

## Comments on the Draft Early Years Strategy 2024-2034 Consultation Report

The Federation of Ethnic Communities' Councils of Australia (FECCA) thanks the Department of Social Services for the opportunity to provide feedback on the draft Early Years consultation report. As the peak body representing over 1500 multicultural and ethnic community organisations and the interests of Australia's diverse multicultural communities, FECCA is a strong advocate for a fair and inclusive multicultural society where everyone has the opportunity to reach their full potential. We welcome the Early Years Strategy (the Strategy) and wish to draw your attention to how the Strategy can be strengthened to address key issues faced by multicultural communities so that it can serve all Australian children.

**Recommendation 1: Include anti-racism measures as part of the Strategy to address racism experienced by young children and their parents.**

### Racism in schools

Up to 60 per cent of racially marginalised children in Australia experience racism, often in schools.<sup>i</sup> Despite school anti-racism policies and other initiatives promoting safe and inclusive, the lived reality for many children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds is the experience of marginalisation, discrimination and racism. <sup>ii</sup>We also know the true extent of the issue is masked by students, families and teachers.

The extensive national consultations on racism FECCA is undertaking to support the Australian Human Rights Commission develop the national anti-racism strategy is revealing the prevalence of racism in education settings, and the significant impact this has on children and educators, including migrant educators. These incidents often stem from subtle but harmful biases and stereotypes which can be difficult to identify and address before they become overt incidences of racism. The inability to voice their pain leaves many children trapped in a cycle of silence, where internalised harm erodes their sense of safety and trust, impacting their long-term emotional and psychological well-being. Consultation participants reported that if incidents of racism are reported, response mechanisms are often inadequate, are not child-centred and lack the necessary urgency to stop further harm.

The following quotes from FECCA's consultations demonstrate that incidents of racism are not just conceptual, words, attitudes and behaviours have significant impact on people's well-being, sense of belonging and opportunities in life.

*"I am smart and I could've furthered my education and done amazing things in life. Racism I experienced in school stopped me from achieving it."*  
Woman in Sydney

*"My son didn't go to school for year and my daughter was told to go back to where you came from and called 'black dog' especially during COVID-19. People say it's a joke but it's not a joke for us."* Parent in Melbourne

Parents emphasised the need to build trust within communities through early education.

*“Education needs to start before five years of age. Children need to be educated beyond Harmony and NAIDOC week. This needs to be an important part of the curriculum, in scale with the actual problem, and parents need to be aware that this is a serious part of the learning, because, often, racism start at home. The systematic change of the education system will inevitably overflow to adults, who have grown themselves in a racist environment.”*

Parent in Tasmania

As the early years can be both the settings of racism and opportunity for early interventions against racism, comprehensive anti-racism measures need to be a clear component of the Strategy. These measures should include comprehensive unconscious bias training, awareness-raising and behaviour-change campaigns, information on how to identify and respond to racism, and effective complaints mechanisms. These measures should be co-designed with organisations and communities who can provide insights drawn from their lived experiences and expertise.

**Recommendation 2: Ensure work environments are culturally safe and inclusive for a multicultural workforce.**

### **Racism faced by multicultural educators**

Migrant educators are crucial to Australia's early childhood education and care sector, making up 28 per cent of the family day care workforce and 31 per cent in centre-based day care (2021).<sup>iii</sup> Their contribution to the sector is invaluable and poised to grow. However, despite the crucial role they play in the sector, FECCA has heard repeated accounts of racism faced by many multicultural educators, from incidents of micro-aggressions to blatant discrimination and racism.

*“I was told by a parent that 'Children are scared of black people.' However, in my experience, children aren't scared of my skin colour, they sometimes are just curious.”* Educator in Wollongong

This incident shared above is representative of the broader issue of multicultural workers experiencing discrimination from both parents and colleagues. This issue is challenging enough for culturally and linguistically diverse childcare workers, but many migrant workers without permanent residency in Australia will be faced with the additional challenge of feeling particularly vulnerable and uncertain around taking steps to address the situation.

It is important to ensure work environments are inclusive, professional and value the expertise and experiences of the multicultural workforce. Successful implementation of the Strategy requires an engaged and committed workforce. Such a workforce will only be possible if we create safe and inclusive workplaces that foster a supportive environment for all stakeholders, including students, parents and multicultural educators. To achieve this, we need a renewed focus on culturally responsive practices and policies that support educators from multicultural backgrounds. This shift necessitates a shared responsibility between the education system, parents and local organisations, fostering collaborative engagement to develop and implement effective strategies.

### **Recommendation 3: Develop a sector language policy as part of the Early Years Strategy.**

#### **Language policy as an instrument for inclusion**

Languages and language policy have played an important and evolving role in the formation of Australia and continue to do so.<sup>iv</sup> Australian schools are linguistically diverse, both in the total number of languages spoken and the level of linguistic ability. This diversity is a source of Australia's strength and resilience, today and in the future.

The education sector holds the key to shaping a future that embraces linguistic diversity and celebrates this diversity as an integral part of our national identity.<sup>v</sup> Schools must shift their perspective to viewing "other" languages as an asset. A whole-of-system approach, integrating both languages spoken at home and formally taught languages, can create an inclusive environment where all children feel valued, supported and proud to embrace their identity. This holistic approach will also improve learning outcomes for all students.<sup>viii</sup>

By implementing inclusive language policies and practices, we prepare students for a diverse world and nurture their confidence in expressing themselves and build bridges of understanding from a young age. This can be achieved by implementing a sector language policy, informed by a broader national language policy. FECCA's [Multicultural Framework Review](#) highlights that achieving a fair and inclusive Australia, where everyone feels a sense of belonging, requires such a national language framework.

### **Recommendation 4: Invest in robust data collection to deliver evidence-based policy and programs for multicultural communities.**

#### **Evidence and data are crucial for implementing the Strategy**

Several studies have shown that collecting and monitoring quality data leads to concrete improvements in early childhood education and care programs. For example, it can trigger the adoption of higher standards, as well as elevate classroom environment ratings.<sup>viii</sup> However, studies show significant disparities in access and awareness of early childhood education and care programs in Australia, with families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds often unaware of available options and less likely to access these crucial services. This can have serious long-term consequences for children, including lower performance in social, emotional, academic, and health measures.<sup>ix</sup>

The report's emphasis on multicultural community involvement in data is crucial. We strongly support this approach, as inclusive data that reflects Australia's diversity is important to understanding and addressing specific barriers faced by multicultural communities. Studies have shown that collecting and monitoring quality data leads to concrete improvements in early childhood education and care programs. For example, it can trigger the adoption of higher standards, as well as elevate classroom environment ratings.<sup>x</sup>

The current research landscape suggests that data on multicultural Australia is fragmented and uncoordinated, leading to significant gaps in our understanding and evidence-base. For instance, current data collection by government often relies on variables like country of birth and language spoken at home. These variables do not accurately measure race and ethnicity, and they can lead to false assumptions and the inadequate allocation of resources. For example, the term culturally and linguistically diverse is often used to refer to a wide range of people from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds. However, this term can be misleading, as it does not consider the diversity within this group.

The inconsistent collection and reporting of data on race, culture and ethnicity across all levels of government and sectors makes it difficult to track the progress and outcomes of programs and policies aimed at reducing ethnic socio-economic disparities. A more collaborative and systematic approach to data collection and research will support the development of more inclusive and effective early years policies and programs.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://emergingminds.com.au/resources/racism-childrens-mental-health-and-anti-racist-practice/>

<sup>ii</sup> Mansouri, F., and L. Jenkins. 2010. "Schools as Sites of Race Relations and Intercultural Tensions." *Australian Journal of Teacher Education* 35: 93–108

<sup>iii</sup> <https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/current/childhood/draft/childhood-draft-full.pdf>

<sup>iv</sup> [Language Policy and Education in Australia | SpringerLink](#)

<sup>v</sup> McLaren, P., and R. Torres. 1999. "Racism and Multicultural Education: Rethinking 'Race' and 'Whiteness' in Late Capitalism." In *Critical Multiculturalism: Rethinking Multicultural and Antiracist Education*, edited by S. May, 46–83. London: Falmer Press

<sup>vi</sup> <https://www.steppingstonesprofessionaldevelopment.com/blog/incorporating-home-languages>

<sup>vii</sup> <https://www.monash.edu/education/teachspace/articles/why-creating-a-school-based-language-policy-makes-sense-for-australian-schools>

<sup>viii</sup> <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/docserver/9789264085145-7-en.pdf?expires=1707778693&id=id&accname=guest&checksum=4DCBADEEB84C2C7B7C7A9BECE3A1B965>

<sup>ix</sup> <https://www.rch.org.au/uploadedFiles/Main/Content/ccchdev/2306-CCCH-MeasuringDisadvantage-Report.pdf>

<sup>x</sup> <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/docserver/9789264085145-7-en.pdf?expires=1707778693&id=id&accname=guest&checksum=4DCBADEEB84C2C7B7C7A9BECE3A1B965>