

Submission to Inquiry into Early Childhood Education and Care



About Special Teaching and Research (STaR) Ltd

STaR pays our respect to all Elders past and present and recognises the strength and resilience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. We celebrate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and ongoing contribution to our community.

Special Teaching and Research (STaR) Ltd. is a non-profit organisation that works across early years, school-aged and post-school settings to ensure progressive, meaningful and inclusive learning for people with disabilities. Within these settings, STaR Special Educators provide professional development, coaching and mentoring to educators and support workers who work with people with disabilities. The organisation is committed to embedding research evidence into its practice and contributing to the evidence base in special and inclusive education. We believe that with the right support all people can learn together, and our mission is to achieve access, opportunity and acceptance for all people with disability.

The STaR early intervention program has been operating within early childhood services in the community for more than 20 years. Over 600 children with disabilities and their families have been supported through the STaR program in over 30 childcare centres. Many educators and student teachers have attended STaR professional development courses and have been mentored 'on the ground' by our Special Educators. Since September 2021, over 3000 early childhood educators from early childhood services (including long day care, preschool and family day care settings) across NSW have attended STaR professional development webinars funded by the NSW Department of Education through the Sector Development Program.

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Summary

Special Teaching and Research (STaR) Ltd submits that one of the best strategies to support developmental and educational outcomes for Australian children, including in preparation for school, is to focus on supporting parents/other caregivers and early childhood educators. Those adults who spend the most time with young children have the greatest potential to positively influence their development. Access to quality ECEC services is particularly important for children and families experiencing disability, developmental delay, and other vulnerabilities. This can only be achieved with a strong and supported early childhood education and care workforce.

Recommendations

- The implementation of Focus Area 3 (Leadership and capability) of the National Children's Education and Care Workforce Strategy (2022-2031) must address the skills, knowledge and confidence of the workforce in working with children with disability or delays and their families.
- ECEC services should be supported to develop and implement Individual Learning Plans for those children with disability or developmental delays, including a record of reasonable adjustments made.
- Access to Inclusion Development Fund Subsidy payments, such as the additional educator, FDC top up and Innovative Solutions Support funding, should be based on documented evidence of the support needs of the child/children in the ECEC learning environment, not on a formal medical or disability diagnosis. Outcome measures should include both measures of educators' use of inclusive practices/strategies and measures of children's engagement, participation, and positive developmental outcomes.
- The Federal government may consider working with State and Territory governments to address the siloed approach to ECEC service support to include children with or at risk of disability or developmental delay so that educators can access support regardless of the setting (i.e., long day care, family day care, out of school hours care, community-based preschools, and preschools operated by State/Territory departments of Education).

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Introduction

STaR commends the Commonwealth Government on requesting an inquiry into the ECEC sector in Australia.

Noting the scope of this inquiry, in this response, we will address *b) the developmental and educational outcomes for Australian children, including preparation for school, and d) outcomes for children and families experiencing vulnerability and/or disadvantage, First Nations children and families, and children and families experiencing disability*. The specific focus of this submission is young children with, or at risk of, developmental delay or disability and their families, including an overview of evidence in the area and suggested ways forward.

Current evidence and the way forward

The 2021 Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) revealed that while the majority of children starting school in Australia were 'developmentally on track', 22% of children in Australia were reported to be 'developmentally vulnerable' in one or more domains (Australian Government Department of Education, Skills and Employment, 2022).

Further, disparities between the outcomes of different groups were apparent. Only 34% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were 'developmentally on track' across all five domains (compared to 56% of non-indigenous children), and 44% of children living in remote and very remote areas (compared to 52% living in regional areas and 56% living in major cities). There was also a significant difference between the percentage of children identified as 'developmentally on track' on five domains living in the most socio-economically disadvantaged geographical areas of Australia (43%) compared to those living in the least disadvantaged areas of Australia (63%).

Young children who are not 'developmentally on track' are at risk of ongoing developmental delay. However, the inclusion of children with disability or developmental delay in ECEC services can contribute significantly to the learning and development of these children through participation and engagement in teaching and learning activities alongside their peers (Kemp, 2016). Every child has the right to be included in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) services regardless of disability or developmental delay (Early Childhood Australia [ECA] & Early Childhood Intervention Australia [ECIA], 2012; Kemp, 2016). Equity, inclusion and diversity also underpin the National Quality Framework, under which every early childhood service in Australia operates (Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority [ACECQA], 2023).

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Although access is one of the key components of inclusion, access alone may not be sufficient to ensure that the child's individual learning needs are met (McConnell, 2002; Rogers, 2000). After access, children should be supported to participate and engage in ECEC services because it is through engagement that learning occurs (McWilliam, 2000). Furthermore, access and participation can lead to the third and final key component of inclusion, positive outcomes for the child and their family (ECA, 2016).

Bray et al. (2021), in their evaluation of the Inclusion Support Program, noted that an increased number of children with disability were accessing ECEC services, but also found that families of children with 'additional needs' (including disability or developmental delay) were more likely to change ECEC services and less likely to report it was easy to find quality ECEC. This is consistent with our experience of delivering the STaR early intervention program within early childhood services in the community over the past 20 years. The number of parent enquiries we have received requesting assistance to find a place for their child in an ECEC service has decreased significantly, while enquiries from both families and ECEC staff requesting assistance for educators to support the engagement and participation of enrolled children with disability or delay (diagnosed or suspected) have notably increased.

Noting that inclusion involves three components: 1. Access to ECEC services; 2. support/reasonable adjustments to ensure engagement and participation within the ECEC service, leading to 3. positive outcomes for the child (ECA, 2016), it is clear that barriers to inclusion still exist despite the increased number of young children with disability/delay attending ECEC services. Training and support of ECEC educators and other staff within ECEC services have been identified as barriers to the inclusion of educators (ECA & ECIA, 2012; Kemp, 2016), perhaps because the base levels of qualifications of ECEC educators do not adequately address inclusion (Bray et al., 2021). Early childhood educators in NSW who attended webinars about inclusion of children with disability/delay in ECEC services (developed and delivered by STaR and funded by the NSW Department of Education through the Sector Development Program) were asked to identify barriers to inclusion. The most frequently identified barriers included educator skills, knowledge, and experience (327 responses related to this), inadequate resources, equipment or physical environment (239), lack of training, professional development, ongoing support/coaching/mentoring or concrete strategies (174), the attitudes, emotions, values, or beliefs of educators or families in the service community (151), staffing (including 'ratios' and access to additional staff to support; 127), cultural and language barriers (122), the cost/financial barrier for the families (92), access,

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transport, and location (including rural/remote; 90), and access to funding (84). Some educators also expressed frustration at families not willing to seek a diagnosis (framing these families as 'in denial').

It is clear that many early childhood educators lack confidence in working with children with disability or developmental delay despite the significant investment of both the Federal and State/Territory governments in inclusion/disability support programs for the ECEC sector (e.g., the Federal Inclusion Support Program and NSW Department of Education Disability and Inclusion Program). The Federal Inclusion Support Program can be accessed by long day care, family day care and OSHC services nationally, and is delivered via Inclusion Agencies in each State/Territory. It is, however, significantly under-utilised (Bray et al., 2021). The main expenditure item is the funding of additional educators in long day care and OSHC services (at a rate of \$23 per hour). These educators are funded to support the whole group, not an individual child. However, services are required to provide evidence of a disability diagnosis for children to access this funding. We have received reports from parents of pressure from services to seek a diagnosis for their child/ren, which is problematic. It is unlikely that access to an extra educator, who (given the rate of pay), is unlikely to have the skills and expertise necessary to increase the capacity of the educators in the service to include children with disability/delay, will contribute towards addressing gap in the knowledge, skills, or confidence of the educators. Inclusion Agencies support services to develop Strategic Inclusion Plans (SIPs), designed to identify and address barriers to inclusion. Bray et al. (2021), reported that SIPs were generally seen as useful by services, but this was related to the requirement to have a SIP in order to access other funding. Anecdotal reports from early childhood educators who have participated in STaR professional development sessions, and those who have approached STaR for support, indicate that the usefulness of the information provided by the Inclusion Professional (acting on behalf of the Inclusion Agency) varies widely depending on the individual professional, with some providing useful strategies for use in services, others reported only having limited contact (virtually) related to IT/the ISP portal with no practical strategies being provided.

The Innovative Solutions Support funding is flexible funding within the Inclusion Support Program that may be accessed to fund support for specific inclusion barriers that cannot be addressed by the Inclusion Agency, such as specialist inclusion training to meet the needs of particular children or groups of children, or networking and other activities to build service capacity. In the period of 2016-2017 to 2020-2021, only 3.0%-

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14.2% of the allocated budget for Innovative Solutions Funding was expended (Bray et al, 2021), indicating an alarming underutilisation given that educator knowledge, skills and confidence are major barriers to inclusion. We have had reports from ECEC services that they would like to access this funding due to identified needs of several children within their services but are unable to because the families of these children have not sought a medical disability diagnosis for their child (as is their right) and therefore the service was not eligible to apply. This contrasts with the support provided to community-based preschools in NSW, for example, where capacity building supports are funded for all services as part of the Disability and Inclusion Program regardless of identification of children with disability or delay. However, other support (such as ongoing funding for an additional educator) do require documentation of a disability diagnosis (see <https://education.nsw.gov.au/early-childhood-education/operating-an-early-childhood-education-service/grants-and-funded-programs/disability-and-inclusion-program>). We note strongly here that a disability diagnosis will not provide the educators with detailed information regarding the strengths and support needs of an individual child within their learning environment, nor will it provide information about the support needs of the team of educators working with that child, or those children. Documented evidence of the child's engagement and participation within the program and the level of support and use of strategies by educators are more likely to provide insight into the support needs of the child and team and developmental and educational progress.

Family Day Care educators and representatives from services/schemes in NSW who attended professional development webinars (developed and delivered by STaR and funded by the NSW Department of Education through the Sector Development Program) expressed specific concerns about access to support via the Inclusion Support Program, with one participant reporting that she had been advised by the Inclusion Professional 'not to bother' applying for the Family Day Care Top Up payment because 'it is like a unicorn. Nobody ever gets it'. Bray et al. (2021) reported that only 25-35 subsidies are provided each year nationally, again indicating an underutilisation of this component of the program. Overall, support for ECEC services to meaningfully include children with disability or delay varies greatly depending on the service type, whether the child/children have a documented disability diagnosis that the family is willing to share, and the jurisdiction/geographic location of the service. This disjointed approach to inclusion support for children with or at risk or disability or delay is resulting in inequitable access to quality learning plans in ECEC services for many children across Australia.

Conclusion

Many young children in Australia start school developmentally vulnerable, and although there is evidence that more children with disability and delays are attending ECEC services, barriers to inclusion still exist. Two major barriers are the skills, knowledge and confidence of the ECEC workforce and the access to both federal and state/territory-funded inclusion support programs. The way forward to achieve developmental and educational outcomes for Australian children, including preparation for school, and positive outcomes for children and families experiencing disability, should involve:

1. Addressing the skills, knowledge and confidence of the workforce in working with children with disability or delay and their families through the implementation of Focus Area 3 (Leadership and capability) of the National Children's Education and Care Workforce Strategy (2022-2031). Professional development programs, coaching, mentoring, and networking should address skills and knowledge required to work with children with, or at risk of, disability or developmental delays and their families.
2. Addressing the 'quiet exclusion' of children with disability or developmental delays in ECEC services (through lack of reasonable adjustments to enable these children to engage and participate on the same basis as their peers) by supporting ECEC services to develop and implement Individual Learning Plans for those children with disability or developmental delay, including a record of reasonable adjustments made.
3. Addressing the barriers to access of the Inclusion Support Program by ensuring that Inclusion Development Fund Subsidy payments, such as the additional educator, FDC top up and Innovative Solutions Support funding, are distributed based on documented evidence of the support needs of the child/children in the ECEC learning environment, not on a formal medical or disability diagnosis. Outcome measures should include both measures of educators' use of inclusive practices/strategies and measures of children's engagement, participation, and positive developmental outcomes.
4. Addressing equity for families accessing different types of ECEC services, the Federal government may consider working with State and Territory governments to address the siloed approach to ECEC service support to include children with or at risk of disability or developmental delay so that educators can access support regardless of the setting (i.e., long day care, family day care, out of school hours care, community-based preschools, and preschools operated by State/Territory departments of Education).

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