Issues paper: Expert perspectives on factors that support quality preschool delivery across settings

Early Childhood Australia

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EVERY
YOUNG
CHILD IS
THRIVING
AND
LEARNING

An issues paper exploring expert perspectives on factors that support quality preschool delivery across settings and contexts.

Prepared for:

Early Childhood Australia (ECA) has been a voice for young children since 1938. We are the peak early childhood advocacy organisation, acting in the interests of young children, their families and those in the early childhood field. ECA advocates to ensure quality, social justice and equity in all issues relating to the education and care of children aged birth to eight years.

Our vision: Every young child is thriving and learning.

Our role in achieving this vision is to be an effective advocate for young children and a champion for quality outcomes in early childhood education and care.

Acknowledgement of Country

Early Childhood Australia acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of Country throughout Australia and their continuing connection to land and community. We pay our respect to them and their cultures, and to the Elders both past and present.

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Background

Early Childhood Australia (ECA) was engaged by the South Australian Royal Commission to explore factors impacting the quality and effectiveness of preschool education delivered to 3-year-old children across different settings in Australia. This issues paper outlines themes drawn from interviews and feedback from 15 expert informants, and discussions and feedback from members of the three-year-old preschool roundtable convened by the South Australian Royal Commission.

The purpose of this paper is to surface issues surrounding the delivery of quality preschool across a range of contexts and settings, drawing on national examples of preschool delivery. This is an area of ongoing debate, particularly across different state/territory service systems. Across Australia, there are high-quality preschool programs operating across community-based preschool/kindergarten settings, long day care settings, and schools (including public, Catholic and independent schools). There are also examples of poor-quality delivery in these settings—setting type alone does not guarantee quality. Increasing the universal provision of three- and four-year-old preschool will increase demands on all service settings. Through this work, we seek to identify the critical success factors and barriers to quality delivery across different settings.

By articulating some of the factors that support quality preschool, this paper seeks to promote dialogue about how components of quality could be configured to support equity of access for every child in Australia.

Consultation on quality preschool for three-year-old children across settings

In consultation with the South Australian Royal Commission, ECA identified 15 expert informants from across Australia who can speak from a range of perspectives including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations, academic, provider, and regulator. The consultation sought setting-specific knowledge (mobile preschool, family day care, long day care, community preschool), context-specific experiences (inclusion support and remote delivery), and subject matter expertise in policy, assessment, quality, workforce and pedagogy.

The selection of experts has been carefully considered in relation to the service delivery landscape in South Australia; however, a deliberate decision was made to consult experts outside of South Australia to seek a broad view of the preschool delivery contexts and to avoid duplicating the work of the Commission.

ECA conducted online interviews with each informant which explored a range of questions relating to the success factors, constraining factors, and strategies for delivering quality preschool to three-year-old children across settings and contexts (questions included in Attachment 1).

The themes from these interviews were summarised to identify areas of convergence and divergence in ideas relating to the factors that support quality preschool delivery. Informants were asked to provide feedback on these themes and identify areas where they agreed or disagreed with other positions reflected in the paper. In addition, the themes paper was presented to members of the South Australian Royal Commission three-year-old roundtable for discussion and further feedback.

Expert informants

Professor Lennie Barblett AM, Edith Cowan University	John Burton and Joanne Goulding, SNAICC
Dr Sandra Cheeseman, C&K	Dr Dan Cloney, Australian Council for Educational Research
Michael Farrell, Family Day Care Australia	Catharine Hydon, Hydon Consulting
Professor Susan Irvine, Queensland University of Technology	Rhonda Livingstone, ACECQA
Meg Mendham and John Gunn, CCSA	Associate Professor Jane Page OAM, The University of Melbourne
Sue Robb OBE Goodstart Early Learning	Janet Williams-Smith, Early Childhood Australia NT
Professor Sandie Wong, Macquarie University	

Factors supporting quality preschool programs

The consultation and issues paper focuses on exploring the factors that support quality preschool for three-year-old children with an emphasis on access—specifically, ensuring that every child in every community can access high-quality preschool tailored to optimise their learning, development and wellbeing. In anticipation of increased demand for three-year-old preschool programs, informants were asked to consider what factors would support and constrain the provision of quality three-year-old preschool across a range of settings—if every available setting was to be utilised. The purpose was to interrogate components of quality both with existing service settings and in settings that are not currently used.

The interviews have uncovered a range of factors that support quality preschool delivery. Key factors that matter when providing quality preschool are included below and expanded upon in the following table, identifying where there is convergence in ideas and where there is divergent thinking.

Factors that matter for quality preschool

The following factors have been identified as important for delivering the promise of high-quality preschool, and its associated benefits, for children.

Context matters: The location and community in which preschool is delivered matter to how the service is configured. Each community is different and requires tailored responses informed by the community. This may include place-based responses or tailoring service delivery to respond to community priorities, requirements of specific cohorts, vulnerability, cultural safety for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and geographic locations. The availability of qualified staff, community trust in the service system, and the physical infrastructure are significant considerations in some locations.

Attending to every child's learning, development and wellbeing means attending to context.

Relationships matter: Preschool is built on strong relationships and partnerships with children and families, in and across communities, and in professional and interprofessional networks. These relationships are interpersonally and locally formed, culturally responsive, and informed by the context in which preschool is delivered.

Some informants discussed the significance of relationships for improving engagement with and effectiveness of preschool for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families—particularly when coupled with opportunities to participate in local decision-making relating to the design and delivery of preschool programs.

Early childhood teachers matter: One fundamental element of preschool delivery identified through the interviews is that preschool is delivered by a qualified teacher with specialist early childhood knowledge. This means they understand learning and pedagogy across the early years, including transitions to school, and have a deep knowledge of the *Early Years Learning Framework* and relevant jurisdictional early childhood curriculum. Teachers configure and plan environments, experiences and relationships around children's holistic learning and development focusing on teaching and learning.

Curriculum matters: Having an early childhood curriculum that is responsive and tailored to children's individual learning, development and wellbeing, and aligned to the *Early Years Learning Framework*, is a critical component of quality preschool. A curriculum that is play-based and grounded in early childhood practice is adaptive rather than prescribed and attends to children's holistic learning, development and wellbeing in the context of their family and community. A quality preschool curriculum is responsive to and includes local cultural knowledges and stories to ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture is celebrated and shared.

The environment matters: The environment plays a fundamental part of a preschool experience. Spaces are planned flexibly and draw in a rich mixture of indoor and outdoor experiences that promote learning, curiosity, and exploration—while including spaces that reflect local cultural knowledges, stories and practices.

Groups matter: A key feature of preschool is learning with peers—this prompts consideration of the size of groups and the peer relationships available therein. Group sizes that are too large to facilitate predictable social engagement or groups that are too small to provide a social learning experience may limit the effectiveness of the preschool experience. Consistency and continuity were also identified as essential elements.

Time and attendance matter: Regular patterns of attendance and duration of attendance were called out as essential elements, particularly for children experiencing disadvantage or vulnerability. There

was no consensus on a 'magic number' when it came to the ideal number of days or length of daily attendance, but there was broad agreement that the days and structure of attendance should plan for continuity (e.g. be consecutive where possible) and that the duration of daily attendance needs to allow for deep engagement in a planned program. The term 'duration' has been used here to describe what some informants referred to as dose and others as a session. This is in response to the question, 'How much is enough?'

There was also an acknowledgement that the offer needed to work for families. This has surfaced challenges relating to how services are configured in different settings, for example, within a long day care program or preschool program with wrap-around supports.

Conditions matter: The conditions under which preschool is provided support the stability of the workforce and its effectiveness. This includes wage parity between service types to reduce attrition and ensure that face-to-face teaching is balanced with non-contact time, allowing for the planning, preparation and analysis required to deliver quality programs. There was also a strong theme that while preschool programs are teacher-led, they are delivered by a team of qualified educators. This is a core component and success factor in delivering preschool.

The funding model matters: The model of funding and related guidelines creates the conditions, enabling or limiting, through which children can access preschool. Price is an important consideration for many families. Ensuring that families, particularly those experiencing vulnerability or disadvantage, can access universally funded services at no cost was described as an essential element of a universal preschool offer.

Providing services that are accessible for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families relies on funding models and processes that embed cultural safety from the outset. This means ensuring that Aboriginal ways of knowing, doing and being are understood and incorporated into funding agreements, reporting requirements, risk identification and mitigation with the flexibility to

respond to emerging community priorities and access demands. This could be supported by aligning funding models with the *National Agreement on Closing the Gap* priority reforms, particularly in relation to building the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community-controlled sector and transforming government organisations.

The vision and values matter: Informants described a unique set of values underpinning ECEC practice and how these values must be embedded in a vision for preschool. This theme is related to promoting the value of preschool in the community and within the broader education system so the value and contribution are understood. It was important to informants that the specialist early childhood practices, pedagogies and approaches be preserved regardless of setting.

Convergence and controversies: Factors supporting quality preschool

	Convergence	Controversy
Teacher-led	The qualification of the teacher was emphasised across the interviews. A common theme was that an early childhood teacher is a specialist with knowledge and skills that specifically assess and support young children's development and learning. Recognising and supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers in the profession, and recognising the specialisation that they bring through lived experience and cultural knowledge in addition to, and embedded in, their teaching practice is vital. Most informants highlighted the value of a four-year early childhood-specific qualification. Teacher capability was also called out as an essential ongoing factor, particularly providing professional learning to ensure teachers were supported to build capability to work across the age range. The role of the teacher extends beyond their direct work with children and connects with families and community services. Additionally, it was noted that enhancing and promoting areas of specialisation within early childhood teaching could be an additional area of focus.	There was a strong view that qualifications should be specific to early childhood knowledge in recognition that it is a specialist area of knowledge. However, there were different perspectives on whether this should be birth-to-five or birth-to-eight in its focus. Some advocated a birth-to-five focus because it targeted knowledge specific to children's learning in the years before compulsory schooling. In contrast, the rationale for a birth-to-eight focus sought to reflect children's learning across settings under a broader definition of early childhood. Providing remote or hybrid access to a qualified early childhood teacher for teams to develop and deliver a teacher-designed program was raised as a possible option when access to a teacher was a barrier to offering preschool. There were strong divergent views across informant interviews on where three-year degrees, other approved qualifications, and accelerated pathways fit in filling qualification gaps. While some spoke positively about pathways and approaches to recognising and accelerating qualification, others held a position that the minimum standard should be a four-year degree as is typical in the broader teaching profession.
Curriculum	A specific early childhood curriculum was identified as an important element of preschool delivery. It was noted that the *Early Years Learning Framework* provides the broad structure for this;	School readiness and preparation were acknowledged as important elements of preschool; however, it was noted that preschool is an education program in its own right. Preschool attends to children's learning relative to their age

	Convergence	Controversy
Curriculum	however, this needs to be interpreted and delivered in context. Preschool curriculum was also seen to be individually aligned to children's learning, development and wellbeing—it is responsive, not prescriptive. This was seen as essential for delivering preschool to three-year-olds to ensure that it is tailored to how they learn, grow and develop. Additionally, children's learning and abilities vary significantly over various learning and developmental domains. A preschool curriculum is not a syllabus—it is not about teaching children 'things' from a menu of subjects, but instead introducing concepts and content and supporting children to develop knowledge (e.g. communication and language, science and maths, cognitive skills, physical development). There is also a strong focus on supporting the development of learning dispositions and concepts such as exploring, investigating, hypothesising, building constructs, executive function, self-regulation, and social and emotional development. The importance of social and emotional development was emphasised for the preschool age group. Other important features of a preschool curriculum identified through interviews were: they are play-based with a focus on learning; they incorporate reciprocal relationships (children contribute to their learning); they respond to place and context and are culturally responsive; they extend to the environment; and they involve engagement in rich learning experiences. Continuity of children's learning was also raised as an important element that a preschool curriculum reflects, which supports children's learning progression and transitions between settings (including ECEC before and in combination with preschool programs) throughout two years of preschool and into the first years of school. It also connects to the enduring home learning environment and experiences.	and development. There are features of a preschool program that are distinct from other learning environments. Preschool is not solely a preparatory program for school, nor should three-year-old preschool be seen as preparing children to be four-year-olds. The importance of responding to the child's learning, development and wellbeing in the context of these transitions was raised as both important and inevitable. This was described as necessary for developing shared understandings about children's learning and about knowing what is coming next for children (in relation to their learning) to support them to extend. Transitions were also identified as an area in which preschools and schools have reciprocal responsibilities to support children in developing the capabilities to succeed at their level of learning.

	Convergence	Controversy
Assessment	Assessment of children's learning, development and wellbeing was identified as an essential element of preschool linked to the concept of demonstrating outcomes for children and is identified within the NQF as a critical role for ECEC. Different approaches to assessment were described. There was broad agreement that assessment should focus on the individual child's learning, development and wellbeing to support their progress and demonstrate the distance travelled and learning progression observed. Additionally, assessment should be culturally responsive (e.g. ASQ-TRAK adapted for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children). The descriptions of assessment 'of', 'for' and 'as' children's learning in the EYLF was discussed to describe ways in which assessment is/can be embedded as a core practice in ECEC. The planning cycle was noted as important in supporting assessment and the continuity of learning across children's learning environments. Assessment was also emphasised as an opportunity to embed children's voices in assessment and planning. The distinction between assessment and testing was drawn out across several interviews. Assessing children's development was also discussed as an important factor for identifying areas where additional or specialist input may be needed—noting that the early years are a critical point for referral.	The complexity of measuring outcomes was discussed in relation to assessment. While there was a desire to be able to demonstrate the outcomes of preschool, both for individuals and at a population level, there was some concern expressed that there isn't broad agreement on what to assess or how children's learning is understood and measured. It was noted that this is an area that requires further exploration. The Preschool Outcomes Measures work progressing through the *Preschool Reform Agreement* was noted alongside jurisdictionally-based projects. Further, using suitable quality measures for assessment was noted as important for building a common language to describe learning across the profession, within and across settings and jurisdictions. There was also a concern about assessing and identifying needs and that this should be met with a response and an available referral pathway.
Dose/hours of delivery	Informants commented that there is no consensus on what the correct dose of preschool is. There is agreement that consistent attendance is preferable. Descriptions of 'consistent' ranged from a minimum of two days in a row to a minimum of three days a week (up to five). There was broad consensus that one day a week was too irregular to provide a benefit from the program and that international evidence supports the benefit of shorter sessions more frequently (up to five days per week). It was noted that programs must be delivered flexibly, responsively and realistically so families	When considering possible delivery models where access is a barrier, some informants offered models in which dose could be delivered intensively over a shorter period and supplemented with complementary support throughout the year. While this concept presents a challenge to some of the core descriptors of preschool, the perspective was that all options should be evaluated against the intended outcomes of preschool. The length of a daily program was also not firmly identified.

	Convergence	Controversy
	can access them—without significant barriers such as cost, inflexible delivery options or transport.	Planning and delivery of hours are dependent on funding and impact each service type differently. It was proposed that Australia needs to generate its own evidence-based research on dose and attendance relative to the context of preschool delivery.
Attendance patterns	There was some convergence about the value of providing children with a regular/predictable attendance pattern and a consistent group of peers with whom they attend. The complexity of planning for this across settings was also noted, as was the continuity and consistency afforded to children who attended a service several years before participating in a preschool program. Sustaining attendance was another critical element in supporting children's engagement in learning. Some informants discussed how this meant engaging families in a service that started long before their enrolment.	Compulsory? The question of having compulsory attendance at three- and four-year-old programs was raised by informants across multiple interviews. While most held the position that it should continue to be driven by choice, the two lines of thought that emerged in discussions were underpinned by the idea that attendance matters and should be encouraged and supported. This was applied to addressing inequity for marginalised groups and the desire to elevate and normalise preschool attendance, so it is considered as critical as school-based education.
Group configuration	There was a strong preference for preschool to be delivered to children of a similar age who can engage in similar experiences. There was a reasonably high tolerance across interviews for mixed three- to five-year-old age groups. However, it was noted that the proportion of younger children changes the dynamic and load on the teacher and that this should be considered.	It was also noted that children can and do attend and learn across age groups and that models should stretch to consider how an early childhood teacher could support learning in these configurations. There was specific mention of increasing younger children's access to an early childhood teacher and the benefits that this offers.
Group size	No 'magic number' related to group size emerged through the interviews. There was a shared concern about large group sizes, particularly when the environment and infrastructure did not support smaller spaces to support children's learning in smaller groups. Even when ratios could be met, there was a shared sense that large group sizes may compromise quality of relationships and engagement with experiences. Similarly, a small group size began to undermine the 'groupness' discussed as an important element of preschool programs and its importance in social and emotional development. There was also a view that the *National Quality Framework* (NQF) could assist in making decisions relating to group size without prescribing it.	The extent to which small groups should be utilised to deliver preschool is an area that multiple perspectives surfaced. For many, there was a minimum group size that supported social learning; however, for some informants, the need to deliver a program to children who would otherwise miss out outweighed this concern. Several informants gave examples of programs configured for children in remote communities, including residential or community programs with small groups of children facilitated by a teacher (through mobile or outreach support).

	Convergence	Controversy
Environment and place	The connection between quality and the environment was heavily emphasised throughout many of the interviews. This encompassed infrastructure (having fit-for-purpose buildings and spaces) and features such as access to outdoor spaces. Place was raised as an important contextual consideration to which the program design needed to respond. This included knowledge of and connection to local Indigenous culture. Additionally, place was raised in relation to ensuring that preschool has an established place and 'identity' in the community.	The need to respond when ideal places don't exist was also raised—and that access for children needed to be prioritised when infrastructure was not available. Examples of how mobile services operate effectively in communities challenge traditional understandings of how place and space can be claimed for preschool delivery.
Quality	The NQF was highlighted across interviews as being equipped to guide decisions about whether a specific setting was fit for purpose to provide preschool. It was also noted that the *National Quality Standards* and *Approved Learning Frameworks* could support program design that attends to process and structural elements of quality when exploring innovation. While the NQF was considered fit for purpose, informants noted structural and programmatic differences between quality ECEC and quality preschool. Many participants emphasised the value of quality ECEC services for children's learning (including the value of the professionals that lead them) while noting the difference and focus of a teacher-led preschool program. The difference related to practice rather than setting.	Specific approaches to measuring and assessing quality (ECERS and CLASS) were discussed as potentially offering insight into quality and influencing the professional practices of educators in relation to quality. While these tools gained broad support from informants and were acknowledged as internationally recognised and validated, limitations were observed across interviewees for their use in an Australian context. Culturally informed concepts of quality, particularly Aboriginal ways of knowing, doing and being, are not adequately embedded or valued within current quality frameworks. This can mean that cultural knowledge and practice or the context in which programs are delivered are not meaningfully reflected in how quality is assessed.
Inclusion	Practices in high-quality preschool should enable all children and families to participate. Informants discussed this responsibility in relation to delivering services that support inclusion for children (and families) with disabilities and supporting diverse, marginalised and vulnerable groups to attend. Practices relating to cultural safety were emphasised for all cultural groups but particularly for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families. Relationships and connections were discussed as enablers for inclusion—these spanned relationships with families through to the networks and partnerships developed in a local area. Others	Some informants observed that the load of inclusion appears to be unequally distributed across the sector, and that the child's experience of inclusion can depend on the service they attend. Anecdotes shared also described lengthy processes to leverage supports, concentrated high support needs in some groups, and difficulty accessing necessary assessments and subsequent services.

	Convergence	Controversy
	spoke of the significance of establishing a presence/providing a space in and for the community.	
Conditions	Time and resources: teachers need non-contact time to plan quality programs for children in combination with focused delivery time. This includes planning, reflecting on and analysing children's learning and their practice, gathering resources, engaging with families, and making referrals based on assessed needs. Pay parity across settings (including with schools) was raised as an essential factor for the workforce and retention.	The disparity of conditions limits the ability to attract and retain teachers across settings.
Team approach	Teamwork was a key feature identified throughout interviews as critical to preschool delivery. This was noted as necessary for the delivery of the program, emphasising the importance of having a team approach. A feature of preschool and ECEC is that all educators have a role in facilitating children's learning and supporting the program. Informants who asserted that programs should commence with a minimum ratio of two staff (teacher and educator) saw this as a minimum standard.	Some informants wanted to explore different configurations of teams working day to day in the setting, for example, embedding allied health professionals to respond to developmental vulnerability or staff with cultural knowledge to support cultural safety. The context of delivery was considered an important driver when considering these configurations. (Listed as controversy relative to structural considerations.) Extending the concept of 'team' to the community/community members/Elders was considered critical when considering quality in context.
Responsive and flexible	The structure in which preschool is offered was noted as an important element for delivery alongside an observation that programs that did not respond to family patterns of use could present a barrier for take-up. Parental choice was considered important for some informants in relation to how preschool is offered and taken up. Providing information to families about how they can access preschool and what constitutes quality preschool was identified as critical for families to make informed choices.	Some informants noted that designing services that that optimise child outcomes and support the workforce participation of parents and carers needs to balance potential tensions. Services that are impractical for parents to access present barriers for parent and child participation. Configuring services in response to these dual demands may prove challenging relative to structural and funding constraints. The system needs to be configured in ways that make it viable for services to deliver high-quality preschool that ensures that children thrive while also ensuring that it is a practical option for parents and carers to access.

	Convergence	Controversy
Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Leadership	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership was identified as having a significant role in ensuring that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children have opportunities to start learning in their own culture, form strong identities and have the best chance to succeed. This includes community-led design and delivery of preschool. The role of Aboriginal Organisations, and staff, spans direct provision of services and supporting access across the early years system and requires resourcing.	
Accessible and available	High expectations for access were expressed across all informant interviews. That is, ensuring that all children can access high-quality preschool. Improving the accessibility and availability of preschool would address the struggles families face in finding high-quality preschool in their area. Many informants asserted that universal preschool should be free and available in every community. Others noted that hidden barriers (such as prohibitive costs, transport difficulties and costs, and inclusion barriers) prevent access and availability. These factors need to be considered, particularly when attendance is a goal. Engagement is another element of access that, for many communities, must start long before a child or family attends the service and requires a strong community connection. Family and community engagement enables children and families to 'see themselves' in the planning and delivery of preschool and support participation. It was noted that there are cohorts of children who miss out on quality preschool—this occurs for groups within communities and for whole communities.	For some informants, high expectations for access meant that programs should be configured to maximise the available resources in a community and bring innovative solutions to bridge any gaps that may inhibit preschool delivery. The driver for this position was ensuring some level of access for communities that may miss out. Other informants discouraged substituting components of quality for some communities because it was viewed as lowering expectations. The driver for this position was ensuring a consistent and high standard for preschool delivery regardless of location. Another perspective on access and availability highlighted the need to prioritise and load investment to provide access for children likely to be excluded from the system and for whom preschool is shown to make the most difference. The rationale for this position is that targeting areas of low access and attainment with the highest possible quality could provide the biggest impact for children and society.

Setting-specific considerations

Interviews considered a range of settings to explore the extent to which components of quality could be configured for these settings to deliver preschool, including:

- community-based preschool (government or not-for-profit)
- Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisation (ACCO) run community-based preschool
- long day care
- schools

- family day care
- mobile (pack-up/set down)
- community settings and playgroups
- in-home/at home.

In addition, the context of delivery was considered to explore ways that barriers to access are experienced for some communities. Informants were asked to assess the extent to which programs could be adapted or delivered across various settings while also meeting their threshold for quality preschool delivery.

Informants' level of comfort with adaptations to preschool delivery across settings varied. Some informants had a low tolerance for adaptation because all children deserved a similar level of access to the components of quality preschool, and this should be progressed in favour of adapted programs. For others, ensuring access for children who would otherwise miss out meant a higher tolerance for adapting program delivery.

Informants who supported adaptation to delivery identified the NQF as a robust framework to guide decision-making in pursuing innovative service delivery models.

In response to these success factors and considerations, ECA has proposed strategies for consideration when rolling out three-year-old preschool across South Australia to ensure that critical strengths are leveraged and considerations addressed.

Setting-specific considerations: The fourth column provides a marker with an indicative level of support included—this is intended to depict where there was broad agreement, conditional agreement or lower support (where fewer informants discussed the setting). It is important to note that this is not an evaluation of settings types.

Setting type	Success factors	Considerations		ECA strategies
Community-based preschool (government or not-for-profit)	Established teacher-led model of sessional preschool. Aligned with NQF. Caters for group size and consistency elements discussed. Infrastructure and environment are broadly fit for purpose. Structures to support contact/non-contact time are embedded in the model.	Potential limitations in relation to infrastructure—enough space to meet demand. Potential limitations in facilities (nappy change and sleep facilities). Structures for responsive and flexible program delivery for families, including working families.	●	Invest in growing and improving infrastructure and facilities to increase the available appropriate spaces. Support a variety of enrolment/session options that meet the needs of families—including various session times and opportunities for mixed and specific age groups.
ACCO-run community-based preschool	Teacher-led programs. Aligned with NQF. Aboriginal ways of knowing, doing and being, cultural safety and protocols are embedded in the program. Wrap-around supports aimed at addressing the holistic needs of children and families. Work responsively to 'whole of community' priorities and needs. Employing Aboriginal staff (in a range of roles) to support cultural safety.	Funding and facilities (stability).to expand coverage and option for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. Not all services are in-scope of NQF. Need to embed resources for outreach, onsite supports, partnership development and early engagement work. Managing multiple funding sources and reporting requirements. Support for staff to work in, and be supported to work in, trauma-specialised ways. Supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children attending mainstream services.	●	Implement stable, long-term funding for program delivery, wrap-around supports, capacity building and facilities. Embed flexibility in the funding and reporting model to enable responsive service delivery and context-based reporting. Invest in local people to gain qualifications and to be supported in the ongoing work. Embed accountability requirements (funder accountable to the community) that ensure that communities' priorities drive the design of contracts and resource allocation—and processes are culturally safe.
Long day care	Teacher-led programs. Aligned with NQF. Infrastructure and environment, including facilities to support the needs of young children.	For some, a start and finish time was an important marker of a preschool program—though it was noted that programs need to be	●	Define expectations and resourcing mechanisms for delivering preschool programs in long day care settings—including consideration of a mixture of shorter, more frequent sessions or sessions with an

◌ Low support   ○ Conditional support   ● Broad support

Setting type	Success factors	Considerations		ECA strategies
	Flexibility and continuity to support learning across the rhythm of an extended day, particularly for younger children. An embedded team approach to supporting children's learning. Continuity of learning and relationships across the setting and over time that support transitions. Responsive to the needs of working families.	delivered in line with how families use them and that this might need some wrap-around support. Group configuration and size where space for smaller group learning was not catered for (note examples were offered where this was not available). Conditions for teachers in long day care settings, particularly regarding contact/non-contact time, but also about pay and conditions (pay, hours, holidays etc.)		integrated teacher-delivered program offered within a consistent team. Develop guidelines relating to consistency and rituals that support the delivery of preschool to children in groups that plan for continuity. Articulate conditions for teachers that apply consistency across settings. Fund professional learning and networks.
Schools	Availability of infrastructure and convenience for families (with school-age siblings), at times under-utilised. Governance and leadership: the opportunity for strong collaboration between the school administration and ECEC service. A strength of school administrations delivering preschool services was the connection enabled between the school and the early years setting. There were also success factors attributed to having third-party providers deliver services on school grounds (with expertise in delivering services in the context of the NQF and the community). Jurisdictions across Australia have a history of preschool provision in school settings.	Being seen as an additional year of schooling rather than a specific ECEC program. Pushdown of curriculum: direct instruction valued over play-based curriculum. The image of three-year-olds sitting at desks in uniforms concerned some informants. Facilities/environments for children's learning—shared outdoor space with older children. Access to specific early childhood professional learning and networking for early childhood teachers when delivered by the school. Family experience of school/schooling may act as a barrier.	●	Facilitate engagement between school and ECEC leadership and develop guidelines that articulate expectations across education settings of: • reciprocal connections between preschools and schools • supporting transitions • embedding the NQF (ALF and NQS) and play-based curriculums • suitable facilities and environments, including outdoor spaces • the importance of early childhood-specific pedagogy • recognised and authorised educational leader role.
Remote schools	Specialist early childhood teachers embedded in remote schools to integrate early childhood pedagogy into the setting for young children alongside school-aged children.	Group configuration: Remote schools cater for a wide age range—children may have limited or no access to peers of a similar age. Suitability of facilities and environments.	⋯	Explore innovation to embed early childhood teacher-led practice in remote schools where access is compromised.

⋯ Low support　　　○ Conditional support　　　● Broad support

Setting type	Success factors	Considerations		ECA strategies
Family day care	In-scope to provide high-quality ECEC and to support children's learning, development and wellbeing through the NQF.	A significant departure from a typical preschool delivery model.	⟨dotted circle⟩	Interrogate and explore the extent to which preschool could be delivered in a family day care setting, including the configurations of quality required to support preschool delivery.
	There are often specific communities that get value from FDC that they cannot access in other service types.	Structural considerations relating to meeting the NQS and the delivery hours, venue and funding arrangements if an FDC program ran a preschool program—is it a preschool program or something else?		Build in opportunities for larger group experiences.
	Early childhood teachers work as FDC educators and in coordination units.	Group size: too few children to deliver the social learning experience of a preschool program.		Ensure that programs are teacher-delivered (not teacher-directed) in line with other settings.
	Potential for coordination units to facilitate teacher-led sessional programs for preschool-age children—attended/extended by FDC educators at their home.	Group configuration: the ability to deliver a preschool program with a mixed-age group.		Ensure environments are aligned with regulatory, quality and practice expectations.
	In-venue FDC in remote areas where there is no appropriate setting or alternative.	Needs to be teacher-delivered—having a teacher in a coordination unit is not adequate.		
	FDC as a wrap-around to support preschool access.	Distance between FDC educators and coordination units for some programs.		
Mobile (pack up/set down)	Flexible delivery—the ability to reach communities.	Frequency: what is an appropriate level of service to be defined as preschool, and can this be met/resourced?	◯	Resource services to deliver consistent and predictable programs.
	Ability to mirror practices and structures of a quality preschool program (when staffed appropriately).	Limitations in relation to group size and mixed age groups—possible limitations to consistency.		Ensure programs are provided by a team and delivered by a qualified teacher.
	Opportunity for face-to-face assessment of children's development and learning.	Facilities and infrastructure—appropriateness of space available.		
		High level of responsibility—need for a high level of staff support.		
Community settings/ playgroups	High levels of community engagement in recognised community spaces.	A significant departure from a typical preschool delivery model.	⟨dotted circle⟩	Design or extend on community activities to embed components of quality preschool in community spaces.
		Attention to group size and age configuration.		Explore playgroup as an engagement opportunity: to meet families where the

⟨dotted circle⟩ Low support   ◯ Conditional support   ● Broad support

Setting type	Success factors	Considerations		ECA strategies
	The structure of playgroups can accommodate components of the NQF, such as qualified staff and embedding ALF in community activities.	Appropriateness of community spaces to deliver preschool. Not displacing/replacing existing community activity (playgroups for mixed age groups or to support parenting).		community is—could be especially useful where facilities are being built.
Integrated settings	While not discussed as a delivery option, they were described as adding benefits to preschool through: • wrap-around services • access to assessment and follow up • engagement and pre-engagement work to support participation • cultural safety • hubs of information and resources.	Funding models to support integration. Structures to support coordination and collaboration (including resources and consent arrangement).	●	Build as an addition, not an alternative to preschool. Explore opportunities for pre-engagement—supporting enrolment through relationship building. Explore opportunities for multidisciplinary staff to be embedded in preschool programs (potentially in ratio when a program is teacher-led).
In-home/ at home	The support provided throughout COVID lockdown periods demonstrated that high-quality experiences could be planned and supported by preschool teachers to be delivered in homes. This included developing and delivering resources and experiences by preschool programs that could be engaged in remotely or at home and linked to children's shared experiences. Additionally, programs were able to develop and maintain connections with an enrolled group of children over time. Programs exist that deliver remote learning and semi-regular group experiences. They build in regular contact at regular intervals and include a facilitator who takes carriage of assessing and supporting children's development.	A significant departure from a typical preschool delivery model. In-home programs have similar setting limitations to family day care, in that they don't have access to a core group of children to engage in social learning and an environment to explore. Low visibility of children across contexts and settings (with/without parents, with peers etc.). Limits to physical observations and observations over time.	◌	Conceptualise a preschool-like program that could offset the risks of missing out on a preschool program. Develop remote/hybrid models to support the delivery of learning programs and assessments. Foster partnerships with allied providers to combine and maximise face-to-face opportunities.

◌ Low support   O Conditional support   ● Broad support

Policy environment

Exceptions to standard delivery

There is a strong acknowledgement that access to preschool is impacted by a range of complex factors such as geography, community infrastructure, and supply of a qualified workforce—to name a few. While there was a strong sense that the core features of preschool should not be compromised, there was a matched concern for and commitment to equity of access for children. Innovations to meet access demands may require exceptions to the configuration of these core features. These exceptions should be driven by demonstrated community need and based on enabling access where this would otherwise not be available. Exceptions should also be underpinned by high expectations for quality—being exceptional in the exceptions.

I want to be open to that…

In some communities, options for preschool delivery across settings were discussed in the context of low or no access to services for children and families. This included using settings such as family day care, mobile services, community playgroups and remote or hybrid service delivery models (the success factors and constraints to each are listed separately). Additional adaptations to supplement features unavailable in communities, for example, direct access to a qualified teacher or infrastructure, were also discussed.

There was strong consensus that 'something' was better than 'nothing' and that every child should have access to a high-quality preschool experience— particularly for disadvantaged groups who are missing out within the current system. An enduring sentiment was that systems should respond to offer the very best for every child and community where access is limited to broaden the scope rather than lowering the standard of quality. For some informants, this meant thinking innovatively to configure the available components of preschool to deliver the best quality services in the face of barriers. Examples of innovation discussed were: providing remote access to a qualified early childhood teacher to teams where one cannot be recruited (but where a capacity building plan was in

place); providing intensive delivery of hours of preschool; maximising models to deliver a preschool program; or using community spaces to deliver programs. This configuration is depicted in the below three images. In Figure 1, the configuration of all components of quality are in place, enabling high-quality preschool to be delivered. In Figure 2, components are missing, which creates an uneven level compromising the foundation on which quality rests. Figure 3 depicts a scenario in which agreed components of quality can be identified (as present or absent), enabling them to be supplemented to create conditions for quality to be provided.

Configuring factors to support quality
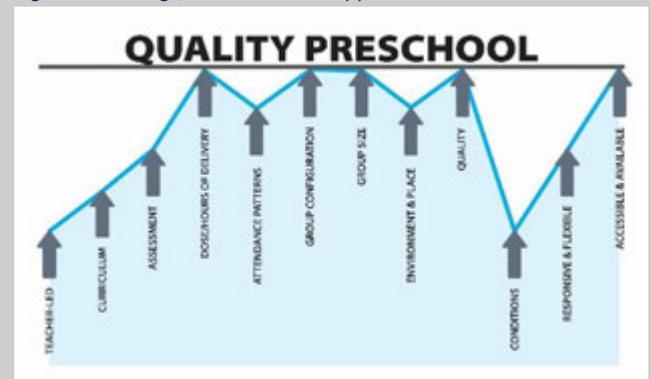

Figure 1: Settings/contexts with supports

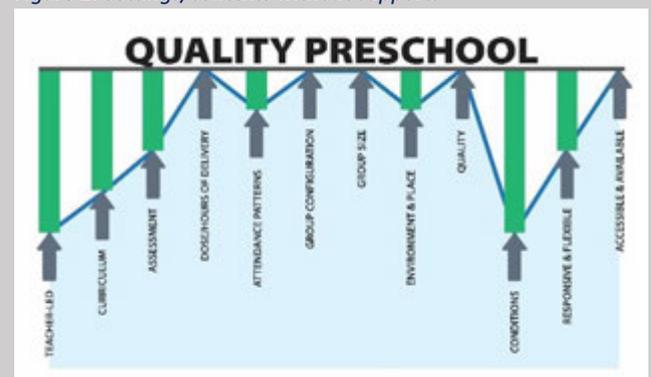Figure 2: Settings/contexts without supports

Figure 3: Settings/contexts configured with supports

For some, the authorising or policy environment needs to be equipped to respond when communities or groups are at risk of missing out on preschool. The policy environment, therefore, should enable and resource configuring services to maximise what is on offer to children. However, it should not create an environment in which a lower standard becomes good enough across the board or for some communities or groups. The NQF was called out as being a solid guide to ensure that high expectations for quality and delivery across diverse settings could be safeguarded. However, additional safeguards would be needed to ensure that communities could demonstrate that their attempts to meet the standard delivery model had been exhausted and that a time-limited plan was in place to meet the traditional delivery model. This could be conceptualised as a capacity-building exception.

Some informants identified the potential to progress exceptions to standard delivery for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities by embedding the *National Agreement on Closing the Gap* priority reforms of 'formal partnerships and decision making, building the community-controlled sector, transforming government organisations, and shared access to data and information at a regional level'. This embeds service design and delivery of programs and curriculum that are led by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and unique to bringing up children strong in their cultures and languages.

In these scenarios, informants envisaged a system with solid integrity measures built in. This would give permission to configure components of quality in exceptional circumstances innovatively but would not be permissive of lower standards of preschool or lower expectations of service delivery for some groups of children.

But is it preschool?

Some informants were more cautious. While there was no disagreement that high-quality experiences should be offered and resourced, there was hesitance in describing this as preschool or an equivalent. One of the driving concerns is that the promise of high-quality preschool is not being delivered for all, creating an equity issue that needs to be noted and addressed throughout their learning trajectory. Informants were very cautious to avoid creating an environment in which access to preschool was differentiated for different cohorts, conveying a message that there is a minimum delivery standard for most children but that this standard could be compromised for others. Another concern expressed was that altering the model may inadvertently reduce the minimum standard of preschool for all settings or reduce the urgency or pace at which preschool delivery is progressed for all children in all communities.

Informants discussing services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and communities noted that adaptations of preschool (e.g. community and family engagement, outreach services, and embedding additional supports) should be made in addition to the core components of quality preschool being provided. This was noted as necessary for levelling access to essential supports.

For this group of informants, where there was a need to deliver an alternative model to provide some level of access for children (it was agreed that this should be progressed and resourced), alternative models shouldn't be conflated with preschool delivery and should be called something else. Further, a system should record and track when these children's access to preschool has not been met.

Expanding the model of delivery

While there was strong support for expanding preschool delivery to three-year-olds, there was some concern about the unintended consequences of the expansion.

One concern was spreading the pool of qualified teachers over additional programs and the impact this may have on staffing for all preschools. Another

insight in relation to this workforce issue is that growing the preschool system to deliver programs to three-year-olds will require more qualified early childhood teachers to deliver them. Growing the workforce at pace to deliver this will increase the proportion of newly qualified teachers with less experience. In the short- to medium-term, this may

reduce the quality of program delivery at an aggregate level while teachers develop in their profession and practice. This is important when establishing expectations that the system will be evaluated against.

Another issue related to the growth of the preschool system is that without intentionally addressing existing areas of inequity, the existing patterns of access and exclusion will be duplicated. This could see marginalised groups that do not currently access services continue to be excluded from new program models, perpetuating cycles of both advantage and disadvantage. Strategies to promote and prioritise uptake by marginalised groups and ensure that services are available, affordable, culturally safe and accessible are needed to ensure that the expansion does not duplicate access gaps for an earlier age group.

Informants discussed the need to help families identify quality preschool programs and described a range of scenarios where this is important. For example, informants described a typical usage pattern in which parents remove children from quality preschool programs offered in a long day care setting to attend sessional preschool programs. Similarly, when considering using school sites to

deliver preschool, some informants expressed concern that parents may think preschool is the start of formal schooling unless school-based delivery is understood as one option for accessing preschool. Many informants emphasised the importance of preschool being defined as a specialist program in the early childhood system and not understood as additional years of schooling. This was seen as important to ensure that early childhood pedagogy is embedded in preschool delivery. Ensuring that families understood that they could receive a quality preschool experience in a range of settings was described as necessary—particularly in the context of needing to increase supply of quality preschool places across settings. A consideration in relation to both scenarios is the mechanism under which children and families can access the universal component of preschool. For example, some services have been configured in ways that the universal component of their preschool offer is embedded in a fee-based package (i.e. 15 hours of subsidised preschool embedded in sessions that total 22 hours). Particularly for disadvantaged groups, it is imperative that the universal component is available without friction and cost. This should be guaranteed for families regardless of the service setting.

Accountability

With an anticipated investment of public funds into the delivery of preschool, there was an expectation amongst many informants that there should be high expectations on delivering preschool to the highest standard and ensuring that high proportions of funding were reinvested into quality delivery. For some, this was described as benchmarks that should be met to remain eligible to receive funding to deliver programs. In contrast, for others, this could be met by demonstrating agreed outcomes or meeting performance measures specific to service management support (e.g. meeting delivery conditions, providing non-contact time, providing resources, and investing in professional learning). It was also noted that while we have low-definition in outcome measures for preschool and ECEC services, there will be a need for high-definition process measures to ensure that services are delivered in ways that align with priority practices.

The need to simplify and integrate accountability requirements was explored in the context of providing services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and communities. Informant interviews identified how accountability requirements did not reflect the cultural context in which services are provided, resulting in significant practices, effort and achievements not being reflected, visible or valued in reporting and evaluation. Additionally, the approaches required to work holistically often mean seeking funding from multiple sources resulting in duplication of reporting requirements and disintegrated data collection. Context also played an essential role in the success of programs delivered—the concept of accountability **to the community** was discussed as a potential mechanism to ensure that services are culturally safe and that there is community control and genuine

community engagement in designing service responses.

Questions and provocations

The following questions draw on some of the issues surfaced through the consultation process. They have been included to promote the exploration of options and decisions relating to delivering universal three-year-old preschool.

Being exceptional where exceptions are required

How can components of quality be supplemented, supported or targeted for communities where there are barriers to accessing preschool or barriers to accessing factors that support quality delivery? What are the implications of this? Is it preschool?

Is preschool a building?

How can community spaces be utilised to support quality preschool delivery? What are the components of quality beyond buildings that could be configured to provide rich learning environments?

Whatever it takes: Assembling components of quality

How can components of quality preschool be assembled to support access across large geographic areas or in areas where very few children live? What methods are required, and who are the stakeholders involved in supporting access for children and families?

Capability and readiness to support access for three-year-olds: Who carries the load?

How does the current service system support access for three-year-olds? Are there demands being placed on young children to demonstrate readiness to participate in services? Are current environments, infrastructure, programs and practices ready for younger children?

How will we know when we get there?

What does a thriving universal preschool system look like (for children, families, communities and for the sector)? What is valued in this system? How will we know when/if we are delivering on the promise of universal preschool for children?

Conclusion

A range of complexities are associated with designing a system that ensures every child has access to high-quality universal preschool. This consultation has surfaced a range of important issues for delivering quality for children and addressing access barriers, including context, relationships, qualifications, an early years curriculum, environments, groups, attendance, conditions and funding, along with the vision and values that underpin ECEC practice.

Through interviews, informants have shared a range of insights relating to specific settings that draw out the extent to which different elements of quality interplay. For some informants, this reinforced

boundaries around preschool delivery and service type, while for others, it enabled consideration of different ways of assembling components of quality to increase access for communities. Exploring areas of convergence and controversy provided opportunities to consider configurations of quality provision and how they apply to different settings.

Ensuring access to high-quality preschool education for all children is of critical importance but also impeded by a range of barriers such as geography, limited community infrastructure, and the availability of a qualified workforce. While there was a strong sense amongst informants that features of quality

preschool should not be compromised, innovative approaches were also explored to address issues relating to access.

This issues paper does not seek to propose or promote specific models of delivery. It does raise important questions relating to the extent to which components of quality can be configured or supplemented while maintaining high-quality preschool delivery components. This includes considering using community spaces for preschool delivery and assembling components of quality innovatively for access in large or sparsely populated areas. Additionally, it asks how the current service system supports access for three-year-olds and how to evaluate the success of a thriving universal preschool system. These are threshold questions intended to promote discussion on how to address barriers to access while ensuring that critical components of quality are configured to deliver the promise of a universal three-year-old preschool to young children.

Attachment 1: Focus of research questions

Research questions have been developed to span settings that will be explored through the consultation. Questions will be targeted to the interviewee based on their particular area of interest and expertise, for example, Family Day Care Australia will be asked the three questions in relation to family day care provision.

Research questions

1) If we were to use every available setting for the delivery of preschool programs to three-year-old children, together with four-year-old-children, what do you see as the key success factors?

   How would these factors apply in each of the following settings:

   a. Community-based preschool (government or not-for-profit)
   b. Community-based preschool run by Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs)
   c. Public schools
   d. Catholic and independent schools
   e. Long day care
   f. Family day care
   g. Mobile (pack up/set down)
   h. In-home / at-home
   i. Other settings_____

2) What do you see as the key constraints for each of the following?
   a. Community-based preschool (government or not-for-profit)
   b. Community-based preschool run by Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs)
   c. Public schools
   d. Catholic and independent schools
   e. Long day care
   f. Family day care
   g. Mobile (pack up/set down)
   h. In-home / at-home
   i. Other settings_____

3) What particular strategies are needed to support quality in each setting?
   a. Community-based preschool (government or not-for-profit)
   b. Community-based preschool run by Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs)
   c. Public schools
   d. Catholic and independent schools
   e. Long day care
   f. Family day care
   g. Mobile (pack up/set down)
   h. In-home / at-home
   i. Other settings_____

4) Overall, do you think there is benefit in having a mix of delivery options? Yes/no/maybe

5) Which would you include and which would you rule out?

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