

Response to November 2023 Productivity Commission Interim Report



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Response to November 2023 Productivity Commission Interim Report

Thorpe Lab: Early Childhood Development and Learning

Queensland Brain Institute, University of Queensland

Australian Research Council Centre of Excellence for Children and Families across the Life course

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Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) is critical to the Australian economy. Its contribution is twofold, both increasing workforce participation of parents and optimising the developmental trajectories of Australia’s children. As summarised in Figure 1 there are many attendant benefits of ECEC, some immediate and some mid- or long- term. All yield benefit for Australia’s economy. To realise these benefits, however, requires not only more investment in ECEC, but more *strategic investment* to prioritise and respond to the most developmentally vulnerable children and communities and ensure they access the highest ECEC quality provision. Availability, affordability and accessibility are not enough. Indeed, recent Australian data suggests that without targeted investments and clear specification of expected provisions, ECEC could perpetuate poverty and forgo the opportunities ECEC offers to deliver social equity and national economic prosperity.

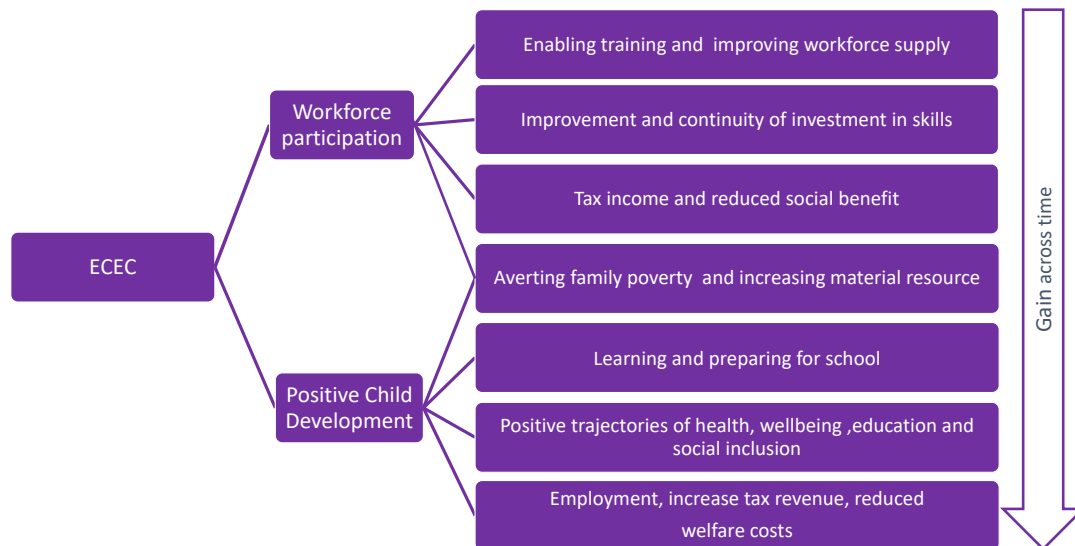


Figure 1: Summary of benefits of ECEC across time

Our submission draws upon the extensive work of our multidisciplinary team at the Queensland Brain Institute, The University of Queensland who lead the ECEC flagship of the ARC Centre of Excellence for Children and Families across the Lifecourse (Life Course Centre - LCC). Our focus on ECEC is centred on the strong evidence from neuroscience that the first 2000 days of life coincide with the most critical time in human synapse formation, a process entrained by early cognitive and social learning experiences and that potentiate a child’s lifetime trajectories of learning, wellbeing, and social inclusion. Australian children spend up to 10,000 hours in ECEC before school entry. These hours are developmental opportunities. The experiences a child has in these hours can provide a stronger, or weaker, foundation for their life course.

Our data draws from analyses of national data sets (Person Level Integrated Data Asset/Multi-Agency Data Integration Project), our own population level data creations funded through the Australian Research Council (DP 066254; DP110104227; LP0990200; LP140100652; CE140100027; CE 20010022; CE 20010022), and Queensland Government Education Horizon grants (2016; 2017; 2018; 2019; 2021). Our evidence derives from in-situ observation at scale and detailed embedded studies that directly observe and measure ECEC quality and child experiences, measure child outcomes and seek the voice of the diversity of stakeholders (children, parents, educator, providers, authorised regulators, government). We utilise data linkage to examine the far reach of ECEC throughout the school years. Our work includes publications in the highest quality international peer-reviewed journals and collaborations with, and reports to, Australian Governments and government agencies (Australian Education Research Organisation, AERO; Australian Children’s Education and Care Quality Authority; ACECQA).

Our response focuses on four key areas addressed in the Productivity Commission’s interim report: Quality; Workforce; Affordability and Complexity; Systems and Governance.

1. Quality of ECEC Provision

We have embargoed research important to inform Commission Findings 8.1 Assessment and rating of quality is too long, 8.3 Support to meet the NQS, and 8.4 Incentivize quality provision.

Findings from this research are under embargo until 27th of February 2024, with distribution to follow subject to additional requirements.

This table summarises key elements of the interim report's recommendations on ECEC quality and provides a response with evidence and required considerations. We then elaborate on key considerations.

Table 1: Key report recommendations and response on ECEC quality

Commission Finding	Commission Recommendation/request	Response - Evidence and required consideration
8.1 Assessment and rating of quality is too long	State and territory regulatory authorities should improve their performance reporting. Review of the National Quality Framework, with a specific focus on the way in which services are assessed against the National Quality Standard, and if assessments could be made more accurate, consistent, and efficient.	Inconsistent predictors of the NQS should be a focus for tailoring and streamlining the content and process of assessment and rating (A&R) to increase efficiency and effectiveness (Staton et al., 2021). Our work presents a clear strategy for improving the accuracy, consistency, and efficiency (cost) of the A&R process (Staton et al., 2021; Thorpe et al., 2020).
8.2 Families tend not to use information about service rating	Info request	There is inequity of access to the most effective services (those rated <i>Exceeding</i>) especially for immigrant families – research data suggest the reasons include high quality centres have waiting lists and new entrants do not get access (Tang et al., 2024). Cultural safety is another factor that is more significant than NQS rating (Tang et al., 2024). Our research on food provision suggests that in low-income areas provisions such as food may be more salient than quality in selection of ECEC (Thorpe et al., 2022b).
8.4 Incentivise quality provision	Info request 8.3 Support to meet the NQS	Services that are <i>working toward</i> the standard are twice as likely to be “for profit” with tensions between profit and cost of provision evident (Thorpe et al., 2020). Our findings suggest a need for intensive resourcing provision in complex communities and a need for detailed study of factors limiting and enabling the highest quality in the most complex communities.

	<p>Services should be incentivised for their work in complex communities. High quality provision is arguably easier to attain in high income areas (Thorpe ARC Laureate, 2023-2027; Thorpe et al., 2022b; Thorpe et al., 2023a). High quality (<i>Exceeding</i>) provision in complex communities should be a priority for investment.</p>
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Key considerations - ECEC quality

How do we define and measure quality?

What constitutes quality in ECEC and how it is assessed remains an issue of debate¹⁻⁴. There is agreement that quality relates to structural features that can be regulated (such as group size, staff to child ratios and educator qualifications, and environments). Yet these are only enablers of quality and not sufficient to effect positive child outcomes. Population based research consistently shows that the qualities of interactions within the ECEC environment are the most potent element determining child learning and development outcomes. The effects of ECEC programs on child outcomes is low in population studies, when compared to experimental studies that focus on disadvantaged communities and that more effectively control confounding variables such as family background. These differences suggest the need to consider the content and context that are missing in current assessment of ECEC quality.

Currently there are two forms of large-scale population assessments of ECEC quality. The first form of measurement is standard observational tools developed for research. The most prominent of these are the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS)⁵ and The Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS)⁶ though there are others emerging. The content and procedures in these measures have been critiqued (See Thorpe et al., 2022a). Using CLASS, the current gold standard measure, we find that emotional quality of the ECEC setting is the prime predictor of child outcomes through to secondary school. However, studies in the USA report different findings. The second form of measurement is Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS). In Australia, the National Quality Framework and the National Quality Standard define quality. Using the Standard, an Assessment and Rating (A&R) process is undertaken gathering data through observation, sighting of documentation and discussion in pre-notified inspection visits. Thus, while both research-based observation tools internationally and in Australia, and A&R measurements of ECEC quality internationally, are associated with child outcomes, they do not yet fully capture impacts on child outcomes. Effects sizes are small and not always consistent, suggesting more needs to be done to tailor ECEC quality assessment to better predict (and deliver) positive child outcomes.

Current models and measures of ECEC quality focus strongly on standards and globally defined educator actions without considering factors that might enable or limit quality of educator-child interactions. Thus, their focus is equality not equity. Through an ARC funded Laureate Fellowship our team at the Queensland Brain Institute is testing a new model of ECEC quality that incorporates the effects of policy, provider, people, and place (Figure 2). This comprehensive 4-component model moves from a singular focus on educator actions to include factors that constrain or enable optimal classroom interactions. By identifying demand characteristics (Requirements) of place and people and supply strategies (Responses) of policymakers and providers we theorise that higher quality provision can be enabled, and constraints overcome through tailored, responsive interventions. This theory is being tested in a longitudinal study of a cohort of children attending services sampled across remote, regional, and metropolitan areas. In making recommendations we urge the Productivity Commission to consider the complexity of achieving equity for children and the ways in which 'ECEC quality' is understood.



Figure 2: Classroom ecology model of ECEC quality

What are the thresholds of quality required to achieve equity?

Children in complex and low- income areas are least likely to access services rated *Exceeding the National Quality Standard*. It is not surprising that the PC report notes higher quality is more likely to occur in more socially and economically advantaged areas. A range of factors explain this outcome, including but not limited to: (1) concentration of complexity in an environment of standard staff-child ratios^{7,8} and, (2) greater difficulty of recruiting and maintaining staff and staff wellbeing in complex communities⁹⁻¹³.

Given that services are embedded within communities of different levels of complexity a one-size-fits-all model of funding to enable educational equity is not fit for purpose. Evidence on what enables or limits high quality ECEC, especially in more complex, developmentally vulnerable communities, is limited but almost certainly relates to provider motivation and financial capacity within their business model. One solution might be to allocate additional funding to more complex communities - the AEDC provides a strong data index for this. However, our data suggests that without high levels of specification of provision the required level of quality is unlikely to be achieved.

Our evidence

1. **Analysis of the national integrated data set (PLIDA) –** asked who gains access to high quality ECEC.

We find that:

- **Children from low-income families and immigrant families have the lowest access to high quality (Exceeding) services and are over-represented in low quality (Working Towards) services.** NQS rating is not meaningful as families often have to take what they can get (see Tang et al., 2024).

2. **Analysis of E4 Kids and E4KidsPlus –** E4kids was a study of 2600 children in Victoria and Queensland whose ECEC quality was assessed through standard observation at 3-4 years and their development outcomes tracked through direct measurement and linkage to NAPLAN. In Queensland, through data linkage to DoE individualised records we have developed *E4Kids Plus* enabling us to track the *E4Kids* children's school outcomes into secondary school.

We find that:

- **Quality of emotional environment predicts children's language development.** This work, cited in the PC interim report, shows links to standard individualised assessment of language (see Rankin et al., 2022)
- **Quality of emotional environment most reliably predicts children's school outcomes.** – While instructional, emotional, and organisational features of ECEC environments are all positively

associated with school performance (English, Maths Science, NAPLAN) at age 13, the quality of the emotional environment is the most consistent predictor (Thorpe et al., 2020b). The finding highlights the importance of surrounding social supports and of the wellbeing of educators.

3. **Provision in ECEC in complex communities** – we have undertaken studies to examine the association of disadvantage and food provision in ECEC focusing on provision in Queensland. First utilising public data sets and second undertaken intense observational studies in complex communities.

We find that:

- **Regional and remote ECEC services are less likely to provide food** (Thorpe et al., 2022b).
- **High market competition in low-income areas drives food provision without increase in fees.** In these areas there appears to be cost cutting in staffing and impact on children. Our studies of sleep-rest practices, for example, show longer times of non-sleeping children lying down without activity in low-income areas. The consequence is higher stress and that children voice their sense of limited agency (Gehert et al., 2021; Staton et al., 2017; Staton et al., 2015; Thorpe et al., 2022b).
- **Children are going hungry in some ECEC services with effect on emotional regulation and capacity to learn** (Searle et al., 2023a; Searle et al., 2023b)

4. **Assessment and rating (A&R) process** – we have undertaken a study for the Queensland Government focused on opportunities to streamline and support Assessment & Rating and Monitoring processes in ECE. This study (1) assessed the association of different activities and teaching formats on observational ratings of quality in a sample of 11,000 observations, (2) undertook a deep analysis of the Guide to the National Quality Framework to examine the activities this document recommends for observation of ECEC quality within the 7 quality areas, (3) assessed a random selection (n=50) of Authorised Officer (AO) field notes undertaken in the assessment and rating process, and (4) interviewed AOs, state regulatory branch staff and ACECQA staff about the A&R process.

We find that:

- **Quality ratings vary by time of day and type of activity rated.** Consistency across activities is recommended to ensure “fairness” in observational assessment. (Thorpe et al., 2020)
- **Four key activities to observe that give fair, accurate and efficient coverage are sleep-rest times, mealtimes, drop off and pickup, play times.** These give the best coverage of observable items and have the greatest variability across services.
- **Services “play the game” - preparing for A&R** (e.g. moving staff, documents, and resources across services).
- **Monitoring visits are more collaborative and positive in supporting quality improvement than A&R and are a key place to deal with regulatory issues.**
- **There is considerable scope to reduce imposition on services and streamline the A&R process with benefits of reduced cost and more frequent A&R assessments** (Staton et al., 2021)

Thorpe Lab Evidence References - Quality

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2. The ECEC workforce

This table summarises key elements of the interim report's recommendations on workforce and provides a response with evidence and required considerations. We then elaborate on key considerations.

Table 2: Key report recommendations and response on ECEC workforce.

Commission Finding	Commission Recommendation	Response: Evidence and required consideration
<p>3.7 ECEC workforce strategy needs clear and measurable targets</p>	<p>Improve the ECEC workforce Strategy</p>	<p>The workforce strategy does not refer to the OECD 2109 report on ECEC workforce strategy where there are some additional strategies and aspects of diversity that might be considered. (McDonald et al., 2024; Sullivan et al., 2023; Thorpe et al., 2023).</p> <p>The workforce strategy consultation methodology was top-down with limited evidence from frontline educators (Thorpe et al., 2023).</p> <p>The workforce strategy does not sufficiently focus on retention. There is considerable focus on attraction, but little on retention. Most graduates want to work in the school sector (Thorpe et al., 2011; Thorpe et al., 2012) while of those working toward degrees while working in ECEC are seeking to “qualify out” to the school sector (Thorpe et al., 2020a; Thorpe et al., 2023).</p> <p>The workforce strategy does not consider potential of NQS to influence workforce. Staff turnover rate is a clear metric that would indicate workplace satisfaction (and is related to child outcomes). Educator reports on morale and professional development opportunities could be enumerated. Quality Area 4 – Staffing arrangements are rather vague (Thorpe et al., 2020a; Thorpe et al., 2020c; Thorpe et al., 2023).</p> <p>The workforce strategy is very weak on wages, yet this is urgent. Without a wage subsidy the resolution of the problems faced by the sector (recruitment, retention, commitment, training improved quality) will not be achieved. This is specifically a problem in more complex communities where additional wage subsidies and recognition are the likely required (McDonald et al., 2018; Thorpe et al., 2020a; Thorpe et al., 2023).</p> <p>Wages are important, but so too are work conditions. Analyses of predictors of retention in ECEC found annual turnover rates of 37% and up to 50% in remote locations. Positive motivation at entry and completing higher qualifications (B.Ed) were associated with exit. The small variations in wages (3-5% above award) did not moderate this</p>

Commission Finding	Commission Recommendation	Response: Evidence and required consideration
		<p>association, positive work environments did. Intention to stay was associated with career pathway motivation and personal satisfaction and exit with work conditions (Thorpe et al., 2020a; Thorpe et al., 2023).</p> <p>Educators are clear about key conditions that challenge them and precipitate exit. In the <i>Early Years Workforce Study (EYWS)</i> the voices of 794 educators provides educator voice on the challenges they face. When mapped to the <i>Shaping Our Futures (SoF)</i>, we identified significant gaps. There were 3 key messages:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Urgency of pay – the SoF is very soft on this issue and has no targets. ○ Attention to retention – while considering personal wellbeing there is not a strategy for improved conditions and recognition. ○ Need to thrive not survive – <i>challenging behaviour</i> and <i>regulatory burden</i> are key issues to address that are not specified in SoF (Thorpe et al., 2023). <p>Professionalism is contrary to the compliance-orientation of a highly regulated system. For example, educators voice a feeling of lack of agency and professional autonomy in managing challenging behaviour from top down (provider organisation and ACECQA) policies (Grant et al., 2015; Grant et al., 2018; Irvine et al., 2023; Panthi et al., 2024).</p>
<p>3.7 The ECEC workforce faces barriers to professional development</p>	<p>Contribute to professional development for the ECEC workforce</p>	<p>EYWS shows that many educators are engaging or intending to engage in study for formal qualifications (McKinlay et al., 2024 In press).</p> <p>EYWS identifies a specific need for supports for working with complex and challenging children but that there is little time alongside their heavy family- and work- loads. Time release and funding are clearly strategies to overcome the problem but in the current workforce crisis work is survival and professional development a “luxury”. (Thorpe et al., 2023; Panthi et al., 2024).</p>
<p>3.6 Inter-jurisdictional differences in teacher registration impose unnecessary workforce barriers</p>		<p>EYWS data does not comment on teacher registration but there is commentary from educators that their training was not sufficient (Thorpe et al., 2022).</p>

Key Considerations Workforce

The workforce is critical to delivery of universal, high-quality ECEC for Australian children and realisation of the intended benefits for families and national prosperity. Yet the remuneration and conditions of those at the frontline do not reflect the importance of their work¹⁴⁻¹⁵. The consequence is that the work is not desirable to new entrants, especially those who are degree qualified. This problem has been exacerbated by Covid 19¹⁶. Platitudes are not enough to sustain and grow the workforce. When educators thrive rather than survive, so too do the children who attend ECEC.

As identified in the interim report, the National workforce strategy, *Shaping our Future (SoF)*, lacks sufficiently explicit targets. Further *SoF*'s timelines do not respond to the urgency of an ongoing workforce crisis. Key points our data speaks to:

Limited strategies and targets for retention – *SoF* focuses on attracting staff and is more silent on retention and ongoing structural supports.

Limited focus on inequity of work conditions across service type – *SoF* misses the finer detail of inequity that is perpetuated by differing conditions of staff in for-profit vs not-for-profit work environments and, particularly in services less able to charge more to parents (low-income areas). Ratings of *Working Towards* are more common in for-profit and low-income areas (Thorpe et al., 2020c). Staff in services rated *Working Towards* have lower staff morale and management name staffing as a key challenge (Thorpe 2020c).

Limited focus on inequity of work conditions across location – in low-income areas where there are high market competition provisions, such food provision, occurs without increase of fees (Thorpe et al., 2022b). The effects are seen in staff conditions with ongoing effects on the quality of child experience. Our extensive observations show that under these circumstances there are longer sleep-rest periods that are not responsive to child needs (as required by NQS QA2.1.2) – Children have been observed lying down but not sleeping without alternative activity for as long as 2.5 hours (Staton et al., 2015b). There are adverse stress effects seen in cortisol patterns (Thorpe et al., 2018) and overt distress (Pattinson, et al., 2014). These behaviours are driven by need for educators to clean and do record keeping when no other time is provided (Thorpe et al., 2020e). Children's agency is more limited under these conditions, perpetuating disadvantage by limiting learning opportunities (Northard et al., 2015).

Limited attention to the potential impacts of the regulatory burden experienced by staff - Our evidence shows that staff experience regulatory burden as high, as undermining educator autonomy and professionalism and as a cause of stress (Thorpe et al., 2023). In our work and that of others there is evidence of performing quality rather than authentic, high-quality provision (Thorpe et al., 2020c; Grant et al 2016; Grant et al 2018)

The report does not consider how the NQS monitoring, and A&R process may be used to ensure that the workforce is supported to stay and thrive. Key points:

Care of staff extends beyond 'self-care' (FA4 in *SoF*) to be a responsibility of provider organisations.

Professional development and administrative time should be an integral part of work conditions.

Additional resources and higher levels of staffing are necessary in more complex settings.

Staff Turnover would be an important inclusion in rating services

Our evidence

1. **Work intentions of those qualifying for a B.Ed (Early years)** – we have studied a cohort of students undertaking a degree specialising in early education. We found that the majority did not wish to work in prior to school sector. A positive practicum improved intention but many did not have good experiences and remained intent on working in the school sector (Thorpe et al., 2011; Thorpe et al., 2012)

2. **Teacher’s experiences of governance** – a PhD project focusing on the lived experience of those working in ECEC services found regulatory burden was high could result in performance of quality rather than authentic quality improvement. (Grant et al., 2016; Grant et al., 2018)
3. **The early years workforce study (EYWS)** – This study conducted a national survey of educators, covering all states and territories to assess the predictors of retention of the workforce. The survey also invited qualitative account of challenges and rewards of the work yielding 794 detailed responses. Services across a remote, regional, and metropolitan locations were sampled using a stratification process to ensure representation of service type and community. From these services 100 educators were interviewed and tracked across time. Statistical analyses of the survey data identified that those most likely to leave the ECEC sector were those undertaking degree training and those who had high motivations at entry.

We find that:

- **A key predictor of retention was the leadership of the service.**
 - **Many educators were dependent on family/spouses to enable them to stay** in the job they “loved” as they did not have a liveable wage.
 - **A core group of educators working in complex communities were highly qualified, working in not-for profit services and had enduring tenure in their services.** There was an over-representation of educators who were from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds raising the question whether they stayed because they could not get alternative work or because they were serving their own communities. **Educators identify challenging child behaviour and regulatory burden as key challenges of their work.**
 - **Educators do not feel adequately paid and feel they are not valued** (McDonald, 2018; Thorpe et al., 2020a; Thorpe et al., 2023).
- **Covid 19 and the ECEC workforce** – The ECEC workforce was deemed essential during the pandemic and educators were required to work through to support others in the essential workforce. The work, published in 2 papers, identifies the extraordinary but unrecognised work educators undertook at that time and reflects on their everyday work of “manufacturing normality” against a background of poor material support and public recognition (Cooke et al., 2024; Thorpe et al., 2020a; Thorpe et al., 2020c)
 - **Men in ECEC study** – we have conducted a series of studies to examine the experiences of men working in ECEC, in keeping with the OECD (2029) recommendation that men may be an important source of labour supply. Men enjoyed their work, but low pay, stigma and risk were barriers. Men’s accounts emphasised the high value of the work, providing important perspective on the need to recognise and reward those in the ECEC workforce (Macdonald et al., 2024; Sullivan et al., 2020; Sullivan et al., 2023).
 - **Sleep and Rest time studies** – in the E4Kids study we observed behaviours that raised concern about distress during mandated sleep-rest periods. These instigated a body of work, led by Associate Professor Sally Staton, that examined factors that drive mandated sleep-rest periods. We found:

Most services implement a mandated rest period in which children lie down without alternative activity with durations ranging from 20 to 120 minutes (2 hours) – despite the majority of children aged 3-5 years no longer napping (Staton et al., 2015b; Staton et al. 2016).

During sleep and rest times there are signs of child stress and distress with effects on cortisol patterns and night sleep (Pattinson et al., 2014; Thorpe et al., 2018). These times are also a source of conflict with parent (Sinclair, 2016) and associated with reduced autonomy and impacts on learning for children (Gehret et al., 2021; Nothard et al., 2015).

Staffing drives the practice of long mandated sleep-rest times. Educators require children to lie down while they clean and complete paperwork (Thorpe et al., 2020d).

Mandated sleep rest times are common in all services, but we found no service located in low-income communities that had flexible sleep rest policies (child choice) and the duration of mandated rest ties were longer in these services (Nothard et al., 2015; Staton et al., 2015a; Staton et al., 2016, Staton et al., 2017).

Duration of mandated sleep-rest times is associated with the quality of ECEC in a service throughout the day (Pattinson et al., 2014).

- **Food provision studies** – Through a program of work titled *Mealtimes Matter* we have conducted assessment of public data bases and a deep dive into food provision and feeding in complex communities. These studies have also indicated that routines are barometers of quality and of staff wellbeing. We found that:

Services in more complex and low-income communities are less likely to provide food for children (Thorpe et al., 2022b)

Educators control food access across the day to “make food last” (Searle et al., 2022; 2023a; 2023b; 2023c)

Educators give up their own food for children (Searle et al., 2023b)

Escalating levels of conflict across the day as children (and sometimes educators) are hungry (Searle et al., 2023c)

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3. Affordability and complexity of ECEC provision

This table summarises key elements of the interim report’s recommendations on affordability and complexity of ECEC provision and provides a response with evidence and required considerations. We then elaborate on key considerations.

Table 3: Key report recommendations and response on Affordability and Complexity of ECEC provision

Commission Finding	Commission Recommendation	Response: Evidence and required consideration
6.1 ECEC is less affordable for lower income families	Monitor rises in fees and out-of-pocket expenses	Limiting fees alone may improve access but without clear specification of the expectations of provisions and staff conditions there is a risk of the perverse effect of reducing quality. In complex communities the evidence is clear – greater levels of supply-side funding and actions to reward the highest quality staffing is needed to deliver equitable and effective universal ECEC provision (Thorpe et al., 2020a, b, c, e; Thorpe et al., 2022)
6.2 Complex ECEC subsidy arrangements can be a barrier to access for some families	Modify the Childcare Subsidy to improve affordability and access Make information about CCS eligibility easy to find and understand	Our evaluation of KindyLinQ in Queensland identifies that ‘paperwork’ and ‘shame’ can be barriers to engagement in ECEC. Families who do not have English language competency and those who distrust the education system require clear communication, active promotion, building community partnerships and employment of skilled personnel (Preferably of the same cultural identity) to support ECEC engagement (Staton et al., 2022)
6.2 CCS changes would reduce affordability barriers for lower income families		The recommended changes to CCS to support affordability is very well justified. Demand side subsidy will support family access. However, these changes will not guarantee access to sufficient quality.
9.1 More info required - Scope for broader funding reform		Supply-side subsidy for those delivering high quality ECEC in complex communities is essential. Supply side subsidy must have clear requirements for high quality as without such specification the system can work to perpetuate disadvantage. One example is the USA Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) where the quality of food provision in ECEC receiving funding is explicitly specified and monitored (Tang et al., 2024; Thorpe et al., 2022)

Key Considerations - Affordability and Complexity

The children and families who **can** most benefit from ECEC provision are those who are experiencing **complex family circumstance and social and economic disadvantage**¹⁸⁻²⁰. The international data, and that from Australia, consistently show that, *when ECEC provision is of sufficient quality*, children enter school ready to learn and their developmental trajectories are positive. The key question is “what are the key elements (‘must haves’) in an ECEC program that enable life-changing experiences for our most

developmentally vulnerable children?”. To achieve the required access to the highest quality ECEC for children in the most complex communities requires unequal investment tailored to child and community circumstance.

The requirements of children and educators (*People*) are located within a community context (*Place*).

The work of an educator is not standard but determined by the child with whom they interact in the moment and the collective of children in their room who bring with them the circumstance of their family life. One child with a behaviour problem can disrupt the access of all children to learning opportunity.⁷ The collective of children’s experiences affects the possibilities within the room and the developmental outcomes of the children who attend⁸. Unlike school, in ECEC most educators work with different children and collectives of children each day. Unlike school, most ECEC educators hold technical, not degree, qualifications. Most (97%) are women. Many are from low-income communities and paid the minimum wage. All are working under considerable stress with ever-growing accountability against a background of poor work conditions. Disaffection is seen in average staff turnover rates of 1 in 3 per annum, with higher rates in remote areas, and an attendant national and international labour crisis²¹ turnover disrupts formative relationships with children and staff stress can limit quality of provision with adverse effects on child outcome²².

Response of policy and ECE providers within a competitive market actively enters the ECEC setting and affects quality, for better and worse.

Curriculum and legislated quality standards are intended to improve quality, while assessment and publicly visible rating is both a carrot and stick to ensure it does. Yet there can be perverse effects. High levels of accountability add stress to educator’s lives and can evoke ‘an industry of paperwork’ to record ‘quality’, disrupting authentic interactions²³. ECEC providers are diverse. Most are for-profit businesses. They compete in a market, and *some* make resourcing decisions to ‘get parents in’ that are sub-optimal for children’s wellbeing and learning²⁴. Most are motivated to ensure children have a positive experience but there are financial constraints. The philosophy and motivation of providers are potent agents affecting educator-child interactions. Against this background, not-for-profit providers with specific mission to work in complex areas have not experienced growth.

Poorer quality ECEC is not inevitable in disadvantaged communities and can make the greatest difference.

Data from Australia’s largest study of *observed* ECEC quality to date, E4Kids, show that quality is typically poorer in disadvantaged communities (median trend) (Figure 3), Yet some of the highest quality is also evident in these locations (Circled-1). Moreover, the poorest quality is occurring in moderately disadvantaged location, suggesting a policy action or provider intervention is creating a disjuncture (Circled-2). Understanding the characteristics of programs that achieve high quality delivery in the most challenging settings and the extent to which these yield positive development outcomes is urgent and the current focus of our team funded through an ARC Laureate fellowship.

In a system where there is focus on standards, and parent ability to pay more buys access to higher quality ECEC, inequity is inevitable. This must change for ECEC to deliver on its economic promise.

Our collective body of data indicates that the primary enabler of positive interactions within the ECEC setting and of long-term learning outcomes is the emotional quality of the environment (see above Quality) . Relationships matter. To enable the highest quality ECEC provision in more complex communities necessitates moving beyond access and quality standards to meet the requirements of People and Place through responsive Policy and recognition and growth of Provider organisations who deliver the highest quality ECEC in challenging environments. Central to this aim is supports and recognition of current staff in complex communities and incentives to attract staff with high levels of training and expertise and provision for more favourable child-to-staff ratios.

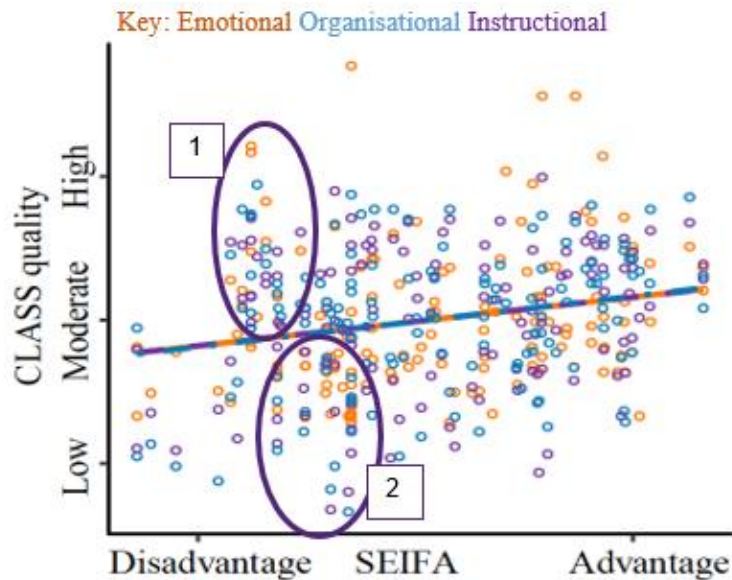


Figure 3: Observed emotional, instructional, and organisational quality (measured using CLASS) in Australian ECEC (CBLD, K/P, FDC) settings

Our evidence

PLIDA analysis – latent class analysis shows that access to the highest quality ECEC as assessed by NQS ratings is not equitably distributed with specific demographic characteristics indexing multiple forms of disadvantage associated with poorer access (Tang et al., 2024)

Effective Early Educational Experiences for Children – E4Kids and E4Kids Plus (see Quality above) identifies a statistically significant linear trend in the association of disadvantage and ECEC quality, but there is also high level of dispersal suggesting policy and practice factors are moderating such effects.

Early Years workforce Study – defined complexity in terms of people (children with special needs, behaviour problems) and provider (for-profit vs not-for-profit). Older educators were more likely to stay in a service with high levels of complexity, whereas younger educators were more significantly likely to leave services that were in complex areas and for profit. Younger staff were more likely to stay if they worked in less complex locations and conditions (Thorpe et al., 2020).

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4. Systems and Governance

This table summarises key elements of the interim report’s recommendations on systems and governance and complexity of ECEC provision and provides a response with evidence and required considerations. We then elaborate on key considerations.

Table 4: Key report recommendations and response on Systems and Governance.

Commission Finding	Commission Recommendation	Response: Evidence and required consideration
<p>9.1 A one-size-fits-all funding model would not be efficient or effective</p>		<p>Our evidence on quality, workforce and complexity (as above) makes clear that a one-size-fits-all funding model is inequitable and serves to perpetuate disadvantage contrary to the demonstrated potential of ECEC to achieve social equity and optimal trajectories of learning and development.</p> <p>Any funding model would need to direct attention to growing and sustaining the highest quality provision in the most complex communities. To date such provision is most often provided by the not-for-profit sector, though we also find examples of the highest quality provision in privately provided services that operate for profit that have a specific remit to serve community. We note the report identifies lack of growth in the not-for-profit sector see Thorpe et al., 2020a; Thorpe, 2022)</p> <p>To ensure that any additional funds to providers in complex communities is appropriately directed, stringent and transparent specifications of the types of provisions is needed to ensure meeting a threshold of quality that delivers reduced developmental vulnerability. This should include basic provisions such as food and increased staffing (e.g. cleaners – so that educators can focus on educating). Our data from the most complex communities shows that when children and educators do not have enough food conflict increases across the day and interactions focus on control (surviving) not learning (thriving) Thorpe et al 2022, Thorpe et al., 2020e; Tang et al., 2024; Searle et al., 2023)</p> <p>Monitoring visits to support services and more regular but streamlined A&R of services, is necessary to ensure that services are delivering the specified provisions. Transparency in the “inspection code” would assist services. Currently the A&R procedure is not public (see Staton et al., 2021).</p>
<p>9.2 Improving components of the funding model would</p>	<p>Improve policy coordination and implementation</p>	<p>Access alone is not enough. Without high quality provision only the very short-term benefits of ECEC can be achieved. What is needed is universal access to high quality ECEC. Our data clearly show</p>

Commission Finding	Commission Recommendation	Response: Evidence and required consideration
support universal access		some disadvantaged demographic groups are less likely to have such access (Tang et al., 2024) and that setting an efficiency cost alone would not ensure optimal provision (Thorpe et al., 2022)
	Establish an ECEC Commission	<p>A commission would be a positive move to set the agenda for improved quality and equity, to reduce the rate of developmental vulnerability of children at entry to school, and to establish positive learning and life outcomes.</p> <p>More detail of the function and composition of the commissions is required. We urge that one function be strategic setting of the research agenda and co-ordination of funding to ensure solution-focused, and impactful evidence.</p>

Evidence – Governance and Systems

A standard system is not delivering equity. Australia’s ECEC provision is a mixed market of for-profit and not-for-profit providers, and, beyond these broad categories, there are providers of different sizes and who have different underlying philosophies and motivations. The current evidence internationally, and in Australia, identifies difference between those operating for profit and those not doing so, but this binary is crude and cannot reflect the detail of service fit for community served. That said, ‘childcare deserts’ exist where there is not provision for the population of children residing in a community – most evidently in regional Australia - and disparities in access to sufficient quality of provision – most evidently for the disadvantaged groups.

Australia has invested heavily in early childhood development, but the Australian Early Development Census²⁵ indicates that nearly one in four children enters school developmentally vulnerable despite near universal provision of ECEC in the year before school. Such figures suggest that more needs to be done. The AEDC provides an index of communities requiring more investment – and more strategically focused investment. In our own work we utilise the AEDC to identify sites for intensive study focusing on communities with at least a third of children entering school developmentally vulnerable. We find some areas with 60% developmentally vulnerable children. Beyond research, the AEDC could provide a method to identify communities requiring higher levels of investment and supports for ECEC providers who work within these locations.

Investment in systematic research strategies must move from description of problems or successes to identification of mechanism that perpetuate or disrupt disadvantage. Three sequences of methods are necessary to understanding mechanisms. First, representative population level observation at scale is needed to enable sophisticated design and statistical techniques, controlling for confounders, and ensuring testing of counterfactuals. Only through these methods can patterns of success or otherwise be discerned. Second, deep dives utilising consultation with stakeholders within complex communities and detailed analyses of interactions within the ECEC environment are critical in designing solutions that work. Third, co-designed intervention studies tailored to community are needed to test effects with data linkage enabling tracking across time.

Current research investments lack co-ordination and operate in an environment of competition rather than co-operation. Research in ECEC is undertaken by a range of agencies comprising Governments, Government agencies (ACECQA, AERO), provider organisations, NGOs, management consultants and universities. Funding available can limit the scope and quality of the work. The Australian Research Council

grants are rarely sufficient for large-scale work. Similarly, budgets for AERO and ACECQA are limited. We note that the interim report focuses on government agencies as the key source of research, with limited consideration of the range of high-level expertise offered in universities. To achieve the highest level of solution-focused research requires strategic co-ordination of research and research funds and collaborative partnerships. The ECEC commission presents an opportunity for setting the research agenda and monitoring research quality to ensure optimal impact.

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