AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL OF TESOL ASSOCIATIONS

Response to Early Years Strategy Discussion Paper

April 30, 2023

Response to Early Years Discussion Paper

Introduction

The Australian Council of TESOL Associations (ACTA) appreciates the opportunity to become part of the national conversation about developing the Early Years Strategy by responding to the Early Years Discussion Paper.

The Australian Council of TESOL Associations (ACTA) is the peak body representing State and Territory associations of educators dedicated to furthering the learning of English as an additional language or dialect (EAL/D). Association members include EAL/D teachers, consultants, curriculum developers, teacher educators, other academics and researchers in school and preschool, tertiary, adult migrant, vocational education and training (VET) and community education settings. ACTA is committed to strengthening Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) for all young children whose caregivers speak languages other than English and who are consequently learning English in addition to their home/family languages.

ACTA advocates for the rights of children and families to maintain their languages and to be supported in learning English, in addition, not as a replacement. We support the maintenance of Australia's rich "language wealth" in the speakers of First Nations and overseas languages, young and old. In particular, ACTA acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and acknowledges the role of early childhood education in recognising and supporting Aboriginal and Torres Islander languages in advancing reconciliation. The attached Early Childhood Education *Principles* document presents ACTA's proposals for improving home language development and EAL/D provision in the Australian early childhood sector catering for children from birth to five years of age.

ECEC programs for children are located in urban, regional, rural and remote communities across Australia. Children who participate in ECEC are thus from linguistically, culturally and socio-economically diverse communities, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, migrant and refugee groups, and communities from varying socio-economic backgrounds. EAL/D learners are represented in all these groupings and thus bring with them a variety of cultures, language backgrounds, experiences, and levels of EAL/D proficiency.

ACTA members believe that Australia should harness our shared linguistic diversity and multilingual resources encouraging all children to learn and use home and community languages, while at the same time adding to their English communication skills. In so doing, the Commonwealth Government would advance its commitment to the current lead policy in Indigenous affairs, Closing the Gap, by supporting First Nations children who are speakers of diverse Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages to thrive in their early years and beyond.

An inclusive and strengths-based strategy would enable ECEC settings to reflect and nurture children's diversity. It is about every child accessing, participating meaningfully in, and experiencing positive outcomes from, ECEC programs. Inclusion is important as it nurtures children's sense of identity, and their confidence in themselves as effective learners, as they

take their first steps into education contexts outside their family/caregivers. Intentionally catering for diversity and enhances children's experiences in high quality ECEC.

ACTA's Response to the Discussion Paper

ACTA provides the following response which incorporates its feedback on the National Vision document to draw attention to the need to explicitly include language in a Vision Strategy statement.

Part 1: Response to Discussion Paper

Policy Priorities

A Language Policy

As a key Learning Outcome within the Early Years Learning Framework for Australia V2.0 (AGDE, 2022), *Communication* is crucial to services providing early education and care to young children across the country. ACTA finds that in many Early Childhood policy documents 'language/s' tend to be subsumed under the broader term 'culture' and argues that language needs to be made visible in developing an Early Years Strategy. While 'culture' includes knowledges, beliefs and practices, 'language/s' are fundamental for communication between generations and both within and across diverse communities.

ACTA contends that the significance of home languages alongside English is critical for children's learning and emerging sense of identity and belonging and thus should be guided by a language policy and explicitly addressed in an Early Childhood Vision and Strategy.

High Quality ECE

More needs to be done to ensure that every child has access to high quality ECE, regardless of their geographical location or household income, linguistic and cultural background, and Indigeneity status. Supporting participation in high-quality ECE is associated with positive transitions to school. Positive transitions to school may contribute to reduced school refusal and improved outcomes for learners, families, communities and society. ACTA expands on Early Childhood Australia's (ECA) four core recommendations for operating ECE services, focusing on all EAL/D children, including Indigenous EAL/D learners (https://www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/). ACTA's four core considerations are:

- **Access:** Many families/carers from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds with EAL/D learners, including Indigenous EAL/D learners, face accessibility issues, including those living in remote, rural and regional areas as well as those in capital cities
- **Affordability:** Many families/carers from linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds with children who are EAL/D learners cannot afford to access ECE. This includes newly arrived refugee families/carers who receive limited access to free childcare
- **Inclusion and Reducing Vulnerability:** Along with ECA, ACTA believes there needs to be substantial investment in inclusion support and capacity building to respond to increasing demand and pressures on EC educators and teachers. This is a critical issue

for young children and their families/carers from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds with EAL/D learners, including Indigenous EAL/D learners

- **Stability:** A substantial number of workforce initiatives exist. These include training subsidies for qualifications and professional learning that focus on the needs of EAL/D children and their families/carers, including Indigenous EAL/D learners. This training could be made available to Early Childhood employers and trainees.

Evidence-based approach

Gaps in Existing Frameworks or other research or evidence that need to be considered for the development of the Strategy

The ecological systems theory developed by Urie Bronfenbrenner shows a child's development is influenced by their surrounding environment, which ranges from a child's immediate environment, through their family, community, and up to the influence of society. ACTA believes that Bronfenbrenner's ecological framework needs to be augmented by a home language-based English as an additional language and/or dialect approach.

Further Development of the Evidence-base

Policy, models and interventions need to prioritise systematic collection of new data sets in this developing field.

- data on children's language backgrounds (see Appendix for a way to collect data).
- differentiating the early stages of first language acquisition while children learn an additional language.
- developing resources, tools and training for an early childhood EAL/D approach to assessment for learning which incorporates assessing children's home language abilities in the relevant settings.
- interpreting data about EAL/D children's results in a range of government assessment measures, including the results of the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC).
- developing curriculum, pedagogy and assessment materials that align with and elaborate on the EYLF 2.0 (AGDE, 2022) framework for EAL/D learners.
- upskilling of EC educators with essential knowledge and skills for a home language-based EAL/D approach. Currently, Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) is not heavily featured in accreditation requirements and educators' professional learning in the area needs strengthening.

Part 2: Feedback National Vision Document

In response to the Early Years strategy discussion paper, ACTA includes its feedback on the National Vision document to draw attention to the need to explicitly include language in a Vision Strategy statement.

Vision (feedback on draft National Vision document)

Every child can access and participate in high-quality, culturally responsive ECEC, including preschool, to support their right to thrive, grow their sense of identity and connection to the world, and become confident and engaged learners.

> *Suggested rewording*: culturally and linguistically responsive ECEC

Every parent can access an affordable, high-quality service to support their participation in the workforce, and the associated social and economic benefits.

> *Suggested rewording*: Every parent/carer

Outcomes (feedback on draft National Vision document)

Services respond to community, cultural and family contexts and can provide continuity of learning and care to children.

> *Suggested rewording*: cultural, language and family contexts and can provide continuity of learning, language maintenance and care to children.

Policy Priorities

First Nations children are empowered to embrace their identity and culture
(feedback on draft National Vision document)

> *Suggested rewording*: **empowered to embrace their identity, culture and languages**

First Nations families feel supported to consistently access quality, culturally inclusive ECEC.

> *Suggested rewording*: culturally and linguistically inclusive ECEC.

ECEC services respect and nourish First Nations culture and kinship. We grow our First Nations and Aboriginal community-controlled workforce, recognising the importance of children seeing themselves, their identities, and cultures reflected in their environment.

> *Suggested rewording*: ECEC services respect and nourish First Nations cultures, languages and kinship. We grow our First Nations (delete term 'and Aboriginal community-controlled') workforce, recognising the importance of children seeing themselves, their identities, cultures and languages reflected in their environment.

New workers are inspired and supported to train and ==work in the ECEC sector==

> *Suggested rewording*: ==… work in the ECEC sector in ways that build on their linguistic and cultural funds of knowledge==.

Enablers

Workforce: Attracting, training and retaining a ==high quality workforce== is a critical factor in achieving the vision.

> *Suggested rewording*: **Workforce**: Attracting, training and retaining a high quality workforce ==with diverse cultural and language expertise== is a critical factor in achieving the vision

Principles

(feedback on draft National Vision document)

Quality:
ECEC services are ==culturally appropriate== for their community and meet high standards in providing learning and development outcomes.

> *Suggested rewording*: ==culturally and linguistically inclusive==

Accessibility
Geographic or ==cultural barriers== to attending a high-quality ECEC are removed

> *Suggested rewording*: ==Geographic, cultural and linguistic barriers==

Data and Evidence

(feedback on draft National Vision document)

Policies, models and interventions must be underpinned by comprehensive high quality ==data and evidence==.

> *Suggested rewording*: **Data and evidence**: Policies, models and interventions must be underpinned by comprehensive high quality data and evidence, ==and sensitive to the need to grow new data sets in this developing field.==

Please refer to the ACTA EC Principles (attached) which focus on inclusion of diverse children and families/carers

Appendix

Practical Solutions to Data Gap: Children's Language Backgrounds

From a language/s perspective, the current ECE strategy needs strengthening. Data in the ECE sector has generally overlooked children's and family/caregiver language backgrounds. This type of data could provide guidance for best practice for very young EAL/D Learners in ECE settings.

FIGURE 1. RECOGNISING CHILDREN'S LANGUAGES BACKGROUNDS: SAMPLE RECOMMENDED DATA COLLECTION TOOL

Language name (or description, e.g. where it is spoken, with whom)	Spoken as a mother tongue Yes/No?	Learned as an additional language say almost anything / know a few words	Used how often?
Standard Australian English		⬌	

For First Nations identifying children

Traditional Indigenous Languages Name?		⬌	
New Indigenous contact Languages Name?		⬌	
Indigenised English Name?		⬌	

For children with overseas language backgrounds

Language		⬌	
Language		⬌	
Language		⬌	

SOURCE: Adapted from Angelo et al (2022: 84) *Learning (in) indigenous languages: Common ground, diverse pathways. OECD Education Working Papers, No. 278*. https://doi.org/10.1787/e80ad1d4-en

FIGURE 2. RECOGNITION AND CATERING FOR A CHILD'S LANGUAGES

Child's languages	How is each language recognised and catered for?
Which language(s) does the child speak as a mother tongue/first language? Name(s)?	
Which language(s) does the child connect with culturally? (e.g. language of place, of heritage) Name(s)?	
Which language(s) is child learning as additional/second languages? Name(s)?	

SOURCE: Adapted from Angelo et al (2022: 85) *Learning (in) indigenous languages: Common ground, diverse pathways. OECD Education Working Papers, No. 278*. https://doi.org/10.1787/e80ad1d4-en