

VU Play Theory of Change

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February 2023

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Background

Cultivating Change was contracted by Victoria University in February 2023 to facilitate the development of a Theory of Change for 'VU Play'. Through a series of two workshops in January and early February 2023, Cultivating Change worked with the VU Play Early Childhood Team and other invited stakeholders to define the intended outcomes of VU Play for various stakeholder groups, and organise these into various pathways to form the overall Theory of Change.



Through this process participants strengthened their understanding, skills and confidence in identifying outcomes and developing theories of change

This document includes the theory of change developed along with the supporting material drafted:

- [Problem statements](#)
- [VU Play stakeholders](#)
- [VU Play activities](#)
- [VU Play principles](#)
- [VU Play language](#)

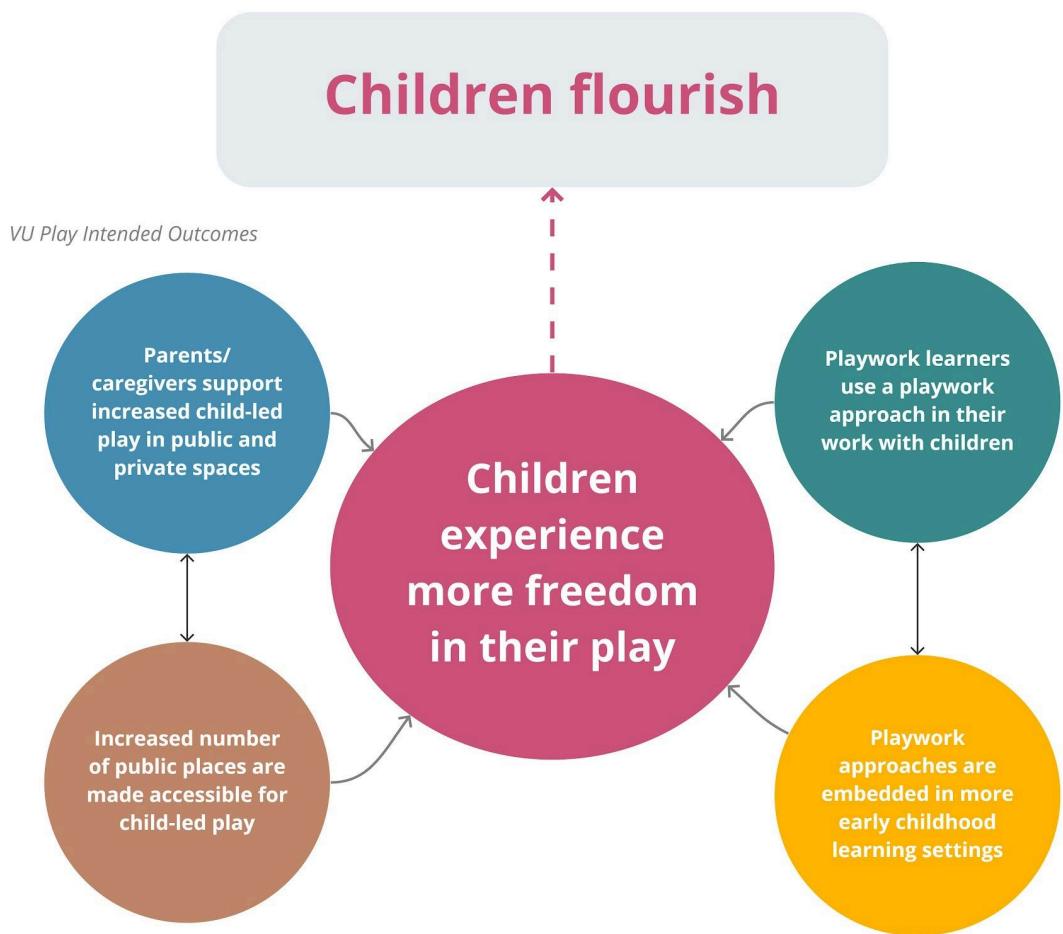
It is anticipated that the Theory of Change and supporting material will be used by Victoria University to seek funding for VU Play. These may also be further refined, and used to develop a shared understanding and communication strategy for VU Play with various stakeholders.

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VU Play Theory of Change

The overall vision of VU Play is that **children flourish**.

VU Play Vision



Outcomes

The **main overall outcomes** of VU Play that contribute to achieving this vision are that:

- **Children** experience more freedom in their play

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- **Parents/caregivers** support increased child-led play in public and private spaces
- **Playwork learners** use a playwork approach in their work with children
- **Increased number of public places** are made accessible for child-led play
- **Playwork approaches are embedded** in more early childhood learning settings

Outcome pathways for each main stakeholder group and associated narrative are included in the [appendix](#) to this document; these pathways visualise the links between the intended outcomes for each group, including linkages with outcomes for other stakeholder groups. Each pathway also includes a longer term goal for that stakeholder group that VU Play contributes to.

Each outcome in the VU Play Theory of Change has been given a unique number for ease of reference;¹ in the lists below, the main intended outcome for each stakeholder group (that also appears on the simplified theory of change visual above) is highlighted in colour.

Children

The intended outcomes for [children](#) (OC) from VU Play are:

- OC1: Children and their families **access public playspaces** supporting child-led play
- OC2: Children and their families **feel increased ownership** of public playspaces supporting child-led play
- OC3: Children become **more confident** to play without parent/caregiver involvement
- OC4: Children are **more visible and heard** within the community
- OC5: Children are **more involved in decision-making** for public spaces
- OC6: Children **experience more freedom in their play**

Parents/caregivers

The intended outcomes for [parents/caregivers](#) (OP) from VU Play are:

- OP1: Parents/caregivers **increase their awareness** of the importance of child-led play for child's wellbeing and development
- OP2: Parents/caregivers **increase their knowledge and confidence** of how they can support child-led play
- OP3: There is **increased social connection** between parents/caregivers accessing public playspaces supporting child-led play
- OP4: Parents/caregivers **support increased child-led play** in public and private spaces

¹ OC = Outcomes for children; OP = Outcomes for parents/caregivers; OL: Outcomes for playwork learners; OG: Outcomes for local government; OS: Outcomes at system level

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- OP5: Parents/caregivers **increasingly expect** early childhood learning services to embed child-led play

Playwork Learners

The intended outcomes for playwork learners (OL) from VU Play are:

- OL1: Playwork learners **increase their understanding** of play and the playwork approach
- OL2: Playwork learners **increase their experience in delivering** a playwork approach
- OL3: Playwork learners **increase their confidence** to embed a playwork approach at their workplaces
- OL4: Playwork learners **use a playwork approach** in their work with children
- OL5: Playwork learners **advocate for the embedding** of a playwork approach within their workplace and wider sector

Local Government

The intended outcomes for local government (OG) from VU Play are:

- OG1: Local government planners **increase their understanding** of child-led play, and its value
- OG2: Urban planning **includes planning for play**
- OG3: Planning for play by local government **includes children's voices**
- OG4: Local government **urban planning policy includes commitment** to children's right to play
- OG5: **Increased number of public places** are made accessible for child-led play

System

The intended outcomes at a system level (OS) from VU Play are:

- OS1: There are **established pathways for learning** about a playwork approach and becoming accredited as a Playworker
- OS2: **Playwork approaches are embedded** in more early childhood learning settings
- OS3: Playwork is **recognised as a profession** in Australia
- OS4: More people are **accredited as Playworkers**

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Assumptions

Assumptions underlying the VU Play Theory of Change include:

1. Families know where public playspaces supporting child-led play are, and how can access them
2. Parents/care-givers value children's agency, and 'release' them to play
3. Adults in the community take notice of children
4. Parents/caregivers want children to play independently, and trust their children's capabilities
5. Parent/caregivers want to learn how they can best support their child to engage in child-led play
6. Parent/caregivers want to increase their social connections
7. Playwork learners have sufficient autonomy to embed a playwork approach within their work with children
8. Workplace stakeholders (e.g. managers, parents/caregivers, regulators) are willing to have a playwork approach embedded within the workplace
9. Urban planners in local government are willing and able to incorporate child-led play into their practice and policies
10. There is interest and demand to establish Playwork as a profession in Australia

Supporting Material – Initial Drafts

Note that these supporting materials are all in draft form, and some are more developed than others. The content below is drawn from the discussions at the workshop and comments on the Miro boards – it is likely that the VU team responsible for VU Play will wish to further develop and edit these.

Problem Statements

What problems is VU Play aiming to address?

- Children have a **human right to play**, yet many children do not have adequate opportunities and environments for play – play is often very structured and regimented (e.g. formal playgrounds)
- Children are **spending more time indoors**, being physically inactive and on screens
- Children are being kept ‘out of sight’, with play under control of adults other than designated playgrounds, children are often **not permitted or tolerated in public spaces** and they require **permission from adults** to play
- The needs and expectations of the current world are very different from previous decades and generations; we **need to foster innovation and creativity** among children to enable them to thrive as they become adults
- Many **parents and caregivers don't know how** they can best support their child/ren's play and creativity
- Existing staffed adventure playgrounds are **few in number**, and are **too expensive** to stay open to play (staffing, insurance costs etc)
- Pre-service training for early childhood educators and primary school teachers **doesn't adequately incorporate the value of play** and a playwork approach within the curriculum
- Staff at early childhood and other educational institutions, policy makers and funders **don't always understand or value children's needs and rights to play**
- Child-led play is **accessible and inclusive**; it does not require dedicated spaces or extensive or expensive materials. All children can engage in child-led play.

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VU Play Stakeholders

- **Children**
 - And their friends, families and existing communities/networks
- **Early childhood and education sector**
 - Existing educators and teachers
 - Students of early childhood and education
 - Operators/administrators of early childhood centres and schools
 - Policy makers
- **Wider community in the geographical area of VU play**
 - Includes people without children
- **Victoria University**
 - Early Childhood faculty and students
 - On-site childcare service
- **Government**
 - Local councils
 - State Government
- **Wider sector**
 - Existing staffed adventure playgrounds, including the The Venny (local to Victoria University)
 - Other universities and research institutes with interest in Early Childhood and the Playwork approach
- **Funders**

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VU Play Activities

These activities are those that emerged at the workshops as necessary to achieve to the outcomes included on the Theory of Change

- Develop **shared language/terms** for VU Play (see [starting list below](#))
- **Increase opportunities** for children to engage in child-led play, and **promote** these opportunities
 - Provide no-cost access to public playspaces (fixed and pop-up),² particularly in areas of socio-economic disadvantage
 - Embed a playwork approach within VU childcare services
- **Promote the value of child-led play** to parents and the wider community e.g. community information sessions
 - With specific focus on reaching different communities e.g. families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, families with children with different abilities
 - Use different ways to engage parents/caregivers e.g. bios of successful people who developed through playwork principles, visuals of play in times of 'yore' (in black and white) vs today
- Deliver **training in a playwork approach** for early childhood educators³, including both theory and practice (e.g. through placements)
 - Pre-service training
 - In-service training
- **Supporting existing and emerging playworkers**
 - Deliver training packages and supporting materials
 - Identify and support mentors for playwork learners
 - Host a community of playwork champions⁴
- **Establish training pathways and accreditation process for Playworkers**
- **Work with local government to incorporate child-led play in planning processes**
 - Training for local government urban planners in child-led play, its value, and their role in enabling this in public spaces
 - Advocate for inclusion of children's right to play in local government urban planning policies
- **Advocate** for inclusion of a playwork approach within policies and curriculums e.g.,
 - Policies and procedures of early childhood centres and primary schools
 - Training curriculums for primary school teachers

² This may include spaces not necessarily designated for play e.g. existing public squares, vacant land etc

³ And potentially primary school teachers also

⁴ Potentially including online 'hub'/resource bank

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VU Play Principles

Principles can be used to articulate '*how the work is done*'; they provide guidance for how activities should be designed and implemented, and can serve as a framework for monitoring and evaluation.⁵

During the second workshop we identified five potential areas for principles for VU Play. The list below includes some starting draft text for each principle, and how these link to the existing [global Playwork Principles](#) developed for the Playwork profession.⁶

- **Child-focused** (links to Playwork Principles #2, 3, 4, 8)
 - *E.g. Child-focused: Child-led play is at the heart of VU Play; all VU Play activities actively embed children's needs, wants and rights.*
- **Rights-based** (links to Playwork Principles #1)
 - *E.g. Rights-based: VU Play upholds and promotes human rights, including the right of children to play, and the right of children to access and use public spaces*
- **Inclusion** (links to Playwork Principles #5)
 - *E.g. Inclusion: Children and families from multiple backgrounds and abilities are actively included in VU Play*
- **First Nations**
 - *E.g. First Nations First: VU Play draws, on, and promotes, local indigenous knowledge, experiences and resources*
- **Evidence Base** (links to Playwork Principle #6)
 - *E.g. Evidence Based: The activities of VU Play are informed by existing research and evidence on Playwork approach, and VU Play will intentionally contribute to growing and sharing this evidence base*

⁵ By applying a 'principles-focused evaluation' approach, which essentially aims to assess 1) To what extent did the principle 'show up' during implementation (i.e. was it embedded/realised) and 2) If and how the application of the principles is contributing to the outcomes emerging

⁶ Note that there is not currently a direct alignment from Playwork Principle #7 (Playworkers recognise their own impact on the play space and also the impact of children and young people's play on the playworker) to these draft VU Play Principles

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VU Play Language

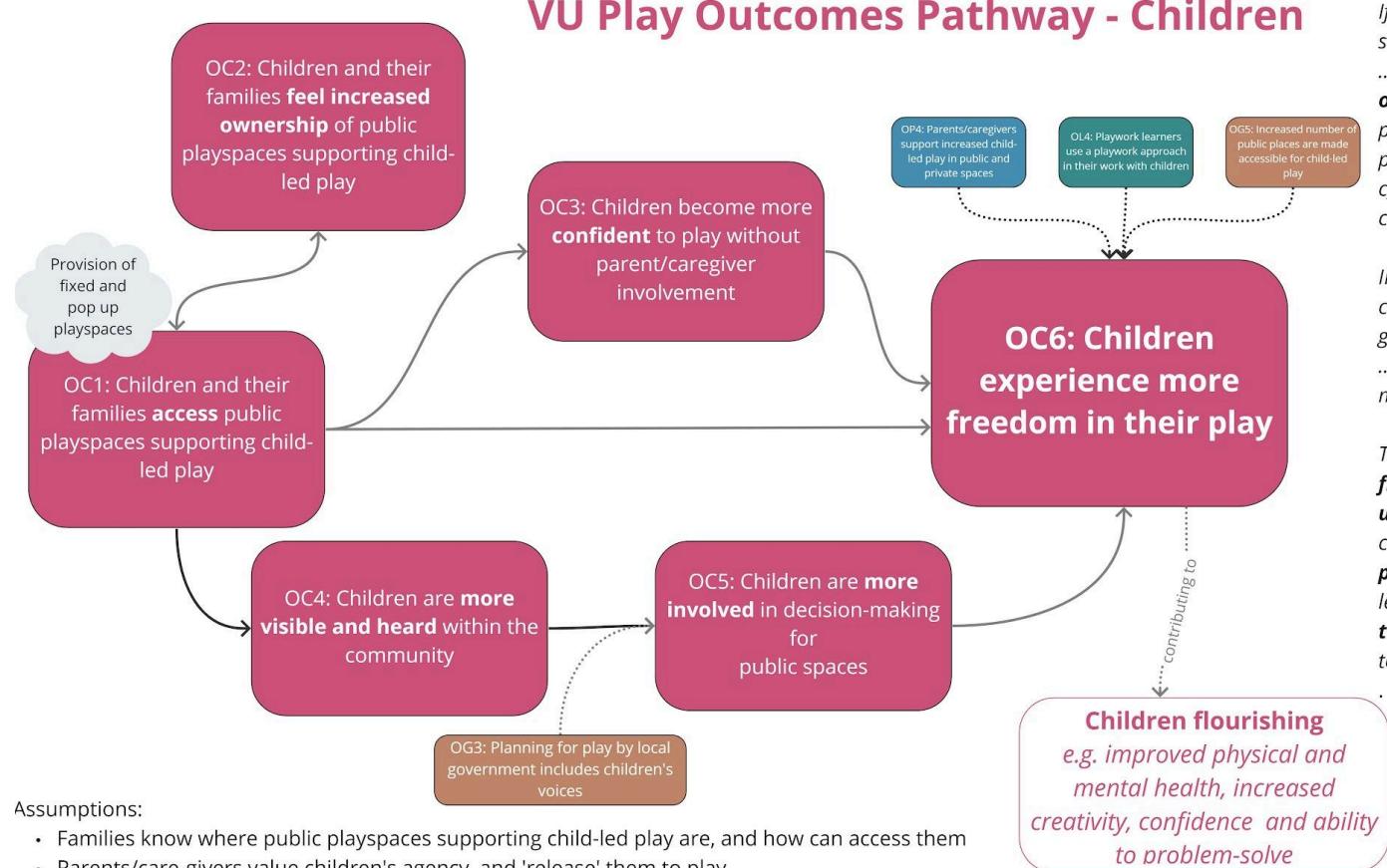
To be clarified/defined e.g. develop list of preferred terms and what they mean

- **Playwork vs playwork approach vs play-based learning vs child-led play:** which term is preferred and why
 - Term to avoid: child-centred play, as this often includes adult-led approaches (e.g. educator designing an activity for children based on the children's expressed interests)
 - For this document: have generally used **playwork approach** (which includes intention of child-led play, as well as the use of loose parts).
 - For ease of understanding, have used child-led play when referring to activities of children and parents
- **Playworker**
 - What that is and how that is different to embedding a playwork approach within a different job title/role
- **Playwork learner vs student vs alternative term**
 - Have used 'Playwork learner' in Theory of Change, to incorporate both those pre-service (e.g. VU Early Childhood Students) as well as those already working with children now learning about Playwork (e.g. existing early childhood educator)
- **Play Revolution** – if/when to use, and what this means
- If/when/how to link play and playwork approach to **wider outcomes** that may be of interest to funders e.g. school readiness, without compromising the playwork principles (e.g. right of children to play)
- When refer to **children** and when refer more broadly e.g. children and young people
- Appropriately **describing the expected role of adults** – shouldn't be about 'allowing' children to play
 - Potential alternative verbs: Supporting, releasing, enabling (Note: used support in Theory of Change for now)

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Appendix: Outcome Pathways

Children



If children and their families **access** public playspaces supporting child-led play (OC1)....
...THEN a) children and their families feel **increased ownership** of public playspaces supporting child led play (OC2) b) children become **more confident** to play without parent/caregiver involvement (OC3) and c) children are **more visible and heard** within the community (OC4)

IF children are **more visible and heard** within the community (OC4) and planning for play by local government includes children's voices (OG3) ...
...THEN children are **more involved** in decision-making for public spaces (OC5)

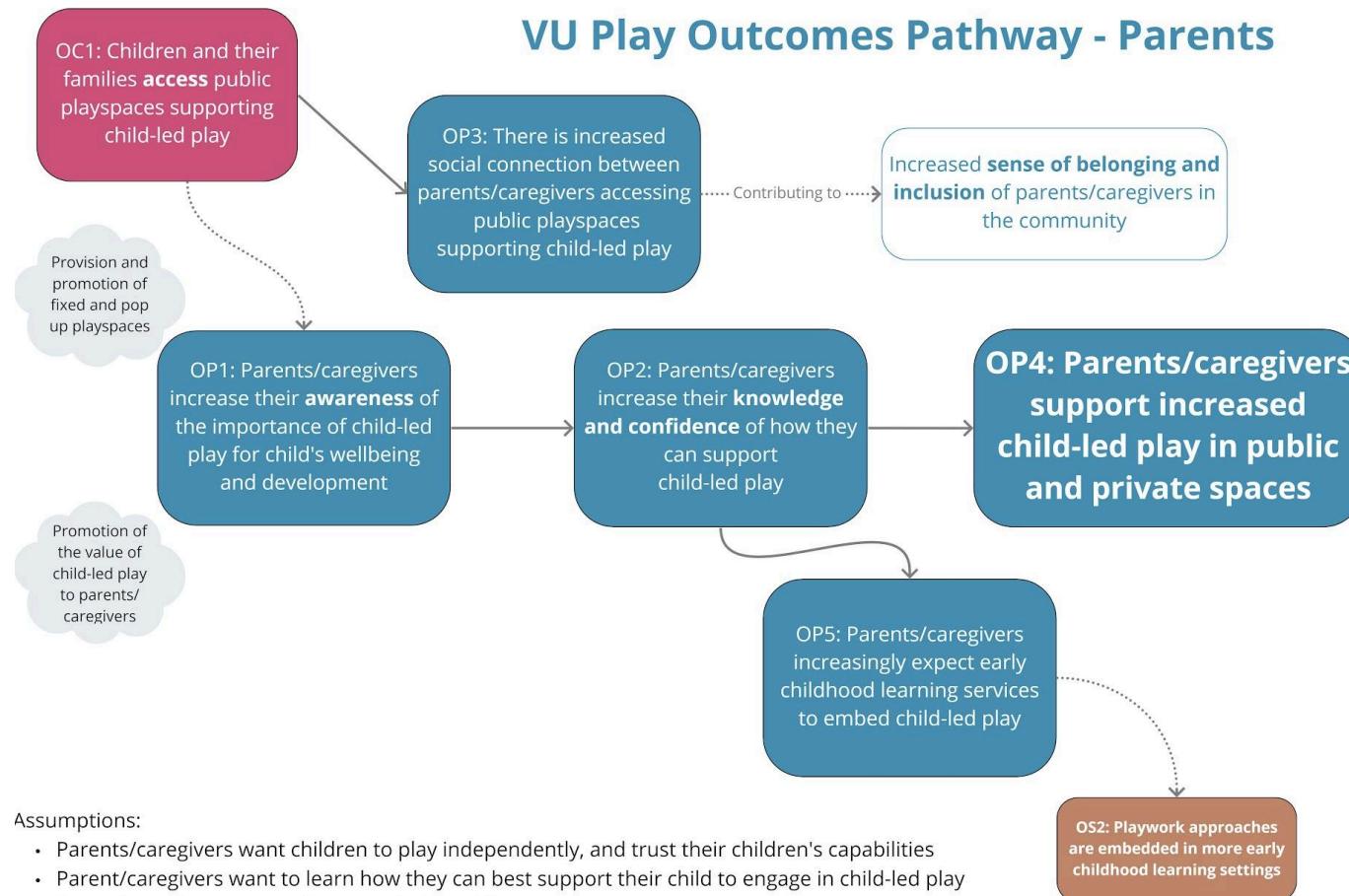
These outcomes for children, together with **support from parents/caregivers** (OP4), **playwork learners using a playwork approach** in their work with children (OL4) and **increased number of public places made accessible** for child led play (OG5) leads to **children experiencing more freedom in their play**. (OC6). This in turn contributes to the long term vision of **children flourishing**

OC = Outcomes for children
OP = Outcomes for parents/caregivers
OL = Outcomes for playwork learners
OG = Outcomes for local government
OS = Outcomes at system level

VU Play activities

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Parents/caregivers



*IF parents/caregivers increase their **awareness** of the importance of child-led play for child's wellbeing and development (OP1)....*

*THEN parents/caregivers increase their **knowledge and confidence** of how they can support child-led play (OP2).*

*IF parents/caregivers **access** public playspaces supporting child-led play THEN there is **increased social connection** between parents/caregivers accessing these spaces (OP3), which in turn contributes to **increased sense of belonging and inclusion** within the community*

*IF parents/caregivers **increase their knowledge and confidence** of how they can support child-led play (OP2)....*

*...THEN parents/caregivers a) support **increased child-play in public and private spaces** (OP4) and b) increasingly **expect early childhood learning services** to embed child-led play (OP5)*

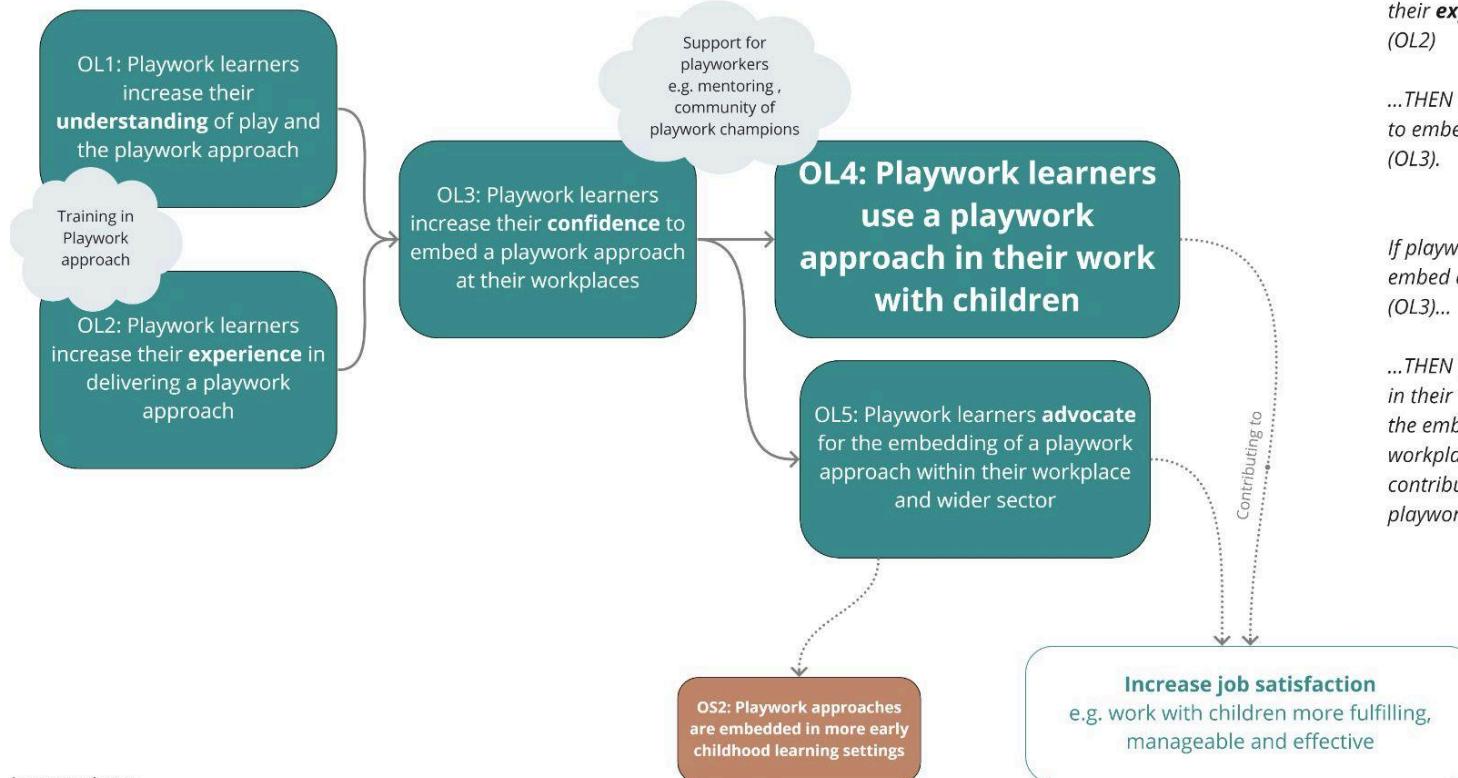
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Playwork Learners

VU Play Outcomes Pathway - Playwork Learners



Assumptions:

- Playwork learners have sufficient autonomy to embed a playwork approach within their work with children
- Workplace stakeholders (e.g. managers, parents/caregivers, regulators) are willing to have a playwork approach embedded within the workplace

*IF playwork learners increase their **understanding** of a play and the playwork approach (OL1) AND their **experience** in delivering a playwork approach (OL2)*

*...THEN playwork learners increase their **confidence** to embed a playwork approach at their workplace (OL3).*

*If playwork learners increase their **confidence** to embed a playwork approach at their workplace (OL3)...*

*...THEN playwork learners **use** a playwork approach in their work with children (OL4) and **advocate** for the embedding of a playwork approach within their workplace and wider sector (OL5). In turn, this contributes to **increased job satisfaction** for the playwork learner.*

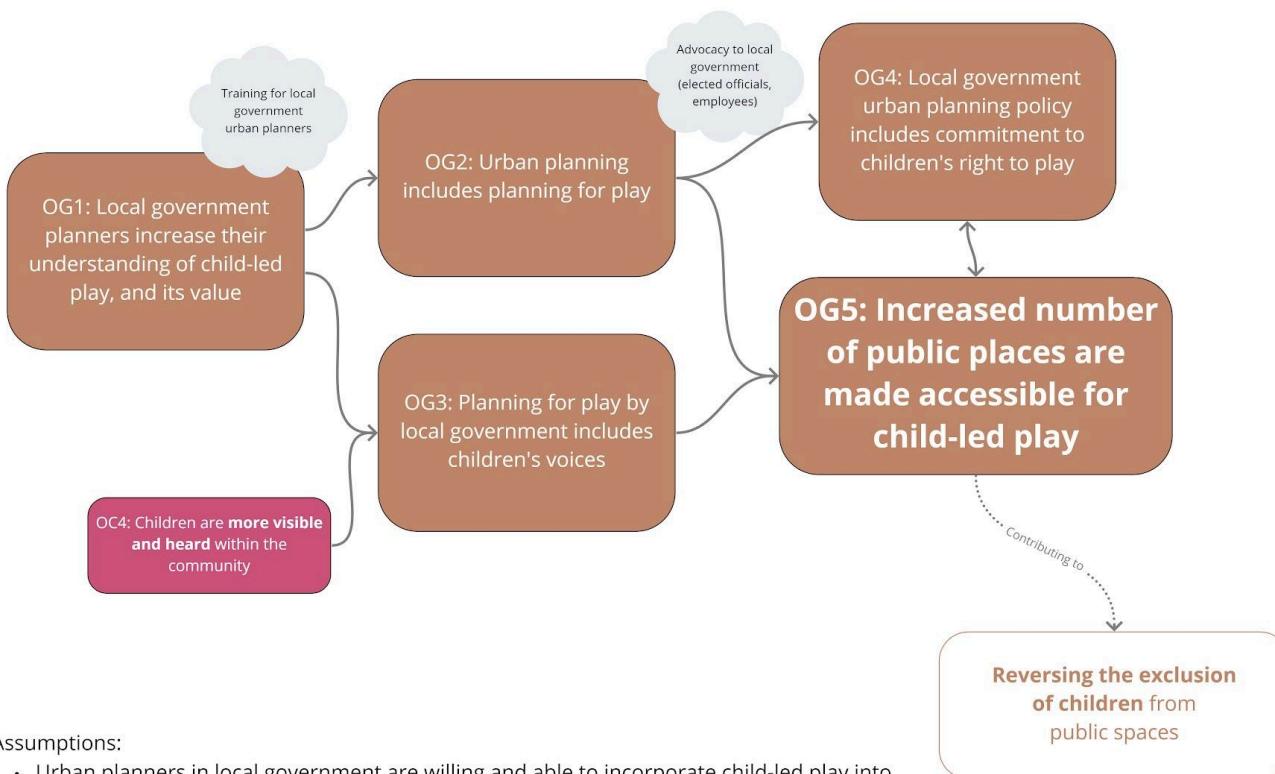
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Local Government

VU Play Outcomes Pathway - Local Government



Assumptions:

- Urban planners in local government are willing and able to incorporate child-led play into their practice and policies

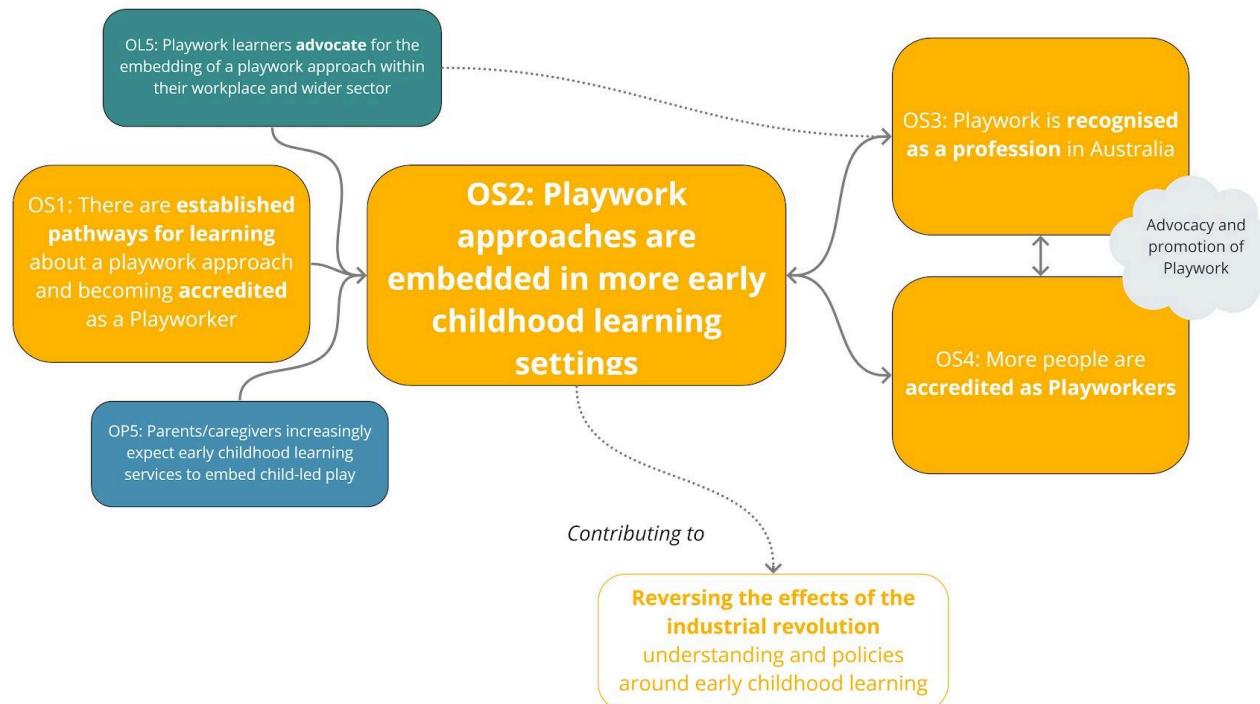
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- OG: Outcomes for local government**
- OS: Outcomes at system level

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System

VU Play Outcomes Pathway - Systems Level



Assumptions:

- There is interest and demand to establish Playwork as a profession in Australia

IF there are **established pathways for learning** about a playwork approach and becoming accredited as a Playworker (OS1) along with parents/caregivers **increasingly expecting** early childhood learning services to embed child led play (OP5) and **playwork learners advocating** for the embedding of a playwork approach (OLS5)

THEN **playwork approaches are embedded** in more early childhood learning settings (OS2).

If **playwork approaches are embedded** in more early childhood learning settings (OS2), and **Playwork is recognised as a profession** in Australia (OS3), this will lead to **more people accredited** as playworkers (OS4) (which then leads back to playwork approaches being embedded in more early childhood learning settings (OS2)). Together, these will contribute to reversing the effects of the industrial revolution understanding and policies around early childhood learning

OC = Outcomes for children
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VU Play activities

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Miro Links

All visuals in this document were developed in Miro; source links below for ease of access

[Theory of Change \(simplified\)](#)

Outcome Pathways

- [Children](#)
- [Parents/caregivers](#)
- [Playwork learners](#)
- [Local government](#)
- [System](#)