

# Co-designing an early childhood intentional teaching model and resources

September 2026

In 2025, the Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO) worked alongside early childhood education and care (ECEC) services<sup>1</sup> to co-design an early childhood intentional teaching model and supporting practice resource. This research summary presents key findings from our research.

The aim of the intentional teaching model was to simplify and clarify understanding and practice around effective intentional teaching. Across 9 months, educators used and tested an evidence-informed intentional teaching model and supporting practice resources and provided feedback to ensure final designs were robust and relevant in real-world ECEC settings.

This research summary provides an overview of what we learned during our [co-design research project](#) and while developing the [final model](#). Findings show engagement with the intentional teaching materials supported educator knowledge and practice and sharpened their focus on children's learning. In this summary, we highlight the new concepts of 'reflective action' and 'culture of intentionality', along with the value of adopting a participatory research approach.

## Introduction

Intentional practices in ECEC settings are consistently linked to improved child outcomes and a lift in learning and wellbeing trajectories, particularly for children experiencing disadvantage. Yet, despite the benefits of intentional teaching, and its place in Australia's ECEC curriculum frameworks, the concept is often misunderstood. There are also limited tools to guide educator understanding and practice (AERO, 2025; Leggett, 2025; McLaughlin et al., 2016).

AERO's [synthesis of contemporary intentional teaching literature](#) suggested that a valuable first step in supporting effective intentional teaching may be to address foundational knowledge gaps related to intentional teaching. This included the underlying beliefs educators hold around children's learning and play and their role within children's learning and play.

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<sup>1</sup> While the research involved educators, teachers and service leaders, for the purpose of this summary, we refer to all participants as 'educators'.

AERO's synthesis also pointed to the importance of developing an intentional teaching model that was not a 'one-size-fits-all' model approach, but rather a model that is culturally responsive and contextually sensitive to place-based early learning. In response, AERO began a co-design research project to develop an intentional teaching model and supporting resources.

## Research overview

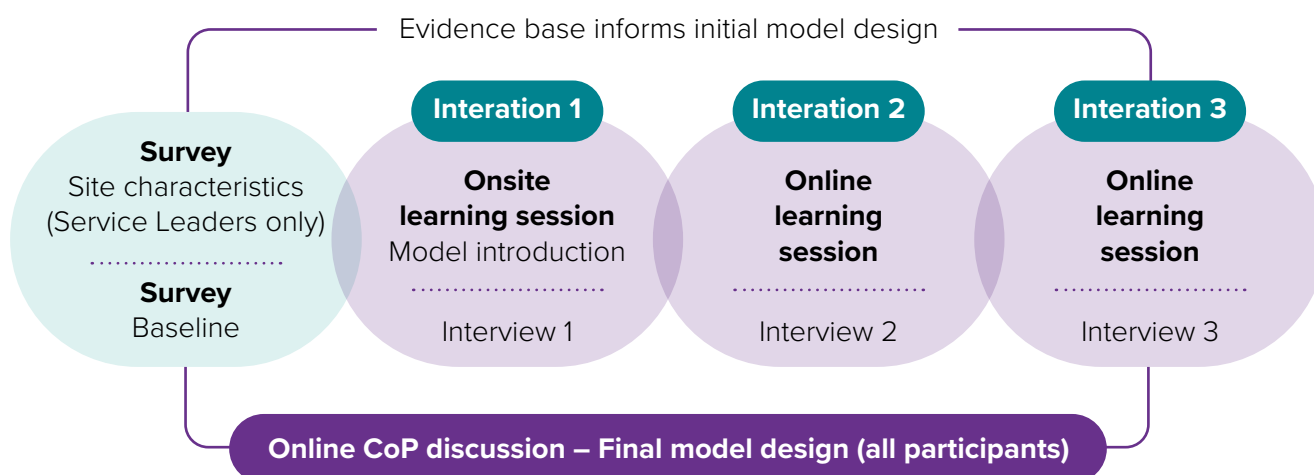
AERO's intentional teaching model research trials aimed to:

- understand how educators conceptualise and enact intentional teaching
- develop a model and supporting resources to simplify and clarify **the practical why, what and how of effective intentional teaching**.

To ensure the final model and resources were robust and relevant, AERO adopted a design-based research (DBR) approach. This involved working alongside educators from diverse ECEC services. (See our research report, [Co-designing an Early Childhood Intentional Teaching Model and Resources](#), for further details of the study.)

**Educators from 13 ECEC services were invited to participate** (see [Appendix A](#) for sample characteristics). This included services in the Australian Capital Territory, New South Wales and Queensland from low-socio-economic status and diverse geographical locations. Services rated within a range of National Quality Standards (NQS) – from 'Working Towards' to 'Exceeding' – were included. A total of 56 participants (service leaders, educators and teachers) working with children aged birth to 5 years were involved in the study. Participants held varied education qualifications (high school to master's degree) and ranged in their years of experience working in ECEC (graduate trainee to 20+ years' experience).

**Using DBR methods AERO worked alongside the educators** to design, test and re-design materials ([Figure 1](#)). Educators engaged with evidence-informed materials across 3 iterative cycles, and then provided feedback via semi-structured interviews. Interview responses were subjected to content analysis and findings informed re-design considerations. The first iteration of the model was drawn from the research in AERO's [discussion paper](#), providing an evidence-informed model as a starting point for co-design, which instilled confidence in participants.

**Figure 1:** Intentional teaching model design-based research process

**This approach to co-design was deemed mutually beneficial** to both the participants and quality of research outputs. Sustained use of the resources supported educator knowledge and practice around effective intentional teaching, while connecting intentional teaching evidence with educator insights strengthened the quality of the final model and resources. Participants also valued the opportunity to give back to the sector:

‘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 think doing it together is a really important part of the journey.’

‘I think it’s a privilege to be able to potentially shape something that’s going to impact  
our whole sector ...’

‘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.’

## Key findings

Three key findings emerged from the iterative dataset:

1. [improved knowledge and practice](#)
2. [strengthening of pedagogical decision-making](#)
3. [shared understandings](#).

We discuss these findings in more detail in the following sections and in the [research report](#).

## 1. Knowledge and practice improved after engagement with the intentional teaching model and resources

Consistent with [prior research](#), participants in this study initially reported varied understandings around intentional teaching and what this looked like in practice. After engaging with the model and resources, participants reported their knowledge and practice had improved.

### Positive shifts in understandings of intentional teaching

Findings show educators **developed a more expanded view of intentional teaching**, which interrupted commonly held misconceptions of intentional teaching as involving planned, adult-led experiences and being in opposition of play and child intentionality. This enabled educators to better understand **their role in children's learning**, and how intentional teaching is enacted in **play-based environments**.

### Strengthened focus on children's learning

Throughout the study, **educators consistently demonstrated a strong commitment to supporting children's learning** and development, alongside a willingness to learn and refine their pedagogical practices. Participants shared that they valued the opportunity to critically reflect on their own knowledge and practices around setting intentions for children's learning, play and child intentionality.

### Assessment informs intentional teaching

Assessment practices drive intentional teaching by providing evidence to develop learning intentions, select teaching strategies and plan purposeful and meaningful experiences. In their interviews, educators shared that engaging with the resources encouraged self-reflection on their practices and how these influenced children's learning and development. Educators reported that when they attuned to children, they could see learning everywhere. The data showed how the **resources helped focus learning priorities, facilitate conversations about learning intentions and maximise spontaneous teaching and learning moments**. All are important contributors to assessment in early childhood.

### Understanding children's intentionality and intentional teaching

Findings captured across the research process suggested that engaging with the model and resources prompted shifts in how educators recognised and responded to children's intentionality. When educators saw children as intentional learners, this strengthened their approach to intentional teaching, and they increasingly made pedagogical decisions that invited children's intentionality and positioned educators and children as collaborative learners:

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

## 2. The intentional teaching model and resources strengthened pedagogical decision-making

Epstein (2009) highlights that intentional teaching requires educators to be clear about what and how children are intended to learn. Engaging with the intentional teaching model and resources strengthened pedagogical decision-making, supporting educators to articulate more purposeful learning intentions and reflection on these intentions and their role in children's learning.

### Developing purposeful learning intentions

The intentional teaching model and resources clarified the adult's role in children's learning and development and supported shifts from ideas that intentional teaching and play are in opposition to one another. As confidence grew, educators set more purposeful learning intentions and reflected on these intentions in spontaneous and planned moments.

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

After engagement with the intentional teaching model and resources, educators reported clearer connections 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 process that informed pedagogical decision-making.

**What emerged was the inclusion of a new, third concept related to intentional teaching: reflective action.** This concept describes the interplay between educator intentionality and the constant iteration and reflection on intentions and teaching strategies.

**Reflective action:** 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.

Participants found that reflective action clarified their understanding of intentionality:

'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 you know is what we intended to happen or did the children use it in a different way from their own ideas and their own extensions.'

### 3. The intentional teaching model contributed to shared understandings and a culture of intentionality

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., 2021). Data from this study showed **intentionality** was **enhanced when it became collaborative practice**. This collaboration was evident through shared understandings and a culture of intentionality.

#### Shared understandings of intentional teaching

Using the intentional teaching model and resources encouraged pedagogical conversations within teams that deepened educators' understanding of intentional teaching and built shared understandings across this team. This led to a **consistent approach** to working towards children's intentions.

Initial data captured varied knowledge and practice around intentional teaching and the resources helped to '*bridge knowledge gaps*' across services. For some, the materials built professional knowledge. For others, the resources '*made tangible*' their thinking around intentional teaching and enabled needed '*shared language and understanding*'. A **consistent approach** was emphasised as **important in promoting children's outcomes**:

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

#### 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. Findings show 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 for all children. A culture of intentionality acknowledges intentionality as collaborative and encompassing all stakeholders, including children. The concept speaks to how intentionality is built and sustained in response to each services' place-based context.

**Culture of intentionality:** 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 staff, 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.

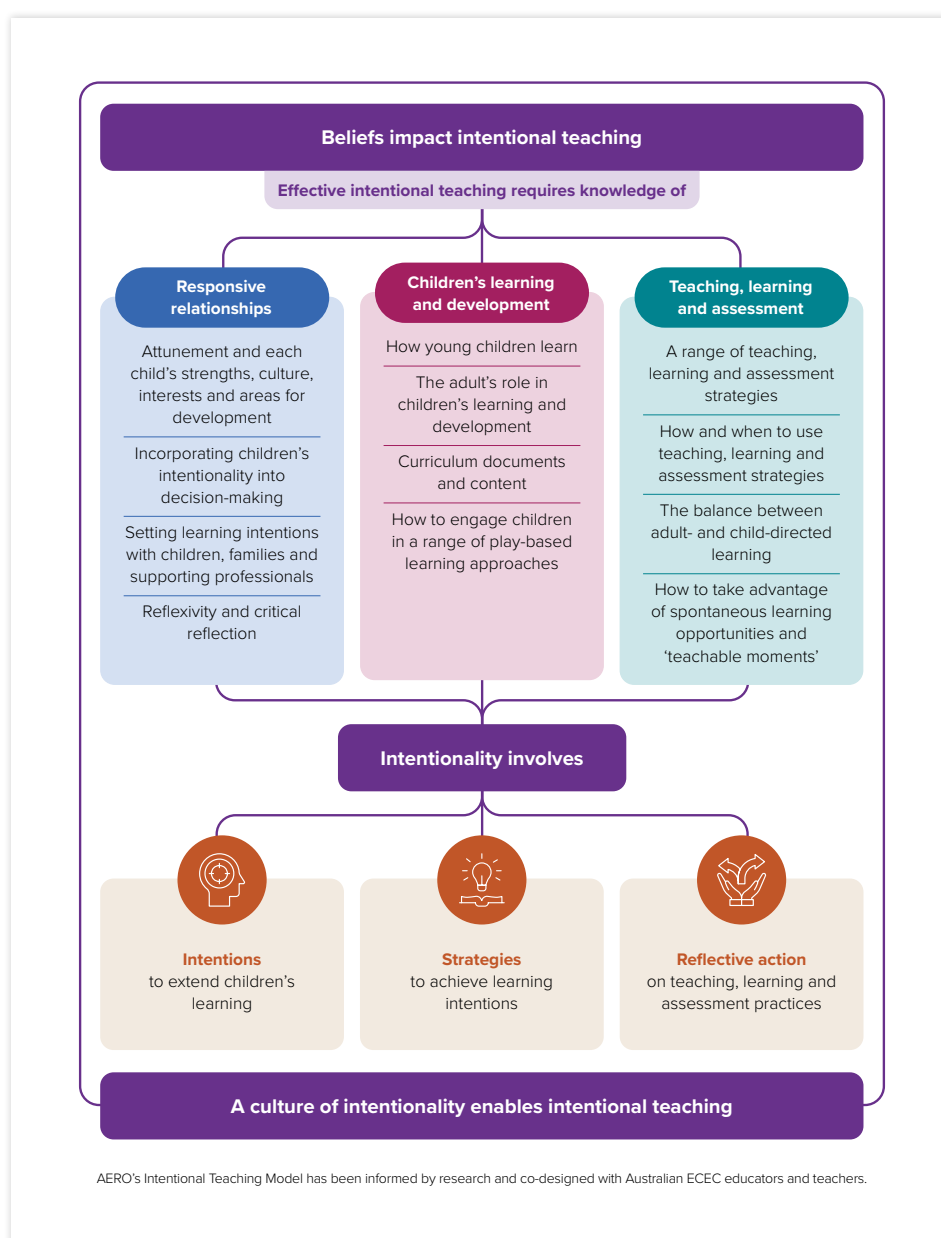
Using the intentional teaching model and resources supported a collaborative culture of intentionality characterised by professional dialogue, collective pedagogical approaches, reflective action and greater incorporation of children's intentionality.

## The early childhood intentional teaching model and supporting resources

This national co-design process with ECEC services resulted in AERO's final intentional teaching model (Figure 2) and supporting [practice resources](#). The resources reflect both the research evidence and what practitioners told us about how intentional teaching works. It describes what needs to be in place for intentional teaching to happen, what intentionality involves and what sustains it over time.

The accompanying [practice resource](#) provides foundational knowledge and practices that support play-based learning with intentionality. It includes a series of resources to support educators to more effectively use intentional teaching to enhance children's learning. It's designed to help early childhood teachers, educators and leaders understand what intentional teaching is, what it looks like in practice and how to strengthen it in their own settings.

**Figure 2:** AERO's Early Childhood Intentional Teaching Model



## Conclusion

We conducted this study to fill a gap we identified in the research that highlighted a policy-practice disconnect. The co-design approach to developing the intentional teaching model and resources ensured they offer clear, accessible and practical information about play-based learning with intentionality. These resources can benefit educators with ranging experience and provide examples spanning contexts and age groups. The resources support engagement with them, as well as knowledge sharing between teaching teams and other stakeholders.

These resources are evidence-informed and shaped by insights from educators working across various ECEC contexts and with children drawing from diverse backgrounds. The resources emphasise high-quality teaching, learning and assessment in ECEC and reposition intentional teaching as an everyday pedagogy, not as an additional task. The research approach has produced resources that can be scaled and findings suggest the value for initial teacher education providers and registered training organisations in strengthening evidence-informed course content:

‘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.’

‘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.’

‘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.’

‘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.’

## More information

You can find more information about intentional teaching and this research project in AERO's:

- [Co-Designing an Early Childhood Intentional Teaching Model and Resources](#) research report
- [Early Childhood Intentional Teaching Model](#) practice resource
- [Play-based Learning With Intentionality](#) discussion paper.

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## Appendix A: Participant characteristics

Table A1 shows the purposive sampling used to select a diverse sample of 13 ECEC services across Queensland, New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory.

**Table A1:** 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 |
|------------|-------|----------------|-------------------------------------------|---------------------|---------------|------------------------------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------------|
| <b>S1</b>  | ACT   | Major city     | 5 Most advantaged                         | Exceeding NQS       | Sep 2021      | Community-based<br>Non-profit<br>Long day care | Up to 77 children          | Birth–5 years             |
| <b>S2</b>  | NSW   | Outer regional | 1–2 Most disadvantaged                    | Exceeding NQS       | Dec 2021      | Community-based<br>Non-profit<br>Preschool     | Up to 100 children         | 3–5 years                 |
| <b>S3</b>  | QLD   | Major city     | 4                                         | Working towards NQS | Sep 2024      | Private for profit<br>Long day care            | Up to 152 children         | Birth–5 years             |
| <b>S4</b>  | QLD   | Major city     | 2                                         | Meeting NQS         | Jan 2024      | Private for profit<br>Long day care            | Up to 65 children          | Birth–5 years             |
| <b>S5</b>  | QLD   | Major city     | 3                                         | Exceeding NQS       | Feb 2025      | Private for profit<br>Long day care            | Up to 86 children          | Birth–5 years             |
| <b>S6</b>  | NSW   | Outer regional | 1 Most disadvantaged                      | Exceeding NQS       | Jul 2024      | Community-based<br>Non-profit<br>Preschool     | Up to 70 children          | 3–5 years                 |
| <b>S7</b>  | NSW   | Major city     | 2                                         | Exceeding NQS       | Jun 2025      | Community-based<br>Non-profit<br>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 |
|------------|-------|----------------|-------------------------------------------|---------------------|---------------|------------------------------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------------|
| <b>S8</b>  | QLD   | Major city     | 5 Most advantaged                         | Meeting NQS         | Apr 2023      | Community-based<br>Non-profit<br>Long day care | Up to 125 children         | Birth–5 years             |
| <b>S9</b>  | NSW   | Inner regional | 3                                         | Exceeding NQS       | Jul 2025      | Community-based<br>Non-profit<br>Preschool     | Up to 80 children          | 3–5 years                 |
| <b>S10</b> | QLD   | Major city     | 2                                         | Meeting NQS         | Nov 2023      | Community-based<br>Non-profit<br>Long day care | Up to 131 children         | Birth–5 years             |
| <b>S11</b> | QLD   | Very remote    | 2–4                                       | Meeting NQS         | Dec 2020      | Community-based<br>Non-profit<br>Kindergarten  | Up to 24 children          | 3–5 years                 |
| <b>S12</b> | QLD   | Remote         | 1 Most disadvantaged                      | Working towards NQS | Jul 2023      | Community-based<br>Non-profit<br>Kindergarten  | Up to 21 children          | 3–5 years                 |
| <b>S13</b> | QLD   | Very remote    | 3                                         | Meeting NQS         | Sep 2019      | Private for profit<br>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.

**AERO would like to acknowledge the ECEC educators and teachers who participated in this research and whose voices helped shape the intentional teaching model and practice resource. Your insights were invaluable.**