Unequal access to early education

We know that there are many cohorts of children who do not have equitable access to early education before school. The Child Care Package Evaluation found that while early childhood education can play a critical role in addressing disadvantage, the specific focus of the package on parental employment tended to displace this goal (Bray et al., 2021). Two key measures were of particular concern for services who participated in the evaluation, the removal of the 'Priority of Access Guidelines' that services were required to use to allocate available places, and the Activity Test.

We applaud recent changes to the Child Care Subsidy activity test for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. Expanding the hours of Child Care Subsidy for these children to at least 36 per fortnight is an important equity measure. However, there are many other children whose parents do not meet the activity test and can only receive 24 hours of Child Care Subsidy per fortnight. There was considerable concern raised during qualitative interviews conducted as part of the Child Care Package Evaluation about the time spent in childcare by vulnerable children under the activity test rules. Many felt that neither 24 nor 36 hours provided these children with enough learning opportunities and thus the outcome gains associated with (high quality) ECEC could not be realised. While it had been anticipated that the childcare sector would respond to these policy changes by changing business operations to ensure shorter sessions of care were available (namely by introducing a six hour session), this was not always financially feasible, as noted above. In centre based services, even 36 hours of Child Care Subsidy might only translate into 3 days per fortnight. Services tend to require children attend the same number of days per week, leaving families to pay full cost for an extra day so their child can attend two days per week, or send their child just one day each week (Bray et al., 2021; Cortis and Blaxland, 2022).

Another cohort of children currently missing out on early education are those whose parents work non-standard hours. Among retail workers, for example, we found only 72% of those who had children in the year before school reported that they were attending a service where they might access 15 hours per week of early education, relying instead on a patchwork of tag team parenting and informal care from family and friends (Cortis, Blaxland and Charlesworth, 2021). 72% falls far short of universal early education. These workers need to be able to access early education at services that provide flexible hours, so that their children can prepare for school, too. Otherwise, there is a risk of perpetuating intergenerational disadvantage.

6.2 Ready schools

In our research, we have found examples of high quality services preparing children for school, but transitioning to schools that were not ready to teach them. In our Engaging Families in Early Education project, the director at one service reported that every year, they have one or two children in their cohort that cannot find a fulltime place in school, either mainstream or special schools.

This preschool service provides high quality care and education in a low socioeconomic area. The service has high level expertise in working with children with additional needs, and enrolls a large cohort of these students each year, supported by state inclusion funding. The service accepts children that have been asked to leave other local ECEC services, and there is a high retention rate of these children in the service due to staff expertise, high staff to child ratios, and interagency work that wraps services around families.

CI Skattebol (a fully trained ECE teacher) has observed some of these children over time. As one example, our fieldnotes show that a First Nations child, who was refused full school enrolment in 2023, in the previous year had been able to successfully participate in learning and social activities throughout the 6 hour preschool day. The child has an Autism diagnosis, and while he experienced difficulty verbally expressing himself, could stay on task for short periods only, and could at times disrupt the learning of others, the preschool team also recognised his strengths and were able to build a strong and supportive relationship with him. They recognised the child had advanced mathematical abilities and was highly engaged in tasks that require spatial, seriation and patterning knowledge. Given the specialised knowledge and collaborative efforts of the preschool team, they were able to support his learning and participation during his pre-school year. School personnel were invited to come to the pre-school to observe and discuss children transitioning to that school in term 4 of 2022. This exchange did not occur.

His mother reports that when he transitioned to school he was placed on a partial enrolment (2 hours a day) for the first 5 weeks of school. Months later, although this period of partial enrolment had officially passed, she was called everyday by 11 am to come and collect him. He received less than two hours of formal schooling a day and she was unable to work. Eventually, because this arrangement was unsustainable, the family sought enrolment in a NSW School for Specific Purposes. However, this child had successfully attended a mainstream preschool without significant challenge.

This case study suggests a need for a better understanding of transitions to school, where these result in partial enrolments, and greater collaboration between primary schools and ECEC to ensure children receive the support they need to attend mainstream schools.

By contrast, findings from another study, the Evaluation of SDN Beranga autism specific preschool, demonstrated that strong relationships between preschools, the Department of Education and local schools can effectively support students transitioning to mainstream school. Effective transitions were marked by having a dedicated Family Resource Worker support parents through the administrative process of enrolling in a local school and advocating for the child's needs so they could receive the support they need. The Department of Education's Transition Support Teacher also played an integral role in supporting families through the process (Adamson et al., 2022). SDN's model very much aligns with other research about effective models for supporting children with additional needs through their transition to school (Chen et al., 2020; Marsh et al., 2017).

In sum, **school readiness requires equitable access to early education before school.**

Currently too many children miss this opportunity because of the CCS Activity Test, or because of their parents' working hours. Moreover, school readiness also requires a supported transition to school, through collaboration with schools and education departments, to ensure that schools are ready to teach all children.

Summary

Our research supports the aspiration for universal access to ECEC in Australia and reveals the need to ensure that policies and program architectures that respond to what 'universal' looks like for different communities and families across Australia. The 5 Aspects of Effective Engagement framework – approachability, acceptability, availability, affordability and appropriateness – helps to think about universal access to quality early education and care from a family standpoint.

- Staffing arrangements (e.g. ratios, levels and types of training required rosters) are essential to achieving approachable, acceptable and appropriate services
- Universal services look different for different children and communities, meaning that funding models need to allow for community-led decision making by organisations that know the circumstances of their community
- Adequate resources, including flexible funding models, are critical to making services (especially in remote communities) available, affordable and appropriate to community needs.
- Funding models should not have disincentives for services to offer non-standard hours of child care, and should be adequately resourced so that non-standard hours of care are available, affordable and high quality for families that require them.
- Across multiple projects, we have found that ECEC need supply side funding if it is to be equitable across **all** of the five aspects.
- Funding that encourage flexible hours that meet community needs is required to ensure that children can access ECEC at the times that suit their families, particularly for those working irregular hours.
- A universal system offers equitable access to early education for all children before school. Currently too many children are unable to participate in early education, as a result of the CCS Activity Test, or because their families cannot use ECEC while they are working.
- School readiness must be matched by schools which are ready to teach all children. Reports of unsuccessful transitions to school suggest a need for better collaborations between ECEC, schools and departments of education.

A universal system ensures that services are, acceptable, available, affordable and appropriate for all families, not just those who are easiest to serve.

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