



# THE FUTURE OF EARLY YEARS LEARNING IN SOUTH AUSTRALIA

KEY ELEMENTS OF A NEW DIRECTION

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*Position Paper*

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## Foreword

This paper has been written at a time of change. Early childhood education is the foundation stone of world class education. As the COVID-19 pandemic has forced our hand in cueing reform, we have the chance to rewrite the script and present one voice for early learning in South Australia.

Early childhood is not the central focus of Educators SA, but one which concerns a significant proportion of our membership. The services we represent include Department for Education preschools, non-government and community-based preschools, long day care and Early Learning centres, and family day care. As such, we are cognisant of the impact that the new strategic direction that the South Australian Government will have on the services that we advocate for.

It is not always easy for governments to make decisions that meet the needs of all stakeholders. In early childhood, this is easier because we all share a goal to ensure that children develop wholly, happily and healthily. We provide the caring and supportive environments and professional expertise to help children reach their full potential. The Department's future priorities must allow us to continue our great work and keep sight of the main goal. We take a definite view of early childhood education as a special time in its own right, focussed on the development of the whole child rather than arguments about instructional approach, sectoral differences, overloading the curriculum or schoolifying these years to prepare for school. The early childhood sector has worked hard to be rightly recognised as a specialist professional field and as such, the sector is striving to ensure that this expertise is valued and understood in the vision for early learning in South Australia.

Educators SA has commissioned this paper in conjunction with its key early childhood member associations. The paper is jointly endorsed by Educators SA, Early Childhood Australia (SA), the Early Childhood Organisation, the Preschool Directors Association, and the Primary Mathematics Association.



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## Background

The Department for Education (DfE) has announced the development of a new Early Learning strategy. Educators SA has been guaranteed adequate consultation on the strategy before release, which the Minister for Education announced will be in March, 2021. This paper presents the key elements that we would like to see considered in the strategy and leverages a comprehensive evidence base to support this, drawn not only from large-scale national and international research but also grey literature that reflect current rhetoric.

Current national and state policy debates, governmental inquiries and community discussions are marked by concern over children's development and educational performance, and ways to improve this. Despite increased funding, the performance of Australian students in education continues to lag and even decline on some indicators (Pascoe & Brennan, 2017). We understand, and support, improvements to the early learning opportunities for South Australian children. We also acknowledge that the first step towards driving change is problematising the issue. However, we are concerned that the existing strengths of the sector and all the great work of educators could be compromised in a new direction that is not based on widely accepted evidence.

## Introduction

We all know and accept that the early years are critical for children to reach their full potential. In South Australia, we have a long and proud history of consistent high-quality early years care and learning provision. In the recent *How Are They Faring?* report, on which the Early Learning Strategy is based, it acknowledges that in South Australia “*enrolment in preschool is high and most preschools offer high quality programs*” (Child Development Council, 2020a).

Investment in early childhood is predicated on the long-term gains that children experience throughout the life course from a good start. Nobel prize-winning economist Professor James Heckman's human capital-modelling argument postulates that investing in early childhood education provides economic benefits for society, in reducing inequality and costs associated with crime and poor health, and raising productivity. The early years period offers the highest

economic return on investment, relative to any other time during childhood, where it declines exponentially during the life cycle (Heckman, 2008). Heckman's work has been influential in arguments for financial investments in programs for children in the 0-5 age bracket (Heckman, 2008; Nutton, 2013). So certainly, the need to invest in these years is justified and productivity can only be achieved within communities and schools if we make the most of these years. But more is needed.

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*Reform of early learning and childcare is the key economic reform that will drive workforce participation, productivity, GDP and government revenue (Thrive By Five, 2021).*

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Within early childhood and education settings, there is a strong impetus for, and expectation of, evidence-informed practice. There should be the same expectation upon the policymakers that drive the policies and reforms- that they take into consideration the full breadth of available research and policy commentary. The central purpose of this paper is to present the most significant, evidence-based aspects that will form the pillars of success of South Australia's early learning strategy henceforth. The major attention of this paper is on the preschool year and the needs of prior to school age children, given that is likely to be the major attention of the strategy, however we fully appreciate the inseparability of care and education in the early years.

There are two divergent ways of viewing preschool:

- 1) An environment that is tuned into supporting families and the broad developmental needs of young children, including their need to play, establish friendships and develop a learning disposition.
- 2) A place where children 'get ready for school' and learn the necessary academic content.

The view that is adopted is one of the most fundamental decisions that guides policy decisions and present persuasive evidence that early learning and care is about far more than academics. There is an ongoing tension in the area of preschool provision, between those who "view childhood as a special time in its own right as opposed to an opportunity for the future" (Raban, 2000, p. 29). We take the firm view that children do not need to be 'prepared'

for future learning. What they need is to be provided supportive environments where they can fully develop their inherent and unique skills and capacities. While it can be tempting to push primary education pedagogical ideas and methods down on young children, one of the great challenges is to retain the unique value of the early years and ground ourselves in the beauty of this brief, but critically important, space.

It is not our intention to get too fine-grained in this paper because there are inevitable differences in viewpoints. The devil really is in the detail and if we engage too much on specific ideologies or instructional approaches, we will find plenty to disagree on. Instead, we draw attention to the evidence-based big picture elements that guide high-quality early learning.

### What is happening in other places in relation to early learning?

There is a strong and growing evidence base, nationally and internationally, which indicates that high-quality ECEC experiences help to facilitate a successful transition into school, and success into the future. The evidence base is strong and consistent. At all levels of government, states and territories around Australia have shown an increasing commitment to reform and improvements in the early childhood sector. It is clear that the early years are front of mind and undergoing reform recently or at present, however, there are nuanced differences in the approaches to staffing, funding and regulating early childhood sectors, and divergent priorities when comparing the policies.

As the SA Department shapes our future, much can be learnt from what has happened elsewhere.

<b>Jurisdiction</b>	<b>Date of reform paper</b>	<b>Policy title</b>	<b>Key elements of the policy</b>
Federal/Australia-wide	2020	<i>Thrive By Five</i>	A national agenda to reform the early learning system federally. The policy calls for play-based learning to be valued, as well as high-quality and universally accessible and affordable early learning and care attached to public schools.

ACT	2020	<i>Set up for Success</i>	Through the strategy the ACT Government commits to work towards 15 hours per week, 600 hours per year, of free universal early childhood education for three-year-old children using a phased in approach.
Victoria	2016	<i>Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework</i>	Birth to 8 approach with an emphasis on continuity of learning, and integrated service provision in early childhood. Close links between Early Childhood and Maternal and Child Health Nurses, and they are well progressed on this agenda.
New South Wales	2018	<i>Early Childhood Education Workforce Strategy 2018-2022, together with the Department of Education's Strategic Plan.</i>	The focus is on workforce development, and supporting staff to obtain necessary qualifications and building the skills, capability and stability of the early childhood workforce.
Tasmania	2017, with an update in February 2020	<i>Tasmania's Strategy for Children-Pregnancy to Eight Years 2018-2021</i>	Birth to 8 focus. Key pillars are quality, equity and partnerships. Launching into Learning is a free program for children 0-4 to support their transition into Kindergarten, run at government primary schools. Alignment to AEDC developmental progress is one outcome measure.
Northern Territory	2016-2020 (due to be updated)	<i>Great Start Great Future</i>	Birth to 8 approach with an emphasis on building the capacity of services as well as families to meet their children's needs. Improving the literacy and numeracy outcomes of children, and reducing the risks of vulnerability on the AEDC, are a major priority in early childhood in the NT.



Western Australia	2020	<i>Building on Strength/Every student, every classroom, every day</i>	The early years targets are embedded within the broader Department of Education directions for public schools. There is no standalone statement or paper that outlines the approach to early learning. AEDC data will also be used to drive policy and interagency collaboration and a strong focus on literacy and numeracy will continue. Engagement with parents is also a high priority.
Queensland	2020	<i>Connect 4 Children Strategy</i>	Attention on 0-5, and the focus is on improving the wellbeing of children prior to starting school and reducing developmental vulnerability on the AEDC. This is to be achieved through a whole-of-government approach and local solutions relevant to specific communities. Specific initiatives include tapping into the values held by families and children, including the strengths, barriers and enablers that are available to them, and improved transitions between settings as well as participation and attendance in kindergarten.

What are the risks in a new direction?

*Cherry picking the ‘big’ data as the only evidence source*

The Department has two main tenets driving the proposed early childhood change: (a) lower student achievement on Year 3 and Year 5 National Assessment Program for Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) and (b) higher (and increasing) proportions of young children with one or more developmental vulnerabilities at school entry as measured by the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC). We agree that these are areas that merit further investigation and analysis, however they must not be the only consideration driving these important reforms. The appropriateness, usefulness and validity of high-stakes testing, such as the AEDC and NAPLAN, are regularly brought into question (e.g. Lingard, 2010; Thompson, 2013; Wyn, 2014) so positioning them as the driver of change will inevitably

pose risk. They are, at best, blunt instruments and in and of themselves, do not provide insight into the capabilities of young children.

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*The push for improved outcomes through increased transparency and accountability turns NAPLAN into a high-stakes test, not by design, but through how the results have become tied to funding, enrolments, government and/or systemic intervention and used as an unofficial measure of teaching quality. (Thompson, 2013, p. 80).*

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The first priority stated in the *How Are They Faring?* report is focused on:

***Proactively monitoring the development of all children in South Australia from birth to school age to reduce the number of children entering the education system with unidentified disabilities and developmental delays.***

One of the key priorities for the strategy is “*An increased proportion of children developmentally on track as they start school*”. Irrespective of their backgrounds, currently school starters are measured against a fixed yardstick of ‘readiness’ - the AEDC. This approach leads to many children being labelled as being in some way ‘deficient’ and impedes educators’ abilities to see the child’s potential and understand what has impacted on their readiness for school learning.

Leveraging the AEDC results, which have declined slightly in SA (Child Development Council, 2020b), as the sole data source on child achievement, and using this measure as a priority target, is problematic and inappropriate. Reporting is done at a community level, based on the location of the child, and does not give information about the learning needs of individual children. Broad-brush, population-level measures, such as the AEDC and SA’s Report Card, that are based on aggregated reporting of confounding factors at jurisdiction or national levels, often miss the nuances of how potentially influential such variables are (Child Development Council, 2020a; Nutton, 2013). We must understand the granular, more nuanced aspects as they intersect with the community-level factors. The premise of this target is because SA currently has no population-level data on child development prior to the AEDC. However, there is also no measure of parent capacity to engage with their child’s

education or no systematic observation of children's strengths or engagement in learning, which are all incredibly important parts of the picture of a student's opportunity for educational success. Putting emphasis on acquiring more population-level research misses the boat.

Countries such as Finland are lauded owing to their early learning approaches, which are fine-grained and meet the needs of their local communities (Bingham & Whitebread, 2012). They take the view that the early years are a time for developing joy, curiosity and wonder, not preparing for standardised testing. They do not seek to meet benchmarks or compare children against norms, which distorts their perception of education and fractures their confidence as a learner.

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*(In Finland) The focus...is to 'learn how to learn.' Instead of formal instruction in reading and math, there are lessons on nature, animals, and the 'circle of life' and a focus on materials-based learning (Pentilla, in Meyers, 2020).*

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Yes, there is a demonstrated relationship between preschool attendance and AEDC and NAPLAN results in the literature (e.g. Goldfeld, O'Connor, Sayers, Moore, Kvalsig, & Brinkman, 2016). However, it is a correlation, and not a clear-cut, causal relationship as is being suggested in the proposed policy idea. Oversimplification of this complex relationship is inappropriate. It is a long bow to draw to link what happens in preschool with the outcome measures, particularly when all other contexts in which a child grows and develops are excluded from attention. Rather, we know from research that the link between preschool quality and later achievement are mediated by many socio-demographic factors, including poverty, cultural background, peer groups, teacher quality and variation in school experience. Woodhead (1994) in particular, stresses that academic performance is affected by school effectiveness as well as by earlier preschool experiences.

It is always a research challenge to disaggregate the complex variables that influence academic achievement. Therefore, it is simply not possible to isolate the impact of preschool. It is not ethical to do a randomised control trial and withhold a beneficial intervention such as preschool for some children over others. Furthermore, linking preschool attendance and

school outcomes in this simplistic way implies that the effect of a preschool is being measured. This is not appropriate or even possible. In many cases, children do not actually go from the local preschool into the school. They may access alternate programs, including childcare-based kindy programs and private Early Learning Centre.

The indicator of success in SA's Report Card is that "*Children enter the school system ready to take advantage of the learning environment*" (Child Development Council, 2020c). Yet we know that readiness to engage with schooling is based on so much more than what happens at preschool. Factors leading to inequity in school entry outcomes include a child's age, gender, experiences in ECEC services, social and emotional competence, any special needs, primary language spoken at home/being a member of an ethnic minority group, Indigenous status, SES, marital status, parental educational and employment attainment, available resources and supports and parenting practices (Barnett & Taylor, 2009; Kinnell, Harman-Smith, Engelhardt, Luddy, & Brinkman, 2013; Margetts, 2002).

#### *A narrow emphasis on literacy and numeracy achievement*

A major policy objective of the South Australian early years agenda is to improve the foundational literacy and numeracy skills of children before school. The scientific literature is replete with examples of how important literacy and numeracy development is in the early years (AIFS, 2018; Thomson, Rowe, Underwood, & Peck, 2005; Winter, 2010). The foundations are laid out in the preschool experiences that children are exposed to incidentally and naturally. However, the strategies that are employed to reach this goal are a source of conjecture. Bringing in sophisticated literacy and numeracy pedagogical techniques in the early years to prepare for later benchmarks is at odds with known best practice in preschool.

According to the empirical literature, literacy and numeracy skills need to be developed thoroughly and systematically, with plans, goals and structures in place that clearly define the kinds of learning experiences children will be exposed to. At the same time, quality programs allow flexibility to meet the needs of each child and different interests, especially for families whose first language is not English. Being limited by narrow benchmarks would reduce the ability of educators to meet these nuanced needs. Further, there is a pressing need to improve

the support and training available to early childhood educators to become more competent in developing a literate and numerate learner (Thomson et al., 2005).

According to Departmental data, literacy and numeracy achievement in the early years of school in SA are quite positive. In SA, year 3 students achieving at or above the national minimum standard in reading and writing rose from 92% in 2014 to 95% in 2019, while the proportion achieving at or above the national minimum standard in numeracy was relatively stable. The new Year 1 Phonics checks are showing similar improvements, increasing from 43% in 2018 to 52% of students in 2019 and 63% in 2020. Conversely, the results for Year 7 students are actually going backwards, with SA performing below the national norms in Year 7 literacy and numeracy. This could indicate that preschool is actually providing a sound foundation for the development of these skills, and that actually the school system may need to address what they are doing to keep students engaged throughout primary school. Anecdotally, our member associations also report significant growth in preschool numeracy through the use of the Department's Indicators of Numeracy, so if children are starting with a strong foundation in mathematics and numeracy, attention should be on what is happening in between.

There is a clear and well-known relationship between oral language and the development of broader literacy skills and oral language should continue to be a strong focus in SA early learning. The reciprocal, spontaneous conversations, language-rich interactions, shared customs, routines and play experiences that are facilitated in preschool help to build a healthy and responsive brain and well-supported child (Pascoe & Brennan, 2017).

### *Opportunities might be missed if the focus is too narrow*

The early years is a time of foundational development processes. To reach their full potential, we should be exposing children to as many diverse experiences as possible. There are 12 months in the preschool year to do the very best for children and set them up for success. The developmental nature of these years make it necessary to prioritise what can be achieved in that time. Elevating one narrow set of skills above others is concerning and at odds with best practice- a point even agreed upon by Paediatricians (Milteer, Ginsburg, & Mulligan, 2012).

The fundamental goal of before school care and learning, and early childhood educators, is more than preparing children for school, or AEDC or NAPLAN. Their remit is much broader and set young people off on their learning journey and develop them socially and emotionally as well as academically. Early childhood educators do more than teach children. They assist children to develop new and secure relationships with adults other than their parents, and support families to recognise that they are a critical part of their child's learning journey. Some of these parents are entering the education sector for the first time since their own childhoods. For children, play with peers and learning to sit still on the mat are capacities that are just as important to develop as learning letters.

If we amplify particular learning outcomes, what might be missed? If the focus is on the end point, like the attainment of shallow, one-dimensional learning outcomes, instead of the process and skills developed along the way, such as symbolic thinking or problem solving that come from exploratory, play-based learning, the loss of learning opportunities will be greater (Gonzalez, 2016). Inevitably, focusing on any one or two learning areas is likely to be at the detriment of others. National standardised testing, such as NAPLAN, is already heavily critiqued and research has demonstrated that it has led to a narrowing of the curriculum. This is an outcome that no-one should be striving for in preschool.

Finally, there is a growing interest amongst educators to ensure that children arrive at school ready to learn and be taught. Graham's (2019) research identified that 62% of teachers have concerns with children's management of themselves at school; particularly, confidence in their own ability and their self-regulation skills. This is consistent with previous research, including the AEDC data that shows social and emotional developmental vulnerability continues to present a concern for educators and other studies rating children's emotional readiness as problematic (Denham, 2006). Also, Dockett and Perry (2001) found that the teachers within their sample expressed a belief that "we can teach them to write their name, but it's more important to have kids who can function in the classroom". Finally, research has indicated that children's self-regulation in preschool predicts children's readiness for school and later academic outcomes (Walker & Berthelsen, 2017). Self-regulation capacities are best acquired through play and social situations particularly help in the development of these competencies (Walker, Fleeer, Veresov, & Duhn, 2020), with children leading and educators scaffolding with guidance. There needs to be time in the day for these interactions to occur, which might be lost if the focus is too narrowly placed on achieving academic outcomes.

### *Assessment of developmental issues by preschool staff has risks*

Educators are seen as trusted sources of information about child development and parents often seek their advice before seeking further support from specialised services (Parenting Research Centre, 2019). Some families use the preschool year as exploratory to see how their child will adapt to the learning environment. It is often during this year that concerns present themselves, as children are around peers and expected to function in a group setting, particularly in those children who have not accessed childcare or playgroups. Preschool staff use their professionalism in child development and early childhood education to make observations about children holistically, and report these detailed and comprehensive individual needs to schools. This is exactly what should be happening before children start formal schooling. While several authors recognise that high-quality ECEC services and programs have the capacity to screen and identify impediments to children's development and wellbeing, this must be managed appropriately (Press, 2006). Expert advice reinforces the benefits of a wraparound care, multidisciplinary model that places a child at the centre and the supports placed around them (Siraj-Blatchford, Clark, & Needham, 2007). However, meeting this brief relies on adequate provision of services and timely referrals able to be made.

Preschool staff need appropriate training and trust that the relevant service connections can meet them in the middle. There is a need to ensure that there is sufficient provision of qualified allied health professionals to meet the significant demand before they arrive at school. The significant wait times for specialist service providers are of concern to member organisations and improving the timeliness at which services can be engaged in a preschool year should be a priority.

Appropriate training and support must be available for educators to be able to recognise potential early support needs, and to be able to easily refer families for additional supports. Consideration should also be given to what affordable, quality and readily accessible alternatives exist for families whose child does need additional support, beyond what can be provided by preschools and schools.

## What we want to see in the SA Early Learning Strategy

### *The realisation that attendance matters, but so does engagement and quality*

Large-scale research has demonstrated a clear relationship between access to quality early childhood education and later educational and other life outcomes (Yoshikawa, Weiland, & Brooks-Gunn, 2016). A sustainable, qualified and stable workforce is key to ensuring the quality of early childhood education. The *Lifting Our Game* Report of the Review to Achieve Educational Excellence in Australian Schools through Early Childhood Interventions identifies the most important factor in delivering high-quality early childhood education is a skilled and stable workforce (Pascoe & Brennan, 2017).

The emphasis on early childhood services has moved from access and participation to quality, as quality is the mediator in influencing outcomes for children (OECD, 2018; Torii, Fox, & Cloney, 2017). Outcomes for children are optimised when children start early, attend for longer and the quality of the service provided is high (Pascoe & Brennan, 2017; Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford, & Taggart, 2004)

Unlike schools and early childhood in many other countries, ECEC provision is not compulsory in Australia and parents decide on the timing and extent of their children's attendance. Children's attendance in ECEC programs in Australia, and the frequency of their attendance, increases as they approach school age (Tayler, 2016). Despite attendance remaining steady and relatively high in Australia, we are yet to see marked improvements in outcomes. Instead, the quality of the early learning program is implicated in many studies as a factor in their success (Sylva et al., 2004). Now, the emphasis on early childhood services has moved from access and participation to quality, as quality is considered to be the mediator in influencing outcomes for children (OECD, 2018; Torii, Fox, & Cloney, 2017). High-quality early childhood education experiences contribute significantly to achieving educational excellence, by improving school readiness, NAPLAN and PISA results, as well as school completion rates (Pascoe & Brennan, 2017; Tayler, 2016).

One of the consequences of the ongoing structural gaps in early childhood policy has been increased performance pressure on educators and lower professional esteem and morale.



Increasing the use of data that are almost entirely focused on accountability and compliance, rather than support and capacity building, will further entrench these feelings of despair. Policy reform needs to be undertaken in consultation with the profession, and designed in such a way to boost their profile, enhance professional capacity and trust them to teach within well-resourced settings.

### *Meeting the goals of preschool are more important than debates about instructional approach*

There are two overarching philosophical approaches to teaching children in the early years. The first is a play and inquiry-based approach characterised by a high degree of choice. The other is an academic and outcomes-based approach where students are led by a teacher in more structured learning and explicit teaching approach. They are often represented as a dichotomy, but they need not be seen as opposing forces. There may be a place for a range of instructional approaches in teaching young children and more importantly, the goals of preschool go beyond academic instruction.

Research has been conducted to see how effective different approaches were in preparing children for school success. No one approach was determined to be most effective. Instead though, a clearly defined curriculum with adequate resources and materials and well-trained early childhood professionals were essential components of successful programs (Bingham & Whitebread, n. d.; Sylva et al., 2004). The Effective Early Educational Experiences (E4Kids) found similar. E4Kids was a five-year longitudinal study, commencing in 2010, and tracked 2,494 Australian children and 157 control group participants who participated from age three to four years through to age eight. It was one of only a few comprehensive studies to assess the impact of participation in ECEC programs on children's learning and development outcomes. The study was able to separate out, and control for, the effect of ECEC programs relative to other child development inputs such as the child's own characteristics, the home learning environment, child and family health, family SES, and characteristics of the community in which the child resides and where programs are provided. Assessment of children's cognitive abilities and achievements was undertaken over three years and linked with the children's NAPLAN scores at age eight. There was no clear level of quality and quantity that assured positive child outcomes, however the findings did confirm that certain

teaching and learning dimensions within a program significantly impacted on children's achievement outcomes. The most significant finding for program quality as a driver of child development was the quality of adult-child relationships and that the most crucial determinant of quality in early childhood education is the interaction between educator and child (Tayler, 2016). Hence, the important aspect here is on the professionals teaching children, and ensuring they are well-supported in their role. So while the kind of early learning experienced by children matters, the evidence suggests that so do teacher-child relationships and the individual learning programs they create can help all children to reach their full potential.

There must be a value placed on learning through play, as we know from a long history of research that this is an effective way for children to learn and it lays the foundations for healthy development and later academic achievement, especially in literacy (Ayoub & Bartlett, 2014; Goodwin, 2013). Research has shown that children achieve more positive outcomes if they have attended play-based early learning programs, helping them settle into the school environment and show greater engagement, compared to more rigid academic preschool programs (Carlsson-Paige, Bywater McLaughlin, & Wolfsheimer Almon, 2015; Milteer et al., 2012). demonstrated that play helps children settle into to the school environment and foster greater engagement. The *Lifting Our Game* report in Australia also reported that children who access play-based learning guided by qualified educators have more highly developed dispositions for learning and experience other benefits including increased cognitive abilities, which are further linked to improved readiness for school, academic achievement and subsequent levels of educational attainment (Pascoe & Brennan, 2017).

A play and inquiry-based approach is often questioned because the implicit nature of teaching concepts puts children most vulnerable at risk of not gaining the essential knowledge and understandings they need to later succeed at school (Kenny, 2017). However, there are also risks with pushing formal learning onto children prematurely, making them feel pressured and out of their depth. Earlier is not better when it comes to formal academic instruction and this pressure on a child to fit into the school system can be detrimental (e.g. Goodwin, 2013; Sahlberg & Doyle, 2019).

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*While early formal instruction may appear to show good test results at first, in the long term, in follow-up studies, such children have had no advantage. On the contrary, especially in the case of boys, subjection to early formal instruction increases their tendency to distance themselves from the goals of schools, and to drop out of it, either mentally or physically (Katz, 2010).*

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On the other hand, learning through play and inquiry is developmentally appropriate, matched to their current understanding of the world and enjoyable. So, if the goal in preschool is to prepare learners for the demands of formal schooling by setting them up with a love of learning and a positive learning disposition, the play-based approach takes on a new value and should be further promoted.

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*One of the most important goals of all education, at every level, is to support and strengthen the disposition to go on learning throughout life (Katz, 2010).*

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According to the Department’s Implementation Guidelines for Indicators of Preschool Numeracy and Literacy, “*the dispositions and learning processes children display indicate how a child is engaging in their learning*” (DECD, 2015, p. 7) and are therefore critically important to develop. The extent to which these will be able to be harnessed and assessed if the focus is on narrow measures of achievement is dubious.

The age at which the “*integrated, explicit and systematic*” (Child Development Council, 2020a), or ‘direct’ instruction is brought in to teaching children is an ongoing point of contention. We argue that this is out of scope and really what matters is the degree of autonomy that the early childhood experts are afforded. They should be given trust as professionals to know the best way to create a learning environment that meet the needs of each cohort of children. There will always be advocates and opposers on both sides of the debate, and in practice, a single approach is rarely employed 100% of the time (Kenny, 2017). Nor should we be advocating for a single form of instruction for every child and a

hybrid approach is also possible, delivering instruction directly in a fun and developmentally appropriate way.

### *Partnerships and collaboration: More engagement with families*

A child's learning potential is largely predicated upon what has happened at home before entering preschool. The early family environment makes a stronger contribution to children's development than any other early childhood environment (Pianta, 2013). It is also a bidirectional relationship. Supporting parents is a powerful way to improve children's educational outcomes and overall wellbeing. The care and education of young children is not peripheral to the work undertaken with families, but is critically important.

It can be concluded from the available evidence then that parent and family factors are greater determinants of a child's progress than the early learning they receive outside of the home. Hattie's (2003) meta-analysis of over 500,000 studies concluded that while quality of teaching accounted for 30 per cent of student outcomes, a larger 55-60 per cent is accounted for by the skills, competencies and experiences that children bring with them to school. It stands to reason then that the combination of an engaged family and a high-quality preschool, working collaboratively and collegially, will have a stronger impact than either does alone on setting a child up for success.

Contemporary practice has now done away with the traditional provider-receiver model of education towards a collaborative partnership with responsibility shared between families and schools (Stein, 2009). Both Bronfenbrenner and Epstein acknowledge that children learn across different, but overlapping, contexts and so they emphasise the complementarity of schools and families. Both theorists suggest that children have greater success when the spheres work collaboratively and supportively to promote learning and development (Epstein & Sheldon, 2006).

The potential influence of early years educators on child development is two-fold: through partnerships with families, as well as direct interactions with children. Forming positive home-school relationships represent best practice and this is especially true at key points of educational transition (Dockett & Perry, 2007). Yet unfortunately, this is not yet

commonplace. Many early childhood education approaches fail to harness the potential of parents as partners in, rather than recipients of, children's education and development (Sheridan, Knoche, Edwards, Bovaird, & Kupzyk, 2010). Governments must understand the needs of parents and there must be more opportunities created for parents to participate in their child's early learning, and engage in shared decision making and joint goal setting (Parenting Research Centre, 2019).

Lin and colleagues (2019) have shown that by educators facilitating strong communication and sharing information with parents about what they can do at home to support learning, they were more willing to undertake home learning activities focused on literacy and numeracy skills. This was further substantiated within the EPPE study, which found that greater cognitive gains were experienced by children in preschool centres that encouraged high levels of parental engagement. The most effective settings shared information relevant to the children with staff and parents, and parents had a greater say in decision making about their child's learning. Importantly, children experienced better outcomes in centres that encouraged continuity of learning between the home and the setting and shared their educational aims with parents, thus allowing them to reinforce learning at home with complementary experiences (Sylva et al., 2004).

To improve student achievement, it is crucial to develop parental social capital. If parents do not understand the educational journey of their child, or if the goals of the program do not align with the beliefs and values of the family or the community, they are less likely to engage (Moore, McDonald, & McHugh-Dillon, 2015). Helping parents to understand their role as critical in the learning journey will almost certainly lead to improving their levels of engagement and development of positive beliefs. It is therefore important that educators promote collaboration and incorporate strategies that work with parents in a supportive way, to support their engagement and participation. A clear outcome of the research by Woodrow and colleagues (2016) was that several parents were quite successfully engaged in their children's learning at home, and consequently enhancing their child's educational success, without a conscious effort or awareness.

The earlier the engagement or investment by parents, the greater the benefit the children experience (Australian Government, 2015). The prior to school period presents an ideal opportunity to establish a pattern of parental engagement throughout children's schooling as

home and school contexts come together. The relationship between educators and parents is strengthened as parents are often interested in the academic and behavioural expectations of their child and also what they can do to support the transitioning process (Hirst, Jervis, Visagie, & Sojo, 2011). Murray, McFarland-Piazza, and Harrison (2015) argued that building strong relationships between educators and parents is most successful in the early years, because they interact and communicate more with educators in early education settings than once at school. Many researchers have argued that parents are more likely to collaborate with relevant professionals, and to invest time and interest in their children's learning, in the early years (Fox, Dunlap, & Cushing, 2002). Research has linked greater involvement of parents as children enter school with continued higher involvement in the first term of schooling and throughout the first year of schooling (Giallo, Treyvaud, Matthews, & Kienhuis, 2010). It is therefore necessary to find effective ways to learn about the environments children are in before entering preschool and more explicitly link home and early learning.

It is recognised that it is far easier to engage those who are already willing to engage but educators, and those with policy influence, have a responsibility to reduce the equity gap and make engagement the number one priority. For the sake of children that have additional needs or families have disadvantage or vulnerabilities, it will be more challenging, yet arguably more important, for parents to engage in the learning process to ensure they receive the support they need to thrive alongside their more privileged counterparts. However, caution is needed when conveying such messages to parents who are already under-resourced as well as socially and financially challenged. Any starting point identified by such parents must be acknowledged, and appreciated as just as valuable, as the highest level of engagement from another parent (Woodrow et al., 2016). Failing to support parents early in this role could lead to disengagement with their child's learning and engagement with support services, which can have a dire effect on children's future educational trajectory.

There needs to be attention on finding a starting point for engagement with under-represented and marginalised parents before they begin preschool. Further investment in strategies and a suite of programs might be beneficial to support some parents in their early educative role in the home environment. These might include at-home support mobilised to meet them where they are at, like the Home Interaction Program for Parents and Young People and Families as First Teachers (in the Northern Territory), and increased supported playgroups. Henderson and Mapp (2002) conducted a synthesis of 51 studies that focused on the influence of family

and community involvement on student outcomes. It was found that early childhood programs that trained parents to work with their children at home had significant positive effects.

It is clear from the South Australian Government's recent investments, policy reforms and strategic directions that they grasp the point that education does not just happen within a school or preschool and that parents are a resource to engage and partner with to see every child improve their educational potential. However, these are offered inconsistently in a patchwork approach, so these well-intentioned ideas are not reaching all families. The Department for Education has developed a 'Transition to school rubric' (DECD, 2016) for schools, but it is not mandated, so there is not a formal policy guiding services on how to best support families in the transitioning process, nor does it indicate any ways in which parents can be supported to build their capacity. Parent engagement is high on the Department's priority list and this is reflected in resource allocation and financial expenditure. The Department has a well-developed Parent Engagement Strategy, which is a useful step in the right direction to help parents engage with their child's learning but it has not been effectively translated to families. SA was also the first state to host a Parents in Education week, which has been held annually since 2015. In addition, Parenting SA, a body that is a partnership between the Department for Education and the Women's and Children's Health Network provide, Parent Easy Guides for free to parents in SA and some of these guides relate to starting school and ways to improve children's literacy skills (Parenting SA, 2015). Over the years, the Department has had valuable programs in this area, including the internationally awarded Great Start website and Learning Together teams, but this support has either been withdrawn or minimised and there is still a noticeable gulf between what is known to be best practice and what is currently and consistently offered.

#### *Continuity of learning: A cohesive, joined-up approach between preschools and schools*

A more cohesive and collaborative effort to deliver early childhood care and education and former schooling will benefit children, families and educators. At present, the gulf between preschool and school is quite dramatic in terms of the aims, pedagogy, learning content and expectations. While some children navigate this transition successfully, others are left further

behind. This is unacceptable and the transition process must be made more uniform so no child is left behind.

The complex needs of children and families cannot be met by any single organisation or Department. Integrated service provision is multidimensional and complex to achieve, given the numerous systemic barriers that currently exist, but the research has shown that it brings out the best in relation to outcomes for children. Systems that enable collaboration facilitate better communication, joint decision-making and joint service planning with the child at the centre, thereby allowing families to more easily engage with their child's learning and receive a more holistic experience.

Around the country, State and Territory governments are moving towards greater coordination and collaboration that transcend departmental responsibility. A 'whole of government' direction of early childhood is widely supported because continuity between settings, including stability of best practice pedagogical approaches and communication between early education providers, schools and families is created when everyone surrounding a child is working together (Moore, McDonald, & McHugh-Dillon, 2015). Importantly, children and families experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage gain maximum benefit from improved access and coordinated support to early childhood services (ACT Government, 2020).

Collaborative relationships between before-school settings and schools are a vital prerequisite to children succeeding at school. Effective transitioning from preschool to school relies upon the communication and transfer of information on individual students and deliberate efforts by schools to build upon a solid early childhood foundation (Pascoe & Brennan, 2017). While participation in early childhood programs has been shown to help children with their adjustment to school, it also follows that the greater the discontinuity between the early childhood environment and school (e.g., the physical environment, peer group changes), the harder that transition will be for children (Boyle & Petriwskyj, 2014; Margetts, 2002). What is learnt about a child in preschool can also help schools to be prepared for the children and communities they serve.

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has developed *Starting Strong*. These reports, released every four years, have provided a number of widely



accepted frameworks to guide countries in their implementation of effective early learning policies. They also suggest the adoption of a more unified approach to learning in both the early childhood education and the primary school systems (OECD, 2019). While policy reforms of the last 10-15 years, such as the National Quality Framework, have aimed to strengthen linkages between education-focused and care-focused services, more needs to be done to ensure integration for children moving between preschool and school.

Most notably, the OECD recommended that ECEC services and primary schools adopt a more unified approach to minimise the stress associated with the transitioning process for children and families. This requires equal respect for both systems and what they bring to a child's educational journey, rather than trying to 'schoolify' the early childhood system (OECD, 2019; PACEY, 2013). In essence, recognising that what happens in early childhood will continue to affect what happens in schools and this is critical to improving school outcomes. The supportive experiences a child has in early childhood need to continue well into the schooling years to ensure long-term gains (Pascoe & Brennan, 2017).

Complementarity implies that the cumulative effects of early childhood investment can only be maximised if preschool and school work together cohesively and investment is continued (Heckman, 2008; Mitchell, Wylie, & Carr, 2008). Preschools can make a solid start, but *“facilitating environments must be followed by facilitating environments”* (Mitchell et al., 2008, p. 24) to achieve great outcomes. This focus on children and families at the centre aligns well with Siraj-Blatchford's (2009) recommendation that an integrated approach should be *“centred on the child and their family...supported through integrated organisations and agencies”*.

Given that we know how important the early years are for development, we should be creating a continuous, high-quality path for children to follow as early as possible. The Department has trialled a range of programs in this space, such as the Transition and Reimagining Reception projects, but they were not retained or even refined. Perhaps there is scope to revisit these as part of the new strategy, and improve the on-the-ground support available to services and families for more seamless transitions into preschool and school.

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*The...five-year 'window' from conception to the start of school lays the developmental foundation for all that follows and has lifelong consequences. From a public policy perspective, this means that time, effort and resources should be committed to optimising children's experiences during this vital period. This big idea should be set against the fact that, other than a recommended schedule of universal child health checks, sustained public expenditure on children's learning, development and wellbeing does not currently kick in until a child starts full-time school at around the age of five years; just as this important 'window' of development ends. The rationale for delaying sustained, universal and systematised investment in children's learning, development and wellbeing until five years of age is at odds with the evidence (Cahill, 2020).*

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#### *Assessment that is driven by individual child needs, not benchmarking*

Assessment in early childhood, and its place in determining a child's school readiness, has been widely debated, but used in Australia to guide policy and determine appropriate interventions (Denham, 2006). It has been argued that given the importance of the early childhood years, and the claim that indicators within these years can predict a child's health, emotional and overall life outcomes, it is essential to gather data about how well young children are developing (Brinkman, Gregory, Goldfeld, Lynch, & Hardy, 2014). However, assessment of individual child abilities and needs are lost in an over-reliance on population-level assessment. Since analyses are not reported at the individual level, any comparisons between AEDC results and specific child and family needs are not possible. There is a place for preschools to understand and utilise available large-scale data to understand their community's needs, and doing so will mean they are better able to plan for successful, and targeted, transitioning practices. However, it is also beneficial to get to know children and families in more nuanced ways. By making the effort to develop a relationship with the incoming student cohort, educators can develop responsive environments and effective teaching practices to meet a child's individual needs. Capturing the voices of parents broadens understandings and helps early years educators to match planned learning experiences to what children know and what parents' value.

Early childhood professionals aim high in their expectations of what children can achieve and are accountable for the provision of quality teaching and learning experiences. However, being bound by standardised testing, benchmarks, developmental checklists and illegitimate metrics does little to help children reach their full potential and is overly simplistic. We know from research that inappropriate performance targets can lead to whole range of unintended consequences in schools (Zhao, 2017).

Goodhart's Law reminds us of the importance of using the right metrics when assessing success.

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*When a measure becomes a target, it ceases to be a good measure of performance (Goodhart's Law, in Koehrsen, 2018).*

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In other words, if the target is on improving NAPLAN results, it is inevitable that we will lose the rich and diverse experiences currently offered in preschool.

If it is acknowledged that children's skills are developmental and embedded in interactions and relationships, then assessment takes a different course. The purpose of assessment should always be on achieving improvements. So, what does good 0-5 assessment of children and professional practice look like? The consensus arrived at by decades of research contains the following components:

- An emphasis on qualitative assessment.
- Not moment in time but ongoing and woven into daily experience.
- Be culturally and contextually appropriate for all children.
- Observations in multiple contexts, as context determines the meaning of observed behaviours and children's opportunities to display certain traits and skills (Denham, 2006).

These criteria align with the Indicators of Preschool Numeracy and Literacy and Numeracy in government preschools. In particular, this point resonates with the view purported in the Indicators that "*evidence of children's understandings, skills and dispositions needs to be*

*gathered in contexts that are familiar to children and collected over time”* (DECD, 2015, p. 7).

The priority must be on building the capacity of early childhood educators to be able to gather the required data in meaningful ways, that still allows for these principles to be met. So, if the Department wants more meaningful data from preschools, they need to build the capacity of their educators to gather this data in a manner that meets these components and does not place unnecessary administrative burden. Likewise, there must be education and training made available to early childhood educators in the accurate use of large-scale or linked data to inform program and practice so it holds value and informs their programs and practice.

### *Two years of high-quality preschool for all, with a foundation of equity*

The Department is primarily concerned with reducing the number of children entering school with disabilities and school ‘unreadiness’. It follows then if evaluating children’s development against school-based targets is a key goal, maximising the trained professionals that observe and understand children intimately across preschool is vital. However, one year is not enough to accurately measure change. There is one element that recurrently emerges within the literature when looking at how to remediate such issues: longer duration of preschool.

When compared with other jurisdictions, South Australia has the highest number of services with an excellent rating. Hence, the quality of preschool is already very high. Of those 98 per cent of SA preschools and kindergartens that have been assessed and rated under the National Quality Framework (98%), no service requires significant improvement. Furthermore, the majority of sites meet or exceed the National Quality Standards. Therefore, perhaps the attention needs to be on increasing the dosage of preschool, so children are having more of the quality they are currently receiving.

The OECD *Starting Strong* reports (OECD, 2019) recommend that two years of early childhood education is the minimum dosage to achieve optimal educational performance at age 15. Moreover, it was found that the strongest systems offer early childhood education to a

larger number of children, do so over a longer period of time, have smaller child-to-teacher ratios and that invest more per child at this level of education. Internationally and even in some Australian states and territories, two years of funded, high-quality early childhood education is being rolled out.

While all children deserve this, the priority must be on those children who have not had home environments that have prepared them appropriately for school. The benefits of high-quality early childhood experiences are greatest for vulnerable children, with children in low-SES communities often showing the most significant gains (Yoshikawa et al., 2013). Inequities during the early years are especially important to address because of the nature of early childhood development, where most capacities and competencies are developed (Moore et al., 2015).

Sylva and colleagues (2004) concluded in the EPPE study that all children experience the benefits of early childhood education regardless of their family, social or economic context, but the benefits are greatest for children who experience disadvantage. In Australia, the 2018 Report on Government Services has demonstrated that fewer than one-quarter (22.4 per cent) of young children from low-income families accessed preschool or childcare services in 2017, and that this has steadily declined in the last five years (Australian Government, 2019). The E4 Kids study found that only seven per cent of disadvantaged children received high-quality care, compared to 30 per cent of the most affluent children (Tayler, 2016). The OECD supports this by suggesting that broadening access to preschool can improve school performance and equity amongst children if SES disparities exist, but only if the increased coverage does not come at the cost of quality (Melhuish, 2016). Key policy papers (e.g., Page, 2016; Tayler, 2016) advocate that children with additional disadvantage attend high-quality preschool programs for a longer duration to assist them to start school on a more equal footing with their peers.

It is possible to design early childhood education provision that recognises the universal benefit for all children, while also taking into account that some children benefit more or require additional support to achieve the same outcome. Known as the proportionate universalism approach, it is akin to the needs-based funding model in school funding. Every child would receive a baseline level of preschool provision, and vulnerable children and

families would receive extra support. For example, children with some identified disadvantage could receive subsidised, or free, access to preschool, more hours, additional professional educator or practitioner support, with the goal of making them more school ready like their advantaged peers (Pascoe & Brennan, 2017).

## Key messages

1. The early years period offers the highest economic return on investment, relative to any other time during childhood. So let's get it right and invest appropriately in evidence-based interventions and strategies.
2. Children do not need to be 'prepared' for future learning. What they need is to be provided supportive environments where they can fully develop their inherent and unique skills and capacities.
3. Leveraging the AEDC results, which have declined slightly in SA, as the sole data source on child achievement, and using this measure as a priority target, is problematic and inappropriate.
4. The early years are a time for developing joy, curiosity, confidence and wonder in children, not preparing for standardised testing.
5. Assessment of individual child abilities and needs are lost in an over-reliance on population-level assessment.
6. It is a long bow to draw to link what happens in preschool with the outcome measures, particularly when all other contexts in which a child grows and develops are excluded from attention
7. Literacy and numeracy development must remain a major focus, however it must be introduced in age-appropriate ways. Further, the goal must be to develop a love of these areas and not simply to prepare for later high-stakes testing.
8. National standardised testing, such as NAPLAN, is already heavily critiqued and research has demonstrated that it has led to a narrowing of the curriculum. This is an outcome that no-one should be striving for in preschool.
9. Boosting parent engagement in the early years is very important and has the potential to influence ongoing parent beliefs and behaviours about their child's education.
10. Self-regulation capacities are valued in school starters and best learnt through play and social situations particularly help in the development of these competencies.
11. There must be a renewed priority for learning through play, as it lays the foundations for healthy development and later academic achievement, including in literacy and numeracy.
12. There are real risks with pushing formal learning onto children prematurely, making them feel pressured and out of their depth.

13. A cross agency approach to responsibility for early childhood education and development is needed. Intentional relationship building and information sharing between multidisciplinary services and teams supports access to the right service at the right time, and strengthens continuity of learning for all children across the ages.
14. Assessment in the early years must have qualitative, descriptive aspects, be ongoing and genuinely located within children's every daily experiences across a range of contexts.
15. The strongest learning systems around the world offer early childhood education to a larger number of children, do so over a longer period of time, have smaller child-to-teacher ratios and that invest more per child at this level of education. We strongly call for at least two years of funded, high-quality early childhood education, with the emphasis on creating a world class education system that emphasises equitable provision to our most disadvantaged children.

### Concluding thoughts

The new direction for early years learning in South Australia provides us an opportunity to write a future-focused narrative for early childhood for all South Australian children. Conversations about early learning, and how it can be improved, are valuable and we welcome the opportunity to present the evidence that supports best practice early childhood teaching and learning in this paper. We further expect that the key messages in this paper will call for immediate action by the Department, and act as an impetus for change rather than an ambitious wish list. The onus falls on the Department to take responsibility to ensure that the suggested actions are taken, and make a commitment to using these evidence-based practices and values as the reference point for policy architecture and practice.



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