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National Education Evidence Base

The Federation of Ethnic Communities' Councils of Australia (FECCA) is the national peak body representing Australia's culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities and their organisations. FECCA provides advocacy, develops policy and promotes issues on behalf of its constituency to Government and the broader community. FECCA supports multiculturalism, community harmony, social justice and the rejection of all forms of discrimination and racism so as to build a productive and culturally rich Australian society. FECCA's policies are developed around the concepts of empowerment and inclusion and are formulated with the common good of all Australians in mind.

Scope of the evidence base

FECCA believes that the scope of the evidence base should include data relating to children younger than 4 years old (or prior to the year before compulsory schooling begins). The evidence base should also seek to reach children who are not attending early childhood education and care programs outside the home.

FECCA highlights the importance of child care and early childhood education for CALD children. The quality of life of migrant and refugee children is directly affected by their access to appropriate early childhood education and care services.

Child care and early childhood education hold a key place in the wellbeing of families and their local communities. They provide key opportunities for children's development and social engagement, and for enabling families to engage fully in the labour market, each of which is important in contributing to stronger families.¹

Child care and preschool attendance have been consistently found to affect early child development.² Further, evidence suggests that early childhood education improves the

¹ Australian Institute of Family Studies, 'Child care and early childhood education in Australia', Facts Sheet 2015, 2.

² Australian Institute of Family Studies, 'Financial disadvantage and children's school readiness', *Family Matters* No. 83 (October 2009), 24.

confidence and social skills of children from disadvantaged backgrounds, leading to a better foundation for school success.³ Children of migrants and refugees may not have much or any exposure to English language at home, so early childhood education is particularly important for the development of their language skills. Child care also provides an important opportunity for migrant children to be exposed to Australian social culture, assisting with their later transition to formal schooling.

Children from non-English speaking backgrounds are among the least likely to attend preschool or day care prior to entering school.⁴

Given the importance of early childhood education, particularly for children from migrant and refugee backgrounds, FECCA recommends that the national education evidence base should include all children, including those younger than pre-school age and those who are not accessing formal care and education. By including these children in the evidence base, the educational outcomes for marginalised groups can be monitored. This data will assist Government and service providers to target programs to children in need.

Objective of the evidence base

FECCA believes that the objective of a national education evidence base should be to improve education outcomes. The evidence base should inform Government and other stakeholders about how children in Australia are progressing in their development, and whether certain groups are dropping behind.

Data to be collected

FECCA believes that the data collected should include:

- country of birth;
- main language spoken at home;
- religious background (where applicable);
- ethnicity; and
- English language proficiency (including English language proficiency of parents).

This data would assist the planning of targeted language services and education in schools.

Enabling children to embrace and maintain their cultural identities is a vital aspect of building a multicultural Australia. Data collection on language needs will provide the education system with an opportunity to target resources and create an inclusive educational environment and opportunities for cross cultural learning.

One key way that migrant families maintain a connection to their home country and identity is through the preservation of language and culture... Therefore supporting children's cultural and linguistic diversity during the development of their speech, language and communication is integral to developing their sense of self and cultural identity.⁵

³ S Goldfeld, E O'Connor, M O'Connor, M Sayers, T Moore, A Kvalsvig and S Brinkman, 'The role of preschool in promoting children's healthy development: Evidence from an Australian population cohort', *Early Childhood Research Quarterly* 35 (2016), 41.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Sarah Verdon, Sharynne McLeod, Sandie Wong, *Supporting culturally and linguistically diverse children with speech, language and communication needs: Overarching principles, individual approaches* (2015, unpublished), 6.

Cultural and linguistic characteristics require specific, inclusive and targeted programs that promote access, equity and participation, and ensure that no one is excluded and left behind.

The recently released National Guidelines on Best Practice in Early Childhood Intervention⁶ focus on culturally responsive practice:

Culturally Responsive Practice: creates welcoming and culturally inclusive environments where all families are encouraged to participate in and contribute to children's learning and development. Practitioners are knowledgeable and respectful of diversity and provide services and supports in flexible ways that are responsive to each family's cultural, ethnic, racial, language and socioeconomic characteristics.⁷

Data in relation to cultural diversity within educational and care structures would be vital in delivering services in line with the aforementioned guideline, especially in relation to ensuring that the practitioners are knowledgeable of the family's cultural, ethnic, racial, linguistic and socioeconomic background. This data is also important to assist with culturally responsive practice in primary and secondary education.

An inclusive educational environment must cater for specific requirements of children who come from diverse backgrounds including, their dietary requirements, requirements in relation to clothing and dates/times that are of cultural/religious significance. This will enable the institutions to provide requisite supports and accommodate the needs of such children and their families.

People from CALD backgrounds are not a homogenous group. They encounter different outcomes on a variety of factors which impacts on their wellbeing, including length of time since their arrival, migration pathway (eg. as a refugee), level of acculturation and exposure to Australian systems, English language proficiency and socioeconomic status.

The collection of this data will enable the appropriate investment of resources and development of targeted programs. Investment of adequate resources into education can ensure that children from migrant and refugee backgrounds develop a sense of belonging, have access to adequate support and are empowered to preserve and develop their cultural identity while gaining knowledge and understanding of Australian culture.

⁶ Early Childhood Intervention Australia, *National Guidelines on Best Practice in Early Childhood Intervention*, accessible at: <https://www.ecia.org.au/resources/best-practice-guidelines>

⁷ Ibid