

**Transforming Early Learning (TEL)  
Reimagined Vision for the Future  
Early Learning System**

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## Acknowledgement of Country

In the spirit of recognition and reconciliation, the Front Project acknowledges the traditional custodians of Country throughout Australia and their connections to land, sea and community.

We pay our respects to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander elders past and present and extend that respect to all First Nations peoples today and in the future.

We pay respect to elders who have and continue to raise children, lead communities, and share their ancient gift of culture. We express our gratitude for their caring of Country, our sorrow for personal, spiritual and cultural costs of that sharing, and our hope that we may walk forward together in harmony and in the spirit of truth-telling and healing.

We commit to educating ourselves and supporting the education of others in our ongoing two-way cultural learning journey. We know sovereignty has never been ceded. Australia always was and always will be Aboriginal land.

## Executive Summary

The future of early learning in Australia is an ever-pervasive question and one without a concrete answer. The subject is on the national agenda and is resultantly a hot topic, with many loud voices competing to be heard and often drowning out others in the process. But what if this was not the case? What if diverse systems parties came together to create one collective vision? After all, as Abraham Lincoln and Pete Drucker aptly stated;

*“The best way to predict the future is to invent it”.*

When considering this quote in the context of early learning, it suggests that to predict the future of the Early Learning system, we must first reimagine a vision of it. That vision is precisely what the Front Project and The Apiary Fellowship have tried to capture in the following pages.

This Transforming Early Learning (TEL) Synthesis Report brings together research on child and adult perspectives from all corners of the Early Learning system across the country. The report is therefore a culmination of their diverse perspectives which, taken together, create a holistic, cohesive and informed vision of the future of early learning in Australia.

The purpose of this report - and the TEL initiative more broadly – therefore, is to support the development of said vision through co-design by all systems actors, and to support the cultivation of a more effective Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) system that is inclusive, equitable, and fosters collaboration and coalescing between services, organisations, for profit, not-for-profit, and government parties.

The report highlights and compares the key findings that emerged from TEL events and activities with both child and adult participants. As part of the TEL initiative, the following events and activities took place:

- The TEL Visioning Summit.
- Three Transformative Scenarios workshops.
- Postcards to the Future, Landscapes of the Future, and Transformative Scenarios activities were conducted with over 100 adults across Australia.
- Postcards to the Future and Landscapes of the Future were conducted with approximately 239 children in 19 services across the country.

These events and activities were conducted with children and adults with the intention of highlighting how their perspectives diverge and converge. In the final section of this report, the identified areas of convergence are the main source of recommendations for government and policymakers, with areas of divergence also highlighted to illustrate shared identified needs and priorities.

The central aim underpinning the creation and delivery of the TEL initiative is to paint a more complete picture of the future of the early learning system, one which includes and champions children’s perspectives especially, as well as those of adults. The reason for this is that consulting with children represents a major opportunity for early learning visioning initiatives in Australia.

We recognise that undertaking research that centres children’s perspectives not only meets Australia’s commitment under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child to truly give children a voice in discussions directly pertaining to their lived experiences, but also aligns with the early years learning curriculum’s principle of developing active and engaged citizens as early as the pre-school years.

The following key themes (which are explored in more detail in the following pages) emerged from children’s narratives:

- Indoor, outdoor, natural and built learning and play environments
- Positive connections and secure relationships with people and places
- Cognitive and emotional processes
- Digital artefacts, toys and books
- Physical and creative activities.

It should be noted that several of these themes, particularly learning and play environments, connection and community, and cognitive and emotional processes are interrelated and interdependent.



Furthermore, interestingly, several of these themes are already embedded within other key parts of the ECEC system's framework, such as the National Quality Standards. This emphasises that not only are children actively attuned to the beneficial characteristics of their early learning settings and experiences, but that they can express these benefits clearly and passionately. Once again, this reinforces the need for ongoing engagement with, and active listening to children on the part of policymakers and system actors and the need to bring children's perspectives into policymaking.

The following key themes (which are explored in more detail in the following pages) emerged from adults' narratives:

- **Prioritise children's needs and perspectives** – shaping the future of early learning with rather than for children.
- **Role exchange and “equal footing” positionality** – universalising the roles of “teacher and learner” for children and adults alike, intergenerational learning and growing together.
- **Integration of First Nations pedagogy and ways of doing, being, and knowing** -interconnected across curriculums and integral to decision-making processes.
- **Localised and community-informed learning and play environments** – in community settings, on Country, outside traditional “four walls”
- **Greater familial access to integrated services** - emphasis on familial choice and agency, communication and cooperation amongst services, organisations, and overlapping systems
- **Positive workforce value recognition and appreciation** - pay rates and working conditions, career pathways with opportunities for support and progression
- **Lifelong funding models** - for early learning and education, policy development and implementation, integrated hubs, community controlled.



Although these themes are explored in more detail throughout the report, there are several converging and diverging themes that emerged from child and adult narratives. In this sense, the narratives do not conflict, but rather complement one another as overlapping themes illustrate overlapping interests and priorities, and diverging themes illustrate unique perspectives and needs.

Taken together in one vision, the narratives therefore create a more well-informed, holistic picture of what the future of early learning should look like according to those who experience it. This reinforces the need for system actors to actively listen to and engage with all systems parties including both the children and adults if they wish to not only help children thrive and have the best experience possible, but also to confront their own personal assumptions about what “good” learning and care in early childhood should look like.

This report concludes with a recommendations section. Supported by TEL Initiative findings, analysis, and evidence-based research, the recommendations outline possible next steps, priorities, and gaps to be addressed in the early learning system in order to make the collective vision of the future a reality. The recommendations can be summarised as follows:

### **Regulations**

- Adapt to support children’s healthy risk-taking.
- Recognise children’s innate capacities for both learning and teaching, the value of imagination, and the importance of diversity in learning environments.

### **Funding, equity and clarity**

- Research into contingent lifelong funding models and how to connect the early learning system to other closely related systems.
- Take better consideration of child and adult perspectives when budgeting allocated funding, especially at the local level.

### **Policy levers**

- Incentivise staff via financial and career development pathways to support professional training and undertaking of advanced qualifications.
- Encourage community-informed design and coalescence between services to promote universal accessibility and familial choice.
- Promote flexibility when services and practitioners apply the NQS and relevant frameworks in practice.
- Enhance uniformity and clarity in system-wide language and terminology to protect and raise the status of the early years system and its workforce.

### **Practice**

- Provide more opportunities in both rural and urban settings for intergenerational participation in activities with children.
- Place children on a more equal footing with adults in terms of recognition, feedback loops, and role assignment.
- Adult practitioners practice storytelling and exercise creativity to model this for children and support their imaginative development.

## Introduction

### **Who are TFP?**

The Front Project is an independent, national enterprise that works systemically to address disadvantage and improve outcomes for children, families, and society by realising the benefits of quality early learning. Early Learning has the potential to address children's experiences of inequity, vulnerability, and intergenerational disadvantage, delivering both immediate and lifetime impacts.

To achieve this impact, we have developed evidence-based, meaningful, and pragmatic policy and system solutions through the Impact Foundry and the Apiary Fellowship. The Upskill Program, Mentoring Program and the Online Community are designed specifically to address workforce challenges facing educators, teachers and the sector.

### **What is the Apiary Fellowship?**

The Apiary Fellowship brings together people who are committed to creating thriving futures of children in Australia. Through the support of the Front Project and The Paul Ramsay Foundation, the Apiary Fellowship builds systems leadership for all involved, fosters inter- and cross-system collaboration, and the capability for individuals to work differently to bring about sustainable positive change to early learning. Over a series of forums called Convenings supplemented by workshops and the incubation of key ideas to leverage systemic change, the Apiary fellows collaborated on the identification of this unique opportunity to unify diverse systems under a shared purpose for the future, one which centres children, families and communities that they are trying to support. Together, fellows help visualise how diverse early learning stakeholders can meet the timeless needs of children in the future as the world around them changes.

### **Background to this report**

Australia's early learning system is complex and multifaceted. It consists of many moving parts operating in many different settings. Ultimately, children, families and communities across the country engage daily with early childhood education and care (ECEC) services, all of which contribute to building children's early learning experiences in their foundational years. The importance of early learning therefore cannot be overstated and is increasingly being recognised as such.

This is evident given that the future of the early learning system is on the national agenda. At present, the Australian Federal Government is embarking on an ambitious and important ECEC policy agenda and is creating a whole-government approach to the early years by developing an Early Years Strategy that aims to identify ways to deliver better outcomes for children and families across Australia. Several State and Territory Governments are also pursuing respective reforms to increase access and affordability to ECEC for children in their jurisdictions.

Collectively, these actions point to one thing: now, more than ever before, is the time to implement sustainable positive change in the early learning system. The question, however, remains; what changes are needed and what will they look like?

In response to this question, the concept for envisioning the future of early learning was born. This stemmed from the Front Project's application of systems change approaches and the cultivation of an extraordinary group of system leaders in the Apiary Fellowship.

Together, the Front Project and the Apiary Fellowship agreed that the creation of a vision for early learning in Australia can enable all systems actors to develop strategies and pathways to systems change, build shared aspirations, and work together with a shared sense of purpose and connection. To support this, we have been bringing together diverse perspectives from children and families as well as actors from all corners of the early learning system to develop a holistic vision of early learning that can benefit all future generations in Australia.



## Purpose of this report

This report has been created to synthesise the findings of all TEL initiative outputs and cultivate subsequent recommendations as Australian policymakers embark upon ambitious and important ECEC reform. The report offers direct quotes and insights from children and adults as they have navigated various activities in and around respective early learning environments, and reflected on what the best possible future might look like for them in the coming years. The findings presented are done so with as little interpretation as possible, this is to allow the voices and perspectives of children and adults to shine and support the initiative's intended purpose of being 'child and family centred'.

This report aims to illustrate and explain the overarching goal of TEL which is to support the transformation of the early learning system into one that every child, family and community can co-design and thrive as party to. In this way, we hope to cultivate a system that is supported and underpinned by inclusive, equitable and coalescing service provision and effective stewardship.





## Transforming Early Learning (TEL) Explained

### What is TEL?

TEL is an initiative which was seeded by Apiary fellows in conjunction with the Front Project. Since August 2022, this seed has grown to take on a life of its own with several events and activities capturing the invaluable voices and perspectives of adults and children from across the early learning system. The findings from each were correspondingly documented in written reports all of which are accessible via the Front Project website.

### TEL Origin and Evolution

The thinking behind the TEL initiative originated in August 2022 when the First Ministers at the National Cabinet agreed to work together on a long-term vision for the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) system.

### Inaugural Visioning Summit

Following this, in October 2022, education and early childhood ministers and numerous key figures within the sector (including children, families, public servants, advocates, peak bodies, and those working with and/or for children in early learning settings) gathered at the inaugural Transforming Early Learning Summit in Canberra. This was co-hosted by the Front Project and the Apiary Fellowship and facilitated in partnership with Orange Compass.

Many parties who attended had different goals and objectives in how to best support children and were able to access different policies and funding to be able to do so. However, all were united on the evident need to hear from and include children's voices and perspectives in shaping their own future. Drawing upon innovative and interactive futuring methods, Summit participants uncovered interesting insights and undertook collective visioning for the long-term.

This event provided invaluable opportunities to hear and learn from the lived experiences of children and families. The Summit helped to centre their voices, perspectives, and lived experiences to create the foundation for a shared vision for the future of early learning. This vision was imagined as one which will enable all children across Australia to access their full potential and receive quality care and education. To read more about the Summit, please find the TEL Insights Report published here or on the Front Project website.

### Visioning Conversations with Children

One of the chief outcomes of the Summit was the Visioning Conversations with Children data collection project. Two of the three future visioning activities imagined and created at the Summit – including postcards to the future and landscapes of the future - were adapted to make them both meaningful and accessible for children.

For example, although children's stories and experiences of these activities were captured in notes and recordings by activity facilitators including educators and teachers, children were nevertheless clearly able to articulate their desires for early learning and shared environments, activities and people that are important to them. Activities also took place in environments and settings that the children were familiar with to ensure that the most honest and authentic insights could be gathered.

Overall, therefore, the adaptive approach employed subsequently allowed children's voices and perspectives to hold equal weight to those of adults, thus enabling children to be collaborators and co-designers of the future of early learning, rather than mere recipients of it. It also allowed for direct comparisons and cross-analysis to be conducted with adult data as seen in the later pages of this report.

In total, approximately 19 services and 11 organisations across the country implemented future visioning activities with 239 children. Early learning practitioners, teachers and educators, parents, and community leaders were provided with guidance and support to implement the two activities with children and capture the outcomes. The methodology is available to view here as well as a series of learning sessions which were delivered via Zoom.

## Visioning Conversations with Adults

The Visioning Conversations with Adults data collection project was designed to complement the above data collection project with children. The futuring activities imagined and created at the Summit including postcards to the future, landscapes of the future, and importantly transformative scenarios, were delivered with adults present at the Summit and later with system professionals, actors and practitioners in three respective workshops (see below).

By getting adults involved in future visioning activities, they were able to open and honestly express their uninhibited desires for the future of the early learning system and in doing so embrace their inner child and draw upon their own imaginations and innate sense of curiosity and creativity.

In total, approximately 130 adults from various personal and professional backgrounds participated in the future visioning activities. All were facilitated by members of The Front Project, Apiary fellows, and Orange Compass colleagues.

## Transformative Scenarios Workshops

Although insights generated during the TEL Visioning Summit in October 2022 highlighted both the pitfalls and strengths of the current early learning system as well as desires and pressing needs in the future, it was evident that the voices, perspectives and contributions of several parties who were unable to attend were missing. This meant that the collective vision for the future of the early learning system generated was incomplete and many voices went unheard.

The Transformative Scenarios workshops in June 2023 sought to change that.

In June, three stand-alone Transformative Scenario workshops were held for practitioners, thinkers and adaptive leaders in the early learning system in Western Australia, Tasmania, and South Australia respectively. With the inclusion of the perspectives and voices of workshop participants in these areas, together they were able to feed into the iterative and evolving collective vision for the future of early learning in Australia to make it more broadly reflective and inclusive of diverse perspectives, insights, and lived experiences of those living and working across all areas of the country.

Two of three Transformative Scenario Workshops were online for people based in Tasmania and South Australia and one in-person workshop was held in Perth, WA. In total, 28 people attended from across the early learning space and related systems such as infant and maternal mental health, nutrition, and more. Ultimately, attendees contributed a fresh set of insights and ideas whilst also building upon and evolving the work of the Summit last October. The key insights that emerged from the workshops were summarised in the TEL Transformative Scenarios Workshops Report.

## Who is involved in TEL?

Throughout the TEL initiative, the Front Project and the Apiary fellows consulted and engaged with a breadth of stakeholders from across the country and the early learning system. Stakeholders included policy and government decision-makers, relevant ministers in state and territory jurisdictions, centre directors and leaders, academics and researchers, community leaders, early childhood teachers (ECTs) and practitioners, parents and caregivers, and children.

Furthermore, we also made sure to involve people who work or interact with children and families and other professionals in diverse settings. These included ECEC services, playgroups, libraries, First Nations and cultural settings, health, mental health, disability, early intervention, libraries, social groups, sporting clubs, arts and play.

In collaborating with different people in these settings, we aimed to be as truly inclusive and representative as possible in the most supportive and comfortable way. This was done so that the initiative could put children and families at the centre of the drive for change, and in doing so recognise diverse lived experiences, champion fresh ideas, and identify the needs of those experiencing disadvantage across the system.

## Methodology

### What is 'futures thinking'?

Futures thinking is a creative and exploratory process that seeks many possible answers whilst acknowledging uncertainty. Futures thinking does not attempt to predict the future, rather it involves a range of innovative and interactive methods to help people uncover unique insights for the long-term (DPMC, 2021; Gandhi, 2021; Iversen, 2004).

In practice, the intention of each future thinking and visioning activity was to help participants (both child and adult) move beyond the default dichotomous frames of likely-unlikely or desirable-undesirable futures, and instead to question assumptions and to explore a wider lens of possibilities.

When participating in future visioning activities, therefore, children and adults alike subsequently recognised that there are many possible futures and judgment of what is possible, plausible, probable, or even preferable, differs between people and over time. This, however, is what made the inclusive and collective discussions about the future so engaging and important. They generated rich insights into the future and can be used to inform decisions in the present which have impact in the future in terms of elevating early learning system quality, equity, and accessibility for example.

### How is it done? - High level activity overview

As mentioned above, insights gathered from children and adults in this initiative were generated using a range of future thinking methods to help prompt collective imagining and visioning. These methods were designed with inputs from leading futurists and included:

- Postcards to the future (photo elicitation)
- Landscapes of the future (3D system modelling)
- Transformative scenarios (narrative scenario development).

All former activities were undertaken with both child and adult audiences in mind, with respective adaptations made to activities support equal understanding and equitable involvement.

When conducting the activities specifically with children, we adopted a "train the trainer" model approach where professionals were supported, trained and mentored to implement the activities in their services and communities where strong relationships between children and adults already existed. This aimed to provide the children with a sense of safety and security where they felt confident to express themselves and communicate their ideas with authenticity and honesty with people they knew and were comfortable with.





## Activities explained

### Postcards to the Future (Photo Elicitation)

As part of the postcards to the future visioning activity, each participant (both children and adults) was provided with a set of 5 photos and were asked to choose the photo that resonated with them and their ideal vision of a happy, fulfilling future early learning system the most. After choosing a photo, participants answered the following question on the back of the postcard; “What is your vision for the early learning system?”.



### Landscapes of the Future (3D System Modelling)

In the landscapes of the future visioning activity, participants were asked to imagine a successful, holistic early learning system in 2040 that would enable all children and families to thrive. When conducting this activity in person, children and adults made landscapes using paper and loose parts such as toys, textiles, playdough and more. For those who did this activity online, they took photos around their homes or offices as sources of inspiration to reflect their imagined visions. After creating or capturing their visions, participants shared back with their respective groups their findings and rationale.





## Transformative Scenarios (Narrative Scenario Development)

The final visioning activity was the Transformative Scenarios future planning. In this activity only conducted with adults, participants were invited to leave behind the system they know and the assumptions, judgements and expectations they hold. Instead, they were encouraged to think about how a new system might better serve the varied needs of children and families in a changing environment.

This proved to be a unique opportunity for adults to challenge their underlying assumptions, examine points of difference from the norms and expectations associated with the current version of the early learning system, and to think outside the box to imagine alternative futures from a different perspective.

Participants created their transformative scenarios in small groups and after group discussions, each fed back to the collective and engaged in dialogue by practicing questioning, curiosity, and collaboration.

As part of this activity, small groups identified:

- The key drivers shaping their future early learning system
- The new behaviours emerging
- What their new version of the system could look like
- The subsequent outcomes for families and children
- How the scenario generated was fundamentally different from the world we currently live in
- A headline statement: “This is a world in which...”

For a more in-depth look into the future visioning activities, please see the TEL methodology report available [here](#).





## Why were these methods used?

We elected to use three distinct methods of data collection because of the inherent value in multi-modal methodologies. Multimodality in this context referred to the use of qualitative group discussions, small focus groups, and individual interviews to solve the research problem comprehensively. The use of multi-modal methods collectively enhances the validity of findings, including the ability to cross-reference multiple types of generated data (Fabry et al., 2022).

The structure of the three activities, moreover, was shaped by the acknowledged power of the use of vignettes in qualitative research, particularly in studies involving young children. Vignettes, in this context, included “short scenarios in written or pictorial form, intended to elicit responses to typical scenarios ... [or] stories about individuals, situations and structures, which can make reference to important points in the study of perceptions, beliefs and attitudes” (Barter and Renold, 1999).

In doing the future visioning activities outlined above, participants also undertook and experienced four key development and reflective processes, each of which informed the other:

- **Revelation:** participants shared their individual expectations and perspectives in generating their desired vision of the future, and in doing so highlighted and explicitly discussed the assumptions they carry with them about their future visions.
- **Revision:** in imagining the future through a frame that is distinct from their expectations and assumptions, participants were able to revise their original visions and experiment with different sets of key drivers to stretch the imagination and craft alternative future scenarios.
- **Revaluation:** when participants came back to the present and looked at the alternative futures they had explored, they were able to search for new issues that had emerged and ask powerful new questions.
- **Responsiveness:** driven by the questions raised during revaluation, participants were able to generate ideas for learning and gaining new knowledge, this included projects, prototypes, and action learning plans.

In experiencing these four processes of revelation, revision, revaluation, and responsiveness, both child and adult participants were able to develop and hone their skills of enquiry and review the system’s overall effectiveness, rather than just carrying on with the status quo and learning and doing as they always have done. In this sense, the future visioning activities enabled all parties to question, in a positive way, what they do and why they do it and then decide whether there is a better way of doing it in the future. This process illustrates the work of systems change as participants’ mindsets and pre-conceived mental models surrounding early learning itself were transformed (Kania, Kramer, and Senge, 2018).

## Children at the centre

The future visioning methodology and corresponding activities were also utilised for this TEL initiative because they place children at the centre of the early learning system. Amongst their shared set of values, the Front Project and the Apiary Fellowship recognise the need to actively listen to and include the voices and perspectives of children and their families in decisions that emerge from the changing context in which they live. Promoting children’s voices can enable them to have a say in decisions that directly impact them.

In 1991, Australia ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. This specifies the right of children and young people to have their opinions considered in matters that affect their lives (Article 12, Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989). In this context, therefore, the future visioning methodology that have culminated in generating future-state visions for the early learning system in Australia have children's voices at the centre. They also incorporate the perspectives and lived experiences of their families, the ECEC sector and other relevant system stakeholders. These include but are not limited to the disability, Allied Health and Community Services sectors. In this manner, the visioning activities were deliberately designed to be as inclusive and accessible as possible, thereby enabling all stakeholders to launch a deeper national conversation about the future.



Consideration was also given to ensuring that the activities through which data were collected were structured to encourage open-ended and voluntary responses, particularly from child participants. While this may invoke notions of loose methodological parameters or give rise to concerns around the literal or reactive nature of responses, it was deemed vital (as supported by the literature on effective and ethical research with children) that participants were not placed in situations that felt unnatural or in any way forced. Qualitative methods such as those employed in this initiative are arguably far more effective in illustrating the authentic insights of younger children than quantitative approaches, which are “discernibly shaped by adult study designers” and leave little room for “children’s unanticipated, volunteered felt meanings” (Clark, 2011).

Lastly, it should also be noted that further to children’s voices and open-minded, voluntary involvement, the future visioning methodology was employed because it takes children’s wellbeing, including safety and privacy, directly into account. The safety and wellbeing of children is of paramount importance and was prioritised throughout implementation of these activities. Ethical principles and considerations were mandated to be adhered to by all participants including signing of a Collaboration Agreement by adult participating parties - which outlined all implementation, data storage and security considerations – as well as child assent and parental consent forms.

## Data Analysis and Validity

During each respective TEL initiative event – including the Inaugural Summit, data collection with children, data collection with adults, and three Transformative Scenarios workshops – data collected was collated and analysed in two different ways – using a bespoke framework and using thematic analysis. This was done to ensure that the overarching collective vision for the future of early learning generated could be as wholly representative, holistic, and comprehensive as possible. Different analytic lenses were also employed as they were regarded as the best suited to acquire the most relevant, accurate information respective to corresponding data.

For example, the hundreds of ideas, quotes and images generated during the Inaugural Summit were analysed using a bespoke framework that provided six categories for clustering the changes people wish to see in the system. These are areas that we might seek to intentionally nudge, change, influence or incentivise in the future so that the early learning system can work better for all children, families and communities across Australia. These six categories were:

1. **Resources and conditions** - skills, money, subsidies, technology within the system
2. **Feedback loops** - data, information and communication about the state of the system – and missing/delayed feedback loops
3. **Decision making** - authorising environment, decision-making structures and behaviours, implementation processes
4. **Power, relationships, and roles** - who is trusted, empowered, engaged? What connectivity or networks shape the system? What enables collaboration across boundaries?
5. **System design** - structures, laws, policies, institutions, rules - incentives, punishments, constraints
6. **System intent** - system goal/purpose and the dominant paradigms and beliefs that underpin system design.

For more details on the findings from the Inaugural Summit, please see [here](#).

When bringing together the findings of respective TEL initiative events in this report, thematic patterns, links and trends were identified as emergent across all outputs. The inductive thematic analysis that followed (outlined below) drew on inductive analytic methods, involving reading through textual data and identifying and coding emergent themes within the data.

This *inductive approach* meant that the data determined the themes that emerged. A *deductive* approach, conversely, would have involved approaching the data with preconceived themes that we would expect to find reflected there, based on theory or existing knowledge. The latter is more subjective as it is an active process of reflexivity in which the researcher's subjective experience is at the centre of the data sensemaking process (Azungah, 2018). As this work sought to centre children, families, and system actors, it is for this reason that the inductive approach was subsequently employed instead.

It is also important to note that while the TEL initiative set out to explore children and adult's visions for the future of early learning, responses did not always remain neatly in that conceptual framework, especially those of children. Rather, they often reflected their more immediate/innate interests, passions and feelings. Far from reducing the value of their contributions, this arguably emphasises children's critical and constructive ways of thinking around the environments they learn in, highlighting why their voices and perspectives are crucial in the development of strategies, policies, frameworks and programs that affect them.



## Themes

### Themes from children's narratives

After analysing the responses from 239 children across the country about their vision for the future of early learning, the following key themes emerged:

- **Learning and play environments** - diverse indoor, outdoor, natural and built environments support wellbeing, learning and development
- **Connection and community** - bonding with friends, family members, teachers and educators and place
- **Cognitive and emotional processes** - imagination, creativity, critical thinking and emotions
- **Artefacts** - tools children use including digital artefacts, toys and books
- **Activities** - physical activities indoor and outdoor, creative activities such as writing and drawing, and general play.

It should be noted that several of these themes - particularly learning and play environments, connection and community, and cognitive and emotional processes are interrelated and interdependent. Many also appear in the adult narratives which are explored in more detail in the later pages of this report. The duplicated and overlapping thematic responses show that both children and adults value several of the same elements in early learning and wish to see more of this in the future vision of the early learning system.

The themes have been broken and segregated below, however, to support inductive thematic analysis (see the section on Data Analysis and Validity above). The data determined the themes that emerged and thus they have been articulated as such. In the recommendations section of this report synthesis, they are brought back together in an effort to generate more holistic recommendations that are similarly interwoven and interdependent.

### Learning and play environments

Learning and play environments were the most mentioned aspects of children's future visioning of early learning in both the postcards to the future and landscapes of the future visioning activities. This suggests that children highly value diverse indoor, outdoor, natural and built environments as they are crucial to support their wellbeing, learning and development.

Overall, there were 74 mentions of outdoor environments (including natural and built) and 29 mentions of indoor environments from children who completed the postcards to the future activity. The largest number of comments – 42 in total – were related to natural outdoor environments specifically.

From the landscapes of the future activity conducted with children, 22 mentioned outdoor environments (both natural and built in equal measure) and two (2) spoke of indoor environments. The higher frequency of outdoor versus indoor settings, and more specifically of natural as opposed to built or synthetic settings suggests that children value and enjoy the former types of environments more.

To delve deeper, several children spoke of specific aspects of the natural environment that they enjoy and appreciate. These included gardens (vegetable gardens, fruit trees, grass, flowers, trees and other plants); animals and creatures (such as ladybirds, birds, sea animals, and farm animals); landforms, the elements, and atmospheric conditions (including rocks, sand, fire, clouds, the sky, rainbows, and rain); and exploring and playing with friends in different natural settings (including parks, beaches, and mountains).

*"I like finding things outside."*

*"I've got some leaves for fairies to sleep on. I'm making a beach now. I like looking for shells and crabs at the beach."*

*"I want to go on a mountain with grandpa."*



Although there were fewer comments from children about the built environment outdoors (n=10 from postcards, n=12 from landscapes), children nevertheless mentioned liking the buildings displayed in the postcards, as well as other built landscapes including Disneyland and fairgrounds, cubby houses at preschool, and playgrounds, specifically sandpits and seesaws.

*“I want to go to [the suburb], we got diggers at [the suburb].”*

*“I want to try to make Disneyland. I also made a candy world. It's got candy people and different kinds of marshmallows.”*

Other aspects of the outdoor environment that children commented on (postcards: n=22; landscapes n=1) included the sorts of activities they enjoyed doing outside such as playing with toys, scooters and swings, listening to “noisy sounds”, playing hide and seek, and planting plants and gardening.

There were fewer responses from children about the indoor environment; overall, 18 children in the postcards to the future and one (1) child in the landscapes of the future activities respectively made comments about indoor environments.

Of those who spoke of indoor settings, some mentioned enjoying the ‘home’ corner in daycare, whereas others commented that they like to learn at ‘school’ and one specified that they like to learn ‘with the teacher’. Some children went further and noted the activities that they enjoy doing indoors include sleeping, playing with toys, cooking, and looking outside through curtains and windows.

*“I like playing inside with toys”*

*“I like playing and learning at home”*

**Summary:** From these responses, it is possible to infer that environments, in particular natural outdoor environments, are greatly valued by children in early learning as they stimulate sensory learning, inquiry and curiosity, and exploratory adventurous spirit and discovery of the unknown.

There is a wealth of research that supports these children’s conclusions on the importance of outdoor environments in early learning. For example, in 2015 an international group of experts reviewed evidence on the benefits of active outdoor play for early learning and development, creating a Position Statement on Active Outdoor Play which noted: ‘Access to active play in nature and outdoors—with its risks— is essential for healthy child development. We recommend increasing children’s opportunities for self-directed play outdoors in all settings.’

To ensure a safe yet free environment for learning and play, therefore, outdoor spaces must align with National Law and be regularly maintained, as recommended by the QLD and SA state governments for instance. These laws and regulations are quite prescriptive about the focus on outdoor environments being as natural as possible (such as limiting fake grass, plastic, etc), and children having access to natural materials like stones, leaves, water.

It seems that there is most definitely a gap between what is being idealised and what is occurring. According to the National Quality Standards (NQS) for example, services are assessed against such criteria but obviously do to varying degrees of quality depending on context.

However, as the evidence above indicates children want access to natural outdoor environments and we know from research that this type of play enhances wellbeing and development. We recommend therefore, that efforts made need to go beyond the “business as usual” requirement and suggest that service providers and educators enhance opportunities for play in natural environments including opportunities to engage in local and community natural spaces (bush/nature/beach programs). The Early Childhood Outdoor Learning Network is one bright, leading example of this type of work as it exists to promote and support outdoor learning for preschool children in Australia.

## Connection and Community

47 children in the postcards to the future activity and 6 children in the landscapes of the future activity mentioned different people who hold significance in their lives and early learning journey. Whilst mums, dads, siblings, teachers and educators, and others (e.g., grandparents) were all named, the most frequently named group of people were friends (n=29). These references mostly involved playing with and/or making new friends.

Teachers, educators and parents were similarly often named in response to their involvement in learning and playing with the children, in addition to being tools in sensemaking and relationality. For example, when asked what they might change in the postcard they'd chosen, one child's response was:

*"I would change the grandfather to a daddy."*

Siblings were also identified by many as playmates, support networks, and companions, with one child noting:

*"I like to play with my brother because he helps."*

Other people and family members such as grandparents were spoken of in 13 comments in the postcards to the future activity and four comments in the landscapes of the future activity. Many children commented how they love their grandparents and enjoy spending time or participating in activities with them.

*"I'm making a place where Nona and Nono lives. They live in Queensland. I love them."*

*"It's a fairground because you can go down a big slide and eat lots of corn. I feel happy there and there's lots of people."*

**Summary:** It is evident from children's comments above that the people they interact with play a substantial influential role in their early learning journey and early childhood more broadly. Children have relationships with people of all ages and backgrounds, the diversity of which help them to weave an informed web of understanding wider civil society and their place within this. The connection that several of the children made in their responses between people, activities, places, and emotions further suggests that they appreciate sharing their experiences of learning with others whom they care about in places that hold meaning for them. This highlights the interconnected nature of the analysed themes and how they collectively cultivate more meaningful and memorable experiences for children, their families, and communities. In doing so, they positively support children's overall wellbeing, sense of nurture, security, and care.

The importance of attachment for children – both to people and places – is clearly iterated in international as well as domestic bodies of evidence-based research. As similarly noted by the Early Childhood Development Department at Erasmus University Rotterdam and Lady Gowrie Child Centre SA, attachment in the diverse forms helps children to regulate their negative emotions in times of stress and distress, shape their self-perception and the way they feel about the strains and stresses of intimate relationships, and to explore the environment, even if it contains somewhat frightening stimuli (Van IJzendoorn, 2019; Harman-Smith, 2011).



It seems apparent, therefore, that the importance of connection, community and attachment is being recognised but is not being translated accurately into policy and practice in Australia (the Front Project, 2022). There must be financial and career development pathways and reward needed to incentivise staff to progress their professional training at all levels and, where appropriate, to undertake advanced qualifications, ideally remaining in the sector to enhance the quality of early learning (The Front Project, 2019).





## Cognitive and emotional processes

56 children in the postcards to the future activities made comments related to cognitive and emotional processes. In the landscapes of the future activity, 17 children made comments indicative of these processes. Cognitive and emotional processes discussed included imagination, creativity, critical thinking and emotional reflection and feeling.

Comments indicating imagination included children imagining what they could do, or attributing characteristics to others, with one child recognising their own empowerment to choose their future:

*"I can choose what I want to be."*

Creativity was reflected in children's comments on their chosen postcards and elements that they would change, with several other children commenting about the things they like to create in addition to this:

*"I like making things for people."  
"I want to change the boy's hair to pink".*

Critical thinking was apparent in six comments (four in the postcard activity, two in the landscapes activity). For example, one child recognised the risk inherent in large vehicles.

*"... tractor bike with 4 seats and a roof and doors that open and close with a horn and a bell in case people don't hear the horn."*

Children also named various emotions in their activities including love, love for and with their families, anger and annoyance. One child even recognised how activities can impact emotion: "

*"I like dancing. It makes me happy."*





**Summary:** It is apparent that cognitive and emotional processes are important facets in children's early learning as children recognise the value and importance of imagination, creativity, and emotional reflection in supporting their understanding and development of relational empathy and social interaction skills, self-empowerment and building self-esteem.

The importance of cognitive and emotional processes in early learning is well documented in existing literature and research. The most common arguments put forth contend that cognitive and emotional processes (such as imagination, creativity, and emotional sensitivity) excite children's curiosity and passion for learning, create possibilities for self-expression and development of higher-order thinking, critical thinking, and open their minds up to new possibilities, feelings, and empathetic development (Ganis and Patterson, 2011; Gidley, 2016). This demonstrates the co-dependence of cognition and emotional processing in healthy child development and the importance of fostering an early learning environment that enhances both. All of these are tools which enable children to think laterally, solve problems, and be emotionally available and mentally strong (Carrick, 2020).

However, measuring and quantifying cognitive and emotional processes, and in particular the nexus between the latter and both place-based learning and attachments and connections with communities are less thoroughly researched. The grey area of overlap between these three respective areas presents an opportunity for further research and to leverage existing research, particularly that of First Nations academics and practitioners (Choate and Tortorelli, 2022; Bowes and Grace, 2014; Lohoar, Butera, and Kennedy, 2014).

Several of these works highlight the complex co-dependent relationship that exists between children's cognitive and emotional development, place-based learning, and attachment to community (involving communal or extended caregiving and learning systems contrary to more narrow Eurocentric versions) in early childhood.



## Artefacts

In total, 52 children made comments about different artefacts in the postcards to the future activity, and 8 children made comments about artefacts in the landscapes of the future activity. The largest number of comments were about toys (n=45), whilst digital artefacts, books, food and animals achieved fewer than 10 comments each.

In relation to toys, many of the children's statements related to specific types of toys while others pertained to the experience of playing with toys. Indoor toys mentioned included but were not limited to the tickle bug (a soft, fluffy toy or character in a book), a toy bunny, magnets, baby dolls, shells, stickle bricks, baby toys, cars, chairs, toilet roll, Barbie dolls, jewellery, puzzles, Duplo, pencils, toy batman, real batman, ribbons, love hearts, dinosaurs. Outdoor toys specified were jumping mat, swings, skateboard, scooter, hula hoop, bikes, slides, helicopters, and a motorbike. Interestingly, two children considered risks and safety in their discussions;

*"I made some trampolines because I love jumping on the trampoline, but you have to be careful not to fall."*

In the postcards to the future activity, several children who chose the digital postcard commented on aspects of that card, including arrows, little circles, the robot, the screen, the (digital) tablet. Independent of the postcard, two children mentioned television while one mentioned an iPad. One child spoke of a computer in the landscapes of the future activity:

*"I'm also going to make a computer magic thing. I want to learn dancing, drawing and computer things. There's a 9cm small apple in my computer place."*

Books, food, and animals also appeared in children's discussions of early learning. Five children commented on books in a list of other artefacts or reading as an activity; six children respectively mentioned food either in relation to growing their own or their food preferences and tastes. Animals also made appearances in many children's landscapes of the future, with tigers, cats, dogs, giraffes, butterflies, elephants, snakes, monkeys and pigs being the most common.

**Summary:** From the above comments, it is evident that children see artefacts (be it digital, physical or otherwise) as imperative tools in their early learning and play as they illicit genuine enjoyment and contentment, stimulate social engagement, foster motor-skills development, and more.

Various influential researchers and early childhood proponents have referred to artefacts and play being children's work and harnessing the opportunities for learning. Children's games and toys contribute to the development of their cognitive, motor, psychosocial, emotional, and linguistic skills and play a key role in raising self-confident, creative, and happy children (Dag et al., 2021).

Artefact and toys, therefore, are beneficial for children's play and learning in a variety of ways. They help shape children's experience, enhance their imagination and affect their behaviours (Yilmaz, 2016). Toys that encourage unstructured play are particularly valuable for children's imagination and learning and are appreciated by parents and experts for the benefits they foster (Gardner et al., 2012). Therefore, it is important that learning and play artefacts be appropriately resourced in terms of funding and provision for services and organisations to deliver to children.



## Activities

30 children (26 in the postcards to the future and 4 in the landscapes of the future activities) spoke of different activities they like to participate in. These included physical activities, expressive activities such as crafting, drawing, and writing, and general play.

In relation to physical activities, many of the children's responses included artefacts such as bicycles, trampolines or gardening. When discussing expressive activities, conversely, several children named the activities they liked and what about it that they like specifically:

“I like doing art and making things.”

“... learning how to write my name.”

Cumulatively, 18 children mentioned general play-based activities, or simply 'playing'. Children discussed playing with different artefacts, with friends or other people, in different locations and the types of activities they enjoyed, thus bringing together several of the above themes in one.

**Summary:** As can be seen above, children's responses about activities – physical, play-based, or otherwise - suggest that they value and enjoy participating in these as part of their early learning journey.

There is a whole body of research available which concurs that activities not only support coordination and fine motor skills development, but also encourage mutual engagement and equitable involvement of all children in recreation and social bonding (Thrissur, 2021; Ceglowski, 1997).

Activities instil in children confidence, teamwork, and communication skills, whilst also teaching them to accept challenges and come up with possible solutions (Ibid). In this sense, the importance of activities should not be overlooked and should be continued to be implemented in practice in diverse ways that are engaging for all involved.





## Themes from adults' narratives

The following key themes emerged from adult's narratives:

- **Prioritise children's needs and perspectives** - shaping the future of early learning *with* rather than *for* children
- **"Equal footing" - roles and positionality** – universalising the roles of teacher and learner for children and adults alike, intergenerational learning and growing together
- **Integration of First Nations pedagogy and ways of doing, being, and knowing** - interconnected across curriculums, pedagogy and decision-making processes
- **Localised and community-informed learning and play environments** – in community settings, on Country, outside traditional "four walls"
- **Greater familial access to integrated services** - emphasis on familial choice and agency, communication and cooperation amongst services, organisations, and overlapping systems
- **Positive workforce value recognition and appreciation** - pay rates and working conditions, career pathways with opportunities for support and progression
- **Lifelong funding models** - for early learning and education, policy development and implementation, integrated hubs, community controlled.

Similar to the themes that emerged in the findings from the children's voices and perspectives, it should be noted that several of the themes above - such as localised learning and play environments and integration of First Nations pedagogy and ways of doing, being and knowing, for example-are interrelated and co-dependent. They have been broken down into specific themes, however, to support inductive thematic analysis. In the recommendations section of this report synthesis, they will be brought back together to generate more holistic solutions and contextually informed recommendations.





## Prioritise children's needs and perspectives

Out of a total of 96 adults (including centre leaders, practitioners, directors, and more) who attended the Inaugural Summit and Transformative Scenarios Workshops, and hence participated in the postcards to the future activity, 40 chose the postcard displaying children immersed in nature, playing and gardening together. When explaining their rationale for choosing this postcard, virtually all respondents highlighted the need to have children's needs and perspectives at the core of the future early learning system they wish to see. Some frequently iterated comments were concisely summarised in the following quote:

*"Children are at the centre, their contributions are heard and valued and their input into design and decisions is embedded in how we shape the future."*

Adult recognition of the value of children's involvement in system co-design was further underscored during landscapes of the future and transformative scenarios activities. Discussions recognising the agency, power and capabilities of children were said again and again.

Several groups also emphasised the significance of valuing early childhood for what it is and will always be: a time in which children, grow, learn, and simply be.

*"We value childhood for what it is right here and now... we think this should be appreciated more than say the drive for productivity or the need for centres to meet quality performance measures and standards."*

**Summary:** As can be seen from the responses above, it is apparent that children's needs and perspectives are at the forefront of many adults' visions for the future of the early learning system in Australia. For such a vision to become reality, it is necessary for learning to be shaped by and with children, slowing down to go at their pace and place emphasis on their current needs, experiences and enjoying the moment.

Although involving children in decision-making and co-design is not an original concept, it is currently gaining momentum in Australian early learning and development contexts. The National Quality Standards (NQS), for example, recognises children as competent and capable, and supports their agency by endorsing their involvement in decisions that cut across all seven quality areas including curriculum content decision-making (ACECQA, 2018; Commission for Children, Tasmania, 2016). Version two (2) of the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) and of the My Time, Our Place framework (MTOP, 2022) also emphasise children belonging, being, and becoming, with the latter acknowledging children's capabilities and participation as active citizens (ACECQA, 2022).

The fact that adult responses advocate for centring of children's needs and perspectives in a future vision for early learning system, however, suggests that a gap exists between what is said in rhetoric such as this and what is currently being implemented.





### Role exchange and “equal footing” positionality

When explaining their landscapes of the future and transformative scenarios, several small groups touched on the roles of teacher and learner in the early learning space and how these are assumed by literature, policy, and regulations to manifest in practice with children as learners and adults as teachers.

Correspondingly, these same participants noted that in their vision for the future early learning system, they thought it would be better if such roles were not as rigidly assigned. Instead, they reasoned that if children truly have agency and influence in decision-making on facets of early learning such as curriculum and content for example, then they need to be able to explore their interests alongside parents, guardians, communities, and practitioners.

In this sense, children, subsequently, should be empowered to become the leaders and teachers and adults as supportive learners alongside and from them. Put simply, one participant noted that the traditional roles of teacher and learner must be reimagined so that:

*“The roles of the teacher and learner are transferrable and universal.”*

Several other individuals in the postcards to the future activity (19 participants) and small groups in the landscapes of the future expanded upon this notion of transferrable and universal roles. They related it to positionality more broadly and the need to encourage equitable involvement of parents, grandparents, and all generations in children’s early learning journeys.

*“Multigenerational approaches where strong partnerships exist across generations, supporting the child to thrive.”*

**Summary:** It can be seen from the responses above that there is a growing desire amongst adult systems actors to break out of traditional, potentially confining roles and instead have learning as fluid, multigenerational practice. It seems that there are many practitioners, centre directors, for profit and not-for-profit parties across the country who seek more equitable involvement, knowledge exchange and learning across generations in their collective vision for the future early learning system.

The continuity and universality of learning is well-established the world over, as is the importance of learning the first years of one’s life to support cognitive and emotional growth (Mcleod, 2023; Mahn & John-Steiner, 2012). However, the notion of role transferability, or more specifically children taking on the role of teacher is less explored, especially in predominantly Western contexts.

Older academic studies such as those by Vernon Allen (1976) and Audrianna Allen (1967) explore in their respective works children taking on the role of tutoring other children and how this positively builds self-resourcefulness, independence, and empowers children to be actively involved in shaping their own learning methods, content, and journey. There are few recent studies, conversely, which touch on this.



There are also even fewer which explore children taking on the teacher role not just for their friends but for their families. It is understandable given that traditional Western conceptions of children as learners, not teachers are based on the often-overlooked assumption that age is a guarantee of wisdom and experience, and youth is a guarantee of innocence and vulnerability.

Research studies conducted by authors such as Gapany et Al (2021) alternatively point towards First Nations thinking and practices in which children are encouraged to learn and share knowledge with their families of all generations. “...by Aboriginal terms of reference, our children are regarded as capable, autonomous and active in contributing to the world. They are not helpless, hopeless and childish. Regard is given to their capacity to regulate their own behaviours given certain situations and to fulfil their responsibilities to self and to others.

This also means they have the capacity to ensure others fulfil their responsibilities toward them” (Martin, 2007). This could be regarded as one way of encouraging role transferability and learning universality in practice. As Martin notes “As an Aboriginal educator, the role of teacher has expanded to first be one of a learner in order to establish a physical, social, intellectual, emotional, cultural and spiritual environment where relatedness is the currency. Relatedness is the premise upon which any participation, trust and experiences can be built and then maintained” (Ibid).

Supportively, in the 2019 CIRCA review of the Aboriginal Families as Teachers (AFaT) program in NSW, the former found that in recognising that families are children’s first and most influential educators and that children should be active participants in shaping their own experiences as learners and knowledge holders, together they can build developmentally rich home learning environments, support the active participation of Aboriginal children and their families in early childhood education, and support successful transitions to school (CIRCA, 2020).

The costs of overlooking or ignoring the value of intergenerational connections, mutual learning, and role transferability in the early learning system and general civil society today is well-summarised in the following quote; generally speaking, “People are living longer, with many being isolated from family members and younger generations due to the family make-up, breakdown and migration. People today tend to socialise only with their own generation or family whether friends from school, students or new mums. Many of the places where we traditionally mixed are slowly disappearing. [...] This growing separation means that children and older adults miss out on opportunities for mutual interaction, understanding and learning” (Clyde, 2019). This quote serves as a warning, outlining a very different vision of the potential future of the early learning in Australia, one in which division and disconnect reign as they are growing to do so now.





## Integration of First Nations pedagogy and ways of doing, being, and knowing

In relation to intergenerational involvement in early childhood learning, many adult participants in across all three future visioning activities noted the importance of embedding Aboriginal values, knowledge, and culture throughout the system itself in principle and in practice. This was aptly summarised in the following comment:

*“No decision is made without First Nations people. First Nations pedagogy and perspectives are interconnected across curriculums and are integral to decision-making processes.”*

When asked to consider what this looks like, many respondents commented that First Nations elders, educators, teachers, community leaders and others involved in children’s early lives need seats at the table where decisions about where and what the children are taught and the ways in which they learn are held. One participant commented that:

*“First Nations pedagogy should be central to all decision making and deeply valued.”*

Others alternatively suggested changing the pace and bureaucratic control over learning in order to challenge the prominent Western focus of early learning on productivity, efficiency and control drivers. Instead, they suggested that the future system blur the boundaries between play and learning and encourage a paradigm shift around what is termed acceptable safety so that learning is not confined within four walls, rather learning is everywhere and involves everyone.

**Summary:** The comments above illustrate communal recognition of value that Aboriginal perspectives and knowledges have within the early childhood system at present and the collective desire to fully embed such perspectives in a more deeply interwoven manner within a future iteration of said system.

As part of the NQS, the second version of the EYLF (2022) was designed to help support this as is the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, led by the Coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Organisations and all Australian state and territory governments. This identifies early childhood education, care and development as a national policy priority.

Relational and place-based pedagogies with emphasis on diverse culturally informed ways of knowing, doing, and being are mentioned in such frameworks however the fact that feedback from this TEL initiative indicates a lack of follow-through says there is much left to be delivered and clarified. Martin (2007) and Kitson and Bowers (2010) suggest that factors such as anti-paternalism, relatedness, and indigenous views of literacy may go some way to bridging the gap from recognition in theory to practice in reality.

They also emphasise the importance of reconceptualising childhood as part of life-hood, bringing community, truth telling and “classroom rituals” together with agency and communal support. For instance, for instance, “Childhood is the evolvment of conception and babyhood and the transformation that is physical, intellectual, spiritual, emotional and social. Thus, children have engaged, and been engaged in, ever-increasing sets of relatedness, effecting agency in these engagements and in their relatedness to people, plants, animals, waterways, climate, land and skies... Aboriginal early childhood education programmes based on relatedness would respect the autonomy of each person, especially the children, but would equally respect their inter-relatedness” (Ibid).



## Community-informed learning and play environments, familial choice, and integrated service provision

In the postcards to the future activity, 18 adult participants chose the postcard displaying children and community learning outside. When explaining their rationale for choosing this postcard, many commented on the need to host learning and play in diverse, sustainable environments and promote relational and place-based pedagogy. Many also noted that to truly be sustainable, however, the design of these environments must be informed by First Nations' perspectives, local community collaboration, and integrated, accessible service provision. For example, the participants stated that they want to see the following in the future early learning system across the country:

*"Community responsive-localised settings developed within communities where children and families can access integrated early learning and education, health, social services, food/nutrition and nature/ environment."*

*"Community early learning settings on Country with multiple pathways and entry points."*

*"Sustainability and environment are integral in the creation of community spaces."*

These comments highlight the need to adapt national strategies and frameworks to suit community and localised contexts and the potential gaps between intent and implementation that currently exist. In one small group's transformed scenario, they flipped this current reality to say that:

*"... families' and parents' individual choices are respected and gaps between intent and implementation do not exist as early learning services are accessible and affordable in every suburb, supported by commitment from government and policy reforms."*

Several other participants mentioned diverse early learning settings in relation to supporting children's sense of security so that they feel comfortable to express themselves freely:

*"Inclusive and diverse settings where individuality and uniqueness are embraced."*

*"Inclusive and diverse environments are created, and everyone is respected."*



**Summary:** It is evident that the environment in which early learning is conducted matters greatly to those who are involved, whether that be children or adults. As discussed earlier, the findings of this TEL initiative indicate that children generally prefer to learn and play in natural outdoor environments. It seems that adults agree, with their focus being meaningful on Country learning and cultural safety, community-informed design and involvement, and coalescing between services to promote universal accessibility and familial choice.

Although such aspects of early learning environments are iterated in high-level government policies and frameworks such as EYLF v2 (2022), MTOP v2 (2022), and the NQS (with the third quality area being ‘The environment as “the third teacher”’, the fact that these were the most prominent themes discussed indicates that there is still a way to go in translating national rhetoric into tangible localised actions.

The emphasis on community involvement and integration of service provision especially raises questions around the driving actors hindering collaboration. The Productivity Commission Inquiry into Early Childhood Education and Care (Goodstart, 2023) points towards mixed-market system conflating conflicting agendas, competition, and bureaucracy. The latter suggests systems actors should look to a more deliberate and planned approach to promote ‘network approval’ amongst all stakeholders (at local and regional levels particularly) to open new integrated services in community environments (Ibid).

New Zealand’s newfound approach to network management, for example, could be a bright spot which the Australian early learning system could learn from. The former is designed to ensure that licensed early childhood services are part of a planned and diverse national network that is sustainable and meets the local needs of communities (NZ Ministry of Education, 2023).

Services have to apply for and be granted network approval, meaning that they must show that there is a need for the new service, of the type and in the location proposed and that they are suitable to provide the service. Applications are assessed against 7 criteria and the Minister of Education has the final say in application approval status. As Māori immersion services are eligible to be excluded from the requirement to seek network approval, perhaps the same could be applied to Aboriginally owned and run services here in Australia.

The ACCC inquiry interim report alternatively highlights the growing disparity surrounding availability and affordability of childcare and early learning services in regional versus urban areas. Average fees for centre-based day care services are higher in areas with more services (in urban settings) and for-profit services generally charging more than not-for-profit services. In relation to parental and familial choice, the inquiry finds that “competition in childcare emerges more substantively through non-price factors and service differentiation... Parent and guardian choice seems to be focused on location, availability, safety and security and connections with educators” (ACCC, 2023).

These findings are similarly reflected in those gathered from this TEL initiative, however, respondents suggested that one potential way of reducing these disparities is to devolve decision-making processes around service planning and building, for example, to consult with parents, families, and communities and put more power in the hands of those on the ground. Some workshop TEL participants took this a step further to suggest that there needs to be built-in flexibility in national standards, frameworks, and procedures to ensure that their recommendations are relevant, adaptable and applicable to diverse cross-country contexts.





## Workforce value recognition and appreciation

In the postcards to the future activity, 18 participants chose the postcard displaying children learning outside with a male educator guiding them. When asked why they selected this specific postcard, many respondents highlighted the importance of and need to greatly value the workforce, including all educators, teachers and practitioners. Two

(2) respondents commented:

*“My vision or hope for the future of the early learning system is quality educators building relationships; listening to children’s voices; being attuned to children’s needs; collaborative learning; and using every opportunity to teach. This postcard was chosen because it speaks volumes about communities...”*

*“The early learning system values the workforce by high pay rates and conditions, and there are career pathways.”*

During the landscapes of the future and transformative scenarios activities, other participants similarly recognised the need to appreciate, incentivise, and value the workforce to support greater staff attraction and retention, better pay and conditions of employment, and quality training and leadership. When asked how this could be achieved, some noted that the focus and overarching mindset within the early learning system needs to shift so that existing underlying assumptions and widely held societal beliefs are challenged.

These assumptions and beliefs, they commented, include the notion that ECTs, educators, and practitioners are simply carers and/or childminders, and the early learning space is naturally female-centred due to conventional gendered stereotypes.

In terms of what such challenges to these assumptions and beliefs could look like in practice, participants suggested revisiting and altering the language used with regards to early learning practices. This, they suggested, could help with expectation management, changing the narrative and raising the status of professions within the system more generally.

Others workshop participants highlighted the need to more positively incentivise those already in the workforce as well as draw others in. This, they suggested, could be achieved by offering better opportunities for career progression, flexibility to engage in leadership or practitioner positions as preferred (rather than as sector or services’ needs demand), and supporting those entering the workforce with more practical hands-on experience and skills to deal with everyday realities that they may encounter through trauma-informed practice training for example.

Such discussions concerning workforce pay and conditions, career progression, and skills development are at the forefront of national and state and territory governments’ agendas as seen by the Federal Government’s Department of Education National Children’s Education and Care Workforce Strategy (2023), Productivity Commission Report, and more.



**Summary:** The conversation surrounding revisiting language and terminology is ongoing at present in many areas across the country but there is an evident lack of national uniformity and clarity on levels of appropriateness and professionalism (Roberts, 2022). Early Childhood Australia (ECA, 2021) and Petit Early Learning Journey (Petit ELG, 2022) pay particular attention to the fact that ‘whether written or spoken, the power of words can detract, humble, honour, encourage and empower. Using professional language is a choice to support and respect our sector and its educators’ (Ibid).

Shifting language use and terminology can also frame the work as both valuable and part of a continuum, connecting the early years to the rest of children’s lives; ‘By framing the work as education and care as part of a birth to five continuum and beyond, early educators, teachers, and practitioners might be perceived as such rather than the ‘childcare for parental employment’ discourse which devalues the professional role of staff’ (EYWC, 2021).

Broadcasting knowledge, experiences, and realities of those working within the sector to civil society more generally was also suggested by TEL transformative scenarios activity participants as a means of challenging underlying assumptions and stereotypes. Participants noted that knowledge sharing could be achieved through leveraging contacts and information sharing in the system and through connected systems such as nutrition and food, mental health, agriculture, and more.

Although there are some national bodies such as the Build Initiative who believe in and champion the interconnectedness and interdependence of all elements of the early childhood system – including early learning, health, housing, economic development, and transportation - there are few that operate at the state, territory, or community level (Build Initiative, 2023).

Moving forward, it is apparent, therefore, that there needs to be a creation of set national standards (with room for adaptability to local geographical and cultural contexts) to encourage uniformity and clarity surrounding language and terminology use with regards to the workforce.

Furthermore, although this change in terminology is a start, it is not enough (EYWC, 2021). Expectations about the real-life scenarios encountered in working practice, qualification levels of staff, and their pay and conditions also need to be brought more in line with other phases of the national education sector beyond the early years. A change in terminology, coupled by additional financial and developmental incentives for those both considering work in the early years sector and those already in post, could create a virtuous cycle which reflects the crucial importance of the sector and positively change public perceptions.





## Lifelong funding models

The final theme that emerged prominently throughout the TEL future visioning activities, especially in the landscapes of the future and transformed scenarios, was funding. More specifically, over 20 participants mentioned the desire for lifelong funding models to promote universal entitlement, accessibility, and affordability of early learning. The need to sustain and maintain such models throughout children's early learning journey and their transition into primary school was also mentioned explicitly. The structural change required to do this at a national level would have to come from Federal Government and would likely manifest in retargeted resource flows and policies underpinned and informed by mindsets surrounding the value and prioritisation of the early learning system in relation to others. To incentivise such high-level governmental structural changes, it was posited during the transformative scenario activity that implicit, prevalent age-old (predominantly Western) assumptions that children are burdens or "adults in waiting" need to be flipped. Instead, one participant proposed that: *"Children should be regarded as citizens and treated by government as such. They deserve equitable resourcing and funding, as does the sector more broadly."* At the local level, conversely, participants stated that attitudes need to transform so that services operate on the proviso that: "...our community and our families employ us".

To do this, TEL transformative scenario activity participants suggested that funding could be managed locally, underpinned by consistent coordination and transparent communication between service providers. It was agreed amongst small groups that these facets of collaboration "must be championed over competition" and consequently informed decisions made about training needs, type of service provision, etcetera could occur at local rather than regional levels. In this sense, it is possible to infer that systems change in a semi-explicit form – being relational change concerning relationships and connections, and power dynamics – needs to shift to generate positive impact in terms of funding continuity and sustainability. The latter conclusion was perfectly summarised by one workshop participant; "By putting more power in the hands of those on the ground, the system might look less uniform but overall be better at adapting to and catering for the needs of those it aims to support."

**Summary:** It is apparent that funding and the utility and applicability of different models are at the forefront of many adult practitioners, centre and service providers' thoughts when considering their future visions for the early learning system in Australia. The history of Australia's funding models with regards to the early learning and early childhood system more broadly are well-documented in research conducted by CELA (2023), the Australia Institute Centre for Future Work (Grundhoff, 2022), and others (Hill & Wade, 2021). These concur that in recent decades there has been a general shift from implementing supply-based funding to needs- and demand-based funding models, as evidenced by the Child Care Subsidy (CCS) and Cheaper Child Care Policy (2023).

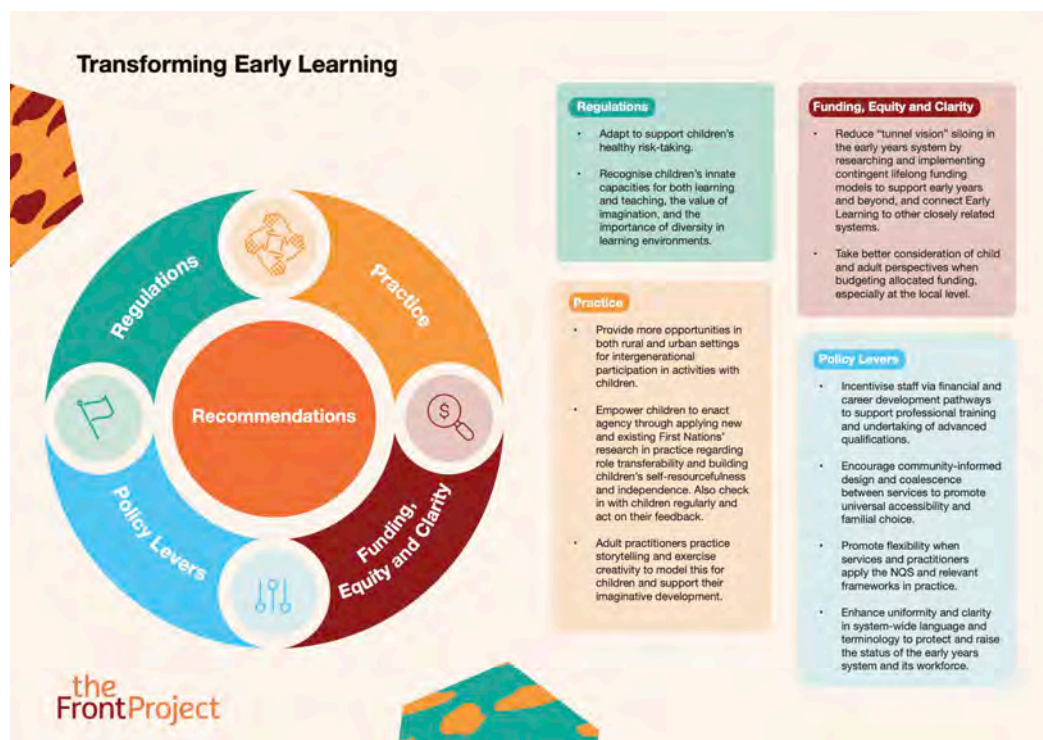
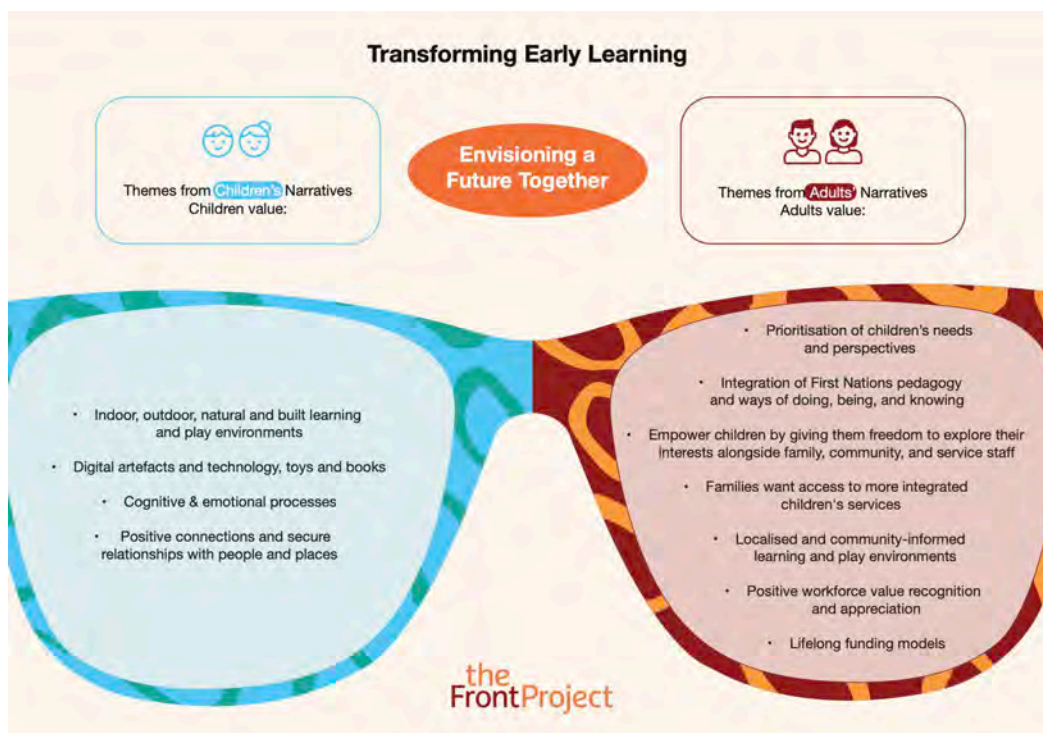
Accompanying this shift, however, have been persistent questions around the alignment to purpose, advantages and disadvantages, applicability and overall utility of such funding models, especially when translated from theory and policy into practice. ACA, ACCC, ECA, ELACCA, the Front Project, and The Parenthood, for example, have all provided perspectives in relation to the CCS evaluation. The latter noted concerns in relation to familial budgeting - 'it is hard to manage when subsidy levels may vary from week to week' - and services bearing the financial burden of changes 'whilst waiting for issues with eligibility to be sorted' (Lucas, 2019).

Alternatively, the Front Project recommended features to improve the CCS including the maximum subsidy increase to 95% of the hourly rate cap (up from 85%), broadening access so that families with combined income of \$80,000 can receive the maximum subsidy, more gradual subsidy phasing rather than sharp changes as income increases, and all families receiving some subsidy, regardless of earning level (minimum 30% subsidy for all families). To read more on this, see here. It is worth noting, however, that at the time of writing this report, it is not yet clear the impacts of the ACCC and PC reports as they were only recently introduced and so more research is needed on this subject in the coming months.

## Summary of Thematic Findings

The thematic findings from the TEL initiative demonstrate that adults and children have a shared vision for a future early learning system that puts children at the centre. When child and adult narratives are brought together into one collective vision, they illustrate a universal desire to generate a future system that enables a joyful, curious and wonderful experience for all involved, filled with positive and nurturing relationships, activities and play that foster creativity, imagination, and learning. First Nations peoples' involvement and co-design are certainly key to this vision, as is internal and external systems collaboration.

As noted in many of the analyses regarding key themes, it is apparent that we need to find practical ways of centring children's needs and perspectives in the iterated early learning system. We can see preliminary indicatory evidence of this in key frameworks such as the NQS, EYLF v2 (2022) and MTOP v2 (2022). However, the fact that adult responses advocate for centring children's needs and perspectives in a future vision for early learning system suggests that a gap exists between what is said in rhetoric and what is currently being implemented.





## Recommendations

As Mark V Heard appropriately notes;

*“Without execution, vision is just another word for hallucination”.*

These recommendations subsequently bring together the key themes and evidence-based data above to support the development of a vision for the future early learning system that can be executed and is informed by children, families, communities, and the sector more broadly.

## Regulations

The TEL initiative has pulled into sharp focus that there must be more contextually adaptive regulations surrounding several key facets of the early learning system.

Although some regulations already provide some scope for calculated risk-taking by adults and risky play by children, this is evidently limited and is compounded by the problem of a risk-adverse culture. The latter can include service managers and families who may not understand the benefits of risk, along with educators who may not be able to articulate the importance of or advocate for risky play.

In order to truly prioritise children’s needs and perspectives, and foster co-design and connections with families, communities, and services Government departments should provide more resources and advice on these matters and facilitate more opportunities for professional development. This will not only enable parties to support risky play more outdoor play, it will also encourage children’s self-directed development and learning outside of constrictive traditional “four wall” environments.

Across the country, regulations must recognise children’s innate capacities for both learning and teaching and the value of their imagination and creativity (Schroeder et al., 2022; Rahiem, 2021). Regulations must also acknowledge the importance of diversity in learning environments and how no two play areas are the same. Indoors and outdoors, there must be greater universal emphasis on connecting to Country, culture, and history through learning about land, sea, and community in storytelling and other engaging activities (Thompson, 2020; Martin, 2007).

There is already some evidence of this happening, as seen in the Bush Kinders Program in Victoria and intergenerational play groups and centres scattered across the country for example (Vic Gov, 2023; AIPP, 2023). However, there is a long way to go before regulations are both nationally applicable and contextually relevant and adaptive across all areas of Australia.

## Funding, equity and clarity

To leverage the recognised value of relationships, attachments, and connections between children, families, carers, practitioners, and communities, Federal Government funding needs to operate in a sustainable and longitudinal manner.

**Funding of “tunnel vision” siloing of the early year system should be either significantly altered or completely overhauled in favour of contingent lifelong funding models which not only support children throughout their early years and beyond, but also connect the early learning system to primary education, food and nutrition, housing, healthcare, and other closely related systems (ELAA, 2023; DSS, 2023). There must be further in-depth research and investigation as to what this could look like and how it could be structured, especially within current and near future contexts given the ACCC and PC reports published this year and the subsequent consequences.**

The Front Project's report on Funding Models and Levers for ECEC highlights the variety of funding instruments and models that are available to the early learning system in Australia. The latter study encourages broader understanding of each funding type to enable stakeholders across the system to engage in constructive and collaborative discussions around the best type, or combination of types, to support system collaborations, accessibility and affordability for all children, families, communities and practitioners, as well as high-quality service provision and a capable workforce.

**At a local level, it is clear particularly from the adult narratives that there must be a devolution of power so that decisions about funding, curriculum and pedagogy, service location, type, staff training, recruitment needs and more can be made and collectively informed by children, families, and community leaders as well as by service providers and practitioners.**

**To support this, rather than creating another layer at the local level in an already complex funding system by which money is channelled, instead, when budgets are allocated, they need to take better consideration of child and adult voices. This could be achieved through reference groups and advisory committees at the local level.**

Although there are community childcare associations and management services scattered across regionalities, there are few which involve children, families, and other services directly (CCC, 2023). If these reference groups and localised collaborative advisory committees expanded their reach to include service directors and practitioners, and related system representatives as well as community leaders, parents and families, then they could consult directly and safely with children about their contextual experiential, relational, and learning needs and priorities. These committees could thus act with rather than on behalf of children and hold more influence over allocation of capitation/needs-based funding (as well as other types such as programmatic funding for instance) to holistically and equitably support children's attachments to people and place.

By decentralising control and democratising the decision-making process in this way, funding could be used to purchase artefacts and materials to support all-party engagement through activities – with the activity type(s) to be decided collectively. This would result in children playing and learning with toys and games alongside their parents, carers, and teachers, and therefore more greatly contribute to their building cognitive, motor, psychosocial, emotional, and linguistic skills (Dag et al., 2021). In turn, families and practitioners would also be emotionally rewarded by raising more self-confident, creative, and happy children.





## Policy Levers

### Sustainable and valued workforce

Recent publications such as the ACCC and PC reports have highlighted that realistic policies and procedures are the platforms which will support the early learning system to have a sustainable and valued workforce. Thematic findings from the TEL initiative supports this conclusion that policy changes will enable the system to pay its workforce properly, promote positive and generative working conditions, and subsequently provide sustainable, high-quality early learning experiences for all involved and changed perceptions of the early years career pathway.

**To do this, financial and career development pathways and reward are needed to incentivise staff to progress their professional training at all levels and, where appropriate, to undertake advanced qualifications, ideally remaining in the sector to enhance the quality of early learning (the Front Project, 2019).** This should include opportunities for professional development training and progression into wider sectoral leadership roles in local authorities, training providers, and universities.

Importantly, these opportunities should be accessible but not mandatory to avoid creating vacuums and shortages at the practitioner level and underconfident and inexperienced systems stewards (NSW Government, 2022). The Front Project's Upskill program is a current example of this wherein educators are personally supported through mentoring, access to peer-to-peer support, and leadership and development opportunities as they upskill to become early childhood teachers (ECTs).

In supporting a sustainable and valued workforce through leveraging policy levers, interactions between children and their educators and teachers would subsequently become more positive, trusting, and consistent (EYLF v2, 2022). As findings documented in this report illustrate, both children and adult narratives place great value upon connection, community, and relational bonding. Lasting attachments based on feelings of safety (including cultural safety), security, and support are key to children's social, emotional and cognitive development and learning to form impactful, character-building relationships and connections with others of different ages and backgrounds.





The child and adult narratives above infer that to apply an overly regulated, efficiency and productivity-driven policy lens, therefore, may hinder interactions between children and practitioners and subsequently restricts the level of attachment and bonding that can be achieved. Instead, the policy focus could shift towards valuing children as citizens, for who and where they are now, for the early learning experience they need and desire rather than the one which adults assume and enact for them. In this sense, early learning should be co-constructed by children and practitioners alike. Well-trained educators and teachers need to respect children in the here and now, to appreciate their learning and developmental needs, and to subsequently provide explicit engaging and adaptable learning opportunities.

### Place-based learning

Although the frameworks exist to endorse place-based learning, it is clear from the TEL research in this report that there is a gap between national policy intentionality and rhetoric, and local experience and practice (EYLF v2, 2022). TEL findings show that children tend to prefer learning and playing in natural outdoor environments, and adults agree with this, in particular with learning on and about Country. However, generally, children today have fewer opportunities for outdoor free play or regular contact with nature than they did one or two generations ago, physical boundaries have shrunk and they experience less autonomy than they did in the 1960's and 1970's (Government of South Australia, 2017).

To rectify this, there must be greater community-informed design and coalescence between services supported by policy levers to promote universal accessibility and familial choice. The more integrated and collaborative services are with one another, communities, and families, the greater the likelihood of forging sustainable cooperative working relations with related systems that can better cohesively and holistically support early childhood.





## Localised decision-making

Given that the responses from children and adults highlight the importance of community and place, devolving decision-making, power and control around service planning, building and infrastructure must be affected by policy amendments.

**In this sense, it is apparent that there needs to be a more balanced approach to localised decision-making with children and adults' perspectives feeding into this. Such an approach must occur within a more uniform system in which there is a greater degree of consistency – this could be aided by better and more supportive and understandable translation for services and practitioners when they apply the NQS and policy frameworks in practice so that they are relevant, adaptable and contextually applicable to diverse settings.**

This recommendation is not only supported by the TEL findings above but also insights generated by the ACCC report (2023). This shows that markets and experiences of early learning are hyper local, and families choose early childhood education and care primarily based on location amongst other factors. Putting power in hands of those on the ground, therefore, may create a less uniform system but one which would be better at adapting to and meeting local needs. This suggests some flexibility is required within existing policies.

## Revisiting language and terminology

**To manage the critical and often undermining assumptions and expectations of those entering the sector as well as civil society more broadly, the Government must act to protect and raise the status of the early years system and its workforce.** To support this, the system-wide conversation around language and terminology needs greater direction to enhance uniformity and gain greater clarity regarding appropriateness of usage and professionalism (Roberts, 2022). Using professional language is a choice to support and respect the sector and its educators and has the potential to frame the work as both valuable and part of a continuum, connecting the early years to the rest of children's lives (EYWC, 2021; IECA, 2021; Petit ELG, 2022).

Moving forward, it is apparent, therefore, that there needs to be a creation of set national language and terminology standards orchestrated or illustrated through policy, with room for adaptability to local geographical and cultural contexts.



## Practice

The evidence is compelling for Government to incentivise centres and services to make the following adjustments to their practice as these ideas are coming directly from the children, practitioners and centre and service leaders themselves.

Much of the below practice recommendations are not entirely new or groundbreaking. However, they are uniquely approached from the dual angle of promoting children's voices and perspectives and internal and external collaboration amongst systems parties.

It should also be noted that practice recommendations are not uniform, realistically they vary depending on context and therefore recommendations are deliberately not overly prescriptive as they will subsequently show up differently.

## Intergenerational learning

It is clear from the findings in both children and adult narratives in this TEL initiative that the more intergenerational involvement in children's early learning journeys, the better they are for everyone in terms of relationship and connection building, knowledge sharing, and meaningful and memorable experiential generation.

**There must be more opportunities in both rural and urban settings for intergenerational participation in activities with children such as active play, storytelling, and more.** First Nations thinking and practices encourage children to learn and share knowledge with their families of all generations. Indeed, just as elders are traditional custodians of Country and knowledge, children learn this as they "are regarded as capable, autonomous and active in contributing to the world. Regard is given to their capacity to regulate their own behaviours given certain situations and to fulfil their responsibilities to self and to others" (Martin, 2007; Gapany et al., 2021).

If models such as this concerning intergenerational knowledge sharing and learning were to be implemented more often in practice in Australian early learning settings, therefore, then this would promote more equitable and open involvement for broader communities as well as non-nuclear families.

## More equal footing between practitioners, families and children

**If children are to truly thrive, enact agency, and have their voices actively listened to in the early learning system, then they need to be placed on a more equal footing with adults in terms of role assignment and recognition.** Likewise, if the overarching objective of the early learning system is to centre and empower children, then they need to be able to have the freedom in practice to explore their interests alongside their parents, guardians, communities, and practitioners. There also needs to be further research into what feedback loops can be implemented to hear from children on a regular/periodic basis about their experiences in and ideas about early learning.

**In this sense, traditional Western approaches to the roles of teacher and learner need challenging and adapting in favour of learning from First Nations approaches.** As Martin (2007) notes, here "the role of teacher has expanded to first be one of a learner in order to establish a physical, social, intellectual, emotional, cultural and spiritual environment where relatedness is the currency. Relatedness is the premise upon which any participation, trust and experiences can be built and then maintained". The value of championing both new and existing research of First Nations scholars and practitioners regarding role transferability and building children's self-resourcefulness, independence, and active engagement in shaping their own learning methods, content, and journey cannot be overstated.



## Storytelling and imagination

The insights from children that have emerged during this initiative remind us of how important imagination and stories are in shaping children's perspectives and understandings not only of early learning, but also of the world and their place in it. This must be supported by adult practitioners who practice storytelling and exercise creativity themselves.

As the landscapes of the future demonstrate, children's imaginations are vibrant and powerful, and yet they are often recognised as intangible or superfluous in policies about practice as they are assumed to be difficult to measure and/or quantify (Treffinger, 2009). Instead, policies prioritise drivers around quality, efficiency, and productivity for example which are of course merited but perhaps neglect to value early childhood for what it is – a life stage of discovery and exploring in which children grow, learn, and simply be (Thompson, 2020).

There is a significant body of evidence-based research which indicates the scientific value of imagination (and by extension imaginative play, learning and storytelling) in building children's critical thinking skills, resilience, capacity and use of expressive and receptive language, emotional maturity and social skills which children carry with them throughout the rest of their lives (Schroeder et al., 2022; Rahiem, 2021; Thompson, 2020).

To support children's imagination and storytelling, therefore, practitioners need to be doing this regularly with the children. In many early learning settings, play-based learning is implemented alongside activities involving digital, written and verbal storytelling and knowledge sharing, for example. However, much can be learned from First Nations traditional practices which speak to the innate need to connect children and communities to their place, history, and each other and "storytelling is a good place to start" (Taylor, 2022).



## Conclusion

The above recommendations aim to address the most significant challenges that are currently pervading the early learning system, to ultimately ensure a clear and cohesive strategy of directionality and purpose in the future.

This report's recommendations are closely interlinked and provide a response which is greater than the sum of its parts. Taken together, these measures aim to support the system in a strategic, joined-up way so that together we can truly transform the early learning system into one that every child, family and community can co-design and thrive as party to, a system supported by inclusive, equitable and coalescing service provision and effective stewardship.

It is crucial that the Federal Government take a coalescing, holistic approach to future strategies for the sector. Piecemeal reform has consistently failed or only been partially successful, leaving the sector with an uneven landscape in which there are varying degrees of pay, staff support and quality of provision.

### **What is the legacy of the TEL initiative?**

The TEL initiative is the first of its kind in that it actively listens to, documents, and recognises children, family, and workforce views and synthesises them into one cohesive vision for the future of the early learning system. However, there is certainly more work to do.

The TEL initiative and the concept and corresponding process for envisioning the future of early learning was born from the Front Project's application of systems change approaches and the cultivation of an extraordinary group of system leaders in the Apiary Fellowship.

The ideation of Apiary Fellows, the TEL initiative and its focus on promoting children's voices and perspectives has sparked government interest and has generated further exploratory research and ongoing work commissioned by the Department of Social Services (DSS) and the Productivity Commission to ensure children are heard as part of their ECEC enquiry.

Regarding DSS specifically, the Front Project's Impact Foundry has recently been engaged in research that will bring children's perspectives more closely into the Early Years policymaking process in Australia. The present work has been commissioned by the Department of Social Services, on behalf of the Early Years Strategy Taskforce.

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