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

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Prepared by:

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Acknowledgement of Country

The University of Melbourne acknowledges the Traditional Owners of the unceded land on which we work, learn and live: the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung and Bunurong peoples (Burnley, Fishermans Bend, Parkville, Southbank, and Werribee campuses), the Yorta Yorta Nation (Dookie and Shepparton campuses), and the Dja Dja Wurrung people (Creswick campus).

The University also acknowledges and is grateful to the Traditional Owners, Elders and Knowledge Holders of all Indigenous nations and clans who have been instrumental in our reconciliation journey.

We recognise the unique place held by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the original owners and custodians of the lands and waterways across the Australian continent, with histories of continuous connection dating back more than 60,000 years. We also acknowledge their enduring cultural practices of caring for Country.

We pay respect to Elders past, present and future, and acknowledge the importance of Indigenous knowledge in the Academy. As a community of researchers, teachers, professional staff, and students we are privileged to work and learn every day with Indigenous colleagues and partners.

Summary of submission

The REEaCh Centre[1] is committed to improving the lives of all young Australian through research on educator effectiveness and children's outcomes, improving program quality in early childhood education and care (ECEC) and leading evidence-based learning and development for ECEC professionals. (We use the term, *educator* inclusively, to refer to employees in Early Childhood Education and Care [ECEC] with varying levels of qualifications.)

Based on evidence from Australian and international research, and the research, practice and policy expertise of the REEaCh Centre, three core recommendations respond to the needs of early childhood education and care (ECEC) in Australia:

1. An equitable funding system that allows all children and families access to high-quality ECEC from birth. Support for young Australians in their early years must be based on the concept of *Proportional Universalism* in which **universal access** is supplemented by support that is targeted according to the requirements of individual children.

2. Ensuring the provision of **high-quality ECEC** for children to experience the benefits of early learning. Simply attending hours of daycare, preschool or kindergarten does not guarantee positive outcomes: children need interactions with skilled educators to foster learning and development.

3. Sustained **professional learning and development** is key to improving the skills of the ECEC workforce to improve the quality of ECEC provision.

Learning from birth through to school age has the most profound impact on life outcomes. High-quality ECEC influences children's learning and can respond to individual needs of children and families. High-quality ECEC provision is an essential – and profitable – investment in Australia's future (The Front Project, 2019).

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[1] **The REEaCh (Research in Effective Education in Early Childhood) Centre** The REEaCh Centre in the Melbourne Graduate School of Education at the University of Melbourne was established in 2019 through the generous support of the Leaper Foundation. Our purpose is to make a sustained impact on the lives of young Australians by advancing the quality of early learning experiences for all children. We have three priorities of research and engagement in ECEC: program quality, the equitable participation of all children, and educational leadership. Our research is multi-disciplinary and occurs in partnership with early childhood stakeholders to build capacity and provide professional learning around two ECEC research programs:

1. Teacher effectiveness, with a focus on teacher or educator-child interactions and assessment for learning practices as valuable ways to maximise young children's learning and development outcomes, and address disparities in development; and
2. Children's learning outcomes, demonstrating the mechanisms (e.g., sufficient quality and intensity) by which programs impact children's learning and development.

This submission provides the Productivity Commission with an overview of the context of high-quality ECEC, then case studies to illustrate each (interdependent) recommendation.

Overview of context

> "The process and practice of educating young children in the early years is a specialist area derived from research into early learning, development, health and wellbeing".
> Emeritus Professor Collette Tayler, *(Page & Tayler, 2016)*

The evidence is clear that high-quality, play-based learning experiences provided through early childhood education and care (ECEC) benefit cognitive, language and social development in the short- and long-term.

The gains are even greater for children from disadvantaged circumstances (Lee et al., 2021). More hours (intensity) of high-quality programs increases the benefits for the most vulnerable children. ECEC programs, services and policies are only equitable when all children and families receive them at a scale and intensity that is proportionate to their individual levels of need and vulnerability.

Flexible systems (such as those documented in European Union and OECD reports) provide minimum hours of universal provision, with the capacity for additional hours based on children's needs, a process often referred to as *Proportional Universalism*. An ECEC system built on principles of Proportional Universalism can provide high-quality preschool programs for all, as well as allowing for more intense programs for priority groups of children. This system is the best way to close the gaps in development and learning that emerge during the preschool years among Australian children.

High-quality universal programs have the potential to improve outcomes for all children, across the whole socio-economic spectrum, including those with developmental vulnerabilities. It is important to note that families experiencing barriers to accessing preschool are often more likely to attend a universal service, particularly if it is culturally appropriate (Cascio, 2023). Targeted provision of preschool programs has already proved successful for highly vulnerable young children and families (Jordan & Kennedy, 2019). Longitudinal data from the High Scope/Perry Preschool program and the Abecedarian

program demonstrate significant developmental advantages from childhood into adulthood through participation in intensive, long-term, and integrated education and home-learning programs in early childhood.

Quality is central to any vision of the benefits of preschool programs, but characterising what high-quality pedagogy and practice looks like has a long and sometimes chequered history. Quality has customarily been characterized by two domains, *structural* and *process* (Dowsett et al., 2008; Mashburn et al., 2008; Vandell & Wolfe, 2000). Structural quality includes features such as the learning environment, educator qualifications, and child–educator ratios. Also included in structural quality are supports for professional development, learning frameworks to guide educational programming and practice, and support for families to provide home learning opportunities. In contrast, process quality encompasses children's experiences within ECEC programs, with a focus on pedagogy and effective teaching strategies, child–educator interactions and learning programs. Process quality also includes social-emotional support and the fostering of children's well-being. A third domain of quality, *system*, has been introduced and defined as consisting of factors such as funding, governance and regulatory standards (McClean et al., 2022).

Process quality can be characterised as the key driver impacting children's development (Edwards, 2021; Pianta et al., 2016; Torii et al., 2017), whereas system and structural quality are essential to support process quality. Specifically, pedagogy and educator-child interactions, have the greatest impact on overall preschool program quality and importantly on children's outcomes. There are minimum thresholds of quality, particularly in intentional teaching and responsive interactions, necessary within educational programs before an impact on children's learning can be expected.

Efforts to improve process quality have a greater impact on outcomes than work focused on structural features in isolation. (Please refer to Case Study 1, Building a Bridge into Preschool in Remote Northern Territory Communities, below for a discussion of how we used structural supports to help develop a program high in process quality within Aboriginal communities.) Staff ratios, class size, and staff qualifications are important for structural quality. However, structural quality alone is not sufficient for the provision of high-quality programs. The links between staff qualifications and high-quality pedagogy are best described in the Starting Strong report (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2017): "it is not only qualifications that affect [child] outcomes; it is the ability

of staff members to create a better pedagogic environment that makes a real difference." p.23.

Ensuring structural quality and improving process quality influences children's learning and development; but we recognise families as first teachers. ECEC provision must work to support families, not only in providing access to flexible, high-quality programs that meet the needs of the community, but also to support learning at home. Parents and caregivers should have access to knowledge and resources that support them to engage in frequent, warm, responsive interactions with their children. As shown in Figure 1, a vision for early childhood education and care services in Australia needs to have the child at the centre, providing support for families and educators to engage in high-quality interactions with children.
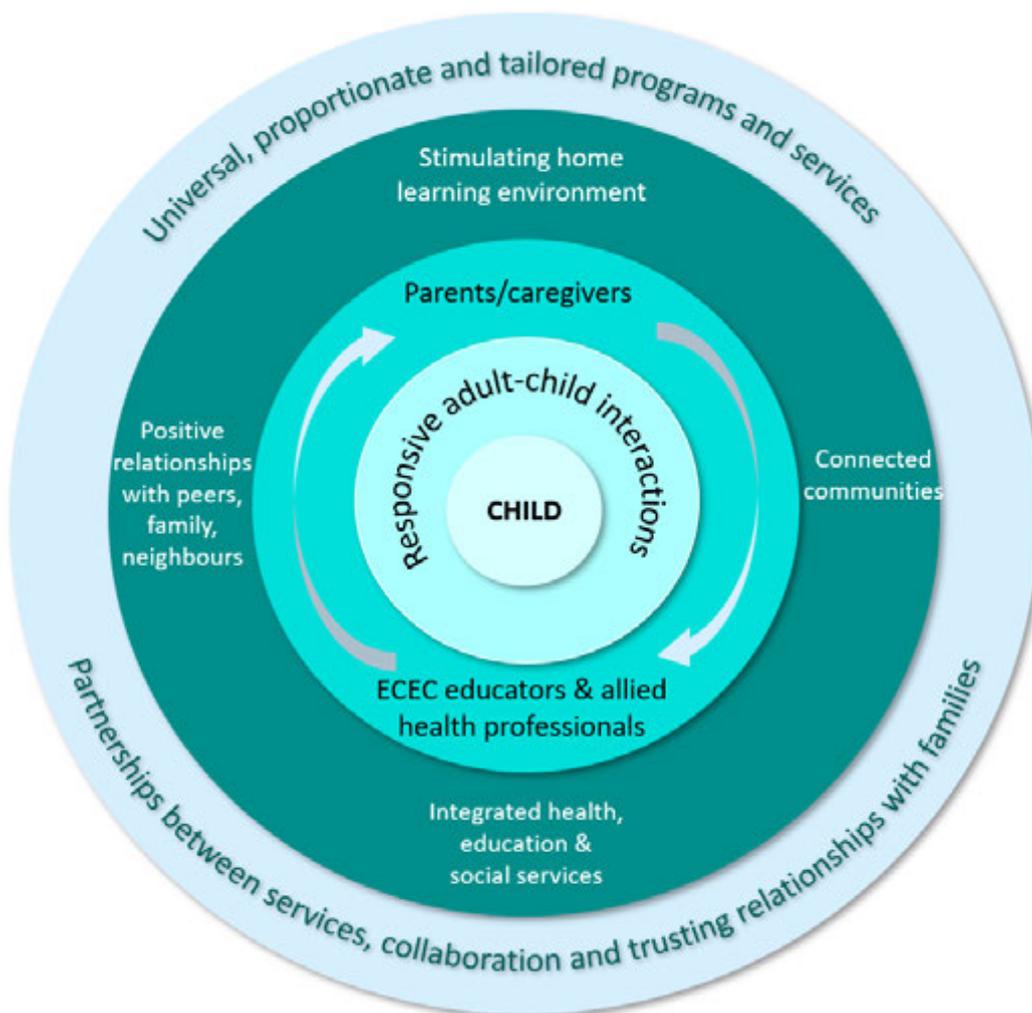

Figure 1. Our vision for early childhood in Australia

1. Australia needs to fund universal access to early childhood education and care (ECEC) programs that meet the needs of children and communities.

Access to high-quality ECEC services and evidence-informed interventions should be available to all children and families, regardless of income, location or ability. In some jurisdictions, this may require expanding access to government-subsidised programs, such as universal preschool. Current evidence supports the view that universal, proportionate early childhood services can address developmental disparities through targeted approaches to engaging diverse children and families (Moore et al., 2015).

Support for young Australians in their early years must be based on the concept of *Proportional Universalism* in which universal access is supplemented by support that is targeted according to the requirements of individual children. Specific policies should promote the development of flexible systems that enable universal and proportionate access to high-quality services. In particular, there is a need for a centralised system that can bridge the gap between services and sectors and ensure that families are aware of what is available and how to access it.

Support for young Australians must also include a high-quality, universal ECEC system that incorporates more intense programs for priority groups of children, for whom the gains are the greatest (Lee et al., 2021). For example, families experiencing vulnerability who have previously experienced barriers to accessing preschool may be more willing to attend a universal preschool program that is culturally appropriate (Cascio, 2023) and responsive to their family's needs (Jordan & Kennedy, 2019). Providing universal access to evidence-based programs that are then tailored to individual children and delivered by professionals who have the appropriate expertise will improve access to services for those who need them most without stigmatising families or communities.

The longitudinal study of the effectiveness of ECEC in Australia – E4Kids – found that families in lower socioeconomic areas had less access to ECEC (Cloney et al., 2016; Tayler et al., 2016): the location and availability of services matters. It also matters that programs respond to the needs and knowledges of the local community, as illustrated in Case Study 1.

Case study 1: Building a Bridge into Preschool in Remote Northern Territory Communities

ARC Linkage Project, in partnership with the Northern Territory Department of Education.

High-quality early learning programs that incorporate and prioritise the cultural, linguistic and pedagogical knowledges and perspectives of families and community members are crucial for equitable learning and development outcomes as children transition to preschool and school (e.g., Fuller et al., 2021). The goal of this study was to establish an ECEC learning bridge, supported at one end by the strength of local cultural knowledge and practices, and at the other by proven learning techniques from ECEC research and practice (REEaCh 2021a, 2021b). This case study serves as a good example of how, with sufficient structural supports programs high in process quality can be developed to meet the needs of all children.

The study was conducted with Aboriginal children, families and staff at two *Families as First Teachers* (FaFT) playgroups in remote Northern Territory communities. FaFT is a voluntary early learning and family support program for Aboriginal families in remote communities, co-delivered by a Family Liaison Officer (a local Aboriginal person with early childhood experience) and a Family Educator (an early childhood teacher). The study explored whether a culturally adapted 3*a* approach (Page et al., 2019; Sparling & Meunier, 2019) could support young Aboriginal children's language, learning and cultural knowledges and skills prior to preschool. In the study, FaFT staff provided parents with coaching in 3*a* strategies in their first language/s. Contributions from a core *Indigenous Early Childhood Parenting Reference Group* and from each community helped ensure that local culture, identity, and language remained at the centre of the program.

Findings show that children's language and early learning outcomes were associated with program intensity. Higher exposure to Conversational Reading and Learning Games predicted stronger language and developmental outcomes for children. To have the greatest impact on children's outcomes, it was important that FaFT sessions were structured to increase child and family engagement over time. Daily records supported staff and family members to make sure that every child attending FaFT was engaging in 3*a* strategies each day. The authentic representation of local culture and language was also an essential component of the program. The culture and languages of children's communities needed to be embedded into the learning content underpinning key evidence-based strategies. In addition, building the capacity of staff and families was critical to the program's success and sustainability. Coaching at FaFT was an effective way to build parents' confidence in the use of strategies, and to show family members how they were supporting children's learning when they were engaging in 3*a* strategies together.

The outcomes of this study have important implications for the design of programs. All children have the right to early learning experiences which provide a strong foundation for life. Universal access, however, does not mean the same program for every child. This case study illustrates that evidence-based programs that align with cultural priorities and are tailored to meet the needs of diverse groups can improve outcomes for children and their families.

2. ECEC programs need to be high-quality to have a positive effect on children's learning and development

ECEC programs characterised by play-based learning experiences advance children's cognitive, language and social development. Teaching and learning practices need to be implemented by ECEC professionals who continually gather and review evidence to support optimal outcomes for the children in their care. High-quality ECEC programs emphasise educator-child interactions that focus on children and their needs, based on a recognition that, "Educators are uniquely positioned to observe children's development, interactions and behaviour, to identify any issues of concern, and to take action to support all children's safety and wellbeing." (Australian Government Department of Education, 2022, p. 44). Staff in high-quality ECEC services communicate with families and collaborate with other services. In this way, they develop strong, reciprocal educator-family partnerships that build on families' knowledges and expertise as their children's first teachers and contribute to a sense of community and belonging, while supporting the different needs of children.

High-quality pedagogy is characterised by intentionality and scaffolded learning environments and sustained shared interactions within play-based programs. Indeed, in reviews of ECEC pedagogy, interactional quality has consistently been identified as an important factor in child learning (Eadie et al., 2022; Hanno et al., 2021; McClean et al., 2022). High-quality interactions lead to positive child outcomes with respect to self-regulation, social-emotional skills, school-readiness, and phonological awareness. These positive effects are significantly greater for vulnerable children. Such findings are in line with international research indicating that the relational and interactional quality of educational practices is crucial to promoting language, social, and literacy skills (Burchinal et al., 2016), as well as socio-emotional learning (Mondi et al., 2021) and critical thinking (O'Reilly et al.,2022). Case Study 2, *Every Toddler Talking* (Eadie et al., 2017), illustrates how collaborative partnerships between allied health and ECEC educators lead to the kinds of positive and responsive educator-child interactions that are integral to children's learning and development.

Case Study 2. Every Toddler Talking

A research evaluation in partnership with the Victorian Department of Education and Training.

Language learning is shaped through the social contexts of children's earliest experiences at home and in ECEC settings with responsive caregivers. Facilitating high-quality interactions between ECEC educators and children affords opportunities to foster language-rich exchanges and promote strong language skills. The present study investigated the impact of a language-specific professional learning program on the quality of educator-child interactions.

Educator practice was compared across 38 ECEC services. (Half participated in Learning Language and Loving It™ and the other half served as a comparison group.) After the intervention, the instructional quality of services in which educators had participated in the professional learning program was significantly higher than that of services in which the educators had not. In addition, the instructional quality within ECEC rooms in which more than one educator had participated in the program was higher than that in rooms in which a single educator had participated. Interestingly though, educator qualifications per se were not associated with higher instructional quality.

Study results indicate that strengthening the discipline-specific knowledge of educators in the context of individual coaching of teaching strategies led to an increase in the quality of educator-child interactions. Findings suggest that quality-improvement programs need to engage with ECEC services regularly and over sustained periods to ensure that resultant improvements in educator-child interactions are large enough to enhance children's outcomes.

The facilitation of Learning Language and Loving It™ by both a speech pathologist and an educational leader in each location was perceived by participants, service leadership and management to be a crucial aspect of Every Toddler Talking. The paired professionals (educational leaders and speech pathologists) brought different but complementary skills and knowledge to the program, and they worked together to deliver training relevant to local community contexts. In some instances, educational leaders and speech pathologists varied in their initial expectations of Every Toddler Talking, and these differences were navigated throughout the course of the intervention. Based on participants' reflections, there were three key features of shared facilitation: (a) the value of a common language when discussing children's communication, (b) the learning opportunities that arose for paired professionals, and (c) the need for educational leaders and speech pathologists to be aware of each other's professional knowledge, strengths and limitations.

In summary, implementing the professional development program, Learning Language and Loving It™ for ECEC educators improved quality in educator-child interactions. It is noteworthy that these advances were even greater when educators worked as collaborative teams. The leadership of an educator who worked alongside a speech pathologist was a key feature of the initiative. Overall, Case Study 2, shows that enhancing process quality in ECEC through multi-disciplinary professional training and support improves the quality of interactions occurring in preschool programs.

3. ECEC educators need ongoing access to evidence-based professional learning and development.

Implementing high-quality preschool programs that integrate intentionality in play-based, developmentally appropriate learning experiences requires sustained professional support. Professional development programs need to be collaborative, practice-based, include coaching, have multiple learning components, and allow time for implementation and reflection (Eadie et al., 2022). Such programs enhance staff satisfaction, staff motivation and engagement, and reduce potential staff turnover. Importantly, as Case Study 2 (above) and Case Study 3 (below) show, implementing professional learning programs for the ECEC workforce can improve quality in educator-child interactions and this improvement can be sustained through the role of the educational leader as a pedagogical coach.

Case Study 3, *Victorian Advancing Early Learning Study* – an ECEC professional learning model comprising pedagogical training and coaching in evidence-based teaching strategies to improve the quality of educator-interactions – highlights the importance of high-quality ECEC in the lives of young Australians (Eadie & Page et al., 2021; REEaCh, 2019a, 2019b). The findings of this case study show that advancing the quality of ECEC educators' interactions with young children in their daily programs improves children's developmental outcomes. These kinds of sustained quality advances can be achieved via policies that focus on ECEC programs emphasising management and leadership supports and multi-component professional learning.

Professional development needs to encompass opportunities for educators to learn and establish networks beyond their own programs and settings. This includes capacity building for working with other early childhood professionals in health and social services, to collaborate where children need additional supports for their learning and development. Finally, the professionalism of the ECEC workforce needs to be recognised: government investment and public messaging needs to be directed towards making the vital work of educators visible and enhancing the value of the sector in society.

Case Study 3. Victorian Advancing Early Learning

A professional learning intervention in partnership with the Victorian Department of Education and Training

Throughout this submission, we have argued that advancing the quality, frequency and intensity of educator-child interactions has flow-on effects for maximising young children's learning and development, addressing disparities in child outcomes in the years prior to school. Case Study 3, which was built on the findings of the E4Kids Study (Tayler et al., 2016) further supports these claims (Pilsworth et al., 2017; REEaCh, 2019a, 2019b). In this study, we developed, piloted, and tested the impact of professional learning in evidence-based teaching strategies. Specifically, we explored the effects of training and coaching ECEC leaders and educators in the Abecedarian Approach Australia (3a) by examining changes in educator-child interactions over time.

Based on a participatory action research approach, VAEL educators worked with children from birth to five years of age. Throughout the course of the professional learning intervention, we tracked the quality of their interactions. We measured the levels of emotional, organisational and instructional support in classrooms using the Toddler and Pre-K CLASS (Classroom Assessment Scoring System) Tools. Initially, we conducted a pilot study in two ECEC services. We then implemented the adapted professional learning model for two consecutive years in a new service (main study). We continued working with the long day care service from the pilot study for a further year to track ongoing impact. VAEL results showed that the training and coaching lifted the quality of all educators' interactions with children across all rooms. The professional learning program led to increased levels of emotional and behavioural support and engaged support for learning provided by teachers to children from six months to three years of age. In addition, the program enhanced the emotional support, classroom organisation and instructional support for children three to five years of age (REEaCh, 2019a, 2019b). These positive outcomes were strongest in services with leadership support and stable staffing.

Taken together, VAEL findings indicate that joint, targeted, ongoing evidence-informed professional learning with coaching from trained educational leaders to support implementation, improves the quality of educator-child interactions. In addition, when we explored changes in children's concepts and cognition across the intervention, we uncovered improvements that went beyond expected developmental changes. Furthermore, families reported that participation in VAEL led to benefits for children that played out in their interactions within the home. In the pilot service which engaged in the study for two years, the levels of quality interactions continued to increase across the duration of the study in all rooms. Thus, children continued to experience consistent, high-quality interactions with educators as they moved across rooms, both before and during three- and four-year-old kindergarten.

Conclusion

The three recommendations in this submission call for all children to have access to high-quality education and care. Children need universal, funded access to high-quality ECEC programs, and program quality is largely influenced by the quality of educator–child interactions. Improving the quality of learning interactions requires educators to participate in ongoing professional learning and development; training should be evidence-based, responsive to the needs of educators and the children and families they work with, and be ongoing to support sustained benefits to practice. The Case Studies above serve as powerful examples of how appropriate professional learning, combined with ongoing coaching from educational leaders, enhances ECEC for all children. Figure 2. illustrates key elements in the provision of high-quality ECEC.
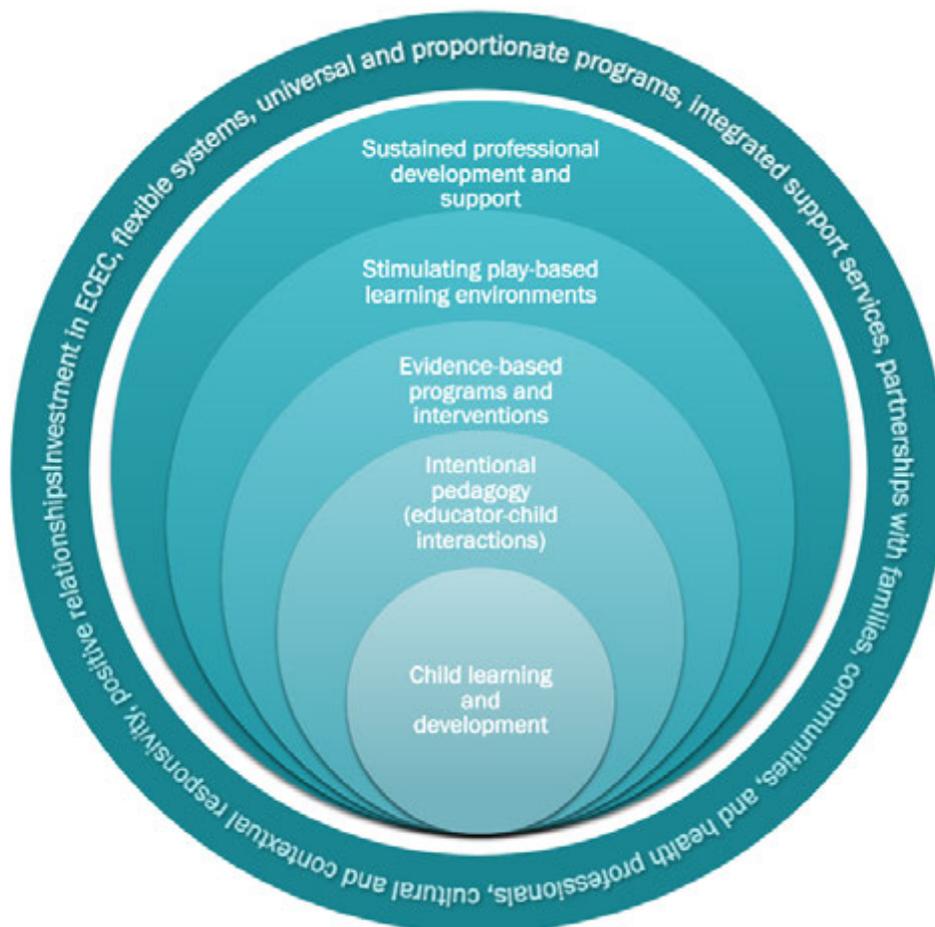

Figure 2. Quality in early childhood education and care

Policies that improve and maintain the quality, reach and accessibility of ECEC are vital. To help all children, investment should be distributed so that every service can provide educational programs and practices that meet minimum quality thresholds.

In relation to the scope of this inquiry, increased access to ECEC services inevitably increases workforce participation for parents, particularly for women. There is an even stronger argument, however, for the economic and social benefit of investment in the provision of high-quality ECEC evident in changing the life trajectories for children who experience disadvantage and improving outcomes for *all* Australian children.

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