

Rapid Review Report

**Published
perspectives
on the current
and desired
state for the
Early Childhood
Development
system**

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**August
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orange compass

**Early Years
Catalyst**



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A close-up photograph of a child's hands holding several brown eggs. The child is wearing a blue t-shirt with white text that reads "HUGO BOSS" and "BIKE". The background is a blurred outdoor setting with green foliage. The text "Rapid Review Report" is overlaid in large white font on the left side of the image.

Rapid Review Report

Published perspectives
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Purpose

The Early Years Catalyst (EYC) is an ambitious, long-term systemic change initiative that emerged from the 2020 National Early Years Summit. We are a national collaboration working to improve early childhood development outcomes for children experiencing disadvantage and vulnerability. We seek to connect, support and amplify the work of organisations across the country so that together we can transform the early years system to better meet the needs of children and their families. Our vision is that by 2030, significantly more children in Australia will be thriving in their first 2,000 days and beyond (pregnancy to five).

This “rapid review” (a desktop synthesis of current knowledge) was commissioned as part of the EYC’s broader systems mapping project – as a contribution to building a collective understanding of the many interconnected systems which influence early childhood development.

This rapid review process involved an analysis of current position papers and thought leadership in the early years space, some of which EYC members authored. These papers are often considered the ‘Articles of Faith’, articulating the evidence and perspectives that inform much our advocacy for change.

It is important to note that this is a rapid review and a limited snapshot – which may not prove to be a representative cross-section of views within ‘the system’. However, our intention is to observe, generate insights and reflect - not to present a comprehensive and complete analysis of every paper written on this subject.

Using a systems lens, we analysed and synthesised 35 leading papers - which articulate clear views about what needs to change and how that change might happen to improve early childhood development outcomes for all children.

For each paper we identified their ‘position’ or ‘theory of change’ and compared:

- UNDESIRABLE OUTCOMES - what undesirable system outcomes are in focus?
- NORTH STAR - what is the long-term vision articulated?
- TARGET COHORTS OR SYSTEMS ACTORS - Who is the ‘paper’ suggesting needs to make change?
- LEVERAGE POINTS & SOLUTIONS - How is it envisaged that change will happen?

This report is presented in three parts:

- Part 1 - What we know from the evidence (current state)
- Part 2 - What organisations are saying needs to change (desired state)
- Part 3 - Implications

Part One – Current State

What we know from the evidence

THE OVERARCHING ISSUE OF LOW SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS

We know that: poverty affects people of all ages, but there are unique issues associated with poverty in early childhood. It is well established that poverty exposure influences children's social, emotional, and cognitive development. Socio-economic status, whether measured by parent education, family income or neighbourhood status, has a disproportionate impact on young people's educational opportunity and achievement (Lamb et al., 2015). The negative impacts affect children who have experienced either persistent or transitory poverty (Duran et al., 2020, Daneri et al., 2019).

The 2018 Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) found that nearly 33% of school entry age children in the most disadvantaged communities in Australia were found to be developmentally vulnerable in one or more of these categories. This compares to 22% for the Australian average (AEDC, 2019).

These concerns tend to exacerbate over the school years and can have lifelong negative effects in terms of future employment and mental and physical health. These impacts across cognitive, social and emotional domains is partly due to the heavy influence that a child's interactions with adults has on their development (Daneri et al., 2019, Shonkoff and Phillips, 2000).

There are a range of critical influencers of childhood development that are related to socioeconomic status:

- Early learning and education
- Home learning environment
- Family income
- Family stress
- Social exclusion
- Extra-curricular activities
- Parental confidence

EARLY LEARNING AND EDUCATION

We know that: positive learning experiences and nurturing relationships provided in these settings deliver lasting benefits for all children, and particularly for disadvantaged children. When it is of high quality, early learning significantly reduces levels of developmental vulnerability and the gap between advantaged and disadvantaged that is evident at school entry (Goldfeld et al., 2016). In addition to strengthening cognitive development, high quality early learning supports a child's social and emotional wellbeing (Melhuish et al., 2015, Taggart et al., 2015). It can lead to a better foundation for school success and increased educational and occupational opportunities later in life (O'Connor et al., 2020).

Success at school impacts young people's transition into employment, their income throughout their lives, their health and wellbeing, their chances of going to prison, and their opportunity to lead productive and happy lives without the stress of poverty (Heckman, 2006, Lamb and Huo, 2017, Kautz et al., 2014).

The issue: children of families experiencing disadvantage are less likely to attend early learning services and services offered through maternal and child health (Sylva et al., 2009). This means that barriers to achievement start before they've even begun school.

HOME LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

We know that: the quality of the home environment is linked to children's development and learning. In fact, the home learning environment is the single most important factor in the development of early speech, language, communication and other cognitive, social and emotional skills (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). As well as impacting on a child's development in the early years, the home learning environment has ongoing impacts on children's learning and development throughout their schooling. A positive home learning environment can reduce the impact of socio-economic disadvantage on children's development during the early years.

The issue: the home environment is not static. The way parents construct the home environment is both important and variable over time. (Korucu and Schmitt, 2020). In particular, it can significantly change with shifts in employment and income (Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000; Raver, 2003; Votruba-Drzal, 2003).

FAMILY INCOME

We know that: stable, meaningful and appropriately paid work improves the home learning environment, enhances the wellbeing of parents and carers and provides financial security to families (Baxter et al., 2007, Baxter et al., 2012, Gray and Baxter, 2010, Harding et al., 2015, Magnuson, 2007, Magnuson and McGroder, 2002, Gershoff et al., 2007, Green et al., 2009). Sufficient income is needed for people to fully participate in society, to take advantage of resources and opportunities available, and to freely make choices, including those for and about their children (RCH, 2009).

The issue: without sufficient income, families may find it difficult to make sure children have enough food, access to healthcare, and resources like school books, uniforms and shoes. This lack of access to material and cultural resources can fuel social exclusion, shame, and reduced self-esteem and self-respect (RCH,

2009, Duran et al., 2020). The consequences can be long lasting and intergenerational. This was highlighted in an Australian study which found that family income was related to all measures of child cognitive development and emotional health. In addition, the grandfathers' occupational status was independently related to child cognitive development. The results point to the transgenerational, socioeconomically related acquisition of cognitive development, mental health impairment and health-related behaviours in children (Najman et al., 2004). For many families, disadvantage has become an inescapable cycle that passes from generation to generation.

FAMILY STRESS

We know that: excessive stress, regardless of source, disrupts the neuron pathways of a child's developing brain (RCH, 2009). It can also make it more difficult for many parents to provide an appropriate home learning environment.

The issue: families living in economic hardship also disproportionately face stressors which can impact the development of young children by disrupting family dynamics (Duran et al., 2020). Complex life circumstances like parental mental health, family violence and insecure housing can all result in high levels of family stress.

FRAGMENTED AND INAPPROPRIATE SERVICES

We know that: children and families with the greatest need are the least likely to access services and receive the comprehensive and coordinated support they need (Fox et al., 2015, Moore et al., 2014a). At least one in five children and young people with significant needs have no access to support services (Little, 2017). And a quarter of children with emotional or behavioural issues are unable to access support (Department of Education and Training 2015). Families consistently report that services are hard to find out about, are not culturally safe or appropriate, involve long waiting lists, respond to issues in isolation, and/or don't respond effectively to their particular needs (Cortis et al., 2009, Watson, 2005). This affects cognitive, social and emotional development of the child and results in poor linkages between schools and other services that seek to support families with young children.

The issue: services and supports are rarely tailored to meet the health and wellbeing needs of vulnerable children and families experiencing complex life circumstances like intergenerational disadvantage, social isolation, crisis and long-term unemployment. It is complex and fragmented with differing sectors and systems across health, education and welfare and with funding streams from multiple sources. There is often poor communication or coordination among services, even within the same program or service setting and significant variations in the methods and quality of service responses across different sectors. Navigating complex service systems can leave vulnerable families feeling humiliated, frustrated and disempowered. A system response of siloed and prescriptive 'service provision' that focuses on symptoms rather than root causes was never destined to work.

SOCIAL EXCLUSION

We know that: social isolation is linked to mental health problems, abuse and neglect within families (Zubrick et al., 2008). In contrast, inclusion fosters a sense of belonging. The benefits of belonging are associated with improved mental health, more effective parenting, improved child behaviour and stronger communities (Crisp and Robinson, 2010, Zubrick et al., 2008).

The issue: poverty can result in social exclusion which negatively affects childhood development (RCH, 2009). Social exclusion results in lower levels of engagement of both children and families. It is a cycle that reinforces low self-efficacy, low self-esteem and low self-regulation over time. Social stigmas and low expectations become self-fulfilling prophecies and help is least available to those that need it most. Those that are most socially disadvantaged and socially excluded are more likely to feel they are ignored, treated as insignificant, disrespected, stigmatised and humiliated (Wilkinson, 2005: 26). This in turn contributes to lower levels of engagement and access, particularly access to services within the community (Hayes, 2008). Families without sufficient income may also find it difficult to access after-school activities and other cultural resources, further fuelling social exclusion, shame, and reduced self-esteem and self-respect (RCH, 2009, Duran et al., 2020).

EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES

We know that: after-school activities like sport, music, craft and dance build children's confidence, help them make friends and learn to get along with people (including adults), keep them fit and healthy, and help them develop new skills and discover talents and interests (ABS, 2012, Tanner et al., 2016, The Smith Family, 2013). For example, children who participate in visual arts and music activities at ages 7–12 years develop better persistence and concentration, and learn to work as part of a group. They also achieve more academically (Metsäpelto and Pulkkinen, 2014).

These activities can also boost non-cognitive skills such as perseverance, conscientiousness, self-control, trust, attentiveness, self-esteem, resilience and empathy. Children with these skills have better school attendance, behaviour and relationships (Jacobson and Blank, 2011, NEA, 2008).

The issue: children growing up in low-income households are disproportionately missing out on the benefits of after-school activities such as sport, music and dance. In low-income households, children do fewer after-school activities and at least 50% don't do any at all (The Smith Family, 2013). In particular, research shows that children are less likely to do extra-curricular activities if they live in: families with lower income; single-mother households, with the mother not in paid employment; and jobless couple households (Rioseco et al., 2018).

The issue: for many families, confidence and self-agency in an education context is a foreign concept. Adults who grew up in disadvantaged communities often had a difficult time at school, may struggle with employment, and may have mental and physical health challenges to manage as well. All these things can contribute to low self-confidence and poor self-esteem. Families have reported that when they do visit a school, they felt they faced judgement, the sense they are a burden, or tokenistic programs that only reinforce that others do not understand their needs (Our Place, 2019). It is too often mistakenly assumed that such parents don't engage because they are disinterested or lack aspiration. Meanwhile, they are constantly being held down by life's challenges outside the school gates.

PARENTAL CONFIDENCE

We know that: the self-esteem and confidence of parents and carers is linked to the creation of optimal learning conditions. Healthy early childhood development requires families that are confident as parents and carers and willing to engage in their children's learning. Confident families feel a strong sense of self-worth. They learn together, are connected and socially included, and have a sense of pride and belonging. This confidence can be fuelled by enabling parents to actively develop their own life skills and education, providing role models for their children. Opportunities for children to attend and engage in community events or participate in expanded learning opportunities are another important step towards greater inclusion. Supporting children reach their potential means looking beyond the classroom to the whole-of-community (Moore et al., 2014a, Valentine and Hilferty, 2012). It means actively welcoming parents and their children and enabling them to be more involved and connected with their community (RCH, 2009).

What might this tell us about what is required to shift the dial?

WRAP AROUND SUPPORTS

- Implementing a comprehensive and family-centred approach to service delivery improves educational and social outcomes for children. This means a family-centred wrap-around approach that joins up and curates accessible and appropriate services to support each family's often complex health, wellbeing and learning needs.
- A family-centred approach has been shown to be much more effective than ad hoc access to fragmented services split across health, education and welfare sectors. Such an approach requires establishing a foundation of empowering relationships, which are the key to achieving positive outcomes for families (Moore et al., 2017). It also requires:
 - bringing service providers together to support a family's needs, preferences and perspectives when they make decisions, rather than merely duplicating what works best for the service system
 - developing flexible service delivery models in consultation and in partnership with local communities, reflecting local parent, child and community needs and expectations and the best available research evidence
 - the use of individual and family case management to ensure families are supported to access and receive services in a coordinated, efficient and effective way and they only have to tell their story once.

- The wrap-around of secondary social services and targeted supports across the universal platform of early learning and school contexts will require significant structural realignment of education and service delivery as well as long-term investment. The factors driving disadvantage are complex and have become entrenched over decades.
- Government services need to work more closely with other partners and the community to develop a shared vision, use resources more effectively, and reduce system-level barriers.

SAFE SPACES FOR COMMUNITY

- Each early learning service takes a holistic view of each child and family, because the child does not exist in isolation from the home environment and community.
- Working with local schools to host support and resources for health and wellbeing has been shown to be a powerful strategy for helping families get better access to higher quality services (Moore et al., 2014a, Valentine and Hilferty, 2012). With opportunities to flourish – like education, employment and safe and affordable housing – families are able to escape the cycle of disadvantage (Yule, 2015).
- Reframing education locations as community hubs requires a different way of working for schools. It means shifting to a worldview that values children and parents as the experts in their lives, that allows for the school to be domain of more than education, and that opens its doors to the wider community.
- It means creating family-friendly, safe places for community participation in learning and soft-entry engagement activities for parents and carers about potential opportunities and building their comfort levels to engage with learning.
- A lot can be learnt from place-based approaches - collaborative, long-term commitments to build thriving communities delivered in a defined geographic location. This is a means of responding to complex, interrelated or challenging issues that

influence disadvantage and is ideally characterised by partnering and shared design, shared stewardship, and shared accountability for outcomes and impacts (Dart, 2018).

PARENTAL CONFIDENCE AND AGENCY

- Opportunities are created for families to engage with adult learning, pathways to employment, and community participation, including entry-level learning opportunities (pre-accredited) to build skills and knowledge, volunteering opportunities with the aim of building a skill or gaining experience, and accredited units from certificate and diploma-level courses.
- All parents and carers are supported in creating appropriate learning conditions for their children; conditions which are underpinned by confidence.

SOCIAL INCLUSION

- Opportunities are created for everyone to be involved, join a team, volunteer and contribute, including parents and carers.
- All children are provided with affordable before/after school recreation activities including opportunities for physical activities and special interest activities such as cooking, music, and arts and craft.

- Every school has the capacity to support the building of community and connections with families, including the resources to shape their schools as a community hub; a place where a blend of services and supports are available from across what are traditionally siloed sectors requires collaboration and partnerships.

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE

- High quality early learning services, playgroups and child health and parenting support available to all families, no matter where they live.
- Educators forge strong relationships with families and building parents' and carers' capacity to support their children's play and learning.
- Continuity in learning is taking place between the early years and school, with early years educators and school teachers working and planning together to ensure a more continuous learning experience for children.



Part Two – Desired State

Undesirable outcomes

What undesirable system outcomes are in focus?

INTERGENERATIONAL DISADVANTAGE

- Inequality of early learning opportunities for children living in the most disadvantaged communities (Cassells et al., 2020).
- Covid-19 contributing to a deepening of existing inequalities, and a widening of disadvantage that now affects families who have never experienced joblessness, insecure housing, or other vulnerabilities (Harris et al., 2021).
- Inequities emerging in early childhood often continue into adulthood, contributing to unequal rates of low educational attainment, poor mental and physical health and low income. In some cases, this experience is part of a persistent cycle of intergenerational disadvantage (Molloy et al., 2019).
- One in six Australian children live in poverty (Tsorbaris, 2021).

INTERGENERATIONAL TRAUMA & DISCRIMINATION

- Some First Nations children are still facing ongoing challenges that stem from colonisation and its effects, including discrimination, poverty, systemic removal, intergenerational trauma, dislocation from land and culture, and community disempowerment (SNAICC, 2019).

INADEQUATE SERVICE RESPONSES, FRAGMENTATION AND LATE INTERVENTION

- Late intervention - equates to higher spending on child protection services, health services, social security payments, mental health treatment, and the youth justice system (CoLab et al., 2020).
- Fragmentation in wrap around supports - child development not treated as a whole experience - siloed service responses and service gaps mean children miss out - early learning, family support and child health interconnected but the systems don't operate that way - no real system of affordable, integrated care, delivered on the basis of need for children under 12 (Logan Together, 2020, NMHC, 2021, Moore, 2021a).
- Traditional service-oriented approaches to supporting children and families have failed to deliver desired change. Little change in developmental vulnerability rates, which has lifelong consequences, inequity and the impact of disadvantage is not shifting. Health inequity - linked to other social determinants - compound the inequity and sub-optimal life outcomes (ECA, 2019, Fox and Geddes, 2016, Clark and Jackiewicz, 2016, CPD, 2021, Department of Health, 2019, Moore, 2021b, Centre for Community Child Health, 2021, Centre for Community Child Health, 2019, Fox et al., 2015, Moore et al., 2014).

- Major social changes that have occurred in recent decades have altered the conditions under which families are raising young children and challenged the traditional service system's capacity to support them effectively (Moore et al., 2016, Moore, 2021b).

INADEQUATE POLICIES AND FUNDING

- Tax, welfare, and childcare subsidy settings:
 - Denies childcare subsidies to children whose parents do not work a certain number of hours per fortnight.
 - Makes childcare too expensive for full-time (4-5 days) work for the primary carer – generally women (Brennan and Crosby, 2015, Wood et al., 2020, Productivity Commission, 2014).
- Lack of affordability of childcare (especially for the growing cohort of families experiencing insecure, casual or episodic employment in the recovery from COVID-19) (KPMG, 2020, The Front Project, 2020, Joseph and Mueller, 2019, ECA, 2019).
- Complexity in ECEC funding models and system arrangements - complex and costly to administer and difficult for families and providers to navigate (Hurley et al., 2020, Productivity Commission, 2014).
- Inconsistent provision across jurisdictions (Productivity Commission, 2014).
- Formal ECEC does not provide the flexibility some families require. Funding supports do not support non ECEC type ECE - ie in home services (Nannies etc) - reducing family choice / affordability (Productivity Commission, 2014).
- Lack of parental leave for fathers means lower rates of workforce participation and economic security for women (Wood et al., 2021).

OUTDATED MINDSETS

- View of children as 'waiting to learn', rather than learners from birth (Cheeseman et al., 2015).

EDUCATIONAL IMPACTS

- Decline in Australian school students' performance (Pascoe and Brennan, 2017).

ECEC WORKFORCE CHALLENGES

- Workforce issues threaten quality improvements (high rates of staff turnover in the ECEC sector, high rates of illness and stress, low wages and working conditions) (Jackson, 2020, ECA, 2019).

INEFFECTIVE ADVOCACY

- Advocacy is not working - system is not responding to scientific explanations of ECD and campaigns to change. And the focus on technical solutions and the story of quality and high returns ignores diversity of voices and social, economic and political issues of health and fairness (L'Hôte et al., 2020, Moss, 2015).

The north star

What is the long-term vision articulated?

ARTICLES	NORTH STAR
(Brennan and Crosby, 2015, Wood et al., 2020, KPMG, 2020, The Front Project, 2020)	<p>A PROSPEROUS AUSTRALIA</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Australia as a prosperous, productive and happy society into the future • Economic and social dividends to Australia • Accelerating economic recovery while ensuring children’s wellbeing and education as we begin to move out of COVID-19 and into the future
(Brennan and Crosby, 2015, CoLab et al., 2020, Fox and Geddes, 2016, Moore, 2021b, Centre for Community Child Health, 2021, Molloy et al., 2019, Tsorbaris, 2021)	<p>BREAKING THE CYCLE OF DISADVANTAGE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduction in the number of children needing high intensity support over time • Significantly less children are developmentally vulnerable when they start school • Improving outcomes for young children and their families who are experiencing socio-economic vulnerability • Redressing inequalities • Reducing child poverty
(NMHC, 2021, Cheeseman et al., 2015, Department of Health, 2019, Cassells et al., 2020, Fox et al., 2015, Harris et al., 2021, SNAICC, 2019)	<p>CHILDREN REACH THEIR FULL POTENTIAL</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All children in our society have the opportunity to reach their full potential, and that the services provided to children and families allow for this • Australian children fulfil their potential, and are healthy, safe and thriving • Giving Australia’s children the ‘best start in life’ • Supported by an optimal mental health system - all Australian children are able to feel safe, happy, and supported, and have meaningful, loving connections with family, friends, and community • Improving the wellbeing of children, young people and families at population-level • Ensuring all children are supported to realise their full potential and are not left behind • Improving outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in the early years
(Moore, 2021a, Centre for Community Child Health, 2019, Wood et al., 2021, SNAICC, 2020)	<p>BETTER EARLY YEARS ENVIRONMENT</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Better early years’ environment for children and families • Improved community conditions that shape children’s wellbeing • Shifting culture and give fathers and partners the green-light to make the choices that work best for them and their families • Ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and young people grow up safe and cared for in family, community and culture

ARTICLES	NORTH STAR
(Jackson, 2020)	<p>A STRONGER WORKFORCE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enough early childhood educators to deliver quality, accessible ECEC services to all Australian children and families
(L'Hôte et al., 2020, Moss, 2015)	<p>BETTER ADVOCACY</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> All ECD advocates are using the same core stories and achieve cut through with the messages Our approaches to ECE / ECD are informed by many / varied perspectives
(Productivity Commission, 2014, Joseph and Mueller, 2019, Logan Together, 2020, Clark and Jackiewicz, 2016, ECA, 2019, Moore, 2021a, Moore et al., 2014)	<p>A SIMPLER, MORE FLEXIBLE, INCLUSIVE & SUPPORTIVE SYSTEM</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> An ECEC system that is simpler, more accessible and flexible with greater early learning opportunities for children with additional needs A more flexible childcare system that caters to the different preferences of parents A universal child development system that includes improvements in health, family support and early learning All Australian children, regardless of levels of disadvantage, have the scaffolding required to succeed in learning and life Systems that meet the needs of all Australians All Australian families are able to benefit from ECEC regardless of their family income
(CPD, 2021)	<p>A MINIMUM CONSISTENT EXPERIENCE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> A National Guarantee to Children and their Families about what they can expect from the early childhood system
(Centre for Community Child Health, 2017)	<p>PLACE BASED APPROACHES</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mindset shift that supports and enables place-based responses

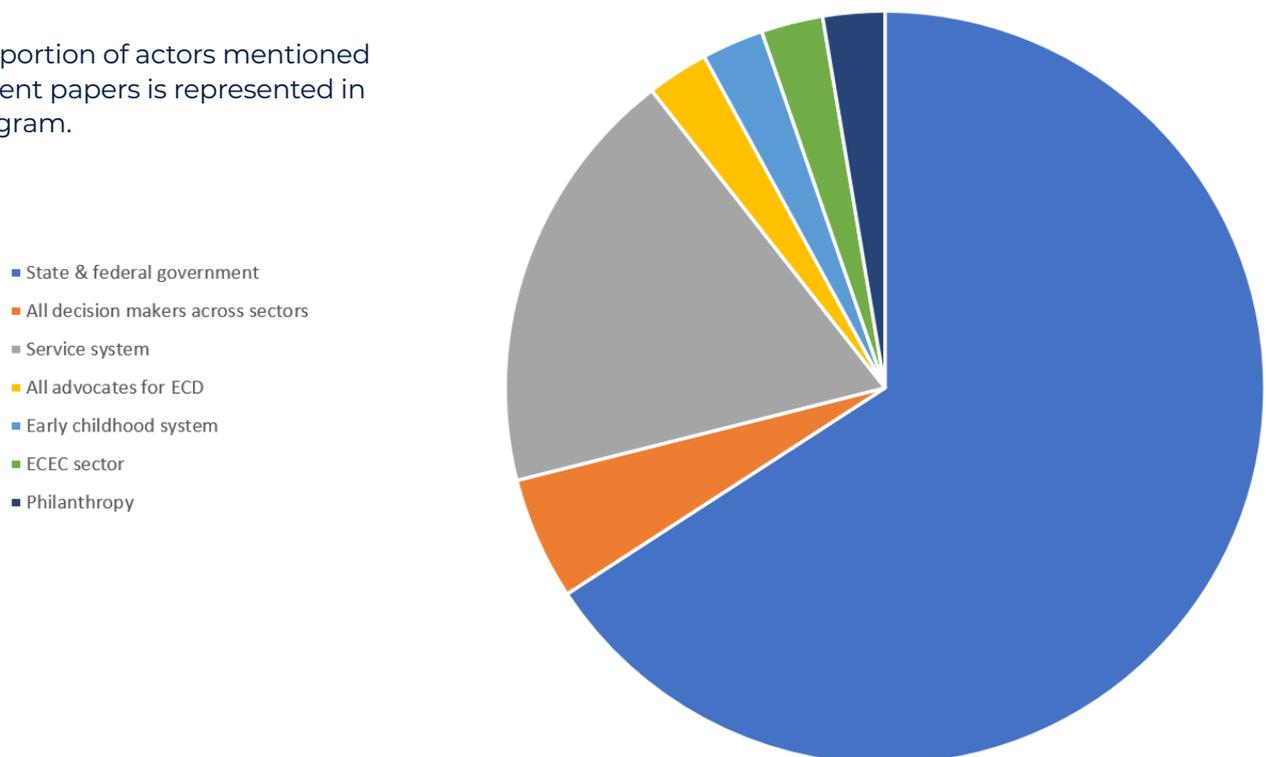
Target cohorts or system actors

Who is the ‘paper’ suggesting needs to make change?

- **Policy makers - state & federal government** - (Brennan and Crosby, 2015, Cheeseman et al., 2015, Pascoe and Brennan, 2017, Wood et al., 2020, KPMG, 2020, Hurley et al., 2020, Jackson, 2020, Joseph and Mueller, 2019, The Front Project, 2020, ECA, 2019, Logan Together, 2020, Fox and Geddes, 2016, Productivity Commission, 2014, Clark and Jackiewicz, 2016, Moore et al., 2014, Centre for Community Child Health, 2017, NMHC, 2021, Department of Health, 2019, Moore, 2021b, Harris et al., 2021, Molloy et al., 2019, Tsorbaris, 2021, Wood et al., 2021, SNAICC, 2019, SNAICC, 2020)

- **All decision makers - government, philanthropic, business and community leaders** - (CoLab et al., 2020, CPD, 2021)
- **Social service delivery system/providers** - (Cassells et al., 2020, Moore et al., 2016, Moore, 2021a, Moore, 2021b, Centre for Community Child Health, 2019, Centre for Community Child Health, 2021, Fox et al., 2015)
- **All advocates for ECD to be a policy priority in Australia** – (L’Hôte et al., 2020)
- **The early childhood system - including story tellers and advocates** - (Moss, 2015)
- **ECEC sector** - (Productivity Commission, 2014)
- **Philanthropy** - (Centre for Community Child Health, 2017)

The proportion of actors mentioned in different papers is represented in this diagram.



Leverage points & solutions

How is it envisaged that change will happen?

RESOURCE FLOWS (FUNDING)

(Brennan and Crosby, 2015, Pascoe and Brennan, 2017, Fox and Geddes, 2016, Cheeseman et al., 2015, Wood et al., 2020, Joseph and Mueller, 2019, KPMG, 2020, The Front Project, 2020, ECA, 2019, Productivity Commission, 2014, CPD, 2021, Harris et al., 2021, Molloy et al., 2019, Tsorbaris, 2021, Wood et al., 2021, Department of Health, 2019, CoLab et al., 2020, SNAICC, 2020)

- Sustained investment in high-quality ECE for all children
- Universal, teacher-led preschool in the two years before school
- Increase investment in strengthened prevention and targeted early intervention in the first 2000 days, including family support and reunification services
- Improved and increased Child Care Subsidy
- Greater parental leave
- Raise the income of caregivers to an adequate rate
- A guarantee for Australian children and families about what they can expect from government for their children

RESOURCES (DATA AND EVIDENCE)

(CoLab et al., 2020, ECA, 2019, SNAICC, 2020)

- Use data and information more effectively
- Actively grow the evidence base

- Enable smart and transparent decision-making for accountability
- Improve data collection and linkages to build a better picture of ECD
- For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and government to work together to improve data collection

RESOURCES (WORKFORCE)

(Jackson, 2020, ECA, 2019)

- Recruit and retain sufficiently qualified educators to meet demand and provide quality practice

POLICIES & PRACTICES (APPROACHES)

(Jackson, 2020, CPD, 2021, Moore et al., 2014, Moore, 2021a, Moore, 2021b, Centre for Community Child Health, 2019, Fox et al., 2015, SNAICC, 2020)

- Place-based approaches to address complex social problems
- Service responses tailored to the needs and circumstances of families and communities
- Prevention and targeted, early intervention with integrated family support services
- Integrated child and family services – through government/policy integration; regional and local planning integration; service delivery integration; teamwork integration
- Integrated child and family services - to ensure core care conditions for children and families are created
- Refocus policy and investment on prevention and early intervention, to reduce the risk to children of separation from their families, communities and cultures
- Culturally secure and trauma-informed intensive family support services delivered by Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs)

REFRAMING THE ECD SYSTEM (MENTAL MODELS)

(L'Hôte et al., 2020, Clark and Jackiewicz, 2016, NMHC, 2021, Pascoe and Brennan, 2017, Department of Health, 2019, CoLab et al., 2020, Hurley et al., 2020, Cassells et al., 2020, Logan Together, 2020, Moss, 2015, Centre for Community Child Health, 2021, Centre for Community Child Health, 2017, Moore et al., 2016, Moore, 2021b, Moore, 2021a, SNAICC, 2020)

- More holistic approaches to early intervention with more appropriately framed intensive family support services – by bringing the existing systems together to work differently with children and families at the centre
- Community-led place-based approaches to addressing complex social problems
- Reframing ECD advocacy in context of health, wellbeing and fairness
- Reframing mental health along a wellbeing “continuum”; focus on function rather than diagnosis etc
- Law, policy and practice in child and family welfare that is culturally safe and responsive

POWER DYNAMICS (SHARED DECISION MAKING & TRANSPARENCY)

(Moore, 2021b, Fox et al., 2015, Centre for Community Child Health, 2019, Moore et al., 2014, Hurley et al., 2020, CoLab et al., 2020, Moore et al., 2016)

- More effective community engagement and partnership by the service system
- Place-based, community-led approaches - to improve the environments and experiences of children in the communities in which they are born, live, learn and grow
- Systems underpinned by robust accountability and governance mechanisms
- Improving the transparency of government funding for ECEC

- Improve the transparency of private investment in ECEC
- Enable smart and transparent decision-making for greater accountability

POWER DYNAMICS (PARTICIPATION AND DELEGATED AUTHORITY)

(SNAICC, 2020)

- Ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and organisations participate in and have control over decisions that affect their children
- Prioritise and increase investment in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander service design and delivery by community-controlled organisations in line with self-determination and the aspirations of communities
- Establish and support independent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander family-led decision-making models in every state and territory, for all families across all significant child protection decision-making points
- Expand the delegation of authority to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations for statutory child protection functions across Australia

RELATIONSHIPS & CONNECTIONS (PARTNERSHIP)

(Moore et al., 2016)

- More effective community engagement and partnership by the service system

Part Three – Implications

Systems thinking tells us that transformational change happens when you shift the deep forces and mental models that underpin a system. To understand what it will take to create transformational change, we need to understand the deep forces at play in the ECD system.

Our job as systems thinkers is to build mental models that better align with real-world complexity than those created under a non systems thinking approach.

Thinking differently can help to:

- **reframe challenges**
- **broaden the ‘solution space’**
- **surface hidden relationships that may drive unanticipated consequences**
- **highlight critical assumptions for testing**
- **identify vulnerabilities and opportunities.**

In this rapid review of current literature focused on shifting ECD outcomes, we found that the majority of the current approaches advocate for interventions directed at structural change (ie. policies, practices and resource flows) rather than transformational change.

We also discovered vulnerabilities and limitations in our collective field of vision and highlight opportunities that we may otherwise have missed.

So, if we see these papers as a fair cross-section of views within ‘the system’ and use the term ‘we’ broadly, identifying ourselves as part of the field we are observing, we offer these reflections/thoughts.

AS A FIELD, WE DON’T INCLUDE OURSELVES AS PART OF THE SOLUTION

The majority of papers reviewed identified government and policy makers as holding the responsibility for change. There appears to be an implicit assumption that it is our job to tell government what they are doing wrong, but it is not our job to provide actionable and impactful solutions.

Proposals for change that require all system actors to do things differently are almost non-existent. Instead, we tend to focus on just one actor, usually government, reinforcing the impression that someone ‘other than us’ needs to be doing the fixing.

This points to a worrying tendency for us to assume that we have low power and little influence. We frame the solution as one outside our control, favouring “policy settings and resource flows” as the nominated systemic change solution.

There is a plethora of research and thought leadership in this space, and the basic evidence about ECD is consistent, undisputed and well-known. How to bring about meaningful change is far less well defined.

AS A FIELD, WE ASSUME THAT IF WE COMMUNICATE BETTER, OTHERS WILL LISTEN

As mentioned above, there is a plethora of evidence and research and many reports that synthesise, summarise and simplify the needs of children. And yet our actions suggest that we still believe that if only we presented the evidence more clearly, this will someone how lead to change.

In order for the message to be heard, we also downplay the complexity and diversity of ECD conditions in Australia. We force ourselves to offer over-simplified silver bullet solutions – presenting what can only ever be a part of the answer, as a “solution”. We target a single audience to minimise the risk of creating confusion, by avoiding the real-world complexity.

OUR PUBLISHED THOUGHT LEADERSHIP IS LARGELY SILENT ON POWER DYNAMICS, RELATIONSHIPS AND CONNECTIONS

One of the biggest revelations of this analysis was the degree to which we have avoided naming and making visible the dynamics of power and relationships (the mechanics of interconnection) across the many systems influencing ECD.

Many of the papers reviewed provide comprehensive recommendations about resource flows (funding, data, evidence, workforce); policies and practices (integrated services; place-based and family centred approaches); and mental models (including how ECD is framed).

However, there is relative silence on fundamental issues such as the nature of interconnections across systems; how interventions might impact and disrupt relationships between actors in the system; or the huge impact of the distribution of power and control over resource flows.

Without building our collective understanding of the way power and relationships operate in the field, we will not find solutions that will truly shift systems, as we are blind to the forces that keep the systems in place, maintained through power and relationships.

WHY DOES THIS MATTER?

In learning these three things about our written works, we are forced to ask:

- What is it that forces us to be silent on certain aspects?
- If we aren't naming hard truths, then how can we be sure that the solutions we include are truly targeting the things getting in the way of change?

- What if we each only know how to change parts of the system and the other parts aren't visible to us? Or
- What if we don't know how to make this wider complexity visible?

These are uncomfortable questions to sit with.

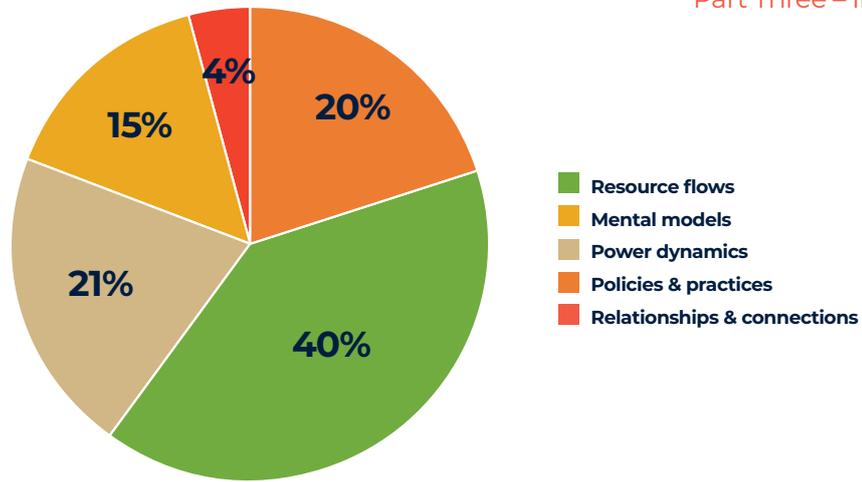
SEEING OURSELVES IN THE SYSTEM

If, as a field, we want to engage the system and influence its behaviour, pushing it towards a desired goal, then we must intervene from where we stand in the system.

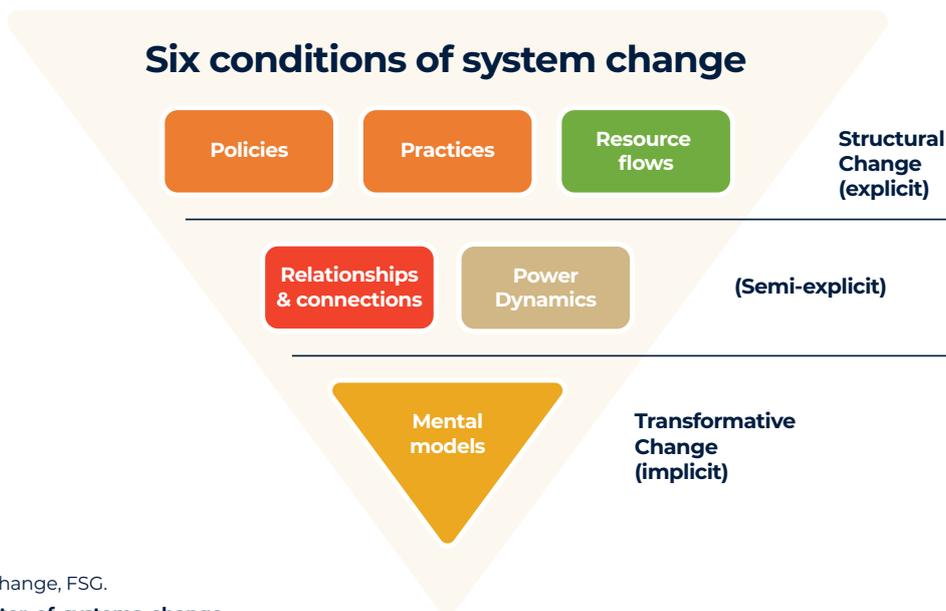
To activate our own untapped agency and authority to act, firstly requires us to see ourselves in the system and then to examine and acknowledge the roles that we play in perpetuating the status quo.

In order for the EYC to operate as a true field catalyst for collective systems transformation - there is a need to build capacity both within the EYC and across the field - to see and work with the complexities inherent across these complex systems and to build new mental models that better align with the real-world complexity.

This image shows the relative focus of different papers



Six conditions of system change



The Waters of Systems Change, FSG.
fsg.org/publications/water_of_systems_change

WHERE TO FROM HERE?

The EYC commissioned this rapid review as part of the broader systems mapping process undertaken from August 2021 to May 2022.

The systems mapping process has revealed that there are deep systemic forces influencing behaviour and outcomes in a myriad of ways, within and across the systems that influence early childhood development outcomes.

There is ongoing work to be done to further map what a future system could look like and how to get there. To state the obvious, if we want a different future, we must do things differently. We must establish new and different patterns and take different approaches to address the problems we know exist currently.

We extend an invitation to all actors embedded in these systems: you may wish to reflect on the role

you play in the dynamics of the ‘current state’, and the role you could play in supporting a transition to the desired, future state. We are currently preparing a workshop structure which we can offer the field to assist actors in reviewing their role in perpetuating systemic forces and bringing about long term systemic change.

Based on the insights generated throughout the systems mapping process, the EYC is refining their theory of change – and their role supporting systemic transformation within the ECD systems. The EYC is committed to continuing collaborative ways of working with the field, and to harnessing the knowledge and perspectives of a wider group.

Please reach out to the EYC Backbone Team
backbone@earlyyearsatalyst.org.au

for more information, to get involved or to engage in a future workshop with the EYC.

Annex 1

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orange compass



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