



## **Deakin University's Early Childhood Teams' response to the Early Years Strategy**

28<sup>th</sup> April 2023

We are grateful for the opportunity to respond to the Early Years Strategy Discussion Paper. This response is from [REDACTED] at Deakin University, in collaboration with her early childhood colleagues (listed below), who undertake research and provide teacher education in early childhood education. The Early Childhood Team at Deakin University comprises of dedicated academics and researchers who work diligently to make a difference to the lives of all children and their families across Australia. According to the QS World University Rankings by Subject (2023), Deakin is ranked 4th in Australia and 38th in the world in Education and Training. In the School of Education (SoE), Deakin University has a strong focus on strengthening the communities it serves. For example, the Early Childhood Team have established collaborative partnerships with several Early Years Management (EYM) organisations in high needs Local Government Areas identified as being hard to staff or 'childcare deserts' (Hurley et al., 2022). Deakin's SoE is a sector leader for student satisfaction, has a long-standing record for using cutting-edge information technology in the courses it offers, and advances in research including cross-disciplinary collaborations have been a hall mark of its success. Deakin University's early childhood programs have increased by 200% since the introduction of an accelerated degree program with an employment-based pathway, with retention of students at 95%.

We would like to begin by applauding what this strategy is intending to do – to provide a roadmap to shape policy in 'a holistic way' ensuring there is shared understanding of what children and families in Australia require during the early years of a child's life. There is much to celebrate within this Early Years Strategy as set out in the Discussion paper especially its intention to provide an overarching Commonwealth strategy to support the Early Years in Australia. It is hoped that a national framework for action and reform is achievable and sustainable, as this is currently lacking causing challenges and difficulties across the Early Childhood Education and Care sector.

As a group of academics and researchers who specialise in the education of young children, we want all children to thrive in early childhood education, with educators and teachers who know them and their families well. However, we note the significant focus on health in the Early Years Strategy panel and would appreciate more focus on education to provide a balanced view.

While we wholeheartedly agree that lifting outcomes for children at risk of experiencing disadvantage should not be determined by postcode, enabling all children to experience quality early childhood services requires a sustainable, high-quality Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) workforce that is well trained across the items noted as important indicators for success in the Early Years Strategy. Without a sustainable ECEC workforce we cannot guarantee quality early childhood settings that support all children and families. ECEC workforce issues, including the quality, diversity and sustainability of the workforce are major components currently missing from this document. Therefore, we offer the following comments for consideration to strengthen the implementation and success of the Early Years Strategy.

## **Priorities for consideration**

### ***Supporting the Early Childhood Workforce***

We know from our own research and the research of others that there is currently a huge shortfall of educators and teachers in the Australian ECEC workforce. We acknowledge the current efforts that some governments are making to increase Early Childhood Education provisions (e.g. VIC and NSW), however these are not matched by efforts to increase and retain workforce. For example, the Victorian Department of Education and Training scholarships only go part way to solving the workforce issues in the state. We are therefore suggesting the need for greater focus on a wide range of strategies to develop, support and maintain the workforce.

Coupled with a workforce shortfall there are ongoing retention issues, usually due to pay, conditions and status that are disproportionate when compared to similarly qualified teachers (e.g., degree qualified primary school teachers). In cases where individuals have chosen to leave a career, including primary school teaching, to become an early childhood teacher, they have later left the profession in-part due to incommensurate and inconsistent pay and working conditions. Issues related to their working conditions may result in teachers experiencing demoralisation, isolation, and compromised mental health and wellbeing (Ciuciu & Robertson, 2019). When pre-service teachers study a dual qualification (awarding them registration to teach in early childhood settings and/or schools), research has shown that the majority of graduates will choose primary teaching over teaching in ECEC settings due to the vastly different pay and conditions in each sector. Significant disparity of pay and conditions also exists within the early childhood sector, with different awards and agreements being offered by employers. This creates inequality of working conditions across places of employment and confusion for educators and teachers seeking employment. It also takes advantage of educators and teachers who are in vulnerable positions financially, linguistically or culturally. Research by Deakin University early childhood colleagues and others (e.g., Ciuciu, 2022; Robertson et al. in press), suggests such disparity of conditions both within the early childhood sector, and across other levels of education primary and secondary) leads to demoralisation and contributes to the ongoing retention issues. These issues must be addressed to enable a sustainable ECEC workforce that attracts and retains qualified early childhood teachers.

Educating initial teacher education students for a Birth to 5 teaching qualification will assist in retaining teachers in the ECEC sector, as they have made a commitment to early childhood education as a profession rather than to a dual qualification (primary and early childhood). However, such a qualification does not attract similar recognition across Australian states and territories. Here we draw attention to the jurisdictional anomalies across Australia in relation to early childhood teacher registration. These anomalies are inhibiting workforce mobility and recognition of the fidelity and validity of Birth to 5 early childhood teacher qualifications. Therefore, we propose that the registration of early childhood teachers across Australia should be a national process and prioritised in the Early Years Strategy. Currently many university-degree educated teachers from a number of universities across the country experience difficulties when attempting to register to teach in states and territories other than where they obtained their degree. For example, qualifying in Victoria but wanting to teach in SA, TAS, QLD or NT creates barriers for graduate teachers who are keen to take up teaching positions. This problem exists for all graduate teachers, including First Nations teachers who qualify in one state but wish to teach in their own local communities located in other Australian states or territories. Deakin University's National Indigenous Knowledges Education Research Innovation Institute - NIKERI has a proud 35-year history of supporting many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People through community-based education programs. Our Early Childhood Education graduates come from all over Australia, as this is an integral program for First Nations pre-service teachers and communities. This qualification needs to be recognised throughout Australia to acknowledge graduates as teachers in their communities.

In summary, an overarching Commonwealth Early Years Strategy must address this disfunction in relation to the current inadequate registration so teaching institutions nationally recognise specialised degrees to increase the early childhood workforce across Australia. We are optimistic that the desire to support greater collaboration across states and territories for the early years as outlined in the Discussion Paper, will support this vitally important aspect of teacher recruitment that currently is working against having a sustainable, specially trained workforce.

Ensuring quality services where all children have the same opportunities to learn, develop and thrive wherever they live means supporting the professional development of the workforce. Our research shows that access to professional learning when in the profession is not equitable for teachers and educators (Molla & Nolan 2020; Nolan & Molla 2019). Currently, teachers in primary and secondary schools are allocated leave and CRT provision to attend professional development during worktime. This is not offered to all early childhood teachers and educators equally. A further finding from our research (e.g., Robertson et al. in press), also highlights the need for strengthened career pathways for early childhood teaching professionals, who are leaving the profession because they cannot see an available pathway beyond classroom teaching.

### ***Positioning children as having agency***

To further the strength-based focus the Early Years Strategy is endeavouring to embed, we would encourage a shift in thinking about assessing children and their learning in the Strategy that broadens the dependency on child developmental measurements alone. One example is the Australian Early Development Census (AEDC) that frames children purely within a developmental lens rather than multiple ways of looking at children. Current research has shown we have moved beyond this narrow developmental view of children and their capabilities. To acknowledge the dynamic nature of young children's learning an understanding of children's lives, contexts and what they experience needs to be considered, such as the impact of poverty which is linked to school and later life success, language and literacy, communication and socio-emotional functioning (Harrison, Goldfeld, Metcalfe & Moore, 2012). Research informs us that children living in intergenerational poverty are subject to wider effects on their learning and development such as social exclusion, reduced self-esteem, low self-efficacy and low self-regulation (Ridge, 2002). We contend that children's socio-cultural context is important and needs to be considered alongside more standardised measurements. We also question the relevance of the AEDC domains to children in remote areas of Australia where learning is considered significant when viewed through a cultural and community lens.

We also wonder what the vision is for Australia's multilingual and multicultural children and families. It is noteworthy that 'language' is mentioned in only three instances across the Discussion Paper: once, on page 8 in relation to recognising diversity, and then twice on page 10 in the section that discusses 'developmental vulnerability' ('children of language backgrounds other than English'). NB. We suggest this categorisation should be changed in the Early Years Strategy to read: 'English as an additional language (EAL)' to be respectful of all the other languages many people speak rather than deficit based that they cannot speak English. We are concerned that the explicit mention of 'First Nations children, children in regional and remote areas, children with language backgrounds other than English, and children with disability' suggests a deficit orientation that positions some children and their families as 'outside of the norm'. Further, research conducted during the last few decades in the fields of cognitive psychology (e.g. Bialystok, 2001, 2009, 2012), cognitive neuroscience (e.g. Mehmedbegovic & Bak, 2017) and bilingualism/multilingualism (e.g. Genesee, 2015), has consistently provided extensive evidence that early childhood bi/multilingualism is of undeniable benefit to children's socio-cognitive and socio-emotional development, and executive function. The influences of globalisation, refugee populations, immigration, demographics, along with economic disparities, need to be reflected in the Early Years Strategy. Professor Lester-Irabinna Rigney, one of Australia's most respected Aboriginal educationalists, speaks of an increase in complexity of diversity and growing awareness of the multiple forms that 'diversity' actually takes, which moves beyond tools for supporting multiculturalism. Superdiversity is the new normal of classrooms and should be reflected more strongly in the Strategy.

### ***Westernized school readiness discourse and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children's 'two-way learning'***

In regard to the Closing the Gap data and a more nuanced understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children's engagement with ECEC, we urge a reconceptualization of the notion of 'school readiness', requesting that this be adopted in the Early Years Strategy. Superseding the narrow, deficit-based definition of 'school readiness' as a child's individual characteristics, such as 'age, maturity and/or academic skills' (Dockett et al. 2010, p. 2), contemporary understandings of 'readiness' adopt a more holistic, strength-based perspective and are grounded in ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner 1979). That is, the concept of 'readiness' stems from a confluence of systems, with interconnecting contexts and relationships (SNAICC 2013). This multidimensional conceptualisation recognises the interplay between children, families, communities, schools and services (McTurk et al. 2008), and is much more aligned with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' ways of being and knowing in the world (Yunkaporta 2009, 2019).

Researchers have critiqued the Westernised version of 'school readiness' by applying an Indigenous lens to the term and its processes (Anderson et al. 2022). Anderson and colleagues (2022) assert it is devised as 'fundamentally an assimilationist concept' (p. 4) as it implies that Indigenous children are expected to adapt themselves to fit 'from one culture into another culture' (p. 5). In contrast, they argue that educational programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children need to be 'seen as a two-way process rather than constantly reinforcing that Indigenous students and their cultures are deficit to the more advanced or developed culture around them' (Anderson et al., 2022, p. 5). In reframing this narrative, Krakouer (2016) contends that early childhood teachers and settings need to be ready and culturally prepared for the child rather than the other way around. Furthermore, a focus on culturally responsive early childhood services that welcome and actively employ Indigenous early childhood teachers and educators will subsequently offer sustainable and long-term benefits to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and their communities. This enables programs to utilise cultural protocols and processes. In doing so, a two-way process between culturally responsive early childhood programs and school settings will help afford smooth transitions between educational settings in terms of preparedness and safety.

Krakouer strongly claims that 'Only in acknowledging the cultural mismatch between home and [early childhood centre] environments for Aboriginal children will successful early childhood education outcomes be achieved' (p. 1). Researchers have continued to find that there are many aspects of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families' experiences of, and engagement with early childhood education that are 'not well understood, including the quality, cultural safety and appropriateness of the early childhood education environment' (Falster et al. 2020, p. 371). This could be strengthened in the document and would greatly be welcomed by Indigenous higher education staff members at NIKERI, and non-Indigenous colleagues at Deakin University.

### ***Children's voices***

It is mentioned many times throughout the Early Years Strategy Discussion paper that the intent is to 'genuinely listen to and include the voices of children's' and to... 'seek to capture their ideas and intentions' for this inquiry – careful consideration is needed to ensure that appropriate methodologies are employed. For example, the Mosaic approach (Clark & Moss, 2011) offers theoretical, practical and respectful ways of listening to young children.

**This response has been compiled by the Deakin University Early Childhood Team comprising:**

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