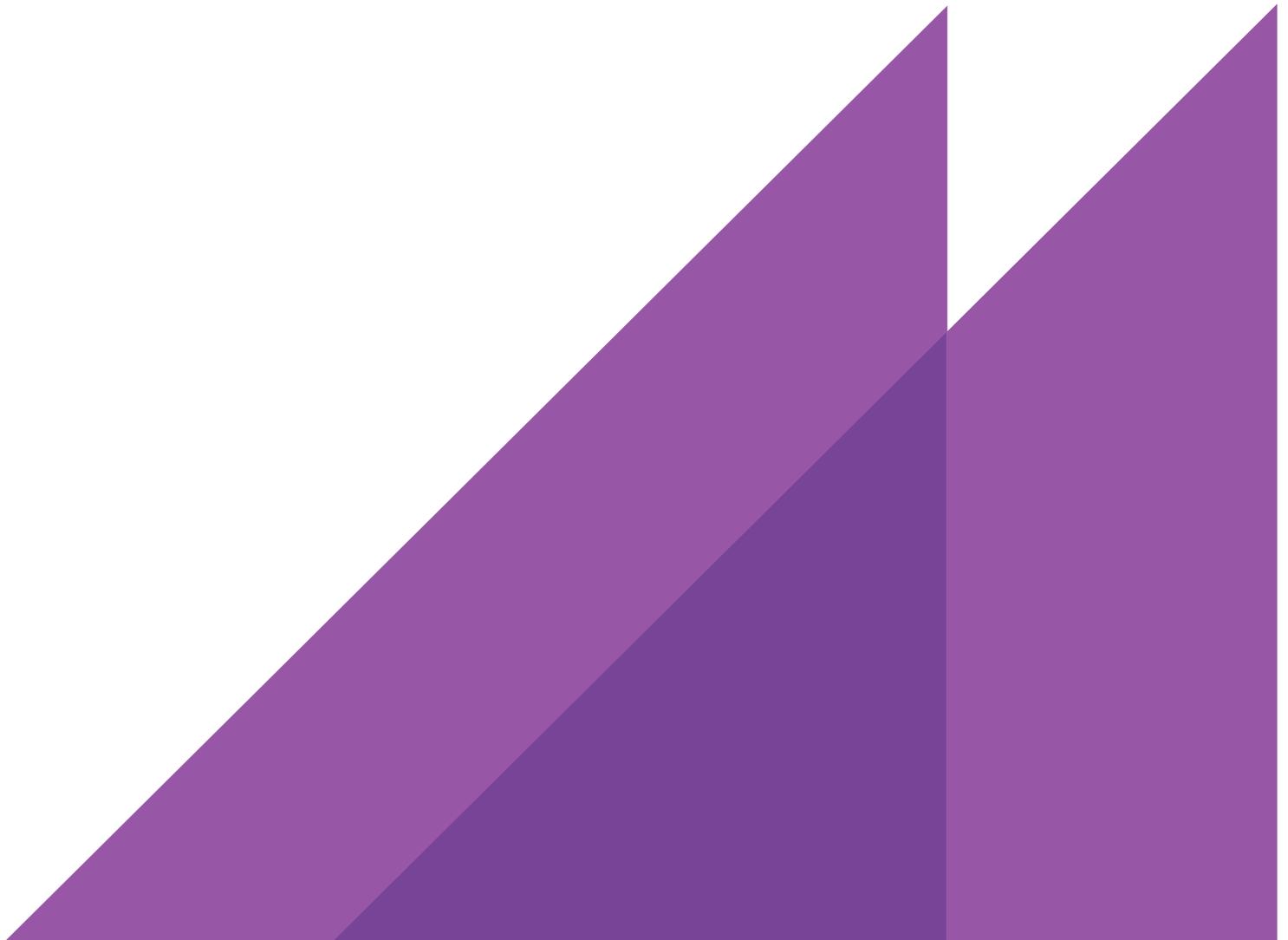


REPORT TO
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION AND TRAINING

UTILISATION OF THE AUSTRALIAN EARLY DEVELOPMENT CENSUS

 REPORT





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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

The Department of Education and Training (DET) engaged ACIL Allen Consulting to provide insights to the utilisation of Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) data. The engagement contributes to the evidence base for how the AEDC is used, provides insights to the use of AEDC by stakeholders, and informs DET's consideration for improving AEDC utilisation in the future.

The AEDC provides a national snapshot of early childhood development for children in their first year of full-time school. The AEDC measures how well children are doing across five key areas of development: physical health and wellbeing; social competence; emotional maturity; language and cognitive skills; communication skills and general knowledge. In March 2019, the results of the fourth AEDC collection (data collected in 2018) were publicly released.

In the early stages of the project, DET and ACIL Allen determined a focus on three main user groups: communities, policy makers and academic researchers.

The data collection focussed on case studies and other practical examples of engagement with the findings from the AEDC data. In particular, semi-structured interviews were undertaken with eighteen stakeholders to understand the impact of the AEDC in their role and lessons or opportunities to benefit future application of the AEDC.

AEDC utilisation across stakeholder groups

AEDC utilisation in communities

Consultations were undertaken with stakeholders working in communities with responsibilities in supporting collective action across local organisations and services. Key themes in the feedback on current AEDC utilisation were that:

- the AEDC provides insight into child development, increasing understanding about child development in communities and addressing a substantial gap in prior data
- the AEDC enables collaboration between levels of government and provides a common link between services in a community
- the AEDC is key tool in community planning, though not all communities have the capacity to unpack the richness of the dataset.

Consultees raised several areas where the AEDC and its use can evolve:

- better integrating planning, monitoring and research to achieve on the ground change
- expanding complementary datasets to provide additional information for communities
- continuing to build engagement with the AEDC, with schools identified as a particular service where strong engagement can have a big impact for a community.

AEDC utilisation in policy

Consultations were undertaken with stakeholders working in state government with responsibilities for policy development and monitoring. Key themes in the feedback on current AEDC utilisation were that:

- the AEDC is highly valued for its comprehensiveness (i.e. across domains, national collection) and clarity in providing a headline measure of developmental vulnerability
- the AEDC is used to understand children's outcomes, particularly changes over time and differences between geographic areas
- the AEDC communicates the importance of the early childhood period in human development
- the AEDC informs regional planning for the early years as well as broader partnerships that monitor the wellbeing of communities
- the AEDC isn't used to measure service performance.

Consultees raised several areas where the AEDC and its use can evolve:

- making more of the current AEDC data through data linkage and as an impetus for strategic conversations about child development
- prompting a more sophisticated understanding of influences in children's lives, such as housing or the economy
- taking a life course approach joining the available data and addressing gaps in data, particularly prior to school
- continuing efforts to build understanding of the AEDC
- increasing the speed at which AEDC data becomes available and for more frequent collections.

AEDC utilisation in academic research

Consultations were undertaken with stakeholders working in universities with responsibilities for published research. Key themes in the feedback on current AEDC utilisation were that:

- the AEDC has raised interest in childhood research bringing expertise and resources
- the AEDC is a valued, high-quality data set
- the AEDC has been effective in stimulating community interest for change
- the AEDC provides a snapshot of development at one time point, but there is interest in a broader view of early human development and its influences.

Consultees raised several areas where the AEDC and its use can evolve:

- enhanced data linkage, including routine linkage with school data and potentially with biological data
- additional surveys across the life-course that extends understanding of the well-being of children and young people and the social factors that influence their development
- continuity of the current instrument is important to maintain its current strengths and research being conducted
- better ways to engage communities to engage with the AEDC data to facilitate its use.

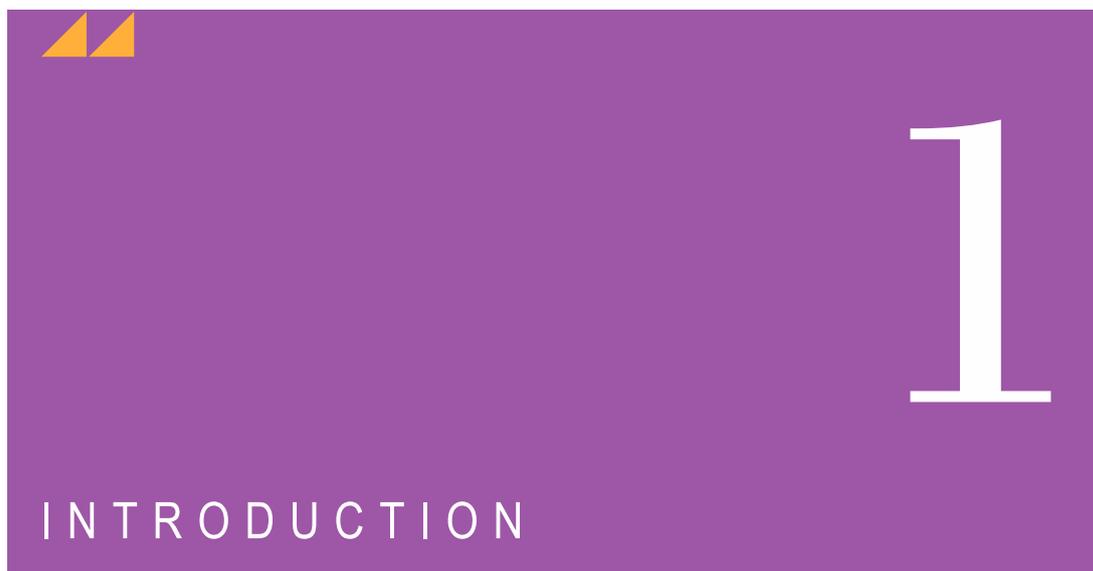
Challenges and next steps

Overall, the interviews and case studies highlighted the potential for the AEDC to expand its role in research, decision-making and resource allocation. Several challenges to the expanded use of the AEDC emerged through the discussions:

- *Limited awareness of activities across the three groups in focus* – communities, policy and research. For example, there wasn't widespread awareness of how AEDC data have driven local action. Deeper understanding of local activities may inform both local policy and potentially state policy from the ground up.
- *Substantial focus on the AEDC data as 'population-only' data* – this emphasis carried a perception of inappropriateness for deeper analysis, such as data linkage and presentation to schools.
- *Seeing the AEDC data as the 'end point' to measure the impact of the early childhood system* – often the AEDC data are seen as the outcome of early childhood rather than the 'start-point' for schools with the effect of limiting school engagement and better understanding of the cohort of children starting in their setting each three years.

Understanding and supporting AEDC utilisation will reinforce its value and inform its advancement. The areas in which AEDC utilisation will grow and change are not however currently planned or prioritised. The insights arising through this report are helpful starting point in considering how the AEDC's use can be encouraged and supported.

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This chapter introduces the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) utilisation project objectives, context, and main sections of the report.

1.1 This engagement

The Department of Education and Training (DET) engaged ACIL Allen Consulting (ACIL Allen) to provide insights to the utilisation of AEDC data. The engagement contributes to the evidence base for how the AEDC is used, provides insights to the use of AEDC by stakeholders, and informs DET's consideration for improving AEDC utilisation in the future.

1.2 AEDC background

Background

The AEDC provides a national snapshot of early childhood development for children in their first year of full-time school. The AEDC measures how well children are doing across five key areas of development: physical health and wellbeing; social competence; emotional maturity; language and cognitive skills; communication skills and general knowledge. In March 2019, the results of the fourth AEDC collection (data collected in 2018) were publicly released.

Taken together, the AEDC data highlight what is working well and what needs to be improved or developed to support children and their families by providing evidence to support health, education and community policy and planning.

History and roles

In 2009, Australia became the first country in the world to collect national data on the development of all children starting school. Following this first national collection, the Australian Government has committed to the ongoing national measurement of the health and wellbeing of Australian children through the AEDC.

The AEDC is collected every three years in schools across Australia. The data collection was completed in 2009, 2012, 2015 and 2018. The Australian Government works with state and territory governments, schools and parents to collect AEDC data. The AEDC community results for these collections are publicly available.

DET is supported by the Australian Government to facilitate the collection of AEDC data to achieve a high participation rate. In addition, through its partnership with the Australian Government, Victoria seeks to:

- strengthen awareness of the AEDC among key stakeholders, for example schools, local community organisations, and government agencies

- increase government and community utilisation of the AEDC results in early childhood policy development, service delivery and program management
- support communities with relatively high levels of developmental vulnerability to respond to their AEDC results.

Utilisation of the AEDC

In 2010, an independent evaluation was undertaken of the AEDC¹ national implementation. The evaluation methodology included interviews with key stakeholders and considered the appropriateness, effectiveness, efficiency, governance, quality and suitability of the AEDC.²

Drawing on reviewed documentation, the evaluation noted that the primary aim of the AEDC is to provide data to assist governments and communities to develop and reorient services and systems to improve the health, wellbeing and early learning of young children.

The evaluation also noted a number of ongoing objectives of the AEDC including:

- providing baseline data about how children in each community are faring in each of the developmental domains of the AEDC
- enabling governments and communities to monitor progress on early childhood development outcomes
- utilising the implementation process of the AEDC to assist in the development and strengthening of relationships between key agencies and stakeholders in the community
- facilitating community mobilisation and the development of forward planning and action based on the results of the AEDC.

Since this time, the different uses of the AEDC have grown and the AEDC has reached a wide audience. An annual survey of AEDC stakeholders has been conducted from 2014 to explore AEDC usage, benefits and challenges. A report from the Telethon Kids Institute discussed recent results³, and noted that a breadth of groups use the AEDC results, including: governments, non-government organisations, early childhood education and care services, research organisations and parents.

In addition, materials (e.g. information sheets, case studies) are made available through the AEDC website to guide application of the AEDC by different audiences (e.g. schools, communities).

1.3 Project objectives and method

Objectives and scope

The current project seeks to support DET in its role in increasing government and community utilisation of the AEDC results. The engagement has three main objectives:

1. contribute to the evidence base for how the AEDC is used
2. provide insights to the use of AEDC by stakeholders
3. inform DET's consideration for improving AEDC utilisation in the future.

In the early stages of the project, DET and ACIL Allen determined a focus on three main user groups:

- *Communities*: stakeholders working in communities with responsibilities in supporting collective action across local organisations and services
- *Policy*: stakeholders working in state government with responsibilities for policy development and monitoring
- *Academic research*: stakeholders working in universities with responsibilities for published research.

Method

The project was undertaken in three stages as specified in the Table below.

¹ Then known as the Australian Early Development Instrument (AEDI).

² Atelier Learning Solutions (2010) *Evaluation of the Australian Early Development Index*; A report prepared for the department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations.

³ *How are the AEDC results being used in Australia? Results from a stakeholder survey and interviews*, November 2018. Telethon Kids Institute, Adelaide.

TABLE 1.1 RESEARCH METHOD

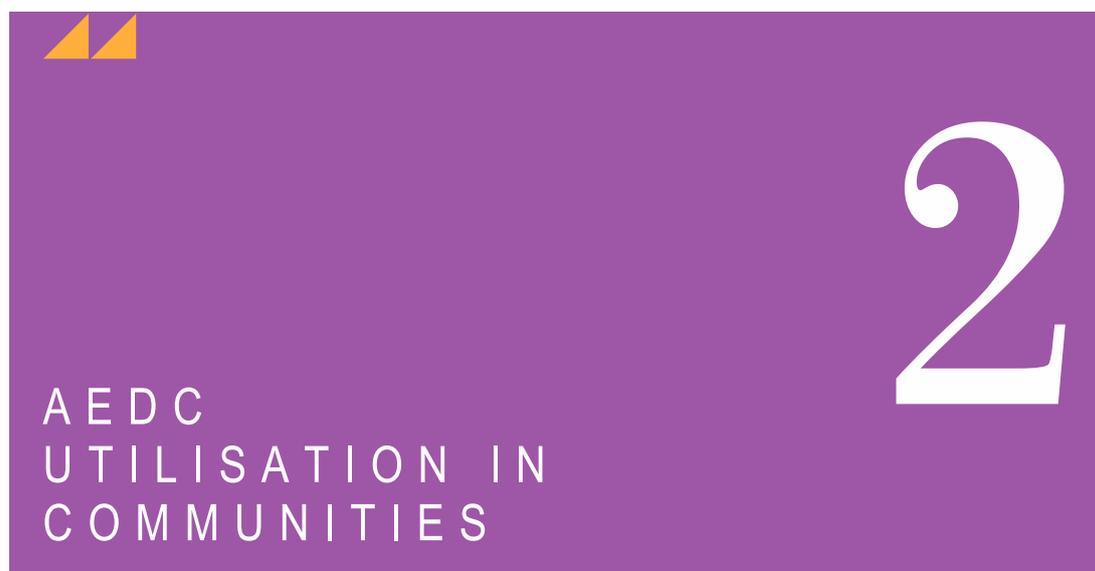
Stage	Activities
<i>Stage 1: Project mobilisation</i>	An initial meeting was held on project commencement between DET and the project team. This included discussion of the project objectives, scope and expectations, the project methodology and identification of the stakeholders to be consulted.
<i>Stage 2: Data collection and drafting</i>	The main focus of the data collection was to develop case studies that provide practical examples of engagement with the findings from the data. Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with eighteen stakeholders to gain an understanding of the focus activity, the role and impact of the AEDC, and lessons or opportunities to benefit future application of the AEDC.
<i>Stage 3: Final report</i>	At the conclusion of consultations, a small group workshop was held with DET to test the emerging consultation findings, consider the current and emerging Department context, and emerging directions. Following the workshop, a draft final report will be prepared that accounts for the feedback provided by the Department. The Department's feedback was considered in preparing the Final Report.

SOURCE: ACIL ALLEN, 2019

1.4 Sections of this document

The sections of this document are:

- *Chapter 2 AEDC utilisation in communities* – discusses themes from consultations and presents selected case studies.
- *Chapter 3 AEDC utilisation in policy* – discusses themes from consultations and presents selected case studies.
- *Chapter 4 AEDC utilisation in academic research* – discusses themes from consultations and presents selected case studies.
- *Chapter 5 Opportunities and conclusion* – summarises opportunities arising from the analysis.



This chapter discusses themes from consultations with stakeholders in communities and presents selected case studies.

BOX 2.1 OVERVIEW OF AEDC UTILISATION IN COMMUNITIES

Key themes in the feedback on AEDC utilisation were that:

- the AEDC provides insight into child development, increasing understanding about child development in communities and addressing a substantial gap in prior data
- the AEDC enables collaboration between levels of government and provides a common link between services in a community
- the AEDC is key tool in community planning, though not all communities have the capacity to unpack the richness of the dataset.

Consultees raised several areas where the AEDC and its use can evolve:

- better integrating planning, monitoring and research to achieve on the ground change
- expanding complementary datasets to provide additional information for communities
- continuing to build engagement with the AEDC, with schools identified as a particular service where strong engagement can have a big impact for a community.

SOURCE: ACIL ALLEN, 2019

2.1 Introduction

The AEDC helps communities understand how children are developing before they start school, what's being done well, and what can be improved. A key purpose of the AEDC is to help communities and local governments to tailor their services, resources and support to help young children and their families.

Nationally, AEDC materials are available to assist communities to access and understand the data. The national AEDC website also provides case studies on AEDC use by communities and tip sheets for supporting children to develop in the domains of the AEDC.

In Victoria, AEDC data is additionally presented alongside case examples of how communities are using the AEDC and other data to improve children's outcomes. This includes:

- maps of AEDC and other social data that enable communities to examine the available services and supports in conjunction with AEDC results
- case studies of communities that have turned the AEDC data into action
- maps of change over time in Victorian communities to visualise how community AEDC results have evolved from 2009 to 2015.

2.2 Themes from consultations

Key themes arose through the consultations regarding AEDC utilisation in communities. These are discussed below.

AEDC provides insight into child development for communities

Consultees noted that the AEDC has greatly increased understanding about child development in communities.

Without a doubt, it's the only tool we have that measures early development in Australia. People see the AEDC as a valid, reliable and strong dataset. We have four collection points now. The strength of it is that we are reliable in the data. The fact that we continue to do it over time is a strength, to see the trends and patterns over time.

The AEDC is vital. It tells us how children are tracking physically, emotionally and in their learning. The AEDC is the only thing that enables us to track over time, or compare region to region, and city to city.

I know that for one of our LGAs [local government areas] here, they had no idea about it. We had a look at the AEDC together. I nearly died when I saw theirs [results]. Their health data was like remote Australia. It was actually reflective of bigger issues in the community.

The AEDC has also addressed a substantial gap in data about child development and the services provided to families.

We had such massive gaps in understanding what's going on. Understanding the gaps in services is almost impossible. Schools and kinders are experiencing it every day, but how do you quantify, and actually attract some attention, and get some support. It did confirm people's anecdotal feeling, what their gut told them. We didn't have understanding beyond NAPLAN on how kids are travelling. We didn't have any measures about children. It was a massive gap. The ABS Census tells us about families and characteristics but doesn't tell us how children are going.

The Victorian Population Health Survey doesn't do anything in the child space and the department doesn't publish it. We use to have local profiles based on young people, adolescents, which was great, but since then we haven't had any data. We can't measure, and what you can't measure you can't change. Without the AEDC we'd be in a seriously bad position.

The usability of the AEDC has improved over time.

Its progressed a long way over eight years in terms of usability and profile in the community. Back then, only people in the early years knew about it. Now services working in health and wellbeing, or working with families, would have heard about it. The use is still mixed but awareness has grown so much. The profile has lifted and the usability has lifted. The online presence is so much better over eight years.

The Commonwealth [Government] put together the broad results and DET has developed the community profile, which has been a useful tool for community engagement. It's allowed councils to transfer the information that is known about a community to really progress discussion in the development of their planning. It's not about starting from scratch. It enables sophisticated dialogue. All local governments have a community engagement plan, and the AEDC has been used numerous times to help engage the communities and all the other service providers.

AEDC enables collaboration

The AEDC was noted as a way of connecting the actions at different levels of government, including reforms that are underway.

The AEDC is an important tool to communicate and to contribute new ways for state and local government to work together. It's not a new measure, but it is an important measure that has meaning at both levels.

The AEDC has a role in informing the community. There's major state reforms underway and this can help the community to understand why the change is important, what's happening, and what more needs to happen.

Several consultees noted that the AEDC had provided a common link between services which had enabled greater collaboration.

I think the AEDC has been well thought out in terms of the developmental domains. The AEDC aligns with the broader health dimensions that define how well the community is going. It's diminished the tit for tat that can go on with the health services and education. It's also highlighted the opportunity to say that every service that has an interaction with the child has a responsibility. We had a couple of meetings that were really hard, but once they could see the AEDC and impact indicators they could see the issues weren't one or the other. Impact indicators are like the glue. What are we doing, how are we doing it, how often do we meet? The data has provided a really invaluable tool to look at what the issues are. The conversation of 'we're all responsible for this, what can we do?'

It's about the strengths. It helps people identify where capacity can be built and how they can adjust what they do and when they do it. It gives an insight into what they can do different and how they can work collectively. It's initiated 'together is better'. We don't all have to jump in, but it's how I redesign my part of the work and share the knowledge. It's also helped us to have the conversation. It helps them see how they can be part of the collective to get the improved outcome for each child.

I went to the two local schools and brought the principals together and talked to them about the AEDC results and asked what more we can do to help. They had no idea. They take the surveys, but I think they need to do more to educate the schools. The principals had no idea we were that bad. I spoke to someone who thought school readiness wasn't important. He came to the local forum and now he's our biggest supporter. But there wasn't that knowledge that kids come at a developmentally vulnerable level. At our forum we probably had 12 representatives from our local primary school and even from our local secondary school.

Importantly, these collaborations were guiding areas for change.

The AEDC results steer us on what activities to focus on. It helps with what we put our time and energy into.

We've used it to monitor and redirect focus – we want the best bang for our buck. We have a good partnership here with the community, philanthropies, services. We show the AEDC and discuss what our community needs.

Interestingly, it's played out in practical ways. We're doing more screening and earlier, and we're talking about other things we can do and how we might target our services.

AEDC is a key tool in community planning

Consultees highlighted the role of the AEDC in local planning. This directly relates to council early years plans, and increasingly council Public Health and Wellbeing Plans.

When the AEDI concept started, it was very new in terms of it being a population understanding of where children were at. It was a new way for councils to drill down into how communities were going to a small level. When I look at when it started, and now, it is without a doubt one of the biggest planning tools councils have in planning, and in reviewing different services. It is really cemented in as a fundamental tool in planning.

There is a framework provided for local government early years planning. The AEDC has been critical to inform early years plans. These are changing and increasingly they're in council Health and Wellbeing plans. The AEDC is still the main measure for children in a community.

We have used it extensively to help define and develop strategies, helping schools unpack the school-level data. We made the data more user-friendly for each local area. We've now had proactive responses, people getting in touch, to use the AEDC to help shape service delivery.

Early years plans prior to 2009 were non-existent, now we have a stronger focus, driven by the data from the AEDC. The AEDC is a change driver.

Each four years we develop a Health and Wellbeing plan. The focus of additional effort is often on disadvantage. We realise that, at the population health level, change is very slow. Priorities and goals are often the same, actions change but priorities are similar. The fact that the AEDC is a regular cycle means can plan for data over time. Over the past decade it's been a guaranteed collection. We're confident that it's coming and can build it into our measures and the evaluation work. The maps also mean we can share it and engage others with it. Other data, such as through the ABS, we have to do lots work to make it plain and usable.

The AEDC has a key role – looking at the vulnerability of children earlier and earlier to design the right interventions and support for children.

It was also noted that the AEDC reporting is rich in additional data, though a deeper data capability is needed to unpack it's full benefits.

A strength of the AEDC is that it can be used as a simple measure, but there is a much more complex set of information in there. We've unpacked the domains where we've seen some change. Sometimes people who are coming across the domains need to see it what practically means so we describe the questions. How the domains come together and the richness. It's even more valuable than you'd realise.

At council, we have a manager who understands it intimately. They lead the strategic and service planning, and they know what they need to, to make it work. For those who have less use – such as a service making a funding application – they need support.

Rural councils have much less capacity and may not deliver services themselves. In our region of five councils we'd be the most aware and knowledgeable. There's definitely an urban rural divide in health and wellbeing planning and resourcing to use evidence – a big difference in capacity to use and apply this data. The economies of scale are not there so they don't, can't, build and develop the expertise and sharing of knowledge.

2.3 Evolution of the AEDC and its use

Consultees identified key areas by which the AEDC and its use can evolve.

Better integrating planning, monitoring and research to achieve change

Several consultees identified that AEDC is a common touchpoint across planning, policy and research. They identified that richer integration of these activities can lead to on the ground change.

I don't think it's quite hit its strength yet. People are really beginning to realise how powerful a tool it is. It's helping us to weave agencies together with purpose. The research... here's the thing... it's really good sitting in these research institutes, but how much actually gets used. Research is great, but it's only as good as what we do with it. I look at the evidence-based stuff... people say 'gurus' ... 'where are the people doing the doing?'. Whatever they decide with this, we need to think, ok what's going to make the difference to the people on the ground. How will it inform and empower and get people to reconsider their practice?

You've got really clear evidence for differentiated services. How can we use AEDC as a crucial and critical catalyst to get that cross-agency engagement to look at that differently? How do we understand each other's work? To be honest, it's not rocket science, but it's missing that view to build that horizontal collaboration. We need to build bridges across agencies, to build outcomes across the programs.

The Compact is an opportunity for a live, living process in which communities can get together providing information for the government and service providers to gauge how the community is going. For me, can it [the Compact] be extended to encompass universal platforms – MCH, early learning? I do think the Compact will be useful for communities and for government – it can be developed as a basis for planning, for early intervention. The AEDC is a centrepiece for this.

I think it could be used to identify communities who are improving their results. They should be showcased, and they can show how they've done it. We're always happy to share our information. It'd be great to show us their data and how they've done it. We'd be happy to try it. I think sharing the success of the communities. I think it would also be useful to highlight to

government where you need additional services. We don't have enough OTs [Occupational Therapists] or psychologists. If government directed some funding to those sorts of things it would be a great help.

Expanding complementary datasets

Consultees are using the AEDC in combination with other data but indicated a strong interest to expand the available information.

I think the AEDC needs to be seen in the continuum of life – looking early at intergenerational vulnerability as with the TDI [Toddler Development Instrument]. The AEDC is a critical measure in the early years, but I don't think it is early enough.

We have always used our AEDC dataset, not as a standalone, but along with kinder data, breastfeeding rates, crime data – we use it quite broadly. I'm really interested in linking it to NAPLAN and long-term outcomes, understanding the limitations between population data and individual data. We are talking about opportunities to have a broader focus on utilisation.

We'd like to see a spectrum of measures to have a sense of how children are travelling. There's a real interest in seeing from the start to how students are travelling through the school years. So, I can see definitely adding in the TDI and the MDI [Middle Years Development Instrument].

The AEDC team work hard to help us understand what the data means. They prepare the local maps which join the data up and they've been out to talk with the community. But I think they're working with second best, what's available, not what's needed. We'd need more surveys for this.

I think brother or sister collections to understand what it looks like at 18 months old and the transition from primary to secondary. These are really big gaps. There's lots of anecdotal feedback that children and young people are struggling but it's hard to know consistently where or why.

Continuing to build engagement with the AEDC

While progress had been made in building understanding of the AEDC, consultees were interested in continuing to develop community use of the data.

I think it has so much more potential to be used to inform decisions in community health and local government. Again, it's about understanding how to use it and visualise it – particularly for grassroots organisations who don't have specialty data analysis people. It has opportunities in local communities, that don't have that ability.

The tools that come with the AEDC, no matter who is using them – the council, community groups, providers, SRF development, senior-level government – I don't think it is promoted and marketed well enough. I'm not sure about others, but for communities, I think having it on an app in a visual way would also help.

The annual AEDC conference showed lots of ways how the AEDC can be used – this was great. We started to understand that it wasn't just numbers on a page.

Schools were identified as a service where strong engagement can have a big impact for a community.

Early on for us, it was important to show schools how we [the community] are doing. It's not about their performance. They are part of the community. They are there for forward planning in the early years.

I communicate and work with schools, teachers, and developed a teacher training pack. Originally, the response is that they didn't have time, but I went to the schools and promoted the use of the dataset to them. Most of it [my work] is about helping schools to understand the value of the AEDC. I would like to see most schools do it without me by 2021. I think there is an increase in the understanding of its use though.

I was shocked that they [the principals] didn't know! The reason I'm surprised is that, I remember doing a piece of work at a principal and teacher meeting around the early years

and saying, “these children will be coming to you soon, and this can have a legacy”. We have an obligation to be right across this.

It does make a difference, but it's not translated into DET particularly well. Where does it show in, you know, the school-level report, where is it showing? I don't know if it's being used as usefully as it could be. We do such a tap dance around NAPLAN. ... Maybe in fairness, it hasn't been as clear an expectation with principals. We've been very curriculum focused. There hasn't been a requirement for principals. If it hasn't been in their dataset, then it's not seen as a must, but as an extra.

2.4 Selected case studies

BOX 2.2 CASE STUDY – DRIVING COMMUNITY ACTION IN BENALLA

Tomorrow Today is a community foundation established in 2002 to create a stronger, more resilient Benalla community. The foundation raises money and provides grants.

Overview

The Education Benalla program is a Tomorrow Today activity. The aim is to improve education for children and young people. One goal is that all Benalla children start school ready to learn with a focus on parenting skills and practices. There are three other pillars – improving literacy and numeracy, improving wellbeing, and raising aspirations in our community.

Role of the AEDC

The AEDC results from 2009 created a focus for the community on school readiness and the 2012 results still indicated challenges. Understanding of potential AEDC use then increased following a 2015 DET forum sharing what other communities were doing.

We went to that forum and understood, wow, this is how we can use it. When we got the 2015 results, I took a deep dive and it showed that we'd made progress in quite a number of areas, but we hadn't made any inroads in social and emotional maturity. If you understand the AEDC you can see they [the domains and questions] act as guidelines to see what you have to do to make change.

As a result, the community organised a local forum to instigate change and set a plan in place.

We called a community forum with the department there to give it weight and significance. We had 53 early years professionals come along, we put up the results, and showed where we made improvements. It was about promoting how the AEDC could be used. We listed all the activities that were there with regards to each domain. We then developed a strategic plan, which has been in place since then.

Following this, the community put in place a program and activities aligned to the AEDC to support parents.

One of the ways we've made the change was to import an English program called PEEP [Parents Early Education Partnership]. It works with families and it's about parent education, and it's about encouraging parents to speak to their children. What we've also started to do is incorporate knowledge from the AEDC. We educate the parents on how they can prepare their child for school, especially the social and emotional areas where we weren't doing so well, and this spreads to all the children in their family.

When we developed our plan, it occurred to me that... well, what on earth happens when kids get to school and they aren't ready. We identified the need for a prep immersion program. We could go into the schools and work with the kids who were developmentally vulnerable. We've been running this program for three years, roughly 15-18 kids for the last three years. We've funded retired or on leave teachers to work for eight weeks, and the results have been really quite successful in bridging that gap between them and the other kids in the school. We're now running a similar program at the kinders. Now the school has funded us to do that. We've switched to a phonics program, and the kids made really good progress. The gap has been greatly bridged. That's a response to the AEDC over the years.

The community is developing a new plan and has continued to develop its understanding of the AEDC and the insights it can provide.

We have looked at where we've made successes and where we've plateaued a bit. We've combined our focus into three main thrust areas. One thing that is interesting is if you can get the full paper [the community results], you'll find all these interesting things – there's a lot about the background, the families of the kids in the background to the results. One of our board members has even linked the higher number of students with special needs, with perpetual disadvantage. That extra information is pretty useful.

We've still maintained all our activity, but we've used the AEDC to guide what we're doing. Our hope is that by 2021 that we'll be below the national average [in terms of developmental vulnerability]. It's really against the trend from disadvantaged communities to have that turnaround.

Learnings or opportunities

The AEDC is important for communities, particularly to examine progress over time.

It's the best available data that we've got. It's going to continue to be our most significant indicator. Because it's a national measure, and you know, it's administered consistently, they're the strengths. It isn't only a measure. It's a validated tool, and because it's recognised internationally it's pretty powerful data. Also, for funders, it's an arms-length measure. It's an Australia wide statistic so it's really significant for them.

The AEDC is valuable as it can be used in a range of community contexts, while connecting to the overall national picture.

I think there is a lot of value across Australia because you can drill down to tiny localities. I think the website is user friendly. It lets you compare neighbours and like communities. I think it would be useful for government to identify successful interventions, and it actually tracks our progress as a nation over time. It's that higher-level data, if you add it up, that could inform the thinking and policy making.

More support for communities from state government or through peer support, is an opportunity to improve AEDC utilisation.

I think increased community education on the data that's being collected, informing parents on the questionnaire itself, educating preschool parents on what they can do to make their child school-ready, and recognising that parents are their first and most important educator. Not all communities can do it, so peer support is important. We've done work with other communities and you always learn something new and hopefully its helping them.

See also: <https://tomorrowtoday.com.au/>

SOURCE: ACIL ALLEN, 2019

BOX 2.3 CASE STUDY – DRIVING COMMUNITY ACTION IN LODDON

The *Strong Families Strong Children* initiative supports children in Loddon Shire to start school ready to learn. It supports families and connects them with education, health and wellbeing services. The initiative has received funding from the William Buckland Foundation.

Overview

In 2016, the Principal of a local Pre-Year 12 school connected with other education leaders to discuss the developmental needs of students starting school. In late 2016, a *Strong Families Strong Children* network forum was attended by more than 30 staff from schools, community and health services, and government departments. It built a shared understanding about the status of local children and a commitment to improve alignment of effort. In 2017, new data were collected using the Middle Years Development Instrument (MDI) and placed alongside the AEDC.

In late 2017, North Central Local Learning and Employment Network (LLEN), on behalf of key stakeholders, received funding to reshape the service system to better meet the needs of families, with a dedicated focus on 20 families (around 180 children). As described by one consultee:

It is early days (we commenced on the ground in May 2018) but we are optimistic that through addressing each of the child's and family's barriers to accessing and engaging in the services they need, that we will be able to re-shape the early years service-system leading to better outcomes.

The initiative is led by an Early Years Facilitator who is an experienced Speech Pathologist. The overall approach is structured as follows:

1. *Direct service delivery* – work with each family including mapping out needs and barriers to them acting and their priorities.
2. *Strengthening the sector* – the learnings from family work are shared to re-shape the service system to make it more responsive and easier to navigate, and may lead to workforce development support or advocacy to address gaps in the system
3. *Community awareness raising and development* – bring together a broader range of community supports (i.e. schools, libraries) to share their resources and facilitate innovative ways to benefit all children in our different communities.

Role of the AEDC

The community examined the AEDC in more detail following as a progression work with schools. In particular, the LLEN and the school community were a natural partnership and had also been involved with the MDI. At the same time, a community project was underway in which speech pathology support was provided in schools. As one consultee further explained:

From this work, teachers were saying that children were entering schools with poor literacy and numeracy. At that stage, the focus was children in their class who couldn't read rather than broader social / emotional issues. We heard this information anecdotally, but there was no data on what it means for the community. We knew broadly about the AEDC, but we didn't know how powerful it could be.

Another catalyst was an AEDC state-wide forum with follow up at the local level.

Being exposed to how to use it is important. With the forum, thinking from a community point of view how the AEDC is being used, it was fascinating to hear others talk about the cross-sectorial [learning, health, well-being] impact. The case studies resonate with you with what you know anecdotally. It is a credible data and methodology, and we thought we could bring it to the ground to help inform decision making. That was what motivated me in the early days from just the LLEN focus on secondary schooling to understand what was happening prior. We then went and had an early years session by DET locally and there were presentations on the varied tools that exist within the AEDC, overlaying maps etc.

The AEDC results were the basis for the funding application and the program's design.

The funding application followed analysis showing children in the Loddon Shire are more than twice as likely to arrive at school inappropriately dressed, late, tired or hungry, and the region has higher rates than the Victorian average of families facing disadvantage and children lacking physical independence and motor skills for school.

The AEDC was used to target additional support from current services.

A strength of the AEDC is that it highlights areas where we can put funding. Here, it is very much a universal platform. We wanted to target funding for the community to the most vulnerable families. We looked at language communication and physical to identify vulnerable children. We identified activities to try to shift these results.

The AEDC is also used to measure impact on the readiness of children to go to school.

We are relying on the AEDC to tell our story. Getting re-funding is likely dependent on whether the outcomes are improved on the AEDC. If we are not getting the right results, then it shows that maybe the way we are doing things isn't right.

Learnings or opportunities

The AEDC is a guide to understanding the success of actions.

We've seen a real shift in the way service providers are sharing information, and the MCH nurses. There have been changes in behaviours, but the outcome will be in the data shift in the AEDC. We are re-shaping the service system through the lens of the 20 most vulnerable children. It makes sense in theory and it seems, in practice.

The focus for the community is change across the life course of child and adolescence.

I think it needs to be seen in the whole continuum. It's important to have the whole continuum. If we were just looking at one part of the continuum, then the partners will pull away. That's very much the LLEN's vision and I think beyond that. We've got lots of partners; local government has been fascinating. You've got the situation where local government is the universal platform, it's what the community sees. They provide care from birth to death – the community's vision is most easily understood through their relationship with the local government.

Rural communities need a local champion to support build understanding of the AEDC and how it is used.

There needs to be a key champion to help with the interpretation of the AEDC data. In a rural community you can't have everyone knowing everything. It is critical for someone to understand how to drill down, otherwise it's just numbers on a page. We've been asked to present at council meetings, schools, for services about the AEDC data and how it can be used. There needs to be someone with that capability.

See also: <http://www.ncllen.org.au/sfsc-loddon.html>

SOURCE: ACIL ALLEN, 2019



3

AEDC UTILISATION IN POLICY

This chapter discusses themes from consultations with stakeholders in government policy development and monitoring, and selected case studies.

BOX 3.1 OVERVIEW OF AEDC UTILISATION IN POLICY



Key themes in the feedback on AEDC utilisation were that:

- the AEDC is highly valued for its comprehensiveness (i.e. across domains, national collection) and clarity in providing a headline measure of developmental vulnerability
- the AEDC is used to understand children’s outcomes, particularly changes over time and differences between geographic areas
- the AEDC communicates the importance of the early childhood period in human development
- the AEDC informs regional planning for the early years as well as broader partnerships that monitor the wellbeing of communities
- as a population measure, the AEDC isn’t used to measure service performance.

Consultees raised several areas where the AEDC and its use can evolve:

- making more of the current AEDC data through data linkage and as an impetus for strategic conversations about child development
- prompting a more sophisticated understanding of influences in children’s lives, such as housing or the economy
- taking a life course approach joining the available data and addressing gaps in data, particularly prior to school
- continuing efforts to build understanding of the AEDC
- increasing the speed at which AEDC data becomes available and for more frequent collections.

SOURCE: ACIL ALLEN, 2019

3.1 Introduction

The AEDC assists governments to examine developmental changes in populations of children at varied geographies, such as state, regional or community levels. The routine collection of AEDC data also supports analysis of variations in children’s vulnerability across time. This understanding is intended to support policy makers to make informed decisions about policies and programs for children and families.

The AEDC website provides access to data in various forms to support such activities. In addition, summary data analyses are available through the website that examine data trends for states and territories over time.

Materials are also available through the AEDC website on potential uses of AEDC data, such as for allocation of resources and services to more effectively meet the needs of children and families, informing strategic plans, monitoring the progress of communities over time, and assessing the impact of policy changes. Alongside this data, several resources and case studies are provided outlining the use of the AEDC in policy making and monitoring.

3.2 Themes from consultations

Key themes arose through the consultations regarding AEDC utilisation in policy development and monitoring.

AEDC is a highly valued data set

Consultees considered the AEDC to be a highly valued data set for its holistic coverage of children's development (i.e. across five developmental domains), national collection and strength in monitoring populations over time.

It's absolutely the jewel in the crown to look at how we're tracking. If we didn't have the AEDC, we'd have to invent it. The thing I love is that it is holistic. For example, we use that data along with research evidence about the importance of oral language development in a children's journey. We use it to understand social and emotional development – it's one of our key data in social areas. We use the data at a local and state-wide area.

It really matters because it is a clear and measurable indicator of progress, based on individual children, for monitoring population health outcomes. It is such a great measure. People understand it and can use it – certainly, the service system does. I wouldn't expect so for families. It measures the right thing. It is also important because it measures the right thing in terms of creating long term changes.

It's standardised across Australia. The only other outcome data to compare across Australia in this way is NAPLAN.

Consultees also valued the clear message as headline measure of developmental vulnerability and the ability to communicate this measure at different geographic levels.

I think it's a nice and simple measure. It's easy for people to relate with because it's broken into suburbs. The first thing people do is look at their suburbs. The major strength is its simplicity.

It's an entry point for many people and a starting point for further investigation.

As a result, consultees identified that the AEDC data is accepted and understood across government.

I think the categorisation of developmentally vulnerable children seems to be generally accepted. What it means to be vulnerable in the health of social domains, we use these a fair bit. The other indicators, developmental indicators on 1 or 2 domains, we use this.

Because its accepted, it can help refocus people.

AEDC is used to understand how Victorian children are faring

Consultees use the data to understand children's outcomes, particularly changes over time and differences between geographic areas.

It's preeminent in the data we've got at an outcomes level alongside the QARD data⁴ to tell us about the quality of the services. We're looking at the AEDC data on a state-wide level and disaggregated – so we're able to use it to see if what we're doing is working or not working. It's kind of the diagnostic of the performance of the early childhood system.

We analyse the data when it comes in for a number of things – for example, the basic state-level comparisons over time. The regional and school level that we share with the regions. Particularly with the schools that have concentrated areas.

⁴ Quality Assurance and Regulation Division (QARD) data refers to information on the quality ratings of early childhood education and care services under the National Quality Standards.

The distribution is not just in low SES families. There is data that shows the highest number of developmentally vulnerable children are in the middle class – it shows the universality of the problem.

AEDC communicates the importance of the early childhood period in development

Consultees recognised that the AEDC has a role in communication and advocacy about the importance of the early childhood period.

It's effective as an advocacy piece and data. It makes a short, sharp point on why we want to invest in the early years. You see the cut through stat. everywhere – for example, 1 in 5 children are at-risk.

It's the evidence base of the 1 in 5, more than the absolute value, that resonates with people, communicates the problem. No one would think that it is a good thing.

The thing we found incredibly powerful was the data linkage with the NAPLAN results. That was a very concrete way to validate for people that if you start behind then you stay behind. It also helps validate the idea that the measure is right and indicative of outcomes.

AEDC informs regional planning

The AEDC is used in regional planning for the early years but also broader partnerships that monitor the wellbeing of communities.

It's also used in our Early Years Compact [regional forum] discussions. We have conversations at a local level along with other input and output variables about what's going on in a particular community.

We have been using it in the Compact and for School Readiness Funding. It's now been picked up in the regional partnerships. It's informing planning. It's gaining traction as a policy tool and some traction as an operational tool. They [regional partnerships] are a bottom-up, placed-based initiative providing advice to government. They have been given a suite of data including the AEDC data. This is a good example of how the AEDC is used and informing policy. The AEDC is one data-point with immunisation rates, under attendance, etc. It is probably the most important measure for children under 5 – in particular, the vulnerability measure.

AEDC isn't used to measure service performance

There was recognition that the AEDC is a population measure and this limits its use for individual service operations.

We also have other measures we use for example, the school entry questionnaire, and the English online screening test. These are other assessments at 5-years old that are more individually accurate for schools. I'm not sure whether trying to change the AEDC to a more local and operational tool is needed because we have a range of other things at this level.

I think AEDC is giving back information to schools that they are giving to us. I think its information and supporting information.

A consultee also reflected on experiences in the United Kingdom (UK), while noting that the connection between contextual data and service provision is less direct in Victoria.

It is different when local government has more direct control. In the UK, there was a lot more importance placed on the contextual factors. There were more indicators around the performance of students and young people in groups. Services were engaged in the data in that way. It was a much more integrated provision market. There was a much stronger ability to direct services and behaviour in practice. It responded to the community.

3.3 Evolution of the AEDC and its use

Consultees agreed that the evolution of AEDC use was important, identifying practical areas for development.

Making more of the current AEDC data

Consultees expressed interest in additional analyses to inform policy. Greater data linkage is one area for development.

I can see it evolving in a number of ways. I think they need to push the insights and analytics space to make it as valuable as possible. Data linkage at a unit record level if we can maintain the anonymity while doing the data linkage. We know the AEDC has unique identifiers. Anything that can join them together on an individual level.

In addition, several consultees noted the need for strategic conversations starting with the problem and using this as the basis for identifying priority actions.

There is a real opportunity for the AEDC to inform federal policy. It's about making sure that people understand its capability to inform policy and planning. The different jurisdictions are all involved in joint policy and joint provision. I think AEDC can play a critical role in showing where we are at in terms of vulnerability and help with where we want to move to.

Shifting the AEDC at scale... what would it take? As far as I know, with the exception of some of the place-based people, that's not a conversation in policy. They think I'll just improve the bit that I do.

More sophisticated understanding of influences in children's lives

Consultees were interested in more routinely combining the AEDC with other complementary data to see the bigger picture on influences in children's lives, such as housing or the economy.

It's important to be able to step out periodically and actually see, when we add it all up, the combination of all different kinds of supports. Ideally you want to map AEDC data to delivery data, you want a heat map that tells you about behaviour, engagement, parental unemployment, family violence. I think it helps to bring us back to the idea that ECE [early childhood education] is really important, but so are a lot of really big picture things, and how do we think about that. How do we join up AEDC data with other fascinating pieces? This is the bit where I'm not sure we've squeezed all the juice out of what we've got. I don't know we've been able to tell a coherent story about what's going on before we try and short circuit that by putting more weight on one particular input.

Someone needs to do a proper strategic analysis. Someone who understands related datasets. We have increasing numbers of parents... we have an increasingly casualised workforce who are in more part time, more casual roles, we haven't had wage growth. What is the evidence on how the economy is travelling, what are the other sorts of causal relationships on children's outcomes? Then it needs someone to be able to talk about that to senior bureaucrats about what the AEDC means. I think people are always hungry for evidence, for analytic insights.

Life course approach

A view of development across the life course was a focus for a number of consultees. For some, this was a matter of joining the available data.

I think we take what it is and make sure it's regularly executed and make much more of what's actually in it. Not just policy, but strategic policy. My own view is that we should think of the AEDC and other sorts of quality (service output) measures as part of the scorecard. There's no one ring to bind them all. The idea was that NAPLAN was going to be that. AEDC is better, in that in that it's holistic.

We use AEDC as a starting point, then move to SEHQ [School Entrant Health Questionnaire], because it is simple to use. We walk them through the various data to NAPLAN. The AEDC is not so much for monitoring because it doesn't tell us anything new, it's about where to invest our time and resources. The strength is that it is a population measure across Australia. We can compare nationally and consistently used. The early years sector are starting to engage with it more at the service level.

Consultees raised that we have a gap in understanding what happens prior to school.

We have championed the TDI for a while. The idea that you have something before five years old would be useful and important at a population level. I'm persuaded by these arguments. I

don't know if the cost outweighs the benefits. We haven't done detailed work on this but if we have the Toddler Developmental Instrument, we would certainly use it.

Continuing to build understanding of the AEDC

Consultees considered that understanding of the AEDC was still developing and that there is continuing work required to assist understanding of AEDC data and the use it can have.

I'm not sure schools do much with it – there might be an opportunity for schools to use the AEDC. What actually happens when kids get to school and how schools respond., and how the AEDC played a role – these are important questions.

I don't think we have cracked the local level in a universal way. Engagement in the local government level for areas and communities is in the mid-range. Many schools don't see it as a universal tool. People are seeing it more over time though. We need to keep leveraging it as a tool – getting Principals and Prep coordinators working closely to improve educational levels, and opportunities in this space.

A limitation is the sector knowledge and knowledge of how it can be utilised, for services like MCH, kindergartens. I think there's quite limited understanding of the data beyond the leadership roles. Schools know a bit more of it because they collect the data, but I'm not sure whether the data is used much in schools.

I wonder how well the AEDC is used by the secondary and tertiary level services for planning. It [the AEDC] obviously outlines vulnerability so should align with a lot of what's happening at those levels of the service system.

Collection frequency and availability of the AEDC data

There was interest in increasing the speed at which AEDC data becomes available and in having more frequent collections to pick up patterns for individuals.

The time it takes to disseminate – the kinds of data filtering and speed – it takes a long time. Schools get their reports within weeks to months, but the conversation with local government is much longer. The community-level data is slow. If these are quicker, it might be more utilised.

There's a pragmatic side on the data release – if it only pops up every 3 years it falls off people's radar. If you create an annual event, it forces the community to push it to the front of their mind.

Because it's only every three years – potentially we need something more frequent. It would be a census in combination with other measures which might be more frequent but less holistic.

...every 3 years is probably not enough to pick up individual kids. For example, depending on when children start kinder/school, then we may miss a large time period for pivotal data collection.

3.4 Selected case studies

BOX 3.2 CASE STUDY – STATE OF VICTORIA'S CHILDREN REPORT

The State of Victoria's Children (SoVC) report series considers examines the wellbeing of Victorian children and young people.

Overview

The 2017 SoVC report focused on the health and wellbeing of children. The report uses a life course perspective – from the early childhood period to adulthood – to examine human development and the service and social influences on development.

The report outlines research and recent data to provide a comprehensive picture of how Victorian children are faring. The report also adds to the evidence-base about children's health and wellbeing, including insight to areas to support child development.

The report is underpinned by the Victorian Child and Adolescent Monitoring System (VCAMS). VCAMS is a whole of government approach to monitoring and reporting how Victorian children are faring. VCAMS includes an Outcomes Framework and associated data collection and reporting on children and young people's health, wellbeing, safety, learning and development outcomes.

Role of the AEDC

The AEDC features prominently in the 2017 SoVC report providing data on health, wellbeing, learning and development. The report draws on AEDC data collections over time, enabling tracking on key measures and identifying changes in key outcomes.

The report also draws on research undertaken using the AEDC. For example:

- research using the AEDC highlighting the positive relationship between kindergarten and healthy development
- research indicating that developmental vulnerability at school entry on the AEDC is associated with poorer future educational achievement.

Learnings or opportunities

The AEDC has a key role in the SoVC and more broadly and as part of VCAMS public data. It was explained that the SoVC and VCAMS complement each other.

The SoVC report gives the state view. The AEDC is drawn on pretty heavily. VCAMS data [through the portal] goes in tandem with SoVC reports. VCAMS generally provides local government level data. It means that local level data and the state data can be compared.

The SoVC report takes a life course perspective on the development of young Victorians. While drawing on data collected through VCAMS and other research, a number of gaps are evident in measuring and tracking development in key domains. As one consultee noted:

We undertake surveys and data collections at different points in early childhood and schooling. These surveys have developed over time. We can make more of what's there but stepping back and looking at what else is out there is a useful activity. We've done this in the past and iteratively developed our collections. The AEDC is a more holistic approach. Should we be that broad throughout the school years, I'm not sure. But there's gaps to be addressed. We're working on our understanding of learning achievement at entry to school through English and Maths on-line. The social / emotional dimension we do through sample surveys. We're trialling the MDI.

Engagement with the findings of SoVC reports was another area of consideration.

A lot of work goes into the report. It's a big publication and it's important that it meets a need. It contains a lot of information that wouldn't otherwise be available, and it appears to be valued. We hear that its used in a range of ways by local government, by organisations applying for philanthropic funding. In schools we've put a lot of work into building data literacy. Generally, I think there's a growing interest in data. How you engage people, how you get their interest that's what's important.

See also: <https://www.education.vic.gov.au/about/research/Pages/reportdatachildren.aspx>

SOURCE: ACIL ALLEN, 2019

BOX 3.3 CASE STUDY – SCHOOL READINESS FUNDING

School Readiness Funding is a Victorian initiative that provides extra funding for preschool program providers so they can purchase additional programs or supports to help children to get the most out of their early learning. The amount of School Readiness Funding each service receives is based on the level of need of the cohort of children at the service.

Overview

The School Readiness Funding initiative commenced in 2019 in 32 Victorian communities. The initiative is being progressively rolled out to all 79 Victorian communities over three years.

Preschool providers can use the funding to support goals in the three priority areas of communication (language development), wellbeing (social and emotional), and access and inclusion.

As part of the initiative, an annual School Readiness Funding plan must be prepared for each service. These plans draw on local and service-level data to determine the needs of each service. A mid-year review and end-of-year acquittal confirm how School Readiness Funding has been spent.

Role of the AEDC

The development of a School Readiness Funding annual plan is a collaborative activity to engage the service community. This collaboration seeks to enrich decision making and ensures the development of common goals for the service's continuous improvement.

- *Collect information* – Step 1 is for services to collect information, being data (including the AEDC) and feedback from the service community
- *Analyse the information* – Step 2 is for services to examine the information collected to identify the overall service needs at a community/child, service and educator level
- *Identify priority areas* – Step 3 is for services to identify their priorities and activities for the funding.

Throughout the process, services are encouraged to consider the needs of children and families that attend the service and in the community.

Learnings or opportunities

The AEDC is an influential tool to talk with services about the needs of children in the community.

With the introduction of School Readiness Funding we use the AEDC in working with services. We use the AEDC data as a source for the service provider to understand what's going on in their local community. It's been a really important data literacy journey. We're only in our first year. The money [School Readiness Funding] in of itself is valuable, but it's also a good spur to better understanding the children in the local community.

Understanding of the AEDC is still developing.

We have a focus in this area about increasing the use of this data in planning for the use of readiness for school funding. There was about 10 per cent of people who have used it. We have put together focus groups to help increase this, which has improved the utilisation. The data is telling us where the needs are which informs where we need to focus.

See also: <https://www.education.vic.gov.au/childhood/providers/funding/Pages/srf.aspx#link5>;
<https://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/childhood/providers/funding/school-readiness-funding-annual-planning-guide.pdf>

SOURCE: ACIL ALLEN, 2019



This chapter discusses themes from consultations with stakeholders in academic research and presents selected case studies.

BOX 4.1 OVERVIEW OF AEDC UTILISATION IN ACADEMIC RESEARCH

Key themes in the feedback on AEDC utilisation were that:

- the AEDC has raised interest in childhood research bringing expertise and resources
- the AEDC is a valued, high-quality data set
- the AEDC has been effective in stimulating community interest for change
- the AEDC provides a snapshot of development at one time point, but there is interest in a broader view of early human development and its influences.

Consultees raised several areas where the AEDC and its use can evolve:

- enhanced data linkage, including routine linkage with school data and potentially with biological data
- additional surveys across the life-course that extends understanding of the well-being of children and young people and the social factors that influence their development
- continuity of the current instrument is important to maintain its current strengths and research being conducted
- better ways to engage communities to engage with the AEDC data to facilitate its use.

SOURCE: ACIL ALLEN, 2019

4.1 Introduction

The AEDC provides data to support research in relation to better understand early childhood development and the early years of schooling. AEDC data reflects the environments and experiences children are exposed to, and enables researchers to examine factors impacting on children's development.

Researchers use AEDC data to develop research agendas and undertake analysis to identify new knowledge about the social and biological determinants of children's health, well-being and development. This research supports other activities, such as policy and program development. The questionnaire is highly researched from a reliability and validity perspective.

The AEDC results are available online as part of a suite of data resources including tables, maps, graphs, and user guides. The AEDC website includes the Data Guidelines setting out the principles and protocols governing the management, access, use, and dissemination of AEDC data. In addition, data can be requested for research purposes at microdata and microdata levels.

4.2 Themes from consultations

Several major themes regarding AEDC utilisation were raised in the consultations.

Raising interest in childhood research, bringing expertise and resources

The AEDC is seen as an important commitment that the early childhood period matters and has a role in shaping the long-term health and well-being of Australians.

Childhood is a period of rapid development and the AEDC pays attention to this stage of life and the conditions that support it. Fundamentally, the AEDC means we have a foundation for understanding the growth of children in Australia.

Consultees highlighted the role of the AEDC in harnessing the expertise and resources of researchers and organisations on young children.

The AEDC has brought in technical capacity. Research is driven by inquiry but also possibility. Having the AEDC means we have a substantial data set that can be linked and examined over time.

The AEDC is helping generate new insights into what is driving child development in Australia. Further, the involvement of government signifies interest in evidence to guide decisions on policy and the role that research can play.

There's been important research arising out of the AEDC. Not many countries have a data set like this. A census of a nation's children at school entry is not common. It's a unique opportunity and it raises the interest in research and its possibilities.

The continued investment of governments indicates interest in data for policy and for communities.

A valued, high-quality data set

Through the AEDC, researchers gain access to detailed early years development data to enhance the early years evidence base. In addition, its implementation as a national census provides scope for comparison between communities. The repeated collection over time also provides opportunities to observe change.

Consultees highlighted important strengths of the AEDC.

The survey instrument has been through testing – it's been developed through validation processes, implementation acceptability testing, and for cultural appropriateness.

Its design covers key development domains that are linked to child health, education and social outcomes. Its design also means that it is appropriate for populations, while access to unit record data is powerful for linkage purposes.

Nonetheless, it is also important to take care in data interpretation.

The evidence here is subject to huge influence from changes in residences. Over a five-year period, people move out, you can be working on an entirely different population. I don't think there is a resolution. It's just important to be open to its limitations.

Effective in stimulating community change

The instrument has been effective in stimulating interest in the community on how kids are developing. As one consultee explained:

The other valuable thing is that the AEDC is fed back and made available to the community. We have provided some feedback from our work to local schools, to give them the profile of children. We do this so that the schools can get a snapshot of how children are faring.

Feedback to communities is an impetus for discussion and both change in the short and long term.

Firstly, it supports the creation of change to strengthen outcomes for communities. It's important so that local people know how they are tracking, what can be done to improve

outcomes, to allocate resources. Secondly, community engagement with the data will provide sustainability, that they see the pay-off from their efforts.

It's been an important and useful measure to stimulate local discussion about child development. Its galvanised a terrific interest among those working with young children. It's given them something that they can take to politicians to point to and say we have work to do in these areas. They stimulate local advocacy and interest in how children are developing.

A snapshot of development at one time point

Several consultees identified concern for the bigger picture of measurement regarding Australia's children and young people. In particular, that while energy has focussed on securing the AEDC commitment and some adaptation to the AEDC, the agenda should be broader than one-data point.

The AEDC is one point in time. It's a good beginning and a significant commitment, but its not everything. The focus on the AEDC can be unhelpful in some regards. Its not perfect and it doesn't represent all of child development. We need to focus on the AEDC in addition to other system-wide data. As they say, 'in the land of the blind, the one-eyed man is king', but I'm not sure that focus is sufficient.

In some jurisdictions you can have some access to the bluebook – books the family carry with them that measure immunization, etc. Otherwise the 60-month landscape to the AEDC is a walk through a data dessert – a barren data environment, unless the family has a high level of particular need which causes them to go into the department. That means our understanding can only be for these children. The AEDC gives population-level data from the beginning of age 5.

There is interest in a broader view of children and young people's development and its influences. But, while government has a key role to play, the catalyst for future action may not rest with government.

I don't think people appreciate that in childhood we have the seeds for the future of this country. We need to invest in that. Investment in children shouldn't be seen as a cost. We need to ensure that children have the best possible start to life and have resources lavished on them.

We can take this broader view. We have organisations that champion it, such as ARACY, but we don't seem to get the governments aligned. A focus on changes for young people across childhood and adolescence is what's needed. There's a separate focus on health, a focus on education, wellbeing – we can do better.

At present, we seem satisfied with the current approach. I don't see them [government] having the imagination of looking forward and seeing how we develop its value into the future. So, no I'm not optimistic [that development will happen].

In addition, caution was added in seeking to understand the development of individual children prior to age five due to variation in development in the early years of life.

I'm not convinced at all that we have any stability in the measurement environment to step in and capture sensitive measures during that period of time. All the development data suggests to us that development capacity in the age of 2-4 years epoch are extremely volatile and variable. Kids move between ranges significantly. I think we are positioning development measures at about 4-5 pretty intelligently, and things have settled a little at these ages. At the age of 2, a check of language development is useful and check with the family that the kids are interested in languages and monitor late language bloomers. The point of a measure at around the ages of 4-5 are good.

I wouldn't be suggesting a measuring environment around 3-4 that's aimed at the child, but I would be interested in what the kids have access to at this time.

4.3 Evolution of the AEDC and its use

Consultees agreed that the evolution of the AEDC and its use was important, though needs to proceed carefully to maintain the current strengths.

Enhanced data linkage

Consultees identified that data linkage is a major opportunity that could be undertaken to support teaching and for new areas of science.

Linkage to emerging school entry tests are foreseen.

The government is on the cusp on implementing diagnostic measurements in year 1-2, the entry point of learning. The environment is constantly changing. I don't think this is competitive with the AEDC. A lot of the activity at the school entry points is pushing really hard now in getting some diagnostic measure to aid teaching for disadvantaged kids.

Another area is linkage to biological data.

It would be very nice to have some biological data, particularly genomic data, and then linked to the AEDC profiles and then health and other long-term outcomes. This would be a very long term. I'm not sure that the population is ready, and it would be challenging at the ethics, politics level. There will also need to be a discussion on what genomics has to offer.

I think AEDC and linkage to CheckPoint is a wonderful thing, and I think the real challenge is putting this all together. CheckPoint provides the first national data on heart, lung and other aspects of health for Australian 11-12 year olds and their parents.

Additional surveys across the life-course

There was interest from several consultees in using complementary surveys to gather information in important areas. A particular focus is a life-course approach that adds surveys of the well-being of children and young people and the social factors that influence their development.

Much of the work of key groups such as ARACY, centres on the wellbeing of Australia's children and young people as they grow and develop. We have the AEDC and we can, and should, be building on this. We have a major opportunity here, in our existing survey infrastructure [the AEDC], in the community interest, and in our national interest.

A life course approach, building on the AEDC, is what we are trying to do with our work. The AEDC is one-time point at school entry. It's an important part of the picture. I do recognise that this is a snapshot every 3 years, but the life-course is important.

There would be advantages in doing supplementary surveys in later years (middle schools), adding in a toddler development instrument. Assessing the cohorts longitudinally would be of interest.

Continuity of the current instrument

Consultees reinforced that consistency of the current instrument is important. A key aspect of the AEDC's value is that it provides a longitudinal data set which enables research and examination over time. This ability to look across time requires consistency in the instrument. Consultees also cautioned against adaptations to the instrument that extend beyond its original purpose. As a result, consultees did not suggest extensive change.

There is plenty of work in my view with the AEDC as it exists. I wouldn't consider it rapidly changing, because then it is a moving target. If it gets altered too much, it just promotes an environment of uncertainty about the efficacy of the measure. I'd be advocating for a very slow change and progressive change on the AEDC entirely based on a methodology and evidence for why a change is made.

I don't think the upper range of the instrument should be extended – away from a vulnerability perspective. We don't have evidence that is stable enough in five years up into later ages in life.

Better ways to engage communities

Consultees were also interested in new ways that the data can be provided to communities to facilitate its effective use in planning and service provision.

A key issue is to support engagement with the data.

I think the key thing is the way it is communicated to the community. I worry the AEDC is not valued because of how the data is laid out. Perhaps give the data to a data scientist, to get the geographical mapping and data animation (if need be) to make the data more valuable locally.

The AEDC data may be an overload – communities get all this data.

Opportunities to enhance the use of AEDC were greater data engagement, such as using smaller data as an entry point to more complex data analysis, and assisting communities to understand the story or narrative in the data.

What we need is a data digest – a way of giving bite-sized pieces. I think there's just a limit of the human brain to process data. The issue is when you collect too much data and present too much data to people, they just get overwhelmed and get lost – that's the big problem. That's where the vulnerability scale comes in. It digests the data heavily – people look at the map and they get this – then you can start to deep dive into the domains and profiles. there's something that needs to be done there in the science communication and data visualisation.

The main story needs to be seen. It's like having a big map of a region and looking at it from on high, for the community, not from one standpoint. What's the message from up high? That's where it starts.

It all comes down to whether the community can digest the data. Even with machine learning and big data – this is only useful if it can be presented to the community in a meaningful way. A lot of people aren't data literate. A lot of people don't have a strong data background.

4.4 Selected case studies

BOX 4.2 CASE STUDY – NSW CHILD DEVELOPMENT STUDY

The NSW Child Development Study (NSW-CDS) was set up to identify the risk factors for poor mental health in adolescence and young adulthood.

The study has a number of government partners and has attracted interest from policy makers, practitioners and researchers interested in a range of areas, such as child protection outcomes, forensic outcomes, and education outcomes.

Study overview

The study identifies profiles of risk, as well as protective factors, of subsequent mental health outcomes. The methodology for the study is based on unit record linkage. Data from the AEDC for NSW cohort in 2009 was linked to the child's birth record, mental health record, child protection record, education record (NAPLAN), and a database that gives us school expulsions and suspensions data, police data (criminal record). Using the birth record we were able to identify the parents (mother and father), and we were able to link the data to the parents' health records and criminal records. Research using data linkage has used a successive framework: pre-birth to 5 years of age, then up to age 13-14, then up to 16-17 years.

Role of the AEDC

The AEDC from 2009 was the basis of identifying the cohort to be followed. In NSW, the study has linked 87,000 children (72,000 sets of parents).

The AEDC was important because we could draw on a comprehensive state-wide data set. The AEDC also contained data that was highly relevant to the psychosocial factors of interest.

It [the AEDC data] was by far the best available and is universal.

Learnings or opportunities

The study team has a focus on the impact of the research and has developed relationships with government.

The overarching aim is to be able to influence government policy in relation to mental health, education etc. We have developed and maintained close relationships with the three departments. We hold meetings to share the findings and seek to influence improvements in policy.

The study could be replicated nationally and undertaken on a rolling basis.

We've been able to associate a number of factors at birth to age 5 (from AEDC) that are strongly predictive of mental health. This supports prevention early in life for mental health. I think we could repeat the methodology in NSW on the national level. Linking AEDC with administrative records – health, criminal justice etc., so that we can get an ongoing and rolling picture on child development and outcomes.

Research builds over time and there's opportunity in building on what's come before.

The Study has built up over a number of projects and research grants. I first started when I was working on schizophrenia. At the end of this time, there was some money left that I allocated to write a grant to the ARC which was successful. We did a pilot study to look at the probabilistic data linkage. This was an ARC linkage grant which was supported by NSW departments. The ARC grant was for 5 years. Our other investigators have also received grants bringing money in for continued work.

See also: <http://nsw-cds.com.au/>; [https://www.aedc.gov.au/researchers/resources-for-data-users/research-projects/research-project/nsw-child-development-study-program-\(wave-3\)-linkage](https://www.aedc.gov.au/researchers/resources-for-data-users/research-projects/research-project/nsw-child-development-study-program-(wave-3)-linkage).

SOURCE: ACIL ALLEN, 2019

BOX 4.3 CASE STUDY – COMPREHENSIVE MONITORING ACROSS CHILDHOOD AND ADOLESCENCE

The trial will examine the potential to survey social-emotional development using a life-course approach that is appropriate to each age and stage of development.

The work is being jointly progressed by the Centre for Social and Early Emotional Development (SEED) at Deakin University, the Victorian Department of Education and Training, and the Human Early Learning Partnership (University of British Columbia, Canada). The work builds on the Australian Temperament Project which, over the past three decades, has been systematically following the health and development of over 2000 young Australians, from infancy to adulthood and into the next generation.

Study overview

The initial focus is the feasibility of monitoring early child development at three time points – toddlerhood, school entry and middle childhood – in selected Victorian Communities.

Through this work, protocols will be developed for the provision of high quality, community-level, assessment of social-emotional development in toddlerhood and middle childhood, and to link these to AEDC for Comprehensive Monitoring.

Role of the AEDC

The Toddler Development Instrument (TDI) and the Middle Years Development Instrument (MDI) have the potential to contribute to a comprehensive monitoring system alongside the AEDC.

Children's early experiences have been shown to affect lifelong health and well-being. The purpose of the TDI is to increase our understanding of the early experiences, needs, and barriers faced by families with young children. The TDI is a questionnaire for parents and caregivers of children aged 16-20 months that asks about the early experiences and environments of the children, their caregivers, and their families. The TDI includes questions about family, home and community environments, as well as the supports and barriers families experience within these environments. The TDI connects with a wide range of community-based early years services and programs relevant to health, education, and family services.

As with the AEDC, the MDI is based in schools. The MDI is a self-report questionnaire completed by children at ages 10 and 14. The MDI asks students how they think and feel about their experiences both inside and outside of school. Both the Grade 4 questionnaire and the Grade 7 questionnaire include questions related to the five areas of development that are strongly linked to well-being, health and academic achievement.

Together the TDI, AEDC and MDI provide an in-depth picture of experiences and outcomes related to children's development over time. The TDI is a unique addition to the monitoring system in that the partnerships established for implementation extend beyond schools and school districts to a wide range of community-based early years services and programs including health, education, and family services.

Learnings or opportunities

There is a high level of community interest in the AEDC and complementary data. Implementation of the TDI is underway in selected Victorian sites.

There has been a high degree of community support and engagement for the implementation. Communities are seeking insight to the experiences of families to their experiences in supporting their child's development at this early stage of life and opportunities for services to improve the available support. The Maternal and Child Health Service is closely involved in implementing the survey and discussing parent experiences with the survey.

A systematic approach to comprehensive monitoring will enrich our understanding of experiences in the early life-course.

Expanding to the life-course framework – earlier and later in life – is a key opportunity. Over time, this will be extended in scope with the addition of perinatal, adolescent and young adult emotional growth indicators to capture the full span of the early life course from pregnancy to adulthood. It's a family of common survey data points to understand how children and developing over time.

It's a map to inform our understanding of the social and emotional development of children and young people. For a long-time we have been flying largely blind. We know some things, a mosaic, but the AEDC is alone in terms of broad-based population capture. If you fly from Melbourne to Los Angeles you probably have seven beacons, but for understanding social and emotional development you only have one [the AEDC]. Having one is not enough.

Over the last couple of years the focus has been continuous monitoring. I think that's got plenty of support. With such a powerful resource as the AEDC you want to link it up with other data sources. I think pragmatically, the questions is, "How can you get that power and impact [of the AEDC] equated at other age levels?"

See also: <https://www.melbournechildrens.com/atp/translation/comprehensive-monitoring-project/>

SOURCE: ACIL ALLEN, 2019



This chapter summarises opportunities arising from the interviews and case studies.

5.1 Summary of opportunities

Over the past decade, substantial progress has been made in establishing the AEDC as a widely recognised, unique, credible and valued dataset in Australia.

Over the coming decade, the interviews and case studies undertaken for this report highlighted the potential for the AEDC to expand its role in research, decision-making and resource allocation. In doing so, the AEDC will be an increasing basis for improving the development and well-being outcomes of Australian children.

Several challenges to the expanded use of the AEDC emerged through the discussions:

- *Limited awareness of activities across the three groups in focus* – communities, policy and research. For example, there wasn't widespread awareness of how AEDC data have driven local action. Deeper understanding of local activities may inform both local policy and potentially state policy from the ground up.
- *Substantial focus on the AEDC data as 'population-only' data* – this emphasis carried a perception of inappropriateness for deeper analysis, such as data linkage and presentation to schools.
- *Seeing the AEDC data as the 'end point' to measure the impact of the early childhood system* – often the AEDC data are seen as the outcome of early childhood rather than the 'start-point' for schools with the effect of limiting school engagement and better understanding of the cohort of children starting in their setting each three years.

Understanding and supporting AEDC utilisation will reinforce its value and inform its advancement. The areas in which AEDC utilisation will grow and change are not however currently planned or prioritised. The insights arising through this report are helpful starting point in considering how the AEDC's use can be encouraged and supported in three key areas as outlined in Table 5.1 below.

TABLE 5.1 OVERVIEW OF OPPORTUNITIES

Sector	Opportunity	Overview
Communities	Integrating AEDC activities to drive change	Better integrating policy, planning, monitoring and academic research to achieve on the ground change.
	Expanding access to complementary data	Expanding complementary datasets to provide additional information for communities.
	Building understanding and engagement with the AEDC	Continuing to build engagement with the AEDC with schools identified as a particular service where strong engagement can have a big impact for a community.

Sector	Opportunity	Overview
Policy	Making more of the current AEDC data through analysis, using academic partnership activity where appropriate	Making more of the current AEDC data through data linkage and analysis of AEDC subdomains as an impetus for strategic conversations about child development. This may be facilitated through doing more to use the data in academic partnerships across state government.
	More sophisticated understanding of influences in children's lives	Developing a more sophisticated understanding of influences in children's lives, such as housing or the economy.
	A life course approach to understand development	Taking a life course approach joining the available data and addressing gaps in data, particularly prior to school.
	Continue to build understanding of the AEDC within the department, particularly practical AEDC use within communities	Continuing efforts to build understanding of the AEDC within the department, particularly practical examples of data use by local communities.
	Collection frequency and availability of the AEDC data	Increasing the speed at which AEDC data becomes available and for more frequent collections.
Academic research	Enhanced data linkage	Enhanced data linkage, including routine linkage with school data and potentially biological data.
	Additional surveys across the life-course	Additional surveys across the life-course that extends understanding of the well-being of children and young people and the social factors that influence their development.
	Continuity of the current instrument	Continuity of the current instrument is important to maintain its current strengths and research being conducted.
	Better ways to engage communities	Better ways to engage communities to engage with the AEDC data to facilitate its use.

SOURCE: ACIL ALLEN, 2019

5.2 Conclusion

The report draws on a series of interviews and case studies to examine experiences with the AEDC and its utilisation in different sectors. These interviews and case studies illustrate the breadth of innovative ways that the AEDC contributes to activities and outcomes across the sectors. In doing so, the report can inform the evidence base for how the AEDC is used.

The report also informs consideration for improving the AEDC and its utilisation in the future. Opportunities are apparent reflecting the different sectors. There are also noticeable consistencies in several areas. For example, there was consistent interest in expanding access to complementary data that would inform understanding of children's development before and after the entry to school. In addition, interest in continuing to build understanding of the AEDC and its application was common across the sectors. These are areas that will garner interest across sectors. The other opportunities identified can also lead to important change.

Overall, a final message from the research, is the consistent view of consultees that the AEDC is a significant and valuable foundation for understanding the development and well-being of Australian children. Moreover, consultees identified that the benefits of the AEDC are significant in contributing to change that will improve outcomes for children and Australia more broadly.



Interview participants are listed below below.

TABLE A.1 INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS

Interviewee	Role	Organisation
Ann Sexton	Consultant	Ann Sexton Consulting
Connie Spinoso	Executive, Performance and Evaluation	Department of Education and Training
Dr Geoff Woolcock	Research Fellow (Regional Community Development)	University of Southern Queensland
Dr Marion Frere	Executive, Service Design and Performance	Department of Education and Training
Gabi Burman	Executive, Strategic Policy Early Childhood	Department of Education and Training
Jan Barrett	Early Years Policy Consultant	Jan Barrett Consulting
Jane Hosking	Executive Officer	North Central Local Learning and Employment Network
Jerri Nelson	Director Community Development	Buloke Shire Council
John O'Shaughnessy	Manager, Region Early Childhood Improvement	Department of Education and Training
Karen Modoo	Co -Coordinator, By Five	Wimmera Southern Mallee Early Years Project
Katie Haire	Deputy Secretary, School Education Programs and Support	Department of Education and Training
Kim Little	Deputy Secretary, Early Childhood Education	Department of Education and Training
Lisa McLeod	Manager Community Policy & Planning	Warrnambool City Council
Pat Claridge	Executive Officer	Tomorrow Today Foundation
Pippa Procter	Executive, Service Design and Performance	Department of Education and Training
Professor Craig Olsson	Director, Centre for Social and Early Emotional Development	Deakin University
Professor Steve Zubrick	Professor, Centre for Child Health Research	University of Western Australia

Interviewee	Role	Organisation
Professor Vaughan Carr	Professor of Psychiatry and Chair of Schizophrenia Epidemiology	UNSW
Sally Matheson	Education Program Manager	Tomorrow Today Foundation

SOURCE: ACIL ALLEN, 2019



A discussion guide was provided to interviewees in advance of consultations. The guide is provided below.

B.1 Consultation Guide

You are invited to participate in an interview about utilisation of the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC).

This research is gathering insights into the application and influence of the AEDC for communities, policy makers and researchers.

ACIL Allen Consulting has been engaged to undertake this research for the Victorian Department of Education and Training.

AEDC utilisation

The AEDC is a nationwide data collection of early childhood development at the time children commence their first year of full-time school. The AEDC highlights what is working well and what needs to be improved or developed to support children and their families by providing evidence to support health, education and community policy and planning. In March 2019, the results of the fourth AEDC collection (data collected in 2018) were publicly released.

The Victorian Department of Education and Training (DET, the Department) is supported by the Commonwealth Government to facilitate the collection of AEDC data to achieve a high participation rate. In addition, through this funding, Victoria seeks to:

- strengthen awareness of the AEDC among key stakeholders, for example schools, local community organisations, and government agencies
- increase government and community utilisation of the AEDC results in early childhood policy development, service delivery and program management
- support communities with relatively high levels of developmental vulnerability to respond to their AEDC results.

The engagement will contribute to the evidence base for how the AEDC is used, provide insights to the use of AEDC by stakeholders, and inform DET's consideration for improving AEDC utilisation and dissemination in the future.

Why am I being asked to participate in this consultation?

As part of the research, ACIL Allen are undertaking consultations with selected participants using the AEDC to improve services for children in the early years.

You are invited to participate in the consultations to explore your experiences with utilisation of the AEDC for a key activity and more generally, the broad benefits of AEDC knowledge and data, and how AEDC utilisation and dissemination might be improved into the future. Areas for discussion are included below to assist in guiding the discussion.

What will the consultation involve?

The consultations will be undertaken with you individually in-person or by phone. We expect consultations to last approximately 30 minutes.

Who do I contact if I have further questions?

If you have any questions, please contact Catherine Watkin Nolan at the Department of Education and Training at nolan.catherine.m@edumail.vic.gov.au or Tom Peachey, the Project Manager at ACIL Allen Consulting, at t.peachey@acilallen.com.au.

Questions

1. Please tell us about your role.

Application of the AEDC

2. Is there a key activity where the AEDC has been central in catalysing and / or directing action?
3. How did the data and knowledge from the AEDC apply in this activity?
4. Why was the AEDC important in catalysing and / or directing this activity? What are the AEDC's strengths?
5. What were the limitations of the AEDC in catalysing or directing this activity?
6. Is there a continuing role for the AEDC in the activity? Please explain.

Thinking more broadly

7. What do you see as the main value / role of the AEDC in Australia?
8. Do you expect the role / use of the AEDC to evolve over the coming decade (i.e. by 2030)? If yes, why and in what ways?

Opportunities

9. What is the AEDC achieving that could be expanded to add greater value to your policy development, monitoring or planning for the delivery of services? How could this occur?
10. Are there other opportunities to use or apply the AEDC more effectively?

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