

family

A D V O C A C Y

**Submission to the Australian Government's
Early Years Strategy Discussion Paper
April 2023**

“Children that learn together, learn to live together”

Jody Carr, Former Minister for Education, New Brunswick, Canada, speaking at Family Advocacy's National Symposium on Inclusive Education 2017

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Acknowledgement:

Family Advocacy would like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the lands on which this report has been written, reviewed and produced, whose cultures and customs have nurtured and continue to nurture this land since the Dreamtime. We pay our respects to their Elders past, present and future. This is, was and always will be Aboriginal land.

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Executive Summary

Family Advocacy supports the notion the Early Years Strategy (the Strategy) “will create an enduring vision for Australia’ children and their families.” As a disability advocacy organisation that seeks to promote and defend the rights and interests of people with a developmental disability across NSW, we see the potential for the envisioned Strategy to fulfil this purpose for children in the early years.

Throughout this submission, we provide evidence which demonstrates the many ways children with disability (and by default their family members) continue to be subject to devaluation, marginalisation, exclusion and discrimination. Solutions to these challenges will be discussed and it is with this lens, we make the following recommendations.

Summary of recommendations:

- Recommendation 1: Developing an Inclusive Education System.
- Recommendation 2: Encouraging Transformational Leadership.
 - Merging our parallel system of mainstream and Early Intervention Centres into one holistic system
 - Use the Early Years Strategy to develop a national inclusive education plan to gradually phase out segregation and exclusionary practices
 - Develop transformational leadership amongst Early Childhood Directors, and educators and parents
- Recommendation 3: Educating for Life.
- Recommendation 4: Promoting an Inclusive Culture.
- Recommendation 5: Developing Partnership.
- Recommendation 6: Investing in Equity.
- Recommendation 7: Tackling Barriers to Participation.
 - Adoption of an Early Years Inclusive Education Strategy
 - Ensure the legislative/policy frameworks and good inclusive practice are known and understood by early educators/leaders.
 - Independent complaints process
- Recommendation 8: Strengthening Inclusive Pedagogy.
- Recommendation 9: Prioritising Professional Development.
- Recommendation 10: Learning from Experience.
- Recommendation 11: Plotting the Journey to Inclusion.
- Recommendation 12: Effective and efficient funding allocation.

Introduction

Family Advocacy is an independent disability advocacy organisation that works across NSW to promote the inclusion of and protect the rights and interests of people who have developmental disability¹. We were founded 32 years ago by families of people with disability and continue to be governed by families. We provide support in the following ways:

- Advocacy advice and advocacy information to individuals
- Advocacy development for family members of a person with disability
- Systemic Advocacy

This submission highlights Family Advocacy's strategic vision to promote inclusive lives. Specifically, for children in the early years, our vision is that "children are living valued lives in their family and community with experiences, opportunities and high expectations ensuring they are on a pathway to full and inclusive life". To achieve this, we:

- Build the knowledge of families by providing timely information about child rights, the evidence base, and where they can obtain support, targeting the places and spaces they engage.
- Assist families in the early years to strive high and learn about the rights and interests of people with disability through visioning for an inclusive life and build their advocacy skills.
- Grow family leaders in the early years, who then provide peer support to other families within their communities.
- Influence the influencers of families, so they are providing them with good information and guidance to set them on a pathway for inclusive lives.
- Strategically collaborate and build allies in Early Childhood Education and Care sector so children with disability accessing the same ECEC service (ECEC) opportunities and environments.

In the early years, for obvious reasons, advocacy is undertaken by the parents of the child with disability. The families we hear from often experience considerable challenges, including stigma and discrimination, when advocating for the rights of their children. Parents across NSW reported gatekeeping (exclusion during enrolment), demands for partial attendance, suspensions, expulsions, and micro exclusions (being segregated within classrooms). This deep sense of 'othering' of the child is getting worse, not better. Over the last five years, our education (including early childhood, primary and high school) related calls have doubled.

Family Advocacy appreciate the opportunity to provide a response to the Australian Government's Early Years Strategy (the Strategy) discussion paper. We applaud the statement "*Every child deserves the opportunity for the best start in life*". We appreciate the many policy instruments, frameworks, principles and standards being considered by the Australian Government to ensure the Strategy will be an overarching roadmap that will shape Government policy in a holistic way. In particular, we applaud the sentiment to be respectful and inclusive of diversity: "The Strategy will be inclusive. Children with disability or with developmental concerns deserve the same positive experiences and opportunities to thrive as all children". (p.7).

However, we are obliged, due to the very large gap between this inclusive sentiment and the experience of families and their child with disability, to re-frame the discussion to drive more effective change. As such, before responding directly to the questions in the discussion paper, we discuss the need for attitudinal, structural, relational and environmental changes to be considered prior to finalising the Strategy in order to mitigate the long-term wounding

effects of ableism on children with disability (and by default their family members).

Our comments and recommendations are premised on three decades of experience working with families who have a child with developmental disability in the education system in NSW, collaborating with the Department of Education and other stakeholders, our widespread knowledge of international research/practice in the field of inclusive education and the multiple submissions we have written for the NSW and Australian governments and the current Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability.

Family Advocacy also supports the following positions in conjunction with this submission:

- Disabled People’s Organisation of Australia’s Position Paper on [Segregation of People with Disability is Discrimination and Must End](#)
- The Australian Coalition for Inclusive Education’s [‘Driving change: A roadmap for achieving inclusive education in Australia’](#) (How to make education better - [Easy English version](#))
- Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY)’s [The Nest](#) child wellbeing framework
- Early Childhood Australia’s [Statement on the inclusion of every child in early childhood education and care](#) and draft [Statement on Play](#)
- Early Childhood Australia and Early Childhood Intervention Australia’s [Position statement on the inclusion of children with a disability in early childhood education and care](#) Thrive by Five & The Minderoo Foundation’s [Time to Act: Investing in our children and our future](#)
- Play Group Australia’s National Advisory Group’s [Playgroup Statement 2022](#)

Levers for change:

To achieve a meaningful Early Years Strategy the challenges listed above need to be addressed. A way of getting there is to be focused, persistent and make better use of the following key levers for change.

- [Australia’s Disability Strategy 2021-2031](#)
- [Disability Standards for Education](#)
- [Review of the NDIS](#)
- [National School Reform Agreement](#)
- [Disability Royal Commission](#)
- [National Disability Data Asset](#)
- [National Disability Research Partnership](#)

Inclusion and the Early years

“All children are born included - it's the natural state. Children with disabilities become excluded not because they have disabilities, but because of our actions. If we want them to be successful and included as adults, we need to make sure they are successful and included as children!”

***From Special Ed Schools: Help or Hindrance?** Kathie Snow*

Family Advocacy has a vision for inclusion which means belonging, togetherness, access, opportunity, participation, and valued and recognised contribution. And where inclusive mindsets and practices are the status quo. Inclusion should start early, essentially with a child's first formal education experience in ECEC at age three or four. ECEC is supposed to represent a microcosm of society, where diversity and difference is embraced and accepted. It makes sense to build connections with community from the same age other children do, so that children with disability move naturally with their peers into inclusive education settings. Accordingly, let's work toward the world we hope for, right from the start. ALL children should to be learning together in their local ECEC. Inclusive education is essential for creating the inclusive society to which every Australian is entitled.

Apart from the moral imperative, there are many other justifications for inclusive education. It is a:

- human right¹;
- it is supported by legislation and policy²;
- decades of research showing better social, academic and life outcomes for ALL children³;
- it increases the likelihood of employment (economic contribution) in the post school years with less reliance on the welfare system⁴; and
- it is better for society as a whole because our society is made up of diverse communities and this reality should be reflected in our education settings, including ECEC.

¹ [United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities; General Comment No. 4 \(Right to Inclusive Education\) \(August 2016\); United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child,](#)

² United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation, *The Salamanca Statement and Framework For Action on Special Needs Education*, June 1994; UN Sustainability Goals 2030, Goal No.4 being to “Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” by 2030; Disability Discrimination Act 1992; *Disability Standards in Education 2005* (Cth) Australia's Disability Strategy and the Early Childhood Targeted Action Plan;

³ Jackson, R (2008). Inclusion or segregation for children with an intellectual impairment: What does the research say? Queensland Parents for People with a Disability. Kathy Cologon (2013). Inclusion in education: towards equality for children with disability. Children and Young People with Disability Australia. <http://www.cyda.org.au/inclusion-in-education>

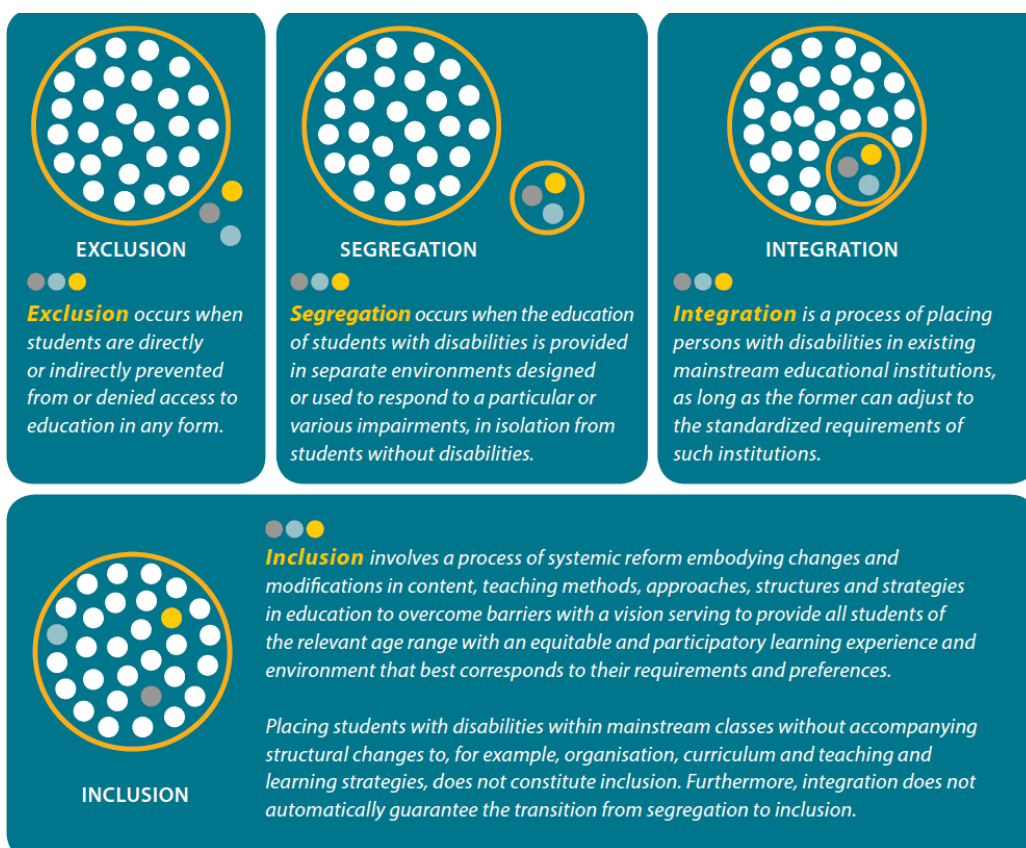
⁴ http://alana.org.br/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/A_Summary_of_the_evidence_on_inclusive_education.pdf;

Be clear of what inclusion is and what it is not

Due to frequent misunderstandings of inclusion worldwide, General Comment No. 4 of Article 24 in the UNCRPD on the Right to Inclusive Education, was created to define clearly what inclusion is and what it is not:

Inclusion involves a process of systemic reform embodying changes and modifications in content, teaching methods, approaches, structures and strategies in education to overcome barriers, with a vision serving to provide all children of the relevant age range with an equitable and participatory learning experience and environment that best corresponds to their requirements and preferences.

The dot diagram below makes the clear distinction between exclusion, segregation, integration and inclusion:



If we reflect where we have come from and where we are heading in the the early childhood sector, we could see that this dot diagram above reflects the evolution of society where we used to exclude children with disability before the 1950s to segregation in the 1960s which continues today. By the mid-1990s, we moved to integration where children with disability were allowed to attend mainstream classes, however, they had to adjust to the standard requirements of the environment without appropriate support being provided. The natural progression is for our early childhood sector to move from integration to inclusion, where the environment/system/teaching approach will make adjustments to properly support the child with a disability in order that they may reach their full potential.

Inclusion has three main domains:

- **physical** - where children with disability are present in the same environments as all other children for the same amounts of time
- **social** - where all children are welcomed and seen to belong. Children with disabilities are not separated in the classroom or playground, including through being with the support staff during times when their peers are together
- **curricular** - where all children are included in the same lesson material, with appropriate adaptations.

Elements of inclusion

We know from the lived experience of many families we come across, inclusion can and is being done well in pockets. And we have some wonderful examples where authentic inclusion has worked well for a child with disability, and over the years, the common theme to a positive inclusive experience has been the “will” of the ECEC to give it a go (mindset of a welcoming culture), see inclusion as a journey (a process not a target), and the willingness to collaborate with the family (positive partnerships, learning together).

Case studies and stories from families

As stated above, for many of the families we hear from, inclusion is conditional upon the child’s ability to fit in. We share a case study and comments from parents below.

Case study: Early Childhood service

Participant: 5 y.o. boy with ASD, Sydney West

Overall themes: Lack of adjustments and skilled staff, leading to expulsion

Case summary and process: Child has attended this EC centre since he was 1 year old. At around age 4 he was diagnosed with ASD. Centre attempted Inclusion Support but was utilising extra educator to 'prop up' ratio numbers while staff did paperwork, meaning the ratios were not raised as per funding model. Child's behaviour was deteriorating due to lack of adjustments and skilled staff to support his individual needs. Child inevitably showed signs of being overwhelmed which at times involved hitting and kicking. At these times, the child was sent home, sometimes only after 20 minutes (suspensions). The Centre Director first encouraged the family to enrol the child into their "Autism support unit" centre which was a 30 minute drive away, saying they cannot provide adequate care for him. Parents declined, knowing their vision was for him to remain with his friends and graduate with all his peers. Next Director then requested family to agree to a partial enrolment, reducing hours to 9-3 so they had all core staff around to 'manage him'. Parents could not agree to this, due to their own medical needs and family responsibilities with 3 other children. Four more months of minimal support and incidences and the EC Centre resorted to expulsion, giving the family no other option but to leave and find a new EC Centre. The child left his friends and a bond with one of the educators in the pivotal year before primary school. Family was left with 3 separate drop offs and pick-ups each day.

Systemic issues: Pressure into segregated setting, under skilled EC educators, lack of adjustments, partial enrolment/hours, expulsion.

Outcomes: Family left and had child home with them for extended period of time before finding a new centre with vacancies. The new ECEC is providing fantastic adjustments and child is no longer showing signs of overwhelm.

*It became obvious my ECEC child had a good day whilst he was in an inclusive learning space in a regular daycare (where **he was treated like a child first before a label**) but not in the Early Intervention Centre (IEC), which was therapy based. I wanted him to be in a regular class at his local ECEC but was pressured by the ECEC that he would be better off in the support unit.*

In term 1, he received an award for being the most inclusive child in the ECEC playground where all children, including from the mainstream, played together. In term 2, they decided to restrict all the SU kids to a sandpit with a locked pool fence euphemistically named "the sensory garden". This is a form of social and environmental restrictive practice. He could not read or write by the end of the year.

He regressed socially and academically. He displayed similar behaviour to when he attended the EIC. His speech went backwards, he would only grunt like when he was 3 years old. He refused to enter the classroom. He could not read or write.

During this period, I started to learn about my child's rights and the legal obligation of the ECEC. I decided to move him to a regular class in a mainstream ECEC. By the end of Year 2, he could read and write at peer level and when he is sick, his friends run up and tell him they missed him.

The difference? The attitude of the Principal and teachers treating him like one of the kids and provide support where needed. See him as a person first and label after that. Staff have a collaborative working relationship with me with the focus on what is best for the child.

Parent 1

"How will his speech improve when he is a class with children who don't speak?"

Parent 4 - Wanting mainstream but forced into special ECEC setting

I would question what the antecedent to the behaviour. Often, I would not be told the whole story. It would become clear that my child's needs were not being met, or it was from not understanding him as a person first, his developmental needs were not being recognised, and/or not enough care had been provided to him, being expected to do things he did not have the capacity to do. If the teacher had recognised my child's behaviour was his way of telling her something, a form of communication, there may have been a different end result. No kid wants to be in trouble.

We found a very insightful psychologist who taught the teacher that time out for my child is unhelpful, suspension will embed the behaviour, the child needs support not punishment. Using words like violence is stressful and unhelpful. For a child with severe ADHD and Autism, if they are feeling elevated, it is important to have a safe space to go to such as the library and a safe person to talk to, to build a strong relationship with an adult at the ECEC.

To the ECEC's credit, they took the psychologist's advice and after a long process of teacher/parent collaboration, my child is happy and calm, attending full time hours, maturing as he feels he is in a secure environment that is supporting him. The teacher has a personal passion for different learning styles, made incredible accommodations for our child such as wobble chairs, or making the alphabet out of 3D foam so my child could learn in a tactile way. My child is thriving. Behavioural issues were a daily occurrence. Now they are just every now and again.

The cost to families – financial, emotional and social – cannot be underestimated. Many families have resorted to home schooling after suspensions/expulsions. This has an impact on a family's income capacity, let alone the impact on a child's academic and social learnings.

At a recent Family Advocacy event, we asked parents to list the explanations they had been given by ECEC leaders/school principals when asking to enter Kindergarten and other ECEC staff for why their child did not belong. The list is as follows:

<p><i>But this is what we have always done</i></p> <p><i>Teachers aren't therapists</i></p> <p><i>They are becoming mainstream but not there yet</i></p> <p><i>We do reverse integration</i></p> <p><i>You have your head in the clouds</i></p> <p><i>You do realise your child has a disability</i></p> <p><i>When they grow out of disability they can come</i></p> <p><i>You haven't accepted your child's disability</i></p> <p><i>We already have a child with disability</i></p> <p><i>We have done all we can for your child</i></p> <p><i>We only take children with high functioning disability</i></p> <p><i>You don't always get what you want in life</i></p> <p><i>Your child is not disabled enough for individual funding</i></p> <p><i>There is such a big academic gap so it won't work</i></p> <p><i>They are not a good fit</i></p> <p><i>This will be too exhausting</i></p> <p><i>We don't have enough resources</i></p> <p><i>We don't know how to teach children in mainstream</i></p> <p><i>Our teachers aren't babysitters</i></p> <p><i>Our teachers aren't nurses</i></p> <p><i>We have no specific disability knowledge</i></p> <p><i>Your child is a risk to others</i></p> <p><i>Your child excludes himself/herself</i></p> <p><i>We are already dipping into the general budget</i></p> <p><i>Kids are cruel so they are better off somewhere else</i></p> <p><i>Their self-esteem will be affected</i></p>	<p><i>We have no resources</i></p> <p><i>We don't have the skills</i></p> <p><i>We can't afford the modifications</i></p> <p><i>Your child won't get funding</i></p> <p><i>Our ECEC is heritage listed so it's not a good idea</i></p> <p><i>When she is toilet trained</i></p> <p><i>My teachers don't have to teach your child</i></p> <p><i>You got lucky in primary school</i></p> <p><i>The gap gets wider so why put them through it?</i></p> <p><i>They will take teacher's attention away from the children</i></p> <p><i>Will you be paying for this?</i></p> <p><i>You don't realise how tired this will make the teachers</i></p> <p><i>We are not experts</i></p> <p><i>They won't identify with their peers</i></p> <p><i>You will get backlash from other parents</i></p> <p><i>We don't teach them</i></p> <p><i>She can't be educated</i></p> <p><i>He doesn't meet school requirements</i></p> <p><i>She can't come here because we can't lift her</i></p> <p><i>We have done all we can</i></p> <p><i>We can't solve all the world's problems</i></p> <p><i>Your child is not a good fit</i></p> <p><i>There are special places for your child</i></p> <p><i>You are ruining your child's future</i></p> <p><i>You are not doing the best for your child</i></p> <p><i>Your child doesn't belong with adolescents</i></p> <p><i>We will get a teacher's assistant to teach them</i></p> <p><i>There is best practise and there is reality</i></p> <p><i>It will be an unjustifiable hardship</i></p> <p><i>Not in our area</i></p>
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This is in part a consequence of low expectations of children with disability – that educators and other children fail to recognise children with disability as capable of learning. Or it could be the educator is not confident and/or competent of how best to educate a child with disability, and therefore may not adequately take into account the different learning needs of these children. But a big factor is the medical model of disability that focuses on labels, and deficits. More on this in the section on “Understanding Devaluation” below.

Systemic discrimination exists before a child has set foot in an ECEC. Children without disability and their families do not encounter these barriers. Instead, they are given a welcoming attitude with high expectations and a willingness to do what it takes to support that child's learning and involvement in ECEC. There is no question about this. Conversely, for those with a disability, this is not the case. The consequence of gatekeeping to both child and family are obvious. Rejection, stigmatisation, lack of educational outcomes, isolation, low self-esteem.

Far more needs to be done to teach and enforce the laws and policies prohibiting the prevention of enrolment of children, suspensions/expulsions, and forced partial enrolments.

Understanding devaluation and breaking the cycle through inclusion

Fostering inclusion in childhood has the potential to break the cycle of stigma associated with disability. It is worthwhile briefly explaining these negative assumption/unconscious bias and the impact this can have on a child with disability.

Rather than a person being seen with an identity, a personality, likes, dislikes, dreams, people are perceived as their impairment, a deficit orientation where one is blinded to see the potential in a person with disability. This type of thinking leads to the “othering” of whole groups of people, whereby it is assumed a person with disability needs to be in a special places with special people with special materials. People with disability end up being distanced, pulled apart and away, physically and/or socially and/or with the curricular. It is this othering that can dangerously lead to the likelihood of abuse, neglect, violence and exploitation.

Confronting as it may be, some of the negative roles and perceptions that get in the way of people with disability being afforded the opportunity of having access to things that most Australians enjoy and act as a barrier are some of the perceived devalued roles below:

Not being fully human - We have many examples of comments from people to justify this. For example, being told the person with disability don't know the difference if they have a friend or not. People with intellectual disability do not experience grief, do not need a medical procedure that most people would need. There are many examples were people with disability are not given the same access to rights, choices or the right supports to achieve this. Things we would automatically afford as essential to a person that was not devalued.

An object of pity - charity recipient, with approaches often derived from a place of pity not rights or valued status. Often leaving the person more vulnerable.

Burden - people see the person with disability as a burden to the family or society more broadly. Unable to contribute back to society and to constantly take and not give.

Menace - crafted as a menace by being caged like an animal such as those found in ECEC/schools/support units. Being seen generally as being menacing such as violent, sexual deviate with this stereotype filtering across many people with a particular disability diagnoses and often carrying this unworthy reputation with them for year. Often dramatically changing how they are seen and what treatment they receive and, in many cases, putting them at substantial risk due to this.

Loss of authentic identity - not called by name but as “clients” or being equated with their impairment, for example, the downs girl or the autism kids. People see the label first or the role of client rather than the human behind it.

Eternal Child – people with intellectual impairment are often seen as children who will never grow up. Families who embrace this idea find it hard to break out from this. And of course, it is then reinforced by many specialist roles such as pediatrician, GP, Service professionals, educators and broader society. All reinforcing this negative assumption with many people with disability only knowing this way of being treated with many learnt responsive being experienced with this. ‘An adult man of 55 years who has a mental age of 6 years’ is a very common negative assumption and keeps many people trapped in

childhood role forever.

Better off dead - people may not be aware they are thinking this way. However, we only have to take a look at the statistics around people with disability of all ages to identify that quality of life measurement that is afforded to most Australians aren't often afforded to people with disability. Mortality rates are grossly avoidable, with many lives cut short due to a call from medical specialist in relation to whose life is worth living and what conditions makes a person's life not worth living. This is a modern day reality with medical safeguarding being seen as essential for both formal and informal advocacy.

These perceived devalued roles bring with them horrific consequences. For many people with developmental disability, due to the historical practice of being placed on a segregated path, valued roles have become out of reach. The more valued roles a person who is devalued has the more other nondisabled people can personally relate to them creating a safeguard against some of the negative assumptions which heighten the risk of abuse, neglect, violence and exploitation. We now know from the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse⁵, segregated settings are harmful and are a factor that heightens risk of abuse of children with disabilities. The more recent Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability, also heard many accounts validating this point.

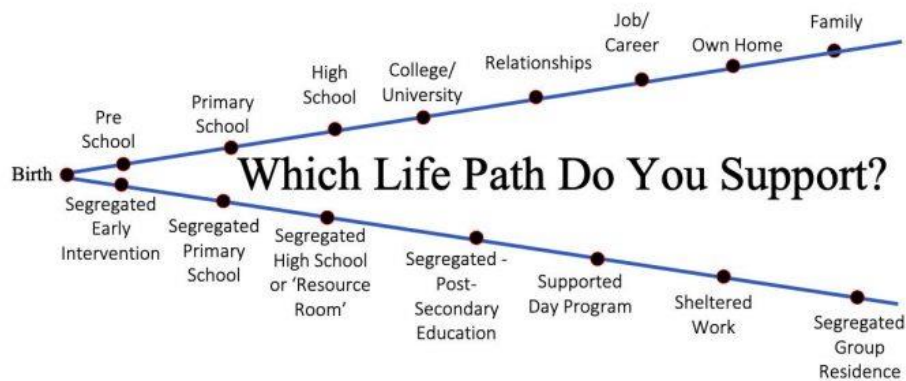
Phase out segregation - For many parents, "special" ECECs are like manna from heaven, an answer to a prayer, based on the advice given that their child be "safer and get the supports they need". We now know that segregating children with disability is not an evidence-based practice, but rather stem from traditional old ways of thinking based on negative assumptions/unconscious bias about people with disability. When we look beyond the apparent benevolence of "helping" young children with disabilities, we'll know that the special education ECEC experience may well be a hindrance to a child's current and future success.

Many parents argue that their child's special education ECEC is a wonderful, inclusive classroom. However, when we look at the environment, it reveals a congregated setting based on having a disability. The natural proportion of children with disabilities in Australia is 1 in 5 (according to National Consistent Collection of Data). So in a group of 20 children, no more than 4 should be children with disabilities. But this natural proportion is always violated in special ECEC settings. Children who have not yet acquired speech are placed in a class with other children who cannot talk yet. How does this make any sense? If we wish to learn Italian, the best way to learn is to be in Italy immersed in the language.

Segregation harms children with disability in the long term, irrespective of good intentions. It is an unintended consequence of an historical and unsubstantiated practice. The Disability Royal Commission demonstrated that within these segregated environments, which children and young people are more commonly funnelled into, people with disability experience more exposure to violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation. This finding prompted Family Advocacy to join with 41 other organisations to call for an end to segregated environments.

More than sixty years later, we now know these segregated settings of special ECECs and their surrogate support units in mainstream settings were not based on best practice or evidence. There is no evidence base to continue to support segregation. Current evidence and values of community inclusion no longer support this harmful model of segregation. As a society, we need to dare ourselves to think otherwise and confess to our ignorance that the labelling of "special" and the setting of "special" has wounded and done a great disservice to people with disability.

⁵ Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse Final Report in 2017



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Segregating leads to segregation. This is best depicted in the diagram below which shows the natural pathways of childhood and the impact of an ordinary pathway versus a segregated pathway. Every step taken down the segregated pathway is a step away from being part of regular society/community. As one family member noted, “the further you travel down the segregated path, the harder it is to come back to being part of the community”. We cannot underestimate the damage that can be done due to subconscious devaluation and segregation. When children are excluded from regular class of their EC centre, we set them up on a path of being “othered” and “done to” in all areas of their life. In short, they are seen as different and often are not afforded many of the things most Australians take for granted.

Inclusion and Early intervention - An education policy which supports education of children with disability with targeted support and early intervention from the earliest stages of formal learning in ECEC environments clearly requires engagement with early childhood policies and practices. Some of the key intersects in this space are: the federal government’s [National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and Care](#); the [Early Years Learning Framework](#); [My Time Our Place – Framework for School Age Care in Australia](#).

We do caution there is a danger of over therapising the child. Early intervention and educational learning support of a child with disability should take place within the settings the child would naturally be part of – family life, local community daycare, playgroups and community ECEC⁶. Supports should be brought to the child to facilitate his/her participation in natural settings, rather than removing the child from his/her [natural setting](#) to access disability or early intervention support.

We need to gradually phase out all segregated settings towards full inclusion where ALL children, even those with severe and profound disabilities, are included. We refer to the Australian Coalition for Inclusive Education’s paper - ‘*Driving change: A roadmap for achieving inclusive education in Australia*’ - which provides a 10-year plan underpinned by six pillars to help realise inclusive education in Australia and prevent the violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation of children with disability. These pillars are drawn from the evidence base and embed the rights of children as set out in the United Nations CRPD. We recommend the Strategy be based on the ACIE roadmap and adjusted to suit the Early Childhood sector.

⁶ [Following the natural paths of childhood](#), Bob Jackson (This paper is a development of a paper “Should schools include children with a disability?” Robert Jackson, Ron Chalmers and Daryl Wills, Interaction 2004)

QUESTION 2. What vision should our nation have for Australia’s youngest children?

Vision

In terms of the Vision for the Strategy, we suggest the Australian government draw on the two most important international commitments to advancing inclusive education, (which the Australian Government has signed up to):

The 2006 UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (notable Article 24) calls for an “inclusive system of education at all levels” as a human right and is focused on people with disability.

The Sustainable Development Goal No. 4 (SDG4) has a goal to:

“Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote life-long learning opportunities for all”.

This directs our attention to three axes defining progress: quality, equity *and* inclusion. We wonder if all of our focus being on inclusive education sometimes leaves the other two axes too implicit. It would be our recommendation to ensure all 3 elements were emphasised in the Vision of the Strategy.

Quality

Quality directs our attention to what education is for and what it means in the life of all children.

A useful definition is offered by Ken Robinson (British educationalist): education aims to enable children to understand the world around them and the talents within them so that they can become fulfilled individuals and active, compassionate citizens”. A similar sentiment is echoed in Australia’s *Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration* which states “education should continue to promote excellence and equity and enable all Australians to become confident and creative individuals, successful learners, and active and informed community members”.

These definitions are at odds with Australia’s current policies directed at standardisation, which we challenge. This will be discussed below in the Equity section.

Equity

SDG4 widens our focus from disability to ensuring access for ALL. The targets specifically mention eliminating gender disparities and ensuring access for indigenous people and children in vulnerable situations. Intersectionality is a word being used to draw our attention to the ways in which different threads of disadvantage are intertwined in the lives of children, which is what early childhood educators both experience and need to engage with, in the ECEC and classroom⁷.

To ensure the Strategy does not pay lip service to the concept of equity, we want to ensure that it is understood that equity is more than the “permission to be present” but rather valued full participation and belonging. We wish to challenge the current mindset of the Australian Government regarding standardisation and being very outcomes focused towards literacy and numeracy. Rather than current efforts towards sameness with a standardised approach to education, we recommend the Strategy value difference and human diversity and adopt an equitable actively anti-

⁷ [David Towell, Commentary on Let’s Chat about Inclusive Education Series One: Transatlantic Reflections](#)

biased approach to early education. This approach would ensure all children are included on a physical, social and curricular level.

Inclusion

We have already provided a lengthy discussion regarding the definition of inclusion. We recommend the following Principles of Inclusion be incorporated in to the Vision.

12 Principles of Inclusion - Inclusion is not just about being present in a mainstream setting, it means being actively engaged, and creating environments for all children to be able to develop relationships. For the child's participation to be meaningful, the child's role and contribution must be valued by all those involved in the activity, including the child themselves. For inclusion to be successful, **below are 12 principles** we recommend in the early childhood learning space. These principles also apply to all education settings from primary, secondary to tertiary levels.

12 Principles of Inclusion	
Leadership	Children with disability flourish when leadership in the early learning environment ensures children with a disability are valued and disability is viewed as adding diversity to the class.
Natural Proportions	Children with disability should be spread out in natural proportions rather than being grouped together by the category of their disability.
Supports	Support needs to come direct from the teacher rather than aides (ECEC learning support). We need to move away from 1:1 support.
Time for Planning	teachers should have sufficient co-planning time to ensure children with disability have adequate and appropriate support and reasonable adjustments made.
Mobile services	rather than taking a child out of the regular classroom, services should be delivered in the context of the regular classroom. Learning skills in a natural environment is more effective than practicing a new skill in an isolated setting once or twice a week.
Specialist Teachers	should be supporting the teacher in the regular classroom
High expectations	assume every child can learn without requiring evidence of their capacity. Inclusive education needs no prerequisite skills.
Collaboration	develop partnerships based on mutual commitment, trust and respect between the ECEC, the child and their family/guardian.
Peer Learning	To foster friendships and avoid micro exclusion in classrooms, instigate peer learning opportunities.
Changed mindsets	are required for inclusive education where traditional views of education are transformed. Disability competency training in formal educator settings.
Continuous reflection	required on practices, policy, values and beliefs and how they impact the inclusion of children with disability.
Children and parent voice	acknowledge the lived experience of the child with a disability and their parent, their experiences, their needs and their solutions.

QUESTION 3. What mix of outcomes are the most important to include in the Strategy?

Create an Inclusion/Well Being Index - No need to reinvent the wheel. We suggest creating an Inclusion/Well Being Index, drawing on what already exists for ECECs and tweak them to suit the Early Childhood sector. The benefit of this approach is that ALL children benefit from an inclusive approach, not just children with a disability.

It would be very possible to develop something very useful drawing on the [UK Index for Inclusion, developing learning and participation in schools](#), the Disability Standards for Education 2005, relevant research, and the broader work toward inclusion.

Other suggestions are:

- [Inclusive schooling IQ](#), Julie Causton
- [Signposts for School Improvement: Inclusive Education](#), Queensland Department of Education
- [Queensland School Autism Reflection Tool](#), Autism Hub adapted from an original version created in the UK. Although through the lens of Autism, it is easily applicable across disability generally.

Find helpful resources and readings for each QsArt section:

- [Section 1: Individual children](#)
- [Section 2: Physical environment](#)
- [Section 3: Collaborations and partnerships](#)
- [Section 4: Pedagogy and differentiated teaching](#)
- [Section 5: Leadership and continuous improvement.](#)

[NCCD Reflection Tool](#)

- Consultation and collaboration with the children and/or their parent, guardian or carer
- Assessing and identifying the needs of the children
- Providing reasonable adjustments to the children to address their identified needs
- Monitoring and reviewing the impact of the adjustments provided

All Means All indicators of inclusion

While every inclusive ECEC may have its own different “look and feel”, the following are common indicators of inclusive ECECs:

1. All children belong as of right – inclusion is not something that needs to be “earned” or for which a child has to prove “readiness”. All children are readily seen learning the same curriculum (with differentiated instruction and appropriate support for those who need it), sharing the same spaces, having the same type of day (length of day, time of arrival and departure) and having the same opportunities to participate in extra-curricular activities.
2. Positive attitude to difference – the ECEC environment is friendly and human differences are accepted by staff and children as valuable and are not denied or stigmatised.
3. A climate of children cooperation and effort, not competition and ranking – the ECEC is committed to maximizing learning outcomes of ALL its children regardless of background or ability and children are

encouraged to work together and support each other, individual progress is celebrated and children are not privileged or shamed depending on their grades or comparative skills.

4. A moral commitment to being inclusive is reflected at every level – in the ECEC’s vision, beliefs, policies, practices and culture, and in strong and engaged leadership.
5. ECEC openly embraces its role in promoting an inclusive society.
6. ECEC welcomes working collaboratively with families and community - to share “learnings” and support children.
7. Inclusive language is used. Words can show how we value diversity.
8. Shared Communication: Communication Partner skills⁸
9. Disability equity education: eliminate ableism

QUESTION 4. What specific areas/policy priorities should be included in the Strategy and why?

QUESTION 5. What could the Commonwealth do to improve outcomes for children—particularly those who are born or raised in more vulnerable and/or disadvantaged circumstances?

QUESTION 6. What areas do you think the Commonwealth could focus on to improve coordination and collaboration in developing policies for children and families?

Transform our dual education system to be inclusive to benefit ALL children

“Change may often proceed through small steps but the changes required to deliver this vision of inclusive education cannot be achieved just through tinkering with traditional education; rather it requires a transformation in which new ways of thinking are reflected in action at all levels in the education system, especially of course in the classrooms where teachers and children meet.

Transformational change requires a significant investment in developing transformational leadership, not only among policy-makers and professional staff but also among parents and children.”

Gordon Porter, Director, Inclusion Canada, Advancing Inclusive Education, May 2017

NSW and Australia are lagging behind other jurisdictions around the world in their education and treatment of children with disability. For example, some jurisdictions such as Italy, some states in the USA and New Brunswick, Canada, have created educational reform to ensure that no child is in a segregated setting and that all children are given the best opportunity to learn and develop normatively in these formative years, together. We encourage the Commission to look further afield and would be happy to assist in this regard.

It is important to highlight that Family Advocacy has worked in partnership with the NSW government and the NSW Department of Education and has been funded by both over many years to provide training to support families in NSW around inclusive education. This includes teaching them about their rights, in an attempt to

⁸ <https://towardinclusion.com.au/>

counteract the barriers that they face in trying to get access to an equitable quality education for their child.

The many government inquiries held in previous years, and recommendations that follow them, have shown that the system's attempts at reform have been tinkering around the edges and have not come close to providing the positive outcomes expected in 2023. This is why we recommend not improvements, but **transformation**.

We urge the Australian Government to adopt our recommendations suggested below, which are inspired by Inclusive Education Canada's, Advancing Inclusive Education document on the Keys to transformational change in public education systems, May 2017. They are based on the need to mutually reinforce actions at all levels with all stakeholders - the early childhood classroom, ECEC, district and government level. These suggestions are not meant to be seen as prescriptive but rather a helpful stimulus to the Australian Government to find its own route to transformation using the Strategy.

Recommendation 1: Develop an Inclusive Education System.

As shared through the case studies above, there are large gaps between policy and practice. There is a need to fully engage with inclusive education as transformation – a transformation to education settings and experiences that enable and are underpinned by a genuine valuing of all people in all our diversity and a flexible and responsive approach within systems and individual settings⁹. This can only happen if mainstream ECECs become capable of educating all children in their local communities. We have previously discussed the rationale and benefits of developing an inclusive education system, being mindful of the inadequacy of current systems and the negative assumptions of society. It will not be easy but it will be worthwhile. To be reminded of the bigger picture, in a widely quoted section, the Salamanca Statement¹⁰ concluded that:

Regular ECECs with [an] inclusive orientation are the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all; moreover, they provide an effective education to the majority of children and improve the efficiency and ultimately the cost-effectiveness of the entire education system. (ix)

To achieve this an inclusive society, we must start in the early years with the inclusion of ALL children.

Recommendation 2: Encouraging Transformational Leadership.

The largest barrier to implementing an authentic inclusive education system which improves educational outcomes for all children is the existence of the parallel segregated special settings. This leaves early education/ECEC leaders and mainstream educators feeling compelled to indicate that there is another place for children with different learning needs. A more enabling model is one where the system is expected to guarantee participation in the regular ECEC and all those involved ask "what will it take" to enable the child's full participation. This can only happen if the option to segregate is not available.

Recommendation 2a: Merging our parallel system of mainstream and EIC into one holistic system of education so all children are placed in regular EC settings, with reasonable adjustments and supports so they can access the curriculum and extra-curricular activities.

⁹ [K Cologon, Is inclusive education really for everyone? Family stories of children and young people labelled with 'severe and multiple' or 'profound' disabilities', 26 Nov, 2020](#)

¹⁰ Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education 1994.

Recommendation 2b: The starting point for this reform will be to use the Strategy to **develop a national inclusive education plan to gradually phase out segregation and exclusionary practices** and to undertake development of a comprehensive plan to revolutionise our system.

This will involve **political leadership** through legislation and policy, which are discussed below under “Tackling Barriers to Leadership”. Ensuring inclusion in the local ECEC will require multi-layered strategies such as ensuring an attitude that is welcoming to a child with a disability and their family, increasing the inclusive practice capacity of teachers, and providing adequate systems and resources to implement quality inclusive education.

To do this, we can move teaching expertise from segregated settings to the local ECEC, to work together with the local teacher to educate every child. There are schemes that already exist that build a whole system¹¹—state, district, ECEC, and community – with capacity to provide academic and behavioural support to improve outcomes for all children. In many cases, the wheel does not need to be recreated but modified to our particular system¹².

Recommendation 2c: Transformational change will also require investment in **developing transformational leadership amongst ECEC Directors, educators, parents and children/children**. Such leadership needs to be found and nurtured, be given opportunities to be inspired, especially through learning from the achievement of children/children, as well as “space” for developing their skills through reflecting on their own experiences in the company of fellow leaders.

Recommendation 3: Educating for Life.

Traditionally, education has been focused on standardised knowledge acquisition and assessment on subjects defined academically, achieved through whole class instruction in ways which fail to recognise that every child is different. By contrast, Article 24 of the UNCRPD offers a more holistic and empowering conception of education. This refers to children with disability but is relevant to all children.

We acknowledge this more holistic philosophy was no doubt the intention behind the *Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration* and *Australia Disability Strategy* and the *Early Childhood Targeted Plan*.

Moreover, if a better future requires active citizens with different skills, thinking critically and working collaboratively, then these attributes need to commence in the early years and be further developed during the school years. We repeat the quote from the title page from Jody Carr, “Children that learn together, learn to live together.”

Recommendation 4: Promoting an Inclusive Culture.

Despite the rhetoric, to achieve inclusive and accessible communities requires a paradigm shift in community attitudes. We previously discussed the inherent unconscious devaluation of people with disability. Communities and institutional contexts can only become inclusive and accessible when they are made aware of these unconscious biases and too take on board that people with disability are citizens first and foremost, and entitled to a respected place in society, due process and protection from harm.

The exclusions and micro exclusions children with a disability currently face highlight the Disability Discrimination Act has its limitations. But a positive attitude of those in charge of the ECEC as well as a collaborative approach

¹¹ [K. Lane, et al, School-wide systems to Promote Positive Behaviours and Facilitate Instruction](#)

¹² [Association of Independent Schools, Using SWIFT in the Australian context](#)

with parents, can make a lot of difference.

We currently have a culture of exclusion which prohibits children with disability from enrolment in the regular classroom. The research provided shows unequivocally that exclusion has a negative impact on children with disability, and children without disability are missing out by not having children with disability in their class. Therefore, continuing to segregate will adversely impact educational outcomes for all children. A transformation in culture and practice is required to ensure that all children benefit.

Recommendation 5: Developing Partnership.

Collaborative processes are an integral way to bring about best practice and positive children outcomes. Through a funding grant from The Department of Education, Family Advocacy developed [Conversations for Collaboration](#), a collaborative engagement framework which aims to guide conversations between educators, parents and children that will enhance children supports and successes for a positive educational experience. We recommend this guide be adopted as a tool to support the Strategy. It is also important that early educators are equipped to direct a family to know their child's inclusion rights and how to access advocacy supports. Early educators can be very influential when parents are guided by their opinions around inclusion or exclusion pathways.

Recommendation 6: Investing in Equity.

To achieve this transformational change, governments need to invest resources in early education system development and ensure that specialist expertise moves into the support of mainstream ECECs. Resources need to be allocated in a way which encourages inclusive enrolment and fairly reflects the needs in each ECEC.³⁹

Recommendation 7: Tackling Barriers to Participation.

As discussed, there are physical and attitudinal barriers to the equitable participation for a quality early education. Some may be about the physical design of buildings, the local transport system, availability of aids and adjustments, or about how children/children are understood or learn differently. Identifying and reducing these barriers so no child is disadvantaged is an important task of legislation, policy and practice. First, there is a need to see disability as a consequence of poorly designed environments, not something which is located inside the individual. The Strategy can set out the requirements for ECECs to make 'reasonable adjustments' including ensuring children that normally experience obstacles to learning, can gain access.

Recommendation 7a: Inclusive Education Strategy. As we have previously recommended, Australia needs a National Inclusive Education Plan and the Strategy can provide this. As discussed, the Australian Government must be clear around the definition of inclusion (as discussed above). Without this directive piece, ECECs are left to interpret what it means in their settings, and critically what impact it has on young people and their learning journeys. We must ensure clarity as to the definition of inclusion, affirming the human rights of each children to an inclusive education in accordance with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), General Comment No 4 (2016) on Article 24: Right to Inclusive Education (Para 9).

Recommendation 7b: Ensure the legislative/policy frameworks and good inclusive practice are known and understood by early educators/leaders. This includes the Disability Standards for Education 2005, Universal Design for Learning, and disability competency training. Make these mandatory requirements through the NQF.

Recommendation 7c: Independent Complaints process. Family Advocacy's position on restrictive

interventions in educational settings is that the rights of children and teachers would be better protected by establishing a system with independent oversight for reporting and monitoring. Independent, transparent data and analysis, combined with continuous quality improvement review mechanisms in place to support ECECs to manage behaviours of concern while protecting the rights and dignity of children in their care.

Timeliness would be critical to this process. In the event that the decision is unsatisfactory to the person with disability or their parent/guardian/advocate, then appeal options should form part of this process through current structures such as the Administrative Appeals Tribunal or NSW Civil and Administrative Tribunal. This will require legislation. Whilst it may take longer, this is a preferred pathway as it critical that this process be both independent and rigorous.

Recommendation 8: Strengthening Inclusive Pedagogy.

Families having a good inclusive ECEC experience tell us that good educators think carefully about how each child/children learns best, taking into account different aptitude and learning styles. We have previously mentioned Universal Design for Learning and tailored individual adjustments provide a framework for equitable participation.

The Department of Education can support ECECs to provide support to classroom teachers through sharing best practice, providing multi-professional expert advice, and allocate relevant resources such as co-teachers and teaching assistants. The Australian Government can foster inclusive pedagogies through policies on flexible curricula and investment in educator/teacher education.

Recommendation 9: Prioritising Professional Development.

For mainstream educators, until there is an authentic expectation of children with disability in the mainstream classroom then they will continue to feel unprepared and unable to teach to diverse classrooms due to either inadequate pre-service teaching, not having done 'inclusive ed' electives or a lack of experience. It is important that teachers and other staff are fully equipped to deliver inclusive practices in the ECEC.

We need practitioners to feel equipped and empowered to support the needs of all their children because "teachers prepared to work effectively with a diverse range of learners' needs can act as multipliers for inclusive education"¹³.

Lack of quality early educators and support is a barrier to inclusive education. Attitudes directly influence the implementation of inclusive practices in the classroom. Pre-service education is directly related to educator attitudes. Educators who receive education about inclusion (which includes the Disability Standards for Education 2005) have been found to be more likely to have positive attitudes towards the inclusion of children with disability¹⁴.

From the experiences of our families, an approach to pre-service early educator education would be to move away from deficit thinking with low expectations to an approach that welcomes and celebrates differences. It is not only disadvantaged and vulnerable children, but all children who will benefit from this approach.

In part, this is about the reform of early educator education in the Universities and other training institutions, but

¹³ European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education, 2012

¹⁴ Cologon, K. (2012). Confidence in their own ability: Postgraduate early childhood children examining their attitudes towards inclusive education. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 16(11), 1155-1173.

also for those who are already part of the workforce. It would be useful to make inclusive education (as distinct from special education) a mandatory requirement via the Australian Children's Education & Care Quality Authority (ACECQA) as part of in-service training.

The Australian Government can foster inclusive pedagogies through policies on flexible curricula and investment in early educator education. We recommend disability competency and awareness training is taught to early educators/ leadership and parents. We refer to the body of work done by ACECQA's on [cultural competency](#)¹⁵. We recommend a similar approach to teach "disability competency". In the past, when this has been raised, governments mistakenly interpreted this to mean simply defining a list of disabilities. It must go beyond this to include an understanding concepts of devaluation, normalisation, ableism, negative assumptions/ unconscious bias, Universal Design for Learning, Understanding Behaviour is a form of communication, and trauma informed practice. Family Advocacy are open to discuss/ assist with formulating a "Disability Competency Training" program for early educators, leaders, and parents and more broadly with the medical profession, allied health professionals, and bureaucrats.

It is important that it is distinguished from special education, and prioritising continuous development for qualified practitioners. Educators need to be afforded the time and space to reflect on their experiences with other educators, and learn from parents. In Canada, one method that works well is a "solution circle" which offers practical and efficient ways in which small groups of educators can help each other find practical solutions to challenges arising in the classroom. Another suggestion is to set up a Community of Practice for Inclusive Education with all of the EC centres, ECECs, and childcare centres where inclusive practices can be shared.

Recommendation 10 - Learning from Experience.

Not only is leadership development and professional development important for educational transformation, but it is also vital to learn across the system as a whole, both vertically and laterally, so that policy is responding to experience in the classroom and vice versa, and one innovation area is informing the other. We need leaders to be engaging with each other, assessing challenges, identifying priorities, and monitoring progress against the shared vision of inclusion.

Family Advocacy has had the opportunity to see the Inclusive Education system in New Brunswick which started the process in the 1970s. What stood out to us was the commitment to regular review of progress in the whole province. There are many tools they have created to assist in this review process. We discuss a number of measuring tools in Question 3., but one example is an Index for Inclusion: Developing Learning and Participation in ECECs¹⁶.

Recommendation 11 - Plotting the Journey to Inclusion.

Inclusion is a journey not a target. Value driven and creative leaders work with each other to plot the journey and this can start in different ways - parents seeking mainstream ECECs, educators starting to innovate in their own classrooms, education leaders taking their own ECECs in new directions, political leadership inspired by a human rights perspective. Whatever the initial impetus, leaders will need to establish a compelling vision of inclusive education and build wider support for change.

¹⁵ [ACECQA website](#)

¹⁶ Booth, T, Ainscow, M (2011) Index for Inclusion: Developing Learning and Participation in Schools

Recommendation 12 - Effective and efficient funding allocation.

Whilst we appreciate the early childhood sector is largely privately owned organisations/corporations, the Australian Government can influence inclusive education through the Strategy. Inclusion indicators, such as a requirement that every leader/educator knows the Disability Standards for Education 2005, Universal Design for Learning, have disability and cultural competency training, could be made part of the National Quality Framework. The Strategy could direct ECEC funding to support inclusive education, to shift the organisation of resources and infrastructure from the segregated setting to the inclusive setting.

It is extremely important that we highlight that the success of inclusive education is not solely reliant on funding. What is also significant is having ECEC leaders that create an inclusive culture. A ECEC with an inclusive culture will search out solutions, use collaborative problem solving and flexible working structures. As previously discussed, the inclusive culture provides a significant positive impact on learning outcomes for all children including disadvantaged and vulnerable children.

QUESTION 7. What principles should be included in the Strategy?

Principles of to include in the Strategy - We suggest these broad principles below as well as the Australian Centre for Inclusive Education's Principles on Inclusive Education

1. Use the Strategy for transformative change for children with disability as rightsholders within an inclusive Australian society.
2. Put children with disability at the centre of the Strategy through co-design and ongoing governance/oversight/accountability.
3. Ensure everything funded or enabled under the Strategy advances the rights of children with disability as equal citizens.
4. Make sure the Strategy recognises the strength and diversity of children with disability
5. Use the Strategy to drive cohesive interaction between it and other legislation and policy reform agendas and responsibilities.
6. Make sure relevant recommendations of previous Reviews are reflected and implemented.
7. Acknowledge the critical importance of the role of families
8. **An education system for all**
All children/children are accepted into a single, universally accessible and inclusive education system. Children/Children are not segregated or excluded on the basis of disability and receive the support required within the general education system, to realise their right to education on an equal basis with others.
9. **A welcoming and inclusive environment**
All children/children and other members of the ECEC community are welcomed and belong in a learning environment free from discrimination and prejudice. ECECs embed the values of full inclusion into their culture, policies and practices and adopt effective measures to prevent abuse and bullying.

10. Diversity

Diversity is recognised and valued and all children feel respected, included and listened to. The differing requirements and identities of individual children are accommodated and there is a commitment to the elimination of barriers impeding the right to education.

11. Access, participation and outcomes

Curriculum, resources, assessment and teaching practices value and respond to the diversity of all children and provide educational experiences that are inclusive of individual needs. Education systems and educators have high learning expectations for children with disability, and seek to optimise learning outcomes. Any support measures provided to individual children strengthen opportunities for them to participate in the classroom and in out-of-ECEC activities alongside their peers, rather than marginalising them.

12. Transparency and accountability

The Australian and State/Territory Governments are accountable to Australia's agreed international human rights conventions, treaties and agreements, particularly the right to inclusive education under Article 24 of the United Nations [*Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*](#) and [*General Comment No. 4*](#) (Right to Inclusive Education). The Australian and State/Territory Governments take significant action to provide inclusive education for children with disability, and monitor and report on progress towards meeting their human rights obligations.

QUESTION 8. Are there gaps in existing frameworks or other research or evidence that need to be considered for the development of the Strategy?

There is a significant body of work on inclusive education. We direct the Australian Government to the following sources:

- Family Advocacy's webpage, "[What does the research tell us about Inclusive Education?](#)"
- **Dr Thomas Hehir** for The Alana Institute, [A Summary of the Evidence on Inclusive Education](#)
- **Associate Professor Dr Bob Jackson** at (www.include.com.au) has done a great deal of research in inclusive education. His work has encompassed a very extensive review of the literature about inclusion and he has given presentations to parents and teachers across Australia. He has been closely involved with ECEC inclusion, advising families, teachers, ECECs and education systems on the rationale and practicalities of inclusion. Below are two of Dr Jackson's articles. [Inclusion or Segregation for Children with an Intellectual Impairment: What does the Research Say? Why should ECECs include children with a disability?](#)
- **Professor Kathy Cologon** from Macquarie University wrote an issue paper titled [Inclusion in education - towards equality for children with disability](#) for Children with Disability Australia in 2013. This paper states that Inclusive education is an approach to education free from discriminatory beliefs, attitudes and practises, including free from ableism'. It discusses the concept of ableism as the attitude that a person with disability is somehow inferior to a person who has no disability. It also emphasises that every children has the right to an inclusive education and recognises that inclusion is not about disability or ECEC but it is an issue of social justice. Another article written by Professor Kathy Cologon [Inclusive education means all children are included in every way, not just in theory.](#)
- We direct you to **Professor Linda Graham**, the Director of QUT The Centre for Inclusive Education website – notably [Inclusion and Exclusion](#), and [Resources](#) and [DRC Rights and Attitudes Paper](#).
- **Bruce Uditsky**. It can be helpful to revisit what has occurred in other countries who are also challenging a segregated ECECing system. In this document [From integration to inclusion: the](#)

[Canadian experience](#)¹, Uditsky moves through an historical overview of the education of children with significant disabilities in Canada, focusing on the parent movement because they were and are the principle leaders and agents of change. Several other themes run through this chapter including:

1. the struggle for inclusion as a reflection of personal and cultural values not educational science
2. educators as allies in the process of change
3. inclusive ECECing practices as different from integrated ECECing practices.

Uditsky ultimately argues that although a definition of inclusion is still evolving, fundamental to the process is a set of principles ensuring the children is valued and needed. From these principles come several key components to the practice of inclusive ECECing: membership, curriculum, teaching practices, friendships and supports. You can view [this interview with Bruce Uditsky and Anne Hughson](#) discussing the opportunities for full inclusive education in Australia. Some main points of reflection from the experience in Alberta Canada is:

- increasing the opportunities for fully inclusive education from ECEC years onward
- guaranteeing teachers are equipped and qualified to teach in an inclusive classroom
- ensuring ECEC leaders are being mentored and are able to instruct staff in their ECEC communities
- upholding the United Nations Convention (note that Australia signed this convention in 2007) - read more about this on the know your rights page
- working with Universal Design of Learning as a teaching pedagogy that raises the bar for all children to do well by creating a rich learning environment.
- **New Brunswick, Canada's Policy 322 on inclusive education**
The inclusive education system in New Brunswick and [Policy 322](#) on inclusive education issued by then Minister for Education and Early Childhood Development, Jody Carr in 2013 that was recognized as a global exemplar at the 2016 Project Zero Conference sponsored by the Esri Foundation, the World Future Council, and the European Foundation Centre at the United Nations Office in Vienna, Austria. Policy 322 states the goal of Inclusive public education:
 - Recognizes that every children can learn.
 - Is universal – the provincial curriculum is provided equitably to all children and this is
 - done in an inclusive, common learning environment shared among age-appropriate
 - peers in their neighbourhood ECEC.
 - Is individualized – the educational program achieves success by focusing on the
 - children's strengths and needs, and is based on the individual's best interest.
 - Is requiring ECEC personnel to be flexible and responsive to change.
 - Is respectful of children and staff diversity in regards to their race, colour, religion,
 - national origin, ancestry, place of origin, age, disability, marital status, real or
 - perceived sexual orientation and/or gender identity, sex, social condition or political
 - belief or activity.
 - Is delivered in an accessible physical environment where all children and ECEC
 - personnel feel welcome, safe and valued.
- **Dr Scott Avery**, [Culture is Inclusion](#), a narrative of Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander people with disability, First People Disability Network (Australia)

Conclusion

Inclusive education is about setting children with disability up to achieve and have a meaningful and safe life. Unfortunately, the current early education system is deeply flawed with ableist structures, attitudes and environments that promote exclusion and segregation. A segregated education system leads to a segregated life. Despite the vast number of legislative and policy instruments and the string of parliamentary inquiries at all levels of government over decades, the early education system is failing children with disability (and their families). It is time for the Australian government to show leadership and think beyond election cycles.

There is no linear progression from “special education” to inclusive education”. We acknowledge that our government’s have made attempts for our ECECs to be “inclusive” with good intentions but this has been more of a “bolt on” approach. Using what we had and adding in the “special needs”. This has been ineffective, harmful and costly. The onus has been heavily placed on the parents of the child with disability to make inclusion happen.

A transformational solution is required. A fundamental paradigm shift.

Moving to more inclusive ways of working therefore requires shifts in policy-makers’ values and ways of thinking, which enable them to provide a vision shaping a culture of inclusion, through to significant changes within ECECs and classrooms. And, of course, this has to involve the wider community.

We ask the Australian Government to be strong in its assertions and recommend this transformation towards a system of genuine inclusive education as defined by General Comment No.4 on Article 24 of the UNCRPD.

If it is true that the political act of education reflects the principles and values of the people and society of each time¹⁷, then the question becomes what values do we hold, as individuals and as a society, and what values do we wish to hold going forward.

We invite the Australian Government to ask: As a nation, do we continue to support an outdated ineffective dual education system, whose existence is based on a historical habit of segregation rather than best practice? Do we continue to uphold a system that sends a strong message to a child (and their family) that they are seen as something broken or needing to be fixed, that subjects them to rejection, exclusion, isolation, and stigmatisation?

Or do we use this moment in time to evolve as a society and reconstruct a system that is based on evidence of what is best for the child, and sends a clear message to the child that they are unique, loved, respected, accepted, belong, have value and can contribute to society?

Reflecting the understanding of inclusion as a valuing of human diversity, the Australian Government must consider the challenge posed by Slee (2013)¹⁸, in which inclusion involves questioning “Who is in and who is out? How come? And, what are we going to do about it?”

¹⁷ Freire, P. 1970. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. London: Zed Books. [Google Scholar]

¹⁸ Slee, R. 2013. “How Do We Make Inclusive Education Happen When Exclusion Is a Political Predisposition?” *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 17 (8): 895–907. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2011.602534>. [Taylor & Francis Online], [Web of Science ®], [Google Scholar]

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