

Professor Karen Thorpe

on the

10,000 hours

ECA recently caught up with **Professor Karen Thorpe**, one of the 2022 Australian Research Council's (ARC) Australian Laureate Fellows and Professor at the Queensland Brain Institute at the University of Queensland, to discuss her upcoming research project. The project, entitled '10,000 Hours: Time in early education and care for better life opportunity', refers to the number of hours a child might be in early childhood education and care (ECEC) if they start in the first year of life and attend full time. It will be a large-scale longitudinal study on the role of ECEC in the first five years of children's lives.



Congratulations on being awarded a 2022 Australian Laureate Fellowship. This is a significant honour—what does it mean to you?

For me, it is a recognition of the importance of the sector and of the question I am asking, that is, how do we ensure that the most disadvantaged children get access to the highest quality early childhood education and care (ECEC)?

What are the expected outcomes of your research project, '10,000 Hours'?

The key point here is equity. How do we deliver for the most disadvantaged children who enter school 'developmentally vulnerable', as described by the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC)? Where do we put our resources to make sure these children get an equal footing when they start school? My study focuses very specifically on disadvantaged areas that the AEDC found to have more than 25% vulnerable children.

There are four P's that we are looking at: policy, provider, place and people. We are going to start with the toddler rooms and track the children, observing them every year until they enter school. And then when they enter school, we have an arrangement with the Queensland Government to do data linkage, and then we can track those children and look at their educational outcomes. Through our

statistical analyses, we can look at what made a difference to these children and what the enablers and barriers were.

What are some of the knowledge gaps that you hope to close through your upcoming work?

We will be looking at educators in classrooms and services with the aim of informing policy, specifically the *National Quality Standard*. A standard is, by definition, inequitable because children enter a classroom or service from different starts in life, so we need to have more resources in the more challenged areas.

One of the knowledge gaps I would like to address surrounds what the policy levers are that you can pull to make ECEC equitable. In disadvantaged locations, a kind of double jeopardy exists. Children not only start with more disadvantage at home; their services are under more pressure too. So the question is, how do we address these problems?

We understand that this research will be a long-term project. Is there a time frame of months/years by which you anticipate some trends to emerge?

We are not waiting until the end of five years. I have created a number of databases already, so we will hit the ground running.

In the first year we will be investigating the concept of 'quality' and how we can assess it. For example, we have a PhD study in the project called 'Same educator, different day', which looks at how children drive quality and the effects on quality of having different mixes of children in the classroom across a typical week.

In the longer term, although the study itself only covers five years of ECEC, we will be able to link that to Queensland Government education data that tracks student progress during their 13 years of school.

Hopefully I will be retired well before that! The idea is to leave a legacy for researchers in ECEC in Australia.

Who do you think the findings of the report will be most beneficial to? What impacts do you expect your research to have?

The main beneficiary will be ECEC providers who we can tell where they should concentrate their efforts for the best outcomes for children. Governments will also benefit since we can tell them how best to invest their funds to make the biggest difference. And of course families and children will benefit, particularly those in the most disadvantaged areas. Ultimately, it should also benefit Australian society because more equitable societies are societies that thrive, and the biggest aim of this study is to make ECEC more equitable so that the number of children entering school who are currently seen as developmentally vulnerable will be reduced and given a better start in life.

... the question I'm asking ... is, how do we ensure that the most disadvantaged children get access to the highest quality early childhood education and care (ECEC)?

Please tell us more about how ECEC can be a mechanism for social equity.

There is a large body of evidence from neuroscience, economics and my own discipline, developmental psychology, that shows that if we invest in children early, we make a very big difference not only to those individuals, but to society as a whole. Although we now have a government that is trying to improve the affordability of childcare, that is not the only barrier. We want disadvantaged families to have

access to high-quality ECEC, to feel safe—culturally safe and secure—and to have their children benefit from rich learning experiences. That is where I think we can deliver.

What is your message to students of ECEC and emerging early learning professionals?

It is important to recognise the incredible work they do, the incredible difference their work makes to society. They are an absolutely critical resource for the country. And I just hope that soon we start recognising that in a range of other ways. But what I would say, I guess, is 'thank you—you provide an essential service.'

Thank you for your insights. Is there anything else that you wish to add?

Although this is a personal award to me as a Fellow, there is a big team that sits behind it, and I want to acknowledge my industry partners and my amazing team that have built the work that has allowed us to get to this place.



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