Big thinking on place: getting place-based approaches moving

Collaborate for children: scoping project

Murdoch Childrens Research Institute
Healthier Kids. Healthier Future.

The Royal **Children's** Hospital Melbourne

About this report

This publication has been developed by the Centre for Community Child Health at the Murdoch Childrens Research Institute and The Royal Children's Hospital as part of the *Collaborate for children: scoping project* funded by the Australian Government Department of Education. It provides a summary of expert views on the issues and opportunities for getting place-based approaches moving in Australia, in order to promote children's wellbeing.

Over 12 months, the project investigated the Australian place-based landscape to understand how we can better promote children's wellbeing through place-based initiatives. This publication is one of four key reports produced through the project. The reports are:

- *The evidence: what we know about place-based approaches*

- *A snapshot of place-based activity promoting children's wellbeing* – who is driving, doing and supporting place-based initiatives

- **Big thinking on place: getting place-based approaches moving**

- *The state of play in Australian place-based activity for children* – a summary of project findings with recommendations for accelerating place-based efforts.

All publications can be downloaded from **www.rch.org.au/ccch.**

About us

The Centre for Community Child Health at the Murdoch Childrens Research Institute and The Royal Childrens Hospital is committed to supporting and empowering communities to improve the health, development and wellbeing of all children. The Centre works in collaboration with campus partner The University of Melbourne to integrate clinical care, research and education in community child health. The Centre provides leadership in early childhood and community health at community, state, national and international levels, and is widely recognised for its clinical, teaching, research and advocacy programs.

The Centre seeks to enhance outcomes for children through:

- population health research

- policy and advocacy

- consultancy in service improvement and innovation

- training and professional development

- specialised clinics

- knowledge translation and dissemination.

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Executive summary

Increasingly, governments in Australia have recognised place-based approaches as a means to tackle disadvantage and address the complex problems faced by children and families in today's society. While many place-based initiatives have generated rich learning experiences and positive results, too often lessons have not been broadly shared and mistakes have been repeated. Anecdotal evidence suggests that a better coordinated practice, policy and research agenda could substantially increase the impact of place-based approaches across Australia. With this in mind, leaders in place-based practice, research, policy and philanthropy were engaged in in-depth consultations to explore and identify issues and opportunities for advancing Australian place-based reform.

What follows is a summary of the contemporary needs of policy makers, funding bodies, academics and practitioners in designing, delivering and researching approaches to support children and families in 'place'.

Issues and opportunities for practice, research and policy

Participants identified many issues across practice, research and policy that were perceived to lessen the effectiveness of child-focused, place-based initiatives in Australia. These included the need for:

- new skill sets to deliver place-based initiatives

- advancing expertise in collaborative practice and co-production with families

- evaluation for learning and impact

- a more rigorous and coordinated research agenda

- exchanging knowledge on what does and does not 'work'

- advocacy and leadership on place-based initiatives.

A common theme expressed through the consultations to address the above issues was collaboration. A network or mechanism to bring together people was advocated, for two main reasons. These were to:

- advance strategic leadership and coordination on place-based issues, with specific attention given to the co-production of policy and a coordinated research agenda

- exchange and/or build knowledge, particularly in relation to identified practice skill gaps.

Conclusions

The consultation findings reveal a need for stronger leadership and advocacy on child-focused, place-based initiatives in order to effectively respond to specific and universal issues in policy, practice and research and to advance place-based thinking and action.

A national place-based network, involving policy, practice, research and philanthropy, would be an appropriate mechanism to support leadership and advance activity. A convenor is required to facilitate such a network. Network activity should be guided by an action plan, developed in collaboration with network members, to address priorities identified in this report.

Overview

The Centre for Community Child Health engaged 23 stakeholders to participate in consultations for the purpose of identifying barriers to effective place-based practice, as well as opportunities for advancing the place-based agenda. Stakeholders were representative of the following:

- **practice leaders** – community leaders and practitioners from community service organisations experienced in co-ordinating the implementation of a child-focused, place-based initiative

- **research leaders** – researchers experienced in design, implementation and evaluation and/or currently undertaking research on child-focused collaborative place-based approaches

- **policy leaders** – those funding and/or experienced in driving the design, implementation, evaluation or research of innovative child-focused collaborative place-based approaches

- **philanthropic leaders** – committed to sustained investment in supporting community-led place-based approaches with a focus on children.

Thematic analysis was used to examine consultation findings and further reflection and feedback was gained from the project's reference group. This is a summary of findings.

Findings: issues and gaps

Practice-specific gaps

Knowledge and expertise

Place-based initiatives are complex and require different ways of working. Consultations revealed the delivery of place-based initiatives requires a new set of skills and knowledge and highlighted gaps in several areas of expertise considered integral to success.

Leadership skills

Advanced leadership skills were often found to be lacking in place-based initiatives and a modest number of adept leaders in 'place' was reported. In addition, some participants commented that leadership development in the early childhood sector is generally not well supported.

Understanding influences on child development

A common theme throughout the consultations was the need for practitioners working with children to have a greater awareness and understanding of the multilevel or ecological influences on children's development. This included the influence of family and community, but also the influences of government policies, environmental conditions, and broader social norms, beliefs and attitudes. It was noted that this knowledge, or lack thereof, shapes how effectively service providers approach and respond to child development issues within the context of place.

Establishing shared agendas

Participants considered the ability to develop and negotiate shared agendas to be fundamental to the success of any place-based initiative. These agendas outline the desired short and long-term outcomes, as well the activities needed to work towards those outcomes, and were often enabled by the development of a common vision or aspiration for the community.

It was repeatedly identified that "this [creating a shared community-level action plan] is where support is still really needed…again and again I talk to communities that are struggling with this."
Practice leader

Working in collaboration

Building and maintaining effective partnerships was another skill believed to significantly contribute to the success or otherwise of place-based initiatives and one that is in need of development. Participants saw a need to address the effectiveness of collaborative partnerships between service providers and families (co-production), as well as collaborative partnerships across community organisations.

"We know that we need to work in a genuinely respectful way in partnership with disengaged families and we know that a lot of work is needed to support practice change in this area…it is about service providers and community members actually working alongside each other and developing new and helpful responses to local needs together."
Practice leader and practice change facilitator

While participants expressed positivity around the level of commitment and good will of organisations and individuals to collaborate and partner with one another, the logistics of creating opportunities for professionals from different disciplines to interact and share information were reported to be challenging.

"School and kinder teachers spend the majority of their time with the children they teach, so finding a time for these professionals to work with each other or with other professionals more widely is logistically close to impossible."
Research leader and practice change facilitator

Data literacy and evaluation skills

Low levels of data literacy among practitioners was identified as a significant gap in knowledge and expertise. Participants believed this gap negatively impacted on initiatives in relation to prioritising action, monitoring activities and responding to evaluation findings.

Stretched resources

Participants noted working to place-based principles requires the development of new skill sets by service providers. However, supporting skill development within existing resources (time and budgets) was reported to be challenging, as services are already stretched and struggling to manage current demands. The vulnerability of a place-based initiative's success was further highlighted by comments that the introduction of any new staff, particularly at a leadership level, had the potential to shift momentum back towards the 'status quo'.

Research-specific gaps

Participants stressed the need for further research to inform effective place-based implementation and for the research to be more accessible.

Effectiveness of place-based approaches

While place-based approaches make sense conceptually, there is still little evidence that place-based approaches work. The absence of evidence on place-based reforms in the Australian context, particularly those with a focus on improving children's outcomes, was seen as a significant research gap.

Conditions for effective interventions

The consultations emphasised more research is needed regarding the conditions under which interventions are effective. In particular, participants noted the importance of teasing out the differences between interventions in metropolitan, rural, and remote communities, and in communities with higher populations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and culturally and linguistically diverse families.

"It is different...the rural issue. Rural places require different approaches to urban or inner city areas."
Practice leader

Implementation processes

Participants noted more research on effective implementation processes is needed, in light of growing evidence that 'how' an intervention is delivered impacts on success.

"We would emphasise the need for really careful attention to implementation and implementation processes, whether it be related to practice change, programme change or system-level change."
Research leader

Understanding and using research

Outcomes sought by place-based initiatives depend on the unique needs of children and families in the particular community and will consequently differ from one initiative to the next. Participants highlighted the need to assist place-based planning through better synthesis of the research evidence on the variety of problems faced by communities.

Policy-specific gaps

Supporting effective investment

Policy-makers consulted highlighted the need for further information on how government can best support and monitor place-based activity. A desire to optimise the return on investment was clear, with policy-makers keen to identify which communities to invest in, when the community is 'ready' for investment, and which organisation/s or partnerships should be selected to deliver the investment.

Universal issues and gaps

Measurement and evaluation

In addition to the specific gaps in data literacy and evaluation expertise faced by practitioners, it was widely felt that new measurement and evaluation methodologies, better access to meaningful local data, and the value and funding of evaluation were issues for policy, research and practice.

New methodologies

The need for robust methodologies to measure the short, medium and long-term impact of place-based approaches was emphasised by practitioners, policy-makers and researchers alike. It was noted that evaluation methodologies must be practical to implement and offer real-time

feedback to allow for assessment of progress against locally determined priorities. Methodologies must also take into consideration factors such as population migration.

"Everybody just wants to get out of the community as quickly as they can. You've got new cohorts of disadvantage coming through, all the time... so it looks like the approaches haven't made a difference."
Practice leader

In addition to this, it was emphasised that evaluation methodologies must be able to capture and articulate relevant inputs and implementation processes (including outputs and activities).

"We often don't know what the outcomes are and we really don't know what the inputs are either... so then we can't make a judgement about whether or not it was because of poor implementation or whether things were implemented but they in fact didn't work."
Research leader

Community-level data

The Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) community profile data was highlighted as a key data source for communities planning place-based initiatives, which also helped to build a case for change. However, the need for additional meaningful data on a broader set of indicators to inform decision-making and planning, was strongly expressed.

It was noted that without routine collection of community-level data there is an absence of baseline data, which significantly reduces the capacity of communities to measure change over time.

Valuing evaluation

Participants stressed the importance of valuing and funding evaluation in order to identify change (either positive or negative), guide practice change and maximise return on investment. However, it was noted that evaluation is not always valued as a central component of place-based initiatives.

"Every practice example I've talked to says, we think we are making a difference but we just don't have the resources to demonstrate that we are... this of course has challenges for further funding but also more importantly for knowing if we are making a difference to the outcomes of children."
Research leader

Knowledge exchange

The need for improvement in capturing and sharing findings was identified as a common issue, particularly across practice. Knowing what others are doing and what has worked well elsewhere was seen as an important enabler to undertaking child-focused, place-based work. However, it was identified that this information is not easily accessible.

"For a whole range of reasons, we've not been very good at capturing the practice learnings, and making them accessible to each other."
Philanthropic leader

Participants identified a need to value and share lessons about what has not worked as well as what has, in relation to practice, research and policy.

"Failed interventions never get published, and yet they're the ones that we ought to look at because often they fail for a reason... well, they can fail for many reasons, and we can all learn from that. It doesn't mean the researchers were incompetent, it means they had the courage to test the model and try."
Research leader

Consultations warned of the pressure on leading place-based initiatives to impart knowledge with the field, sometimes resulting in 'sharing fatigue' and a one-way information exchange.

Coordination

Participants identified a lack of coordination between different levels of government and across different government departments, believed to impede strategic opportunities for advancing place-based research and implementation.

"Most [government departments] have got place-based approaches but they're not, in the main, integrated in any way. There are some initiatives underway to address this across government departments, but the political will to address it between governments is highly variable and comes and goes."
Practice leader

Similarly, limited coordination between place-based researchers was noted, exacerbated by traditionally competitive and reductionist research environments. Missed opportunities to broaden knowledge and accelerate research advancement were discussed.

"If you tried to convene a round-table now, you'd get a hundred thousand different ideas and everybody pushing their own barrow."
Research leader

In relation to practice, participants stressed the need for funding models to be structured in a way that promotes collaboration rather than competition and commits organisations to shared outcomes in 'place'.

"The existing funding model has fragmented services terribly. The funding has tended to divide services and make them highly competitive and territorial. So funding models are very important, and they are a way of catalysing collaboration."
Research leader

A common language

The complexity of defining 'community', 'place' and 'place-based' initiatives was noted as having implications for the implementation, evaluation and funding of place-based activity.

"Place-based work is complex. It's really easy to come and say – 'you've got an illness, here's a drug and you'll be better'. We're involved with multidisciplinary, socially constructed areas and we're trying to look at solutions that are sustainable and replicable. The complexity means we often lose people, because we also don't have the right narrative for it yet."
Research leader

However, some participants cautioned against expending too much energy in defining terminology.

Public and political will

The lack of a strong social and political discourse in Australia that values children, early intervention and prevention, and views children as important to invest in was highlighted in a number of interviews. Participants described this as the back drop on which child-focused place-based initiatives currently sit, presenting a challenge for funding place-based initiatives and the prioritisation of children within them.

"Almost every place-based initiative focused on social policy issues in Australia zeroes in on all the 'usual suspects' as places (i.e. socio-economically disadvantaged communities) and almost regardless of the funding source, there are a stack of various local stakeholders putting their hand up as to why they ought to be prioritised. Where do children end up in all that clamouring for attention? Not necessarily first, second or even third, I'd hazard a guess."
Research leader

Short-term thinking

Participants highlighted the negative effect of funding and policy cycles on commitment to long-term reform, investment by government and on sustaining focus and effort for the amount of time that is needed to generate practice change and address local-level issues.

"It's been a long process of education and consultation and gently helping organisations reach the conclusion that they can actually achieve a shift in child developmental outcomes."
Practice leader

"We [Australia] have a very short-term thinking approach."
Practice leader

Findings: solutions

Participants discussed a range of opportunities to address some of the needs identified. Some were specific to practice, research and policy, while others cut across all three sectors.

Practice-specific solutions

Pre-service training

It was noted that effective skill development and practice change requires practitioner training and support, delivered over a sustained time period.

New support roles

Ways of actively linking communities to support, knowledge and tools, when needed, were considered important to enhance the implementation of place-based initiatives.

"[Intermediary] organisations attempt to bridge the research-to-practice gap or the knowledge-to-service gap. They bring research and implementation skills and a model of collaboratively working with people on the ground."
Research leader and practice change facilitator

It was identified that 'connector' agencies could link initiatives to intermediary organisations with different technical expertise and skills. Participants flagged that venture philanthropy has commenced this on a small scale and the same benefits could be achieved through the establishment of centralised collaborative technical support centre/s.

"Our philanthropic partners keep us in touch with projects and activities that might interest us and that we should know about."
Practice leader

Mobilising community members

Local community members were identified as an underused resource that could contribute positively to community reform if appropriately engaged and mobilised.

"Human resources that exist in these communities are by far the most critical resources that are constantly overlooked. There's an existing mass of resource in every community, regardless of the different ways we view it, that can be mobilised."
Practice leader

Research-specific solutions

More coordinated and rigorous research

Investment in longitudinal place-based research was identified as essential, both to provide concrete evidence around the effectiveness of child-focused, place-based initiatives, and to inform decisions about future investment in such initiatives.

"There is a need for a long-term investment of resources to demonstrate that the evidence base is there, in that place-based approaches can lead to improvements in outcomes for children."
Research leader

Actions that would improve research coordination were suggested. These included ongoing mapping of current and past child-focused place-based research efforts and having a more coordinated and rigorous research agenda where findings are shared.

"We ought to be encouraging several approaches, and we ought to be resourcing all of it. They shouldn't compete but compare notes, and at the end of the day we might end up with quite a flexible new set of tools and new knowledge about how to do this work, and not just the one way, but perhaps several ways of doing it."
Research leader

Policy-specific solutions

A whole-of-government approach

Many participants suggested that a whole-of-government approach is needed to advance the place-based reform agenda at a policy level, and also to be able to provide the cross-government support needed to implement place-based approaches at a local level.

It was frequently highlighted that funding bodies, government or otherwise, needed to recognise that sustained support and funding is required to establish practice change and embed promising practice.

"These things can't be turned around in a year or six months. I think it's going to take a long time."
Research leader

Universal solutions

Measurement and evaluation

Participants put forward several ideas to overcome measurement and evaluation issues. These included routine local data collection, analysis and discussion to build a case for change, and to plan, monitor and evaluate. Regular compilation of local 'state of children' reports was also suggested as a strategy to improve local data analysis and measurement.

Participants noted that government and funding bodies need to prioritise measurement and regular feedback on progress as part of funding agreements. They should also be setting requirements for a greater emphasis on the articulation of the program logic or theory of change underlying measurement and evaluation.

"Policy makers need to get smarter, demand more and invest more wisely in evaluations. The theory of change underlying the evaluation needs to be well articulated because often you might have a successful programme, but you have no idea what the successful elements of it are. That doesn't help you in terms of providing guidance around what should change."
Research leader

As skills and expertise in evaluation and measurement were perceived to need technical advancement, it was suggested collaboration by leading experts could optimise existing knowledge and provide solutions to current issues. Priority outputs of such a collaboration were suggested to include resources and frameworks to better measure short, medium and long-term outcomes of place-based initiatives.

Knowledge exchange

The key solution offered to improving knowledge exchange was establishing a 'place-based' community of practice. Participants offered different views on the need to focus on children, or children and young people, within the community of practice, but unanimously agreed that the community of practice should be built on existing mechanisms, with control measures embedded to ensure the quality of information shared.

It was suggested the community of practice could link to a library of existing resources or an evidence-informed intervention catalogue (a 'place-based clearing house'), which should include information that communities with broad-ranging characteristics and demographics could use.

Co-production

Participants also highlighted the need for increased co-production by researchers, policy makers and practitioners. It was suggested that better links and understandings between researchers, service providers and communities would assist the uptake and application of research findings as well as the implementation of policy directives.

A shared narrative and framework

Creating a shared vision, narrative and framework, or logic model, about why place matters and what should be done was suggested to advance the child-focused place-based agenda. Opportunities for raising awareness of child development in communities more broadly, and the profile of children in policy development were discussed.

"I think we're on a journey, and it's a journey about awareness. The early years and brain development story is something that helps. I think it gives people something concrete so they can understand that what happens to children in their early years matters."
Research leader

Participants stressed that any messages about children's wellbeing be delivered in a manner that celebrates and supports the role of parenting, in recognition of the central role that primary caregivers play in children's development.

Advocacy and thought leadership

Participants outlined the idea of a central coordinating space to facilitate cross-sector dialogue and bring leading thinkers together to set strategic agendas, address universal issues (e.g. the need for longer funding cycles), problem solve and inspire.

"My view is that everybody is saying place responses are the answer, and yet there isn't... there aren't opportunities for really unpacking, exploring, researching, considering policy and practice implications of what that means. There's little pockets of activity happening everywhere, and something that attempts to make connections between all of that would be really helpful... would be a complete value add."
Research leader and practice change facilitator

Demonstration sites

It was also highlighted that a more incremental approach to building evidence and scaling up interventions is required in Australia.

"In Australia, we rush straight into large-scale funding and implementation funding on the basis of insufficient preparatory work, and then we have a large-scale intervention that doesn't work."
Research leader

Using demonstration sites as an opportunity to harness, model, test and advance cross-sector collaboration between those implementing, supporting and funding child-focused place-based collaborations was put forward as another strategy.

"When we do see good results and good outcomes, try to pull out what the factors are, and then use them as exemplars."
Policy leader

Conclusions

The findings outlined in this report provide a comprehensive overview of the challenges currently faced by those leading the design, implementation, support and research for child-focused, place-based approaches in Australia. They also provide an overview of the current opportunities for improving efforts across the Australian place-based landscape. The issues and gaps, in addition to the suggestion solutions, are summarised in Table 1 on next page.

Overall, findings show a need to work much more collaboratively across the practice, research, policy and philanthropic sectors. A network or mechanism to bring together people was mentioned for two main reasons:

- to strengthen leadership, coordination and advocacy in place-based activity to benefit children and their families, with specific attention given to the co-production of policy and a coordinated research agenda

- to exchange or build knowledge, particularly in identified knowledge and skill gaps in practice.

"I would really hope that we start to accelerate innovation and learning and skills development in this work because I just think that we have gone a very small distance in the past 15 years, and we need to change the way that we're working or we're going to be at the same place."
**Philanthropic leader**

Stakeholders interviewed showed a strong interest in and broad support for a national effort to progress action in both these areas. There was strong agreement that any effort should build on current efforts and minimise duplication, but that a national network for advancing leadership and coordinating progress on place-based initiatives for children would be beneficial. Network activity should be guided by an action plan, developed in collaboration with network members, to address priorities identified in this report and should be coordinated by a convenor.

Table 1: Summary of issues and solutions for accelerating place-based approaches

Issue or gap	Sector-specific or universal issue?	Suggested solution/s
Knowledge and expertise in supporting, implementing or researching place-based approaches	Universal	• Resource opportunities for pre-service training • Establish a community of practice on place-based initiatives, linked to a resource library • Establish coordinated technical support for communities or access to intermediary agencies • Invest in community mobilisation to support long-term sustainability • Establish agencies to connect initiatives with expertise • Increase advocacy and leadership • Use demonstration sites to test new ideas
Limited resources and funding available to enrich practitioner skills/expertise	Practice	• Share available resources and improve networks
Missing evidence	Universal	• Identify priority research questions and coordinate a strategic research agenda
Uptake of research in practice and policy	Practice, policy	• Improve research synthesis and co-production of research • Establish coordinated technical support for communities or access to intermediary agencies
Optimising investment and resources in place-based initiatives	Universal	• Develop targeted and coordinated research questions • Increase advocacy • Develop whole-of-government approaches

Issue or gap	Sector-specific or universal issue?	Suggested solution/s
Evaluation and measurement: methodologies, skill gaps, funding	Universal	• Establish mechanisms for leading experts to collaborate on the development of new methodologies and expertise • Develop resources/frameworks to measure short, medium and long term outcomes • Compile regular local 'state of children' reports • Advocate on the need for, and true cost of, evaluation and measurement • Use demonstration sites to build evidence and trial methods
Limited or slow exchange of knowledge	Universal	• Develop a community of practice, particularly for those delivering place-based initiatives • Develop a library of existing resources or an intervention catalogue
Inconsistent terminology	Universal	• Promote a shared narrative and logic model on place-based initiatives • Develop and promote consistent messages about children's wellbeing • Increase advocacy and leadership
Public and political will	Universal	• Develop and promote consistent messages about children's wellbeing • Increase advocacy and leadership
Short-term funding	Universal	• Increase advocacy and leadership • Pursue whole-of-government investment
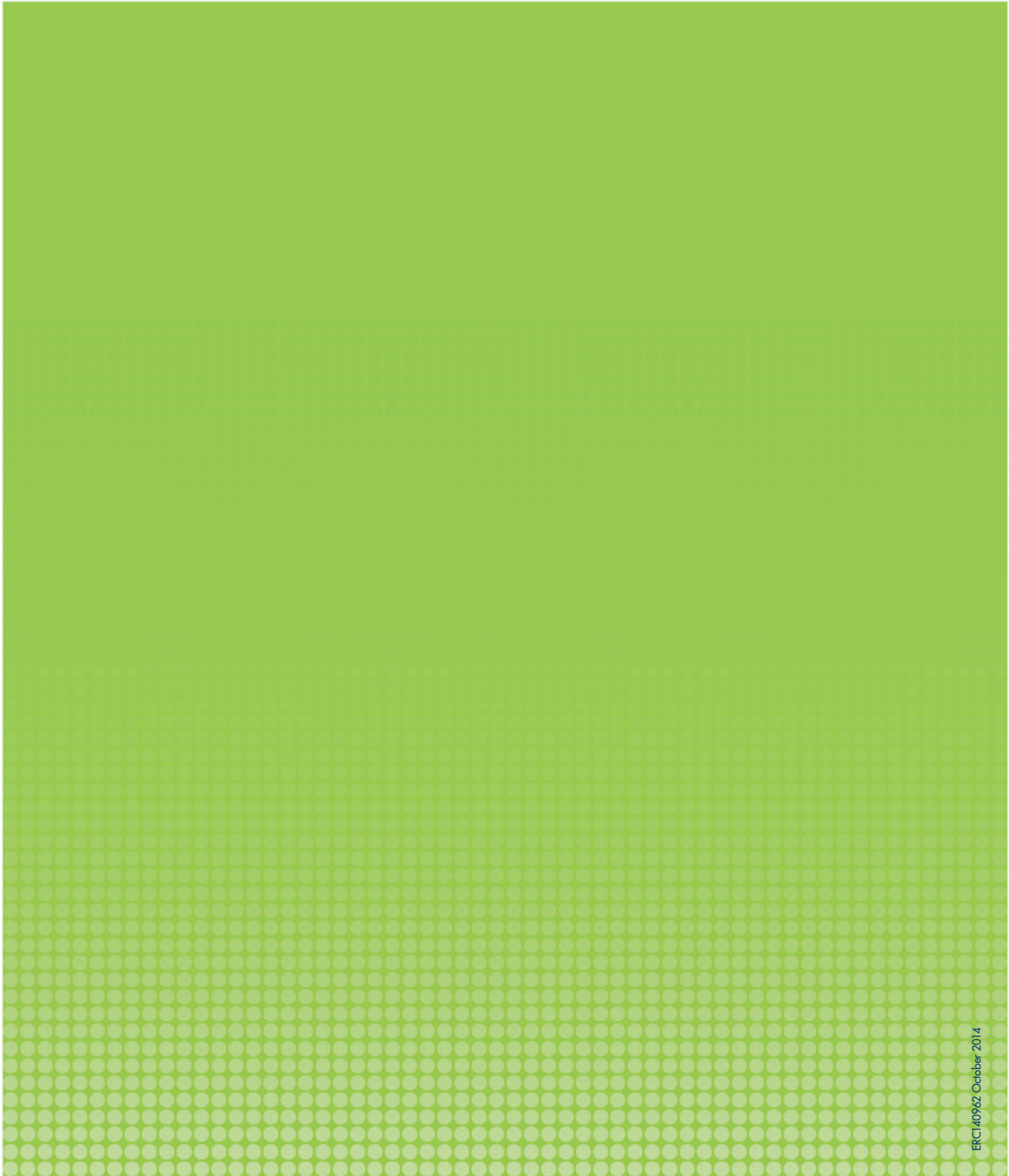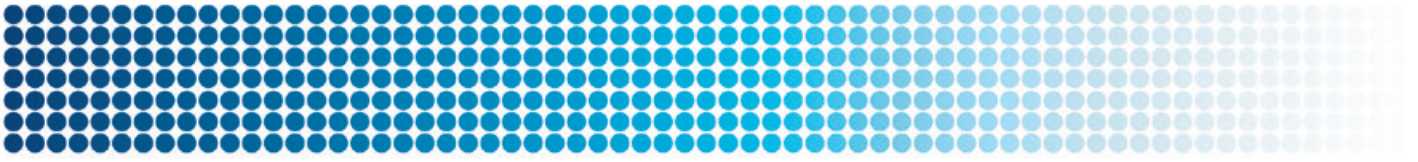
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