

A. Some brief comments on the Royal Commission into Early Childhood Education and Care – Interim Report (April 2023)

Some comments from the perspective of linguistic and cultural diversity in early childhood education and care are as follows:

1. I wish to congratulate the Commission on its excellent processes and a strong interim report.
2. In the report on ‘where we are now’ (Ch.1) in early education and care, the authors discuss the structural arrangements and provide comparative data with all states and territories of Australia. In such a report that is focused on provisioning for early childhood education and care for all children in South Australia, I would wish to see a profiling of who these children are. All learning (and provisioning for such learning) needs to begin with the profile of the learners – who they are socially, developmentally, linguistically, culturally. Can some data and a characterisation of the children be included? In line with the linguistic and cultural diversity perspective that I am foregrounding; this would give a picture of the diversity of children, a point that needs to be made up front in the report. The learners and their diversity needs to be front of mind for all. This then would also link to the comment I made in my previous comments on the immense diversity of families that needs to be recognised. It also reinforces the crucial point that in all the discussions about provisioning, who the learners are in their diversity is always central.
3. The diversity of learners and families then needs to be picked up in the nature of a three-year-old preschool program. The report highlights definitional matters. From my perspective, the nature of programs needs to go beyond definitions to capture the nature of *learning* in these settings at this developmental stage. This is captured to some extent in Recommendations 6 and 7 but the foregrounding of languages and cultures could be strengthened. I welcome the inclusion of my statement that:

“All children learn through play-based language learning experiences and live the languages and cultures that are available in their community as part of the everyday, that they are participants in, rather than just observers of linguistic and cultural diversity” (p.42 of the Interim Report).

It is certainly about outcomes, measures, structures, groupings, supports, etc, that you capture but it is also about developing children’s language(s) repertoires. Children learn through language and (for those who bring additional languages) through languages (plural). All learning is mediated through the languages and the cultural experiences and lenses that children bring. As such language(s) are central to their language and literacy development *and* to their sense of comfort and well-being in being *in* linguistic and cultural diversity.

The whole environment in these settings needs to be rich in languages and cultures and much of the *experience* of being in early childhood and care is about action-related talk (doing, experiencing, playing, languaging and learning). This perspective is captured in the *MELC Statement* (though that statement was developed within a K-12 perspective – see <https://www.education.sa.gov.au/docs/sper/melc/melc-statement-reimagining-learning-as-intercultural-engagement.pdf>) It conveys the spirit of how fundamental languages and cultures are to children’s learning, development, well-being and identity and this should be captured in the way in which early learning is conceptualised in the report.

In this regard I note that on p.57 of the Interim Report, there is mention of culturally responsive pedagogy. The notion in the MELC Statements of 'intercultural learning' extends this idea. The notion of being 'culturally responsive' requires attentiveness to the cultures and cultural knowledges that children and families bring. However, this notion does not capture (1) the fact that the responsiveness needs to be in relation both to children's *languages* and cultures, and (2) it does not recognise that what is actually involved is a two-way exchange where Australian English language/culture/knowledge *interact* with the languages/cultures/ knowledges that children bring. This is crucial for Aboriginal children, for children who speak any other language other than English and indeed for all children. It recognises the notion of *inter-change*, learning to interact and exchange respectfully and with curiosity in relation to others – in diversity.

B. Matters related to workforce

There are many matters related to workforce that were captured well at the Roundtable discussion and do not need to be discussed here. These relate to fundamental qualifications, ongoing professional learning, the recognition of diverse pathways, the need for flexibility, and more. From the perspective of linguistic and cultural diversity (recognising that educators may well come as migrants from diverse locations, I wish to highlight some key ideas as follows:

1. That in order to create environments that are language-and-culture-rich, that include extensive and stimulating material resources and offer experiences of linguistic diversity as a whole-of-centre endeavour, it will be necessary to ensure that *all staff receive professional learning on how to work in environments which are characterised by linguistic and cultural diversity*. This will include developing approaches to working actively with multiple languages (even if they are monolingual), how to focus continuously on languages and cultures in learning, how to use people as resources to provide experiences of linguistic and cultural diversity (e.g. parents, caregivers, visitors, bilingual assistants, interpreters, etc.). In other words, there are many ways of sustaining a multilingual and intercultural environment, rich in experiences, even when the educator does not (and indeed cannot) share the children's languages.
2. That it is important that all environments put in place *mechanisms to capture the linguistic and cultural profile* of their workforce (as well as profiling the children) as a starting point for ensuring the best configuration of staff (in their diversity) for providing rich programs.
3. That particular processes of induction, mentoring and professional learning need to be put in place for migrant workers to support their work in an early childhood educational culture in Australia that may be different from that in their home countries. Further, that every effort should be made to recognise that (within the South Australian regulatory framework) there may well be alternative ways of working/caring that migrant workers bring that may well be of value to developing a broader repertoire of ways. In other words, migrant workers working together with local staff would become a process of intercultural comparison and exchange and co-learning which is potentially highly fruitful and desirable.
4. That particular attention be given to engaging bilingual officers who can work with children who bring additional languages to the learning environment. Their use in early childhood environments should be seamless. This is an area that will require further consideration both in policy and in practice, as is the use of interpreters and translators. These are not difficult processes but they are not well understood currently.

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