Great to Eight:
A 10 Year Research Agenda for Child Wellbeing

Project Description (Phase One)

Version Date: December 2019

Project Start Date: 1 July 2019

Project Duration: 18 months

ARACY

Australian Research Alliance for Children & Youth

Collaboration • Evidence • Prevention

Introduction

Great to Eight: a 10 Year Research Agenda for Child Wellbeing (Great to Eight) is a nation building project with the potential to positively influence Australia's investments in early childhood research on a grand scale. The Ian Potter Foundation has commissioned ARACY to lead phase one of this visionary program of work as part of their commitment to improving learning outcomes for children aged 0-8.

In an Australian first, this project is seeking to develop a comprehensive and collaborative set of research priorities that not only addresses the needs of funders, policy makers, practitioner and researchers, but also, positions us as world leaders in early years research.

Project Phasing

Phase one will see ARACY working with experts and other stakeholders from across the sector to collaboratively develop a Priority Setting Mechanism (PSM) for the research agenda. **The information in this document relates to Phase 1.** Please see Appendix 1 for an overview of the expected phasing of the project overall.

1. Project Vision

To improve childhood outcomes and thereby life chances for children in Australia aged zero to eight. Children and young people in Australia are loved, thriving and reaching their potential.

2. Project Mission

Great to Eight supports the vision by producing a cohesive research agenda that contributes to the improvement of childhood outcomes through cultivating system and sector collaboration, promotion and dissemination of best practice and new knowledge, and guiding wise investment. Phase One of the project will produce a priority setting mechanism that will become the foundational tool used in Phase Two, the development of the research agenda.

3. Stakeholders and Partners

For this project, stakeholders and partner are defined as follows.

Key Stakeholders (also known as boundary partners) are

"those individuals, groups, or organizations with whom the program interacts directly and with whom the program can anticipate opportunities for influence. These actors are called boundary partners because, even though the program will work with them to effect change, it does not control them. The power to influence development rests with them." (Earl et al., 2001)

If we are unable to influence party one, then we must determine another party that can influence them. Party two is therefore our Key Stakeholder, not party one (Earl et al., 2001).

In assessing which of the parties listed can be considered Key Stakeholders, we consider the question: *"Whose behavior needs to change in order to achieve the mission and vision?"* (Souvairan et al., 2014)

Strategic Partners are in turn, parties that we want or need to work with to achieve our mission but whose behaviour we do not necessarily wish to change (Earl et al., 2001).

Key Stakeholders:

1. Research funders: philanthropy and corporate

2. Research funders: government (ARC, NHMRC)

3. Policy Makers: federal and state government departments, members of government and opposition

4. Academic institutions and research organisations

5. Peak bodies and associations

6. Governance Committee

Strategic Partners:

1. The Ian Potter Foundation

2. Beneficiaries (children aged zero to eight)

3. Families

4. Phase 1 Desired Outcomes

Outcomes for Phase 1 of the project are expressed as the desired behavioural change for each Key Stakeholder:

1. Great to Eight intends to see philanthropy and corporate research funders who desire to improve childhood outcomes, recognise the need to make informed funding decisions, promote project engagement amongst their networks, and effectively collaborate with ARACY for the development of the priority setting mechanism.

2. Great to Eight intends to see government research funders who desire to improve childhood outcomes, recognise the need to make informed funding decisions, promote project engagement amongst their networks, and effectively collaborate with ARACY for the development of the priority setting mechanism.

3. Great to Eight intends to see policy makers who focus on children aged zero to eight, are engaged with ARACY in championing the need for a national research agenda, and effectively collaborate with ARACY for the development of the priority setting mechanism.

4. Great to Eight intends to see academic institutions and research organisations who seek to perform research in areas of most need or impact relating to improving childhood outcomes, are engaged with ARACY in the development of the research agenda, and seek to effectively collaborate with ARACY.

5. Great to Eight intends to see peak bodies and associations who desire to improve childhood outcomes, see the value of having a national research agenda in this space, promote project engagement amongst their membership and networks, and effectively collaborate with ARACY for the development of the priority setting mechanism.

6. Great to Eight intends to see a Governance Committee who desire to improve childhood outcomes, are engaged productively in committee meetings, add value to the quality of the project through their expertise, and utilise their standing in the community to motivate and maintain sector engagement in the project.

5. Limitations

This project will focus on the wellbeing of children and young people living in Australia. This includes any child or young person within the geographical area of Australia, regardless of citizenship status. However, the research can be informed by international literature.

The focus of this work will be limited to an age range of 0-8.

The project will make every effort not to duplicate existing practices or structures, but to incorporate and work with them.

6. Theoretical Framework

This research is based upon ARACY's *The Nest* framework for child wellbeing. *The Nest* provides an evidence-based conceptualisation of child and youth wellbeing. From comprehensive research involving more than 4000 young people, parents, researchers and practitioners, *The Nest* identifies six domains that are necessary for wellbeing. These domains are Loved and Safe, Material Basics, Healthy, Learning, Participating, and Positive Sense of Identity and Culture. A shared understanding of the elements of wellbeing is essential for this project to better enable links and support collaboration across sectors.

7. Underlying assumptions

The following assumptions are made in the development of this project as a whole and in the development of Phase 1.

- That coordinated/needs-based research will make a positive difference to children

- That funders, researchers and research institutions are motivated by the desire to improve outcomes for children, and that this motivation is sufficient to influence funding and research choices

- That researchers and research institutions can be influenced by funder priorities

- That the research agenda can be flexible enough for funders and researchers to find an area of research that aligns with their own focus and priorities, while still detailed enough to be an effective guide

- That we will not inadvertently close off promising avenues of research by seeking to narrow our focus to priority areas

These assumptions will be tested and added to as part of the Discovery Stage (see below).

Note: while we recognise the critical links between research, policy and service delivery, assumptions relating to the influence of research on policy and services are deliberately excluded from this phase of the project. It is not within our power to make research outcomes and evidence influence policy and service delivery. However, we note that effective knowledge translation and developmental research such as randomised controlled trials, pilots, test sites and similar endeavours have an essential role to play in creating a strong evidence base to support decision making in the policy and service spheres, and it is expected and intended that the research agenda will reflect this role.

8. Methodology

8.1 Research philosophy

The theory of knowledge that informs this project is pragmatism. Pragmatism holds that by drawing upon multiple data and information sources, a richer understanding of the issues can be reached. To achieve this, the project will incorporate a number of methods and stages. Pragmatism also has a focus on the integration and meaning of knowledge (Coghlan D & Brydon-Miller M, 2010).

8.2 Methodological framework

The project design is underpinned by systems theory. Systems theory holds that individuals do not exist in isolation, but instead interact with their physical and social environments (Teater B, 2015). In this context child wellbeing is the system and according to systems theory, changes to one aspect of child wellbeing effects the whole system (Social Work License Map, 2019). *The Nest* shows that the six domains are interconnected and impact each other. To take an obvious example, a lack of material basics will have an impact on health.

Philosopher Mario Bunge describes a system as a set of parts (P) and a set of relations (R) amongst those parts (Langlois R.N, 1982), or if described as an equation, P + R = System. When examining a system like child wellbeing, we seek knowledge about the problems in this system. In systems theory, a problem is a manifestation of a set of interrelated elements. As such there is a problem situation with many causes rather than a singular causal factor (Stewart J & Russell Ayres R, 2001). This is known as a feedback loop and the model can be depicted as follows:

Figure 2: Depiction of a feedback loop in a system
(Stewart J & Russell Ayres R, 2001)
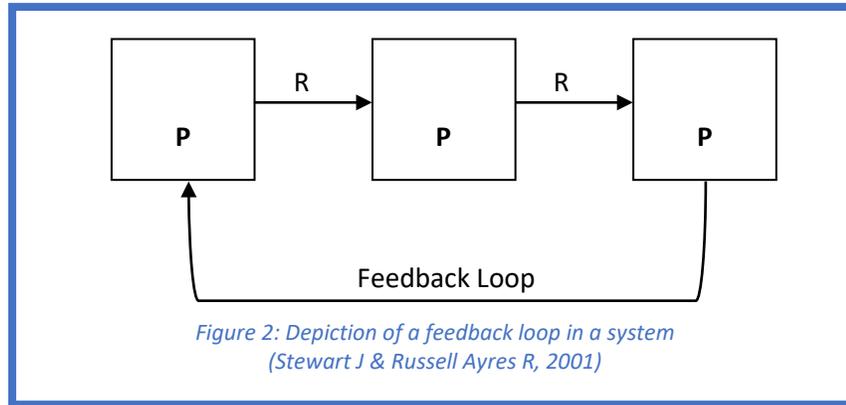
Child development and wellbeing will contain many of these feedback loops and they do not exist in isolation. Just as there are relationships within a loop, there are relationships between loops also.

8.3 Staging

Stage One: Discovery Stage

An expert reference group from across sectors related to child wellbeing (the Governance Group) will be formed to help inform the understanding of the field, and the gaps and perspectives on opportunities. They will also provide input in phases two, three and four to ensure these phases are carried out to a high standard.

In this phase a detailed project plan will also be developed, along with a project logic, risk management plan, monitoring evaluation and learning plan, communications strategy, and terms of reference to establish the roles and expectations between parties.

Early consultation with stakeholders will be conducted to interrogate assumptions, sense-check the project logic, and identify any additional considerations to be taken into account.

Data obtained in Stage 1 (see **Data collection tools**, below) will be organised and synthesised as per the TACSI "Insights" process (The Australian Centre for Social Innovation Learning Team, 2018).

Stage Two: Literature scan

A restricted literature scan will be conducted to identify the key learnings of research into priority setting. Most of the literature identified thus far is in the fields of medical research (for example, see Terry, R.F., Charles, E., Purdy, B. et al. An analysis of research priority-setting at the World Health Organization (2018)), and to a lesser extent in the public health/social care delivery and funding sphere (eg, Collins, M., McHugh, N., Baker, R., Morton, A., Frith, L., Syrett, K., & Donaldson, C., Frameworks for Priority Setting in Health and Social Care (2019)).

It is assumed that some lessons will be applicable to the purpose of the Great to Eight project Phase 1, and will inform the design of the PSM.

Stage Three: Consultation

Consultation will be conducted with a range of stakeholders across sectors on key themes and questions relating to the design of the PSM, identified through the literature scan.

This is likely to be an iterative process as feedback informs refinements to the PSM.

Stage Four: Consolidation

A final draft of the PSM will be presented to the Governance Group for final agreement and endorsement.

8.4   Data collection tools

Stage 1 will entail early discussions with the Governance Group and semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders to understand the current issues, test assumptions and identify key themes.

Stage 2 will be a desktop review of the available analysis and evaluation of priority setting mechanisms in relevant fields.

Stage 3 will be a combination of face to face workshops and events; online surveys asking key questions; and the option to provide longer form electronic submissions relevant to the design of the PSM.

Stage 4 will entail a face-to-face discussion with the Governance Group to seek final feedback and refinement of the PSM.

ends

Appendix 1:
Anticipated phasing of the Great to Eight Research Agenda

Please note that at this stage, only Phase 1 of the project is funded.

Phase	Indicative time frame
Phase 1 Establish a clear scope for the Decadal Plan and design and develop a Priority Setting Mechanism for the robust identification of research priorities	December 2020
Phase 2 Establish data requirements, and source data. Use the Priority Setting Mechanism to establish draft priorities for the research Agenda. Validate findings through an agreed mechanism such as a Review Panel.	July 2021
Phase 3 Build and host a searchable online resource to house the Research Agenda.	July 2023
Phase 4 Ongoing monitoring and biannual updating of the Research Agenda through an agreed mechanism such as a Review Panel.	Ongoing

The Great to Eight Research Agenda is ultimately intended to operate in concord with other core components of a "virtuous circle", described on the following page. The elements work together systematically to guide research and investment, support policy and practice, and continuously build the evidence base.

Example of research and evaluation system

Researchers and funders use the Research Agenda as a guide

10 Year Research Agenda
- Identifies gaps and areas of interest
- Encourages collaboration

Evidence gaps report back to the Research Agenda

Research & Development
(e.g. Great to Eight)

Data & Information
(e.g. Children's Health Queensland Data Dashboard)

Evidence of What Works
(e.g. What Works for Kids)

Evaluation

Helping kids through best practice
Policymakers and practitioners seeking best practice search What Works for Kids by target audience, type of intervention, geography etc.

As programs are evaluated they feed into the evidence base

ARACY
Australian Research Alliance for Children & Youth
Collaboration • Evidence • Prevention