# Realising the Potential: Early Childhood Forum

## Being an Agent of Change

## Session transcript

Our breakout session on being an agent of change will feature the following speakers:

* Charlene Smith, Policy Program Director at Mitchell Institute
* Catharine Hydon, Early Childhood Consultant
* Professor Deborah Brennan from the Social Policy Research Centre at the University of NSW, Sydney

Ideas discussed during this session will cover:

* The importance of creating a more coherent and connected early childhood system
* The latest research and policy findings of the Lifting our Game Report and links with the Through Growth to Achievement Report, as well as how to empower professionals and leaders in the sector to work together to advocate for change and improve community awareness and understand of early childhood.

### Jane Hunt - CEO, The Front Project

Good afternoon and welcome to the final session for today, and I have to say the best session for today. Yeah, see that’s good.

So my name is Jane Hunt and I’m the CEO of The Front Project. And I’m really delighted to be with you here this afternoon.

Now first I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners on the land which we meet on today, and that’s the people of the Kulin Nation, and I’d like to pay my respects to their elders past and present and the elders from other communities that are here today. I also want to acknowledge the emerging leaders that we have in the audience. So welcome.

It is absolutely fabulous that you are joining us for a session on Being an Agent of Change. Around this time last year the Victorian Government released the Education State Early Childhood Reform Plan, and it presents the government’s vision for early childhood. But to achieve that vision we need every single person in this room. We require that all parts of the system work together whether you’re delivering services, leading and managing services, whether you’re a policy maker, a researcher, an advocate, we all need to work together.

Some of the ways that we can work together towards that reform are by improving community awareness and understanding of early childhood, which is why at The Front Project we ask people to boldly advocate for the early years. And we all need to do our bit to deliver services that are connected and accountable and based on best practice.

In this session today we’re going to hear from three fabulous women who have very different perspectives on how we can do that. Now feel free to Tweet. You can follow at @detvic on Twitter.

And I also encourage you to spread the conversation far and wide, that’s what we’re here to do, using the hashtags #realisingthepotential and #earlychildhoodau, and #vicedu.

So we have three fabulous speakers as I mentioned. We’ve got Charlene, or Charly, Smith who is our Policy Program Director at the Mitchell Institute, give a wave Charly. We’ve got Catharine Hyden who is the Director of Hyden Consulting. And we have Professor Deb Brennan who is from the Social Policy Research Centre at the University of NSW, and fabulous co-author of Lifting our Game, for which I think has been one of the most fabulous reports Deb.

Now to maximise time, and so that you get to hear from our speakers, I’m going to leave the mic to them. And so each will present, for about 15 minutes, and then we’ll be joined back together to have some questions and discussion.

So I’d first like to ask Charly to join us, and make her very welcome.

### Charlene Smith - Policy Program Director, Mitchell Institute

Thanks so much Jane. My name is Charlene Smith. And I’m an Australian woman of mixed European decent. I was born on Bundjalung country in North Eastern NSW. And I grew up mostly on the Kamilaroi Track. And I now live and work on the traditional lands of the Kulin Nations. And I would just like to express my gratitude and how humbled I am to be standing here on those lands that the people of the Kulin Nations have cared for for so many generations and that they continue to hold with such beauty and such respect at I thank them.

So my role as the Policy Program Director at the Mitchell Institute involves heading up our policy team. The Mitchell Institute is an education policy think tank at Victoria University. We look at the research evidence and the policy landscape, and we work to improve access and opportunity for all young Australians to high quality education.

So this graphic shows us how important it is to improve the responsiveness of our education system. Around a quarter of our young people fall behind or disengage at some point in their journey through the education system. And for too many of them this continues through into adulthood. At the Mitchell we’re driven by the goal of an Australian education system that is excellent, inclusive, and provides young people with pathways towards future wellbeing and success.

When we’re thinking about policy solutions it’s with the lens of how to improve educational opportunity for all. How to identify and assist those who are missing out. How to ensure children are kept in mind. And how we can better design and resource policies and programs throughout the system so that children at risk of falling behind can be picked up and be given the chance to get back on track.

In the early years, from conception to school, children’s development is at the centre of a complex intersecting web of interests. I think everyone in the room can probably find themselves in one of these circles. Which part of the stakeholder landscape do you occupy? Are you a policy maker or a policy thinker? Do you make decisions about funding? Are you a philanthropist? Are you a bureaucrat in the government? Are you a researcher? Are you a part of the service system? Are you a part of Allied Health? Are you an early childhood education and care provider? Are you an advocate? Are you a worker? Are you all of the above? Are you a parent? Are you a grandparent?

The question about where we sit in this landscape that I think is really important, is are we going to be a sector or tit for tat? Or are we going to be one that has strength in numbers?

The Australian Early Years Policy landscape is almost as complex as the stakeholder landscape. This is just a little quick, really high level snapshot, of the Early Years Policy context at the Federal level, and it’s not even exhaustive. We’ve got Education, Health, Social Services, Prime Minister and Cabinet, Human Services, all of whom have explicit responsibility for some part of policy and program funding and delivery in the early years.

In the Education space this includes paid parental leave provisions, financial supports for families to access early education and care, provision of universal childhood - universal childcare in the year before compulsory schooling, as well as the National Agreement that codifies our efforts to ensure all children are accessing quality environments. These provisions reflect the evidence that in order for early childhood services to fulfil their promise, they need to be accessible, equitable and high quality. And that they also reflect the role of early childhood education and care in scaffolding children’s learning and development, relying on responsive engaged educators, and providing appropriate opportunities for children to learn as they grow.

We want to see ongoing improvement in early learning opportunities for Australian children, and one of the key ways to ensure this is to make sure we have policies in place that focus on maintaining and improving the quality of life that young children experience. But it’s also important, not just to think of the sector or the departmental string that we sit in, but to consider what programs and services are going on in other areas of government. Where are the boundaries between what we’re doing and the areas where slippage might be occurring?

At the state and policy level we see another complex area. There’s overlaps and intersections between different departments and portfolios. Here in Victoria there’s a great example with maternal and Child Health System which sits within the Department of Education and Training. In other states it might sit within the Department of Health. Our amazing MCH nurses provide support for families and children’s health, their learning and their material wellbeing. They have a complex role to play that cuts across different areas. It’s not just about early learning, it’s also about child health and development. It’s also about social services, and keeping an eye open to the holistic wellbeing and development of children.

One of the great advantages of having so many stakeholders, and such a high level of interest and investment in early childhood, is the potential for powerful collaboration and cooperation. The multidisciplinary approaches that can give us insights that isolated silos might not be able to achieve. But some of the risks are in the overlaps and the gaps. Are we making assumptions about other people’s activity? Do we assume another department is doing things we know need to be done? Or do we make sure? What are our lines of communication? We know no system is perfect, but we also know that shifting systems is the only way to shift outcomes for whole populations. And that’s why I’m really excited at the potential in the information sharing arrangement that the Victorian Government has recently passed. I think this has great potential to benefit children and their families, to save them having to tell their story over and over and over, and hit up against the barriers of access and engagement that can so often stop people from accessing services at all. And it’s going to be important that that’s implemented carefully, with consideration for all of the important protections and privacies that we know are so vital.

I believe that if we can shift from fragmentation to collaboration we will build towards growing impact and powerful, sustainable systems.

I think everyone in this room knows what young children need. I’ve just kind of summarised it here. All young children need to be provided with care and communication, with safety, with health and nutrition. And they need to be protected from abuse, neglect, toxic stress, poverty and environmental hazards. And you can see in this list of the things that children need, that none of these things are something that one service, or one service provider can deliver. We need to be working together across our disciplinary boundaries to make sure that children are met where they have needs.

A recent report from the World Bank says children’s early years offer a rare window for societies to make investments with extremely high returns. Efforts to improve children’s lives can significantly increase individual and societal productivity while reducing inequality. We know from the research of amazing people like Sean Coffin and Heckman that investing in the early years is going to have amazing returns if we can just get it right.

From the perspective of policies and programs we know what works in the early years. The strongest evidence-base is for pre-school programs, for home visiting programs, and for parent education interventions. Based on a huge bulk, you should see my desk, it’s covered in piles of paper. Like I’m very old school and I kill too many trees. There are decades and decades of research demonstrating to us that high quality early learning interventions help children. That high quality home visiting interventions help children. That improving the home learning environment helps children. But we also know that none of these programs in isolation can be a silver bullet. All of them have small to moderate affect sizes, which means that although they may make a difference, and they do make a difference on average for all children, they won’t necessarily revolutionise that child’s life. You’re not going to have a child in abject poverty suddenly hitting the absolute top of the class because you gave them a one year home visiting intervention. We need to work on joined up approaches to consolidate the gains and to sustain the benefits. We know that these interventions by themselves are not enough to close gaps. We need ongoing joined up efforts.

But the things that these programs can contribute to is better educational outcomes, better social and health outcomes, higher parental workforce participation, and better long-term prospects for children in their employment in justice, in health and wellbeing.

I’m a strong advocate for universal provision of these services, and why, because all children benefit from high quality early childhood - high quality early childhoods especially in early learning. Ensuring that there’s a high quality pre-school program available in every local area is the best bet we have to make sure all children have access to high quality early learning regardless of their circumstances.

All children need support and care to develop, and that doesn’t change just because of who their parents are and what their parents do. We know that targeting is an imprecise science. There’s always a risk if we only deliver targeted programs that will exclude children who should be included. Based on the AEDC findings from its inception and continuing to now, we know that about half of those children who are developmentally vulnerable at school entry come from the top three SES quintiles in terms of the numbers of children who are developmentally vulnerable.

SES does not equal disadvantage and vulnerability. Participation in early childhood education and care is one of the best bets we have for levelling the playing field and ensuring that all children have the opportunity to learn as they grow.

But do we need targeted approaches too? Yes, I think we do. But they need to be responsive. They need to be strategic. And they need to be child centred. It’s vital when we’re thinking about targeted programs that we maintain developmentally appropriate practice. The last thing we want is for children who we know are experiencing disadvantage, and who are in the greatest need, to be pulled out of our high quality services to give them their special targeted thing.

Some children will need to be provided with additional wrap around services at their point of need. Some of them will need more of the service they’re currently getting in a proportionate universalist response, same service, more intensity, higher dose. One service or program will never be enough. Some children have more complex needs and require responses from other providers and sectors. It’s so important that we know what those of our colleagues in the other sectors are doing and providing so that we can join people, and children and families up with the services that they need.

When a child comes into your kinder it may be the first time they’ve come in contact with services outside their home since they had their MCH home visit when they were a newborn. It’s a great opportunity for you to recognise their need and join them up with the services that can help them. We know that families at risk of adversity are less likely to seek help for their health, for development and for educational outcomes.

So ideally what we want to see is the child kept in the universal service and provided with additional provision, but also linked up with parenting programs, with Allied Health, with behavioural interventions if needed, social work, housing, mental health, alcohol and other drug counselling, making sure that we’re not expecting ourselves to be all things to all people, but working with the people who are expert in those areas to make sure that families are met at their point of need.

I am optimistic that this sector is on the cusp of lasting, powerful reform. There are shifts in policy and systems on their way, and they’re going to benefit out children into the future. I believe we can move from isolated initiatives toward united strategies, from competition to cooperation, from uncertainty towards confidence. Big reforms can happen. They can stick. And with vision and commitment, and working together, we can make change for all children.

Thank you.

### Professor Deborah Brennan

Well good afternoon everybody. It’s wonderful to be in the great state of Victoria, the home of so much progressive change in so many areas, and fantastic to be in a session about being an agent of change.

I’ve been around this sector for a very long time, actually more than 40 years now, and I think I’ve been called a stirrer and a troublemaker and all sorts of things, but I’m definitely happy to embrace Agent of Change and be part of this discussion with you all this afternoon.

So Charly’s given us a fantastic overview of why a holistic approach is so important in the early years. And it’s really brought home, I think, the complexity of the early childhood policy landscape, and the need for so many people to play a part in advancing the cause.

So I’m also really pleased to have an opportunity to talk about Lifting Our Game, which is the report that I recently completed with Susan Pascoe. And I’m going to build on Charly’s theme of the importance of system change, and the importance of holistic approaches to early childhood education and care.

I’m just going to - so I’m not going to assume that you’ve all heard of let alone read Lifting Our Game, so what I’m going to do is say a little bit about the background to the review and its process. What we focused on in the review, what our key recommendations were, and then I want to introduce the theme which Catharine will continue, that Lifting Our Game as a report is just going to sit on the shelf and gather dust unless there’s some action behind it.

So let me then say a little bit about the review. So Susan and I were commissioned late last year by all the states and territories combined, which is a wonderful thing in itself, to lead a review into achieving excellence in Australian schools through early childhood interventions.

So the states and territories wanted a report that would really bring the early years, before compulsory schooling, into the debate about education. So this was occurring at a time when there was a lot of focus, and of course there still is, huge focus on school education. And David Gonski was completing his second report. And so what we were asked to do was in parallel to Mr Gonski’s report, and that was to look into the policy and practice interventions that would be most effective in contributing to children’s school performance, taking into account the range of context in which children find themselves in the years before school.

So this is not to say that school performance is the be all and end all of early childhood education and care, it’s most certainly not in my view or in Susan’s view. But it’s a very important piece of the puzzle, and it’s an aspect of policy that’s very salient in the Australian context at the moment. So it was wonderful to have an opportunity to think about it.

So the process of the review was quite a whirlwind but we managed to get around to all the states and territories. And we met with individuals and organisations representing parents, educators, unions, employers, providers, advocates, health and welfare providers. We also met with senior officials from all the relevant jurisdictions. And we had the opportunity to meet with them and gain advice from some fantastic experts. And we also met twice with Mr Gonski to keep him informed about our work.

In preparing our report Susan and I benefited from the assistance of a fantastic secretariat led by Victoria, but with input from other states as well. And with the support of the secretariat we were able to look at a vast amount of national and international data and research, to help us to develop a picture of what’s happening internationally in early childhood education, and to show in very practical terms how Australia could improve.

So our review recognises that really huge strives have been made in this country in respect of early childhood education and care, particularly over the last decade. But we found that the evidence from around the world about the benefits of high quality provision in this space, firstly is absolutely compelling, and secondly really points out that Australia needs to do a lot more to lift its game to take the title of our report. We really need to do a lot more if we’re going to give all children a great start in life, to prepare them well for education, but not only for education but for a happy and solid foundation for the rest of their lives. And throughout the day we’ve heard some incredibly compelling presentations about how the world is going to be different for young children, and why we really need to start early and make sure that all children are included.

So our report summarises a lot of the latest research on the importance of the early years and the benefits of high quality early education. We also look and provide evidence about the return on investment that is possible for governments. And I think it’s important that we take on board notions such as return on investment. If a government invests in early childhood education and care, they want to know what they’re going to get back. So we’ve put our toe into those waters though in a relatively tentative way.

And we also emphasise in our report, the opportunity for what we call a double dividend from high quality early childhood education and care. And by that we mean the opportunity firstly to generate improved outcomes for children; but secondly to support increased workforce participation. Setting those two up as alternatives or setting them up as childcare versus early education is so counterproductive, and we really don’t want to go there.

So I’m not going to speak today about our findings around the benefits of high quality early education. I know this is a very informed audience. But I would suggest that if you’re interested you might like to have a look at the report, because as I say, we did benefit from a wonderful support team that helped us bring together a lot of very current research.

So I’m going to just briefly speak about the recommendations we made in Lifting Our Game. And I think we made about 18 or 19 recommendations. I’m not going to talk about them all, but I’m going to talk about the big themes that we’re putting forward.

So the first big theme that we’re emphasising in terms of our recommendations, is imbedding foundations for future reform. So I mentioned a moment ago, and you all live this in your daily lives, Australia has made some great advances in the last decade or so, especially through the Universal Agreement on Pre-School Education for children in the year before school, and through the National Quality Framework, and National Quality Standard. But we certainly can’t be complacent about what we’ve done. And it’s time now, we argue, to consolidate our achievements, but not only that, also to build on them and extend them.

We heard this morning, and these figures are in Lifting Our Game as well, that Australia ranks 24th out of 26 OECD countries for our investment in pre-primary education. Australia invests less than half of a percent of its gross domestic product in early childhood education and care, which is well below the OECD average. So it’s time for governments to commit to permanent and adequate funding, both for universal access and for the national quality framework. As you know Australia went backwards in the recent commonwealth budget, when the Commonwealth withdraw from the National Partnership Agreement, on the national quality agenda, and that was very disappointing.

A second big theme of our report is the importance of moving to early childhood education for all three year olds. The research about the importance of more than one year is now absolutely overwhelming. And moving to this standard would make a significant contribution to educational outcomes, as well as having many other benefits for children’s wellbeing. Two years is now the international norm, and that’s our recommendation in this report.

But saying that all children should have access doesn’t mean that all children should get the same. And I really endorse the arguments that Charly has made, about the importance of additional support for some children and families. We know that the children who start school behind stay behind, so it’s really important that we invest additional resources in those children and families.

We think it might be possible to consider, as we’re moving towards with the school system, an approach that ensures that every child receives a baseline of support and access to high quality programs, while some children receive additional or more intensive, or more specialised services.

I think, and I think this is consistent with the way Charly expressed her opinion, I think that the debate about universal and targeted is, to a large extent, old hat. We actually need both.

Quality and workforce, now these issues are very important in the Lifting Our Game report, and we see them as two aspects of the same thing. There’s widespread agreement that a skilled and valued workforce is the major contributor to driving positive outcomes for children. But we’re simply not doing enough to make this a reality. And especially we’re not doing enough to support our teachers and educators.

In addition, some 25% of services in Australia don’t meet the National Quality Standard. And we’ve put forward some suggestions about how government might address that issue, particularly by using its funding levers to really ensure that all services do at least come to meeting the standard.

We’ve also suggested that considerable emphasis needs to be put in formulating policy on the development of a workforce strategy. And that would be concerning both pre-service training, but also professional development and in-service education and training. It’s really a terribly - it’s really a scandal actually, that Australia does not have an early childhood workforce strategy, and that’s something where we really need to pay attention.

Parent and community engagement also looms in our report. Parents, as we all know, are absolutely vital to their children’s early development and education, and also need to be informed participants in the service landscape. So there’s a lot that, not only governments, but other players in the field could do to improve parental and community understanding of the vital importance of the early years, but also to provide opportunities for genuine forms of engagement.

Under the theme of transparency and accountability, we’ve put forward a number of suggestions about data and evidence, and how we could strengthen the data and evidence base for the early childhood realm.

Now in terms of implementation, I think in the report as a whole we’ve taken quite a long view. And we acknowledge that good policy takes time to conceptualise and to implement. But we don’t have a lot of time to - we need to get started quickly. We need to recognise what things need to be developed slowly, and what things we can move on really quickly. And I would suggest that workforce is one of the things that’s absolutely urgent.

So this slide says discussion, but I couldn’t change it, I wanted it to say time for action, so really that’s what I’m saying. It’s time for action. Over the 40 plus years that I’ve been involved in this sector, I have seen enormous change. But the one consistent thread that I do see, as I look back over that period, is that change does not come about until there is determined action and sustained political pressure. So I think is the moment now for me to talk - to handover to Catharine who is going to give you her perspective on being an agent of change in this sector.

Thank you.

### Catharine Hyden - Early Childhood Consultant

Thank you very much Deb. Thank you very much Charly.

I’m very conscious of the fact that I stand here before you talking about being an agent of change. And I know that I stand on the shoulders of amazing giants. And we’ve heard from those today, and we started today by hearing from an amazing giant, Aunty Joy Murphy who welcomed us to country. And all the way through today there’s be an opportunity to hear from incredible people who can help us understand the landscape that we work, and teach, and learn in. And I’m conscious of also the fact that we are gathered here with a whole bunch of people who have great expertise. So can I start by thanking you for all of your amazing work and contribution in this space?

Deb is right. I’m going to take a slightly different perspective on this conversation, and perhaps a little bit of a personal conversation with you about being an agent of change as a professional person, and thinking about how we can empower ourselves as professionals, to become strong advocates, and indeed activists in relation to the change that is before us.

I’m struck in this conversation today, and you’ve just heard a few little hints of it today, by the need to start action now. Now of course this does not suggest that you haven’t been acting all the time up ‘til now, but I do feel that we are now faced with this amazing need to act really quickly. And here I’m going to quote the amazing Martin Luther King. Last year I had the very good fortune of going to an early childhood conference in Atlanta, the birthplace of Martin Luther King, and to go to his burial site. And it was an incredibly moving opportunity to see how a man had taken significant action. And how he had gathered together the men and women of his own community to take action. I think his words ring true now. “We are now faced with the fact that tomorrow is today. We are now confronted with the fierce urgency of now. In this unfolding conundrum”, and isn’t early childhood education as we’ve heard a bit of a conundrum, “of life and history, there is such a thing as being too late. This is no time for empathy or - apathy or complacency - definitely a time for empathy - this is a time for vigorous and positive action.” And I want to talk to you today a little bit about how we might undertake that process, and acknowledge the work, the fine work, that is happening now.

My heart sank a little bit when Karen Lynn Kagan said that we were taking baby steps, and that we’d been taking baby steps for some time. And part of me wants to acknowledge that, that we’ve doing some things but perhaps we could be much better at taking more vigorous and immediate action.

And I want here also to engage with you in a bit of question and a conversation around our professional identity. I’m a fellow early childhood educator. I began my career as an early childhood teacher, what seems like a very long time ago now, but not really in the great big scheme of things. As I’ve said, there are giants amongst us who’ve been working and thinking about early childhood for more time than me. But I wanted to suggest to you that a new thinking around our identity as professionals is absolutely required. And some of you have already crossed the threshold into thinking about yourself like this. But I do continue to meet early childhood educators who say it’s somebody else it’s not me. It’ll be someone, it’ll be Deb, get Deb to do it. Charly will do it. Somebody else will do it. But I think now we hear from Jill, particularly in relation to the conversation around systems, that we need everybody to come together and think of a new way of professional being, a new way to understand ourselves as professionals.

Thinking about how we take the rigorous conversations we have about our work with children and their families, what we know and understand about what makes a difference, and start to have very different conversations with people perhaps who haven’t heard from us yet. And also to talk to each other in different ways about what we know and understand about our professional identity.

And here I just want to beg your indulgence a little bit, and reminisce a little bit on my professional journey. And I was thinking to myself, and having a bit of a chat to my husband about, so when did I feel like I had a level of professional agency? And when did I feel like I could be an agent of change? My husband thinks I just always have had that, and maybe that’s true. But I do want to recall a time in my own professional career where I started as an early childhood teacher in the northern suburbs of Melbourne, in sunny Broadmeadows, you’ve heard from Broadmeadows today.

And it was a time when, I think, I graduated into a space, and some of you sitting here will remember this space, where I think I had a perception on graduation that everybody thought we were great. There was no question about whether we would be funded into the future. No-one ever mentioned it in my pre-service education that there might be an issue with funding. Everybody got us, everybody loved us, we were untouchable. And everybody would come along to kindergarten, it’ll all be rosy, and it’ll would fine and nothing would change.

And in the first year that I began teaching, the then Victorian government, began a conversation around funding cuts to early childhood. I was shocked. I couldn’t believe it. Like, hold on a second, no-one told me this was happening.

And this is a photo that I’ve dug out, from a 125 years ago, of myself and my amazing colleague, Shirley, who is an extraordinary woman, no longer working in early childhood, but led me and another giant in early childhood. And I said to her we’ve got to do something Shirley. And she just thought I was a bit nuts. But we gathered together, and worked with the parents, and we made a big sign, and we stuck it on the fence, and we stood out there and the local paper came and took our photo. And that’s that photo.

But, you know, I look at the photo and I think would I say some of those things now. I would, but I’d probably change the kindergarten part and just say early childhood education, a right not a privilege. And I spelt privilege right just so you know, ‘cause you can’t see that there. Like, my husband asked me that question, did you spell it right? Yes I did. But I wanted to say to you that I think - that was my first year of teaching. And from that moment I thought, you know that notion of myself as an early childhood educator that I came into this early childhood space with, I think it’s now outdated. I need to reinvent myself. And ever since then I have thought of myself as an agent of change, as an advocate, at times an activist, and I know there are people sitting in this room who have done that work with me. And I’d like to personally thank you for that work because I wouldn’t have been able to do it without you. And I know that some of you are doing that in really amazing ways in your own spaces.

And I want to beg your indulgence here, by suggesting to you that there five things that you can do in terms of thinking around about yourself as an agent of change, as a professional who sees themselves as empowered to go out there and sell an amazing message. I’m not suggesting by any means that this is the be all and end all list.

And if you go and speak to some of the people sitting in this room about what does it feel like to be an agent of change, they are going to have different takes on this and I encourage you to do that. But it’s my little collection.

So here we go. First to become knowledgeable; second to understand your context; third to build a really strong network; fourth to create opportunities wherever you are; and last to speak in your own voice.

The first one I want to talk about is building your knowledge. Now I think we’ve done a bit of a good job of that today. And Deb said, I’m not sure whether you’ve downloaded or read the report, but if you haven’t do it. And I think it’s a really important thing that we do to become agents of change, is to actually know what we’re talking about. Some of you I know are eloquent and you have a really strong understanding of what we understand about the work that we do, and the data and the evidence and all of that work. If you don’t what is going on about early childhood, we have to build that knowledge base first so we can start to talk about that message in a really strong way.

Now it’s not like the olden days where you have to go to a library. You can use the worldwide web to find out a whole lot of things about early childhood education. And what an amazing thing that’s happening in terms of our global conversations that we’ve heard today about what the OECD is doing, what we know is happening in the United States and across the globe. So if you are thinking that I’m saying to you start reading, start learning about the world of early childhood, then that’s exactly what I’m saying, start to know your stuff.

The second one is to know your context. And I’ve had the enormous privilege of working with early childhood education and care services around the country, who I think are deeply tuned into their context. This is the front door of Clare Court Children’s Services, children’s centre in Yarraville. And I know that they know their context well. They know the creek next door. They know that community garden. They know what those families and those children want and believe in. And one of the things that is inspirational when I go and meet early childhood educators, is the more you know your people, the more you can speak in a way that makes sense to them. Some of your communities will want to know lots about literacy and numeracy. And others will want to know what it’s like for out their children - what it will be like for their children in the future. Others want their children to grow up as sustainable human beings who look after the planet. Know your community so that you can advocate in ways that make sense to your local context. And, you know, one of the great ways to do that is to go out and talk to people, listen to what families are telling you.

The other really important thing for me is to build a coalition, build a community. These are two of the people who I count in my amazing network, the incredible Dr Lennie Barblett and now Dr Sandra Cheeseman. And these are people who I hold in deep regard. And I’ve built a group of people around me who I feel I can call on. They hold me to account, but they also have my back. So when I stand up here, and when I stand in front of other opportunities and talk about early childhood, I feel like I’ve got peeps behind me. If you feel like you haven’t got any peeps, and you don’t have enough people around you, then go find them ‘cause they’re here. They’re all the people here who will have your back in the conversations you want to have with the communities that you’re part of. And indeed, we’ve got to find new coalitions, new guiding connections. We’ve got to make friends with the person next door who can come and be a peep for us. And we in turn can have their back in this conversation.

Those networks become incredibly powerful as we start to create opportunities for thinking and learning, and also how we can build strength of our convictions. It’s not possible, and you’ve heard this multiple times, to do this thing alone, we need to build these coalitions.

I’m also interested, and I might just sort of slide away from this conversation for a minute, to say that in those networks, and those relationships that we build, those professional relationships, we will not always agree. And this is good. It’s the lively culture of professional enquiry that we want engage in. But at times we do need to stop talking about the things we disagree on, and start talking about the things we agree on, because too often our community of learners, our community of practice looks divided. So hang out with each other, have the robust debate, agree on some things and start talking turkey.

The next thing I want to say to you is that all of the things you’ve heard today, and as Deb had said, the reports remain on shelves, they have a lovely lifespan, you can download them, you print them off etcetera, etcetera. You read them, you might put them on a shelf etcetera. But they will come to nought if we don’t create opportunities to talk them up.

And I think it’s an absolute requirement of us to go out and find opportunities. I know you’re busy. And I know you don’t get paid enough. And I know you’re overworked and stressed. Stop doing something else and start doing this. Let’s think about where our opportunities lie for advocacy and conversations with our community, internally, in our own - with our own educator teams, with our professional teams, but also in our broader community.

And I’m struck by the examples that I see out there. Melbourne City Council did an amazing project of children’s rights and had an exhibition and invited the community. I’m not sure how many people came, but it’s not the point. You make the invitation.

And sometimes you have to go to the community and start talking up what we do. And I went recently to a community event in my own local neighbourhood, and there was an early childhood service there. And I went up to them and said what are you doing here? And they said we invited ourselves. And I went well done you.

And I know there are people sitting in this room who have been brazen enough to invite a politician to their front door. And guess what, they come. So please be brazen. Go and seek out opportunities, ‘cause you’re very lovely, and who can say no to you. And we know that there are people who are knocking on Coles’ door, they are knocking on Woolworths’ door, they’re knocking on the people next door’s door, and they’re finding opportunities. Don’t stay in your bubble. Get out there and talk it up.

And lastly I want to say that this is not an intellectual conversation only, it is, and we need the voices of academics who can talk to us about really strong ideas, and help us understand really amazing statistics in great graphs, and great images, thank you very much, and we need those voices. But we also need yours. We need you to be able to speak in your own voice about the things that are important to you, in your own community. You work with children every day. You can tell incredible stories in your own voice that I can’t tell, Deb and Charly can’t tell them, you can tell them.

And here I have to do a really bit shout out. Who speaks a language other than English? Put your hand up and yell out how great you are. Hello. I can’t really see you. Well done you. Can you give him a clap? Thank you.

I’d just like to say that the advocacy and activism that sometimes happens in the Australian context happens too much in English. It needs to be in languages other than English. And those of you who speak a language other than English, and are in your local communities, please use your knowledge and understanding about the world of early childhood and speak in your first language to the children and families in your community about what you know about early childhood. I think we’ll be the better for it.

And I remember distinctly a conversation with Janet Gonzalez-Mena, some of you will know her work, and she came to the FKA Multicultural Resource Centre when I worked there, and told us that we needed to hear more of the voices of our diverse community of early childhood education, in order for us to truly embrace what it means to be a welcoming and inclusive early childhood community. So talk it up.

And I want to end today by suggesting to you that all of these things are immensely doable, maybe not tomorrow, but maybe next week, maybe the week after. Maybe in our coalitions we can get together. One of you might do one, somebody else will do something else, and together I think we can join forces to become incredible agents of change.

And can I leave you with a bit of adoption for me, a bit of an adaptation, and with thanks to Moira Rayner, an amazing giant who I got the good fortune to meet in a whole lot of campaigning that we did around real rights for refugee children, about children in immigration detention, probably something we need to continue to do as we speak. And she said this, and I offer the words to you as a way of moving forward from today. “As you leave this meeting, remember the children and their families, and the communities of which you are a part. Think of what they hope for, and what they are heading to, and what they see their future to be. When you get home consider yourself their ambassadors and speak on their behalf in your own tongue. They are our fellow citizens of our republic of conscience. Your embassies are everywhere, but they operate independently, and no such ambassadors will ever be relieved.”

Thank you.

### Jane Hunt

How fabulous were our three speakers? And I also feel my jetlag going away with your energy. So fabulous. One thing I wanted to mention, I was flying home and I was in LA airport and I opened up the newspaper and in the newspaper was an article based on some data from Germany that talked about Universal access not being substantiated by evidence. So I know Debbie you said that that debate is old hat but what would the three of you say that each of our change agents could take away about that debate of universal vs targeted?

### Deborah Brennan

Well I guess I would invite people to have a look at the evidence that is the exercise that I have recently engaged in. I found the evidence absolutely compelling in support of a universal platform of Early Childhood education.

I think that once we start slicing and dicing and categorising and putting families and children through all sorts of hoops, requiring them to make declarations about their inadequacies or their incomes or their what’s going on in what many perceive to be their private family business, we inevitably exclude children and we give the message that this is a service only for a special group. So I think that every child is special enough to be entitled to high quality early education, for at least two years, but I do think that there is a lot that needs to be done to make that possible for some children. And that’s where I think that some of the points that Charley made are really, really important.

### Charlene Smith

Yeah, I would just add that I think, you can read research evidence through certain lenses and there are ways to read some of the reports that have come out in recent years as evidence against universal provision because they might show that, for some children, the difference that’s made isn’t enough to justify the cost.

But what we know to be true is that all children benefit from high quality early learning, we know that the children at greatest risk of falling behind benefit the most, but just because children who aren’t at great risk don’t benefit as much as those who are at great risk doesn’t mean that they don’t benefit at all. And we need to remember what some of these studies are comparing their outcomes to. So a lot of the studies that are held up to show that universal provision doesn’t work, what they’re making the comparison to might be full day versus half day provision of free pre-school programs or it might be about expanding from targeted to universal access of people who were already accessing services, but who were paying for them, and now they’re being provided by the state.

So, it’s important to know the details of these studies are not just taken on face value oh that says it made no difference. Who did it make no difference for? Compared to what? In what context?

We need to be clever in the way we read these things and not be disheartened when a report comes out that says that it makes no difference, because if you tease them apart, almost all the time you’ll discover that actually they’re founded in this given knowledge that high quality education makes a difference for all children and does a bit extra make enough of a difference to invest in it? They are not asking that base question anymore.

### Catharine Hyden

And I think it might be a trap, it’s a trap that stops us generally who think, oh jeepers is it universal, or what is it, I can’t really answer that question. I think don’t engage. I resent being asked the question to some extent. I think stop talking about that and let’s talk about children’s rights, let’s talk about what they deserve, let’s talk about equity, let’s talk about the way in which we know that children get what they need and don’t trap me in a conversation about that.

Although, I would then say, then, go and speak to the experts. So you’re not off the hook.

### Jane Hunt

That is actually a really great point about using each other. Isn’t it? And how important that is for us to be part of a community of people absolutely arguing for two years of universal access to pre-school for all children.

Now one thing Catharine, you touched on a little bit, in the way that you work. So there has been some research done around how you bring about systems change, like two years of universal access of early learning and care and this report identified people who act as agitators, innovators and orchestrators in that movement of change are really important.

And so I was wondering your perspectives, and that article was in the Stanford Social Innovation Review, but I’m wondering, for the three of you, what would you see yourselves as or what do you think is really important in us bringing about this change?

Catharine Hyden

Well I think I have been all three at various times and I think maybe again, do I have to choose? And I think at various times you decide whether you need to be an innovator and other times you need to be a major agitator and you know, you choose the ones you think are appropriate at the time based on the experience and where you happen to be and who your community is, how much that is going to sail in your community or not. I would encourage all of us to think about how we can be all three at different times and figure out which one works in which context.

### Deborah Brennan

Yeah, I think that’s pretty much the way I feel. I think for myself my roles have changed over my life. I spend less time now painting placards than I did when I was a student but when I was painting placards for free 24 hour childcare in the 1970s, we didn’t have very sophisticated sense of policy change and advocacy and it was the thing we could do - placards, marching, chanting and so on. I’ve had other opportunities to do research and connect with policy makers and I guess fall into the innovator category and what we are doing now I guess is a little bit of orchestration, trying to get people active and think about the roles each one can play. I think the point that comes through in that article is the importance of all of those roles and I really agree with that point that you can take different roles at different times and not everyone has to do all three.

### Charlene Smith

Yeah and I would just add, that I think, and as one of my early slides shows, this landscape that we are working in, it’s highly populated and we can convince ourselves that because early childhood education isn’t necessarily a vote winner in the minds of politicians, that it’s not front of mind for many people, when actually, it’s the livelihood of pretty well everyone in this room. It’s the future of our children. It’s the future of our society. And I think it’s really important to remember that although you may not personally be able to play an orchestrating role, that you may well be able to be agitating, you may well be able to be advocating. There is something that you can do and I loved what Catharine had about getting your peeps around you. And knowing who else is out there. This day has been inspirational for me, both to hear people from around the world who know stuff I can’t imagine being that clever to know and meeting other people who have on the ground, day to day child experiences that I’m not equipped to do. I’m in absolute awe of you people who go and work with children all day every day – I find it hard enough with my own two. So Hats off, I think it is remarkable, invaluable work that you are doing and you have access to families in a way that those of us working in the policy and systems thinking space, just don’t have. You’ve got the opportunity to build momentum from the grass roots in the communities that you are working in. And I just really encourage you to do so.

### Jane Hunt

So building on that Charley, what would be something that people here can do? That they can go away and do? As an Agent of Change? Or any of you.

## Charlene Smith

I think, I really just refer you all to Catharine’s presentation that was so inspirational for me. It’s my job to be informed. It’s not necessarily your job to know all of the evidence but people like Deb have done an incredible job translating the piles and piles of paper on my desk into something succinct, cut through, practical, pragmatic, and convincing. Arm yourself with that knowledge.

I think there is a lot to be said for believing what we know to be true about this work. This morning when we were hearing that in Findland they don’t collect data the way they do in England and why don’t they do that. And I was just saying to Jane before this session, I suspect that the reason they don’t do that is because people just know that this is important work. People just know that early childhood education and care is important and valuable and needs to happen. And children have rights and it follows that child. And there was also that comment about individualised learning approaches. So is there a need to be doing data collection to figure out that a child has needs if you’ve designed their learning journey around that child? Perhaps it’s not as important in that context, but in this context we’re still building that belief in our population and amongst ourselves.

### Catharine Hyden

I think I’d like you to remind us of Anne Stonehouse, many of you will know Anne Stonehouse and one of the things I thought about in preparing my presentation is her amazing work in the early 1990’s when she talked about ‘not just nice ladies’, you will remember this. One of things she said in that nice ladies conversation was that we need to throw off the mushy and fluffy language that surrounds our work. In more recent times she made a presentation to the Early Childhood Australia Conference in Darwin and she asked us to stop using the word passionate because it had served us not very well because if you’re passionate, we can pay you crap.

So, I think one of the things for me is let’s take all of the things we heard from Charley and Deb today and all the other presenters and the language that we now have access to within our frameworks and reports and the data and all this amazing thing and start to craft really clear scripts that help us work and whenever we are anywhere, start talking up our work and you know, I in jest, I sometimes say to people, don’t say you’re just an early childhood just, that just early childhood educator. Ban that language! Ban the girls in the babies room! Ban that! And instead say I’m a professional who is instrumental in brain architecture.

And we want to have very different conversations, because that makes someone like George Megalogenis stand up and take notice and say ‘you’re a what, you are an architect in brain what? What are you? So this changes the landscape. But that is something we can all do individually and I get who you are talking to. You can be talking to a parent who comes in and wants to enrol their child. Or you can be talking to somebody at the pub. I don’t mind where it is but it’s got to be a conversation that shifts the language that we have inherited, I think, over a long period of time, and we’ve all been part of that and I think there is a real opportunity there for shifting that language.

### Jane Hunt

Oh look I could not agree more. At the Front Project we engage with business and we have over 88 very senior business leaders who think what you all do is amazing and they know the link between what you do and the future prosperity of this country and the wellbeing of our children. So if you need help translating for business, let us know because we have done quite a lot of work around that. But be prepared to have conversations around this people outside your area. When you go to a BBQ and you meet with someone who works in a business context, tell them that that’s what you do. Because you would be completely surprised how many people do not know anything about this area and we need to change that. Because we need the community absolutely understanding that children need access to early learning and care.

Now can you all please, warmly thank our three wonderful presenters?