

Co-designing an early childhood intentional teaching model and resources

Findings from research trials

September 2026



The Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO) is Australia's national education evidence body, working to achieve excellence and equity in educational outcomes for all children and young people.

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Acknowledgement of Country

AERO acknowledges the Traditional Owners and Custodians of the lands, waterways, skies, islands and sea Country across Australia. We pay our deepest respects to First Nations cultures and Elders past and present. We endeavour to continually value and learn from First Nations knowledges and educational practices.

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List of abbreviations

Abbreviation	Full term
ACECQA	Australian Children's Education and Care Authority
AERO	Australian Education Research Organisation
AGDE	Australian Government Department of Education
DBR	design-based research
CoP	community of practice
ECEC	early childhood education and care
EYLF V2.0	Early Years Learning Framework V2.0
ITE	initial teacher education program
NQS	National Quality Standard
RTOs	registered training organisations

Glossary

Key term	Definition
Children's intentionality	Children have intentions for their learning and seek to deeply understand things that matter to them. At times, they capably lead their own learning and the learning of others. Intentional educators incorporate children's intentionality into their decision-making processes by drawing on children's ideas, interests, curiosities and funds of knowledge to inform their decisions.
Cultural responsiveness	Cultural responsiveness 'is a contemporary way to think about culture and enables individuals and organisations to be respectful of everyone's backgrounds, beliefs, values, customs, knowledges, lifestyles and social behaviours. Being culturally responsive includes a genuine commitment to taking action against discrimination in any form, embedding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives in all aspects of the curriculum and working collaboratively with culturally and linguistically diverse children and families' (Australian Government Department of Education [AGDE], 2022, p. 65).

Key term	Definition
Culture of intentionality	A culture of intentionality is a shared commitment to purposeful practice and quality outcomes for all children. It is built through consistent approaches to intentional teaching and collaboration among educators, children, families, communities and other professionals to support learning and engagement.
Funds of knowledge	Funds of knowledge ‘are the historically accumulated experiences and understandings that an individual has and includes abilities, skills, bodies of knowledge, life experiences and cultural ways of interacting. A child’s funds of knowledge are often described as a “virtual backpack” of all the life experiences and knowledge they bring into the early childhood setting’ (AGDE, 2022, p. 66).
Intentional teaching	Intentional teaching can be defined as any thoughtful or deliberate action educators take to respond to children with purpose to make pedagogical decisions within environments (AGDE, 2022).
Intentionality	Intentionality is being thoughtful and purposeful in actions and making decisions and is something that both children and educators can do (AGDE, 2022, p. 66).
Learning intention	A learning intention is an aim, objective, goal or intended outcome for children’s learning and development.
Pedagogy	Pedagogy is ‘the art, craft and science of educating. Pedagogy is the foundation for educators’ professional practice, especially those aspects that involve building and nurturing relationships, curriculum decision-making, teaching and learning’ (AGDE, 2022, p. 67).
Reflective action	Reflective action is insights drawn from attuned noticing and reflecting on spontaneous and planned opportunities to extend children’s learning. It includes reflective decisions about where children are in their learning, next steps for learning and reflecting on the use of teaching strategies. A feature of reflective action is to encourage children’s intentionality and capacity for reflection on their own learning.
Teaching strategies	Teaching strategies help educators achieve learning intentions or extend children’s learning in spontaneous moments. Learning intentions, context, cultural responsiveness and knowledge of individual children will determine which strategy will be most effective in extending children’s learning.
Temporal environment	Temporal environment is the organisation of time, routines and transitions.

A note on language

Participants in this research are early childhood teachers, educators, and service leaders (including directors, managers, and those in centre leadership positions) who work directly with children in early childhood settings. In text all participants will be referred to in this research as ‘educators’. Participant quotes are identified by role title and iteration number only to protect participant privacy.

The original research questions used the terminology ‘set’ intentions. However, this report now adopts the phrasing ‘develop’ intentions. This shift in language more accurately reflects the research findings, which emphasised intentionality as a collaborative and responsive process.



Reflexivity statement

AERO's First Nations Charter maintains a whole-of-organisation commitment to creating a workplace that is reflexive and culturally responsive. We're committed to amplifying the voices of First Nations researchers, peoples and communities through our work as we strive to create resources that embed culturally responsive practices. All members of the research team have engaged in reflexivity and responsiveness workshops that aim to build capability and efficacy in these practices. These practices create the preconditions for the effective and authentic co-design mechanisms that we've used in our intentional teaching model and resource development. The intentional teaching model and supporting resources were co-designed with Indigenous and non-Indigenous educator participants, and their voices are featured in this research report. This research was further informed by members of the AERO First Nations Expert Reference Group, as well as Indigenous and non-Indigenous expert reviewers.

Artwork: Shaun Edwards, www.wildbarra.com.au

Summary

Systematic and scoping reviews link intentional teaching practices in early childhood settings to improved child outcomes and a lift in learning and wellbeing trajectories (e.g., Barblett et al., 2021; Grieshaber et al., 2021; Tayler et al., 2013). Intentional teaching can be defined as any thoughtful or deliberate action educators take to respond to children with purpose to make pedagogical decisions within environments (Australian Government Department of Education [AGDE], 2022). It is recognised that children from diverse groups are most likely to benefit from intentional teaching practices (e.g., Danniels & Pyle, 2023; Elek et al., 2020; Groom et al., 2022; Langeloo et al., 2019; McLaughlin et al., 2016). The importance of intentional teaching practices is reinforced by recent research by the Organisation for Economic Development, which identified that ‘gaps in language, literacy and social skills can be difficult to close’ (2025, p. 3). Children who fall behind by 6 years of age may never catch up, impacting their educational trajectory and leading to increased disadvantage (Schleicher, 2025). Yet, despite the importance of intentional teaching, the concept and its in-practice application, it is often misunderstood, with limited tools to guide educator understanding and practice (Australian Education Research Organisation [AERO], 2025; Colliver, 2022; Leggett, 2025; McLaughlin et al., 2016).

AERO’s recently published discussion paper, [Play-Based Learning With Intentionality](#) (2025), provided a synthesis of the contemporary evidence on intentional teaching to support coherence and address misunderstandings. As a follow on from that research, AERO designed field trials to understand intentional teaching in practice and how an intentional teaching model and resources might contribute to the identified practice gap.

Using an iterative design-based methodology, AERO worked alongside educators from 13 diverse early childhood education and care (ECEC) sites to develop and test an [early childhood intentional teaching model and supporting resources](#). The research provided insights into how educators conceptualise and enact intentional teaching and how this changed as a result of using the intentional teaching model and resources. Of the 52 educator participants, the majority appeared to sharpen their focus on children’s learning through engaging with the intentional teaching model and resources, emphasising high-quality teaching, learning and assessment in ways that extend beyond setting up activities alone.

AERO’s intentional teaching model is evidence-informed and shaped by voices of Australian ECEC educators working with children aged birth to 5 years. The final model design brings together ‘the why’, ‘the what’ and ‘the how’ of effective intentional teaching. New concepts of ‘reflective action’ and ‘culture of intentionality’ are presented in relation to intentional teaching, and the importance of responsive, attuned relationships is highlighted.

This research promotes the value of co-design approaches and contributes new insights on how to translate evidence on intentional teaching into practical, actionable practice and advice.

AERO's plain language explainer of intentional teaching

Intentional teaching can include **pre-planned** and adult-led learning experiences, **as well as spontaneous** opportunities where educators respond to 'teachable moments' that align with their intentions. It may also mean making **deliberate decisions** about when to guide play and when to step back from and observe play experiences to enhance outcomes for children.

Effective intentional teaching is **impacted by professional knowledge** and **beliefs**, including knowledge of:

- the importance of **responsive, attuned relationships**, including relationships with and between children, with families, communities and supporting professionals
- **how children learn and develop** and the **role of the educator** in promoting children's outcomes
- **a range of teaching, learning and assessment strategies** and understanding of how and when to use these in practice.

Effective intentional teaching involves **reflexivity and critical reflection**, both individually and collectively, on the beliefs and knowledge held about **children as learners** and the critical **role of educators** in **play-based learning**.

Effective intentional teaching includes children's intentionality.

Children have intentions for their learning and seek to understand things that matter to them. Intentional educators tune in to children's intentions for their learning and make decisions about how to support and extend children's thinking.

Introduction

A recent synthesis of intentional teaching literature by the Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO) found that confusion around intentional teaching often stems from a view that intentional teaching is synonymous with adult-led instruction (AERO, 2025). Specifically, the evidence suggested that a valuable first step in supporting effective intentional teaching may be to address foundational knowledge gaps related to intentional teaching, including the underlying beliefs, attitudes and perspectives educators hold around children's learning and play and their role within children's learning and play (AERO, 2025). [AERO's evidence synthesis](#) pointed to the importance of developing a model that was contextually sensitive and not a 'one-size-fits-all' model approach. In response, the research trials included a co-design approach with a diverse sample of Australian early childhood education and care (ECEC) services.

The aim of this study was to develop an early childhood intentional teaching model and supporting resources that would simplify and clarify the practical what, why and how of intentional teaching. Educators were involved in the testing and refinement of the intentional teaching model and resources to ensure accessibility, cultural responsiveness and practical application within various place-based ECEC settings.

Research overview

This research used a participatory design-based research (DBR) approach to develop, pilot and refine an intentional teaching model and supporting resources.

DBR is defined as:

A systematic but flexible methodology aiming to improve educational practices through iterative analysis, design, development and implementation, based on collaboration among researchers and practitioners in real-world settings, and leading to contextually sensitive design principles and theories (Wang & Hannafin, 2005, p. 6–7).

Research consistently cites variant conceptions of intentional teaching exist and characterises the ECEC landscape as complex (Grieshaber et al., 2021). This research project purposefully selected 13 diverse sites, each with their own local conditions and contexts, to ensure ecological sensitivity of the intentional teaching model and resources.

DBR inextricably links knowledge and action (Juuti et al., 2016). The research process is shared between participants and researchers who work together to systemically analyse, iterate and build new knowledge and practical contributions to challenging problems (Burr & Degotardi, 2025; Herrington et al., 2007). A benefit of DBR is that it collaborates with those directly connected to the problem at hand (McKenney & Reeves, 2018). Together, researchers and practitioners explore educational issues and design solutions and in doing so fuse their expertise (Burr & Degotardi, 2025; McKenney & Reeves, 2018). This approach optimises design and findings outcomes and potentialises a framework of transformative learning (Hoadley & Campos, 2022; McKenney & Reeves, 2018).

Use of DBR affords the possibility of knowledge transformation at individual, organisational and systems levels (Burr & Degotardi, 2025; Hoadley & Campos, 2022; McKenney & Reeves, 2018). Existing DBR literature suggests individual practitioners will likely improve their own knowledge as a result of their engagement with the process, with the educational solutions bought forward through this process likely to transform knowledge within their service and the educational system more broadly (Burr & Degotardi, 2025; Hoadley & Campos, 2022; McKenney & Reeves, 2018).

Research methods that can traverse complex contexts are uniquely positioned to offer research insights (Burr & Degotardi, 2025; Hoadley & Campos, 2022). A scoping review by Burr and Degotardi (2025, p. 2) identifies DBR as ‘exactly what the education profession requires to ‘bridge the gap’ between theory and practice’.

Given the theoretical orientation of DBR with theory generated over time – albeit with a practice lens – strong connections with the intentional literature base had to be established. Before conducting the project, 2 literature reviews were undertaken to establish a strong theoretical frame for the research. This literature base, published as AERO’s [Play-Based Learning With Intentionality](#) discussion paper, then supported design and analysis decisions, providing a strong theoretical base for the project while also accommodating local demographics such as provider management types and the way services are staffed (Obczovsky et al., 2025).

The use of DBR was a good fit for working with educators in a participatory way. The approach drew the nuanced, practical insights of educators, together with the robustness of the evidence base. Given the complex and at times challenging nature of ECEC and misconceptions around intentional teaching, participants valued working from an evidence base as a starting point to the co-design process. The evidence instilled a confidence in educators use and of the intentional teaching model and resources and iterative feedback to refine design. Sustained engagement and testing of the materials over a 9-month research period mutually benefited participants and the quality of final designs.

You’ve got people who are living and breathing it and doing it every day. But then you’ve got those who are actually stepping back and looking at it from the outside lens ... I thinking doing it together is a really important part of the journey.

— Service leader, iteration 1¹

¹ Participant quotes have been de-identified to protect participant privacy and confidentiality, and reported using educators’ role title and iteration.

Research questions

The research questions underpinning the field trials included:

1

How do educators conceptualise and enact intentional teaching?

2

How do the intentional teaching model and resources support educators to set² intentions (goals)³ for children's learning and development?

3

What elements of the intentional teaching model and resources support decision-making and enable educators to act with intentionality in play-based learning?

Participant sample characteristics

Purposive sampling was used to select a diverse sample of 13 ECEC services across Queensland, New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory (see [Table 1](#)). Services in low-socio-economic and diverse geographic locations were prioritised in the sampling. This included services operating at a range of National Quality Standard (NQS), from 'Working Towards' to 'Exceeding'.

A total of 56 staff (service leaders, educators and teachers) from 13 participating services were invited to take part in the study. Participants for each site included the service leader and a mix of educators (school-based trainee to master's degree in education qualifications) and ranged in their years of experience working in ECEC (graduate trainee to 20+ years' experience).

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- 2 The original research questions used the terminology 'set' intentions. However, this report now adopts the phrasing 'develop' intentions. This shift in language more accurately reflects the research findings, which emphasised intentionality as a collaborative and responsive process.
- 3 The terms 'intentions' and 'goals' have been used interchangeably in this research.

Table 1: Characteristics of participating services

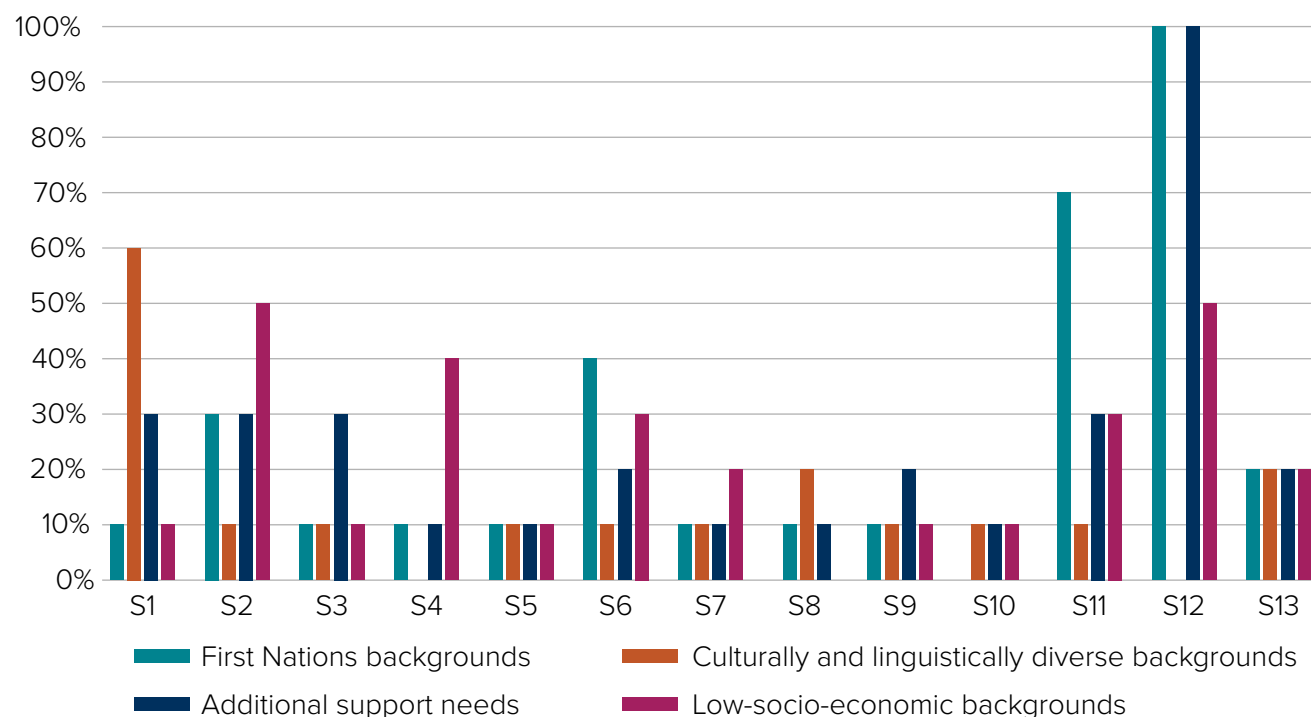
Service ID	State	Geography	Socio-economic advantage and disadvantage	NQS rating	Approval date	Provider management type	Enrolment capacity per day	Ages of children enrolled
S1	ACT	Major city	5 Most advantaged	Exceeding NQS	Sep 2021	Community-based Non-profit Long day care	Up to 77 children	Birth–5 years
S2	NSW	Outer regional	1–2 Most disadvantaged	Exceeding NQS	Dec 2021	Community-based Non-profit Preschool	Up to 100 children	3–5 years
S3	QLD	Major city	4	Working towards NQS	Sep 2024	Private for profit Long day care	Up to 152 children	Birth–5 years
S4	QLD	Major city	2	Meeting NQS	Jan 2024	Private for profit Long day care	Up to 65 children	Birth–5 years
S5	QLD	Major city	3	Exceeding NQS	Feb 2025	Private for profit Long day care	Up to 86 children	Birth–5 years
S6	NSW	Outer regional	1 Most disadvantaged	Exceeding NQS	Jul 2024	Community-based Non-profit Preschool	Up to 70 children	3–5 years
S7	NSW	Major city	2	Exceeding NQS	Jun 2025	Community-based Non-profit Preschool	Up to 24 children	3–5 years

Service ID	State	Geography	Socio-economic advantage and disadvantage	NQS rating	Approval date	Provider management type	Enrolment capacity per day	Ages of children enrolled
S8	QLD	Major city	5 Most advantaged	Meeting NQS	Apr 2023	Community-based Non-profit Long day care	Up to 125 children	Birth–5 years
S9	NSW	Inner regional	3	Exceeding NQS	Jul 2025	Community-based Non-profit Preschool	Up to 80 children	3–5 years
S10	QLD	Major city	2	Meeting NQS	Nov 2023	Community-based Non-profit Long day care	Up to 131 children	Birth–5 years
S11	QLD	Very remote	2–4	Meeting NQS	Dec 2020	Community-based Non-profit Kindergarten	Up to 24 children	3–5 years
S12	QLD	Remote	1 Most disadvantaged	Working towards NQS	Jul 2023	Community-based Non-profit Kindergarten	Up to 21 children	3–5 years
S13	QLD	Very remote	3	Meeting NQS	Sep 2019	Private for profit Long day care	Up to 75 children	Birth–5 years

Note: Geographic classification was based on the Australian Statistical Geography Standard. Socio-economic advantage and disadvantage were classified using the Index Relative Socio-economic Advantage and Disadvantage (IRSAD): 1 = most disadvantaged to 5 = most advantaged. Provider and enrolment were details retrieved from ACECQA website.

Participants cared for children aged birth to 5, with a representative of each age group included in the research. As shown in Figure 1, this included children from diverse backgrounds.

Figure 1: Sample characteristics – background of children in care



Note: % are approximate proportions provided by service leaders via a site characteristics survey.

Research timeline

The research involved 3 iterative cycles unfolding throughout 2025. Figure 2 and [Figure 3](#) capture the research process.

Figure 2 shows an overview of the research, illustrating the iterative cycles.

Figure 2: Overview of iterative cycles

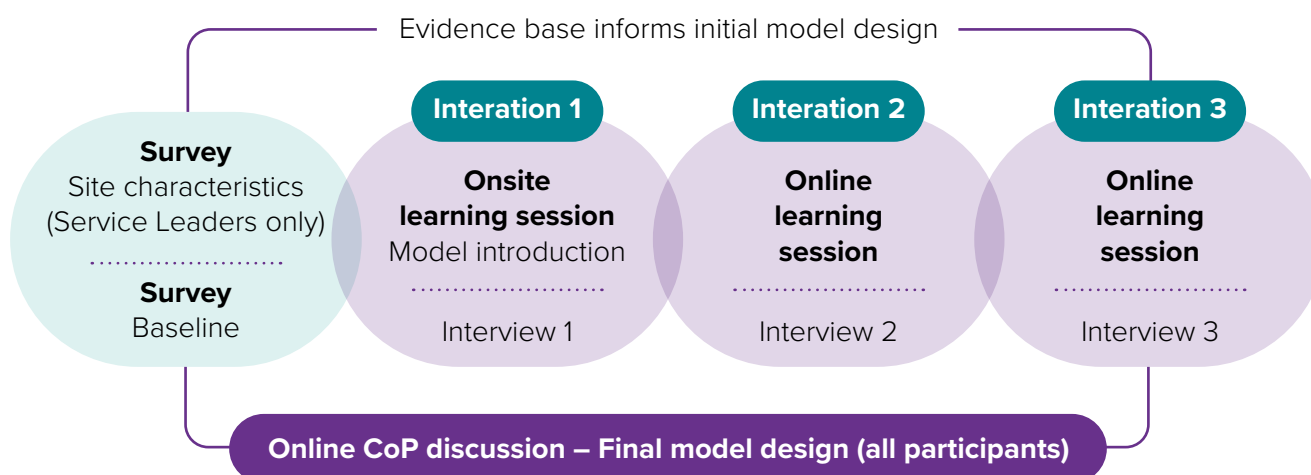
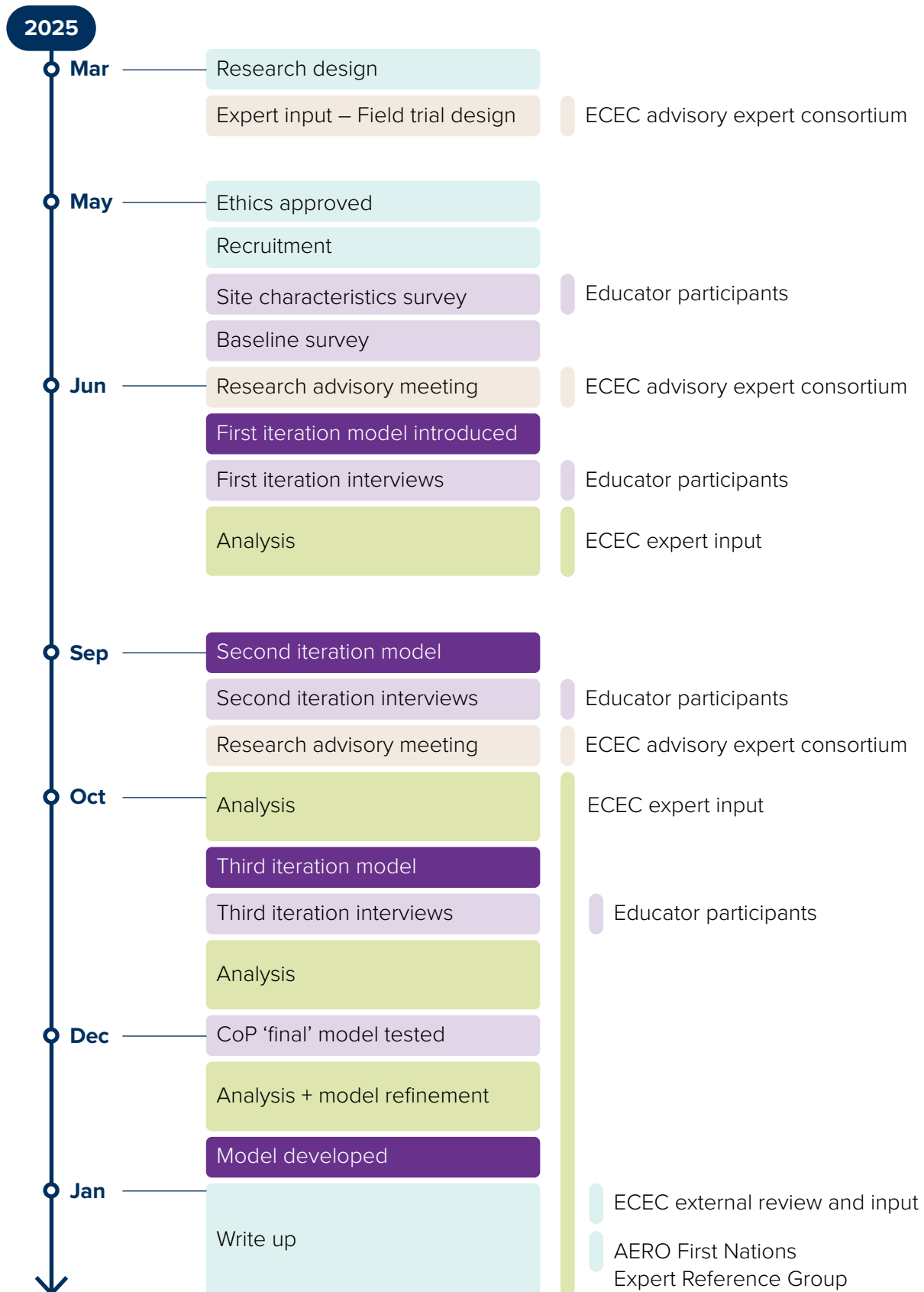


Figure 3 provides an overview of the research timeline, showing the points at which participants and experts engaged.

Figure 3: Research timeline – participant and expert involvement



Research activities and model development

Research design included a range of research activities aligned with the intent and scope of the project. Central to this design was the prioritisation of relationships with participants to safeguard data quality and minimise sample attrition. The first iteration of the intentional teaching model and resources were developed from the findings from 2 literature reviews, providing an evidence-informed model. The draft intentional teaching model ([Figure 4](#)) was included in the resources and talked through with participants in the initial onsite visit.

Online research information session

An online information session was offered to all participants. The purpose of this session was to provide an overview of the research, clarify the participants' role within the process and provide an opportunity to ask questions. This session also represented a chance for the research team and participants to meet and begin to build the relationships required for co-design. For most services, the session was held online via Teams. In keeping with AERO's commitment to cultural responsiveness, some of these sessions were held in person, delivered by a researcher with an existing relationship with the service.

Onsite visits

Following the development of the first intentional teaching model and resources, one member of the research team conducted an onsite model introduction session at each participating service. The onsite visit involved an information session introducing the intentional teaching model and resources ([Intentional Teaching Model](#) practice resource – known in the research as the Intentional Teaching Toolkit). This initial model and toolkit were drawn from the evidence-base (AERO, 2024), and aimed to provide information on the foundational knowledge, beliefs and practice that support play-based learning with intentionality. Participants were provided the opportunity to ask questions and discuss the intentional teaching model and how they would use the model and resources in the next phase of the research. The information sessions were open to all interested employees, regardless of participation in the research. No data was collected during the onsite visits. These onsite visits were instrumental in building a relational approach necessary to form the conditions of co-design.

Focused practice resources

Following the onsite visit and model and resource introduction, educators were introduced to one focused practice resource, known in the research as the [Play and Learning Packs](#). These packs included information designed to scaffold use of the model and resources through familiar learning opportunities. The rationale for using the packs was to focus attention on specific learning for a period of time, explore how the model and resources work and guide the feedback process about what was working and what needed improvement.

The packs included Arrivals, Mealtimes, Sand Play, Home Corner, Gross Motor Play and Block Corner. These focus areas were drawn from everyday familiar experiences and routines in ECEC environments. Each pack was used across an iteration. The packs were designed as a guide to step through use of the intentional teaching model elements, including a step-by-step approach to developing learning intentions and selecting intentional teaching strategies. Educators recorded information on a feedback sheet, which had prompting questions designed to prime thinking ahead of the interviews.

Included in the packs was information about materials that may be used to extend children's learning, and the learning possibilities these experiences provide. The Play and Learning Packs offered a way for educators to implement the intentional teaching model, use the resources in between interviews and record their thinking prior to the interviews. Across the sites, educators used this scaffold in a variety of ways, ranging from extensive use and recording information, to using the packs as a guide and prompt to keep focused between iteration interviews.

Surveys

Two baseline assessment surveys were conducted at the commencement of this research:

- a site characteristics survey
- an intentional teaching survey.

The **site characteristics survey** was completed by service leaders at the commencement of the research process. The survey captured information about each service (outlined in [Table 1](#)), including the nature (e.g., for profit or non-profit), type (e.g., preschool) and size of their service (number of enrolments and employees). Employee qualifications and level of experience and key demographic information of children attending the service was also captured. The site characteristics data contextualised each service and supported data analysis.

The **baseline intentional teaching survey** was completed by all educators. The survey was designed to ascertain understanding prior to model introduction by using a combination of multiple choice, Likert scale and open-ended questions to assess existing knowledge, practice, beliefs and confidence around intentional teaching. Participants were also asked to report their qualifications, years of experience, role title and the ages of the children they were teaching at the time of the research.

This survey was constructed for this study by AERO researchers in conjunction with external experts. To promote scale reliability and validity, the survey was further reviewed by AERO's Analytics and Statistics team.

Interview 1

All participants engaged in a semi-structured interview 2 to 3 weeks after onsite visits. Interview 1 was held online via Teams and lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes. As per ethics protocol, all interviews were recorded to enable transcription.

The aim of the interview was to assess:

1. **Participant conceptualisation of intentional teaching.** Participants were asked to describe intentional teaching in their daily practice as a way of exploring their foundational beliefs, knowledge and attitudes about intentional teaching, play and their role in children's learning.
2. **Accessibility and useability of the intentional teaching model and resources.** Participants were invited to share first impressions of the model and resources and identify elements they perceived as supportive and/or influential to their understanding and enactment of intentional teaching.
3. **Initial insights into their experience of the co-design process.** Participants were asked to share their initial experience of being involved in the research, including any perceived benefits to or challenges in their understanding and practice related to their involvement.
4. **Potential ecological factors** (individual-, service- and-sector level facilitators and barriers) that may be influencing use and understanding of intentional teaching and engagement with the intentional teaching model and resources.

Interview 1 protocol maintained alignment to the research questions, though it was slightly refined following analysis of baseline survey data and advisory expert input. This feedback suggested the value of more thoroughly exploring participants' actual versus reported understanding and practice of intentional teaching, their beliefs and attitudes towards play, and their role in children's learning. A data snapshot was created for each service presenting key insights from the baseline survey findings and used to inform interview protocol design.

Survey analysis

Descriptive analysis was performed on the baseline and site characteristic survey data to identify and describe trends and variation in responses (Loeb et al., 2017). To protect confidentiality, baseline survey data was analysed at the service level.

Interview analysis

Interview responses were subjected to content analysis. Content analysis enabled a systematic approach to the treatment of data that offered flexibility and a way to reduce the data to focus analysis on specific aspects (Schreier, 2012). The coding frameworks were developed and refined in service to the research questions and were tested with an ECEC advisory expert consortium to ensure robustness. Several strategies were adopted to achieve rigour in the qualitative data analysis process (Garvis et al., 2021; Morse, 2015), including peer review, research team member checking of transcripts, external collaborations and triangulation (comparing) with survey data.

ECEC advisory expert consortium

Alongside the iterative design process for developing the intentional teaching model and resources, input into the intentional teaching model design and research process was sought from content experts. Four early childhood professors formed a consortium and engaged in 2 advisory and analysis workshops providing feedback on the research design, process and analytic insights on aggregate survey data.

The following is a summary of the advisory feedback provided.

Advisory meeting 1

The first of these advisory meetings was held to discuss the research design, aims and interview and survey protocols. The reviewers suggested some improvements to the language and overall coherence of the research plan and changes to bring it into closer alignment with the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF V2.0) (AGDE, 2022). As a result of the consultation, the research questions were refined and an additional session added to the research plan to inform participants of the final design of the intentional teaching model.

Advisory meeting 2

The second advisory meeting provided analytic insights on baseline survey data and advice for the interview 1 protocol. Reviewers noted that respondents' definitions of intentional teaching often used keywords like 'purposeful', but that it was not clear if this reflected understanding and practice or was repetition of terms in published intentional teaching resources, such as the definition provided in the EYLF V2.0. Similarly, many respondents reported high confidence and knowledge of intentional teaching, but the survey was not equipped to capture evidence of this.

As a result, the consortium advised using Interview 1 to gain a more complete picture of participants' understanding and practice of intentional teaching. The reviewers also noted that participants reported more intentional practice in social and emotional learning contexts than more 'traditional' content areas like STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) and encouraged researchers to elicit reasons for this contrast during Interview 1. The survey revealed some gaps in understanding regarding the context of intentional teaching. Reviewers suggested exploring participants' use of intentional teaching throughout the day might provide insight into their depth of understanding. Based on feedback, refinements were made to interview protocols.

Co-designing the intentional teaching model

This section explains how the intentional teaching model changed from the original model to the final model, and what this means for educators' intentional teaching practice. The original intentional teaching model (Figure 4) was included in the resources and was introduced to participants in iteration 1.

Figure 4: Original early childhood intentional teaching model



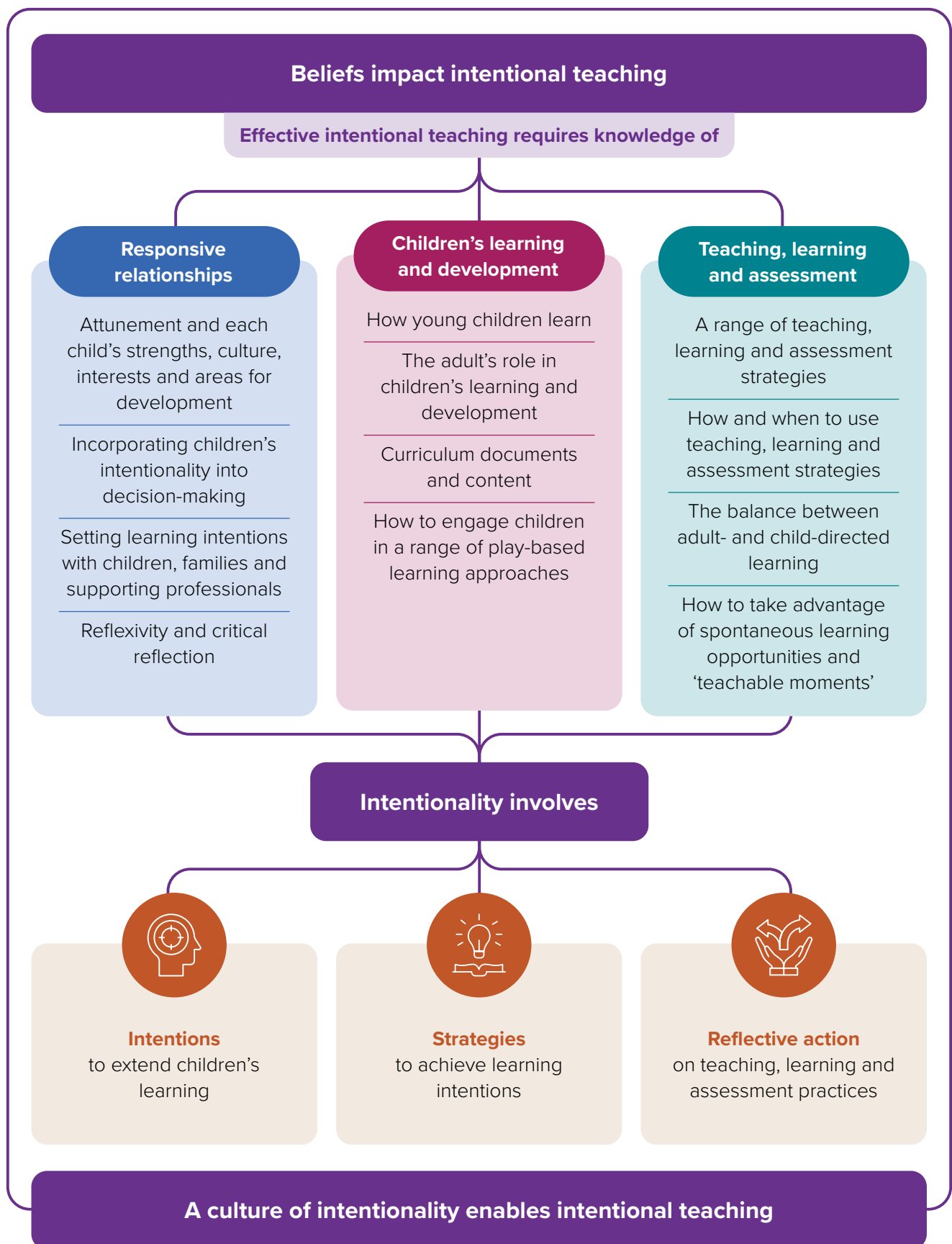
The elements of the intentional teaching model were drawn from AERO's discussion paper, [Play-Based Learning With Intentionality](#). The existing evidence base highlighted 4 elements of effective intentional teaching:

- professional knowledge
- responsive relationships
- teaching and learning strategies
- active decision-making.

Each key aspect was represented as a separate pillar and interconnection drawn between the pillars. It is important to note that the intentional teaching model was not designed to stand alone – rather to be supported by the wider resources, including foundational knowledge and practice supports. It was observed, however, that the resources and intentional teaching model could be accessed by a diversity of educators and used with minimal support. While feedback on the original intentional teaching model was very positive, refinements were made by educators to produce a revised model.

The final intentional teaching model ([Figure 5](#)) reflects an in-depth and sustained process over time to understand what supports educators to conceptualise and enact intentional teaching.



Figure 5: Final intentional teaching model

AERO's Intentional Teaching Model has been informed by research and co-designed with Australian ECEC educators and teachers.

What has resulted is a model that applies a new approach to thinking about intentional teaching and supports educator intentionality in play-based learning.

The final intentional teaching model brings together ‘the why’, ‘the what’ and ‘the how’ of intentional teaching. This research found 3 elements interacted to support intentional teaching. Three professional knowledge pillars – responsive relationships, teaching and learning strategies, and children’s learning and development – form the foundation of the intentional teaching model. This model shows professional knowledge enables, and is enabled by, intentionality, which involves ‘intentions’, ‘strategies and ‘reflective action’. The concept of ‘reflective action’ related to intentional teaching is a new contribution from this research.

The inclusion of **intentions**, **strategies** and **reflective action** as 3 connected concepts resonated with educators, providing a useful conceptual frame around intentional teaching. Separating intentions and strategies – rather than a sole focus on using intentional teaching strategies – provided depth to the process of setting learning intentions. Educators noted that knowledge gained through the resources supported their knowledge of intentional teaching strategies, as well as when and how to use them.

Learning intention: An aim, objective, goal or intended outcome for children’s learning and development.

Teaching strategies: Help educators achieve the learning intention – they are how the educator will approach the learning. The learning intention, context, cultural responsiveness and knowledge of individual children will determine which strategy will be most effective in that situation.

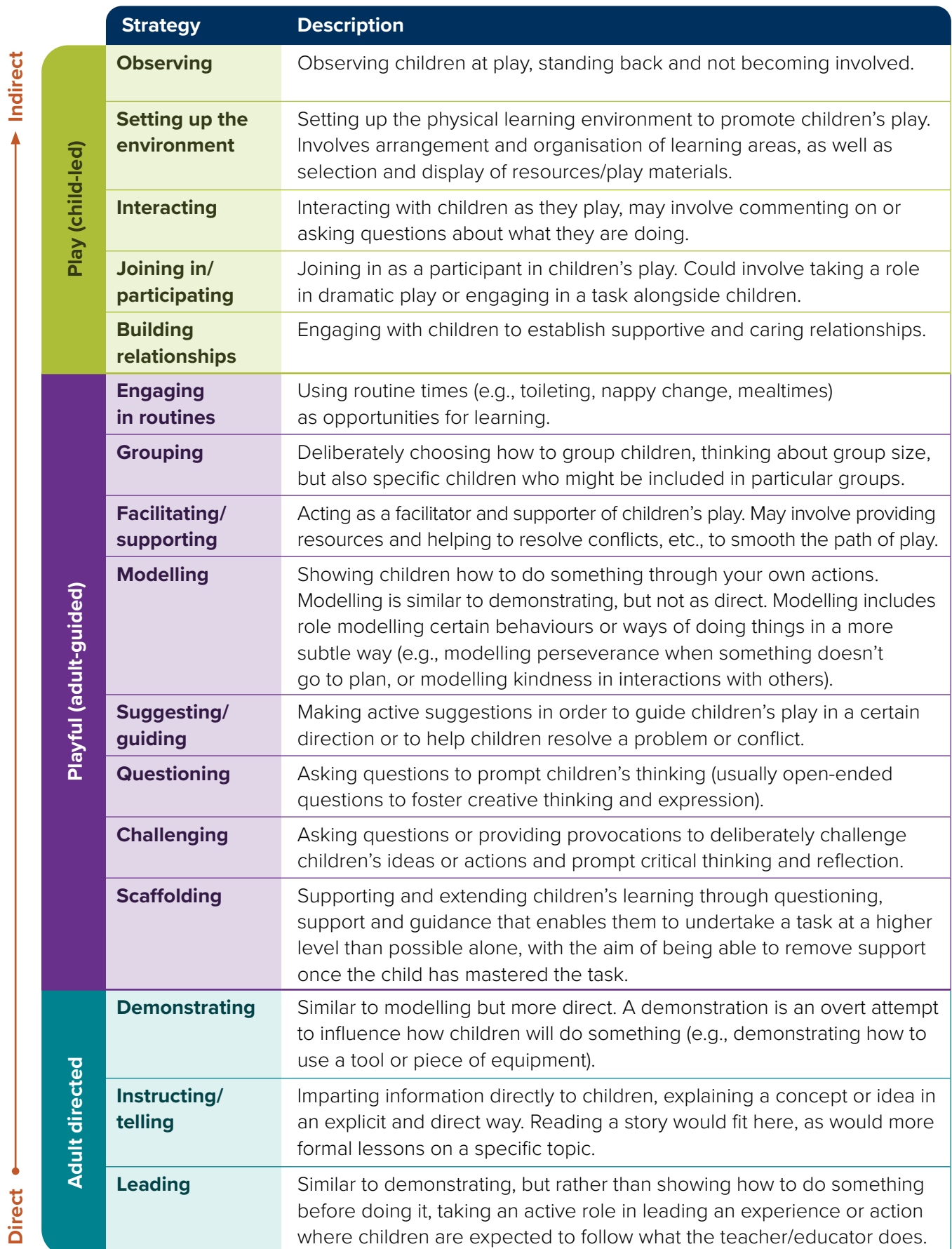
Learning intentions bring focus and clarity to children’s learning. The intentional teaching model and resources supported educators to be intentional in identifying, prioritising and promoting learning and development. Intentional teaching has been positioned as a focus on selection of teaching strategies. However, a singular focus on teaching and learning strategies can remove the intentions from the equation and, by doing so, reduce the effectiveness of teaching practices. To support educators in developing meaningful, relevant and thoughtful learning intentions, the intentional teaching model and resources were used to scaffold the development of learning intentions. Combined with this, the resources provided information to reinforce the importance of educators deeply knowing the children they teach, as well as strong understandings of child development, how children learn and the content to be learnt.

Separating the question ‘What do we want children to learn?’ from ‘How will we support that learning?’ enabled educators to make more intentional pedagogical decisions. Interview findings suggested that highlighting learning intentions as a key element of intentional teaching focused educators on supporting children’s learning. The process of developing learning intentions also reinforced children’s intentionality and their ability to set priorities for their own learning. The data suggested that through the process of separating learning intentions from selecting and using teaching and learning strategies, educators were able to expand possibilities for children’s learning. Educators reported more balanced child-led and adult-led experiences and confidence in holding meaningful conversations about children’s learning. By using the resources, educators refined how they developed learning intentions and prioritised learning opportunities. This is significant as the resources also focused educators on spontaneous and in-the-moment learning, as well as offered a frame for next steps in children’s learning. With clear and specific intentions in mind, educators are much better able to successfully support and guide children’s learning. Through the intentional teaching model and resources, educators were supported in setting meaningful learning intentions and selecting teaching strategies to achieve them, to enhance each child’s learning.

Strategies

Separating strategies from learning intentions in the intentional teaching model was effective at connecting learning (through intentions) with teaching (strategies to achieve intentions). What was pivotal in building foundational knowledge and supporting practice in this area were resources such as the Continuum of Teaching Strategies ([Figure 6](#)) and the Knowledge, Skills and Dispositions Teaching Guide ([Figure 7](#)), which profiled teaching strategies ranging from child-led to adult-led, depending on the kind of learning in focus.

[Figure 6](#) shows the Continuum of Teaching Strategies used in this research.

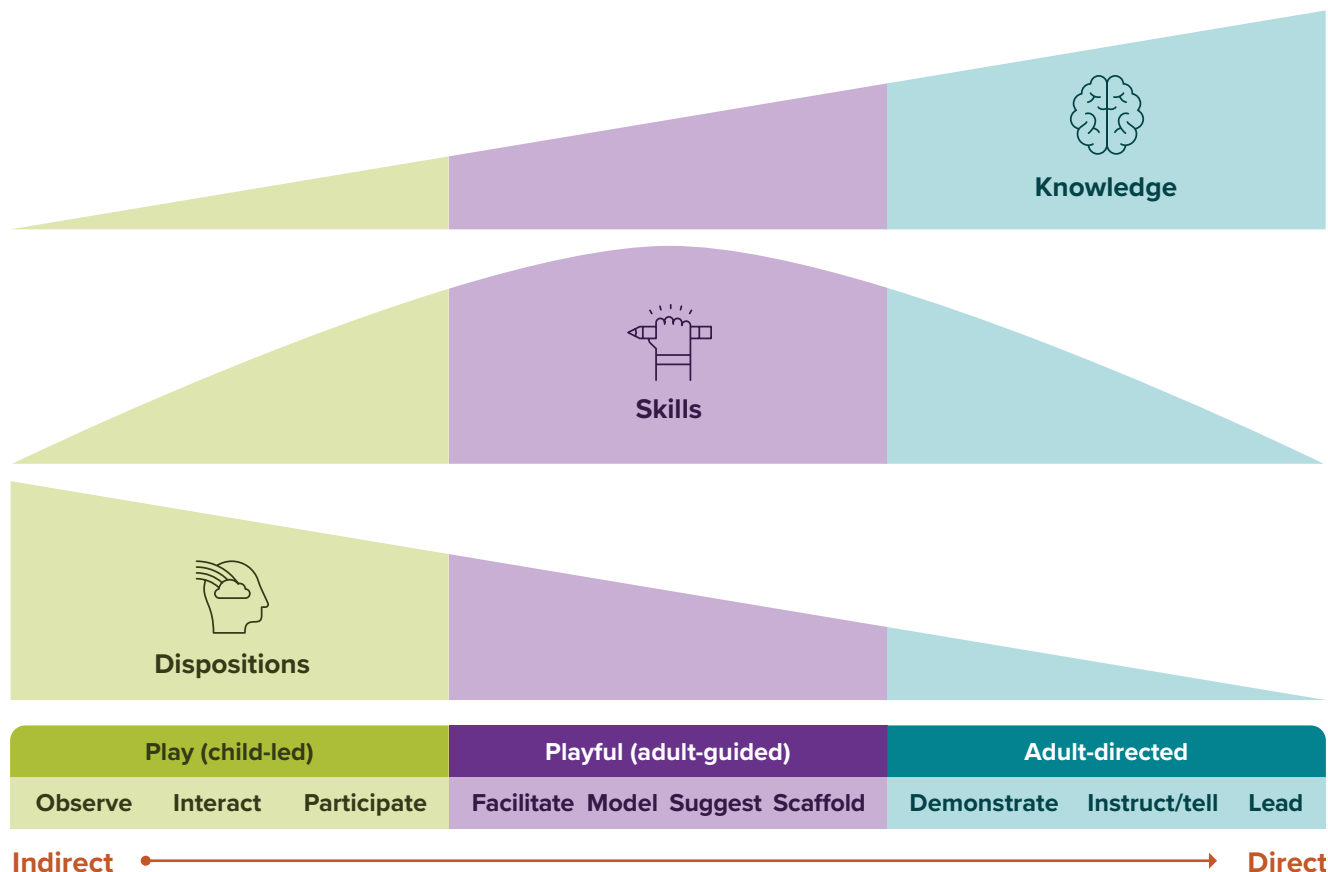
Figure 6: Continuum of teaching strategies


The diagram illustrates a continuum of teaching strategies, ranging from Indirect (top) to Direct (bottom). The strategies are organized into three main categories: Play (child-led), Playful (adult-guided), and Adult directed. Each category contains several specific strategies with their descriptions.

	Strategy	Description
Indirect ↑ Play (child-led)	Observing	Observing children at play, standing back and not becoming involved.
	Setting up the environment	Setting up the physical learning environment to promote children's play. Involves arrangement and organisation of learning areas, as well as selection and display of resources/play materials.
	Interacting	Interacting with children as they play, may involve commenting on or asking questions about what they are doing.
	Joining in/ participating	Joining in as a participant in children's play. Could involve taking a role in dramatic play or engaging in a task alongside children.
	Building relationships	Engaging with children to establish supportive and caring relationships.
Playful (adult-guided)	Engaging in routines	Using routine times (e.g., toileting, nappy change, mealtimes) as opportunities for learning.
	Grouping	Deliberately choosing how to group children, thinking about group size, but also specific children who might be included in particular groups.
	Facilitating/ supporting	Acting as a facilitator and supporter of children's play. May involve providing resources and helping to resolve conflicts, etc., to smooth the path of play.
	Modelling	Showing children how to do something through your own actions. Modelling is similar to demonstrating, but not as direct. Modelling includes role modelling certain behaviours or ways of doing things in a more subtle way (e.g., modelling perseverance when something doesn't go to plan, or modelling kindness in interactions with others).
	Suggesting/ guiding	Making active suggestions in order to guide children's play in a certain direction or to help children resolve a problem or conflict.
	Questioning	Asking questions to prompt children's thinking (usually open-ended questions to foster creative thinking and expression).
	Challenging	Asking questions or providing provocations to deliberately challenge children's ideas or actions and prompt critical thinking and reflection.
Adult directed ↓ Direct	Scaffolding	Supporting and extending children's learning through questioning, support and guidance that enables them to undertake a task at a higher level than possible alone, with the aim of being able to remove support once the child has mastered the task.
	Demonstrating	Similar to modelling but more direct. A demonstration is an overt attempt to influence how children will do something (e.g., demonstrating how to use a tool or piece of equipment).
	Instructing/ telling	Imparting information directly to children, explaining a concept or idea in an explicit and direct way. Reading a story would fit here, as would more formal lessons on a specific topic.
	Leading	Similar to demonstrating, but rather than showing how to do something before doing it, taking an active role in leading an experience or action where children are expected to follow what the teacher/educator does.

Figure 7 shows the Continuum of Teaching Strategies With Learning Types from the Knowledge, Skills and Dispositions Teaching Guide used in this research.

Figure 7: Continuum of teaching strategies with learning types



Considering the specific teaching strategies that were most appropriate for achieving the learning intentions brought clarity to educator involvement in learning experiences. The selection of teaching strategies highlighted that educators need foundational knowledge of the strategies and their application to use them effectively.

When mapping strategies to learning intentions, educators noticed that part of their selection process was identifying children's diverse needs and how different strategies support different kinds of learning intentions. Educators noted that knowledge of, and attunement with, individual children supported them in developing learning intentions and to selecting appropriate strategies.

A focus on decision-making around selecting and using strategies appeared to reinforce the choices educators made about their involvement in supporting and guiding children's play. It also reinforced the idea that adult-directed learning could still be engaging and interactive and provide opportunities for children's intentionality.

It's probably just making you a bit more mindful and it's making you think a lot more about your own knowledge of child development and our effective teaching strategies and practices. So, in setting those goals, it's probably thinking can we achieve them, really breaking it down. Trying to think about the direction the learning is going and how we are determining that – and how the children are ... We lose sight of that ... We are seeking to enrich and expand the present experience that they're in right at that moment. And to do that, we need to reflect on what we're observing and hearing. And we need to be there to guide and support.

— Educational leader and Teacher, iteration 3

I think when we are more intentional, we're more engaged as educators with the play. Instead of just sitting back and observing, not taking over the play, but we're more engaged in the space. [We are] making sure that the resources are available for them, that we were looking and then just helping them or questioning the children or going, 'Oh, that's really interesting, how did you come about that?' Or 'how did you know about this?' So yeah, I think it makes us more engaged.

— Educator, iteration 3

The explicit focus on strategies mapped to different kinds of learning proved most effective. Participants noted that building knowledge of the different kinds of learning children engage in and selecting strategies to map to different kinds of learning was effective in supporting them to feel more successful in extending children's learning and development.



Reflective action

Reflective action as a concept highlights the dynamic way educators reflect on both their and children's intentionality in planned and spontaneous moments and supports making this process explicit. This explicitness contributed to educators constructing a culture of intentionality, where learning intentions were shared between team members, learning priorities were discussed and pedagogical practices reflected on. Focusing on children's learning as a priority supported educators in interrogating all aspects of the curriculum to expand their perceptions of intentional teaching and ensure balanced programs that included a combination of adult-guided and child-directed learning. All this combined to enhance knowledge and practice related to play-based learning with intentionality.

Emphasising the concept of reflective action provided explicit alignment between setting learning intentions, using teaching and learning strategies and assessment practices. These connections were made possible as foundational knowledge was deepened around different kinds of learning, observing and gathering information to support educators to prioritise learning intentions and decide on strategies that may be effective in achieving the intentions. Intentional teaching became more focused as educators exercised assessment practices of observing, gathering information, reflecting on their roles in children's learning and how to support and document children's intentionality. Breaking down the components of intentional teaching and naming decision-making as reflective action provided clarity on assessment practices and processes.

Responsive relationships as foundational to intentional teaching

Early childhood education is based on responsive relational pedagogy. Quality Area 5 of the NQS outlines the importance of relationships with children in quality programs (Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority [ACECQA], 2026). The intertwined nature of care and education for young children means that the quality of the relationships between adults and children in ECEC settings underpins everything else that happens. Effective, ethical educators prioritise relationships. Warm, caring and supportive relationships ensure children feel safe, secure and included, and provide the best conditions for effective learning (Barblett et al., 2021; Leggett & Ford, 2013; McLaughlin et al., 2016; Williams et al., 2023).

Additions were made to the final intentional teaching model based on educator input to reflect the importance of responsive relationships and strengthening this concept as foundational to intentional teaching. These changes included:

- recognising the importance of attunement and supporting children's intentionality
- including educator relationships as an enabler to intentional teaching with the importance of teaching team relationships, leadership and mentoring to strengthen understanding and practice
- adding recognising relationships with families, and the wider community, as visible in the intentional teaching model and resources (across iterations, a shared sense of developing learning intentions that included families' perspectives became evident)
- adding the importance of relationships with allied health and other professionals in maximising children's learning.

The research and model redesign processes were interconnected as per the iterative methodological design. Co-designing with participants warrants shared ownership of design decisions. It also demands careful consideration of the context and sample characteristics the research is unfolding in, the existing evidence base and potential conditions surrounding use of the final outputs. Findings from each iteration shaped the co-design process. The following section summarises the design and redesign decisions following each iteration.

Iteration 1

Iteration 1 introduced an initial intentional teaching model and resources developed from the existing literature base. Highlighting gaps in foundational knowledge around intentional teaching, the original resources were aimed at priming and building participants' knowledge and practice of intentional teaching. Interview 1 then asked participants how they conceptualised and enacted intentional teaching. The data evidenced variant knowledge, beliefs and practices across the sample and within each service. Notably, some participants held binary beliefs around play and intentional teaching, with these misconceptions influencing their understanding of the role they held in children's learning and play. Professional knowledge was shown as instrumental to participant conceptualisations and enactment of intentional teaching:

I think it is easy to get caught up in that idea that group time's your time for intentionality.

— Service leader, iteration 1

Intentional teaching is hard for them – they are very young.

— Educator (infant and toddler), iteration 1

I do like intentional teaching, but I just – like I said in the beginning, I like the children to lead the activity and then just follow up if they need us. I don't like telling the kid you have to do this and that.

— Teacher, iteration 1

More intention in the morning, indoors ... during the drop-off periods it is more helping them settle in, find something to do, but I feel I am comforting them instead of intentionally teaching.

— Teacher, iteration 1

Intentional teaching is 'what you want them to achieve' ... tables set up ... based on children's interests.

— Teacher, iteration 1

Just really observing what the children are doing, and then just following their lead and what their interests are ... I think that all kids will learn in their own ways, so I just like to follow their lead ... We just develop their skills for them and develop a fun way of doing it.

— Educational leader (infant and toddler), iteration 1

If I was to make an observation, outside is seen more as free play... but if you're really being present with everybody – all stakeholders, the environment included – then amazing things can happen ... It's a holistic approach, as opposed to 'Today, I want to teach the children about this.'

— Service leader, iteration 1

Overall participants reported the original intentional teaching model was effective in bringing together evidence on intentional teaching in an accessible way and, as such, no changes were made to the original design in Iteration 1.

Iteration 1 co-design considerations

- The design needs to:
 - capture the interplay between the process of intentional teaching and relationships
 - be able to be used across the unique contexts of each ECEC service (not a 'one-size-fits-all' approach)
 - reflect the dynamic and responsive qualities of intentional teaching and ECEC more broadly.
- Resources are needed to support setting and focusing on learning intentions.
- There was strong support for the simple and accessible design of the 'pillared' model.

Iteration 2

Iteration 2 invited educators to use a Play and Learning Pack – a resource designed to help them plan and develop intentions for children’s play and learning in a focused way. Based on Iteration 1 data, interview 2 sought to further uncover how participants were thinking about play, their role in children’s play, and developing intentions for children’s learning. Interview 2 also tested the model design and relevance of the original 4 pillars – professional knowledge, responsive relationships, teaching and learning strategies, and active decision-making.

Participants shared that using the intentional teaching model and resources helped ‘*focus*’ and ‘*simplify*’ goal setting and equipped them with the professional insight and confidence to develop intentions for learning and assume a more fluid role in children’s play. Iteration 2 participant data evidenced deeper thinking around children as learners and surfaced decisions they made to extend children’s engagement. Notably, this data suggested ‘active decision-making’ was more of an ongoing process, connecting intention, reflection and action. These data highlighted the importance of representing ‘the how’ of intentional teaching and led to re-envisioning the model to capture this process. Through the analytic redesign of iteration 2, the term ‘reflective action’ emerged. Preliminary designs to reflect this process were created by AERO and tested with participants in iteration 3.

Other participant redesign input involved changes to the model at word level, the repositioning of the professional knowledge pillars, and consideration of what was missing from the design. Suggestions on how to improve the resources were also provided in interview 2. These suggestions were made in time to use and review the model in iteration 3.

Iteration 2 co-design considerations

- Intentionality must be reflected as an ongoing process of intentions, reflection and actions.
- Professional knowledge needs to include teaching and learning strategies. It was proposed that teaching and learning strategies are not separated pillars as initially depicted.
- Responsive relationships influence intentional teaching, with the importance of relationships specifically noted. Design considerations in subsequent model design needed to include relationships as a central concept.
- While the model design captured all essential elements, there was a concern that the representation of the intentional teaching process was too complicated. A further design was tested, and it was confirmed that while the representation of intentional teaching as an ongoing process made sense, there was a need to simplify design to enhance translation and accessibility.
- A significant change was noted related to the representation of ‘the how’ of intentional teaching. A re-envisioning of the intentional teaching process was undertaken and resulted in the introduction of the term ‘reflective action’.
- Reflective action was pictured as 2 interlocking circles illustrating the interplay of these elements

Iteration 3

Iteration 3 invited educators to use a second Play and Learning pack. However, this iteration focused on testing the final model redesign. Specifically, interview 3 tested with participants 3 main changes to the intentional teaching model and sought feedback on both content and visual representation of concepts. The 3 main model changes included:

- reshaping the model into a circular format showing relationships and context as outer concentric circles, wrapping intentional teaching process elements in the centre
- merging teaching and learning strategies under the professional knowledge pillar
- representing active decision-making as an ongoing process, refined into the concept of 'reflective action' with simplified visual representation.

Participants offered broad agreement that these changes reflected their input.

Iteration 3 co-design considerations

- While participants agreed with the notion of reflective action and representation as an ongoing process, there was concern that the circular presentation may be confusing for educators with less experience.
- Clear explainers – and likely additional mentorship – would be needed to explain these concepts.
- Further confirmation of the importance of relationships as central in the final model was described as foundational.
- The final model designs were tested, with intentional teaching emerging in 3 key elements of the model:
 - responsive relationships and context
 - reflective action
 - professional knowledge.
- Data from across iterations consistently emphasised the importance of these 3 elements to enabling intentionality and effective practice.



Community of practice design and redesign considerations

Based on iterative datasets, 2 intentional teaching model designs were tested with participants in a community of practice (CoP) online forum, with further feedback sought. All CoP participants expressed preference for the same model design option. The selected model distilled intentional teaching into 3 key elements: reflective action, responsive relationships, and professional knowledge. Participants felt this was option was more reflective of the concept and how it is effectively applied in practice. Additions were suggested in wording in the responsive relationship element, including an emphasis on relationships with professionals, families and communities as central to children's learning.

Final model design and redesign considerations

The overall shape of the intentional teaching model remains consistent with the design tested in the CoP. As per DBR methods, the final design encompasses analytic insights drawn from all datasets, contemporary evidence and considerations related to potential scalability and sector impact (Burr & Degotardi, 2025; Hoadley & Campos, 2022; McKenney & Reeves, 2018):

- Small amendments have been made to the text and explanations in the resources, as per participant feedback.
- The responsive relationships element retains relationships with and between children, and with families and communities, as well as educator relationships, given the data's emphasis on intentional teaching as a collective process.
- Relationships with professionals has been included from participant CoP feedback.

For an overview of the key findings in each iteration that informed the development of the intentional teaching model, see [Table 2](#).

Table 2: Overview of findings informing model development

Iteration 1	Iteration 2	Iteration 3	
Toolkit introduced Laying foundation of understanding intentional teaching	Play and Learning kit introduced Resources facilitating knowledge into practice	Play and Learning kit continued Selection of second Play and Learning kit – resources facilitating knowledge into practice	Online CoP discussion Online structured discussion and online form as options for feedback
4 pillar model introduced - Professional knowledge - Responsive relationships - Active decision-making - Teaching and learning strategies	4 pillar model tested 4 pillars representative of practice and elements of effective intentional teaching	Model redesign tested - Circular design representing reciprocity of intentional teaching relationships and context - Active decision-making as ongoing (to reflective action) - Merging teaching and learning strategies + professional knowledge	Final model designs tested 3 essential elements design options tested: - Responsive relationships and context as central - Reflective action as central
Interview 1 focus Participant conceptualisations of intentional teaching	Interview 2 focus - Testing of 4 pillars model - Perceived shifts of understanding and practice through use of resources	Interview 3 focus - Testing model redesigns - Perceived shifts in conceptualisations and practice	CoP focus - Test model design options - Justification for changes - Final opportunity for input and/or consensus
Key findings informing model redesign - Variations in understanding - Misconceptions around play and learning and role of adult in children's play - Professional knowledge required for intentionality - Mentorship/ leadership enables understanding and enactment of intentional teaching - Context as influential	Key findings informing model redesign - Using resources broadened conceptions of intentional teaching and supported setting intentions - Evidence of decision-making to extend children's learning and promote agency - Consideration of role in children's play, reflection and professional knowledge to find balance - Ongoing process/ relationships as central	Key findings informing final model - Confirmation professional knowledge includes understanding different strategies and how and when to use - Setting intentions and active decision-making as ongoing process representative of effective practice 'Reflective action' captures this - Relationships foundational to intentional teaching	Key findings informing final model - Design consensus reached - Reflective action encompasses everything they do - Ensure expanded view on relationships with and between children, with families, communities and with other professionals

Overall key findings

The key findings in this section were collated across the 3 research iterations, drawn largely from 125 interviews with educators.

Key finding 1 – Knowledge and practice improved after engagement with the model and resources

Analysis of participant interviews across the three iterations showed:

- **Positive shifts in understandings of intentional teaching:** Across the 13 diverse ECEC contexts, initial conceptions and enactment of intentional teaching varied from misconceptions to surface-level to sophisticated understandings. This was evident at both service and individual educator levels. After educators engaged with the intentional teaching model and resources, positive shifts were evident in how they understood and enacted intentional teaching.
- **Strengthened focus on children's learning:** Educators demonstrated a strengthened focus on children's learning after engaging with the intentional teaching model and resources.
- **Assessment informs intentional teaching:** Participant data showed little to no explicit use of assessment language. However, the intentional teaching model and resources supported educators in collecting information to set learning intentions, choose teaching strategies and reflect on children's learning – all key elements of assessment practices.
- **Understanding children's intentionality and intentional teaching:** After educators engaged with the intentional teaching model and resources, improved understandings were evident in how they viewed children's intentionality.

Each of the elements of Key finding 1 are discussed here.

Positive shifts in understandings of intentional teaching

Across the sample, more sophisticated understandings of intentional teaching were closely associated with leadership practices that prioritised reflection, collaborative planning and collegiality. However, within individual services, there was also variability across educators' understandings. These varied understandings were most pronounced in **how intentional teaching was conceptualised**, **how educators understood their role in children's learning** and **how intentional teaching was enacted within play-based learning environments**:

I think if you're not being intentional, you may as well just be a lifeguard – sit on the sideline. It is not just about getting involved in guiding the conversation ... Sometimes, it is making that decision, 'I'm going to stand back to maximise the outcome ... and if they need a little more guidance, I am available to do that.'

— Service leader, iteration 1

I think for the majority of our team, they very much look at it as something that has to be planned in advance. They don't look at it as what it can be in the moment in time ... The understanding we all have of intentional teaching is very different, especially for some of our newer staff.

— Service leader, iteration 1

[The staff] are looking at learning and play as 2 separate things ... then their planning and programming emphasises adult-directed experiences if it is going to be learning ... rather than maybe giving children the materials and watching what is happening and observing what the children are doing and then taking that and using it ... I think that observation portion may be missing.

— Service leader iteration 2

The diversity of understandings of intentional teaching found within this research sample is consistent with variations noted in the literature. There, intentional teaching is often associated with planned group and adult-led learning experiences, with educators experiencing difficulty integrating it across broader aspects of a play-based curriculum (Grieshaber et al., 2021; Leggett & Newman, 2017; Lewis et al., 2019; Taylor & Boyer, 2020). Such variation may stem from a perceived tension between play and intentional teaching, reflecting divergent understandings of play, learning and teaching within the broader context or community (Barblett et al., 2016; Chen et al., 2024). This pilot study recruited a small sample and focused analysis at service – not individual – level. As such, definitive conclusions on how demographics influenced individual conceptualisations of intentional teaching is difficult. Broadly, however, some influencing factors were evident, and these findings were consistent with existing literature. For example, some participants spoke of how their cultural background coloured their perceptions of play and, by default, valued learning and teaching. These insights aligned with evidence cited by Bubikova-Moan et al. (2019).

Interview data from services caring for children in more remote areas had some comparatively different features to that of services caring for children in urban or inner regional areas. Services in remote areas tended to use more collective language and considered children's learning intentions in relation to their community. Educators working in remote settings more consciously prioritised responsive relationships and spoke of this as a necessary precursor to children's learning and development. This data aligns with existing literature on relational pedagogy as a key component of intentional teaching (e.g., McLaughlin et al., 2016).

Years of experience in ECEC was shown as one of the most influential factors on how intentionality was conceptualised and enacted. Initial baseline and iteration 1 data showed differences between how participants with more experience conceptualised and enacted intentional teaching compared to participants with less experience. Across all 3 interviews more experienced participants from across the sample shared how they had noticed that newly trained staff held a different, more surface level, understanding of intentional teaching and noted that the resources helped to bridge this gap.

Further, research highlights a lack of practical guidance on how intentional teaching can be embedded within play-based learning environments, resulting in practices that are largely shaped by individual interpretation (Edwards, 2017). For example, while intentionality is central to intentional teaching, there is limited guidance on what the intentions of intentional teaching might be, or how these intentions can be articulated, enacted and realised through active decision-making and skilful pedagogical practices (Chen et al., 2024; Wu & Goff, 2023).

When we first started looking at it, I was a little bit hesitant because from where I came from and where I started in the industry, intentional teaching was very one-to-one, sit down, stereotypical old intentional teaching picture that people have. So, this was very, very different, and taking on board that almost everything we do has intentionality behind it and has a purpose and were doing it for a reason. So, I think it has broadened my perspectives and I'm more aware of the intentions when doing things.

— Educator, iteration3

Table 3 illustrates the shift in conceptions of intentional teaching experienced by several participants across the research iterations.

Table 3: Participant conception shifts from iteration 1 to iteration 3

Iteration 1	Iteration 3	
Conceptions of intentional teaching at research beginning	Conceptions of intentional teaching at research end	How the resources have supported shifts in knowledge and understanding
Participant – Educational leader		
‘It’s a time for adults to be actively engaged, having conversations, not just a time for dormant supervision ... it is not random.’	‘I think intentional teaching is all the decisions that you make throughout the day, whether they’re planned or spontaneous, that work towards outcomes for children.’ ‘I have probably more thought about how we can bring everyone into thinking about and setting goals for children’s learning. Thinking “Why do we have goals? And what benefit can different children get from the same experience?” What everybody takes away might be different ... The more you know about individual children and the more they know and trust you, you know when is a good time to step in or how much to step in or “No, actually, it is best for me to stay back right now” ... you know what is going to serve them best.’	‘The continuum of learning strategies and the way it talks about which strategies might lend themselves more towards adult-directed, playful or child-directed play. I think the way it is broken into those really made me think about what would be best suited in this situation.’

Iteration 1 Conceptions of intentional teaching at research beginning	Iteration 3 Conceptions of intentional teaching at research end	How the resources have supported shifts in knowledge and understanding
Participant – Educator (infant and toddler)		
‘Doing planned activities, having something you are working towards.’	‘I believe it is to have a reason or an end goal or a purpose of why you’re doing something. I see it as a progressive thing.’ ‘I like that it highlights what it actually means for children.’ ‘Placing things a little bit more intentionally and have them set up differently. I now have shelves completely off the wall so the children can stand and move 360 degrees around the shelves and can all engage together ...’ ‘I have noticed they are a lot more engaged. They are exploring different parts of the room. I have also notice that we have had 2 new children (babies) [that] have settled easier because they have been able to freely explore and I feel that they are more comfortable ... I feel that you need to have a relationship with a child to be able to intentionally teach ... especially in nursery.’	‘[The resources] helped me think about why I was doing something and the actual intention behind it, not because it flowed better for the children’ ‘I used the 6 reflective questions in my daily practice.’ ‘The strategies helped [me] think about “What do I want to achieve? How will I achieve this? What learning do I want to focus on? What do I know?” Those kinds of questions helped me to piece it together and go from having children who can talk to you to children can’t ... but you have to view it more to see what they’re doing, why they’re doing it, how it is helping their development.’ ‘Having it visually there and being able to flick back definitely helped.’
Participant – Early career early childhood teacher		
‘It’s teaching with a purpose. So, there’s probably an outcome that you have in mind. Whether that gets achieved or reached ... but it’s about going into your days, your group times, the way you set up the room, the conversations you are having with the children ... It’s about how you go about it and what you want to achieve ... [includes] tables set up ... based on children’s interests.’	‘Intentional teaching is everything you do within a day-to-day basis. As an early childhood teacher, it is all the things that you put into your program. It’s the conversations that you are having with the children. It’s in your planning. It’s in your reflecting. It’s part of your everyday with something that you set out to do. How you achieve it, where you want to end up and then, as a reflection, what you can then do going forward.’ ‘I would say my confidence as an early career teacher has grown in terms of intentional teaching.’ ‘I’ve definitely put a lot more thought into thinking about and setting goals for children’s learning. Reflecting on what I’ve seen, conversations I’ve had with the children, what the interests are and then figuring out what the gaps are and where [I] can be a little bit more intentional.’	‘Sometimes intentional teaching is more obvious than others and reading through the toolkit has made me realise that.’ ‘Provided confidence in having something to refer back to and knowing it is evidence backed.’ Exemplar and visual and accessible elements made visible the ‘processes of experienced educators’ which is ‘important because [you] can’t just assume that everyone knows. It is a learnt thing.’

Strengthened focus on children's learning

In this study, teachers and educators consistently demonstrated a strong commitment towards supporting children's learning and development, alongside a willingness to learn and refine their pedagogical practices. Involvement in the research process and using the resources offered a point of reflection on existing professional knowledge, practices and beliefs related to intentional teaching. Participants valued the opportunity to critically consider their own conceptualisations and practices around developing intentions for children's learning, play and incorporating child intentionality. They reported that engagement with the materials prompted deeper reflection on play and children's learning, with these shifts noted across the research sample:

It is not just supervision – it is engagement ... interaction as opposed to looking from afar and waiting for an accident to happen and then addressing them.

— Service leader, iteration 3

To maximise children's opportunities for learning, existing research emphasises the importance of educators making decisions to develop intentions for children's learning and then turning these intentions into action. To be able to do this effectively, educators require solid foundational knowledge of holistic approaches to children's learning and development. Learning was unpacked in the resources and aligned with categories identified in the EYLF V2.0, including knowledge, skills and dispositions. Using these 3 categories provided a helpful frame for thinking about learning and contributed positively to educator decision-making and actions:

It's probably making myself more critical of what I am doing and really being aware of missed opportunities in their learning.

— Service leader, iteration 3

Educators have a key role in guiding, shaping and leading children's learning in important and helpful directions. Research suggests that a balance of child-led and adult-guided learning works best, and knowing when and how to be involved in learning is a key skill for educators to develop (Allee-Herndon et al., 2022; Edwards, 2017; Pyle et al., 2024; Zosh et al., 2017, 2018).

The resources/process have supported 'identifying that balance' ... it's that level of scaffolding and support as opposed to free rein.

— Service leader, iteration 3

I can hear the staff talking about children's learning differently ... you can see that their professional toolkits are growing ... they are thinking about it differently ... they're learning when to interject and when to stand back and watch and when it's appropriate to enter children's play.

— Educational leader, iteration 3

In this research, educators reported that using the intentional teaching model and resources encouraged them to consider that balance needed to promote children's learning. Specifically, they noticed using these resources influenced their intentionality in the following ways:

- diving deeper to understand and identify different kinds of learning as illustrated across the across the Continuum of Teaching Strategies (see [Figure 6](#)) was useful as it enabled educators to think about how different kinds of learning respond to different kinds of teaching
- mapping learning intentions to various teaching strategies enabled educators to reflect on their use of different teaching strategies.

Experienced educators reported their already established knowledge and practice deepened through the research, with opportunities to revisit, deepen and refine their understanding of intentional teaching. Participants also reported that it gave them the opportunity for team reflection on joint approaches and directions for children's learning, with educators sharing the importance of 'consistency' of understanding and approach across the team:

It's probably made me revisit intentional teaching. It's something that I hope that we were already quite across. It's definitely put a new lens on it, and it's made us relook at it, and especially with the changes to the EYLF V2.0, just to make sure that we're really embedding it and thinking about it still in a really playful and purposeful way ... Staff were already thinking [about intentions in children's play], though this project has definitely, definitely spurred us on and made us think more critically about it. It's definitely supported it and taken it to a little bit of a next level.

— Service leader, iteration 3

Assessment informs intentional teaching

While engaging with the intentional teaching model and resources helped educators describe and reflect on setting learning intentions and selecting teaching strategies, there were minimal to no explicit mentions of assessment. This was noted as missing in the data, despite descriptions of assessment evident in participant data.

Educators referred to how the intentional teaching model and resources focused their gaze on children's learning and enabled them to reflect on their practices and how they influence children's learning and development. This is consistent with assessment, which is an ongoing process of gathering information to support children's learning and development.

It's actually made us really, honestly, look at our own reflection on our own practice and 'What can I actually expect children's growth to look like? What am I expecting? How can I grow that? What do I want growth to look like?'

— Educational leader and Teacher, iteration 3

Assessment practices drive intentional teaching by providing evidence to set learning intentions, select teaching strategies and plan purposeful and meaningful experiences. Specifically, formative assessment practice allows for information gathered by attuned educators in the moment with children to inform the next steps in intentional planning (Grimmond et al., 2022). The intentional teaching model and resources provided an explicit focus on resources that scaffolded the use of observation to gather information required to set effective learning intentions. Educators noted that this focus heightened their awareness of learning, causing them to tune into children's learning:

Now I feel like when I walk into classrooms, I can see the learning. I think the children are more engaged in their spaces because they are really thoughtfully designed.

— Educational leader, iteration 3

I have seen a shift in the way that they are documenting their planned experiences. But there's also more depth into why they're planning the things they're planning and they're able to speak to the reasoning.

— Educational leader, iteration 3

What was interesting was when educators tuned into children's learning, they could see learning everywhere. The Front of Mind/Back of Mind summary sheet (Figure 8) was reported as particularly useful for prioritising what learning to focus on.

Figure 8: Front of Mind/Back of Mind summary sheet

Front of mind/back of mind learning intentions

There are different types of learning intentions. Some are specific and focused on a particular experience or activity. Others are longer-term intentions that you work towards over many experiences. And some are broad underlying intentions that you will always have in mind.

All of these types of intentions are important, but sometimes there are so many that they can feel overwhelming. Mentally organising your intentions can help make them feel more achievable.

Dividing them into front of mind and back of mind intentions is one simple way to do this.

Front of mind

Front of mind intentions are your primary focus, or your **immediate priorities**. They are what you want to achieve in a specific experience or interaction. They are what you would probably say if someone asked you what the purpose of a particular experience was. Front of mind intentions **help you focus** on learning that is most immediate and important in the moment.

Back of mind

Back of mind intentions, on the other hand, are not your primary intentions. But that doesn't mean that they aren't important. They might be **longer-term intentions** that you are working on in the background, or that don't suit being the main focus of attention. Or they could be underlying intentions that you always have in mind, ready to be put into action when the right opportunity arises. Back of mind intentions **allow you to be flexible** if your intentions need to change. They also help you to take advantage of spontaneous 'teachable moments' as they arise. Having thought about learning ahead of time, you will be more aware of spontaneous opportunities when they arise, and better prepared to capitalise on them.

Thought about in this way, front of mind and back of mind intentions work together to support different kinds of learning.

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Front of mind/back of mind summary sheet

Learning experience or child: _____ Date: _____

Front of mind intentions

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Back of mind intentions

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

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This resource was also an effective gateway for conversations about learning priorities and provided a simple discussion frame, which contributed to educators increasing their conversations about what learning to focus on.

Figure 8 shows the Front of Mind/Back of Mind summary sheet that supported participants to cue into children's learning and prioritise the learning focus.

Interview 3 data showed enhanced evidence of purposeful observation, rich engagement with children and maximising spontaneous teaching and learning moments – all important contributors to assessment in early childhood.

Understanding children's intentionality and intentional teaching

Engagement with the intentional teaching model and resources prompted shifts in how educators conceptualised children's intentionality. When educators saw children as intentional learners, this strengthened their approach to intentional teaching. While children's agency and voice are central to guiding frameworks such as the EYLF V2.0 and NQS, research indicates that children's own intentionality is rarely foregrounded in discussions of intentional teaching (Leggett & Ford, 2013). The intentional teaching model and resources appear to have supported educators in recognising and responding to children's learning intentions, thereby bridging the gap between theoretical commitments to child agency and their practical enactment. This shift was particularly evident in iteration 3, where educators increasingly made pedagogical decisions that invited children's intentionality and positioned educators and children as collaborative learners:

We're allowing children that time to explore the environments and what we've set out for them to extend on their own ideas and experience with how they want to use the materials that we've provided. [The intentional teaching model and resources has helped staff observe] what's actually going on with the things that we're providing. And I think changing that mindset and thought pattern of if what we intended hasn't happened, and that's okay. What have the children done with the experience and what learning has come from that? And then how we're then doing our future planning from what the children have done in those experiences and environments.

— Service Leader, iteration 3

Increased attention to children's intentionality also supported educators in locating the teacher–learner nexus identified by Leggett and Ford (2013) – where educator intentionality and child intentionality meet in a space of collaboration and co-construction – as central to intentional teaching in play-based contexts. Iteration 3 data further highlighted the central role of relationships in supporting this shift. Participants emphasised the importance of attunement to children's needs and learning intentions, extending beyond knowledge of interests to a deeper relational understanding. This enabled educators to adapt learning experiences and select strategies that maximised engagement and supported shared meaning-making. The importance of relationships was particularly emphasised by educators working in diverse settings, who identified strong educator–child relationships as a key enabler of their intentional teaching practices.

Within the data, there were changes in children's engagement, with educators across age ranges reporting children as more deeply embedded in their play – for example, *'They have been more engaged, they're exploring different parts of the room'* (Educator, iteration 3). Data suggests deeper engagement may be due to different, richer learning experiences and changes in how educators conveyed intentionality and focused on children's thinking and engagement:

I feel you need to have a relationship with a child to be able to intentionally teach ... especially in nursery, [strong relationships] with their family, their guardians to be able to see where they're at, what they need. Relationships are a big part, a very big part.

— Educator, iteration 3

Children have their ownership and have their agency in their learning and in their environment.

— Teacher, iteration 3

These findings align with literature indicating that strong, responsive relationships enable educators to develop deep knowledge of children and incorporate children's intentionality into curriculum planning and pedagogical decision-making (Brebner et al., 2015; Chen, 2023; McLaughlin et al., 2016). Such relationships support educators' capacity to move beyond surface-level understandings of children's interests towards a deeper state of attunement, allowing them to interpret children's intentions and adjust pedagogy in the moment (Chen et al., 2024). This relational knowledge also supports educators' understanding of children's individual learning trajectories and developmental needs, allowing them to respond more effectively to diverse learners and to tailor pedagogical approaches accordingly (Kirkby et al., 2018). In line with children's rights to equitable learning opportunities (United Nations General Assembly, 1989), such understanding supports the development of inclusive and responsive curricula that maximise learning outcomes for diverse learners. Through this relational work, educators are more likely to recognise children as agentic and knowledgeable participants, enabling co-construction of learning and strengthening the teacher–learner nexus central to intentional teaching in play-based contexts (Albin-Clark et al., 2018; Leggett, 2025; Leggett & Ford, 2013):

Because the educators are more well versed in thinking about what they're doing, the children are having better outcomes and getting more deeply embedded in their play because they've got that teacher there to support that play.

— Service leader iteration 3

I've noticed that there's more intent in the outdoor area. It's not basically just open the doors and let them play. I'm seeing that the activities that are being set up and the interactions that the staff are having are more meaningful.

— Educational leader, iteration 3

Key finding 2 – The model and resources strengthened pedagogical decision-making

Analysis of participant interviews across the 3 iterations showed:

- **Purposeful learning intentions:** The intentional teaching model and resources clarified the adult's role in children's learning and development and supported shifts around intentional teaching and play as being in opposition to one another. With confidence, educators developed more purposeful learning intentions and reflected on these intentions in spontaneous and planned moments.
- **Clearer connections between learning intentions and intentional teaching strategies through reflective action:** After engagement with the intentional teaching model and resources, clearer connections could be seen between learning intentions and selecting and using intentional teaching strategies.

Purposeful learning intentions

Following engagement with the intentional teaching model and resources, educators articulated more purposeful learning intentions and demonstrated increased reflection on these intentions across both spontaneous and planned pedagogical moments. Developing purposeful intentions helped educators clarify the role they held in children's learning and invited a more nuanced perspective of play. This shift became evident from iteration 2 and was more pronounced in iteration 3, suggesting that the resources have the potential to support sustained improvements in educators' understanding and enactment of intentional teaching. These findings resonate with Epstein (2009), who highlights that intentional teaching requires educators to be clear about what and how children are intended to learn and develop.

It's probably just making you a bit more mindful, and it's making you think a lot more about your own knowledge of children's development and our effective teaching strategies and practices. So, in setting those goals, it's probably thinking 'Can we achieve them?' and really breaking it down. Trying to think about the direction the learning is going and how we're determining that and how the children are ... We lose sight of that.

— Educational leader and Teacher, iteration 3

The biggest thinking for us all is to just ask ourselves, really, daily, 'Do we have the materials? Do we have the resources? Does it actually have a purpose? Are the activities meaningful for the child? And does it create a springboard for their curiosity, for their learning ... sparking their sense of wonder?' And just to build those foundations, because we really want them to have a love of learning. So, we really need to question what we are doing and why we are doing it.

— Educational leader and Teacher, iteration 3

This addresses a need identified in the literature, which suggests that educators often find difficulty in articulating their intentions and roles in intentional teaching (Batchelar, 2016; Cherrington, 2018; McLaughlin et al., 2016). Making teaching and learning intentions explicit also enabled educators to more purposefully select teaching strategies, drawing on their professional knowledge of children, learning content and pedagogy (Chen et al., 2024).

I have probably thought more about goals and how to bring everyone into that and what goals can mean for children's social goal or fine motor goals, whereas I probably would not have thought about that before. Thinking, 'Why do we have them? And what benefit can different children get from the experience?' What everyone takes away might be different.

— Educational leader, iteration 3

Engagement with the intentional teaching model and resources appeared to have broadened educators' understandings of intentional teaching and their role in children's learning and development, supporting a shift away from viewing intentional teaching and play as being in opposition to one another. Research highlights that varied understandings of play and learning shape educators' perceptions of their role in children's play (Grieshaber et al., 2021). When play is viewed primarily as leisure or relaxation, rather than as a pedagogical context for learning, educators may be less likely to recognise teachable moments or to position themselves as active contributors within play (Chen, 2023). Such understandings can reinforce a perceived tension between play-based learning and intentional teaching, contributing to uncertainty and hesitation in enacting intentional teaching in play-based contexts (Barblett et al., 2016; Leggett & Newman, 2017; Lewis et al., 2019; Taylor & Boyer, 2020).

A notable shift in the interview 3 data showed how participants considered play and their role in play, including free play, with data suggesting a dismantling of binary conceptions of play and intentional teaching. Participants shared thinking and decision-making around how to resource play and how to foster child intentionality. This reflection included consideration of if, when and how to step into children's learning to promote learning. The data featured more evidence of strategies such as purposefully observing children's play and interactions, being present with children and playing with children, which showed educators developing more nuanced understanding and repertoire of practices. There was more fluidity in the role they assumed in children's play and capacity to respond spontaneously and leverage teaching moments.

Clearer connections between learning intentions and intentional teaching strategies were achieved through reflective action

After engagement with the intentional teaching model and resources, clearer connections could be seen between learning intentions and selection and use of intentional teaching strategies. Moreover, in iteration 3, participants reported purposefully observing children's play and interactions and sustaining presence within learning experiences. These practices shifted observation from a predominantly monitoring function towards a reflective and interpretive process that informed pedagogical decision-making. These findings align with Chen et al.'s (2024) active decision-making model, in which perceptual monitoring – through ongoing observation and interpretation of children's play and learning – guides action, refinement of learning intentions and the selection of intentional teaching strategies.

Engagement with the resources built foundational knowledge required for intentional teaching. Resources helped ‘fill knowledge gaps’ and supported educators coming into the sector by clearly explaining key concepts and professional terminology and strategies, along with clear guidance to transfer understanding into practice. Exemplars, templates and explicit ‘how-tos’ were valued by participants with less experience, and their suggestions to include more types of these resources in future resources underline their value. In making foundational knowledge explicit, the resources facilitated pedagogical conversations and mentorship and enabled more shared understanding, which many regarded as essential to intentional teaching that enhances outcomes for children.

These findings respond directly to challenges identified in the literature regarding educators’ capacity to articulate and enact intentional teaching. For example, Cherrington (2018) reported that while teachers were generally committed to supporting children’s learning, they often lacked clarity in expressing specific teaching intentions. As a result, learning experiences are often planned without explicit learning intentions, with strategies often selected intuitively rather than through deliberate pedagogical reasoning (Cherrington, 2018). Further, Grimmond et al., (2022) highlights that an educators’ capacity to plan and enact pedagogical decisions hinge on their knowledge and confidence, and specifically notes areas such as mathematics, which require more in-depth knowledge and responsivity to create rich learning opportunities.

Early childhood educators report that limited access to practical guidance and resources, as well as variations in access to professional development, contribute to differences in educators’ understanding and implementation of intentional teaching (Chen, 2023). By providing structured, practice-oriented resources, the intentional teaching model and resources appear to support educators in addressing these challenges by clarifying pedagogical intentions, strengthening professional reasoning and promoting more deliberate, coherent practice. As one participant shared, *‘The model and resources are useful because we do have more margin here in early childhood ... if you go to the school setting ... there are some things that we need to do and do like this, but we have more margin ... it is different’* (Teacher, iteration 1).

Use of the resources affirmed existing professional knowledge and instilled confidence. Many experienced educators positively reported alignment between their existing knowledge and practices and the resources. They felt *‘validated’* and *‘empowered’* knowing they were *‘on the right track’*, with the evidence-backing of the resources heightening feelings of confidence. Participants felt more confident in their own knowledge and practice related to intentional teaching, and more *‘empowered’* to assume leadership and mentor less experienced team members. Enhanced self-efficacy around use of the intentional teaching model and resources appeared to lead to greater adoption:

I have a fairly good understanding of [intentional teaching], only for the fact I have been working for 20 or more years ... but it has helped to go ‘Yep, it’s still right, what we’re doing is still where we should be heading’ and ... it helped to cement that ... like, ‘We’re still good, this is what we do.’

— Educational leader, iteration 3

It’s making myself more critical of what I am doing and really being aware of missed opportunities for their learning ... It’s just making you a bit more mindful.

— Educational leader and Teacher, iteration 3

I don't know what shifted – maybe reaffirmed and sharpened what you should be doing and how you should be doing it. [The resources] have just aligned ... And you're thinking it just made it a little bit sharper, cleaner, brighter, fresher – that sort of thing. It's a fresh outlook ... I have been teaching for a long time, but it's a nice reminder, a nudge.

— Teacher, iteration 3

Notably, experienced educators and those with varied levels of knowledge and experience, reported shifts in confidence through engagement with the resources. For example, an educator with developing experience reported, *'Its empowered me knowing that I was doing it, but you don't realise what you're doing'* (Teacher). Similarly, *'If anything, it's more reinforced it, so I feel more validated in the beliefs that I had going into the [research] program and into early childhood in the first place'* (Teacher). The data suggests knowledge and confidence enabled role agency and 'voice' to engage in pedagogical conversations:

My confidence as an early career teacher has grown just by having this paperwork in front of me to look at and use as a tool, because I know it's backed by people that have got a lot more experience than I do and things like that. So, you're not having to rely on yourself – it's all there for you.

— Teacher, iteration 3

Different to interviews in iterations 1 and 2, interview 3 transcripts featured participants sharing aloud their thinking and decision-making around how they were developing intentions for children's learning. Uniquely, this data made visible the internal dialogue of educators and offered insights into research question 1 – how they enacted intentional teaching. What was evident in the data was more clarity around setting planning goals and more holistic considerations of how they could adjust the physical environment and resources, routines and temporal environment to support children's learning intentions.

Interview 3 captured more participants considering ways to invite children's intentionality, including how they could set up the learning environment and allow children easier access to selecting resources to support their play and move more freely within the learning space. Extending routines and providing opportunities for children to continue to build on ideas through play were also discussed.

Participants in interview 3 also considered how they could foster child–child interactions more effectively. More than planned activities based on child interests, interview 3 showed a clearer connection between learning intentions and decisions related to the whole learning experience:

I think the way that we're supporting educators through that [thinking about and setting goals for children's learning] has changed ... the way we're looking at our environments and our thought processes behind the experiences we're providing for children, thinking about the learning that's there and what our initial intent is with the experiences for the children. And looking at then whether the intent that we've set out with initially ... reflecting on 'That is what we intended to happen' or 'Did the children use it in a different way from their own ideas and their own extensions?'

— Service leader, iteration 3

Intentional teaching is supporting our kids to reach their goals, providing unhurried experiences ... so plenty of time ... I think it's just more intentional teaching is to reach the children's goals – not our goals ... It has to set their goals. It's not just a one-off thing, so you work on it every day.

— Service leader, iteration 3

Intentions can't be airy fairy and flopping around and just waiting for something to happen for it to be intentional. You have to really have it in the front of your mind, decide this is what we're going to do ... even if that is a planned thing or whether that just in that spur of the moment you actually need to make a decision that you're going to move forward.

— Teacher, iteration 3

By emphasising and clarifying the decision-making process in intentional teaching, the resources supported educators to make previously implicit learning intentions more explicit and to articulate these intentions more confidently.

Reflective action

What emerged after iteration 3 was the inclusion of reflective action as a third concept related to intentional teaching. The interplay between educator intentionality and the constant iteration and reflection on intentions and strategies was described in this research as **reflective action**.

Reflective action, as it relates to intentional teaching, includes insights drawn from **attuned noticing and reflecting on spontaneous and planned opportunities to extend children's learning**. Combined with this, reflective action includes **reflective decisions** about where children are in their **learning**, next steps for learning and reflecting on the use of teaching strategies. A feature of reflective action is to encourage **children's intentionality** and capacity for reflection on their own learning.

The term 'reflective action' has been used as a concept to capture insights stemming from the decision-making component of a reflective process (Mezirow, 1991). Transformational learning theory proposes that humans are meaning-making beings who, through learning processes, interrogate, construct and reconstruct interpretations and use this to guide future actions. This process can be done in response to events that occur and can happen intentionally, accidentally or unconsciously (Fleming, 2018). Intentional teaching and the process of intentionality call on educators to engage in cycles of thinking and reflection on their approaches, as well as engaging with children's intentionality.

In interviews, educators described the insights they had stemming from how they noticed and engaged in active decision-making to support and extend children's learning. This reflective action became more pronounced in later iterations as educators expanded their professional knowledge and articulated putting new knowledge into practice. Reflective action resulting from their decision-making was described by one participant as '*on the fly*' thinking. The concept of reflective action captures this thinking. However, reflective action also encompassed a planned approach to reflection, which led to intentional action. Examples of this were seen in reorganisation of learning environments and resources, shifts in levels of educator interactions with children and deeper reflection on learning experiences.

Intentionality within play-based learning is a complex process with interconnected components. The decision-making that educators engage in through spontaneous moments, as well as planned moments, happens largely inside educators' heads, making these decision-making processes invisible to others. Naming reflective action as an important concept makes the implicit, explicit. That is, the concept names the process that is occurring and enables understanding of this dynamic decision-making process.

I think that biggest thing about intentional teaching is you have to be present and it's a mindful change to make. It is not just one that you can sit there and let happen. And you're not going to grow it, you're not constantly trying to adapt it into practice and figure out what works for you and your own pedagogy. I think that [reflective action] is beautiful, because it is everything that falls into that reflective practice and that ongoing thought processes.

— Educational leader, iteration 3

I definitely think for my team breaking up intentional teaching and reflection is really important for them. They see words like critical reflection, and they think it's very serious. And even though they do that [reflective action] ... because they have those words ... they think they are not doing it. So, they just find the words very serious.

— Service leader, iteration 3

I look back even when I'm setting the room. I start from one end of the room, and I go to the other. And then I sit down on the floor, lower myself down to a child's level. So, that how I see the environment ... And then I look at the different areas – what's working, what's not working? When I set up for a child's interest and they're saying, 'No, this is not working', do I need to move it elsewhere? Do I need to add? What do I do to make it more inviting, so I promote that learning.

— Service leader, iteration 3

I guess for me it's in here [gestures to head]. So, a lot of the things like front-of-mind, back-of-mind goals – the back-of-mind goals are all up here. We talk about it with staff in our room, but it's not in a document.

— Educational leader and Teacher, iteration 3

Key finding 3 – The model contributed to shared understandings and a culture of intentionality

Analysis of participant interviews across the 3 iterations showed:

- **Shared understandings of intentional teaching:** The intentional teaching model and resources supported knowledge sharing about intentional teaching and a consistency of approach across teams.
- **A culture of intentionality:** Use of the intentional teaching model and resources supported a collaborative culture of intentionality, characterised by professional dialogue, collective pedagogical approaches, reflective action and greater incorporation of children's intentionality.

Shared understandings of intentional teaching

The intentional teaching model and resources scaffolded opportunities to build knowledge, reflect on existing knowledge and provide a consistency of approach across teams. Participants reported that shared understandings of intentional teaching improved team member responsivity with children, and deepened children's engagement in play-based learning experiences.

Data revealed that all participants – regardless of their role, context or foundational understanding around intentional teaching – found the intentional teaching model and resources useful to developing their professional knowledge and building shared understandings across the team. However, the perceived value attributed to the materials differed according to the participant role and existing knowledge base.

Broadly, participants who held positions such as Educational Lead or Service leader and/or who were more experienced and knowledgeable around intentional teaching, shared that the intentional teaching model and resources put language around their unconscious knowledge about intentional teaching. One Teacher participant commented that it '*made tangible [what was] in their head*'. In doing so, the materials created '*shared language and understanding*' around intentional teaching that could then be communicated with team members across their service. They felt the materials would be particularly useful in their efforts to '*bridge knowledge gaps across the service*' and support members of the teaching team they perceived as needing more professional learning around intentional teaching. Many within this group also felt the resources provided a point of reflection and, in doing so, helped to deepen understanding and practice.

Participants with less sophisticated knowledge and experience felt the resources helped to clarify understanding around intentional teaching using simple language and graphics. The resources provided needed guidance around how to move concepts into practice. Resources that made this process more explicit were deemed particularly useful and beneficial. Through improved professional knowledge, participants with less sophisticated knowledge and experience felt they could participate more fully in discussions, more confidently develop intentions for children's learning and share why they were making decisions around children's learning.

Iteration 3 data emphasised intentional teaching as a collaborative practice. One participant shared '*We are not working in silos.*' It was through pedagogical conversations that understanding of intentional teaching deepened and a consistent approach to working towards children's intentions could be established. This consistency was emphasised as important.

I think using the resources has helped us really have clear direction in where we're headed and what we've been doing, because otherwise it was a bit like we'd have these conversations and where would it go? But yeah, the resources definitely support your planning and support the planning to be able to educate the whole team about why we do what we do. Because I find that teachers do it quite naturally, but we do probably need to teach some of the other staff, so this will be a great resource for newer staff and stuff that doesn't quite come so naturally.

— Service leader iteration 3

Between the 3 of us in the room ... we've decided what we're going to use, how were going to use it and we've kind of gone 'You know what? These are the outcomes we want, we're going to really strongly push for this because they've shown skill in certain areas. So right now, let's provision equipment. We want to see some magic!'

— Teacher, iteration 3

Research emphasises that a shared understanding of both intentional teaching and play across the broader learning community is critical to its successful implementation. Embedding ongoing intentionality within everyday practice requires educators to adopt a broader conceptualisation of intentional teaching – one that recognises a diverse repertoire of pedagogical strategies and the need to move purposefully in and out of children's play (Edwards, 2017). This involves drawing on observation, reflection, and pedagogical judgement to determine when to intervene, extend, question, model or step back in ways that meaningfully support learning (Chen et al., 2024).

Educators' practices are shaped not only by their professional knowledge and pedagogical beliefs, but also by policy expectations, established service practices, accountability requirements and parent perspectives (Chen, 2023). In the absence of shared understandings, tensions may arise between play-based philosophies and perceived expectations for visible, structured teaching. Within this context, participants identified the Continuum of Teaching Strategies (see [Figure 6](#)) and the Knowledge, Skills and Dispositions resources (see [Figure 7](#)) as instrumental in shifting thinking about play and learning, as illustrated by one participant: *'The Continuum of Teaching Strategies and the way it talks about which strategies might lend themselves more towards adult-directed, playful or children leading play. I think the way that it is broken up made me really think about what would best suit the situation'* (Educational leader). Similarly, another participant shared: *'It's really identifying that balance ... children are learning through play, but it's that level of scaffolding and support as opposed to free rein ... not all children know how to play'* (Service leader). Use of the intentional teaching resources led to more shared understandings around play, especially learning in outdoor environments. Data across iterations showed participants more deeply reflecting on learning intentions and the temporal environment across learning context, as well as their role in promoting children's learning in outdoor versus indoor settings. Outdoor contexts are frequently positioned within early childhood settings as spaces primarily for free play, where educators adopt a more supervisory than pedagogical role (e.g., Leggett & Newman, 2017). This construction reflects a persistent dichotomy between 'indoor learning' and 'outdoor play', in which intentional teaching is more readily associated with structured indoor experiences (Davies, 1996, 1997; Hunter et al., 2020). Iteration 1 data from this study similarly reflected this binary perception.

Initially, many participants positioned the outdoor environment as the domain of free play, with adults adopting a more supervisory role. Indoor spaces, by contrast, were perceived to be more intentional and structured. This view was held by educators working with both older children and in the nursery and/or toddler spaces. However, through engagement with the resources, data captured a reorientation towards play and intentional teaching and seeing learning opportunities outside. Notably, many participants working with children aged 3 to 5 spoke of a better understanding of how adults can extend children's play-based learning within this environment. As one participant stated: *'It is not just supervision it is engagement ... interaction as opposed to looking from afar and waiting for an accident to happen'* (Service leader). Another Service leader shared: *'The resources help staff think about learning that is going on in the sandpit – volume, measurements, the science, the sensory. This is a good tool that I can give to my staff and say, "Have this, this is what is actually happening in the sandpit". It's clear ... whether they've done their Cert III, Diploma or ... whether it refreshes them ... it helps them.'*

[Children] getting into things that they might not necessarily come across themselves with their own play, just taking it that extra step by being more intentional. And I think when we are more intentional, we're more engaged as educators with the play. Instead of just sitting back and observing, just being in – not taking over the play, but we're more engaged in the space, making sure that the resources are available for them, that we were looking for or and then just helping them or questioning the children or going, 'Oh, that's really interesting. How did you come about that?' or 'How did you know about this?' So yeah, I think with that, it makes us more engaged.

— Educator, iteration 3

[Thinking more about] play times in particular – not just thinking about intentional teaching at group times or more formal settings. Thinking about how we have intentionality in general play. In particular, we did some block play and thinking about intentionality with that. Rather than just an open-ended play time, having some clearer guidelines and thoughts about what we want to achieve.

— Service leader, iteration 3

Many people just think it's up to the children, but you actually have a huge role to play there.

— Educational leader and Teacher, iteration 3

We do think a lot about ‘Outside is not just a time to go and run around’, it is a purposeful and intentional time of teaching. Especially, some of us have talked about adding water or adding an educator to the play and how it changed and how that modelling and scaffolding their play can shift their play ... [We’ve been thinking about the outdoor environment] as not just being those big gross motor skills – like what does fine motor look like outside? And how can we still have lots of care and thought and not just the old blocks chucked on the veranda?

— Service leader, iteration 3

Shared understandings around intentional teaching approaches helped instil a culture of intentionality, thus leading to more sustained, quality practice.

A culture of intentionality

This research showed that a **culture of intentionality** enables intentional teaching. The term ‘culture of intentionality’ is a new concept borne from this research. A ‘culture of intentionality’ refers to the conditions that foster ongoing intentionality within a service and sustain a focus on quality outcomes for all children. This concept positions intentionality as collaborative and inclusive of all stakeholders, including children. It further acknowledges intentionality is built and sustained in response to the unique place-based conditions in which teaching and learning is taking place. Intentionality is often positioned at individual level (e.g., AGDE, 2022; Chen, 2023) yet the ECEC context is inherently team-orientated and dynamic and educators hold varying qualifications (Grieshaber et al., 2023). Data from this research also showed intentionality was enhanced when it became collaborative.

Data from this study emphasised the importance of not just building individual educator capacity around intentional teaching and facilitating shared understanding, but also the importance of fostering conditions that sustain focus on quality learning and teaching. Data from across a diverse sample illustrated how this focus was cultivated in response to place-based conditions.

A culture of intentionality refers to the **conditions that foster ongoing intentionality** within a service and sustain a focus on quality outcomes for all children. It includes **shared understanding of, and consistent approaches to, intentional teaching**. A culture of intentionality encompasses **all stakeholders**, including teaching teams, children, families, communities and other professionals. It considers how intentionality is built and sustained within the unique context that teaching and learning is taking place in. This collaborative and responsive approach **builds consistency** for children and **promotes children’s learning** and engagement.

Based on the data, this research considers a culture of intentionality at service level to be characterised by shared language, reflective discussions and collective responsibilities, which lay a foundation for intentional teaching to be enacted across a team. Data further suggested that a culture of intentionality could be actively fostered – steered by educational leaders who encouraged engagement with resources and worked to ensure shared understandings across the team. The visual and accessible nature of the resources helped promote this culture and kept concepts visible and active. Many services also began using their regular team meetings to discuss intentional teaching and directions for children’s learning. When a culture of intentionality existed within a service, data suggested educator knowledge and practice improved with a flow on to children’s learning:

I think what really helped the most was probably those conversations where we were able to sit down, talk about, ‘What do you think about this? What do you think about that? How do we think it could be implemented and then go and give it a go and come back and regroup?’, instead of just having the resource and independently trying to figure it out.

— Educator, iteration 3

I think the way that we are supporting educators through intentional teaching has changed ... the way we are looking at our environments and our thought processes behind the experiences we’re providing for children, thinking about the learning that’s there and what our initial intent is with the experiences for children. And looking at then whether the intent that we’ve set out is what we have intended to happen or did the children use it in a different way from their own ideas and extensions?

— Service leader, iteration 3

This is not just a research project – this is a rethinking of how we intentionally play with children.

— Service leader, iteration 3

Having the toolkit and having the poster as a quick reference guide ... and I’ve got the words ... I am becoming more familiar with the words we can use in our approach. But also, in our regular meetings, we all get to sit together as a team, so having those meetings about the direction we want to take.

— Educator, iteration 3

Being in a nursery space, we are not always the most intentional that we potentially could be ... I think sometimes, especially team members who are not in an educator role, don’t feel it is their role, their space to take those steps and lead the intention. So now, we as a whole team can start thinking, asking those questions more regularly, and everyone can be involved in that, and it can become a bit more of a team approach.

— Educator (infant and toddler), iteration 1

These findings align with existing literature that suggests that although intentional teaching is frequently conceptualised as an individual educator's practice, its enactment is inherently relational and situated within team contexts (Chen, 2023). Sustained pedagogical quality depends not only on individual knowledge and skill, but also on collaborative cultures that prioritise shared inquiry, dialogue and reflective practice (Heikka et al., 2021). Research shows a sustained professional development program that included strong reflective practice and planning directly improved the quality of educators' responsive interactions and explicit intentional teaching (Nielsen-Hewett et al., 2019; Siraj et al., 2018). In shared learning environments, where children move between educators and spaces across the day, pedagogical conversations become particularly essential, as they allow teachers and educators to develop collective understanding.

Data indicated that educational leaders were pivotal in fostering a culture of intentionality and, thus, may hold a critical position in enabling and sustaining, intentional teaching across the service. Data showed these leaders maintained an awareness of how intentionality could be further fostered within their unique setting or context. Further, some educational leader participants spoke of using the resources to specifically reflect on their leadership and how they could more effectively lead staff towards improved understanding and practice:

I have definitely been role modelling a more ... probably what I've been doing more since the project is then explaining the what to the why ... I have been thinking about my role as an educational leader and how I can use my knowledge and experience to role model and potentially inspire others who may not have the same understanding of intentional teaching that I do.

— Educational leader, iteration 3

I think it is just building confidence in their knowledge and our more senior educators having input with some of our newer educators. We all know what we know because someone has taught us ... at our centre, looking at the experience we do have and how can we get those more involved in passing on that knowledge to the educators that are here and now coming through as leads ... [This has enabled the success of this project]

Our educational leader and the ways she's been reviewing the programs and having those conversations with educators about those reflections.

— Service leader, iteration 3

The visual, accessible nature of the resources further helped to cultivate a culture of intentionality. The resources provided fresh ways to look at intentional teaching and facilitated team discussions, planning sessions and pedagogical conversations. The visual nature of the resources provided ongoing stimulus that was valued within the fast-paced environment:

I can use this document quickly because it's obviously a very fast-paced environment ... we hang the Front of Mind/Back of Mind poster in the storeroom and it is really good to say 'Okay, what are we focusing on?' and then the back-of-mind goals. It's really helpful'

— Teacher, iteration 3

A culture of intentionality includes all stakeholders, including children and their families.

This study suggests a culture of intentionality promoted children's learning. Participant data showed a culture of intentionality enhanced focus on incorporating children's intentions and invited consistency around quality learning experiences for children.

Intentional teaching incorporates children's intentionality into decision-making processes. When a culture of intentionality existed, educators in this study showed they were more attuned to children's ideas, interests, curiosities and funds of knowledge. This led to more team discussions and reflective action around how best to incorporate children's intentions and make decisions to extend children's learning.

As evidence of this, following use of the Play and Learning packs, and subsequent revisioning of learning environments to meet intentions, participants noted children returning to and expanding on play scenarios from the previous day and starting to ask for certain resources to extend their play. Participants shared numerous examples of discussions they were having as a team around how best to reimagine indoor and outdoor play environments to deepen children's engagement. Some participants recounted team decisions to add or subtract materials from play experiences to better align with children's interests and expand their thinking in new ways. Some shared their service had rearranged room layout and play materials to enable children to more readily access and self-select the resources they wanted to extend their own play. Many educators also shared that they were reconsidering the temporal environment and allowing children more time to extend on their play.

Further, a culture of intentionality promoted consistency of approach with a positive flow on to children's learning. The resources bridged knowledge gaps and established shared understanding and language around intentional teaching and in doing so facilitated consistency in approach.

We so have to work as a team – always need to work as a team. We need to bring everyone on board to keep our practice consistent, and consistent for the children ... even though our practices can be different, we are all working towards the same goal to support children.

— Teacher, iteration 3

We are asking children to be a stakeholder in the process.

— Teacher, iteration 1

Some participants highlighted the importance of consistency for children given the fluid nature of ECEC – for example, team members on rotating rosters and moving between rooms and age groups. One Service leader specifically highlighted the value of the resources in fostering consistency given sector-wide staff shortages and high turnover rates: *'Now it will not matter who is there'*.

It was noted by some participants that the resources could support conversations with parents and carers and foster understanding – specifically, around the value of play and children's learning through play: *'The resources have given the team advocacy ... and feeling like we have for something to contribute, and we do some amazing play and intentionality here and how we can share that with others. And I think I it's probably lifted their advocacy for play'* (Service leader, iteration 3).

Implications for practice

The literature base on intentional teaching recognises the critical importance of early childhood educators' and teachers' intentionality in maximising children's learning within play-based learning programs. However, there is also a plethora of competing and conflicting information about intentional teaching that perpetuates current practice disconnects. AERO's intentional teaching model and supporting resources were developed to deliver insights into the identified gaps in the current literature base around intentional teaching. These resources provided evidence-informed content designed and tested with educators working in diverse contexts to support clear, accessible and practical information regarding play-based learning with intentionality.

The intentional teaching model and resources provided a promising initiative that could be scaled to support knowledge and enactment of intentional teaching with a wide range of educators in diverse contexts. Research insights from this study can inform future interventions and resource development by including features such as:

- delivering information to support practice change in accessible, inclusive and plain language formats
- hybrid resource delivery including the use of hard copies and posters (this approach supported engagement with the resources, buy-in with the project and offered a platform for shared engagement)
- creating a clear rationale for the project and connection to the day-to-day work of educators through evidence-informed resources promoted buy-in (no attrition in this study was recorded other than 2 educators who left an included service)
- resources paced to provide a 'dip-in-and-out' model where educators could access information relevant to their existing levels of understanding
- consideration of educator workload with the project sensitive to the demands of every day practices ensuring a simplified approach to sharing information
- resources targeting practice and embedding reflective opportunities throughout to support deeper understanding, which may contribute to shifts in educator beliefs
- cohesive, coherent resources that focus on the 'how' as well as the 'what' of intentional teaching, which has been of value to educators participating in this research
- examples spanning contexts and age cohorts, which was also noted by participants as beneficial.

The toolkit really, really helped me to understand intentional teaching and what I was doing in intentional teaching. It helped me to understand this is why I'm doing it and there's a purpose.

— Educator, iteration 3

Already, we have worked as a team to try and develop different types of things we can put into practice straight away, just based on having a really clear piece of literature to guide us. I find a lot in my role that when I am looking at literature, I am thinking 'That's fine for me', but if I had to hand this to someone who's studying a Cert III or is on the floor constantly running – what are they actually going to get from reading it?

— Educational leader, iteration 3

Intentional teaching is often described in words such as ‘purposeful’ and ‘deliberate’. However, evidence shows that despite this level of understanding at word level, there are disconnects between the words and practice. Data from the field trials suggested the intentional teaching model and resources were effective at unpacking the *how* of being purposeful, deliberate and creating intentions for children’s learning. The resources helped educators to clarify thinking about intentions and set priorities to align to children’s learning and development. The resources were identified as effective in ‘*simplifying*’, ‘*breaking down*’ and ‘*stripped back*’ the intention-setting process and provided instructive guidance combined with memorable graphics that supported educators to put their knowledge into practice.

[The resource] breaks down play-based learning and intentions ... helps to change mindsets.

— Service leader, iteration 3

I am probably able to be a bit more specific because I am one of those people – I don’t know where to stop with what I am linking to ... Having that brain diagram really supports me ... Having those priority settings really supports me to go ‘Okay, this is our focus.’ Even though I can link to everything else, this is our focus.

— Teacher, iteration 3

It gave words to ideas ... created shared understanding ... its accessible without dumbing anything down ... contains professional knowledge but is accessible.

— Educational leader, iteration 1

The resources focused me on the learning goal instead of leaving everything really broad. It bought my focus in and then I could tell that to other educators as well, ‘This is what I want to see’ ... Being more concise, rather than having broad goals that are open to interpretation, is going to help our younger trainees as well – it’s going to provide more direction for what to do.

— Educator, iteration 3

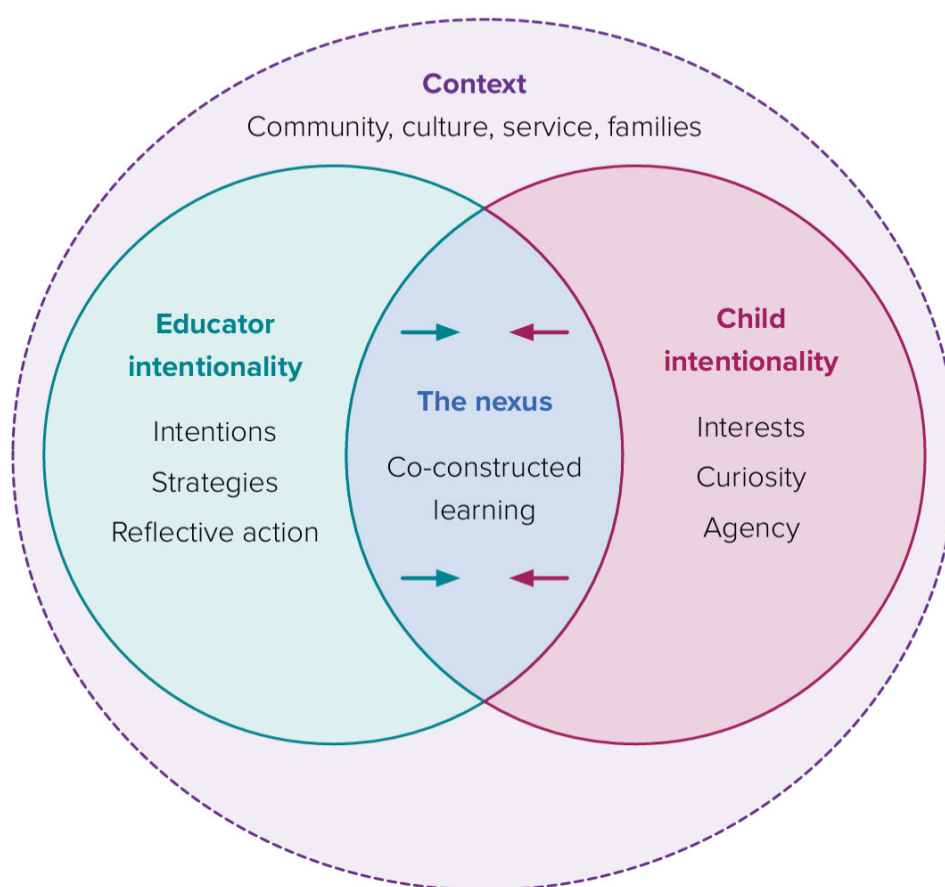
Reframing contemporary understandings of intentional teaching and intentionality

Participant responses echoed the foundational knowledge gaps and practice disconnects highlighted in the intentional teaching literature base. However, engagement with the intentional teaching model and resources prompted new ways educators could expand their thinking about intentional teaching to include spontaneous moments and to consider how they can support children’s learning in meaningful ways. Another value add of the intentional teaching model and resources was in challenging and reframing beliefs about intentional teaching as always planned and educator-directed, providing provocation and reflection on knowledge, beliefs and practices around intentional teaching.

A key part of the reframing around intentional teaching was educators developing a greater appreciation of their role in children's learning and knowledge of when to step in and out of children's play. Participants considered the shift in seeing their role as a passive supervisor or provider of knowledge towards an active collaborator and co-learner as formative. This feedback led to the creation of the learning nexus resource in the [intentional teaching model practice resource](#) (Figure 9).

Figure 9 shows the learning nexus diagram created in response to participant feedback, which represents an important reframing around intentional teaching and educators as active collaborators in children's learning.

Figure 9: The learning nexus



Source: Based on Leggett and Ford (2013).

There was a push when I first started that everything had to be done at formal times, so I think it's good to have a document that supports that it is not like that. It can be done at any time of the day and can be done in different ways. It doesn't have to be clearly written and pre-planned ... It can also be spontaneous learning – the 'How am I going to be intentional in this moment?' So, these resources are giving the evidence to support that.

— Teacher, iteration 1

I think people are more intentional at group time and I think ... there are big, missed opportunities in children's play. I think this document is great in that it is getting you to think, while you're observing play, 'What I my role while this is happening?' I think there is a gap to come into that. You're an educator – obviously very experienced educators have knowledge of play and play schemas but not starting teachers. I think this provides guidance around, 'What do I do when this is happening? What am I looking for?'

— Teacher, iteration 1

Wonder if our approaches are missing moments. There are a lot of moments that we could be more intentional in. Our strengths are around planned learning experiences. We have intentions in everything we do and we're good at consulting with each other about our intentions. But I think there's gaps in where we could take better advantage of particular moments across the day.

— Service leader, iteration 3

Material accessibility

Design features of the intentional teaching model and resources that increased accessibility included the visual supports, templates and plain language explanations. When asked specifically which aspects of the model and resources were most useful, participants responses included:

The plain language definition because it's broken down. It's simple but gets to the point. It actually tells you what intentional teaching is supposed to be.

— Educator, iteration 3

I like that the model and toolkit highlights what intentional teaching actually means for children.

— Educator, iteration 3

I think it [the model and toolkit] covers everything that it needs to cover. It's really clear, its colour-coded, it's concise in ways that other documents aren't.

— Educational leader, iteration 1

We are so quick to add, add, add, but we're not reflective about that. Can we peel that back a little and gradually scaffold a bit more? So, they're just really good reminders and it is great for graduating students.

— Service leader, iteration 3

We did not have the professional knowledge to be able to articulate all of the things that we wanted to do and why we were doing them. We just knew that somehow, in some way, it aligned. So, it has been really good to have this. To be able to do this, you need to have the professional knowledge.

— Educational leader, iteration 3

Having something I can refer back to – it is not just a conversation, and it is not a big document like the Being, Becoming, Belonging. It is smaller, easier to find the information I need. It breaks down intentional teaching ... I can see the team is referring back to it quite often as well. A lot of the time when I walk into the room, the toolkit is set up. So, it is out there being used ... and I can see them engaging with the children more.

— Educational leader, iteration 3

Co-designing practice resources with educators

Using a DBR methodology supported educators to be able to test out new approaches, reflect on these approaches and, importantly, reflect on their role in children's learning. Co-designing the intentional teaching model and resources using an iterative process was reflected on by educators and deemed useful as a process to expand knowledge and practice. Participants valued the opportunity for co-design to contribute relevant resources to sector:

Giving the sector ownership ... and getting real-life experience so when it comes out at the end, people know that their colleagues and peers have been shaping, involved in it. It means that they take – not that it's better or if they hadn't been involved, it would be any different. But just knowing that there is peer evaluation and seeing what works in real life before it gets to the final stage ... makes it that little bit more relatable. So, it's knowing that it hasn't just come from an academic who has said this is the way to go, but has the backing behind it that has been put into place with children.

— Educator (infant and toddler), iteration 3

I think when [resources are] actually designed with educators, we can make it even easier to be implemented for everyone and tailored to everyone. Just because it is so fresh in our minds, all the things we are doing, and we're currently doing with children.

— Educator, iteration 3

I think it's a privilege to be able to potentially shape something that's going to impact our whole sector ... So, if I wasn't honest or didn't fully share my feedback, then that would be a disservice to my intent and also the whole sector.

— Educational leader, iteration 1

To be able to adapt it and change it while it is being developed instead of it just being developed and given to us ... then there nothing we can do about it. Maybe until we get a version 2 in a few years, if they decide to. I know we don't have control over that.

— Educator, iteration 3

Implications for system and sector

Focusing on high-quality teaching, learning and assessment in early childhood education and care

Engagement with the intentional teaching model and resources appeared to prompt educators to sharpen their focus on learning as a central pedagogical concern, emphasising high-quality teaching, learning and assessment in ways that extended beyond setting up activities alone. Within the Australian early childhood context, play-based learning is a highly valued pedagogical tradition and, thus, significant attention is often given to offering engaging experiences that invite children's exploration and inquiry. While such provision is essential, intentional teaching involves moving beyond simply offering opportunities or activities toward actively analysing and extending the learning taking place within them. This requires educators to consider not only what children are doing, but what they are understanding, consolidating or extending through those experiences. In this way, intentionality shifts the emphasis from facilitating activity to interpreting learning and making deliberate pedagogical decisions about next steps. This shift positions assessment as integral to everyday pedagogy rather than as an additional or compliance-driven task. When educators attend closely to children's emerging understandings, assessment becomes the mechanism through which learning is made visible and future intentional teaching is informed (Grimmond et al., 2022). Intentional teaching, therefore, is sustained not through the provision of experiences alone, but through ongoing cycles of noticing, interpreting and responding to children's learning (Chen et al., 2024).

Research consistently reports that varied understandings of intentional teaching persist across the early childhood sector, often compounded by differing conceptualisations of play and learning (Chen et al., 2024; Grieshaber et al., 2021; Leggett & Ford, 2013; Leggett & Newman, 2017). When key pedagogical constructs are interpreted in multiple ways, implementation becomes uneven and, at times, superficial. Drawing on Rogoff's (1993) sociocultural perspective, educators' practices are not static but continuously shaped and reshaped within their social, cultural and institutional contexts. Professional knowledge develops through participation in CoPs, where meanings are negotiated rather than simply adopted from policy texts (Hoadley & Campos, 2022; Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015). In this sense, variability in the enactment of intentional teaching is not indicative of deficit, but reflective of the diverse contexts in which educators work (Chen, 2023).

Establishing a shared understanding, therefore, becomes a critical first step. Demystifying intentional teaching involves moving beyond the formal, policy-based definition to examine what intentionality looks like in everyday practice. This includes exploring how intentional teaching can be enacted within existing play-based programs and across learning areas already familiar to educators, rather than positioning it as an additional or separate pedagogical requirement. By grounding the concept in concrete examples and lived practice, intentional teaching becomes more accessible, coherent and sustainable within diverse early childhood settings. AERO's research noted the benefit of building individual educator capacity, by lifting professional knowledge and practice, and fostering a culture of intentionality to retain pedagogical focus on quality educational outcomes for all children:

There was a push when I first started that everything had to be done at formal times, so I think it's good to have a document that supports that it is not like that. It can be done at any time of the day and can be done in different ways. It doesn't have to be clearly written and pre-planned ... it can also be spontaneous learning – the 'How am I going to be intentional in this moment?' So, these resources are giving the evidence to support that.

— Teacher, iteration 3

I think people are more intentional at group time and I think ... there are big, missed opportunities in children's play. I think this document is great in that it is getting you to think, while you're observing play, 'What is my role while this is happening?' I think there is a gap to come into that. You're an educator – obviously very experienced educators have knowledge of play and play schemas but not starting teachers. I think it's great [in that it provides guidance on] 'What do I do when this is happening? What am I looking for?'

— Educational leader, iteration 3

Designing evidence-informed practice resources

Evidence-informed pedagogical tools and/or resources are often developed within academic contexts and later introduced into early childhood settings. Although grounded in research, their uptake can be influenced by how well they align with educators' and teachers' existing practices, priorities and contextual realities. When tools are not designed in formats that are readily accessible or adaptable, their potential impact may be constrained. This study suggests that developing a community of learning is critical in bridging this gap. Rather than adopting a top-down model of knowledge transfer, the research process functioned as a dialogic space in which academic knowledge and practitioner expertise met in the middle. While evidence-based tools were introduced to educators, equal attention was given to understanding educators' perspectives, contextual constraints and existing pedagogical strengths. This approach aligns with evidence on scalable design where context-specific adaption has shown success in diverse service types and contexts (Centre for Community Child Health, 2025).

In this way, as noted by participants, the intentional teaching model was not simply implemented – it was iteratively shaped through engagement with the sector. The refinement of the model and resources emerged through reciprocal exchange, where educators' and teachers' insights informed its development and adaptation. Knowledge was, therefore, co-constructed through collaborative inquiry. This approach positions the intentional teaching model not as an external prescription, but as a shared pedagogical resource that emerged from, and remains responsive to, the lived realities of early childhood educators. Adopting a DBR methodology was instrumental in providing a context for iteration and refinement of the model and resources. Using this kind of approach values connecting with knowledge, trying new practice initiatives and reflecting on impact with the purpose of maximising opportunities for children's learning.

Confidence, clarity and validation of knowledge and practice

The research revealed that educators were already enacting elements of intentional teaching within their everyday practices. For example, participants consistently described developing responsive relationships with children and drawing on these relationships to build rich, individualised understandings of children's learning. These practices reflect core dimensions of intentional pedagogy. However, at the outset of the study, some educators expressed uncertainty about whether what they were doing 'counted' as intentional teaching. This uncertainty appeared less related to a lack of practice and more connected to varied sector understandings and inconsistent messaging about what intentional teaching looks like in play-based environments.

Through sustained engagement with the intentional teaching model and resources, alongside individual and team reflection, educators began to recognise that many of their existing practices aligned with intentional teaching principles. Rather than requiring wholesale change, their work often involved refining, naming and making explicit the pedagogical decisions already embedded within their interactions.

The resources supported educators in articulating their intentions more clearly, linking practice to learning intentions and communicating their pedagogical reasoning with greater precision. This process not only strengthened clarity of enactment, but also contributed to increased professional confidence and validation of their existing knowledge and expertise. Using the resources inspired thinking about different aspects of intentional teaching, and how this could be maximised through their roles. One educational leader noted, *'Probably as an educational leader, I have been thinking about how I can use my knowledge and experience to role model and, potentially, inspire others who may not have the same understanding of intentional teaching that I do'* (Educational leader, iteration 3).

Evidence-informed content and resources for initial teacher education and registered training organisations

The findings suggest that the model and resources hold value for initial teacher education (ITE) program providers and registered training organisations (RTOs) in strengthening contemporary, evidence-informed course content. The data collected provides a conceptual framework that can assist ITE programs and RTOs to address common misconceptions and clarify the relationship between responsiveness, intentionality and pedagogical decision-making. Combined with this, findings identify a need for system-wide alignment of foundational concepts and knowledge to create consistent messaging about intentional teaching within play-based learning.

Based on participants' feedback, the intentional teaching model and resources create structured opportunities for them to articulate their pedagogical intentions, identify learning intentions and justify their instructional decisions. Educators valued a more nuanced understanding of play and children's learning and development and their role in children's play. This helped them to more confidently balance child- and adult-led experiences and draw on a range of teaching strategies to promote outcomes. The development of a shared professional language across the centre supports building a culture of intentionality. Embedding such tools within training contexts could support emerging educators to move beyond procedural understandings of practice toward more explicit, theory informed reasoning.

Limitations and future research directions

This study was designed as a pilot, with exploratory findings potentially informing future research projects. While the sample size may influence statistical power, it was selected to align with resource parameters and not jeopardise data quality. Despite the small sample size, to help mitigate the risk to generalisability of research findings, sample diversity, iterative data collection and using multiple data methods harnessed insights in line with the research aims.

Co-design – including DBR – is inherently more time, labour and cost intensive (McKenney & Reeves, 2018) than other approaches. As a pilot project conducted with a 12-month timeframe, recruitment decisions needed to ensure project completion within these constraints. AERO advertised the research through their stakeholder network and directly recruited services, with selection decisions based on specified sample parameters and essential selection criteria. Recruitment focused on services in standalone long daycare and preschool settings in New South Wales, Australian Capital Territory and Queensland to ensure completion within the 2025 calendar year (with consideration to additional approval requirements in some states and territories). While purposive sampling potentialised diversity within these constraints, larger-scale national testing of the intentional teaching model and resources would promote further confidence in their utility across varied ECEC contexts.

A key contribution from this study is that it demonstrated the significant benefits of utilising a co-design approach. Participants benefited from involvement in the co-design process, and their data afforded new insights into intentional teaching in Australian ECEC contexts. The process produced a model and resources that hold the potential to strengthen knowledge and practice and, importantly, can be scaled to enable more widespread transformation at systems and sector levels.

Reflective action and a culture of intentionality are new concepts to emerge from this research. Further investigation into concepts supporting intentionality may strengthen their theoretical and practical contributions to the literature base and the ECEC sector more broadly. Future research may also continue to explore how this model and resources promote inclusion and outcomes for all children. These projects would be timely and contribute valuably to current policy discourse and the sector's focus on quality improvement in ECEC.

Conclusion

Research highlights that – despite its recognised benefits and formal inclusion within the national curriculum framework – intentional teaching is frequently misunderstood as synonymous with pre-planned, structured group learning experiences and instructional approaches (e.g., Chen et al., 2024; Grieshaber et al., 2021; Kirkby et al., 2018; Leggett, 2025; Lewis et al., 2019). Educators may also assume that intentional teaching is limited to explicit interactions occurring directly between themselves and the children they are responsible for (Barnes, 2012). Such narrow interpretations can impede educators’ and teachers’ capacity to enact intentional teaching responsively within play-based contexts.

AERO’s intentional teaching model and resources provide a promising scale-up approach to reframing understandings of intentional teaching and intentionality within early childhood contexts. Using an evidence-based approach supported educators’ and teachers’ rationale for using the resources and created buy-in from the outset. Participating educators considered these resources to provide clear, accessible and practical guidance that supported reframing of intentional teaching and refocusing of intentional teaching within quality teaching, learning and assessment practices.

This research involved a national co-design process and has produced findings and outputs of national significance to the education sector. The intentional teaching model and resources simplify and clarify intentional teaching and promote a dialogue of quality teaching and learning for all children. The intentional teaching model centralises attuned, responsive relationships and child intentionality, and the new concepts of ‘reflective action’ and ‘culture of intentionality’ that emerged from this research contribute to theoretical and practical understandings of intentional teaching. In essence, this research and the intentional teaching model shines light on the professionalism of ECEC educators and the critical role they hold in maximising all children’s educational outcomes.



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