



**MACQUARIE**  
University

## Macquarie University PURE Research Management System

---

**This is the author version of an article published as:**

Wong, S., Fordham, L., Davis, B., & Tran, D. (2023). Supporting Regional and Remote Children's Participation in High Quality Early Years Services. *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*, 48(3), 217–233.

**Access to the published version:**

<https://doi.org/10.1177/18369391231173178>

Copyright The Author(s) 2023. Version archived for private and non-commercial, non-derivative use with the permission of the author/s. For further rights please contact the author/s or copyright owner.

## **Supporting Regional and Remote Children’s Participation in High Quality Early Years Services**

### **Abstract**

Little is known about children’s participation in early childhood education (ECE) in regional and remote areas in Australia. This research addresses this gap by investigating the perspectives of early childhood centre directors and educators who work directly in ECE services in these areas. The study used a two-stage mixed methodology, including focus groups with 70 centre directors/educators of ECE services in regional and remote areas of NSW, followed by a survey completed by centre directors/educators in 37 services, to identify the most relevant and pressing barriers to children’s participation, and their views on what can be done to support children’s participation. Using Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory (1995), multi-tiered barriers to children’s participation were identified, revealing that the entrenched problem of children’s non-participation in high quality ECE requires a nuanced and holistic policy approach that operates at the familial, service, community and socio-political level, targeting the specific challenges faced by communities.

### **Keywords**

Early childhood education; participation; regional and remote.

### **Introduction**

The impact of early childhood education (ECE) on children and society is so influential that it is recognised by multiple international organisations as a way of contributing to human rights objectives and global sustainable development goals (United Nations, 2015). The Australian and State and Territory Governments support children’s participation in high quality ECE in multiple ways, for example, through funding, legislating quality and supporting ECE workforce development. Indeed, Commonwealth funding has been allocated to ensure universal access to 15 hours of pre-school education per week (600 hours per year) per child, in the year prior to starting school (Australian Department of Education, Skills and Employment [DESE], 2022). In the main, this policy has been successful for increasing pre-school attendance across Australia (Australian Government Productivity Commission [AGPC], 2022). One of the key objectives of the Australian Government’s support of ECE is to “target improved access for, and participation by, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander,

## SUPPORTING REGIONAL AND REMOTE EARLY LEARNING

vulnerable and disadvantaged children” (AGPC, 2022, p. 3), including children living in regional and remote regions. This focus is in part a response to addressing inequitable developmental outcomes for children living in regional and remote areas of Australia. Australian children’s developmental vulnerability increases in line with their geographic isolation (AGPC, 2022). The Australian Statistical Geography Standard (ASGS) Remoteness Structure divides Australia into five classes of remoteness, which are defined in terms of their “relative access to services” (ASGS, 2016, p. 1). The five remoteness areas are Major Cities of Australia; Inner Regional Australia; Outer Regional Australia; Remote Australia; and Very Remote Australia (ASGS, 2016). Children living in very remote areas are more than twice as likely to be developmentally vulnerable (as defined by the Australian Early Childhood Development Census [AEDC]) than their peers living in inner regional areas, and two and a half times more likely than those living in major cities (DET, 2019). These trends have remained consistent over four consecutive waves of AEDC (2012, 2015, 2018, 2021) (AEDC, 2021). In New South Wales (NSW), the site of the current study, almost half of the children living in very remote areas have been found to be developmentally vulnerable by the time they start school (NSW Department of Education [NSW DoE] 2017). Attendance in high quality ECE could ameliorate this inequity in child outcomes.

Children’s access to high quality ECE in regional and remote areas remains problematic. Whilst children living in regional and remote areas of NSW are more likely to be enrolled in a preschool program than their metropolitan peers (AGPC, 2022), a recent report by the Mitchell Institute on the accessibility of centre-based early learning found that “Families in regional areas are the most at risk of suffering from poor access” (Hurley et al., 2022, p. 4). Moreover, the quality of ECE services is lower in regional and remote areas. Services in regional and remote Australia are more likely to be rated as ‘Working Towards’ the National Quality Standards (NQS) (the second lowest quality rating awarded by the Australian Children’s Education & Care Quality Authority [ACECQA], 2022) than those in major cities; those in very remote Australia are more than twice as likely to have achieved only a ‘Working Towards’ NQS rating (ACECQA, 2022). Some 21% of services in remote Australia, and 27% of services in very remote Australia, are rated as ‘Working Towards’ the NQS. One of the most influential process indicators of ECE program quality is the employment of qualified staff – especially ECE teachers (Manning et al., 2019). Currently, there are troubling shortages across the Australian ECE workforce (National Children’s Education and Care Workforce Strategy [NCECWS] 2021); this shortage is particularly acute

## SUPPORTING REGIONAL AND REMOTE EARLY LEARNING

in regional and remote areas, including the employment of Indigenous educators (NCECWS 2021; NSW Department of Education [DOE], 2020). Therefore, despite decades of government support for ECE in regional and remote areas, there remains an intransigent problem of a lack of participation in development enhancing high-quality ECE (O'Connell et al., 2016; Torii et al., 2017).

Better understanding about the problem of accessibility to and participation in high quality ECE in regional and remote areas, and how to solve this problem, is required (Hurley et al., 2022). Indeed, the NSW Government argues that “improving the regional and remote early education evidence base should be considered a priority” (NSW DoE, 2017, p.14). This paper contributes to new understandings about accessibility and quality, by gathering the perspectives of early childhood educators working in regional and remote NSW on factors negatively influencing children’s participation in high quality regional and remote ECE services, and their views on what can be done to better support children’s participation in these services. In the context of this study, ‘participation’ refers to access or attendance in ECEC services. To explore this issue we employ an ecological systems theory lens.

### **Theoretical framework**

Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory posits that a child’s development is shaped by the interactions within the individual’s immediate environment and influenced by the wider social, cultural, and political institutions within which their environment is situated (Bronfenbrenner, 1995). From this perspective, drawing on empirical studies that utilised a range of methods (e.g. interview, observation, document analysis, and child development testing), we discuss known barriers to children’s attendance at ECE, within the multi-layered context of the personal/familial level; the early years’ service, organisational and community level; and at the broader social, cultural and political level.

At the personal/familial level, a child’s participation is profoundly influenced by their parents’ knowledge and understanding about ECE as well as their capacity to afford ECE. Families may lack awareness of the potential benefits of ECE for their children’s learning and development; they may not recognise the importance of regular attendance; and/or they may prioritise ‘other’ family matters over their child’s regular attendance (Grace et al., 2014; Susman-Stillman et al., 2018). Further, in a system that is largely marketised, families’ abilities to choose between services based on quality may be impeded by a lack of access to

## SUPPORTING REGIONAL AND REMOTE EARLY LEARNING

information about what constitutes quality (Logan et al., 2016). For those families experiencing economic hardship, financial factors, such as an inability to meet costs related to attending ECE (e.g. fees, provision of food, clothing, school bags and excursions), are particularly salient (Roberts, 2017; Susman-Stillman et al., 2018). Given that “a comparatively higher proportion of children living in remote areas” (O’Connor, 2016, cited in NSW DoE, 2017, p. 5) experience vulnerabilities such as, coming from an Indigenous background or low-income family, these issues are likely to be of high relevance in remote areas.

At the ECE service level, the interpersonal relationships between early childhood educators, children and families is critically important, especially for welcoming families into ECE services. Some barriers have been identified with these interconnections, that can negatively impact children’s participation in ECE, including services where educators hold discriminatory values, do not engage in inclusive pedagogical practices, and/or services that are culturally unsafe (Grace & Trudgett, 2012; Roberts, 2017). These barriers are particularly pertinent for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families, with factors such as not feeling valued, welcomed and/or respected, lack of trust and/or cultural fit, and fear of interaction with government agencies or being labelled, identified as concerns (Elek et al., 2021; Kellard & Paddon, 2016; Krakouer, 2016; Leske et al., 2015). Another barrier at the service level may simply be that ECE service opening hours are incompatible with families’ needs (Grace et al., 2014).

At the community level, factors that impact on children’s participation in ECE, especially in regional and remote areas, include a lack of available services in the community and/or low levels of competition that constrains ‘customer’ choice, poor transport, and sparse and fluctuating populations that make planning service provision difficult (NSW DoE, 2017). Factors at the social, cultural and political level that affect children’s attendance at high quality ECE include inequitable distribution or location of early childhood services, shortages in the qualified ECE workforce, the overly complex nature of the system, and a general lack of understanding about the benefits of ECE amongst the general public (Roberts, 2017).

Whilst some of the studies cited above examining access to ECE included regional and remote areas (Elek et al., 2021, Grace et al., 2014; Kellard & Paddon, 2016; Leske et al., 2015; Susman-Stillman et al., 2018), few studies have differentiated between geographic

## SUPPORTING REGIONAL AND REMOTE EARLY LEARNING

areas (NSW DoE, 2017). This makes it difficult to design and prioritise initiatives for improving children's participation in ECE, that are appropriate for regional and/or remote areas. The current study builds on and addresses limitations of previous research by identifying the most pressing barriers and most promising enablers to children's participation in high quality ECE in regional and remote areas. The three research questions driving the study were:

1. Which are the most pressing factors at the familial, service, community and social-political levels, impacting children's participation in high quality ECE in regional and remote areas?
2. What are the differences in these factors across regional and remote locations?
3. What can be done to better support children's participation in high quality ECE in regional and remote areas?

### **Methodology**

The project's methodology is grounded in the constructivist, interpretative paradigm where reality is considered to be socially constructed, and best understood by interpreting the ideas of those who live that reality (Cohen, 2018). Consequently, the study sought to address the research questions by drawing on the knowledge and insights of those working in ECE services in regional and remote areas.

A two-stage sequential sampling mixed methods (Teddlie & Yu, 2007) design was employed in this study; focus groups were followed by an online survey. Ethics approval was obtained from Macquarie University's Human Research Ethics Committee (ethics approval no. 52020621014330).

### ***Focus Groups***

Stage 1 was conducted at a Regional Early Childhood Forum held in NSW (2020), that was organised by Community Connections Solutions Australia (CCSA). Two members of the research team were invited by CCSA to facilitate a session during the regional forum, to enable ECE centre directors and educators to share insights related to barriers and enablers to children's participation in high quality ECE in regional and remote areas. The focus group methodology offers a highly effective way to collect in-depth data relating to beliefs, opinions and motivations of participants who have first-hand knowledge of the topic under investigation (Jenkinson et al., 2019). It was also anticipated that this participatory research approach would have benefits for the participants regarding their learning about, and sharing

## SUPPORTING REGIONAL AND REMOTE EARLY LEARNING

their expertise in, supporting the participation of children in high quality ECE in regional and remote areas.

A total of 52 educators organised into 14 focus groups consented to the study at this stage. Prior to attending the forum presentation, participants were advised by CCSA that the aim of this session was both to (i) enable participants to share their expertise and learn from each other, and (ii) gather data for research purposes that would be analysed and reported on and used to inform future research projects. Further, at the start of the forum presentation, ethical considerations of privacy and confidentiality (such as not referring to services or children by name) were made explicit, and informed written consent was obtained.

The session began with a presentation reviewing literature about children's participation in high quality ECE in regional and remote areas. Concurrent focus groups were then facilitated by the researchers on: (i) how the findings from research resonate with participants, (ii) the barriers they have encountered to children's participation, and (iii) ways to support children's participation, in high quality ECE.

Participants' group discussions and interactions were facilitated by research team members. A group scribe recorded each group's discussion on butchers' paper which were collected by the researchers and later transcribed verbatim. The discussion session lasted one hour. At the conclusion of the presentation the research team summarised the discussions and provided general feedback to participants.

### *Focus group data analysis*

Focus-group data were thematically analysed to identify, represent and report patterns that occurred within the data (Clarke et al., 2019). Data were entered in NVivo software and analysed through three stages. The first stage was descriptive coding, where two researchers made notes about their initial ideas and attached brief comments and defined descriptive codes (n=30). The researchers then applied these interpretive codes to the full data set resulting in 210 coded references. In the second interpretive coding stage, the two researchers clustered the descriptive codes in relation to the research questions. Finally, overarching themes (n=3) were derived from the clustered codes in relation to the purpose of the project. Themes, codes and example references are included in Tables 1, 2 & 3.

## SUPPORTING REGIONAL AND REMOTE EARLY LEARNING

### *Online Survey*

Data for Stage 2 were collected in the year following the forum via an anonymous electronic questionnaire circulated to ECE services in regional and remote NSW on the CCSA organisational database.

The questionnaire contained an introduction explaining the purpose of the survey and how data would be used. Demographic data were collected related to the size, type and occupancy of the service. The location of the service was determined using the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2016) NSW Remoteness Area boundaries map, that identifies an inner regional, outer regional, remote or very remote area of NSW.

The questionnaire was informed by findings from Stage 1 to further explore its results and expand understandings of the most pressing issues and effective strategies for supporting children's participation in high quality ECE services in regional and remote areas. Survey questions were nine Likert scale questions relating to degree of agreement with stem statements, and five ranking questions. Both the Likert and ranking questions were derived from the most common codes to emerge from the analysis. That is, codes with at least 8 references each (bolded in Tables 1, 2 & 3). Resulting in 15 items related to: (i) factors that hinder children's participation (5 items); (ii) factors that impact the quality of the respondents' ECE services (4 items); and (iii) the most supportive interventions for children's participation in regional and remote ECE services (6 items). There were also two open-ended questions to enable participants to provide additional information about factors that hinder and support children's participation. Some 37 participants consented to participate in the survey.

### *Online survey analysis*

The online survey was analysed using SPSS (Version 27). First, frequency statistics were used to summarise demographic information, including service location, type, ACECQA rating, number of staff (full time vs. part time vs. casual), capacity and vacancies. Second, descriptive statistical analysis was conducted to evaluate the level of agreement regarding the factors that participants considered to hinder the attendance of children at their service, from 1: Strongly disagree to 4: Strongly agree. A ranking analysis was also conducted of which factors were the most relevant for each participant's service, and which interventions participants considered the most important for supporting children's participation in regional



## SUPPORTING REGIONAL AND REMOTE EARLY LEARNING

and remote areas. These statistics were compared between inner regional vs. outer regional, remote and very remote services. Due to the small sample size of respondents from remote and very remote areas, this group could not be further differentiated for analytical purposes and were included with responses from outer regional areas.

### Results from Stage 1

Over 70 participants contributed their ideas about barriers to children's participation in high quality ECE in regional and remote areas, and shared their expertise on what might be done to better support children's participation. In relation to focus group question one, participants agreed that factors identified in previous literature resonated with their experiences as educators in regional and remote ECE services. One participant noted:

'Listening to the findings, we can relate to these as we see it day in, day out in our small rural isolated community.' (*Director/educator*)

Another participant reported that whilst enrolment is high in regional and remote services, children's attendance may be irregular:

'Definitely children are enrolled but don't attend as regularly, due to environmental [factors], distance, cost, etc.' (*Director/educator*)

And in line with the quality ratings discussed previously, a third participant commented:

'In larger regional areas it's not so much about access, but quality.'  
(*Director/educator*)

In relation to focus group questions two and three, data consisted of 236 references, resulting in 30 unique codes. From these coded references, three overarching themes were identified: (i) barriers to children's participation in ECE in regional and remote areas (10 codes; 61 references); (ii) factors that impact the quality of services for children and families (8 codes; 81 references); and (iii) Factors that could support children and families to participate in high quality ECE in regional and remote areas (12 codes; 94 references). Each overarching theme, code and example references, are presented in Tables 1, 2 and 3, and are broadly arranged in terms of familial, service, community and social-political levels.

**Table 1**

*Theme 1: Barriers to Children's Participation in ECE in Regional and Remote Areas*

Levels	Codes (n=10; 61 references)	Example reference
--------	-----------------------------	-------------------

## SUPPORTING REGIONAL AND REMOTE EARLY LEARNING

Familial	<b>Costs associated with living in regional/remote areas (n=8)</b>	Families can't afford lunches for children; rural shops don't have the food some days for community - kids are then kept home.
	<b>Service fees/cost of attending ECE services (n=10)</b>	Costs are a barrier
	Burdensome administrative processes required of families (n=4)	Immunisation process is too complex for families (especially if LBOTE: Language Background Other Than English)
	Families' previous experiences of traumatic events and/or situation (n=5)	Trauma, crisis, dysfunction, families will not engage
	<b>High levels of poverty (n=8)</b>	High percentage of lower income families
Service	<b>Demographic challenges (n=12)</b>	Fluctuating population/low birth rate/housing availability
	Lack of accessibility and/or choice in ECE services (n=3)	Mobile preschool in some areas cannot get to some families more than once a week. Not meeting 15 hours
Community	<b>Lack of transport (n=8)</b>	Bus companies are not paid to bring children from rural/remote farms
	Environmental challenges (n=1)	Bushfires, drought
Socio-Political	Inequitable funding models (n=2)	SEIFA <sup>1</sup> bands don't work (not reflective of families/service/homes in its location)

**Table 2**

*Theme 2: Factors that Impact the Quality of Services for Children and Families*

<b>Levels</b>	<b>Codes (n=8; 79 references)</b>	<b>Example reference</b>
Service	Challenge for educators to manage life/work balance & boundaries (n=7)	Negative relationships between adults (historical or small town)
Community	Professional isolation due to geography (n=7)	Attitude of colleagues in city/don't care about rural or remote
	<b>Lack of quality professional learning opportunities (n=20)</b>	Professional development/training (especially for Cert 3) is lacking
	<b>Difficulty in attracting qualified educators (n=11)</b>	Not having access to quality staff. Very concerned about ability to retain ECTs at our centre.
	Lack of access to technology (n=4)	Internet connections - can't do online lessons.

<sup>1</sup> Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA) is an ABS product that ranks areas in Australia according to relative socio-economic advantage and disadvantage.

## SUPPORTING REGIONAL AND REMOTE EARLY LEARNING

	<b>Lack of awareness of the importance of ECE in community (n=18)</b>	Not valuing early childhood as equal to School
	Inaccessibility of allied health facilities (n=3)	Health checks, hearing, sight, speech, OT, dental, no access to these services for children
Socio-Political	<b>Inequitable working conditions (n=11)</b>	Pay rates for ECTs in early childhood not competitive with DET services

**Table 3**

*Theme 3: Factors that Could Support Children and Families to Participate in High Quality ECE in Regional and Remote Areas*

<b>Levels</b>	<b>Codes (n=12; 94 references)</b>	<b>Example reference</b>
Service	Meaningful relationships with families (n=4)	Cultural training should be mandatory for all staff in each particular community they teach
	Flexible service provision (n=5)	Innovative, flexible, affordable
	Simple enrolment procedures (n=5)	Cutting “red tape” with forms. Paperwork processes, birth certificate/immunisation records
	Simple/flexible funding processes and procedures (n=6)	Simplifying funding procedures and applications – portals
Community	<b>Improved access to/financial support for transport (n=9)</b>	Improve transport options (subsidised private travel)
	Support for children's transition to school (n=2)	Resources: all four-year-olds, school transition children should be offered free fees - to get them ready for big school
	Support for educator professional development (n=5)	Local training without exorbitant costs involved/local forums to share knowledge
	<b>Increase access to specialist services (n=11)</b>	Appointments with paediatrician/therapy, diagnosis, action, plans, in practice with staff
Socio-Political	<b>Government funding specific to ECE in regional and remote areas (n=20)</b>	Funding targeted to types of services (one size does not fit all)
	<b>Additional Government financial support for services/families (n=12)</b>	Funding that keeps fees low for families in rural and remote communities
	<b>Support for attracting/retaining qualified educators (n=10)</b>	Wages/pay parity for ECTs/reward the long service staff/bonuses/increase superannuation
	Raise public awareness about the benefits of ECE (n=7)	A change in community perception of what the value of a preschool education is, how important “play” is, educate parents (re-educate) as to our role
	<b>Funding for three year olds (n=8)</b>	Start children earlier – four is too late

### Results from Stage 2

#### Demographics

Of the 37 respondents to the survey, 54.1% (20) indicated that they worked in an inner regional area, 32.4% (12) worked in an outer regional area, and 13.5% (5) worked in a remote area. The vast majority (70.3%) of the educators worked in a preschool setting (26), followed by 16.2% in long day care, 5.4% in a mobile preschool and 8.1% in other service types. More than half (56.5%) of respondents reported that their service is 'Meeting' NQS, while about a third (29.7%) are 'Exceeding' NQS. Very small percentages of services were either not rated (8.1%) or were 'Working Towards' the NQS (2.7%).

In relation to staff, the average number of full-time staff within services was about 4 (range 0–14), whereas the average for part-time staff was 9 (range 1–38). About 43.2% of respondents ( $n = 16$ ) indicated that their service frequently employed casual staff (more than once a month) and a further 29.7% ( $n = 11$ ) did so occasionally, while 16.2% of services ( $n = 6$ ) rarely employed casual staff (less than once every three months). Only 10.8% of the respondents ( $n = 4$ ) reported that they did not employ casual staff.

The vast majority of services offered anywhere from 26–59 places (64.9%), followed by 16.2% who offered 11–25 places. The average number of children reported was about 75 (Standard Deviation = 34.5), ranging from 7 to 180 children. Compared with the number of licensed places, more than half of the services had vacancies (54.1%). Only 43.2% stated that their licensed places were filled, with the remaining 37.8% reporting that their services were filled more than 75% but not fully filled. Yet, 78.4% reported that they had a waiting list.

#### Factors that hinder children's participation in high quality ECE

Table 4 summarises participants' degree of agreement (4 = strongly agree) with each of the most common factors, identified in Stage 1, impacting on attendance of children in their service. The participants tended to agree that the following factors (in order of strongest agreement) negatively impact on children's participation: that (i) disparity between pay and conditions for ECE teachers and their counterparts in the school sector contribute to a higher rate of attrition of ECE teachers; (ii) poor community perceptions of the value of ECE are a challenge; and (iii) transport issues are a barrier to children's participation; as is (iv) the difficulty to attract qualified ECE educators. Participants tended to be neutral about the following factors: that (i) costs associated with living in regional and remote areas are a

## SUPPORTING REGIONAL AND REMOTE EARLY LEARNING

barrier to attendance; (ii) lack of professional learning opportunities in regional and remote areas impacts participation; and (iii) population fluctuations are a challenge. In contrast, participants tended to disagree that ‘high levels of poverty’ and ‘service fees’ are challenges to children’s participation.

**Table 4**

*Level of Agreement with Factors Impacting Children’s Participation*

	N	Minimum / Maximum	Mean	Standard deviation
Disparity between pay and conditions	37	1 - 4	3.3243	.88362
Poor perception of community	37	1 - 4	3.0270	.98563
Transport	36	1 - 4	2.9459	.88021
Attracting qualified educators	37	1 - 4	2.9444	1.06756
Associated costs	37	1 - 4	2.6486	.71555
Lack of professional learning	37	1 - 4	2.6216	.89292
Population fluctuation	37	1 - 4	2.4865	.93159
High poverty	37	1 - 4	2.2432	.79601
Service fee	37	1 - 4	2.1351	.97645

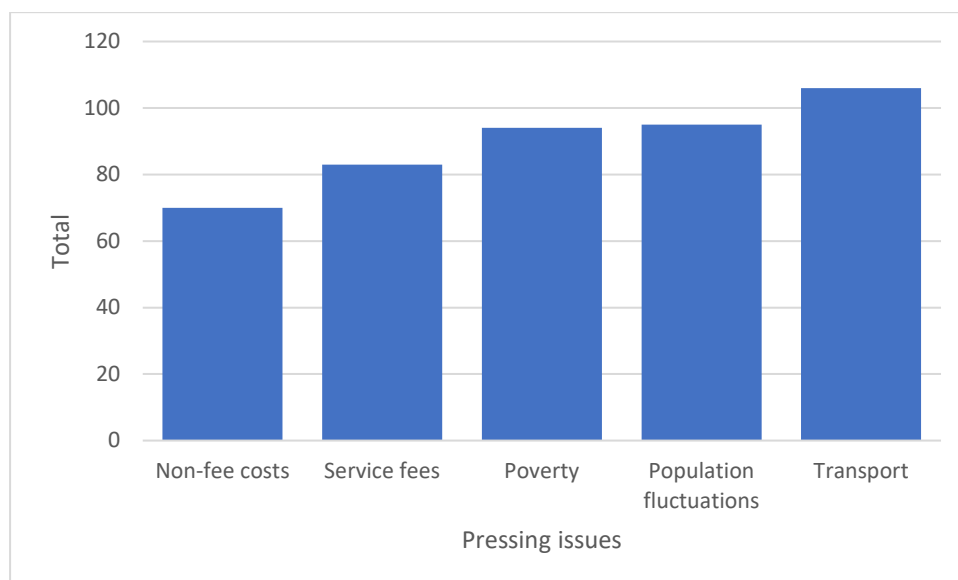
When examining the differences between ratings by service vacancies, ratings for almost all factors were quite similar for services whether they had vacancies or not, except for two factors: ‘population fluctuation’ and ‘lack of professional learning’. Those who had vacancies tended to agree that ‘population fluctuation’ and ‘lack of professional learning’ were crucial factors impacting children’s participation, whereas those who did not have vacancies tended to disagree with these statements.

When asked to rank five factors negatively impacting children’s attendance from the most to least pressing for their service, Figure 1 shows that lack of transport was the most pressing factor, followed by population fluctuations, poverty and service fees.

**Figure 1**

*Ranking of Factors Impacting Children’s Attendance: All Participants Combined*

## SUPPORTING REGIONAL AND REMOTE EARLY LEARNING



However, when breaking the data into inner regional vs. outer regional and remote areas, the pressing factors were different. Participants working in inner regional areas considered poverty to be the most pressing factor, whereas transport was the factor regarded the most pressing by those working in outer regional and remote areas (see Figure 2). One participant working in an outer regional area reported, for example, that:

‘We have children travelling 90 kms to access our preschool. Because one bus operator refuses to take preschoolers, parents are driving 180 kms a day x 3 times a week.’ (*Director/educator*)

And another commented:

‘We need bus travel. Older siblings already catch the bus. Parents follow the bus in with their preschoolers.’ (*Director/educator*)

### **Figure 2**

*Ranking of Factors Impacting Children’s Attendance: Inner Regional, and Outer Regional and Remote*

## SUPPORTING REGIONAL AND REMOTE EARLY LEARNING

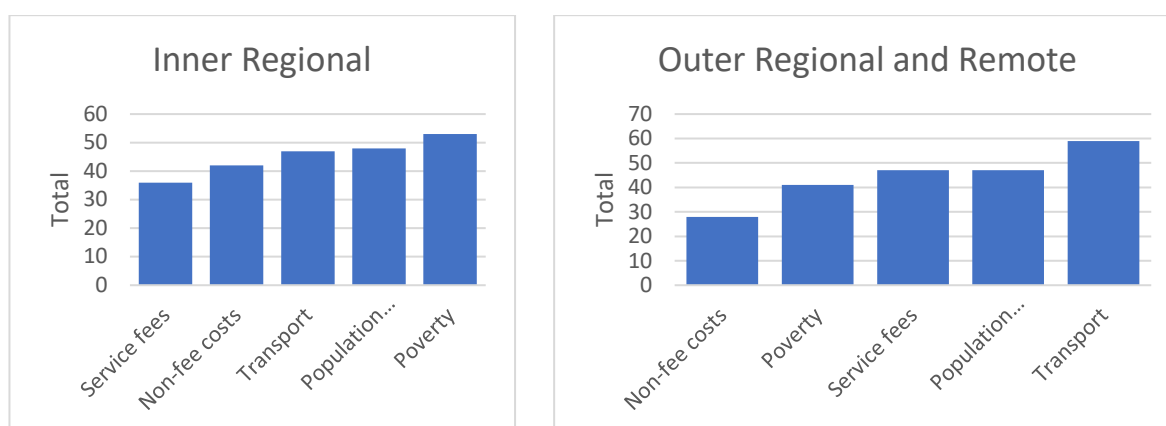


Figure 3 shows how participants ranked the challenges impacting their services' capacity to provide high quality ECE. Participants ranked 'disparities in conditions between ECE and other sectors contributes to a high attrition rate' highest, followed by the challenge to 'attract quality educators', to 'poor community perceptions of the values of ECE education' and, lastly, a 'lack of professional learning opportunities'. The results were similar for both inner regional, and outer regional and remote areas. Typical of comments from participants related to pay and conditions was:

'We cannot attract ECEs to the service as the pay is way under the public sector and most [teachers] go there.' (*Director/educator*)

Comments related to difficulty attracting quality educators included this one from a participant in an outer regional area:

'Ensuring we have sufficient educators employed with diploma/degree-level qualifications to ensure numbers to ratios are within regs [regulations] on a daily basis is our biggest challenge.' (*Director/educator*)

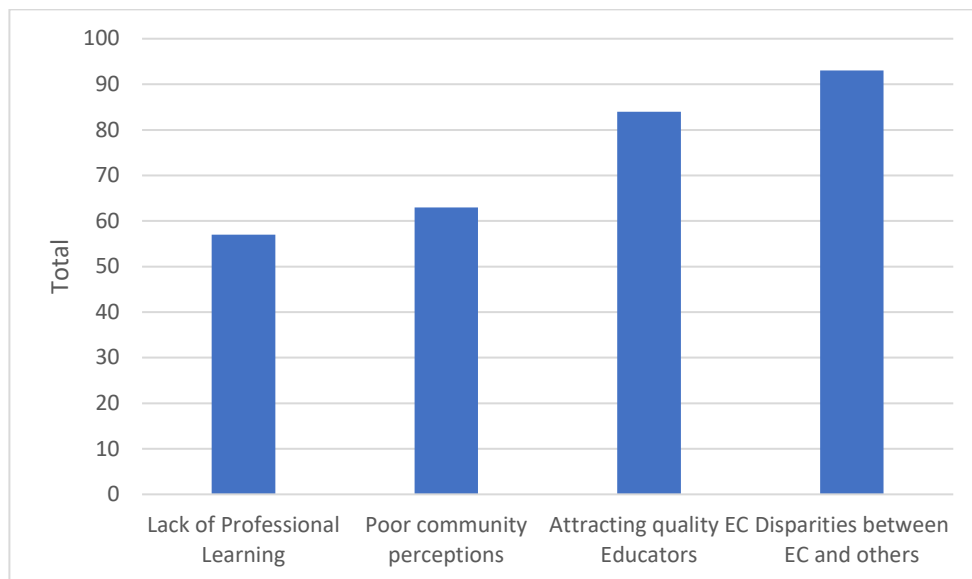
Several participants made comments related to poor community perceptions, including this one from a participant in an inner regional area:

'Family perception on early childhood education is the main barrier. A lot of families couldn't see the values of early childhood education.' (*Director/educator*)

### Figure 3

*Ranking of Factors Impacting Services' Capacity to Provide High Quality ECE: All Participants*

## SUPPORTING REGIONAL AND REMOTE EARLY LEARNING

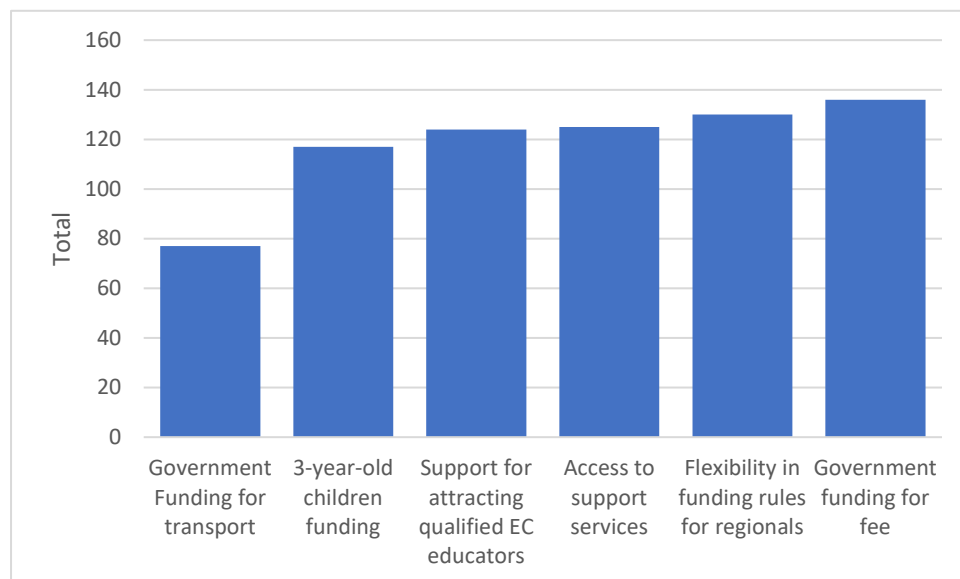


### Interventions that support children’s participation in high quality ECE

Finally, when asked about which interventions were needed to support children’s participation in high quality ECE, ‘additional government funding for fee relief’ was ranked highest (Figure 4).

**Figure 4**

*Ranking of Supportive Interventions Needed to Support Children’s Participation in High Quality ECE: All Participants*





## SUPPORTING REGIONAL AND REMOTE EARLY LEARNING

When breaking up the data into regions, the participants working in outer regional and remote services ranked ‘government funding for fees’ highest, whereas their counterparts in inner regional areas considered ‘access to support services’ to be needed most (Figure 5). One participant from a regional service commented:

‘Poor funding for 3-year-olds; current funding model of 15 hours does not support the continuation of high quality 9–3 preschool services at reasonable costs.’

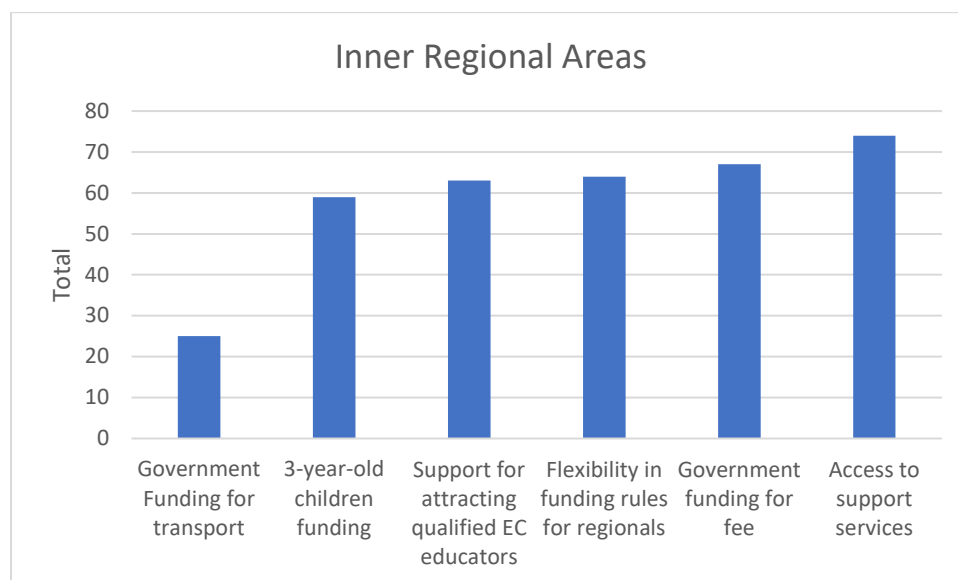
*(Director/educator)*

And a participant in an outer regional area commented:

‘We have very poor access to support services in the Greater West area with wait time for referrals being 12–18 months, which is too long when children in preschool are only with you for 2 years, then they go into the school system unprepared.’ *(Director/educator)*

### Figure 5

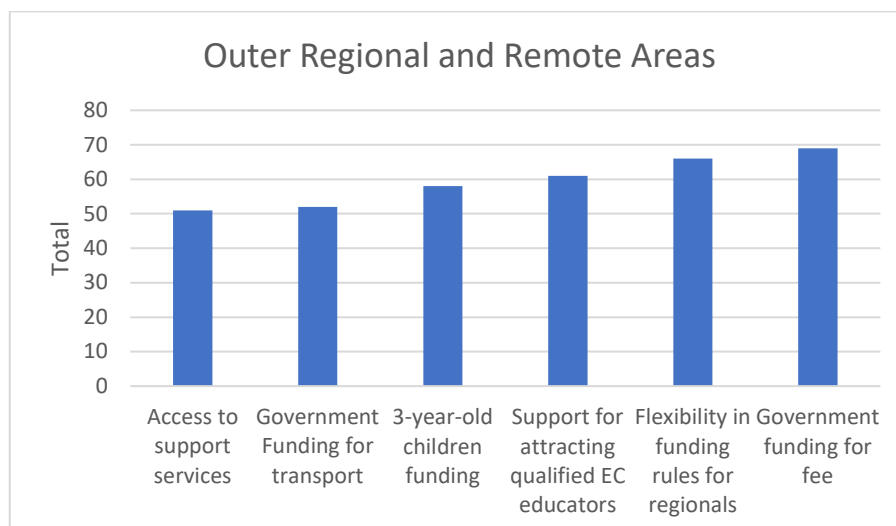
*Ranking of Supportive Interventions Needed to Support Children’s Participation in High Quality ECE: All Participants: Inner regional Areas*



### Figure 6

*Ranking of Supportive Interventions Needed to Support Children’s Participation in High Quality ECE: All Participants: Outer Regional and Remote Areas*

## SUPPORTING REGIONAL AND REMOTE EARLY LEARNING



### Discussion

Aligned with an ecological systems lens (Bronfenbrenner, 1995), participants in the focus groups identified multiple factors at the familial, service, community and social-political level that impacted children's participation in high quality ECE in regional and remote areas. Subsequently, the major themes arising from focus groups were further explored with the survey participants where there was strong agreement. Many factors identified are similar to those reported in the literature as barriers to ECE generally (i.e., not just in regional and remote areas). At the personal/familial and interpersonal level, for example, participants in the current study agreed that, similar to Grace et al.'s (2014) findings, families' previous experiences of traumatic events and/or situations; families' lack of awareness of the benefits of ECE; and financial difficulties in affording the cost of sending their child to ECE, were particularly challenging. Likewise, as has been identified by Torii et al. (2017), at the early years' service level, workforce issues such as difficulty in attracting and retaining staff and supporting their professional development and career; professional isolation; difficulties for staff managing work-life balance and boundaries; and inadequate wages and conditions, were all considered to have a negative impact on the provision of high quality ECE. Interestingly, however, there was little critical reflection on practices within ECE services that might impact children's/families' participation.

At the community level, factors relating to fluctuating demography, environmental challenges, inaccessibility of services and lack of choice, and lack of transport, and also found by Grace et al. (2014), were considered barriers. And at the broader social, cultural,

## SUPPORTING REGIONAL AND REMOTE EARLY LEARNING

and political level, our findings of the negative factors impacting children's participation in high quality ECE, align with previous findings, including inequitable funding models (Torii et al., 2017); burdensome administrative processes (Fenech, 2006); lack of awareness of the importance of ECE in the community; lack of ECE teachers; inaccessibility of professional learning; and inadequate access to technology and allied health workers (Cosgrave, 2020).

By asking participants to rank items in the questionnaire, this research has identified factors that are amplified in regional and remote areas. For instance, 'Disparities in conditions between ECE and other sectors contributes to a high rate of attrition in our service', had the highest level of agreement as contributing to hindering the attendance of children in services, and was ranked as the most pressing challenge facing services. Although there is a shortage of early childhood teachers (ECTs) across Australia (NCECWS, 2021), trying to attract or retain ECTs in regional and/or remote areas can be particularly challenging. Similarly, despite many early childhood educators indicating "a desire for further professional knowledge and mentoring to increase their skills in working effectively with vulnerable children and their families" (Roberts, 2017, p. 7), it is far more difficult to access professionally-enhancing professional development in regional and remote areas than in metropolitan areas. Other factors, such as highly fluctuating populations in regional areas, can result in a lack of choice or make services unviable. Further, respondents noted that current funding models do not adequately consider the 'costs' of doing business in regional and remote areas. Likewise, environmental factors, such as bushfires, floods and droughts, can make it physically impossible for children to attend regional and remote ECE services.

By differentiating between responses from participants in inner regional, and outer regional and remote areas, differences were identified in factors that educators consider most challenging to providing high quality ECE in their location. In particular, poverty was ranked first by participants in inner regional areas, but fourth by those in outer regional and remote areas. Family poverty can be exacerbated by the high cost of food in regional and remote areas. Transport was ranked first by those in outer regional and remote areas, and third by those in inner regional areas. Public transport can be non-existent in outer regional and remote areas, and travelling long distances in private vehicles can be costly. Taken together, these findings suggest that particular strategies may be needed to address the different challenges facing children's participation in high quality services in inner regional areas, from those in outer regional and remote services.

## SUPPORTING REGIONAL AND REMOTE EARLY LEARNING

The findings of this research also point to strategies that might support children's participation in high quality ECE. At the service level, for example, participants nominated flexible service provision, with simple enrolment procedures and educators who develop meaningful, culturally sensitive relationships with families. Additionally, services need resources to support children's transition to school, and access to a range of allied health specialists (ranked third highest supportive intervention). These strategies include practices that have been recommended elsewhere (see ACECQA, 2021; Cosgrave, 2020; Roberts, 2017). At a community level, the issue of transport needs to be addressed. And at the social, cultural, political level, participants considered that additional, easy-to-access government funding to reduce service fees (ranked highest supportive intervention) is required. Equally needed are government policies and funding rules that are flexible and specific to the needs of services in regional and remote areas (ranked second highest). Further, participants considered that provision of incentives to attract and sustain educators – including pay parity, working conditions and accessible professional development opportunities – are important (ranked fourth highest), as is raising public awareness about the benefits of ECE.

It is interesting to note that in the services participating in the survey, there were large numbers of part-time staff, with one service having no full-time staff at all. Why these staff work part-time is unknown: perhaps they choose to work part-time, perhaps they want to work more but local opportunities are limited (making them under-employed), perhaps they have positions in multiple services, or perhaps it is due to the high vacancy levels in services? Given the potential impact of staffing issues on maintaining high quality ECE services, these are workforce issues that warrant further investigation.

### **Conclusion**

Children in regional and remote areas of Australia are doing less well than their counterparts in metropolitan regions in regard to developmental outcomes when starting school. One way to address this inequity is to ensure that children in regional and remote areas can participate in high quality ECE. But despite significant and long-term government investment, there is an intransigent problem of lack of participation in development-enhancing high-quality ECE in regional and remote areas.

## SUPPORTING REGIONAL AND REMOTE EARLY LEARNING

Using a two-stage mixed study approach of focus group and survey methods that enabled themes to be further explored, this study has not only provided valuable insights from those with expert knowledge on what are the most *pressing* challenges for increasing children's participation in these services, but it has also identified *differences* between priorities in regional and remote areas. Additionally, this study has identified what could be done at a community and social-political level to better support children's participation in high quality ECE in regional and remote areas of NSW. It is important to note, however, that the study was limited by a low number of participants from very remote areas, and by being focused in NSW. Replicating the study in other states and/or territories and aiming for higher participation from educators in very remote areas is warranted.

Adequately addressing the problematic barriers to children's participation in high quality early learning in regional and remote areas, and thereby addressing the entrenched inequalities experienced by children living in these areas, will require a nuanced and holistic policy approach that operates at familial, service, community and socio-political levels. In particular, this approach will require policies and strategies that: raise community awareness about the benefits of ECE; provide community infrastructure including transport and access to health and allied health services; provide families with financial support, and services with funding models that recognise the additional costs of living/providing services in these areas; and which incentivise and support the ECE workforce to remain in and provide high quality ECE. Additionally future approaches will need policies that are targeted to the specific challenges faced by different communities.

## References

- Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2016). *Australian Statistical Geography Standard (ASGS): Volume 5 – Remoteness Structure, July 2016*, Cat. No. 1270.0.55.005.  
<https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/statistical-geography/remoteness-structure>
- Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority. (2022). *Snapshot: May 2022*.  
<https://www.acecqa.gov.au/nqf/snapshots>
- Australian Department of Education Skills and Employment. (2022). *Universal Access National Partnership*. <https://www.dese.gov.au/preschool/universal-access-national-partnership#toc-what-is-the-universal-access-national-partnership>
- Australian Early Development Census. (2021). *AEDC 2021 National Report*.  
<https://www.aedc.gov.au/>

## SUPPORTING REGIONAL AND REMOTE EARLY LEARNING

- Australian Government Productivity Commission. (2022). *Report on government services*.  
<https://www.pc.gov.au/research/ongoing/report-on-government-services>
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1995). Developmental ecology through space and time: a future perspective. In P. Moen, G.H. Elder, Jr. & K. Lüscher (eds.) *Examining lives in context: perspectives on the ecology of human development*, American Psychological Association. <https://doi.org/10.1037/10176-018>
- Clarke, V., Braun, V., Terry, G., & Hayfield, N. (2019). Thematic analysis. In Liamputtong, P. (Ed.), *Handbook of research methods in health and social sciences* (pp. 843-860). Singapore: Springer.
- Cohen, L. (2018). *Research methods in education*, 8th ed, New York, Routledge.
- Cosgrave, C. (2020). Context matters: findings from a qualitative study exploring service and place factors influencing the recruitment and retention of allied health professionals in rural Australian public health services, *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 17(16):5815. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph17165815>
- Elek, C., Gibberd, A., Gubhaju, L., Lennox, J., Highfield, R., Goldfield, S., & Eades, S. (2021). An opportunity for our little ones: findings from an evaluation of an Aboriginal early childhood learning centre in Central Australia, *Early Childhood Education Journal* (online first).
- Fenech, M. (2006). The impact of regulatory environments on early childhood professional practice and job satisfaction: A review of conflicting discourses. *Australian Journal of Early Childhood*, 31(2). 49-56.
- Grace, R., & Trudgett, M. (2012). 'It's not rocket science': the perspectives of Indigenous early childhood workers on supporting the engagement of Indigenous families in early childhood settings, *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*, 37(2). 10-18.
- Grace, R., Bowes, J., & Elcom, E. (2014). Child participation and family engagement with early childhood education and care services in disadvantaged Australian Communities, *International Journal of Early Childhood*, 47(2). 271-298.
- Hurley, P., Matthews, H., & Pennicuik, S. (2022). *Deserts and oases: How accessible is childcare?* Mitchell Institute, Victoria University.
- Jenkinson, H., Leahy, P., Scanlon, M., Powell, F., & Byrne, O. (2019). The value of groupwork knowledge and skills in focus group research: a focus group approach with marginalized teens regarding access to third-level education, *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 18. 1–11.

## SUPPORTING REGIONAL AND REMOTE EARLY LEARNING

- Kellard, K., & Paddon, H. (2016). *Indigenous participation in early childhood education and care: qualitative case studies*, The Social Research Centre.  
<https://www.acecqa.gov.au/sites/default/files/2020-12/IndigenousParticipationInECEC-QualitativeCaseStudies.pdf>
- Krakouer, J. (2016). *Aboriginal early childhood education: why attendance and true engagement are equally important*, Australian Council for Educational Research.  
[https://research.acer.edu.au/indigenous\\_education/44](https://research.acer.edu.au/indigenous_education/44)
- Leske, R., Sarmardin, D., Woods, A., & Thorpe, K. (2015). What works and why? Early childhood professionals' perspectives on effective early childhood education and care services for Indigenous families, *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*, 40(1). 109-118.
- Logan, H., Sumsion, J., & Press, F. (2016). The shaping of Australian early childhood education and care: what can we learn from a critical juncture? *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*, 41(1). 64-71
- Manning, M., Wong, G.T.W., Fleming, C.M., & Garvis, S. (2019). Is teacher qualification associated with the quality of the early childhood education and care environment? A meta-analytic review. *Review of Educational Research*, 89(3), 370–415.  
<https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654319837540>.
- National Children's Education and Care Workforce Strategy (NCECWS). (2021). *Shaping our future: a ten-year strategy to ensure a sustainable high-quality children's education and care workforce*. <https://www.acecqa.gov.au/sites/default/files/2021-10/ShapingOurFutureChildrensEducationandCareNationalWorkforceStrategy-September2021.pdf>
- NSW Department of Education. (2017). *Regional and remote early childhood education: literature review*. <https://education.nsw.gov.au/content/dam/main-education/early-childhood-education/working-in-early-childhood-education/media/documents/Workforce-Literature-Review.pdf>
- NSW Department of Education. (2020). *First steps: Aboriginal children's early childhood education strategy 2021-2025*. <https://education.nsw.gov.au/content/dam/main-education/early-childhood-education/operating-an-early-childhood-education-service/media/documents/making-services-accessible-for-all-children/aboriginal-childrens-early-childhood-education-strategy.pdf>

## SUPPORTING REGIONAL AND REMOTE EARLY LEARNING

- O'Connell, M., Fox, S., Hinz, B., & Cole, H. (2016). *Quality early education for all: fostering creative, entrepreneurial, resilient and capable learners*, Mitchell Institute Policy Paper No. 01/2016, Melbourne, Mitchell Institute.
- Roberts, W. (2017). Trust, empathy and time: relationship building with families experiencing vulnerability and disadvantage in early childhood education and care services, *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*, 42(4). 4-12.
- Susman-Stillman, A., Englund, M.M., Storm, K., & Bailey, A.E. (2018). Understanding barriers and solutions affecting preschool attendance in low-income families, *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk*, 23(1-2). 170-186.
- Teddle, C., & Yu, F. (2007). Mixed methods sampling: A typology with examples. *Journal of Mixed Methods Research*, 1, 77-100.
- Torii, K., Fox, S., & Cloney, D. (2017). *Quality is key in early childhood in Australia*, Mitchell Institute Policy Paper No. 01/2017, Melbourne: Mitchell Institute.
- United Nations. (2015). *United Nations sustainable development goals*. Available from: <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>